



BY BLOOD  
SHADOW & SIRE

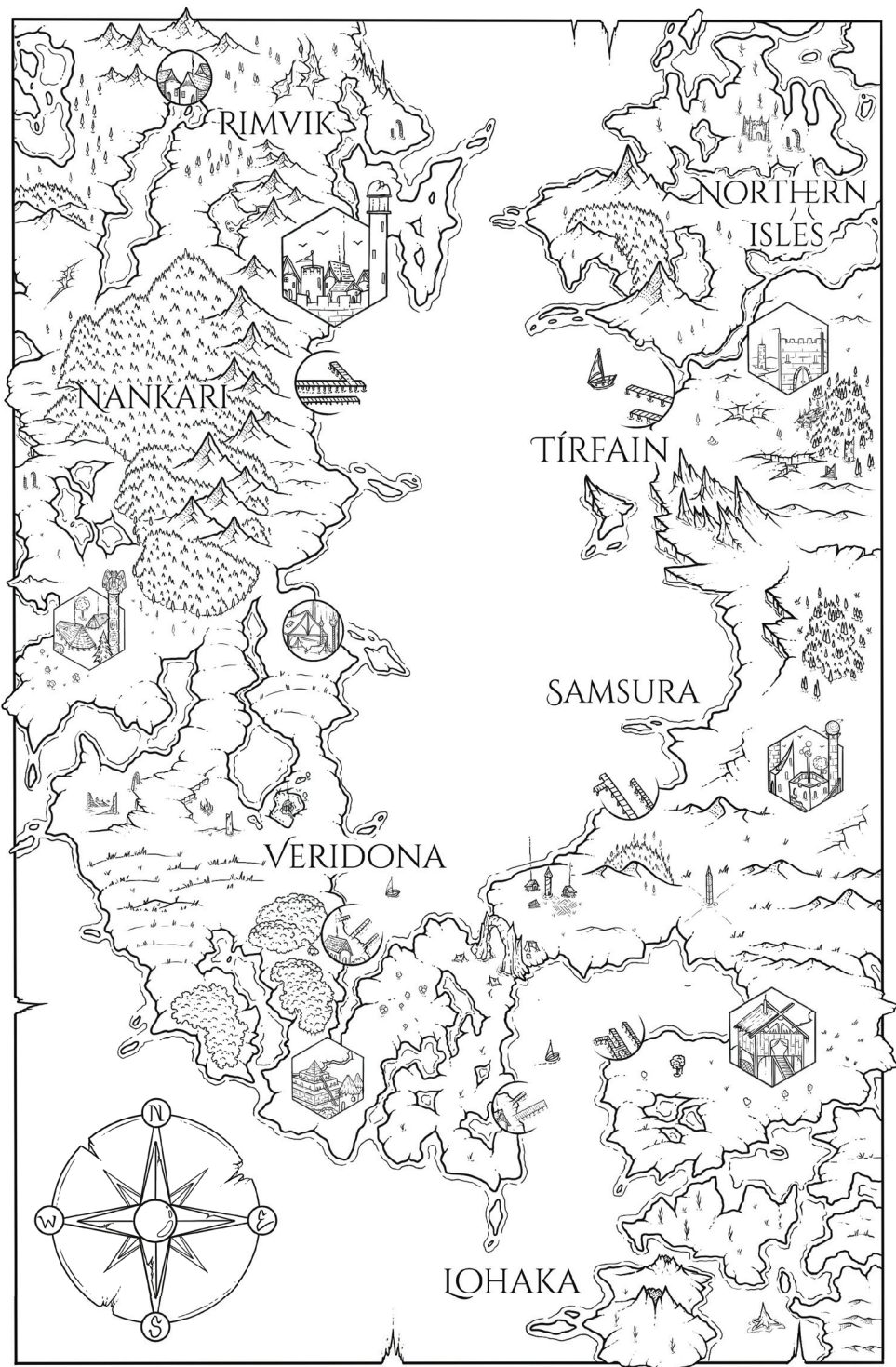
ORIN STEELE

To our daughters.

May they be raised with the fury to walk into the fire and make our  
world a better place.

To us.

May we have the conviction and courage to rise and do what's right,  
no matter the cost.



