

She who  
spins the cloud,  
weaves the storm

WE  
ARE  
BLOOD  
AND  
THUNDER

KESIA  
LUPO

BLOOMSBURY

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ARE  
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LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

# VALORIAN CONTINENT



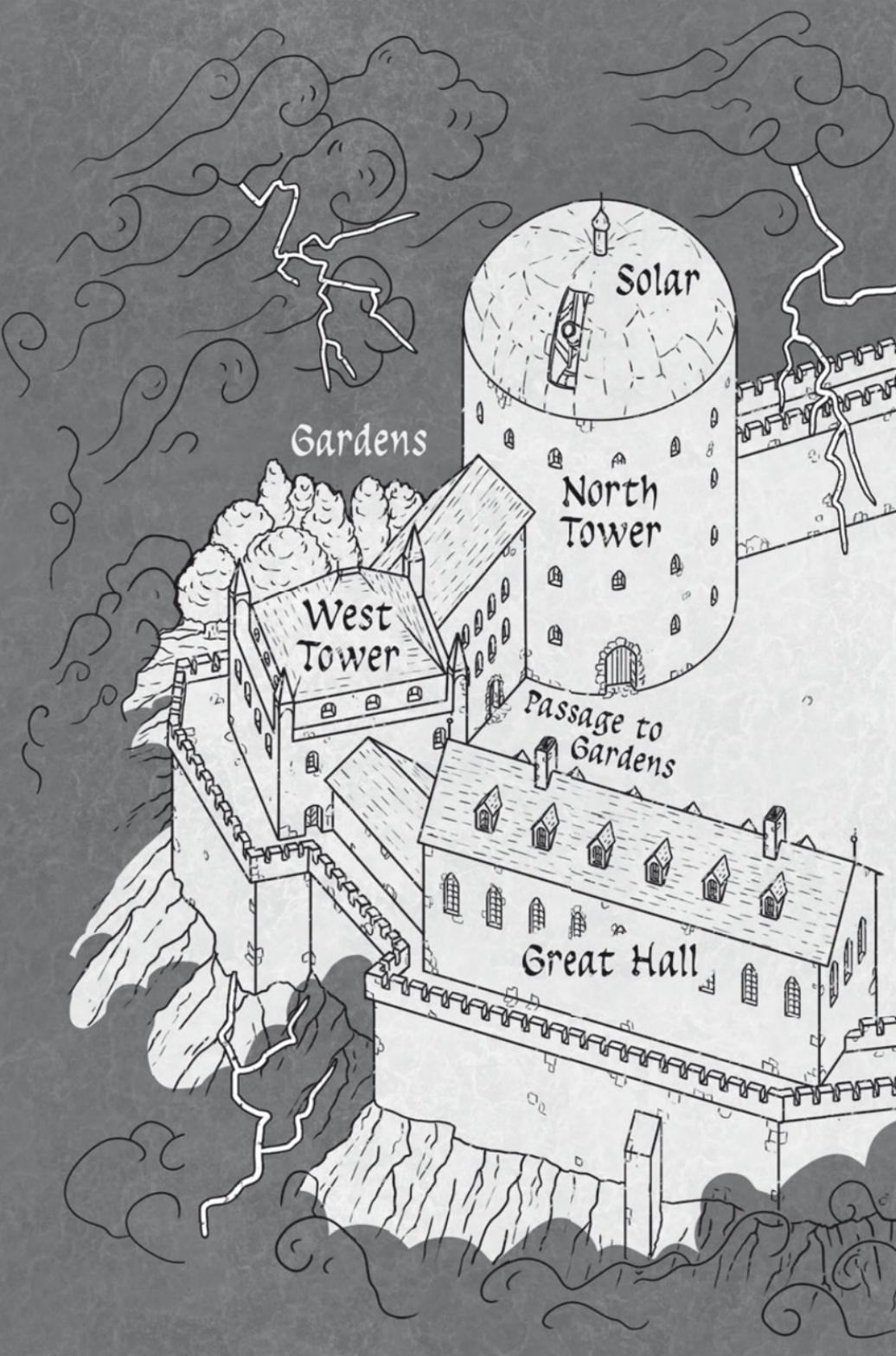
Storm Cloud

Duke's Forest

Foothills

King's Road





Solar

Gardens

North  
Tower

West  
Tower

Passage to  
Gardens

Great Hall

The Gates

The Castle



# HOLY COUNCIL OF THE NINE GODS



## **F**AUL THE HUNTSMAN GOD

Colour of disciples' magic: SILVER

Disciples of Faul are responsible for policing the magical population. They are tasked with finding and bringing in rogues, despatching radicals and capturing magical criminals. Few are suited to the magic of Faul, and the life-threatening demands exacted upon disciples are sure to dissuade some potential candidates.



## **M**YTHRIS THE MASKED GOD

Colour of disciples' magic: PURPLE

Disciples of Mythris are known as spies and assassins, often employed by the state, sometimes by private individuals for the right price. Little is known about the specific content of their work, and their temples tend to be hidden away.



## **J**OK THE WARRIOR GOD

Colour of disciples' magic: RED

Disciples of Jok are combat specialists, learned in the arts of fighting and military tactics. This temple is one of the most populous – few major wars have been fought in recent times and disciples are instead well compensated as general peacekeepers and guards.



