

MARA

The background of the cover is a dark, overcast sky with several small, dark birds flying in the distance. In the center, a woman with long, straight, light-colored hair stands wearing a vibrant red, long-sleeved cape with a traditional Chinese-style button closure. Behind her, slightly to the left, stands a figure in a black hooded cloak with a mask that has a golden, animal-like face. The overall mood is mysterious and dramatic.

AND

REVENGE UNDER
SCARLET CAPE.

MOROK

TRUTH UNDER

BLACK MASK

LEAH ARDEN

Лия Арден **Mara and Morok**

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Аннотация

Таких, как я, называют Марами – отмеченными самой богиней смерти Мораной. Когда-то у меня и моих шести сестер был свой путь.

Тогда люди нас уважали и просили о милосердии. Они приносили нам подношения и молились нам. Но 200 лет назад все изменилось, когда принц Серата осмелился поднять руку на одну из нас.

Я пыталась отомстить, но погибли мы все. Теперь правители Аракена, погрязшие в длительной войне со своим соседом Сератом, решили вернуть меня к жизни. Дать второй шанс на месть и свободу, привязав меня к тому, против кого я никогда не пойду. Таких, как он, называют Морок, и их боятся абсолютно все.

Читайте любовное фэнтези теперь на английском языке!

Welcome to the world of belligerent kingdoms of Serat and Araken, where on the border of good and evil Mara is resurrected for

revenge. Grey haired, wearing a scarlet cape, she is tied to the one who has brought her from the grave.

The perfect blend of dark epic fantasy and romance swirls “Corpse Bride” and “Van Helsing” under the scarlet cape of the one, whose spirit is free.

“There were seven of us. Maras – the ones marked by Morana, the goddess of death herself. Once in the world, Maras had their own way. Back then, people respected us and asked for mercy. They brought us offerings and prayed to us. But 200 years ago everything changed when Prince of Serat dared to raise his hand against one of us. That’s how one of us died. Driven by vengeance, the six of us came to the bloody Prince, but were all killed”

Moroks are marked by The Shadow, the non-existence, where the most rotten souls disappear. Prince of Araken, Daniel orders a Morok to revive a Mara called Agatha. Daniel wants Agatha to use her magic to save the heir to the throne, Nikolay, who’s thought to have been poisoned by the King of Serat.

Agatha knows, that she is tied to Morok, and that this is her only chance to take revenge. She is going to help Prince of Araken, but the price of her help will be very high.

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Лия Арден

Mara and Morok

1

I'm dragging my feet in his wake, doing my best to keep apace with him. For as soon as I slow down, he pulls the chains that are attached to manacles on my wrists and a metal ring around my neck. And if he does it with a jerk, then I'll keel over right into the muck the road has turned into because of the recent downpour. And I wouldn't like to stain my new, and so far, the only, clothes I have. Well regardless, this shirt and caftan are much better than the half-rotten rags they raised me from my grave in.

There is a crowd of curious onlookers gathered on the either side of the road. Even though they huddle together, especially when we walk past, they still can't contain their curiosity – they haven't ventured out to the middle of nowhere in these small hours for nothing, right? Thick, dark clouds have overcast the autumnal sky and it's impossible to guess if it's still morning or if the sun has already started on its way back to the horizon. I can literally feel that nip in the air that signals the upcoming winter. While they were pulling me out of the ground an hour before dawn, I saw my breath escape in tiny clouds of steam and heard the hoarfrost squeaking and crunching underfoot when I stepped

onto the grass.

The faces of the people who see me show the whole range of human emotions: from curiosity, to awe, and even terror. But then again, why should I be surprised? I'm sure it's not every day that they have an opportunity to see a creature from legends and old folk tales raised from the dead. But I have no intention of becoming an exotic beast shown off to entertain the audience, so I lower my head and hope my hood will allow me at least to ignore the prying stares.

Of course, I couldn't escape those stares even if I tried. My scarlet cloak is too conspicuous against the pale background. My lips break into a thin smile as I realize they have dressed me in these ritual robes on purpose, to remind people of my origins and what I really am. Yes, my sisters and I used to wear these to stand out against the winter landscapes and snow-white shrouds that our Goddess owned. But now I'm splashing through the mud, leaving stains on the hem of my cloak. It shouldn't bother me at all but that nagging feeling of resentment has already extended its tentacles and is reaching for my chest.

There were seven of us, including me. Maras. This is the name people gave us. We can do things common people do: drink, sleep, fear, die, and scream with pain. The only difference is that we were all marked by Morana, the Goddess of Death, when we were ten years old, and have been destined to do her bidding ever since. You are special, some people said; your mission means more than life, echoed others while taking us away from our

families to bring us up in keeping with their illusory higher cause. I wish they'd repeated that to my sisters, now that their flesh is decomposing in the mass grave. Or they might have been burnt and my body alone had the bad luck of remaining intact.

A while ago they may have been right, we might have been special. But everything's changed.

I died a long time ago and now the world is a far cry from what it used to be.

He finally tugs at the chain and I stumble forward staining my boots even more. If it were anyone else, I would just hiss my curse and the person would bolt, scared out of their wits and worrying that the few words that have escaped my lips might bring bad luck to his whole kin. But with this man, all I can do is look up in terror and see that black-and-gold mask that hides his whole face, partly covered by the shadow from his hood. The mask reminds me of some beast, probably a jackal, with black holes where the eyes should be. Anyone would wonder if there even is a human being behind the mask. Though whether he is human is also a big question. There's a rumor that there's no face at all, just the darkness itself or a bare skull. No one can say for sure as no one has seen it and lived to tell the tale. Creatures like him are called Moroks. They serve the Shadow, which has no beginning and no end. It's nothing but emptiness, silence and endless loneliness.

I drop my gaze and ask for forgiveness. Then, I awkwardly pull my foot out of the mud with a mortifying squelch, to be able to continue walking. I don't have the guts to look up at him

again but I can feel the pressure of his unwavering stare. Two platoons are accompanying us so as to hold back the crowd and prevent them from getting their hands on me. But it all seems a bit excessive, as no one would approach me, even at knifepoint, while Morok is in the vicinity. If I could, I myself would put as much distance as possible between us.

“How can we be afraid of anyone, we, marked by Morana herself?” I remember asking one of my sisters. Well, somehow, we can.

Absolutely everyone is terrified of Moroks.

And it was a Morok who raised me from the ground three days ago and by enabling me to walk and talk, magically tied me to him. I can breathe only while he is breathing. And it's only the creatures like him who are capable of such sorcery. No one's offered me a mirror, so I have no idea how I look, though during the first night I surreptitiously touched my face here and there and didn't feel anything out of the ordinary, except for the hollow cheeks. While examining the rest of my body I just noticed that my skin had a cadaverous look to it and my long, black hair has turned grey. It doesn't look silver now, just plain grey, like a mouse's fur. I look at my hands with disgust: the fingers are too thin, like bones wrapped in a bit of skin, and I dread to think what my face looks like right now. Though people are not scattering away in repulsion, which I take as a good sign.

“The skin tone will get back to normal in a while,” Morok croaked a few hours ago when I kept scratching the skin on my

wrists hoping I could rub that bluish tint that reminded me of death off my hands.

I froze, horrified. The sound is distorted because of the mask but I suppose it's the voice of a man, though it's impossible to tell his age or even if the voice is pleasant or not. I just had the time to register a cold and empty feeling spreading in my chest while he spoke.

“And my hair?” Why do I even worry about that?

But he replied, for the last time during our journey, “Your hair will stay as it is.”

I didn't probe further.

“We're here!” I hear the prince announce in a loud voice. He pulls on the reins and his horse comes to a halt. The road stops here. I see that we've reached the edge of the woods.

“HALT!” thunders the captain, also pulling on the reins.

All the soldiers, Morok and me come to a standstill and the common people stay fifteen yards behind, not daring to come any closer.

The prince faces me and smiles. He must be happy with the place though I still have no idea why they have dragged me all the way out here, so I don't rush to join in his cheerfulness. I turn my gaze to the gloomy woods ahead. The trees are mostly leafless and their bare, gnarled limbs stick out in different directions. The further my gaze penetrates the gloomy darkness, the more the fir trees try to block it, and it becomes impossible to make out what is hiding there, in the shadows.

The prince dismounts gracefully and sets off in my direction. Unlike the other men, he hasn't got any armor on. He's wearing black trousers and a buttoned-up black coatee with long tails, which fits his well-shaped figure perfectly. The gold-thread embroidery and epaulettes highlight his high status and position of power, though his proud bearing and confident gait could do the trick just as well. He walks past Morok without a flicker of fear on his face, and my guard follows him with his gaze.

"Well, Mara, now, I hope you can show us what you can do."

The prince speaks gently and the smile reaches to his warm, hazel eyes. He says it as if he is actually asking for my help, but he isn't. He doesn't look older than nineteen, the same age I was when I died. But he's a prince and I'm his prisoner and a walking corpse. He nods to the captain, who hands him a sword, which the prince, in his turn, offers to me.

"Do you want me to chop some wood for the fire?" I ask indifferently.

"Watch your tone when talking to His Royal Highness!" the captain roars.

"It's alright," the prince chirps with the same gentle smile.

I may be afraid of Morok, but this Prince Daniel and his soldiers – please! The worst they can do is kill me, and to me that's not even a threat. The prince takes another step towards me and leans forward so that his voice doesn't carry.

"Let me repeat, Agatha. I would love to see what you can do." I try not to reveal my surprise at the sound of my name, I wonder

where he knows it from. “It took me a lot of effort to convince my father that your revival is in our own interests. Please don’t make me regret that. You may be dead but don’t forget that I can say one word and you will be sent to a place far worse than where you are now.”

The words make me break out in a cold sweat. I cast a sidelong glance at Morok, who must have heard everything as he’s standing closest to us. Prince Daniel is right. He can utter one short word and Morok will send me to the Shadow. And it’s not death, it’s worse.

“What shall I do?”

“Good girl!” The prince is pleased. He grabs my hand, pulling me closer, and gestures towards the woods. “People say there’s a ghoul dragging young women off to his den, and he’s hiding there. Ghouls are your specialty, right?”

“Right.”

“There are not many evil spirits left in this area, but according to the folk legends, it was Maras and Moroks who used to help people get rid of them,” he goes on, taking no notice of my reply. “Unchain her,” he orders to Morok.

“Your Highness, are you sure it’s safe?” the captain butts in, eyeing me suspiciously.

“Stop worrying, Dariy. You’ll get yourself more silver hairs,” the prince brushes him off. Dariy frowns. “Don’t you know the powers a Morok has? These chains are just props, so that the crowd feels safe. Otherwise, we don’t need them.”