RIMVIK

NORTHERN ISLES

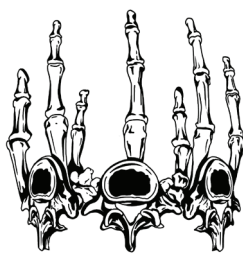
NANKARI

TÍRFAIN

SAMSURA

VERIDONA

IOHAKA



## PROLOGUE

*“There is a place beyond the veil where even time dares not follow.”*

*Observing The Sleeper: Vol. 1*

*ISLYN*

Isllyn’s hands trembled as she looked down at them, slick with blood—hers, someone else’s, she couldn’t be sure anymore. Everything was red even when the world around her was black. Blood crusted in the cracks of her knuckles and ran from fresh cuts she couldn’t see. She should have been used to it, but she wasn’t.

She felt it then—the slither of his words, the iciness of his awareness against the crook of her neck. Bumps raised where breath met skin.

*My love*, the voice said. Not out loud. It rang inside her skull, as though her bones had become instruments for his song.

She had wanted this—*needed* this. But it felt like sipping poison from a crystal goblet. Sweet and deadly.

*Solvora, light my path*, she thought to herself. But no gods would dare to meddle in the affairs of the World Eater.

He continued the gentle assault on her mind, the venom of his words seeping deeper and deeper. *You have come to me, of your own volition. I did not expect you to come to your knees so soon.*

It wasn't a question, but she answered it anyway. "Yes," she said, curling her fingers into fists. Her knuckles cracked. "I submit to your will, Belthorak. I accept your offer."

*Tsk. My love, you know my name—my true name. It is the only way to summon me, to wield me. And that is what you wish to do, is it not? Use me?*

She felt fingers brush her spine, but no hand reached.

*I am no pawn, Islyn, I am the King of Gods. The First Spark and End of All Things.*

His voice was the most dangerous attraction. Its depth pulled you in and lulled you into a slumber before drowning you and devouring your soul.

He stepped forward and the air bowed around him. Power bled from his skin like heat from the sun. His white hair—usually woven into elaborate braids—hung loose and wild down his back, like threads of moonlight caught in ancient winds. He looked older than she remembered—frayed at the edges. Yet nothing about him diminished. Even worn, he was beautiful in a way that hurt to look at. Terrible and eternal. Belthorak was beautiful in the same way that blood splatter was beautiful after dripping from the tip of a dagger plunged through the heart.

He was tall, built with sculpted elegance, every movement precise as a master blade. He wore layered black robes embroidered with ancient sigils, stitched so fine they shimmered when he moved. No markings adorned his skin. No symbols of allegiance. Belthorak belonged to nothing. No one. His broad shoulders squared as her head tilted up

up and the storm in her eyes met the vast fury of his own. They needed each other.

The realm around them was a vast, unbroken expanse of shadow and obsidian glass. Jagged rocks jutted like broken teeth from the earth, and the sky—if it could be called that—was an endless swirl of violet and black, fractured by veins of gold that flashed like distant lightning. The air hummed with static. It reeked of ancient rot and forgotten dreams. Dreams Islyn was desperately clinging to.

The vibrant emerald that looked back at her held no tenderness, only hunger. A small smile tugged at the corner of his lips and it sent a chill down Islyn's spine. To ask *this* of Belthorak, she would need to give him the only thing in this universe he coveted. The only thing that he had not been able to freely take.

*Her.*

Belthorak craved her, not for love, but for possession.

“Say it,” he whispered, his voice now a living thing. His pale hand reached and gently wiped the tear rolling down her cheek. She blinked at the gentleness before he captured it on his fingertip. He pulled a small vial from his robes, letting the salty liquid drop into the glass, then corked it. “Say my name,” he murmured, “so that I may claim you. So that we will be one.”

She would find a way to break this. Eventually. But this was war. And she was losing.

The drying blood flaked from her skin. Her markings shifted beneath the surface. She wondered if the markings she had grown to accept—to love even—would change. If *she* would change. Islyn would be the monster the children of Alarien would fear. Wife of the World Eater.

Death herself. She would welcome it—the fear—if it meant saving those who were left. The few who still walked on this side of the veil.

Islyn's breath shook from her lungs, "I give myself to you," she said.