## **N**OMI THE EXPLORER GOD

Colour of disciples' magic: GREEN

Disciples of Nomi are skilled in spells of navigation and particularly scrying (the finding of lost things). Very few people are suited to this set of skills despite the lure of the exotic locations to which disciples are posted.



## IMRIS THE HEALER GOD

Colour of disciples' magic: **BLUE**

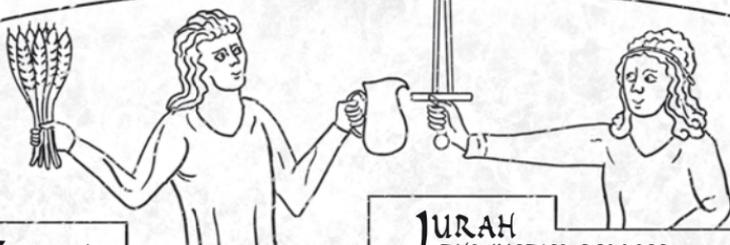
Disciples of Imris are specialist healers and physicians. Although priests of other temples may be physicians, the disciples of Imris are multifaceted and incredibly delicate in their expertise. Imris has many disciples.



## REGIS THE RULER GOD

Colour of disciples' magic: **WHITE**

Disciples of Regis are cut out for leadership and politics. They have truth-seeing and divinatory abilities, useful in both these professions. Regis is a popular temple attracting academically gifted mages.



## TURAH THE LAND GODDESS One of the twins

Colour of disciples' magic: **OGRE**

Disciples of Turah are skilled in agricultural magics, sensing and encouraging growth in the soil and even (for its most powerful disciples) controlling the weather. Turah was once a most revered goddess, but these days few are attracted to this temple.

## JURAH THE JUSTICE GODDESS The second twin

Colour of disciples' magic: **BLACK**

Disciples of Jurah are rare in Valorian, although in the past they were among the most esteemed, their powers allowing them to null and manipulate the abilities of other mages. Nowadays the few remaining disciples of Jurah play a largely ceremonial role as the king's executioners.



## AMORIS THE GOLDEN GODDESS

Colour of disciples' magic: **GOLD**

Disciples of Amoris study the magics of good fortune and seduction. They are the financiers of Valorian, with their temples (which operate variably as bathhouses or the only legitimate brothels in the continent) by far the most profitable of the nine. An enduringly popular temple.



In the Year of Kings 554, the mountain city state of Duke's Forest was beset by a mysterious vapour. It started out as little more than a few wisps of grey cloud, emanating bafflingly from the earth of the lower town, ruining the townsfolk's garden crops. But gradually, month by month, it grew – vapour became mist, and mist became fog, and the fog, eventually, became a storm cloud.

Inside the cloud, a traveller could expect to encounter flashes of light and rumbling noises, sudden gusts and squalls of thin, poisonous rain that stung bare skin. And sometimes, like the eye of a storm, the cloud appeared to sleep – as still and immutable as the mountain itself.

In the first two years, trade was crippled, domestic animals sickened, the rose gardens of the upper town were ruined – yet the cloud, insatiable, crept uphill towards the castle at the mountain's summit. By the start of the third year, the mountain was swallowed up entirely ... and that's when the Pestilence came.

At the start of the fourth year, the Duke shut and chained the city gates, declaring a state of quarantine. After six years, the people of Duke's Forest, ravaged by disease, cut off from the outside world and shrouded from the sky, had sunk into isolation and despair.

*Duke's Forest: A History*



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# PROLOGUE

## A Cryptling

*Before the storm cloud*

Lena swept the last of the dust into her sack and stood up tall, wiping a grimy hand across her forehead. Her brass lantern flickered across the crypt's rough-hewn walls as Hunter slunk past, a twitching rat hanging from his jaws. He dropped it and purred at her, before savaging the poor creature's torso. The largest mouser prowling the crypts, Hunter was vicious, ginger and apparently immortal. For the hundredth time, Lena wondered why he'd picked her bed in which to sleep, leaving dubious gifts of rodents and birds at its foot.

Lena tied the dust sack shut and hoisted it over her shoulder, casting one last look at the empty, fresh-polished sarcophagus where the body would be laid in the morning for its last rites, the Descent. Her stomach twisted and she swallowed hard as bile rose in her throat. Earlier in the afternoon, she'd been allowed to watch while Mortician Vigo prepared the body in one of the special rooms beneath

the gardens. She had managed – but only by digging her nails hard into her palms – to stop herself from fainting.

The dead man's Ancestors lay all around, stretching into darkness. Now, attuned to the scent of the morticians' special preserving ointments, Lena picked out sharp herbal smells beneath the ever-present musk of her world. The tomb itself was relatively small, and while noble families had the luxury of individual sarcophagi, the stonemason's family – like most others – had cut long body-shaped niches into the walls, one over another, or shared two bodies to a resting place. Husband with wife. Sister with brother. Baby with mother.

Each body's empty eye sockets had been sewn open, their eyes replaced with smooth rocks painted as eyes, or sometimes glittering gemstones. Mortician Vigo said that the Ancestors were sleeping, but Lena didn't think so. They were staring at the ceiling, at the floors of the living world above. Waiting.