Morok steps closer and starts unfastening the manacles on my wrists, and then from my neck too. I try not to jerk nervously when his long fingers in black gloves brush my skin. Morok is a head taller than me. I can't guess at his build as his body is covered in black armor and wrapped in a black well-worn cloak. But the shoulder-straps under the cloak make him look broad-shouldered and intimidating. When he's standing close to me, I want to crouch down and stay as inconspicuous as possible.

"She's magically bound to Morok and can't get too far. And even if she attempts to escape, he will track her down in no time. He will follow her trail like a hound. Is that right?"

Morok nods in response and I sigh with relief when he finally steps away from me. I barely have time to rub my neck, sore from the metal ring, before the prince takes hold of my arm and drags me to the edge of the woods. *He's either mad or just stupid.* The others at least have the sense not to touch me.

"Agatha," he sings out my name with something verging on fondness, "I must admit that a lot of time has passed and people have forgotten about the true powers given to you by Morana, and what is left are silly tales to frighten little children and a bunch of fools."

"And what do they say about us?"

"Hm, for instance, that in winter, you walk among the houses in the dark and call out names. Whoever answers – dies. And some people say that after you die, you continue roaming the earth but carrying your head under your arm."

I gaped at him wondering if he's just made it all up or if people have really turned us into spooky fairy-tale characters.

"But I was brought up on ancient legends," the prince goes on completely unperturbed, "about you, Maras, ridding the world of evil, severing the lifelines of tyrants and bestowing the gift of longevity upon the noble monarchs who were good to their subjects. About your scarlet cloaks standing out against snow-white landscapes, your ivory skin with rosy cheeks and ruby-red lips and flowing jet-black hair."

I'd say he's mocking me, if not for that dreamy look in his eyes when he runs his fingers through his fair hair, which only barely covers his ears.

"I heard each of you was young and beautiful, a mirror image of Morana herself." The prince finally turns his gaze back to me and his awe is replaced by condescension, a shade of pity in his smile.

I can hardly keep myself from cringing when he sympathetically pats me on the wrist and holds on to my hand. I want to pull it away but he keeps it tightly in his grasp.

"It's such a shame I never had a chance to get to know you and your sisters at the peak of your power. I wish I had lived when all the fairy tales were real. But we'll have time to chat. I'd love to hear some exciting stories about your life. But now, please get rid of the ghoul."

Prince Daniel stops somewhere between his guards and the edge of the forest. This time I take the sword out of his hands

and stand motionless unsure what to do next. The prince folds his arms on his chest and looks at me expectantly.

“Would His Highness like to step back a little?” the corners of my mouth twitch when I see he understands that what I’m really saying is that he’d better clear off.

“He wouldn’t.” His smile becomes even wider, showing his snow-white teeth. “I prefer watching from the first row.”

“Have you ever seen a ghoul?” I’m trying to put him off his stride.

“I’ve seen colorful pictures in the books,” he retorts, obviously not taking the situation seriously at all.

“Then, would you be so kind as to lend me your dagger, too?”

The prince cocks an eyebrow, realizing that if he does, he will be unarmed. He doesn’t have a sword on him. I’m trying to keep a straight face watching his hesitation. I suppose he didn’t read his fairy tales carefully enough if he thinks his dagger could protect him from me. Though even to attempt to kill him would be a stupid thing to do.

“This dagger is my lucky charm, so I hope you’ll give it back to me soon,” he says offering his weapon to me.

“By all means,” I reply stiffly, taking the dagger and heading to the edge of the woods.

Ghoul.

The prince’s information might be incomplete and partly distorted but most of what he was mumbling is true. It only sounds sinister that we were marked by the Goddess of Death,

in reality we often did more good than harm, though maybe in an unexpected form sometimes. We can lay to rest something that has been dead a long time but has been clinging to the past life, reluctant to leave this world. That includes ghouls, demons, ghosts, souls of drowned people and other evil spirits. To kill a ghoul, you have to be fast. You have to know that you must cut off the creature's head and hands, that you need to keep away from its teeth, and that the first spot where it will try to bite you is your neck. And even if you kill it, you have to burn the remains right away, otherwise all your effort will be futile. And that's only a ghoul. For different spirits there are different rules, and very few people know how to deal with them. But Maras or Moroks can do it all on our own.

Maras have the power of seeing and touching things people can't see. I only need to touch the spirit to sever its lifeline and give it another chance to move on. That's exactly what we used to do with my sisters. We would send lost souls on their way to the next world.

It was the primary task of all Maras, but then we got dragged into politics. We started severing the lifelines of the rulers who had brought devastation on their land and people, the tyrants who had nearly destroyed their own countries.

There was a rumor that even before I was born, my sisters bestowed longevity upon two kings. This was also one of our powers but no one knew back then that you had to keep this information a secret, otherwise it would become the thing that'd

destroy us. And that's exactly what happened.

We are not immortal and our mission is dangerous, so a lot of sisters died in the process of cleansing the world from evil. And even if a Mara manages to live a full life, it will only be one and a half times that of a regular person's lifespan. Before, there was a balance, there were always seven Maras. If one Mara died, another ten-year-old girl would be marked by Morana.

But now I'm the only one left and I can't see any point in doing people good in return for the evil they have caused us. But first things first, I need to free myself from these ties with Morok, which means I'll have to behave myself for a while. And in the end, I'm also curious why they risked so much to revive me. Somehow, I don't think they did it just to get rid of a ghoul.

I throw back the hood and sniff the air trying to smell the ghoul. He's sleeping in the shadow of the fir trees, waiting for dusk, when the sunlight won't disturb him anymore. The stench of rotting flesh is easy to distinguish from the fresh fragrance of the woods and the smell of damp soil.

Prince Daniel wants a show, so why not.

And I strike up a song, a quiet ritual prayer set to music. My lips break into an involuntary smile when I hear the prince and his soldiers let out a collective sigh of admiration. It's not only Maras' faces that are beautiful, our voices, too. We need these to summon the evil spirits, which come running as if hypnotized. It makes hunting easier but there's also a side effect...

I notice that Morok has got it all. He's admiring neither the

voice nor the tune, instead he unfolds his arms and starts walking towards me with an intensity that wasn't there before. But I raise my hand and surprisingly, he freezes, probably deciding to give me a chance.

To be honest, I'm taking a huge risk. Maras only used to attempt a summoning song if at least three sisters had their back. But my own death made me somewhat reckless.

I keep singing for another few minutes. The sound vibrates in my chest, my lungs fill with oxygen and sounds are being pieced together in familiar words as if on their own.

I can feel them waking up. Just as I anticipated, the ghoul is not the only spirit that can hear me. I can feel a low hum spreading through the earth and vibrating in my legs. The birds fall silent terrified by the creatures that are hijacking their home. I finish the song and cast away my cloak, which would only constrict my movements. Under the cloak, I'm wearing plain black trousers, a simple shirt and a buttoned-up caftan in a shade of burgundy. None of it is going to protect me from a blade, nor fangs or claws, but at least I can move quickly. I tighten my grasp on the sword and the dagger, my spine prickling with the anticipation of the on-lookers behind me. I breathe out and start counting to myself, sensing each of their steps.

Nineteen...

Twenty...

Twenty-one...

"Dear Agatha..." the prince starts, he's already tired of

waiting.

Twenty-three...

“Are you going into the woods or do you need some help with that?” He’s almost sneering.

Twenty-four...

Twenty-five...

The first one springs out of the woods earlier than I expect. A foul creature, which looks more like a demon than a human being, but of course he’s neither. He has thin arms and legs with long, deadly claws, greyish skin with an obnoxious green tint is wrapped tightly around his bones, and the mouth is filled with razor-sharp fangs. I block his way when he’s trying to dart towards the soldiers. I dodge his claws diving under his outstretched arm and thrust the sword from behind between his neck and his shoulder. The sword enters his body and I hear the revolting sound of his skin being ripped apart and his collarbone being shattered. The creature trips and falls down in a heap. Everything happens so fast that no one lets out so much as a squeak. But I can see the prince’s face turn white when he glimpses the wrinkled skin of the ghoul, now lying prone in the withered grass. It’s an old ghoul who’s been treading the earth for a long time and his shriveled skin and rare patches of shaggy hair look sickening. I lean in to finish the job and to show them some real magic. To thrust a sword into the creature is no big deal, anyone from those standing around me could do that. I touch the ghoul’s neck lightly with the tips of my fingers and grasp

them, sparkling, iridescent, pale golden threads stretching along his spine. Threads of life.

This is our special power. We see these threads of life and can either strengthen them or if we want to, sever them. There should be three of them but the spirits have only one or two left, the others already torn. This ghoul still has two whole ones. I straighten up, holding the glittering threads in my fist, like a trophy, and stretch them as far as possible so that common people can see them too. And then, locking eyes with the prince, who doesn't even try to hide his admiration, I tear them by jerking my hand upward. The ghoul's body shudders and becomes still, now for good, and the threads disappear.

My palm is sore, there are two deep cuts where the threads cut into it. But there's almost no blood as my heart doesn't work, it doesn't pump that red liquid through my veins anymore. I hide the cuts by balling my hand into a fist. I should have just cut the threads with a dagger like we always did before. But I put on a show in front of Prince Daniel on purpose, so that he knows that, if need be, I can cut off his life threads just as easily. I'd hoped he would be terrified, but there's a glint of keen interest in his eyes and an almost happy smile lights up his face. The smile of a person who's found a diamond instead of a quartz. But I don't have much time to dwell on the thought as another ghoul jumps out of the woods. I turn to him now only clenching the dagger in my hand and wait for him to attack me. But the creature ignores me and makes a quick about-turn. I have just enough time to

swing around and throw my dagger into his head before he jumps at the prince. The ghoul collapses right at Daniel's feet.

I'll give him that, the prince doesn't pass out. Just takes a few steps back. There's no trace of a smile on his face anymore.

"Oh, my Goddess..." I sigh, realizing my mistake.

I exchange quick glances with Morok. I can't see his face or guess at his emotions but I have a feeling we are thinking about one and the same thing. I had expected all the spirits to attack only me but forgot that I'm a walking corpse myself. The creatures are attracted to warm blood. I run up to the second ghoul, pull out the dagger and cut off the threads before he can get up again.

"Should I be worried, Agatha?" the prince asks with some tension in his voice.

"Of course not, Your Highness!" I lie. "Or would you like to swap the first row for the last?"

He doesn't have time to retort as there are new creatures rushing out of the woods. Though it's only one ghoul and three ghosts. The latter are easier to deal with. I guess these are the souls of people the ghouls have dragged into their dens. But what surprises me is Morok's behavior, he steps forward and puts some distance between himself and the prince so that the spirits see him first and Daniel later. He probably could finish off these four spirits with his bare hands but instead he turns to me and nods, waiting for me to... *protect him? Or is he actually helping me by letting me deal with those on my own?*

Maybe he has a fraction of sympathy for me, a Mara who has to prove her usefulness to the royal offspring so that he doesn't think he's revived her in vain.

