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Scar of Nox

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Chapter 1

“He’s gone, Mama. Not gone like you.”

Nox picked at the grass by her mother’s simple headstone, which was little more than a brick in the ground. Carved into the top was an X that curved at the edges so it almost looked like an 8, the common symbol of the god Adonex. Underneath was a name, *Nonette Galena*. Nox pulled at the grass she had plucked, stripping away the edges from their centers.

“My new teacher explained it a little. I’m not sure I understand it yet.” She dropped the shreds of grass and pulled a new one, her hand shaking. “He said Papa’s not dead. But he’s suffering. His soul was taken.”

Nox swallowed. She wouldn’t cry. She had cried herself to sleep the last two nights. Her eyes were tired of it. The headstone waited for her to continue.

“It wasn’t his fault, you know,” Nox went on. “He did it to save me. He kept his promise to you to keep me safe. If anything it was my fault, because I was snatched up. The Unhallowed took me away. They had this iron crown, with spikes along the top, and they were going to pierce me on it. But then Papa appeared, and he grabbed the crown, and...”

Nox paused, dropping the threads of grass she had made, holding back a sob. She didn’t know how to explain the flash of light, the screaming soul that had tried to possess her, how she woke up in a small cave with a campfire and a man dressed in black leather protecting her from the awful things she had seen in the darkness. Her shoulders slumped under the weight of her cloak, which felt heavy all of a sudden. The day was sunny, and she hated it for being sunny today. It meant to everyone else it was normal, like her Papa hadn’t been sacrificed two days ago. She refused to feel its warmth, hiding her head under a hood that was a little too big. Nox

reached up to her cheek and picked at the scab that had formed, feeling a warm drop of blood pour from it.

Her voice became serious. "I'm going to find him. I'm going to find his soul and bring it to Adonex. I swear it. I will kill every Unhallowed enemy I find until I do. Every last one of them."

"It's unwise declaring vows to the dead."

Nox jumped at the sound of a gravelly voice behind her and rushed to her feet. She relaxed when she saw it was only Corilus, the man who had pulled her from under the bodies of the Unhallowed killed by the blast her Papa and his enemy had caused. He wore his long coat open, showing a leather gambeson underneath, a metal holy symbol hanging from his neck like a badge. A cloth bag was slung over his shoulder.

"I wasn't vowing to her."

"Then to who?"

Nox paused. "I don't know."

Corilus stepped closer. He seemed so tall, as tall as Papa to the twelve-year-old girl. The enemy who had collided with Papa was also tall, though. Then again, Nox hadn't been allowed to stand when she saw him. She was being held down by two other men. Nox burned inside at how tall everyone was compared to her, or perhaps at how small she still felt.

"I know what everyone else has been saying about you, Nox," Corilus said, kneeling in front of her so they saw eye to eye. "The god-touched child, who witnessed a miracle, whose father died of some worthy sacrifice, is in shock. But I know that's not true." He extended his hand forward, brushing the blood off of her cheek, careful to avoid the wound around it. "You feel rage, don't you?"

Nox nodded. Of all the grown-ups she had seen in the last two days, Corilus was the only one who seemed to understand what was going on. For that, she trusted him.

“I’m going to tell you something right now. Don’t lose that feeling. Let it guide your vows today. Use it when you think you may forget why you’ve chosen the path you’re about to take.”

“I’m going to kill any Unhallowed who stand in my way. Adonex himself will be shocked at the hordes of evil I deliver to him.”

“You already sound like a hero. But…” Corilus stood to full height, “the path I will be guiding you on is not meant for hatred. It is for justice, and order. If I suspect you are losing sight of that, I will remove you before you perform the Rite of Death. Do you understand?”

Nox stiffened. She knew he was serious about that. The Rite of Death was the only way she could gain the power she needed to save Papa’s soul. “I understand,” she answered, her voice calmer.

Corilus glanced up at the sky. “It’s nearly Zenith. We’d best hurry.” He turned and headed down the cemetery, Nox following. They walked for a few minutes, first passing other brick-sized headstones, then upright headstones that grew more and more elaborate until they reached the low hills where noble family tombs were dug. Corilus walked up to one family tomb, whose front door was flanked by a doorframe of pillars and the word “Furst” carved along the top. A seal on the door in the shape of two torches turned upside down held the stone door shut to the world of the living.

“Seems fitting, doesn’t it,” he joked. “The first tomb you’ll be living in, and it’s the Furst family’s tomb.”

“We’re living in here?” She lifted an eyebrow at him.

“Do you expect to hunt the Unhallowed and their Desecrated in an apartment?”

Nox did not answer. Corilus traced a finger over one of the torches and the door cracked open, sliding wide enough for them to slip past into a room with stone walls and a cobbled floor that led to a set of stairs going further underground.