*Waiting for what?*

A chill ran down her spine. She touched her forehead, lips and heart in the old sign of reverence. When she'd been very little, the Ancestors had frightened her – she'd had nightmares about the staring stone eyes, about the way the older corpses' flesh and skin were shrunken and leathery, but their hair as thick and lustrous as the day they died. How, from certain angles, even the oldest of the Ancestors looked like living people lying in the dark. But now she was eleven, almost a grown-up, and she wasn't afraid of anything.

Hunter mewed and Lena nearly jumped out of her skin. *I'm not afraid of anything*, she reminded herself firmly, calming her racing heart.

‘All right – let’s go,’ she whispered to the cat, after a deep breath. ‘It’s a long walk back.’

She tried not to hurry as she started down the passages under the upper town, leading to the network of small cellars beneath the castle that the cryptlings called home. You weren’t meant to hurry – it wasn’t respectful, Mortician Vigo said. Hunter weaved through her legs, in and out of the lantern light, very nearly tripping her up.

For a time, everything was quiet and ordinary, the only sounds the occasional scuttle of a rat, or the snap of one of the mousetraps Lena had set out on her way down – the cryptlings and the cats were supposed to keep the vermin at bay. But as she drew further through the cobwebbed passages, she started to hear something strange ... a voice. It grew louder, gradually: a low, rhythmic murmur, drifting from somewhere up ahead.

Lena frowned and stopped. Who else might be down here in the dead of night? As far as she knew, the stonemason’s was the only funeral tomorrow, and she was the only cryptling on duty. No one else was allowed down here.

Suddenly she was frightened. She flicked off her lantern and stood in the dark for a few moments. She didn’t like the thought of being seen – didn’t like the way people’s eyes settled on her, on the black mark on her cheek. She felt

Hunter slide past her legs, hurrying ahead impatiently, as she stood listening in the quiet. The voice carried on – distant and musical. A sad song, perhaps ... or a poem. But Lena couldn't make out the words. She wondered if they were in another language.

She continued down the familiar passages in darkness, trailing her fingers along the wall, her footsteps silent in the padded canvas slippers they had to wear in the crypts. The voice grew closer, louder as she neared the passages she knew were directly beneath the castle itself, where the noble Ancestors and their households were interred. But she saw nothing – and after a time, the voice stopped.

Her heart beat faster. Somehow the silence and darkness were more unnerving now that she knew someone, somewhere, was sharing them with her. And that's when she saw it: the flicker of light. She clutched tightly to the iron handle of her lantern and to her dust sack, half-convincing herself to run. Cold sweat broke out across the back of her neck.

At first, she wondered if it was a trick of her eyes in the dark – she'd known it to happen before, green-purple shapes blooming like strange flowers, disappearing and re-forming at a blink. But this was real, she saw, as it grew closer – a clumsy, winding speck of light, fluttering on and off, bright then dim. A ... butterfly?

She watched, her heart hammering. She'd never felt so terribly alert, every sense sharp, nearly painful.

The creature was made of metal – filigree wings, a smooth brass body. It landed on the edge of a sarcophagus

nearby, its wings gently rising and falling, rising and falling, like the breath of a tiny animal.

It was beautiful.

Lena set down her things and stepped closer. The light emanating from the creature's body was flickering, like a sputtering candle. She reached out to touch it ... but hesitated, fingers outstretched.

All the rules Vigo had ever told her ran through her mind at once, like a flock of startled birds. *Don't reveal your face above ground. Don't touch anybody, especially not anybody who's not a cryptling. Don't touch the Ancestors, except as your duties demand. Don't touch the grave goods. Don't touch anything. To other people, Lena, you are dirty. Everything you touch is sullied.*

And yet ... she'd never seen anything so beautiful. Lena stopped thinking. She reached out and cupped the butterfly in her hands. She felt its delicate legs like feathers on her palms. It was incredibly light and made a faint whirring sound like a watch as its wings fluttered weakly.

Suddenly its little light extinguished and the crypt was plunged into darkness. Lena shivered. The creature was silent and still, the slight warmth quickly fading from its body, as if it had never been.

*Is it broken?*

She waited a few moments more, her heart in her mouth. Somewhere, she could hear hurried footsteps, a voice calling – but if they were searching for the butterfly, they were moving in the wrong direction, some way off to her left. Lena opened her palms and ran her fingers along the

butterfly's body. Its wings were fully outstretched, and she liked the feel of the filigree patterns against her fingertips. It was strangely soothing.

But the butterfly didn't belong to her. She should drop it here and go home.

Even though her mind had decided, her body didn't move. She shouldn't take it, should she? She couldn't. If anyone found out she had removed anything from the crypts, she'd be in trouble. Even if she hadn't found it on a body, it was still grave goods. Who would believe her when she said it had been flying towards her, as if it had chosen her, as if it had *wanted* her to take it?

Somehow it didn't matter: the determination was already hardening in her heart. She wasn't allowed to have things of her own: even her clothes were shared hand-me-downs, her soft shoes worn thin by other cryptlings' feet. And above ground, she knew, the un-Marked children of the upper town had rooms filled with toys and trinkets – and even clothes that only they had worn. Except for the dark birthmark on her cheek, she wasn't any different from them. So why shouldn't she have the butterfly? She felt her breath quicken. It was only one thing. Such a small thing. She'd keep it secret of course. She'd never tell a soul. It would be something hers and hers alone – her only possession. Was that so much to ask?