My guess proves true when I see that the creatures dash to Morok and he doesn't even turn to them, just keeps staring at me. If he weren't that dangerous and terrifying, I would yell at him calling him every single, filthy swear word I know, but I only have time to rush to him to catch the first ghost stretching his long fingers out to Morok. The ghosts are easier to deal with because their bodies are not made of flesh and blood, instead they seem to be created from something soft, like concentrated energy. They don't leave physical wounds but one touch of their fingers is enough to make you go mad. Their powers are useless against Maras though, so I stick my dagger-holding hand inside the ghost's body and cut the threads stretched along the spine.

I hold my breath so as not to smell the stink, but the slime on my dagger hand and the revolting sight of it all catches up with me and I start feeling nauseous. The ghost vanishes at the exact moment when the ghoul jumps at Morok and I recklessly throw myself in front of him to protect him with my own body. I don't allow myself to let out a scream, only a hiss, when the ghoul sinks his fangs into my shoulder and they pierce through it, shattering a bone. I'd hoped I wouldn't feel the pain, but *hell I was wrong*. The pain is almost as acute as if I were alive. The ghoul drives his claws into my other shoulder and clings to me like an enormous leech. His repulsiveness sparks a fury deep inside and

I tear him off me, widening my own wounds in the process and exacerbating the pain. As soon as he's on the ground, I kick it hard and thrust the knife into its neck. It takes me far less time to deal with the other two ghosts. I make sure I cut the threads each time. The ghosts vanish right away but the ghouls, or rather the heaps of bones and flesh that are all that remain of them, are left behind spreading their putrid smell.

I come to a halt and try to catch my breath. I suppose that's it for today. There's no one else crawling out of the woods. I take stock of the damage: torn clothes, lacerated wounds that expose injured muscles. There's more blood than on my palm but no real bleeding. However, the pain is still throbbing and my arms start to go numb. Morok is gazing at my wounds with such indifference, that I can't help shooting him a dirty look.

"That was fabulous! To kill so many, all by yourself!" Prince Daniel is grinning at me, almost ready to applaud.

I have to fight the urge to stick his own dagger into his stupid, hazel eye and wipe that charming smile off his face. But instead, I stretch out my hand, returning his weapon. Captain Dariy comes running with his soldiers in his wake, to check on the prince.

"Burn the corpses," I give the order to the Captain and he passes it on to his soldiers.

Daniel accepts my red cloak from one of the soldiers and stepping behind me gently throws it over my shoulders, covering my gruesome wounds.

"It hurts," I almost whisper.

“Can it hurt?” the prince asks Morok with surprise in his voice.

“Yes, but the wounds will heal in a few days.” Morok’s voice is as low and flat as usual, with zero emotion.

“But I’m... dead... my body can’t heal...”

Morok turns back to me and I instantly regret saying anything.

“Our connection. You will be healed with the help of my powers. The same ones that make you walk and babble right now.”

I bite my tongue and wince in pain. I’d love to ask when the wounds will stop hurting but I don’t dare try his patience.

“Are you satisfied with the performance, Your Highness?” I do my best to keep the contempt out of my voice.

“More than satisfied, my dear Agatha!” He gently wraps my hand with both of his. “Now, it’s about time we cleaned you up and introduced you to my father.”

220 years ago

“How lucky!”

“The family is blessed!”

“Marked twice!”

The villagers are whispering to each other, huddled together around the house where six Maras, their scarlet cloaks standing out against the snow, are gathered to meet their new sister. And I am among them.

That’s because one of us died of old age last week. And as soon as she let out her last breath, we all felt that a new sister was born, the one who is to take her place. And it is the first time I’m welcoming a new member to the family.

We are already a few days into the first winter month but snow has taken its sweet time this year. The landscape stayed grey and brownish with rotten leaves and sticky mud covering the earth, the legacy of frequent rains, for what seemed like an eternity. But no sooner than we set off on our journey, what does it do? Start snowing – heavily, all day and all night, blanketing the ground and slowing us down.

When we finally arrive at the village, it is after midday. The

sky is a dazzling blue, the sun is high and its rays are reflected off the painfully white shroud of snow. The villagers freeze when we brush past them in our scarlet cloaks and the ground is crunching under our boots. I'm thirteen and till now I have been the youngest sister.

I became a Mara three years ago, a week after I turned ten. It happened the same way it does to all of us. Only ten-year-old girls with jet-black hair can discover these powers.

"Are you happy, Agatha?" asks Irina, whose hand I'm clinging to.

Irina is my mentor. It is she who is responsible for my training. She must be around seventy years old but looks no more than thirty. Maras live longer than ordinary people. Up to nineteen, we grow just like everybody else and then our aging process slows down significantly. Or so I was told. That's why even the oldest of us, who has turned one hundred twenty-three years, looks about fifty.

Irina, like other Maras, has long black hair, a beautiful face and a pleasant smile.

"I'm nervous," I mumble. "Do you know who she is?"

"No."

"And when you came to take me, you didn't know either?"

"We didn't. You feel that invisible thread... we all feel it as if she's summoning us," I nod and she smiles at me. "So, we follow the thread till we find her, our new sister."

"Why is everyone whispering?" I mutter again, looking

around me.

I've hated being the center of other people's attention since I was little, but now thanks to my garments and my powers, everyone notices me, wherever I go.

"Who knows... they might have an idea about who the new sister is," says my mentor, a mysterious smile playing on her lips.

We arrive last, the other sisters are already gathered in front of the house. We are not going to enter though; everyone knows why we are here. At this very moment the parents of our new sister must be wrapping her in warm clothes and packing some food for her journey... and saying their goodbyes. They must be doing the same things my parents did a few years ago. I've never seen them since.

Even if I'd wanted to, I wouldn't be able to see them because they left our village. That's another rule. After a girl is taken by Maras, the family must leave. It keeps newly marked Maras from running back to their parents' home in the first few years of living in the temple, before they get accustomed to their new family.

You can't run to your parents if you don't know where to run. The villagers, too, start gathering around the house. They stand behind us, buzzing with anticipation, casting occasional glances at the closed door. Some people are wondering out loud how beautiful the girl is going to be. Everyone knows she's going to have a fair complexion and jet-black hair, matching

Morana's. But all Maras have different eye-colors, so there're no rules here. The Goddess herself is said to have dark-brown eyes, almost black. Irina has hazel eyes and Kira – brilliant green, like dewy grass on a summer morning. My eyes are blue, as cold as ice so my mom used to say. Like beautiful half-transparent ice.

The sisters stand in complete silence, waiting for the family to finish their preparations. I am the only one shifting my weight from one foot to the other, trying to keep warm. I'm looking round a small vegetable patch in front of a simple one-storey house, the lopsided roof of which, like everything else around it, is blanketed in snow, making the walls look almost black. The curtains on the windows are closed, allowing no curious glances inside. White smoke billows from the chimney showing that the family is at home. By the time the door opens, my hands are freezing. I breathe the tiniest cloud of steam onto my cupped hand for the last time and look up.

"Mom..."

Irina gives my left hand a gentle squeeze. She is still holding it in hers but doesn't resist when I pull it out and take a few steps forward.

"Agatha!" My mom gives a sob.

I hesitate. I'm looking at my parents who are standing in the doorway not daring to take a step towards me. They are not sure if it's allowed. I glance at the house again, not knowing what to believe, if it is even possible. Peering out from behind their

backs is my little sister. She is wearing a blue, winter fur-lined jacket. We were never rich; I would even say we were pretty poor, and this simple winter jacket must be the most expensive item of clothing my sister owns. It brings out the color of her eyes, which are also blue, like mine, but a darker, deeper sky-blue. Our mom often told us that we were beautiful, but even back then I knew it wasn't true. My sister is the real beauty, you just can't take your eyes off her. Her complexion is fairer and her hair is darker and shinier than mine, and she has enormous eyes. She always looked like a fancy doll and she still does.

Our mom opens her arms, still sobbing, and without any further hesitation I run up to her and fall into her embrace. Then I hug my dad. I also try to pull my sister in but I can't reach her.

"That's true then..."

"The second daughter in the same family!"

"What a blessing!" the villagers are whispering louder now, watching us with rapturous attention.

I look back at my sisters, Maras, and I see them smiling. But these smiles are thin and sad for, unlike the villagers, they realize what a tragedy it is for the family. They know people only talk about the blessing till it comes to their own house and forces them to give up their own child.

And my parents have to give up a second one.

I feel a treacherous joy rising up in me, mixing with bitter disappointment. I know this pain of separation, I know the

lessons my sister will have to learn the hard way, the destiny that awaits both of us. We are destined to live a lonely life, devoid of love of our parents or a husband. We can't marry, our lives are dedicated to ridding the world of evil. I don't want that for my sister. But the warm feeling that I'm no longer alone is already spreading inside my chest.

"Anna," I reach out for my baby sister again and now, she presses against me like she used to when she was a baby.

My father wipes away the tears before they fall, but my mother is not trying to hide hers. She cries openly, gently stroking my hair. They don't say anything to the other Maras because they know that no pleas or threats will stop them. Anna will be taken away no matter what, even if she has to be prized away from her parents' arms.

They say there used to be families that tried to escape and save their daughters from their destiny. But it would always end the same way. The girl would be either given up voluntarily or taken from the arms of already dead parents. So now, no one even tries to resist. No girl who was marked by Morana has ever managed to escape her fate.

But no family has ever been 'blessed' with two Maras either. I glance at the Maras again and it hits me. Anna must be special.

Irina steps forward and gives me her hand. I grasp it like a straw and follow my mentor. My other hand is still grasping Anna's, so I'm dragging her away too, to some new, magical world that she's only heard of from the fairy tales and legends.

The world that will become her new reality, so different from the one we used to dream of, huddled together around the fire on cold, winter evenings.

3

I grit my teeth when Prince Daniel orders his men to find a white steed for me, even if they had to turn the whole village inside out in the process. The more time I have to spend in his company, the more annoyed I become. His childish enthusiasm and the way he talks about the old legends, which for me are (or rather used to be) harsh reality, are really starting to get to me.

"I don't need a white steed, Your... Highness." I add the last word under Dariy's intense and hostile stare. I'm doing the best I can not to snap at him that the dislike is mutual.

Daniel turns to me and his lips break into a ready smile. Either he doesn't notice the way he sets my teeth on edge or he's doing it on purpose, just to have a little fun at my expense. And judging by the fact that his smile that doesn't stretch to his observant eyes, I'm gravitating towards the latter.

"Oh, my dear Agatha, but you do! For two centuries people have thought of Maras as a thing of the past..."

"We are." I butt in.

"...and here you are, in your scarlet cloak..." he goes on paying no heed to my comment. "...entering the capital on a white steed. A living legend. White is one of your colors, isn't it?"