She hesitated only for a moment before meeting death's gaze and speaking the word that would allow the binding.

*"Valeryth."*

The air around her trembled and a sickening grin stretched across Belthorak's—no, *Valeryth's*—face. Her throat tightened as she felt his hand slither around her waist, pushing her flesh against his.

"My queen," he whispered. His voice coiled through her like smoke. She hated the way it made her ache. She needed distance, clarity. Being near him was like inhaling flames.

It was only one of his many weapons. His power was vast and endless. He could end the war without even lifting a finger, but that was not Valeryth. There was no benefit for him in stopping the war—stopping the death. He fed on it. His hand slid up her back, nails biting into her skin. Fingers tangled into the hair at the back of her head, tilting her chin up. The intimacy of the gesture belied the threat behind it.

"The whole verse, *if you don't mind.*" His words dripped arrogance. He knew she was desperate. He was savoring it.

Islyn cleared her throat, forcing down the rising bile. She shook his hand free as a familiar voice whispered through her mind—*Wait*. It shattered her.

She had to remember who she was before Valeryth's grip sunk too deep. Every second near him wore her down. She had to stay sharp. She had to remember *him*. The only one she had ever bowed to was gone. And Valeryth, for all his power, needed her as much as she needed him.

She met death defiantly, the fire within her burning. She had learned to use it—the rage.

“There she is,” he purred. “I do prefer you alert and awake, my love. It wouldn’t be a fair fight otherwise.”

And a fight it would be. To claim Valeryth’s power, not to share it, she would have to take it. She would have to kill him. The World Eater would not fall easily. She would not be his wife; she would be his executioner.

Valeryth sought to own Islyn and the immense power she wielded, but she would own *him* in return. She would tighten his collar until he suffocated. For now, sharing his power would have to be enough.

Islyn reached up and locked her bloodied hands around his throat, nails digging into his skin. He allowed her to push him backward. Tears blurred her vision. Her thoughts began to spiral. This was for everyone she had lost. For all of Santalla. For Alarien.

His blood welled as her grip tightened. Her thoughts flattened into a single line. She had a lie to sell. Valeryth needed to believe she wanted him. That she *loved* him. That she *could* love him. And maybe, in some twisted way, she did. Not the man or the god, but the power. The fear he inspired. The hunger he ignited.

She dug into the veins that were beginning to bulge on his neck and the blood began pooling in the crevices of his clavicle. She released him as he gasped once, dragging breath into ancient lungs.

“Drink, my love,” he said.

And she did—she drank deeper than she had imagined possible. Her tongue traced the blood from his throat, her markings flaring in revolt. Her power screamed its protest. But she drank again. And again.

Power surged beneath her skin. Her body trembled with it. She hated how easily it sank into her, how quickly her body forgot the cost. This wasn't real. It couldn't be real. But the heat curling low in her belly didn't care for strategy or plans. It knew only want. It knew only *now*.

"Sit," she commanded, her voice a chorus drunk on power. He obeyed, taking his throne of death and decay.

She straddled him, breath quickening. The crusted blood on her body had dried into a second skin. She didn't bother to wipe it away. He preferred her this way, as the tang of iron was sweeter than any Alarien wine to the World Eater.

His cold hands gripped her hips, adjusting her weight as she settled against him. She was steel above kindling—sharp, controlled, coiled. He lifted a hand from her waist and removed the ceremonial dagger strapped to his. He placed the long and ragged obsidian blade into Islyn's waiting hand. She took in the beast seated beneath her. Neither blinked as she plunged the dagger into her beating heart. The pain seared through her, but she refused to let out a single cry.

He smiled and pulled the blade from her chest. "Good girl," he cooed before his tongue slid along the sharp edge, biting into the soft muscle. "We may finish the Aurewyn now."

The word *Aurewyn* was ice in her mind. Her vision blurred. The realm began to tilt. She hadn't seen him complete the gesture. He now held a thread of shimmer in his hand—a piece of himself, his soul. She reached into the wound at her chest. Searched for something to offer in return. Her thread recoiled. It didn't want Belthorak's poison, it wanted her mate. But what her soul wanted didn't matter. A tear landed on the dried blood, making it viscous once again.