Lena slipped the metal creature into the inside pocket of her habit, picked up her lantern and sack, and carried on through the tunnels.

# ONE

## The Hounds

*Sixth year of the storm cloud*

Lena ran until her lungs felt close to bursting, her feet thumping, sliding on the steep cobblestone road, down the peak of the city towards the walls and the forest beyond.

The Justice's words rang loud in her ears.

*You have been found guilty of magecraft.*

The storm cloud was all-encompassing, a thick, poisonous gauze clinging to her clothes, obscuring her path.

*I sentence you to die.*

Islands of muffled light trembled in the gloom – a lit window here, a patch of fading sunlight there. Her feet thumped into greyness, invisible.

*The hounds will eat your flesh.*

She could hear them – howling, growling. Had they finished off Vigo? Or had they grown tired of his old flesh, now lusting after hers? He'd bought her time, but it was all for nothing. Tears stung her eyes as she pushed herself faster.

*Your bones will lie bare under the sky, banished from the sacred crypts.*

She could never outrun them. Nobody could. At seventeen, she was far from the youngest to have fallen under the hounds' vicious teeth; you only had to see the chewed-up remains at the foot of the city walls to know that. But there was a chance – just a chance. She had to try.

*Your soul will never join the Ancestors, will never feast on the glories of ages past, will never guide the fates.*

Lena found herself down in the lowest tier of the city. The fog was thicker here. She stumbled to a halt, suddenly unable to breathe, a crushing pain in her side. Pulling up the neck of her habit to cover her mouth and nose, she felt tears welling behind the glass of her shield-eyes.

*You will be dead, in this world and the next.*

A howl broke the gloom, then a chorus of howls, swiftly followed by frenzied barking; the hounds were gaining. No time to cry. She turned and ran, harder than ever, hobnailed boots clacking against the pavement.

Soon the city walls loomed above, a small bone crunching under her foot. She felt sick, but pressed on round the curve of the wall, desperately scanning the base where the dark stone met the bone-littered ground. The gates had been locked for two years, bolted with broad beams of oak, ivy grown over the rusted locks – but nearby ... Vigo had told her ...

Lena scanned the rotted undergrowth for the outline of the old rose bush – and found it, her heart no more than a

hollow, fluttering thing in the back of her throat. She could so easily have missed it altogether, a tangle of bare thorns almost lost among the skeletal remains of its neighbours. Parting the branches with her thick leather gloves, she spotted a slight dip in the earth. So small.

*I used it as a child*, he'd said, in the few moments they'd had together before the hounds. *I would slip out into the forest to play when I was supposed to be at my lessons. It was before my ... deformity.*

She'd shaken her head wordlessly, clutching at his old arthritic hands, the hands which had first picked her up from the steps down to the cryptling cellars as a baby, wailing into the dawn. She'd been crying again, then.

*Lena, I cannot run. But you might just be fast and small enough to escape.*

It was her only chance.

Lena threw herself to the ground as the howls behind her grew in intensity – along with the clink and scratch of claws on the cobblestones. She pressed herself under the bush, the old thorny stems snagging at her habit and showering her with rot, and scabbled into the musty darkness beneath the wall. Curling her fingers as best she could into the damp soil, Lena pulled herself forward, wriggling until her feet were almost concealed under the rose bush, the weight of the great thick wall bearing down over her head, dark and cold and ancient.

The gap was tight, her lungs constricting as she forced her shoulders further, her arms outstretched. She thought

she could feel a wisp of air from the other side – but it was then that a bark came from close quarters, followed by a frenzy of growls, a snapping of teeth. Something closed around the tough leather heel of her boot; a surprising strength pulled her backwards. Panic fuelled her. She gripped on to the wall's slick underside with clawed hands. Her shield-eyes snagged on a root, the leather strap snapping. She let them fall, kicked out hard and redoubled her efforts, squirming frantically under the wall until she could see the light filtering through the other side. She squeezed her shoulders forward and, with more difficulty, her hips, ripping the coarse material of her habit. By this time, she had begun to sob – but somehow she forced her way out.

Lena staggered to her feet, half-falling into the forest. Her heart plummeted as she absorbed the sight confronting her. The forest was a picture of decay, the trees visibly withering. A grey residue veiled their bark and occasionally bumped outwards in a strange fungus. The storm cloud was as thick as it was within the walls of the city, flashing and rumbling between the trees. She thought of her shield-eyes, fallen under the wall – but where she had crawled, the hounds could surely follow: she couldn't risk retrieving them. She ran instead, stumbling over roots, slipping on wet leaves. Here and there, a rotted trunk had fallen across the path, or a branch half-snapped from a larger tree threatened her head.