“The Furst family died out in the last war against the underGod’s army, the Unhallowed,” Corilus explained as Nox glanced down the stairs and into the darkness below. “For their loyalty, we, the Divine Shadow, protect their dead to prevent any of them from becoming the Desecrated.”

It began to sink in what kind of a choice Nox was making. “Why are you called Shadows anyway?”

“We will go over that in a minute.” Corilus reached into a pocket under his coat and pulled out a candle and match, lighting it before shutting the door behind them, the soft light warding off the pitch black trying to enrobe them.

“Now then,” he knelt to her eye level again. “I need you to listen very carefully.”

Nox nodded, completely serious.

“You are about to take an oath. It’s not a simple one. It’s an oath that will follow you to the very end, to your death and beyond. No one is forcing you to take this path. If you wish it, I will open this door now and you can walk back into Esagend, free to live as you like.

“But if you stay, you will pursue a path unknown to most people. It is a path that toys with the barriers between death and living under the guidance of our god Adonex. You will gain him as a powerful ally but will gain all of his enemies as well. From this day forward, you would become a hunter of those who thrive in the darkness.”

Corilus paused, giving Nox a moment to digest his words. Three days ago, she would have called this man intense, maybe even insane. But here she was, on the other side of irreconcilable loss.

“Let’s do the oath,” she answered.

“Very well.” Corilus stood up and handed the candle to her. She took it, freeing his hands to swing his bag from his shoulder to his front. He reached inside and pulled out a small, flat box.

“Before Adonex,” he said, “the dead were forced to wander our world and burdened the people. In this darkness, the underGod was powerful and hunted our ancestors’ souls, his disciples sending the living to him as profane sacrifice.”

Corilus snapped the box open, revealing an iron pendant exactly like his own.

“Adonex was the man who became a god, and is the deity who guides us to a chosen afterlife.” Corilus plucked the pendant from its box and held it up to Nox, its chain clinking against itself. “It is he who protects us from the underGod, who is light in our darkest hour. The church who employs us, followers of Adonex, god of life and afterlife, are conduits of this light. Do you, Nox, vow to carry the light of Adonex within you?”

“I have to become a priestess?” Nox furrowed her brow at this. While she had no real hatred towards the god, she had no love for his church and its leaders. Before, she had almost no opinion, but after how they treated her when they learned what happened to Papa, Nox wanted nothing to do with them.

“It is through Adonex we gain power, but it is through the church we gain the means to hunt. The first part of this vow is loyalty to the church.”

When Nox did not stop grimacing, he added, “It was not the church that stole your Papa’s soul.”

She sighed, causing the candle to flicker. “I vow to carry his light.”

Corilus stepped forward, placing its heavy chain on her. Nox held it up to the candle, admiring the metallic glint.

“Where there is light,” Corilus continued, “there is shadow.”

Nox let go of the pendant and watched as Corilus withdrew a sizeable parcel from his bag.

“In total darkness, the enemies of Adonex reside. Followers of the underGod, primordial being of death and chaos, thrive in places where the living fear to go. From Adonex’s hand of light, a shadow is cast, and in that shadow, we strike the darkness.

“In becoming his Divine Shadows, we are sworn to a life of perfecting the craft of destruction. This means we, too, will suffer for the sake of destroying the Unhallowed and denying the underGod. It is my will as your mentor to guide you through this path and prepare you for the Rite of Death. Adonex willing, you will be blessed with the gifts bestowed only to his Divine Shadow.”

Nox knew what he was referring to. Even if it risked her life, the power on the other side of that Rite was her key to getting her Papa back, and that was worth suffering for.

“Do you, Nox Galena, understand the path you will be taking under my training and care?”

“Yes.” A bead of wax rolled down the candle, burning her finger.

“Do you, Nox Galena, accept this role of the Divine Shadow, with all of its privileges, burdens, and responsibilities?”

“Yes.”

Corilus unwrapped the parcel, letting the wrapping fall to the side. Nox almost gasped as he revealed a beautiful set of blades, one silver, one obsidian.

“Do you, Nox, swear to take these weapons as a sign of your oath to Adonex, to his church, and to a life of defying the underGod and destroying his disciples?”

Nox reached out, but Corilus withheld them. “If you swear, you must take both blades at the same time.”

She looked at him, confused, before glancing around to find a place to set her candle. There was none. She looked again at Corilus.

“A Shadow must learn to hunt in total darkness,” he hinted.

Nox understood. She pulled back her hood, feeling the stale air of the tomb mingle with her cut cheek. Cupping her hand around the flame, she blew it out, the darkness returning.