As she pulled the thread of her soul and offered it to Valeryth, she uttered the sacred oaths, but she didn't feel them; she felt hollow. Cold. Her mouth moved but her consciousness didn't register the words.

She ached for *him*, not Valeryth.

Valeryth answered in the ancient tongue of the gods forgotten by all but him, and the ceremony was complete. Part of her belonged to him now. And part of him would forever echo inside her—even after his death.

Before she could fully process what she had done, her head snapped back and she inhaled a sharp, fiery breath. The world around her fell away, and she was blinded by a piercing white light.

Memories began flashing before her, faster and faster; time was rewinding—she couldn't understand each vision before the next one took over.

She could smell the marshy waters, hear the groan of the pier, footsteps on worn wooden floors, the creak of her father's drawn bow. Memories from years past flooded her vision and suddenly, she was home.



# CHAPTER 1

*"In the end, all fires go cold. Even those kindled by gods."  
The Book of Flame*

## ISLYN

"Mother, please," Islyn begged. She used the excuse of hunger like a shield. They couldn't know the real reason she needed to go. Not yet.

"Words, Islyn," her mother snapped. "Words cannot protect you. It's too dangerous." Alena returned to the watered-down stew brewing over the fire. She stirred the pot harder than necessary, as if trying to drive the conversation away by force.

"I'll take Axy with me. He'll protect me," Islyn said, glancing at the grown wolf, his midnight-black fur illuminated by the warm flames as he lay curled and perfectly comfortable by the fire. "You'll protect me, right, boy?" Neraxys gave a large huff and readjusted his position on the makeshift bed of hay under a wool blanket.

She pleaded, shifting her attention to Kuana. She could already see

the strain on her father's face. "I've trained for years, and I'm stronger than ever—I can control myself."

Her parents exchanged a glance, a silent conversation passing between them. Islyn had seen it before in whispers over dying fires and hushed arguments behind closed doors. Fear. Uncertainty. The weight of choosing wrong.

She took a step closer, voice softening. "Father, I've been training my entire life. *Please.*"

"It's not that we don't trust you, my little Zahra." The name only her father called her sent a warmth into her chest. "We don't trust *them*—how could we?" he asked, placing his hands on her shoulders, pulling her close. "You are too precious to us and we can't risk losing you. Islyn, if you are found—"

Maybe they were right. Maybe the Daeleth were monsters. If there was even a chance her parents were wrong—a sliver of hope that she wasn't some cursed thing—then she had to try. She had to know.

"I know how to hide," Islyn said, frustration threading through her voice. "We've been hiding my entire life. *Twenty-four years* and no one has found us." She swallowed hard, forcing herself to stay calm, to sound reasonable. "It's just the market. I'll be careful. I won't go near the Ceremony. I swear it." The words fell before she could stop herself. "We're starving."

Her mother turned away from the hearth, filling the room with her presence as she grabbed Islyn's arm, pulling her attention from her father. "We are *surviving*," her mother spat. "You've asked, and we've answered, Islyn. No." Alena's fingers tightened on Islyn's arm, she searched for something—understanding, surrender. Maybe even fear. But Islyn had none left to give.

Islyn shook her arm free and looked to Kaz, mending a pair of trousers, hoping for some support, but he simply held his hands up, clearly not wanting to get involved. This was her chance to see one of her kind, but she had to play this right.

“Do you have no regard for yourself, for your brothers...” Her mother paused and corrected through a visible wave of grief. “Your brother.”

Even after five years, Islyn still felt pain when hearing the singular. In her mind, Aleksí was still here. She still found herself waiting to see him walk around the corner or hear his laugh when she told a joke, but she was always met with the silent reminder of his death.

Alena pleaded with Islyn, her voice rising. “We have made a life here in Veridona because it is easy to hide, and you would walk into the mouth of the beast that hunts you.” Tears flooded her mother’s eyes. “Do you know what they would do to us if they found you? We stole from the gods. By all rights, Islyn, they own you. We have given our lives to protect you; Aleksí gave his life to protect you,” she said, pointing to the room that had been built for a son who would never occupy it. “To teach you and guide you through your training. But we cannot protect you from the gods themselves. They will not welcome you with open arms if they find you.”