"It is, but..."

"Good!" says Prince, turns away from me and shouts to his soldiers to double down on the search.

I feel an overwhelming urge to give him a good kick, but one glimpse of Morok stifles it immediately. He's standing still like a statue, in his black armor and his black-and-gold mask, half hidden by the hood. If Maras' colors are red, black and white, Moroks are said to wear only black and gold.

The Shadow's servants are just as real as Maras or evil spirits, but back when I was still alive, they were somewhat of a legend or a cautionary tale for Maras. They have a similar job to ours, they lay lost souls to rest. But if Maras were always easy to reach and anyone could come to the temple and ask for our help, Moroks are hard to come by. Rumor has it that there are only three to five Moroks out there at any one time and only a few people know for sure where their temple is or if they have one at all. Moreover, not many people would have the guts to reach out to them even if they knew how to. Maras are merciful, even when we sever the life threads tying you to earth, we offer a chance of reincarnation, of life after death. The soul finds its peace and flies to the Goddess, who will determine its next life form. Death at Morok's hand is... the end. There's no rebirth, no second chances. Some say that Moroks can also send a soul to the Shadow forever. No one and nothing is there, there are no smells or sounds, it's neither hot nor cold in the Shadow. Just an eternal excruciating emptiness that you can't escape. The mere thought of that place, impossible even to imagine, makes me shudder.

Kings used to take interest in Maras for our ability to prolong a life. But a Morok has a different power, to raise the dead from

their graves by tying them to him. One Morok can only raise one person. However, I still haven't figured out how they managed to raise me from the dead. It's been two hundred years since I died. Why hasn't Morana taken my soul? Why hasn't my body completely decomposed? However, now is not the time to pester my convoy with questions. For now, I'm just watching the prince and Morok as carefully as possible. And that's another mystery: why is a Morok helping a prince in the first place?

Apart from this one, I've only seen a Morok once. It was when I was seventeen. That Morok was wearing a raven mask. I know each Morok has his own mask, it's magically tailor-made to suit each particular servant of the Shadow and is given some additional powers. But neither when I was seventeen nor now can I seem to muster enough courage to pry further.

I am back in my room at an inn. It's our last stop on our way to the capital. We've already been on the road for about a week. The rumors about a live Mara who has been raised from the dead and showed her powers by vanquishing a few ghouls have spread quicker than we expected. I hear people ooh and aah whenever they see our procession. But as soon as they glimpse Morok, they huddle in small groups, apprehensively watching us pass by.

As it has turned out that manacles are excessive and Morok could hunt me down easily without them, Prince Daniel has decided to discard them. But barely a minute passes without me wondering if I can ask him to put them back on, if it means I don't have to travel on Morok's mount together with the Shadow's

servant himself. The first time, he lifted me up like a sack of potatoes and sat me down right in front of him, pressing hard against his chest. But he relented when the pain in my shoulders made me hiss. Since then, Morok has been gentler while helping me on his horse, but for the first couple of days every time he put his arms around me from behind, I shuddered with fear. On the third day, the fear didn't subside, but I learnt how to relax my muscles while sitting so close to this monster.

Back in the room, I'm packing my few possessions. Prince Daniel treats me now a bit less like a puppet he has taken hostage, and more like a welcome guest. How ironic. These cute gifts he's been showering me with, like a hair comb with an exquisite bone handle from one village, a piece of fragrant lavender soap from another, a brand-new dress to replace the caftan, ruined by the ghoul, from a third village, just make me want to roll my eyes. But beggars can't be choosers, so I gratefully receive all the presents with a smile, albeit condescending. It's all I can manage, considering that the prince can be showering me with gifts one day, and tossing me back into the grave the other.

The wounds have already healed, just as Morok promised, and even my skin has turned a shade pinker. In one of the villages, I finally found a full-length mirror. I wanted to see how bad a walking corpse could look like. On the whole, it was better than expected.

I smell like lavender because of the soap, my skin doesn't peel off anymore, and my body is not falling apart. On the contrary,

with each passing day, I'm starting to look more and more like a living person. At the beginning, my skin did have this blueish tint to it, but now it's just a bit paler than normal. I have lost a lot of weight and my jawline is sharper than I'm used to, which makes me look older than nineteen. But Morok has reassured me that it will get even better and the more time passes, the more I will resemble myself. Apart from my hair and eyes. My once jet-black hair has remained grey and my eyes have become lighter and foggier, which makes me look eerie.

I shoot a glance at a small mirror on the table and wrinkle my nose in distaste as soon as I find the reflection of my eyes. I was never as beautiful as my sister but nor was I bad-looking or spooky.

Since the start of our journey, I've found out that not only do I feel pain, but I can also become tired. That's why I have to spend my nights sleeping. I breathe too, though I'm still not entirely convinced that it is necessary, I do it by force of habit. My body is functioning from force of habit too, it is just doing what it is used to. My breath can quicken or slow down depending on my emotional and physical state. I don't have to eat because I don't feel hungry, but sometimes when I see or think about food, my mouth starts watering. Morok has told me that I can taste some dishes I crave if I want to refresh my memory about their taste, but my body does not really need food. The most unusual feeling, however, is the sense of stillness in my chest, where my heart should be beating. But to that Morok said that it would re-start

when I am stronger, and then I will be almost indistinguishable from normal people, because it will start pumping blood through my veins and my skin will turn the right shade again.

I take some stibnite from my purse and line my eyes with it. I also cover my lips with a special paint. Those, too, are Daniel's presents. I used to use stibnite when I was still alive, but instead of lip-paint we would use juice from different berries. Progress can't be halted; people have come up with new ways to make themselves more beautiful. Well, the make-up is an improvement, but my outlandish eyes are now even more pronounced than before.

"I wonder what my Goddess would say if she knew that I too am a spirit now", I say aloud, unable to keep the bitterness out of my voice.

"She won't say anything. Your Goddess couldn't care less, just like everyone else."

The sound of his voice makes me start. I didn't see him enter the room.

"What do you mean?"

He doesn't answer, just shrugs his massive shoulders and gestures me out of the room. It is time for us to leave. I toss the rest of my things into a small bag and follow my guard.

"Yarat is only a day's ride away now, my dear Agatha," the prince reminds me, while Morok helps me onto a white steed.

The prince found me after all. And I catch myself thinking that my scarlet cloak does look nobler against the white of the

horse's back. I smile, patting the white of the horse's neck. The steed is beautiful indeed, with its long mane and silky tale. It's a pity its magnificent body will be stained as soon as we start on this muddy road. Though fortunately, it didn't rain much yesterday.

"So, you can smile," the prince says with a grin when Morok has stepped away.

My smile vanishes. But I continue stroking the horse's mane and meet the prince's gaze.

"I do not allow myself to smile for the fear you might fall in love with me, Your Highness."

He only grins wider.

"And what if I already have?"

His question catches me off guard. Daniel runs his fingers through his golden locks with a look of satisfaction on his young face. He must be waiting for an answer but I keep silent, ashamed at my loss for words. My life has consisted of worshipping my Goddess and training and killing evil spirits. Maras can fall in love but what's the point? If you have been chosen by Morana, you can never get married, your fate is to serve the Goddess. Most sisters, me included, preferred to banish these feelings knowing that there is no future there. So, my experience of flirting is almost non-existent, which is more than can be said about the prince. I have a hunch he will defeat me in these verbal duels more than once. The only thing Daniel fails to take into account while playing his little game of seduction with me

is that I hate princes. But now I can think of nothing better than straightening myself in my saddle and ignoring the question completely.

“I will take it as a yes,” grins Daniel and mounts his horse.

“A yes to what?” is all I have time to say before he trots away.

I let out a scoff of frustration and brush my hair back to put on my hood.

4

Winter has always been our favorite season. Not only because my sister and I have been marked by Morana, the Goddess of Winter and Death, but also because it is the time of year when magic seems to envelop the whole world. I especially love a night after a snowy evening, with a full moon makes the snow shimmer and twinkle like stars. And the frost in the air bites your cheeks and tickles your nose.

I breathe out a small cloud of steam, wrap myself tighter into my fur-lined scarlet cloak and take a few apprehensive steps towards the woods. My legs in high, winter boots sink into the snow up to the middle of my shin.

I cringe when Anna overtakes me at a run and dives into the snow, breaking its perfectly smooth surface. She laughs merrily, throwing snow in the air with both her arms and legs, and then squeals when some of it falls behind the collar of her jacket. My lips break into a smile but I quickly recover myself. I sheepishly glance up to the temple and press my index finger to my lips, urging her to keep quiet.

It's been a month since I turned fourteen and Anna became a Mara one winter ago. The second and coldest month of winter has come. Koliada, Maras' favorite holiday, has already passed. The sisters have made the round of all the neighboring villages, receiving gifts and making sure no evil spirits made a

home there. Anna is too young for these outings and I was left behind to keep an eye on her. We were both disappointed and sulky because we weren't allowed to dance around the bonfires with the others or visit village dwellings to sing carols and get treats in return. But sisters Irina and Kira were unbending and we have no choice but to stay put.

However, the sisters come back when the carols and bonfire-dancing give way, with the last glimpse of twilight, to the traditional worshipping of Veles, the God of Earth and Water and Livestock, when villagers ask for good harvest and healthy cattle. This is no place for Maras, so the sisters head back to the temple for a bit of rest. The temple keepers are busy catering to the sisters and Anna and I have a little time when we aren't supervised, so she talks me into having a walk beyond the temple.

"Come on, Agatha! There's a lake over there and its banks should be covered with cranberries. If we gather enough, we can even ask someone in the kitchen to make your favorite cranberry juice!" Anna is struggling to get back on her feet, still half-buried in snow. She is trying to get the snow out of her hair, but some of the strands are already wet.

"We mustn't go so far, silly." I come up to her and put her hair up so that it doesn't cool down her neck and put her hood up, afraid she could catch a chill. "It's after dark already. If someone notices that we are gone, we'll be in trouble. Do you feel like dusting all the library shelves again?"

I grin as she wrinkles her pretty nose, cleaning is not something she enjoys. Irina tries to straighten her out by punishing her mischief with chores, but so far to no avail.

“It’s not far! I just want to show you something.”

She looks up at me with anticipation, fidgeting with impatience and the same time, I take my eyes off the blueness of her gaze and turn to the temple again. It towers over us, its grey walls almost black against the white woods. Only a few windows are alive with the orange light of the candles. Everyone else is already asleep in their beds.

I look beyond the temple, at the dark sky, and try to come up with an excuse. I want to say it’s too dark to go, but the moon is bright and the snow reflects its light, painting everything silver.

“Okay,” I yield. “Let’s go. But make it quick.”