The candle fell to the ground as Nox reached for both blades, holding them up, barely able to see their gleaming edges. “These are mine?”

“They are. And if you fail to take care of them, they will fail you when you need them most.” Nox felt Corilus’ hands grasp her own, gently moving them to cross over her like they did with the dead.

“Your story is in your hands now, Nox. Welcome to the Shadows.”

Chapter 2

Nox traced a gloved finger along the spaces between the dead within the walls, admiring their varying states of decay. She had come to know each body well in her four years living here. In her years since becoming a Shadow, they had gone from frightening-looking corpses

that kept her awake at night to sources of pride. Corpses were less scary when their bones had names, and she knew them well.

Her footsteps were silent as she walked past, and even the dust in the air barely stirred from her movements. Black leather greaves held her loose, robe-like pants to her so they did not flutter and sweep the ground, and only her vestment swayed as she moved, its black and grey design identifying her as priestess of the Divine One. Even her pale face was blurred by a cowl hood and black mask that covered her scar, leaving only her blue, predatory eyes exposed.

Her face turned from her lovely dead as she detected movement further down the hallway. The torches were not lit, but she could hear the soft tapping of running footsteps headed the opposite direction, then left.

Nox took off running, slipping down through a different hallway to cut them off. She kept to the left side of the hallway, avoiding tripwires and pressure plates, and reached under her vestment, pulling out a six-inch blade of obsidian, which she held ready in her right hand.

The hallways intersected and he appeared where she did, his fist aimed straight for her head. Anticipating the strike Nox ducked, coming back up with a swing of her blade, which he blocked with his open palm. The two danced with colliding strikes for a few seconds before the intruder grasped Nox's face, dark illusions pouring from his palm into her psyche and sending horrific images to her mind, making her kneel long enough for him to escape.

Realizing now he was attempting to escape rather than kill her, Nox crossed her arms over her chest, uncrossing them to summon a shadowy armor that enrobed her skin. She took off after him once more, crossing through different hallways to cut him off, frightening him every time her dark form appeared. The intruder finally ran into a dead end, forced to stand with his back to the wall as Nox approached from the only exit. Wisps of her shadowy armor drifted off of her, fading into the air like cold breath.

“Only fools wander into my crypt,” she said, her voice calm. Her eyes watched for sudden movements.

The intruder laughed. “You’ve made a terrible choice, bringing me here,” he said in a low voice.

Nox raised an eyebrow as the man removed his mask and Corilus shook sweat off his face. “Dead end was a solid choice, girl, but this room’s got four corpses in early decay stages. Easy for summoning in a pinch for the Unhallowed.”

“Oh.” Nox sheathed her blade. “Should have taken another left turn.”

“Good run overall. I know you can take on four bodies if you have to.” Corilus flipped the skull mask in his hands as he walked up to Nox, glowering at the design. “Honestly, for as clever as the Unhallowed can be their style choices are often...”

“Abysmal?”

“Predictable. But that too.”

Nox cracked a grin. “I’m doing alright though?”

“Aye.” Corilus held the mask under his arm and led Nox through the catacombs towards the entrance. “I say give it a little longer and you’ll be ready for your Rite. How’s your Light magic coming along?”

Nox didn’t answer, sliding her hands into her belt pouches, her fingers playing with the components inside. Corilus glanced back at her as she had slowed her pace.

“Still struggling with it?”

“Aye,” she echoed. She liked how Corilus said things like the world around them hadn’t become cogs and metal. “Not sure I ever really will.”

She knew Corilus understood why, and she was glad he did without correcting her. Light magic required a lot of faith in Adonex to use effectively, and while its practical uses were worth

the hassle of learning, Nox harbored a bitterness to the deity. Even now the cool air of the catacombs chilled her cheeks, save for where the scar crept down from the bridge of her nose..

“I don’t blame you,” Corilus answered. Nox always wondered how he could speak with such a deep voice and yet not have it echo off the walls. His thick brows came together as his face furrowed in thought. “The Rites do not require you be a master at Light magic though, and you know enough to get by. Honestly, even if you were shite at it they would probably risk the Rites on you.”

“Cause of the scar?”

“Yeah.” His face relaxed as he looked at Nox, who had caught up to him. The two continued in a comfortable silence for a minute.

Wanting the subject changed, Nox asked, “When is Eva’s funeral?”

“In about an hour. We probably should get ready. She wouldn’t want us looking like we live in a crypt for her special day.”

Nox grew a wicked smile. “I can’t wait.”