Gradually, the howls and barks faded altogether, but it was a long time before Lena allowed herself to be certain she had not been followed – perhaps the dogs, penned for

so long within the city walls, had been spooked by the alien scents and noises of the forest. Or perhaps the houndmaster had assumed her dead and called them off, or perhaps he'd feared losing them forever among the trees, as so many travellers had been lost before. In any case, she was painfully grateful. She slowed down, rubbed her stinging eyes and caught her breath. She rested her hands on her knees for a moment, her heartbeat slowing – and then she reached for the brass butterfly she kept in the pocket of her robe. It was as big as the palm of her hand, warm from her body. Tracing the delicate filigree of its wings, she felt her breathing slow.

Whenever she held the butterfly, she remembered how she had felt the night she'd found it – or rather, the night it had found her. She had felt wanted. Calm. Secure in the knowledge that she was worth something, because she had something of worth.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw a shape – a human shape, hunched at the foot of a tree. Her stomach convulsed and she ducked behind a rotten tangle of undergrowth, pressing her hand against her mouth to stifle a rising scream. But the figure didn't appear to have noticed her. The cloud shifted, alternately revealing and concealing a long cloak, brown boots, large leather gloves. So still, so quiet, his hooded head resting on his chest. Sleeping? But she saw no movement, not a twitch, no rise and fall of breath. Slowly, Lena realised the man was dead.

She slipped the butterfly in her pocket, stood up and walked towards him, her whole body still trembling – but

gradually calming as she approached the corpse. She wasn't afraid of the dead – not unless they ... She shook her head, not wanting to think about it. No, it was the living who frightened her.

She crouched, examined a blade dropped near the body, glinting in the faint evening light filtering through cloud and trees. It was a short dagger, the hilt twined with a dragon motif in silver, its eye picked out with a green gem. Hardly thinking, she picked it up, slid it carefully into her belt. As she carried on, she realised the man had been resting on the edge of a small clearing. And she saw another body. A woman, her back turned to Lena, marked out by her perfectly preserved, long red hair, splayed in the mud. And another – a man curled up under his cloak by the blackened remains of a fire. Without meaning to, she glimpsed his face, decayed and ghastly.

These bodies had been here for a long time. Had they been trying to reach the city? They were strangers, surely. What had killed them?

She didn't want to wait to find out.

She returned to the narrow path and carried on at a stumbling run.

After a time, it grew so late that she could barely distinguish the trees from the darkneses in between – but soon she began to see other things, shapes in the fog twisting into suggestions of hands, eyes, mouths. She blinked, rubbing her eyes and cursing the loss of her shield-eyes. No one in Duke's Forest would step outside with their eyes unprotected – the toxic storm cloud caused visions if they were exposed for too

long. Every now and then, larger shapes loomed from between the trees, and she could not prevent herself from starting backwards before they dissipated, even though she knew they weren't real.

She imagined the strangers' bodies in the clearing moving, rising up, following her. *Don't. Think.* But despite her stern thoughts, and the exhaustion screaming at her to stop, she quickened her pace.

Eventually, Lena could continue no longer. Her legs gave out, and she felt her fingers burrow into the mossy mulch of the forest floor. The hallucinations were worsening. She knew she was vulnerable out here – to *real* threats – if she wasn't able to run. She remembered Vigo's tales of the giant snakes and wild boar that infested the wood, and screwed her eyes shut against a wave of terror. She took a deep breath. She needed her wits now more than ever.

But the forest stretched in all directions, and she had long lost the road – how would she escape? And even if she were to find her way out, what fate could a girl like her expect in the wider world? She felt for the birthmark on her cheek, several shades darker than the brown of her skin. Even the people of Duke's Forest had regarded cryptlings – marked out by their various deformities – with a mixture of disgust and begrudging respect for their duties. Vigo had said the gods were cruel, their followers toying with dangerous magic. What would they make of her? What did they do to Marked people outside of Duke's Forest?

Would *they* try to execute her too?

Lena felt a sickly chill spread from her throat to her stomach as she considered the most terrible possibility of all: what if the storm cloud had swallowed everything, leaving the city of Duke's Forest the lonely centre of the universe? What if those people had been trying to reach Duke's Forest to save themselves?

No – she could not give up. Lena opened her eyes and dragged her exhausted body upright once more, determined to continue, but now she was surrounded, not by trees, but by a mass of people, each one of them turning towards her – each one of them familiar. These were the dead of Duke's Forest, the dead the Pestilence had taken, the dead she had helped to undress, wash and embalm, replacing their eyes with the painted stones and glittering gems that now bore into her.

She was a convicted mage, and an outcast, and the Ancestors were angry.

She stumbled back against a tree, touched her forehead, lips and chest in a silent prayer, her hand shaking. 'Please ...' she managed, but the Ancestors' hearts were hollowed out. The world turned black.

Lena had been sixteen the first time it had happened, a year before the Justice had condemned her to die. She'd been helping Vigo embalm an old guardsman, dead of the Pestilence, in one of the special preparatory chambers beneath the castle's gardens. Thick glass bricks had been set

in the ceiling, allowing weak light – and the occasional flash of the storm cloud’s blue-green lightning – to filter down on their delicate work.

She had pulled up the guardsman’s left eyelid to sew it in place with the curved needle and special white thread. Eyes were something of a specialty of Lena’s, with her slender, accurate fingers – and although she had once hated the feel of the cold gems slotting into empty sockets, in time she had come to find it satisfying.