Anna gives a skip of joy and sets off to the northeast, to the border of Serat. Her legs sink in snow with every step but she doggedly trudges on. I’m taller than her, so I move faster and I catch up with her in no time. I smile at her and take her mittened left hand in my bare right one.

We know the land surrounding the temple pretty well because we are not allowed to venture much further yet, so we’ve spent our time exploring all the paths in the vicinity. Now, even with the earth blanketed in snow, it’s easy to find our way. We’ve been walking for no more than ten minutes but Anna is breathing heavily. She puffs and pants, doing her best to show how exhausted she is. I know what she’s after, so I let her

climb on my back and carry her for a few minutes. It seems to cheer her up, she's riding piggy-back, happily swinging her legs and clasping my neck so tightly my hood falls back revealing my mane of dark hair. The crisp air touches the scruff of my neck but my little sister is rubbing her cheek against mine, so I forgive her for that, as well as her whining.

Now all I can hear is my own heavy breath and the crunching sound of the snow under my boots. There's also an occasional hoot carrying from the thick of the woods, adding more magic to the night.

When we reach the lake, I put Anna down and we both sigh in awe as we take in the view before us. We've seen the lake in daylight, but never at night. The frozen lake stretches out in front of us and the bright disc of the moon is reflected in it like in a mirror. The cracks in the ice look like white and blue veins.

But with a happy cry of "Cranberries!" Anna breaks my reverie.

I obediently follow her in the direction of the berries. The sooner we gather them and return to our warm beds, the better. The night is beautiful but freezing. My toes are already numb with cold.

I spot the blood-red berries in the snow and can almost feel their taste on my tongue. If we gather enough, we can make not only juice but also sugared cranberries and maybe even a cranberry pie.

"Agatha," Anna says in a dreamy voice, "what's a morok?"

I wheel around and look at her in bewilderment. I've no idea where she has heard the name from. I was told about Moroks only in my second year as a Mara.

"They are Shadow's servants," I answer cautiously.

"And what's a shadow?"

"The Shadow is the place where the most rotten souls go, but it is also the darkness that rules that place." I check if the berries are hard enough. But they are already frozen, so they shouldn't mess the inside of our pockets. We have no baskets with us.

"Where did the Shadow come from?"

I pluck a handful of cranberries and toss them into the pockets of my cloak, taking my time to ponder the answer.

"There are a few legends, and only those who have already moved on and met the Goddess know which one is true." I finally say, evasively.

"Come on, Agatha, tell me at least one!"

"And then you'll be too frightened to sleep and will recoil from every shadow on the wall," I snort, watching her shaking the snow off a fir branch to shower herself in snowflakes.

Anna keeps pestering me for a few more minutes and I cave in.

"Okay, there are various legends out there. But most of them are incomplete. One says that Morana's own shadow rose after it was stepped on by the dead. The most popular legend though is the one where Morana grabbed her own shadow and cut it

off to help her deal with rotten souls: those of the greedy and selfish and other evil. And the Shadow has been following our Goddess ever since, separate but forever connected to Morana.”

Somewhere in the middle of the story, my sister stops fooling around and starts listening closely.

“So, Moroks are evil?”

“As far as I know, they aren’t. But even Kira doesn’t know what they are hiding beneath their masks. And she’s the eldest.” I almost whisper.

“Sister Yana says everyone is afraid of Moroks and if you look one in the face, you’ll die.” Anna whispers back.

Of course. Yana loves telling scary stories. Although, what stories can you tell that are scary enough to frighten a Mara, who kills evil spirits herself? But Yana managed to do just that. She told Anna about Moroks.

“I don’t know if that’s true. Irina has warned me that if you meet a Morok, you should hide. And whatever happens, don’t try to look under the mask. So, you should do the same. If you see a Morok, do as you’re told and hide.”

I keep cramming berries into my pockets, when I suddenly hear her laughing. I turn to her but Anna’s not there. It takes a while to find her in the dark but I finally spot her on the frozen surface of the lake. I freeze with horror and the berries spill out of numb fingers.

“Look, Agatha! I saw some boys doing it a winter ago, before you came. They taught me a little.”

Anna is standing thirty feet away from the lakeshore. She starts running, picks up speed and pushes herself forward to slide on the ice... but tumbles over, laughing like crazy. I notice that I'm shivering, not with cold but tension.

"Anna, come back! Come back here!" My voice is squeaky and unfamiliar. I tell her to come back but I can't move a muscle, as if it is me on that ice.

I was still in my third year as a sister when I was told never to set foot on the ice of that lake because it's never thick enough to take the weight of a person. But Anna hasn't been told that yet or she has but the warning has fallen on deaf ears. I'm standing as close to the lake as I dare, praying for the ice to be thick enough to take the weight of a slim girl.

I shudder when she stands up and falls down again, landing on her backside and sliding even further away from me. Her laughter carries all the way across the lake.

"Anna, come back here, please!" I cry again, trying not to sound too scared. If I step on the ice myself, I'm sure it will crack.

"It's not so slippery here," she yells back with disappointment and takes a few steps back towards me. We can both hear the sound.

Anna looks down. From her feet snake-like cracks start sprawling in all directions. She bows her head a bit and takes another step, slowly this time. The next cracking sound is almost deafening. I watch her with my heart in my mouth. She

looks up at me and the fear in her eyes is unmistakable. Her lower lip starts to tremble. I throw back my cloak and stand there in my light caftan.

“Anna! Run to me!” I try to yell but my voice cracks like ice and I hope I’ve managed to say it loud enough for her to hear.

She does and she dashes to me. When she’s nervous, she becomes even more awkward. She manages three steps but the ice is really cracking now, big pieces come loose and the dark water splashes on the surface. Anna slips on the water. I don’t wait to see what happens next and bolt forward, carefully maneuvering between the cracks, leaping from one chunk of ice to another.

Anna is first to go under. She squeals and falls into the water, her head disappearing beneath the black surface. I dive in right after. A rasping shriek escapes my lips as soon as the icy-cold water touches my skin. I spot my sister’s cloak billowing on the surface, find her and pull her up to the surface. Anna is sobbing uncontrollably. Her teeth are chattering and she’s beating against the water with one arm, the rest of her body must have gone numb from the cold.

The water is freezing and it seems like I’m being stabbed by a thousand knives. But my fear pushes me forward and I steadily move towards the end of the lake, pulling my sister behind me. When I reach the shore, I haul her onto the hard surface first and crawl after her on all fours.

My fingers are stiff as I strip Anna of her soaked clothing

and wrap her into the only dry thing we have left, my cloak. She keeps sobbing, shivering from the cold and the shock. I'm not much help as I'm shivering all over too. But the fear of almost losing my sister is more numbing to me than the cold.

Irina is teaching me not to succumb to fear, to act, no matter what. And I try to heed her now.

"A... nnna... ppput... yourrr... arms... a... rrround my... nnneck."

I help her onto my back and try to set off towards the temple again. But my legs don't cooperate, my knees begin to buckle and pain shoots right through me. Anna does what she's told, for once, and clutches my neck, almost suffocating me.

I manage about five feet but my breath is heavy and wheezing. I'm freezing, my numb fingers can hardly keep Anna in place... but I see Irina rushing towards us and tears start running down my cheeks before I can stop them. My sobs turn to wails, even louder than Anna's, as I fall into the soft snow and let Irina run the rest of the distance.

5

Yarat. The capital of Araken.

So many years have passed and the landscapes have changed. My memories help me to orientate myself a little and I realize that we are traveling northwards. I see some new villages that have sprung up, a few roads have widened and the outlines of the woods are different to how they used to be. Some places I used to know are just nowhere to be seen. We are moving along this unfamiliar road and I recognize a couple of places, while all the rest are completely new to me. But I'm happy to learn that Araken still exists and Yarat has remained its capital. Even though, when I was alive, I only visited it twice. The first time, all Maras were asked to attend the new king's coronation and the second time we came to rid the woods from evil.

We, Maras, do not belong to any kingdoms and do not serve any kings. The woods adjoining our temple are considered Maras' territory and are situated right on the border between two kingdoms: Araken and Serat. An ocean washes the western borders of the countries and on the east a mountain range creates another natural border. No one crosses the mountains and no one comes from the mountains. Maybe the world ends there or just people.

Maras do not take sides or have favorites; we help those who need it. Whether the people of Serat have needed us, or the

citizens of Araken, we rush to their aid. But I'm glad it was the Prince of Araken who raised me from the dead. If it had been the heir of Serat, I would have broken his neck before he even breathed a word.

"Your Highness," I address the prince after a few hours of our monotonous journey, "if you don't mind me asking, why are you so interested in Maras?"

"Where should I start?" the prince drags out with a smile; he's probably flattered that I spoke to him first. "My mother died when I was young, just five years after my little sister was born. The king, I mean my father, was not particularly interested in my upbringing and I spent too much time with nurses and my siblings, my little sister and my elder brother Nikolay. My brother loved reading to us and his favorite tales were those of Maras and Moroks."

"A questionable choice of bedtime stories," I put in.

"True. That's what any adult would have thought. But we had a choice between you and goblins."

"What's wrong with goblins?" I ask, nonplussed.

"Well, they are awful monsters, for one."

"They do look weird because of the skulls instead of faces, but they are pretty harmless." I object.

"You call those thugs harmless?!" Daniel looks at me like I've gone mad. "I've heard they can be up to ten feet tall; their horns look like tree limbs and their eyes are blood-red."

"Well, the blood-red eyes are nonsense," I shrug. "More often

than not, they don't have any, just a bare, animal skull where the face should be."

"Even better! Empty eye-sockets definitely look more harmless than red eyes," the prince snorts.

I can't help but giggle and the sound is strange and unfamiliar. I seem to have forgotten how to laugh and the giggling is strained and a far cry from that beautiful resounding laugh I used to have.

But he's right. I am used to goblins and knowing that they are just wood spirits protecting animals and plants, I take no notice of their eerie appearance. For common people, they must look sinister.

"Well, I guess they might look a bit fearsome," I cave.

"A bit?" the prince calls back and his lips break into a smile when he hears me laugh again. "As we've agreed on the monstrosity of goblins, I shall continue my story."

I nod waiting for him to speak.

"My sister didn't mind either way as all tales were horror stories to her. But as you might have guessed, I am not a fan of huge wood... spirits. So, I chose the tales about you. What can be more fascinating than beautiful girls who bring merciful death?"

"Outlandish princesses?"

Daniel waves my taunt away and continues with the story.

"I wasn't wrong. I listened, enraptured, to every story. I was totally fascinated by them! I asked my brother to tell me the same stories again and again and I never got tired of them. Brother had not expected such a reaction though, otherwise he might have

kept the stories to himself. The most popular one, apparently, was where Mara Silvia defeated two demons on her own to protect a group of innocent children.”