Islyn heard them—understood, even—but opportunities like this did not come frequently. Yes, there had been close calls over the years, but she wouldn’t still be alive if the gods did not wish it, *right?*

“I didn’t ask for this,” she muttered, her voice small, not realizing she would be heard. She should have kept her mouth shut. *Oh gods*, she should have kept her mouth shut.

“How dare you,” her mother hissed.

Regret rushed through Islyn, her face flushing.

“How dare you say that after all this family has given. I will tie you to your bedpost myself, Solvora help me.”

The small room fell silent, and Kaz made himself scarce. Alena moved to the center of the room and sat at the small wood table, wiping away angry tears. Kuana sighed and walked behind her, lowering his arms around her shoulders, brushing a kiss on her cheek.

Islyn’s anger softened at the sight. She had too easily forgotten all her family had given up. Homes left behind. Friends lost. The weight of a life unlived.

Unlike the rest of her family, life on the run was all Islyn had ever known. Before her birth, her family had settled into a home with floors worn smooth by years of love and laughter. She had never known a home like that, only borrowed spaces with floors marked by strangers. They never stayed in one place for long. Every time they suspected the beacon triggered, signaling her location, they ran.

The beacon, which alerted the gods of the marked child’s birth, activated with an infant’s cry, so they assumed strong feelings—fear, pain, grief—could call to it again. But they never truly knew. No one did. All they had were guesses, stories, scattered research passed between desperate hands and old memories. When lives were on the line, guesses were enough.

Her parents chose work that could move with them. Her father—once stationed in Isenbyrg’s Trade Commission under his own father, Kaleo—had returned to hunting. Her mother, a renowned translator and historian, stitched clothes for coin in roadside markets, her embroidery needle replacing the quill. When the rare opportunity arose, Alena

would teach the languages of Alarien. Her children knew the basics of every language, so no matter where they landed, they could blend in, at least for a while.

Eventually, they had stopped unpacking the nonessentials. Then they stopped bringing them altogether. They never brought more than they needed. More was a waste when you didn't know when you'd have to drop your entire life and run.

This life hadn't been her choice. It had been chosen the day her family decided to run. The day they'd refused to surrender her. She was supposed to be given to the gods—as every marked child was—a week after her birth.

Alena drew a slow, steady breath. “We will be fine if we go hungry for a time; we will not be if one of us is killed.”

Islyn crossed to the table where her mother sat. “I'm sorry,” she said, and she meant it. “You're right. It is dangerous. But so is every day, every breath we take. If I go, we won't be left here starving until the Daeleth leave... and I'll have a chance to understand who I am.”

Her mother's sharp voice cut through the air. “Yes, Islyn, we are aware. We accepted the danger long ago. But if you are caught,” Alena's voice broke, “death will not be a possibility, but a promise. For all of us. That is what we have been avoiding all these years. We ran because we were not willing to sacrifice you to the wills of the gods, to be their slave or their weapon like the stories describe.” Her eyes softened as she let out a long exhale. “I've researched every text available,” she continued, shaking her head. “We never would have seen you again, and when the gods saw that we were willing to bend, we didn't know what else they would come asking for.” The door Kaz left through creaked.

In two days, the Ceremony of Surrender would begin. Two days, and Veridona would be hosting the warriors of the gods. If she didn't go now, she wouldn't just lose her chance to learn about what she was, she would be trapped. Hidden. Forgotten. Forever.

The Daeleth would be there—beings who were marked, chosen by the gods, surrendered by their families to be remade into something more. They were unaging, powerful, and rarely seen outside the gods' bidding.

Some families claimed bloodlines tied to the gods, though magic could vanish for generations before reemerging without warning. Only at a child's first cry did the truth stir—when a god, unseen, laid their claim to the child with the tattoo-like markings that Islyn bore. Blue and red for the sun and moon that claimed her. Nithri, the Sun, and Santalla, the Moon, were most powerful. There were lesser realms as well, the elementals: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water.

There were also stories of a stronger god—an older god—but what the people knew was limited to only a few remaining texts. *That* god was as good as forgotten everywhere but the Northern Isles where rumors of his worship continued.

Islyn's dual markings should have meant immense power, but all she could manage was a handful of half-formed tricks. Nothing like the legends her mother had unearthed.