The city of Esagend could be best described as a maze of ancient brick and metal fixings that held the old together, broken only by a river that cut through the center. Its roads, also made of old brick laid centuries before, were often filled with travelers and horse-drawn carriages, bringing the low drum of movement throughout the city. These roads, noisy as they were, still felt tight between the mass of mills, apartments, factories, and businesses that loomed over them. These buildings had grown taller over the last two decades, becoming adorned in metals,

especially copper, which draped around them with pipes and ladders, and stood tall as chimneys on their flat or triangulated rooftops. Low walls acted as gates to these pillars of commerce, held together with metal supports drilled into the walls to keep them held together. Above the people, puffs of white steam and smoke billowed from their chimneys and pipes, giving the sky a perpetual cloudy haze.

The modernity of metal and steam contrasted heavily with the parade of black-shrouded Inoculae below. Dozens of them followed a glass hearse, some swinging incense burners around their knees while others sang in a low voice, bringing the morbid reminder that death will come for all to the crowds of common and noble folk who came to watch the spectacle. None could see past the shrouded faces, but many did not fear- they had learned after so many years to trust the hidden faces of the Inoculae, and for this, most did not have to fear the two Shadows that walked among their holy people.

The scent of funeral incense lingered in the open air, finding its way past Nox's shroud and into her nostrils. She walked with her fellow initiates, the youngest who would one day become full Inoculae, her arms crossed over her chest, her hands holding her shoulders, the sign of reverence and prayer among the worshippers of Adonex. While Nox harbored a quiet hatred for the church, she had learned the prayers and mannerisms to keep them from questioning her too much. She put up with it only because they enabled her to become a Shadow, and opportunities such as this one allowed her to hunt in plain sight.

Corilus was far ahead with the older priests, carrying a bucket of holy water that he used to refill his silver aspergillum. Using the little wand, he splashed the crowd of nobles, commoners, beggars, and children to give them a simple blessing. It was also a way of giving Nox a chance to watch for suspicious persons at this funeral; Corilus would agitate the Unhallowed, so it was up to her to find the agitated. The Unhallowed, while not always affected

by holy water, could show annoyance at this show of faith, though Nox knew this was not enough to go on. Her eyes scanned the crowd from under her veil, then, for another kind of expression- a fascination with the body that led this crowd.

Eva Coffin, the woman in the hearse, was certainly a beautiful body, pale-skinned with flowing black hair, paler now that death adorned her. She had been laid out with care in her hearse, dressed in a plain white dress to show her unmarried status and surrounded by the freshest seasonal flowers. Nox had gone to see the body before it was sealed in the hearse and thought Eva was beautiful, as she always had been. She was perfect bait. Nox would not let her funeral go to waste.

There were plenty of people watching the hearse go by. Many came out of their businesses or homes and kept to the space between the road and the low walls to see the spectacle, taking care not to run into the road. Young children held their shoulders in prayer, mimicking the younger priests who were only a handful of years older than they were. Seeing them burned Nox's heart a little. She was Inoculae by technicality, but to them she was one of those who gave their lives to worship Adonex and serve the people of Esagend. They would never know her true nature held no real love for Adonex, and for his church even less so. She may be one of dozens of worshippers to them, but she was one of five Shadow Novices, and that pride cooled her.

Going back to scanning the crowd, she spotted an old man with stringy grey hair. His unkempt appearance was not what caught her eye. Rather, it was the well-dressed man who leaned close to him, whispering hastily as they both watched the hearse with a hunger in their eyes. The old man was too old to be a servant or groundskeeper, and his smile revealed missing teeth. The well-dressed man had his own hair slicked back into a tight ponytail and wore rich colors embroidered in gold, signs of a nobleman. They were an odd pair, and likely their prey.

The hearse came to a stop in front of the Temple of Adonex, one of the few buildings not touched by metallic fittings or pipes in the city. The priests circled around it, facing out towards the crowd, forming a wall of holy people to guard the dead. Nox took her place on the outer edge, keeping the two strange men in her sight. She was so focused on them that she almost jumped when the overseeing bishop began to speak.

“Be reminded, children of Adonex!” he cried out. “Death comes for us all! And when death comes, so too will our Divine One! At this holy Zenith hour, we will now begin the consecration of our recently departed. Go in peace, and remember your death.”

As he finished his solemn warning, the priests and priestesses broke their formation and began helping to bring Eva into the temple for preparation. The younger priests crowded together, chatting excitedly. For some, this was their first public funeral.

“What happens next?” One of the younger priests asked an older one.

“They’re going to take her underground.”

“Will she be put in one of those holes in the wall?”

“Not yet. She must be consecrated first. They will put her next to a twenty-four-hour candle and give her blessings at each holy hour, as our ancestors did to Adonex before he became our god.”

Nox scoffed under her veil, slipping away from the gathering of younger holy people. Moving away from the general public’s sight, she undid her priestess jacket and pulled her veil over her head until it resembled a hood. Tucking her amulet under her dark leather shirt, she waited until no one was looking before climbing a pipe onto the ceiling of the nearest building.