Silvia. I’ve heard the story, too, even though it happened long before I was born. Everyone’s heard it. Demons are huge monsters and you’re lucky if you can beat one, but two...

“To be honest,” Daniel goes on, “the stories that I loved the most were the ones about you and your sisters. I truly admired the last Maras and your bravery in the face of what happened to your sister Anna.”

My cheerfulness is gone like it was never there. That’s what my sister’s name does to me.

“There’s nothing to admire, Your Highness,” I say drily, “there is nothing romantic about death.”

“Well, it may be small consolation, but then I believe you would agree that walking the earth again is quite an improvement on lying in it.”

I turn my head a little to catch a glimpse of Morok, who’s following us at a respectful distance. He’s sitting very straight on his black steed and looks straight ahead. He doesn’t fidget or look around. He positively looks like a statue.

I lean sideways, a bit closer to Daniel so that my voice doesn’t carry.

“Your Highness, how come a Shadow’s servant is helping the Crown?”

“It is said that Moroks appear where and when they are

needed, so it is useless to seek them out,” the prince answers mysteriously. “After Maras were gone, common people had it particularly bad and they hoped that Moroks would step in to do Maras’ job. But they just vanished. Some people say they left because of you, but no one knows the real reason.” Now Daniel leans towards me. “You can’t really ask them, can you. Moroks are not really *big* on conversation.”

I try to stifle a giggle and just nod in agreement.

“Some say that Moroks are people too and they need to pay for their food. And who can pay more than the king himself?”

“Morok is working for you for gold?” The idea seems ridiculous at first, but come to think of it, I can remember occasional stories about Moroks running errands for the Crown and not out of the goodness of their hearts. Maras see taking gold for their work as unbecoming. We’ve never asked for pay, people used to make offerings of their own volition.

“They are sometimes called *hired shadows* now,” Daniel’s voice is no more than a whisper. “Some people say that times have changed and the Shadow has lost the last shreds of its dignity.”

I keep silent and contemplate his words.

“The Shadow’s never had dignity.” The flat but loud voice from behind startles us both. Morok must have come closer during my conversation with Daniel and overheard part of it, if not the whole thing.

He says no more but for a while. And Daniel keeps silent, too.

I pull myself together and decide to ask him the last questions that have been on my mind since I was raised from the dead.

“Does Serat still exist?”

“Unfortunately, it does.”

“Who is ruling it now?”

“The younger son of the late king Aleksey, Severin Lasnetsov.” The prince looks almost pensive now. “Actually, it should have been the eldest son, his name escapes me, but he died when he was still a child.”

“What are the relationships between the kingdoms?”

Daniel cocks his head a little and gives me a searching look. I tried to keep my voice steady while asking the question but I’m not so stupid as to believe he won’t suspect the reason for my curiosity.

“Araken and Serat are at war. After what they did, my ancestors had no choice. At the beginning, it was a full-fledged war, but now it has turned into a protracted conflict. There are occasional clashes on the border but no real battles. However, we keep a close eye on the enemy and shoot on sight whenever anyone crosses the border from Serat.”

I can only nod as my voice fails me. I grit my teeth and tighten my grip on the reins. My leather gloves creak in protest.

“Not to worry, my dear Agatha. One day, we will wipe Serat from the face of the earth. I will not rest easy till I do. And when I do it...” the prince waits for me to look up at him, “...it will be for you.”

“Anna, that is a pretty dress but it won’t do for training. You should wear trousers and a shirt.”

It’s not the first time I have to tell my little sister off for wearing the wrong outfit for her training. She hates working out. I’m not a big fan of running, push-ups and pull-ups myself, but it’s part of our job. Our duty is not only to worship and serve Morana, but also to look beautiful in our scarlet cloaks. Strangely enough, our looks play an important role, too, and there is a host of rules we must obey. But be that as it may, I still believe that our ability to kill evil spirits remains our main asset. Yes, we can see and sever threads of life but to be able to get to them we must fight, and for that we need training, just like common people.

I can understand my sister though, I loved pretty dresses too. I used to try to make myself more beautiful, wanted to draw admiring glances of both men and women, like the ones they cast at my sister now whenever we enter a town or a village. But soon enough, I abandoned those attempts and started dedicating more time to mastering the art of swordplay. So, my go-to outfit became figure-hugging trousers and shirts and caftans the color of blood. These are normally men’s clothes, but a few sisters dress in a similar fashion, as it is more convenient for horseback-riding and for battle. The temple

keepers sew more feminine fits for us so that we can wear them both at work and at court, if need be.

“What help will your sword be if you get entangled in your own skirt?”

I’m chiding her right out in a light temple hall, where any Mara can see us, or hear us for that matter because I’m making no effort to keep my voice low. Though my loud tirades may also be the reason other sisters prefer to steer clear of this particular hall. When I turned fifteen, other Maras re-assigned me the task of looking after Anna as they were eager to create the best possible conditions for her, the ones none of us could have. I’ve always been nice to my baby sister, tried to protect her from any harm. I thought the transition to the life of a Mara was hard on her.

Anna is slim and delicate and every time she’d told me she has trouble breathing after a few minutes of running or that she can’t lift a sword (though she is pretty good with stilettos, fighting knives with long thin blades), I’ve believed her. When she came up with a hundred excuses for missing training and swore that she’d never do it again, I believed her.

I believed everything she told me before I realized she was taking advantage of me.

My little sister knows she has a pretty face and those big eyes you can’t say no to, so she very quickly learnt how to make the most of it by manipulating people and always getting her way. Even the eldest and strictest of sisters melt before her. I suspect

they see a daughter in her rather than a younger sister. I know that Anna does not have ill intentions though, she's just being selfish. She doesn't want to do things she doesn't like.

In a month, Anna will turn seventeen. Her theoretical knowledge is excellent and she's diligent when it comes to study, but she still can't hold her own in a fight. And part of that is my fault, I've been too lenient with her. So, I have dug myself into a hole, which almost consumed me half a year ago.

On that day, four sisters including me and Anna, were sent to one of the lakes to deal with the souls of drowned men. A few people from the nearby village thought they'd seen dead people walking near the lake. We found four of them.

These souls are disgusting but they aren't as quick as the ghouls in the woods around the lakes. Nevertheless, even souls were too quick for Anna. Years of training didn't help much and she was standing there brandishing her sword without touching the dead. It was a sheer stroke of luck that I noticed just as a soul almost seized her. What I needed to do was to chop off its head but there was no time, so I just pushed Anna out of the way throwing myself in her stead. The creature sank its rotten teeth into my arm and dragged me off into the water. If it hadn't been for sister Yana, who saved me, I would have drowned.

Since that day, I've tried to be stricter with Anna: I've told her off more and indulged her less. I sigh every time Irina teases me for having turned grumpy and cranky. I don't enjoy

lecturing my sister but I don't have much choice.

She continues staring at the stone floor, sheepishly fidgeting with the long sleeve of her crimson dress and black corset. I refuse to be swayed by that innocent pose.

"Anna!"

"Sister," she answers obediently, lifting up her sky-blue eyes to me. But as soon as she realizes her charms aren't working, she drops all pretense. "Come on, you know I'm not cut out for this! It's not that I don't try! I've memorized every evil spirit and how to kill it!"

"I know but..."

"It's when it comes to weapons... I just... can't! I'm not as strong as you. I'd love to be... but I can't!"

"You know very well I don't have any special talent. It's the result of regular training and hard work."

Anna falls silent, she has nothing to say to that. And it's not the first time we've had this talk either. I take in a deep breath and let it out, trying not to give in to anger. It works. I take my sister by the shoulders and make her look me in the eye.

"Anna, I love you and I know you. If I could, I would send you home right now, I would spare you this fate. But I can't..."

The corners of her mouth turn down. She knows it but can't accept it. She's still clinging to a childish hope that I can somehow save her from this life. But I can't, no one can.

"Other sisters see I can't keep you in check. I am sure it won't be long till they re-assign your training to someone else. Do you

really want that?"

"I don't."

"Then you will go change and come back for training." I nod.

"Okay. Sorry, it won't happen again."

How many times have I heard that?

"You promise?"

"I promise," she mumbles and gives me a hug.

I hug her back, stroking her back and a wave of her jet-black hair. Suddenly, I take a step back.

"Anna, where did you get this dress?"

She looks agitated and I don't like it. I hold her by the shoulders and she tries to escape my grip but I'm stronger, so she yields.

"Anna," I repeat sternly.

"I've bought it," she says uncertainly.

"We don't have this kind of money! What is that? Serat silk?" I gasp feeling her sleeve. "It must have cost a fortune!"

She seizes the opportunity and breaks free. She runs a few feet and turns back to me.

"Don't be mad, Agatha. It's just a gift." She tries on that sheepish grin of hers again but I know better. This is too big.

"Who is rich enough to give you such a gift?" I ask her.

"It... it doesn't matter..."

"Yes, it does!" I run up to her and grasp her elbow so that she can't escape again. She's still shorter and thinner than me but

she runs faster. It's a pity she does it in all the wrong situations.

"Was it a man?"

She bites her lower lip and this childish habit gives her away.

"You didn't! He... How... How could you..." I struggle to get the words out, incredulous, unable to calm myself this time.

I look around to make sure there are no witnesses and drag her into the nearest room. She doesn't resist and obediently shuffles behind me, lifting the skirt of her dress, which tangles around her feet. I double check the room is empty and lock it from the inside. The place is dark and dusty but I couldn't care less. I put my hands on my hips and turn to Anna, cutting her off from the door too, just in case.

"Who is he?!"

Anna refuses to look at me again and dusts off her sleeve instead.

"His name is Arian, he's the Prince of Serat."

The breath I was unconsciously holding escapes in an exasperated sigh.

"Anna, you know it will never lead to anything! And a prince..."

"I know I'll have no husband!" she snaps suddenly.

I am speechless for a moment. It's the first time she has dared to speak to me like that. I didn't even know she could. She notices my confusion and her boldness is gone. Her shoulders sink and she lowers her head again.

"I know," she repeats, "but why is it so wrong that I want a

little bit of love? It's not forbidden, is it?"

"It's not that, Anna. He's a prince. The path of politics is paved with razor-sharp knives. If someone learns about you, you could be in danger. If the king decides, for instance, that a Mara is not worthy of his son and your affair is tarnishing the Crown..."

I suddenly feel exhausted and sink into a wooden chair. It's beautifully carved, but blanketed in dust. Anna comes up to me and I take her hands in mine.

"I'm only nineteen, sister. I can try to protect you from evil spirits lurking in the woods and under the water, but I can't protect you from political intrigues, let alone a broken heart. And if you love him, your heart will break. It will break the moment you'll have to part. Does he love you?"

"Yes," she says with a serious expression on still a child's face.

"And do you?"

"I love him, too."

"Oh, Anna..."

She smiles at me and starts stroking my hair, not as shiny as hers but just as black.