‘Have you thought about what you’re going to do?’ Master Vigo had said, in the manner of one who had asked the question a hundred times. He was in the process of removing and potting the organs, a special stoneware jar for each one. The smell of spoiling flesh filled the air, but Lena had grown used to it long ago. ‘You ought to. You’ve barely a year until you come of age.’ He deftly pulled the liver through the small incision he had cut in the body’s side and slipped it into the waiting vessel, already packed with the sharp-smelling preservative oils and herbs.

‘I haven’t thought about it,’ Lena lied, trying to sound dismissive. ‘A year is a long time.’ In fact, she’d been thinking about it a lot recently. She’d never chosen this life. The birthmark on her face had chosen it for her – or rather her parents had, whoever they were, when they decided to abandon her to the fate of a cryptling rather than raise a Marked child.

‘It’s not, and you’re a fool to pretend you can put it off for much longer.’

Lena shrugged as she pulled the fourth stitch neatly through the thin skin of the lid. Vigo was a miserable old goat, but she'd come to love him, and she knew he was right. As she leaned forward to make her fifth and last stitch, she felt the weight of the brass butterfly in her pocket. Her secret, ever since she had found it fluttering in the catacombs. She knew if anyone saw it, she'd be accused of stealing grave goods, a terrible crime for a cryptling – but somehow she couldn't bear to let it go. It was the only thing she had.

'You'd make a good mortician,' said Vigo, limping around the body to inspect her work as she tied the thread and snipped it with a pair of small, sharp scissors. 'You've a steady hand, Lena – and you're quiet, respectful.' She glanced up at him. She could tell his leg was hurting him today – the tension around his eyes and mouth showed itself in hard lines through his pale, papery skin. He had a wooden peg from the knee down to replace the limb they'd had to amputate, but no matter how hard Lena tried to find him the right kind of padding, and the right sort of salve, the place where it met the stub was nearly always sore.

She smiled at him weakly and shook her head, setting down her needle. She couldn't tell him the truth. She couldn't admit that because every option involved working in the crypts for the rest of her life, she didn't feel like she had a choice at all. Subconsciously, she touched the mark on her face, a black stain as big as a child's clenched fist. If it weren't for the mark, she'd be ordinary. Imagine. Where would she be now? *Maybe with my parents in a*

*mansion in the upper town, eating sweets and laughing ...* Lena pictured strong sunlight spilling through tall windows, no cowl to shadow her face. She tilted her head slightly towards the glass roof, imagining how the warmth would feel against her skin.

‘Lena?’ Master Vigo shot her a concerned glance. ‘Are you all right?’

‘Sorry,’ she said, returning her attention to her task, slotting more of the white thread through her needle. It was stupid to fantasise as she had done when she was younger. Life was difficult for everyone now: for a year, the city had been under quarantine. Instead of eating sweets in sunny rooms, half the people of the city were dead, rich and poor alike, and the other half lived in fear. As the cloud had deepened and darkened, strange flashes and rumbles disturbing its noxious peace, the Pestilence raged through the population, spreading its fever of hallucinations and shivers that left each victim dead in a matter of hours. The disease had visited three times – always in the warmest months, as if it thrived on the meagre heat of a mountain summer. It was September, and the latest flurry of deaths was drawing to an end.

‘Why not be a mortician?’ Vigo went on, warming to his subject as he pulled out the intestines. ‘People need us more than ever. We are busier than we’ve ever been. And the Justice knows he won’t find any mages among our number. You’ll be safe here.’

‘The Justice,’ Lena whispered. ‘Yes ... I am glad to be safe from him.’ Ever since the Duke had fallen ill, the Justice had

ruled the city with a cold, hard grip. Like most of his citizens, the Justice knew the unnatural storm and Pestilence could have but one cause: magic. Unlike most of his citizens, the Justice had dedicated his attention to searching for the mage or mages responsible. He was obsessed, the other cryptlings whispered, ordering his guards to search for evidence of magic, burning the few magical books and toys in the city, his vicious hounds chasing suspect after suspect to an early, gruesome grave at the city walls. Lena could hear the dogs sometimes, howling in the kennels at dawn, and the sound chilled her to the core. But the cryptlings, dedicated to serving the Ancestors, had never suffered under his rule. The Justice *loved* the Ancestors. Since he'd accepted the reins of power, the ceremonies and rituals dedicated to their honour had grown threefold – old prayers and ceremonies resurrected, new ones invented.

Vigo slid the remains of food from the intestines on to the floor, a system of flowing drains transporting the waste out of the city. 'But what do you say, Lena? Would you like to be a mortician?'

Lena wasn't listening. All right, so she was safe down here – but it still wasn't enough, was it? What if she wasn't meant to be here at all? What if this was all some big mistake – like her parents had left her little basket on the steps just for a moment, and returned to find it gone? Or she'd been swapped with another child by accident? What if there was some other life she should be living, some other place where she would belong? She didn't feel like she

belonged here, that was for sure – and yet this was where she was trapped. She found her vision blurring, frustration trembling her fingers.

‘Why aren’t you answering?’ Vigo snapped. Quickly he tried to soften his voice, though he still sounded irritated as he packed the intestines into their stoneware grave. ‘If you want to try something else, you only need say.’