Careful to stay out of sight, she watched from the rooftop for the two strange men. From above, the people hurried through the streets like blood through veins, focusing only on where they were going, trying to stay out of trouble. They were dotted by the glint of the armored

Protectum Elite soldiers who monitored the city. The businesses and commoner housing clustered together around the temple, and across brown river was all the noble housing, their manors standing tall and smug over their gates. Nox looked through the people below, fearing she had lost the pair for a minute, before spotting them wandering away from the church, still whispering.

Sensing the direction they were headed, Nox plotted her course over the rooftops. The last couple decades had brought metal to the city, which brought copper pipes, chimneys, wall frames, and fences. This, in turn, gave the Divine Shadows a set of pathways above the city, keeping them out of sight and able to watch over most people, as long as they avoided detection.

Keeping her quarry in view, Nox moved easily from one roof to another, making sure she kept her footsteps light. Of all the training Nox had endured in the last four years, stealth was probably the most ingrained to her. She couldn't walk anymore without stepping like she might crack an eggshell under her toes.

After almost a half an hour of following them from above, Nox looked ahead and saw they were heading towards a noble's house. She jumped to the next roof, grasping onto a copper chimney to hold herself steady. While Nox knew she should recognize which house they were going towards, she didn't.

Nox swore under her breath. "Corilus is going to kill me."

"Why?"

Nox almost let go of her chimney at the soft voice. She clutched a hand to her chest when she saw who was sitting on her roof mere feet away, still as a gargoyle.

"Mya!"

The girl didn't look at her. Mya never looked at anyone. Not in the eye anyway. Despite the occasional fidgeting with her fingers and how often her eyes wandered around, Mya was very

good at staying still for hours if she wanted. Of the five Shadow Novices, Mya was the best at long-term stealth and exorcism. Nox hoisted herself up past the chimney and squatted beside Mya, pointing at her prey.

“Them. Do you recognize the house they’re going to?”

Mya leaned forward, squinting. “House Aultan.” She leaned back. Even though Mya was a year younger than Nox, she reminded her of an old woman with how curt she could be.

“You’re quick,” Nox complimented.

“My scholar and I learned every building in Esagend,” Mya smiled, her eyes looking to the sky. “Tell your scholar to do the same.”

“My scholar-in-training died, remember?” Nox kept her voice even, but the reminder was unwelcome, even if she knew Mya didn’t mean it.

“...Oh, yes, I recall. Plague death. Mass grave burial.”

“Anyway, those two. Do you recognize them?”

Mya leaned forward again, Nox doing the same. “The nice one’s Vald Aultan. Displaced son of the baron by the same name. Not sure who his friend is.”

“Good enough.” Nox watched as Vald looked both ways before asking the old man something. The old man, in turn, dropped his jaw, revealing the roof of his mouth to Vald for a brief second.

“Second one’s been branded,” she noted. The two men dispersed, Vald going past the brick gates of his family manor, out of sight. The old man wandered into an alley, also disappearing.

“Want me to pursue one?” Mya offered, leaning back again.

“No, that’s all I needed to see.” Nox nodded at her companion. “Thanks, Mya.”

“Of course. Though you should find a new scholar soon.”

Nox sighed. "I know. I can't do the Rite of Death without one."

"They're very helpful, you know. Mine knows a lot about plants."

"Kind of busy right now."

"Demus has had his almost since his induction. Inoculae girl. Loren's had his for a year now. Garran's had his since—"

"Let's not talk about it, okay Mya?" Nox snapped. Among the cohort, Nox was infamous for not keeping a scholar-in-training. Two had died to the plague, but her first one set the tone by requesting to leave after only a week of working together. Nox herself had appealed many times to the church that she did not need a scholar, but never got past Corilus, who always denied her. The fact that Garran, the Shadow Novice she got along with the least, could keep a scholar with his obnoxious attitude only angered her further.

The air between them felt tense, at least it did to Nox. She could never quite tell what Mya was thinking or feeling. Above, the sky began to go grey.

"I'm going to go report," Nox finally said, trying to find a way out of the conversation.

"Tell Corilus I will wait on the roof opposite. I will watch."

"Will do." Nox turned, silently leaping from the roof to the next, heading back to the one place she did know for certain—the Temple of Adonex.

Chapter 3

“Mya said she will meet you on the house opposite,” Nox reported.

“Crow has taught her well.” Corilus pinched out a candle on the Zenith altar, a puff of smoke escaping his fingers when he released the wick as if he had finally allowed it to breathe. Nox’s gaze naturally followed the candle smoke that came from indents in the wall to the curved glass ceiling above, held together by four strips of iron, symbolizing the four holy hours. Though it was only dusk, she could hear the soft pouring of rain above them. Whatever her thoughts on its religion, she couldn’t deny the cathedral’s majestic design.