She had heard the tales passed down about the Daeleth and their powers. Some say the marked had to pass a trial to earn their place and power, while others claimed it was a gift bestowed, but she would never know because the only way to be sure was to ascend yourself.

This time, however, the expectant family, who lived north of Calvaris, had reason to believe their unborn child would be marked. Their

firstborn had been marked—and their second. The entire town had been preparing for weeks, eager to celebrate the Ceremony of Surrender, eager to witness the arrival of the god-touched warriors who would claim this new child and leave the family's home—and mother's arms—empty once again.

Islyn turned away from her parents, pacing toward the small kitchen. The vase by the window, once overflowing with fresh blooms, now held only brittle stems. Another small sacrifice, another quiet cost of staying hidden.

She glanced back to see her mother leaning into her father's chest and wondered if she would ever know the feeling of love like that—steady, certain, seen. Kaz had never shown interest in finding a partner. Perhaps he had accepted, as she now had, that a life lived in shadow left no room for anyone else. That loving her—loving what she was—would be a burden too great to ask of another.

She drifted past her brothers' rooms, lingering at the door left ajar. The room her father built for Aleksis's ghost, untouched. His old cloak slung over the dusty bedpost. His laughter still echoing in the shadows. Her parents still hoped that one day he would return—that it had all been a dream, but Islyn had watched as his ashes gently danced to the ground where he'd stood.

Grief, sharp as a blade, pierced her chest. She pressed it down, buried it where all the other dark things lived.

She returned and knelt at her mother's feet. Alena's hand immediately found her hair, smoothing it gently, catching and freeing small tangles. Islyn closed her eyes, breathing in the familiar scent of her mother's skin—woodsmoke and lavender—and let herself be small.

Her mother's voice was thick. "Our life has not been easy. We've slept under the stars with nothing but hope and a babe in our arms. We've run far from home, from everything we knew, and I would do it again. Every moment of it. Aleksi would too."

Islyn lifted her gaze to her mother's face.

"I remember the day you were born like it was yesterday," her mother said, her voice soft.

"As do I," Kuana added as he settled into the chair next to Alena. "You were so small—so delicate in my arms. As we waited for your cry, all I could think about were the possibilities that awaited you, good and bad. We knew there was a chance you would be marked. We held our breath—all of us—waiting to see what future would unfold for us all."

His large, calloused hand closed over Alena's. "I still remember the look on your mother's face." He smiled at Alena. "The woman I love more than anything in this world." Alena rested her head on Kuana's shoulder as he continued, "She reached for you and I was so afraid I would drop you," a soft laugh escaped him, "I walked over to the bedside and once you were in her arms I felt a sense of relief, that everything was going to be okay. Neraxys showed immediate interest in you—he was so small then. He immediately jumped on the bed and began nuzzling you, smelling you, learning you. We knew he would be yours."

Kuana shifted in his seat. "Then you cried," he said. "The walls quivered, trinkets and knick-knacks fell from shelves. It felt as if the very ground beneath our feet feared what was coming."

Alena's thumb began circling the carnelian ring on her index finger.

"The scent came before the realization," Kuana continued, "we didn't notice the blanket had completely burned away. It was ash in your moth-

ers lap, and you—fierce and angry—cried and cried, completely unaware of the chaos unfolding around you.” His sorrow-filled eyes met Islyn’s. “That’s when your marking appeared and we knew... the gods had ignored our prayers. You are a miracle, my Zahra. When we realized what you were, we sat down as a family. Your brothers were so young, but we asked them if they would run. If they would love you enough to live in exile.” He swallowed hard, the memory thick in his throat. “Without hesitation, Aleksi said yes.”

Tears blurred Islyn’s vision. Her father reached to wipe one from her cheek.

“Aleksi loved you wholeheartedly from the moment he met you,” Kuana said. “That’s who he was.”

“You are just like him,” her mother added with a tremulous smile. “Gods help us all.”



ISLYN NEEDED AIR. SHE SLIPPED OUTSIDE, THE RICKETY steps creaking underfoot as mist twisted low over the marsh. Their stilted home stood defiant against the damp, a stubborn scrap of a life.

The pier stretched out before her, slick with mist, vanishing into the low-hanging fog that clung to Veridona’s endless marshes. It was normal here for houses to float or stand on tall, spindly stilts like theirs—sturdy despite their narrow, weathered frames. Kuana had built it by piecing it together from driftwood, iron nails, and hope. It wasn’t much, but it was theirs.