He’d misunderstood her silence completely. Lena felt instantly sorry: it wasn’t his fault she felt this way. She gathered herself together and spoke at last. ‘I would like to stay with you, Vigo, of course I would. I just wish ... I just wish there were more options to choose from. Before the quarantine ...’ She looked down at the corpse. One eye sewn open, one eye shut, his face was frozen in a grotesque wink.

Vigo sighed, sealing the intestine jar with a deft twist of his swollen-knuckled hand. ‘Before the quarantine, you would have had the option to leave Duke’s Forest altogether, is that what you’re saying?’ As he set the jar down and wiped his hands, he looked very old and tired, and Lena knew he understood.

‘No, I just ...’ She shook her head. ‘This is my home, Vigo. But it sometimes feels like a prison too.’

He sighed. ‘People like us are marked out for the life we lead, Lena – marked out by the Ancestors themselves. I understand your frustration. When I was your age, I wanted to see the world too – but what was I to do, as a cripple? It is cruel, in a way, the fate that we are handed. My parents abandoned me after my accident. I was a child of six, old

enough to remember who they were, to remember their love, our home, my brothers and sisters, my name.’ Lena said a silent prayer of thanks that she had been so young when she was abandoned. It was easier not quite knowing what you had lost – and although Vigo spoke briskly, in his usual matter-of-fact tone, she could hear the pain beneath his words. ‘It is cruel,’ he carried on, his voice quickening, ‘to give it all up. But it is also an honour. Our families abandon us, divest us of our names and sever our ties to our own blood Ancestors – but it’s only in order that we might serve *all* the Ancestors. Think on it.’

Lena thought on it, but found herself wondering which of the corpses under the mountain were related to her by blood – and whether she’d prepared a body for a grave that was an aunt, or a cousin, or a brother, without ever realising. Had Vigo ever prepared one of his parents or siblings, recognising their faces but unable to acknowledge them for who they were?

‘Ordinary people *never* see the Ancestors,’ Vigo continued, ‘except at funerals. Are we not blessed to be around them constantly? The work we do is the most sacred of all work. I have been here seventy years, Lena, and I feel my life has had purpose, and joy, and sorrow, as much as any other life. I had a wife for many years.’ His eyes grew suddenly watery and he turned aside. ‘I had a child.’

Despite the sincerity in his voice, the suppressed tears, she wasn’t in the mood to play along. Not today. ‘Seventy years in darkness,’ Lena said, setting down her needle and

picking up the green painted eye-stone, not caring if she hurt the old man's feelings. 'A wife and child who lived and died in darkness. Sounds bad enough to me.'

'It is not as if we never go outside, Lena,' he snapped.

'Hidden under a cowl!' she protested, grasping the eye-stone tightly, feeling it cold and hard in her palm. 'We might as well be underground. It's like *they*' – she gestured at the frosted glass ceiling, at the city above – 'can't bear to see us. Like we shame them. I don't feel chosen at all. I don't feel special. I feel the opposite of special.' She turned to the opened eye, scooped out the eyeball with a spoon and slotted the gem in its place. She sullenly plopped the eyeball in a copper dish.

Vigo went quiet for a moment, studiously tending the herbal mixture with which he would pack the dead man's cavities, the whisper and rattle of the pestle and mortar the only sound in the preparatory chamber. In the silence, Lena grew to regret her words about his wife and son, who had died years before she was born, but she wasn't sure how to say sorry. Eventually, Vigo apologised instead, his voice slightly unsteady. 'I am sorry you feel this way. If not for the quarantine, you would have had the opportunity to leave forever. But now ...'

'I never said I wanted to leave forever.' Lena hung her head, feeling shame burn tight and hot in her chest. 'I don't. No one should have to face such a stark choice – to stay forever or leave forever. What kind of a choice is that? I just ... I just want a *real* choice. I want to feel like I'm in control for once.'

She picked up her needle again and started to pull back the second eyelid to sew it into place.

That's when it happened.

That's when the dead man's eye turned to her face and looked right at her, accusingly. She felt the swivel of it under her touch.

She leaped backwards, dropping her needle and thread and knocking an urn of priceless embalming oil with her elbow. It toppled and shattered.

Vigo looked at her as if she'd gone mad.

'He ...' Even as the words started to leave her lips, she swallowed them. The man's eye was dead and sightless once more. 'I ... I'm not feeling well.'

It was true: she felt sick. She had imagined it. She *must* have imagined it. Vigo sent her back to her cell and cleaned up the mess – despite his infirmities – insisting that she rest. Lying on her bed like a corpse herself, staring at the ceiling, she had felt terrible. She played the moment over and over in her mind. Even when Hunter had sat on her chest, purring like a furnace, she'd felt somehow detached from the world, trapped in that moment of horror. *Was* she going mad?

Later, in the refectory at dinner, she'd asked the other cryptlings if they had any stories – Ancestors moving or twitching as they were prepared ... But it was the usual stuff. The hunchbacked boy who sat opposite Lena told her he'd prepared a corpse that farted. The deaf girl next to her mimed how she'd watched as a dead man's arm had risen up like a

balloon, and everyone laughed. Lena nodded, smiling, pretending her experience had been similar. It was true: the contents of bellies could sometimes flood the body with gas, and that could make a corpse move. She told herself that was what had happened. But deep down she knew it was different. Who had ever heard of gas moving eyes? And besides, the man's eye had fixed on her like he knew what she was doing – what she was *thinking*. Gas couldn't do that.