“Head back to her and wait for my signal.”

Her gaze snapped back to her mentor. “What?”

Corilus struck a new match. “You heard me.”

“You’re going to have all the fun waiting for the body to be snatched?”

She wanted to yell it out, but the walls of the Temple echoed, so she said it as a hiss.

Lighting a candle on the Dusk altar, Corilus turned back to her. “We don’t know how he’s going to get it.”

“We know where he’s going. If they were stupid enough to talk in public like that they probably don’t know it’s a decoy door.” Nox stomped over to his left side. “Plus with Mya you have an extra set of eyes. And ears!”

Corilus glowered at her from under his wide-brimmed hat. He never liked when she called out his deaf ear. It was a secret not even most Shadows knew. Seeing him glower, she added, “Plus I’m smaller than you. I can hide in the walls better.”

“You also don’t have the gifts of a full Shadow. What if he sees you?”

Nox pulled out her dagger from its sheath that rested near her lower back, returning it when she knew he had seen it. Corilus turned away from her, frustrated, and began to walk down the aisle between rows of stone benches that faced the four granite altars at the head of the Temple.

“Come on Corilus!” she followed, keeping up with his pace. “I’m going to be a Shadow like you soon. Don’t keep giving me the novice work.” She got in front of him, stopping him in his tracks. “I’m going to be retrieving Papa’s soul one day, and that day has to be soon. Give me the task.” She exhaled. “Please.”

Corilus looked at her, his eyes glinting. He sighed.

“Do you know where Eva is buried?”

Nox nodded.

“There is an open spot underneath for another corpse. Wear your veil to hide your living features. After he leaves, pray the Ancestor’s Prayer before following.” Corilus reached to his belt and pulled from its pouch a large bronze key. “After that, follow to provide backup. If he goes elsewhere, find me. Do *not* engage him.”

“Yes, sir.” Nox’s heart raced in her chest with excitement, but none of it showed on the outside. Taking the key from his outstretched hand, Nox began to hurry past Corilus.

“Nox.”

She stopped.

“Be careful.”

She turned her head to the right. “You too, Corilus.”

Unlike her crypt, the catacombs underneath the cathedral were packed with bodies. The way was dark, with waxy grey stone walls dotted with holes just big enough to fit the dead into like a repurposed beehive. Dust lingered in the air like a ghost, barely shifting as the Shadow moved through it. Nox already had her veil over her head in hopes of it protecting her from the stale air and dust. If it settled in her lungs, she could contract what the city doctors called Undertaker’s Cough, though commoners called it Bone Lung.

The twenty-four-hour candle revealed her destination, and Nox hurried to it. Eva’s body was laid out as beautifully as it had been in the hearse, though there were no more flowers or admirers, save for the Shadow Novice standing above her. Now she lay in a plain wooden coffin at the height of Nox’s torso, its lid laid open and bare, her slender fingers bare of any rings, a signal that she was not yet consecrated. The bodies around Nox all wore a plain bronze ring to show their consecrated status. Up close, Nox could barely see the lines in Eva’s face that showed her age—from afar, she looked much younger. It was not often Nox took the time to admire someone’s features, but they always surprised her when she did. She wondered, perhaps unwisely, what her corpse would look like.

Nox looked below Eva’s coffin and found the opening in the wall Corilus had mentioned. She would be lying perpendicular to Eva’s body, meaning the top of her head would be facing

the body snatcher. Wasting no further time, Nox slid into the body slot, making sure her veil was tucked under her head and not hanging onto the floor before crossing her arms and calming her breath. It was hard to breathe under the veil, but Nox knew how to stay calm by now. It was part of her training for when she passed the Rite of Death. When forced to, she could stay still for hours, waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike out.

It was maybe two hours before she heard the sound of a stone door cracking from its spot in the wall. As it scraped along the floor, she could hear a man breathing heavily. The old man was there. Nox stayed still, concentrating on what she could hear.

The old man shuffled up to Eva's coffin, and she could hear the smile in his breathing. "There you are, beautiful." Nox cringed.

"I know you prolly want to stay down here, but Ol' Gregor's got to bring you to Vald. He's gonna turn you into a cure for my bad bones, make us strong again."

The lid of the coffin slammed shut and Nox heard the sound of a rope sliding around the coffin. "It's time to go," Gregor muttered.

Nox suppressed a jump when the coffin fell to the floor so close to her head. Gregor, as the old man called himself, began to pull it along the floor, almost like a sled. The coffin's wood was light enough that he could slide it after himself back through the door.