Her boots soaked through quickly, the cold seeping into her bones. Still, she pressed on, drawn to the old weeping willow at the far end of

the property. Next to it sat the stone marker—the only grave Aleks would ever have. She knelt before it, the earth cold against her knees, and laid her hand on the worn letter carved into the stone.

“Please forgive me,” she whispered. “Forgive us all.” The mist hung heavy. The willow branches bowed like grieving hands. The river lapped at the bank.

Neraxys appeared beside her without a sound, pressing his massive frame against her. She felt the weight of him—solid, certain—grounding her.

“What do I do?” she whispered, tracing the A with trembling fingers.

No answer came. Only the slow, steady breathing of the wolf at her side.

“If I don’t go,” she murmured, “I may never know what I really am. If I do go, maybe... maybe I will find something better, find a purpose beyond this life,” she paused, taking a long breath before continuing, “if you can even call it that.”

She closed her eyes, breathing in the faint tang of fish and mud. No grand revelation came. Only silence. “He’s not going to answer me, is he?” she murmured, more to Neraxys than herself.

Neraxys let out a slow breath through his nose, the softest sound, but it tightened her chest. He understood. He always did.

No one would save them. No gods, no heroes. Just a starving family, a dying winter, and no choice but to act. The fear would not serve her. The doubt would not serve her. She would have to do this herself.

“Thought I’d find you here,” a familiar voice called.

Islyn turned to see Kaz approaching, his boots silent on the mossy path. He sat beside her with a sigh, tossing a pebble into the dark water.

“So,” he said, half-smiling, “what did he say?”

She almost laughed at the absurdity of it—asking a dead brother for advice she already knew he would give. *Be brave. Take the risk. Find your answers.*

She leaned closer and whispered, “He said you smell like rotten fish.”

Kaz barked a laugh, the sound scraping raw from his throat. “Sounds about right.”

He grew quiet, staring into the mist. “I don’t disagree with you, Islyn,” he said eventually. “We’ve been out of food for days, and I understand your desire. But if someone has to go...” He hesitated. Swallowed. “I’ll do it. I’ll get your answers, I’ll speak to them myself—”

Islyn turned sharply toward him. “No, Kaz. Absolutely not.”

He opened his mouth to argue, but she cut him off.

“If anything happens, if they are not receptive,” she said, her voice low and fierce, “I’m the only one who stands a chance to escape. I’m stronger and faster than you—and besides, I’ll have Axyx. You stay.”

Neraxys huffed. He didn’t like the plan either.

Kaz sighed, rubbing his face with one hand. “You’re stronger than me. Stronger than Father, even. But not strong enough to fight gods, Islyn. None of us are.” He thumped his head lightly against the willow trunk. “But what choice do we have?” he muttered. “Someone has to try.”

Islyn moved to sit next to him. “You don’t have to be him, Kaz,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. As her chin dipped, her hair fell into her face.

He raised a hand and pushed it behind her ear.

Islyn’s relationship with Kaz was complicated. He should have

moved away, found a partner, started a family of his own, but he stayed—out of guilt, possibly—and it was her fault.

*If Aleksis was still alive—*

It wasn't a path she could go down. All the what ifs of the past would drown her if she let them. Losing Aleksis had brought them together—even if just a little—and Islyn was grateful for it. Still, Kaz kept a measurable distance.

Islyn wondered if he was afraid of her or afraid of losing her. Possibly both.

He smiled but it didn't reach his eyes. "I know. I couldn't be if I tried." He reached for her hand, brushing his thumb over the indigo markings on her skin. His lips pressed to her knuckles—a quiet blessing.

"If only you were six again," he said with a laugh. "Maybe then I could tie you to this tree and keep you safe."

She laughed along, the sound bittersweet. "You wouldn't stand a chance." She leaned her head against his shoulder. "He loved you just as much," she whispered.

"I know," he whispered back as a weak smile curled the edge of his lips. "I know."

They sat together in silence, Neraxys coiled at their feet, the world holding its breath around them.

Before the sun rose again, she would leave. She would find the truth waiting for her in the mist. And she would not be afraid to claim it.