Next thing Lena knew there were footsteps, and she started from the forest floor, spitting dead leaves from her open mouth, scrambling back towards the protection of the tree trunk behind her. A shadow began to emerge from the fog. Lena tried to raise herself to her feet, tried to run, but she could not, her legs cramped with cold.

The shadow solidified into a darker mass, holding a bulb of purple light. The figure stopped before her, as if Lena had been its destination all along. She recoiled. There was something wrong with the face of this creature – a smooth brass surface with glassy black eyes and a gaping mouth. A faint *tick-tick-tick* noise appeared to emanate from the face, a cog turning somewhere at its jaw. Lena's hands scrambled at the sides of the tree as she pulled herself upright, shivering, and she hurriedly drew the knife from her belt.

'Get back!' she managed shakily, swiping the blade through the air.

The purple light sped towards her, and Lena saw it was attached to the end of a long cane, which rapped the back

of her hand sharply. Her silver knife went spinning to the ground. She snatched her hand to her chest, her knuckles burning.

This was no monster, she realised, raising her eyes. The strange face was a mask, and the figure was a woman's – a rich woman's, at that. This she could tell by the velvet dress, cinched in at a tiny waist, the golden round talisman hanging almost to her stomach, the gold-tipped cane at her side and the slim kid-leather boots. Long fair hair had been wound into a tight coil at the top of the lady's head. But she wasn't just a woman. The light on her cane was no ordinary lantern. How could it be? The light glowed not yellow, like fire, but an unnatural purple.

*She's a mage.* Lena's stomach twisted in terror.

She watched as the woman observed her own clothes: the faded black habit, the cowl shadowing her face. The lady reached forward with her cane and pushed back the hood; the bright purple light smarted Lena's eyes. She put the bulb of the cane under Lena's chin, and turned it one way and then the other. Lena could feel a strange, mild heat burning inside the glass. Her heart hammered in her chest. The mask's gaze seemed to linger on the dark birthmark on her smooth cheek – perhaps with disgust, perhaps curiosity.

And then, through the grille over the mouth of the mask, a metallic rasp said, 'So you're a cryptling. What are you doing here?'

Lena was silent.

'I said, what are you doing here? What of the quarantine?'

said the woman. 'Speak now and tell me the truth or I shall lose my patience.' She had an authority to her voice that made Lena afraid *not* to answer.

She shook her head, trying to steady her senses. 'I ... was convicted of magecraft and sentenced to death. I escaped. The Justice ...' She trailed off, clenching her fists as grief and anger overwhelmed her.

'The Justice? What of the Justice?'

'He's been hunting mages since the quarantine. He thinks there are mages in the city, causing the storm cloud. And he convicted ... me. He killed my ...' What had he been to her? A parent? A teacher? A grandfather? 'He killed my master. For trying to protect me. But before he was murdered, Vigo told me a way out.'

'I see.' The masked lady regarded her coolly, offering no sympathy, no apology. But she lowered her cane, and somehow Lena felt she understood.

After a few moments, she found the courage to speak again. 'I ... please, I don't know the way out of the forest. Can you help me?'

The lady nodded slowly. 'I will ... but you must do something for me too.'

Lena waited. What could she possibly do to help this lady?

'A man has been pursuing me – you will find him at the forest edge. His name is Emris. You are to tell him that I helped you. Tell him that I said he is mistaken, that I am innocent.' She rapped the side of Lena's head with the cane. 'Do you understand me, girl? Repeat it.'

Lena stammered and flushed with indignation. If she wasn't so reliant on this stranger's help, she'd have told the lady where to stick her cane. 'I ... I am to tell the man at the forest edge that you helped me, that he is mistaken and you are innocent.' *Innocent of what?* she wondered.

'Good.' The woman lowered her cane. 'Now go. There are those in the world that do not come from Duke's Forest, nor believe in its superstitions.' Her voice was heavy with a cold kind of pity. And as she walked past, she added, 'Keep walking, mage, and follow the footsteps I have left behind. You will soon find your way out.'

Lena watched her slender figure fade into the shifting air, the unnatural purple light on her cane gradually swallowed by the cloud. *Mage*. A shiver ran through her and she clenched her fists tight to stop her hands trembling.

She took a deep breath, swallowed, and tried to relax a little. When she felt steady enough, she picked up the silver dragon-knife from the forest floor and slid it into her belt. Then she turned her eyes in the direction from which the masked lady had emerged. *Follow the footsteps*. Lena had wondered how; in the darkness, in the fog, she could barely see her hand in front of her face. But gradually, as she watched, the masked lady's footsteps began to *burn*.

A twisting path illuminated the underbelly of the storm cloud in purple imprints, winding into the distance. And Lena knew she would never have found her way without it. The forest's trick paths looped and disappeared and reappeared without rhythm or pattern, and the storm cloud

flickered blue and green between the trees, casting crazed shadows. But the footsteps were steady, trailing far ahead until the thickening vapour reduced them to a blur, then a faint smudge of light.

Lena followed the path.

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