Just as Nox thought he had escaped, he paused. Nox froze, unsure why he stopped. She waited, listened, staying still as a doll while praying he had not noticed her. Gregor sniffed loudly, then spat on the ground before pulling the coffin through the door, closing it behind him.

Nox didn't dare to breathe. After being unable to bear it, she exhaled. She reached to pull herself out, then remembered Corilus' instructions.

Crossing her arms and grasping her shoulders, she began to pray. "Adonex, giver of hope, bring forth to us an afterlife worthy of our deeds. Show us the path from living to the beyond,

and hide us under your holy shroud from the underGod and his mighty wrath. Be with us in the Dawn, be with us in the Zenith, be with us in the Dusk, be with us in the Midnight Hour. To you we give our souls.”

Despite the desire to race through the prayer, she forced herself to pace it as the congregations of the church did. She would not let her haste ruin her chances of fulfilling this mission. Finally, she pulled herself out of her hiding spot and went for the door.

The hidden door used to belong to an infamous body snatcher, and it was a choice of the Shadows to keep it in place. Normally, it was guarded well, with traps and well-armed Elites standing beside the dead, but tonight it had been abandoned to give the illusion it was forgotten. Nox pressed against the wall for it now, finding the grip that was made for those on the inside and pulling it open slowly, dulling the scrape of stone as much as she could until she could slip past the door. As she slid in, she saw the unholy sigil painted on the inside of the door- a crown, painted by hand in blood.

Memories of the night her Papa’s soul was taken came back to her. There had been a crown that night too. Papa had gone to snatch it from the Unhallowed man who threatened to sacrifice her. There had been an explosion, the sharp pain as her face was cut open by some unknown debris, the sensation of a spirit trying to overtake her...

Nox melted the memory into rage and let it course through her as she shut the door behind her. Gregor could spit on the floor of the consecrated dead all he liked. She would delight in hunting him and his companion down in turn.

Nox pursued Gregor with great caution, first down a long tunnel full of rat bones and dust, then into the sewers beneath the city. Despite the stench and rushing, polluted waters, Nox stayed on his trail, avoiding his detection. He was paranoid, but she was too sneaky, and she knew how to blend into the shadows. Above them, the rattle of carriages served to remind them

both of their place below the city. If this Unhallowed preyed upon others in the darkness, then she lived to prey upon him. Though his journey out of the sewer took longer than she would have liked, Nox's rage simmered on.

She watched the direction the old man went after he left the sewers, sliding the coffin through mud. The rain she heard earlier had stopped in the time she had first gone into hiding, making Gregor's task much easier, and Nox's harder.

Nox pursued at a further distance, watching to make sure he was going where she hoped he would go. If Gregor went to a different destination than Vald's house, she would lose time figuring out where he was going and then finding a way to alert Corilus. Striking down this old man would be easy enough for her, but then Vald would escape being tried, which was crucial. The noble families would cry out that there was discrimination against them, and Vald could move among new companions with ease. She could almost pity Gregor; even if Vald's words were true about helping him, he would never be anything more than a pawn to Vald. She had half a mind to talk Gregor out of his actions, as the Unhallowed had ways of influencing others to do their bidding, but knowing Gregor had a brand on the top of his mouth meant that Gregor himself was not so innocent. Whatever had swayed him remained within him. There was nothing she could do about that now.

After a relentless amount of following, Nox's spirits rose as she saw Gregor turn to Vald's estate. She waited a minute longer, confirming it was his destination, and grinned when she saw him take a hidden way past the walls into the family tomb. It was finally time for action. Once out of sight, Nox ran to the main road in front of Vald's home and to the building across from it, which had a shop that sold luxury goods.

Nox leaned against the building and, after making sure no one else was around, sang out, "Call to me softly, light of death. Call to your lost child."

From above, Corilus' voice finished the song. "Lest I be a beast who hunts the children, then answer me with your teeth."

It was a song the two of them used to tell each other they were close by. Corilus appeared beside her seconds later, also leaning against the wall.

"Where's Mya?"

"Sent her home when the rain picked up." Corilus' strong jaw was barely visible under his hood. Nox pulled her veil up into a hood, but kept it low, mimicking him.

"He's just brought the body to Vald. They're going into the family tomb."

"Then let's go."

Nox led the way this time, bringing Corilus to the hidden passage in the wall behind the noble house. Once past, Corilus took point, leading them to the entrance of a family tomb similar to the one they lived in, albeit smaller and with no door stopping them.

The two Shadows crept down the steps of the tomb, a light at the bottom revealing two pillars they could hide behind. Corilus took one pillar, and Nox the other. Both peeked around to see the coffin on a large stone table, Vald excitedly running around it as Gregor opened the box, revealing Eva's body.