"Don't worry about me, Agatha. I have never been so happy! If you could just see his smile... it's so charming. And his hair is like gold, and when you feel it, it's even softer than Serat silk! I've never seen anyone so handsome..."

A dreamy smile is playing on her lips, but my smile is rueful.

I don't know what I'm feeling anymore. I'm angry with her and I worry like crazy, but maybe I'm also jealous. Everything seems to just fall into her lap. She will even know love, however fleeting, and I've only been loved by my parents and have already forgotten how it feels.

"Alright, sister, so be it. I won't interfere with your happiness or try to talk you out of this madness. It's beyond my powers."

Anna is beside herself with joy. If I wasn't holding her hands, she would start twirling. But I give her hands a squeeze to get her attention back.

"But I want you to introduce me to him."

"You won't go threatening him or anything, will you?"

"Maybe just a little," I say with a straight face and she believes me and shoots me a frightened look. I let out a laugh but then put on a serious expression again.

"There's one more condition."

"Oh no..." she moans.

"I'll keep silent and won't tell the sisters anything as long as you start working hard. I want you to get really serious about your training."

She knows it's a trap. She's breathing noisily and tries to find a way out. But there's none, so I try not to look too smug.

"Okay, okay, I promise," she finally gives up.

"He must be really handsome." I laugh and dodge when her hand lashes out at me.

Yarat has sprawled.

It is my first thought when we climb the hill and the city stretches out before us. Yarat sits on a plain on the north-west of Araken. But the city is growing and I catch myself thinking that in a few decades it will probably swallow the gulf port too. The heavy clouds are blocking sunrays and the city seems gloomy. High spires of temples and the gilded roof of the royal palace look duller. We are still far away and all the houses are tiny, like children's toys, with the palace standing out against them. It has several storeys and it's longer than it is wide. However, it takes up a huge area and the adjacent square looks enormous even from where we are standing.

I am used to the life of an isolated temple, so I've never liked big cities, let alone capitals. I've only been to the capital of Serat once. But even then, I didn't have time for sightseeing, I dashed through the city and the only thing I had time to take note of was a somber palace faced in grey marble. I've visited Yarat a few times, and it leaves me unimpressed. But I'm sure this trip will be especially unpleasant.

I turn my gaze to the Quiet Gulf in the distance. Its waters are always calm thanks to the three islands in the bay that break any ocean waves.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Daniel trots up to me on his steed.

Morok falls back, but only by a few feet.

They still don't trust me. And they are right, of course. Moreover, I prefer Morok's silent company to that of Captain Dariy, who snaps at me every few minutes or so because I am not being respectful enough towards His Highness.

"What? Yarat?"

"Exactly."

I breathe in the cool, salty air and wrap myself tighter in my cloak.

"Just a city." I say drily and turn to leave. When I pass Morok I swear I can hear him snort. I look up at him in surprise but his face is as unreadable as ever.

"I seem to have wound up raising the most impertinent of Maras from her grave," Daniel says loudly with a wide grin.



When we finally enter the city, the sun is already setting and the sky is growing darker by the minute. We move unhurriedly through the streets of the capital, and I'm trying not to swivel around in my saddle too much, though I'm curious to see how much people and their lives have changed.

Many years back, when I was still alive, the houses were all made of wood; now the capital is full of stone buildings, two, three and sometimes even four storeys high. The facades are decorated: the poorer houses have folk-art carvings framing their windows (the legacy of traditional, wooden *nalichniki*), the more affluent houses however, are more ornate and plastered with

stucco. Before, only the main roads were paved, but now I see stone everywhere, so people can get around the city pretty easily even after rain.

Merchants are covering their stalls and closing the shops, which signifies the end of the working day. Other citizens are heading home too, but as soon as they notice Morok, they speed up or just choose a different road to steer clear of the Shadow's servant. I keep turning my head, trying to get a better look at all the devices people have come up with to prolong evening life in the city. Men are lighting candles inside big lamps in the main square and wide streets and putting burning torches into special sconces made of metal. The light allows the citizens to see the road and the outlines of most buildings and the horses can walk without stumbling.

The square in front of the palace is paved with big stone slabs, which makes it easier to ride on. The air is filled with the clatter of our horses' hooves. The palace is a bit long but it's completely symmetrical. It's painted in white and sand and is richly decorated with gold, columns, and stucco. The palace is mostly three-storeys' high, but the central and two parts on the sides are even taller. And if my memory serves me well, there should be beautiful gardens at the other end of it.

I take in the façade as we ascend a wide staircase leading to the grand entrance. The palace has changed, too. It has more extensions now and more ornaments. In my time, there was almost no gold on the exterior. The walls are now adorned with

the silhouettes of firebirds, Araken's coat of arms. You can see the golden image of this mythical creature against a crimson background on each flag in the city. But all this splendor does nothing for me. I was never susceptible to luxury and now even the mention of a royal family makes me nauseous.

"Are you going to drag me to the king in chains, Your Highness?" I ask Daniel poisonously.

We are almost at the entrance and I'm still in manacles. They put them back on when we were approaching the city and explained it away by saying it was just a way to reassure the citizens.

"It's not every day that they can see a Mara, raised from the dead and walking the streets. Some still believe you are the stuff of myths and legends." The prince had shrugged guiltily as the guards snapped the manacles back in place.

"You don't say. I thought raising people from the dead was Your Royal Highness's favorite hobby," I'd grunted back.

"If they were all at least half as beautiful as you are, I would definitely think of taking it up," he'd grinned, defeating me again in this word-fencing game.

This time at least they only handcuffed me, sparing my feet. But it was enough to remind me that I was no more than a puppet in their game. Daniel is the puppeteer and the others are my guards. I should never forget that.

So, I thrust my handcuffed hands under his nose again. I wonder if he's really going to throw me to his father's feet,

chained and humiliated, like a trophy.

Daniel looks me up and down and turns to Morok.

“Do you think we should expect any surprises from our dear Agatha?”

“I don’t think so. But I would have a guard at her side at all times while she’s in the palace. Someone you can trust.”

“Right...” The prince is contemplating the suggestion and I’m shivering in the chilly air, looking from one man to the other. Whatever they decide, I wish they would do it soon. “Thank you, Morok, you may go.”

Morok nods, turns around noiselessly and goes back down the stairs. He takes the bridles of my white steed and his own black mount and leads them away, to the stables, I suppose. It dawns on me that he’s not going into the palace with us. That realization makes me anxious. Morok is scary but I’ve gotten used to having him around. He’s the only one among all my guards who has similar powers to mine and does not belong to this world. And now I’m completely alone, again.

The moment I step over the threshold, through the enormous wooden gates, a wave of old unwelcome memories washes over me. I can see the richly decorated halls of another palace and other heavy gates that became the last obstacle between me and my revenge. The obstacle I couldn’t overcome. Fear and fury rise up in me and are about to take over but I make myself breathe in, breathe out, and return to the present.

Immediately past the entrance, we find ourselves in a gigantic

hall. The doors on the left are locked but there is a suite of rooms stretching before us on the right. I can also see another marble staircase covered with red-velvet carpet, leading to the second floor. The walls are painted in gold and crimson with little silver elements here and there. The columns are adorned with grapevines, also made of gold. And when I look up, I see the ceiling decorated with stucco and massive, gilded chandeliers that seem to be pressing down on you, even though they are many feet above your head. Everything looks too expensive and oversized.

The prince interrupts my thoughts. “You’re right, Agatha, it would be wrong to drag you to my father in chains. Come along.”

I follow him upstairs. On the second floor, the prince turns right into a long corridor. It’s darker here as there are no windows, but there are enough candles mounted on the walls to be able to get around. We walk the whole length of the hall and stop in front of a carved, wooden door which is no different from the other five we’ve just passed.

“This will be your room.”

I don’t have time to answer as he flings the door open and I find myself squinting, expecting it to look like a prison cell, apart from the gold on the walls. But to my surprise, when I peek in, all I can see is a simple room in deep green shades. There are just a few gold touches, but that much I can take.

“No red?” I arch an eyebrow and turn to Daniel.

“Sorry, Agatha,” he smirks, “we didn’t have time to create a

room especially for you, but you will find plenty of red in your wardrobe. I will send you maids; they will help you wash and change. I will be back in an hour.”

He takes off the manacles, somewhat reluctantly, and nods.

“But please don’t go telling the servants you’re dead, you’ll just scare them off.”

“I don’t believe I’m able to unscrew my head and stuff it under my arm.” I roll my eyes remembering the rumors he’d shared with me about Maras.

Uncharacteristically, the Prince doesn’t smile, just shoots me a searching look, turns on his heels and leaves. Now I can look around properly. The room is not big, but there are two large windows opposite the door. They reach almost to the floor, so the room must be bathed in sunlight during the day. In the middle of the room stands a massive four-poster bed. Next to the bed is a dressing-table, and a little further, a wardrobe. A huge, crystal chandelier hangs from the ceiling and I am careful not to walk right under it as I’m afraid it will crash down and pin me to the floor. I walk up to the wardrobe and the doors creak open with a sense of foreboding. I’m right, of course, Daniel did go wild. I browse through brand new cloaks, gowns, trousers and shirts, all in scarlet, black or white. I shut the doors and make a mental note to tell Daniel that a Mara can wear other colors too.

As promised, Daniel sends me two lovely girls, Inna and Marina, who help me take a bath and make me look presentable. I’m not used to being waited on, so I try to refuse their help. They

just smile respectfully and help me anyway, ignoring my feeble attempts to do everything myself. I suspect they haven't been told who I am as they do not ask questions or cringe when they touch me. They actually are a lot of help, but I manage to at least talk them into letting me take the bath on my own.

"M'lady, there's a strange spot on your back. Would you like me to call a healer?" Marina asks me while she's helping me with the corset.

Inna comes nearer too and examines my back.

"Maybe you would like to put on another dress?" she suggests.

Marina answers before I can say anything. "No, His Highness wanted this particular dress."

"So, it was His Highness who ordered you to clad me in this revealing dress with open shoulders?" I turn to them indignantly.

My maids lower their eyes.

To be honest, the dress is gorgeous. The color is more crimson than scarlet. The hem of the skirt and the sleeves are embroidered with real gold thread and delicate lace and the corset is embellished with pearls and rubies. I don't remember ever wearing anything as beautiful, or as revealing, for that matter. The cleavage is at least a few inches too low for my liking and my shoulders are completely bare, which makes me want to cover myself with my hands. I look like an expensive doll and the fact that Daniel *ordered* me to wear this dress feels humiliating. The anger is bubbling up inside of me again but something touches the skin on my back and I start.

"I am sorry, my lady," it was Inna, "but that spot..."

"What about it?"

I turn my back to the mirror and crane my neck to see what is so strange. What I see is a dark, almost black, spot on my shoulder blade that looks like the palm of a hand. *Shadow's touch. A sign that marks my connection with Morok. It's the spot where he touched me when he was reviving me.* The thought sends a shiver down my spine but I turn back to the maids and try to look reassuring.

"Oh that. It's just a birthmark, that's all. I can cover it with my hair. Could you help me brush it back?" I ask sweetly.

The girls look at me with a hint of suspicion in their eyes but they do not dare to pry further. They brush my hair so that it falls down my back in a waterfall, though a smaller and lighter waterfall than it used to be. They also line my eyes with stibnite, powder my face and paint my lips. There are so many jars, flasks and tiny bottles on the dressing-table that I'm afraid to even touch them, having no idea about their contents or purpose. But the girls seem more competent, they swiftly pick up this jar or that bottle and apply colors that match my dress. In the end, when I open my eyes and see my reflection, it's not an unpleasant sight.

"You are breathtaking, m'lady," Marina says with a shy smile.

"Thanks to you."

"I meant m'lady is breathtakingly beautiful even without the dress or the makeup. I am sure His Highness will appreciate your beauty."

“His Highness can shove...” I glimpse a startled look on my maids’ faces and check myself. I put on my best smile and force myself say: “I hope he will be satisfied.”

The prince seems to be into collecting beautiful things. And he must be considering me a new object in his collection.

As soon as the thought forms in my head, the door to my room flies open. It is not the prince who strides in though, it is four guards.

“Excuse us, my lady. We have been sent to accompany you to the Great Hall.”

Four fully armed men, and I am not even allowed hairpins, let alone weapons. Maybe Daniel fears I might kill someone with the hair comb he gave me.

In an act of desperation, I actually cast a quick glance at the dressing-table, but my hair comb is not there.

“Lead the way.” I sigh, standing up and hitching up the hem of my dress. Two guards are walking in front of me and two more are bringing up the rear.

It takes us at least five minutes to get to the Great Hall, though it is situated on the same floor. We weave through corridors and passages, in and out of halls till I completely lose my bearings. But the guards finally stop in front of heavy doors and throw them open. I straighten up and fold my hands somewhere in front of my belly, the way women do at court. I enter the hall, the clicking sound of my heels against the polished floor loud in my ears. Apart from that, it’s almost silent, there are only a few

people speaking in hushed voice somewhere in the distance. I was expecting to find a crowd gaping at a living Mara, but the hall is almost empty.

I take a look around and see that the hall is indeed enormous and spacious, I guess it is where all royal balls and events are normally held. The walls are flickering with gold, a line of sculptures stretching along each of them. The ceiling is covered in frescos, which I can see even at this dark time of the evening due to hundreds of candles lighting the room. There are a lot of windows, too, and by day the hall must be dazzling, with all the gold reflecting the sunlight. But now the windows are dark and I can't even guess what is beyond them.

I spot a table to the right, laden with dishes for the evening meal. On the left, there's a throne, elevated on a platform and towering over the hall. In the throne sits the current King of Araken, Dmitry Rakhmanov. One glance at the king is enough to see that the demanding task of ruling the country has taken its toll on his health and hasn't left him many years to walk the earth. His hair must have been the color of gold before, but now it is almost completely silver, and his thinning beard and mustache too are peppered with grey. I can spot a few bald patches on his head despite the servants' best efforts to hide them by brushing the hair to one side. He must have lost a lot of weight, too, because his red and gold caftan is too baggy, making the king look even older. His hazel eyes are clouded and his whole body speaks of his fatigue. He's resting his head on a hand, propped on the armrest.

Next to the king's throne, there are three smaller ones, probably for his heirs. One of them is occupied by a pretty, young woman in a powder-pink gown. Her golden hair falls in a thick braid down her left shoulder and loose locks frame her face, making it even more charming. Behind the throne, I can make out Daniel, absorbed in conversation with a dark-haired man. The prince is wearing a spotless crimson doublet, he has clearly had a bit of time in which to clean himself up too. The dark-haired man is dressed in a simple, black caftan. Though they are of more or less the same height, in every other sense they look like complete opposites.

"Brother!" The woman calls to Daniel and rises from the throne as I approach.

The prince is so absorbed, he hasn't noticed me come in, but now he and the other man turn their eyes towards me. The dark-haired stranger looks me up and down with his brilliant green eyes, claps Daniel on the shoulder and vanishes somewhere behind the thrones. The prince pays him no attention now as his eyes are fixed on my dress. I hope he is not looking at my cleavage.

I face the king, who stares absently in the distance, but then blinks a few times and finally turns his attention to me. When he realizes who I am, he stands up from the throne with his head held high and his eyes adopt a proud expression. I'm relieved to see he still has some strength left in him. It would be more challenging to try to negotiate with a feeble old man. The only

absent member of the Royal family is the elder son and the heir to the throne, Nikolay.

Daniel steps down and sets off in my direction but I raise a hand motioning him to return back to his place. Maras might have lived out in the wilderness but we have been taught the ceremony of court. I curtsy, not taking my eyes off the king, and he nods approvingly. Daniel glances at me in surprise, then grins and goes back to stand to the right of his father's throne. Now they are all looking at me, I can clearly see their resemblance, all three have light hair and hazel eyes.

"Welcome to Yarat, Mara," the king starts.

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

"I must admit, when my son suggested this idea, my first impulse was to refuse. I was skeptical and didn't truly believe it even vaguely possible. But, when all the others have failed so gloriously, I had to resort to this plan in the end."

The king and his children sit back down on their thrones and I am left standing at the foot of the platform. I'm still in the dark as to why they resorted to this plan. Why raise me from the dead? Getting rid of a few ghouls is hardly worth so much trouble. So, when the king pauses and looks at me expectantly, I keep my silence.

"Well," he is forced to continue, "you already know my son Daniel. And this," he points to the left where the golden-haired woman is sitting, "is my daughter Elena."

"Your Highness." I turn to the princess and bow my head.

“Welcome, Mara. Your name is Agatha, is that right?” She has a pleasant soft voice. “Brother has told me so much about you. I should say, I’m impressed and glad to have you here. You look wonderful.”

“Did you expect to see a half-rotten corpse, Your Highness?”

“I don’t know... I mean of course not but...”

“I was expecting to see some signs of decay myself when I first saw my own reflection. And I was no less surprised that Your Highness when I didn’t see any.”

Princess nods in response, a little embarrassed. I glance back at the king, who looks even more exhausted now, and decide to cut the courtesies short so that we can finish our conversation before he nods off. Besides, I feel tired myself, it’s been a long day.

“Your Majesty, let us cut to the chase. Your son has not yet explained to me why I am here.”

The king gives Daniel a quizzical look and turns back to me.

“About a month ago, my elder son Nikolay was poisoned.”

“Did he die?” I prompt as the king doesn’t continue.

“No, thank gods. Nikolay is my heir. I have been raising him to be a king. I wanted, when my time comes, to pass the country on to a strong and competent ruler. I wanted someone who would put an end to this long-running and fruitless conflict with Serat and would help return Araken to its former glory. If he dies, it’s all been in vain.”

So, the king and his heir want to end the war. The king’s voice

has a definite edge to it now. I cast a fleeting glance at Daniel, but he doesn't seem to mind that his father doesn't even consider him a worthy successor to the throne. His smile is easy and relaxed and he is scanning around the hall absent-mindedly. Princess Elena still has the same discreet smile on her lips.

"Are you planning to sign a truce with Serat?"

"What was that?" the king seems to have zoned out again.

"Peace. Do you want to make peace with Serat?" I repeat slowly trying not to let my irritation show.

"There will be no peace now!" The king throws up his arms. "But gods know, I tried! We had an agreement with Aleksey Lasnetsov that his son would marry Elena. But Aleksey is dead and the other one, Severin, just went and married another, throwing the whole deal out the window!"

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Elena pursing her lips.

"You tell me, Mara, haven't I done EVERYTHING? Haven't I been kind and FORGIVEN him?" the king raises his voice and bangs his fist on the armrest.

I try to stay calm telling myself it's not me he is angry with. The king stares somewhere above my head, probably not even seeing me.

"I'm sure you were terribly kind, Your Majesty."

"I still offered him a truce! If he had just gotten rid of his fiancée," the king spits the word out with obvious distaste, "and taken Elena as his true wife. I gave him a second chance, but he THREW IT IN MY FACE! Do you know what pitiful excuse

this suckling gave me?!”

“He said he’d fallen in LOVE!” the king pounds his fist again and almost yells the last word, so that Elena starts and seems to shrink in her seat.

I just stand there watching all of them, watching their reactions. I see now that Daniel only pretends to be disinterested and distracted but he’s listening to his father, his eyes are cold and his lips have become a thin line. Then a slight movement behind the royal family catches my eye. It’s that dark-haired man again. Daniel must really trust him if he’s allowed him to stay during such a delicate conversation.

“I’d say good riddance, Your Majesty,” I say.

“What was that?”

“I’m saying you’re probably better off without this marriage. The Lasnetsovs have traitor blood, I learned that the hard way.” I raise my head higher and look the king in the eye. “You shouldn’t have even promised the princess to them. Their word is worth nothing, as you’ve seen for yourself. You hoped that after the truce Nikolay’s throne would be safe. But why did you think marriage bonds would stop Severin from attacking Araken? I say it would have been worse had the wedding taken place. Elena would be their lever of pressure on you.”

“He wouldn’t have dared,” king Dmitry says more quietly and with less certainty.

I cock my head and give him a cold smile.

“I remember thinking the same about the Prince of Serat. And

now I see where I am and remember why I died.”

“So, the rumors are true... He did that?”

“Yes, and I heard it from the victim herself, while she was bleeding to death in my arms.”

“Horrible, horrible,” Dmitry repeats even more quietly, stroking his beard pensively.

“I told you, father, that they are behind the poisoning! Isn’t all the evidence pretty conclusive? They know I’m not a rival for them,” Daniel cuts in.

“So, you believe Nikolay has been poisoned by Serat?”

“I do, Agatha. There’s proof, we’ve even found the poisoner who’s confessed everything,” Daniel nods.

I’m still holding my hands in front of me and they’ve gone numb. So, I unclasp them and drop my arms to my sides, allowing myself a more relaxed pose.

“What do you want from me, then?”

“To prolong Nikolay’s life,” the king replies.

I scoff but pull myself together as soon as I see the expression on the faces of the royal family.

“Do you understand what you are asking for? When we prolong someone’s life, time freezes for them. If we prolong an old man’s life, he will not grow younger, he will just be old for longer, since the charms won’t let him die a natural death till they wear off. If Nikolay is in a bad condition now, and I put such charms on him, he will suffer from the poison in his body for many years to come without the mercy of death.” I can see their

faces turn paler by the word. Could they really have no idea about how these charms work? “How is he now?”

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