"You've done excellent work, my friend. She's perfect." Nox grimaced, hating them more with every second. Reaching under the table, Vald retrieved a leather satchel, which he unrolled onto the table, revealing the glint of silver embalming tools, their blades and hooks sharp..

"Are you ready, Gregor?" Vald smiled, picking up a scalpel.

Nox glanced at Corilus, ready to pounce, but he was still. She waited.

"Aye," the old man crooned, finally catching his breath. His grin was back. "What shall we do first?"

Vald pointed, his eyes not leaving the girl. “Fetch me the book.”

They watched as Gregor looked over and spotted the book Vald was requesting, a leathery tome with the same semicircle as the pendant on the statue. He picked it up, taking a second to reminisce. Nox recognized the grimoire from its cover alone. It was a body book, containing alchemical means of using a corpse to gain power. Possessing that on its own was enough for a conviction from the church.

Gregor shuffled back to Vald, handing it over. Vald held the book with one hand, flipping its pages open one at a time.

“The girl is perfect,” Vald repeated. “The candles we could make from her would give us warding power against the priests, the teeth would make wonderful trinkets we could barter with. Her bones alone would fetch a lovely price for their pure marrow I’m sure...”

“Aye, aye,” Gregor acknowledged, getting impatient.

“But to begin...” Vald’s slender finger traced one page, “the blood in her still heart will make for a wonderful tonic. If we mix it right, we can cure that scar of yours.”

Like he had before, Gregor opened his mouth to show the top of his mouth. The ward branded on the top of his mouth had taken away his ability to speak the Old Tongue. The old man coughed out a laugh, his giddiness making Nox’s stomach churn. She glanced again at Corilus, who had not moved. Her fists clenched, trying to suppress her need to run in and stab them.

“Time to embrace what we really are, Gregor... disciples of the underGod, persons to be feared in this society so oppressed by the divine!”

Vald withdrew a pair of scissors from the silvered tools and began to cut away at the dress, parting its front to reveal her sternum. Nox glanced back and forth between Corilus and

the desecration, wanting to move in, but not able to. In a fluid motion, Vald switched out the scissors for the scalpel and began to cut along her flesh, creating one clean line.

“Oh underGod, behold your newly chosen, your defiled children,” Vald began to pray.

“She’s bleedin’ a bit,” Gregor interrupted.

“That’s normal, she’s not been embalmed yet,” Vald explained as he made another incision, lifting her flesh and revealing her ribs. “Receive our offering, oh corrupted one...”

“Vald...” Gregor whispered.

“What is it, you damned buffoon?”

“Her heart’s beating.”

Vald looked down. The heart was still for a moment, then, a beat.

Then another.

Vald dropped his scalpel, barely hearing its tinny clang as it hit the floor, and stepped back. “But that’s impossible...!”

Gregor began to panic. “Her hands are rising!”

Indeed, their victim had come back to life, raising her hands to her chest, folding them as if to pray. Her eyes opened. A soft voice came from her lifeless lips.

“In the name of the Divine Adonex, you are... condemned.”

“Here we go,” Corilus growled, pulling up his mask.

Gregor screamed and Vald made a run for the exit, only to run into Corilus. Cloaked in black leather armor, mask and hood, he landed the hilt of his dagger onto Vald’s head, sending him gracelessly to the floor. Vald had barely crumpled before Nox moved past him, running towards the screaming Gregor, who fell backwards, crawling his way into one of the corners.

“Who are you?!” he cried out, terror in his eyes.

Nox approached step by step as he shuffled back. Speaking as if she were reciting scripture, she answered, “Where there is Divine light, darkness is dispelled, and from its remnants we, the Divine Shadow, are made, to hunt the vile who choose the darkness of the underGod.”

Withdrawing her silver dagger, she raised it, bringing the hilt down onto the old man’s skull. He dropped lifeless before her. She was almost disappointed how quick the whole thing had happened.

With both men downed, the two Shadows sheathed their daggers. There was silence, save for the sound of raspy breathing from the coffin. Corilus approached the pine box, his steps silent. “You alright, Eva?”

Nox appeared on the other side of her coffin. The woman she admired before was very much alive now, a smile appearing on her lips as their color returned.

“Yes. My, that was romantic,” Eva replied. “Stitch me up?”

Corilus was already pulling out a stitching needle and thread from a pouch on his belt, removing his mask before sewing Eva’s flesh back together. Nox could see he hated to pull her skin so taut, it must already hurt, but Eva smiled on.

“Go look around the tomb, Nox,” he ordered.

Nox frowned, wanting to watch the stitching, but obeyed. Taking a look around at the tomb, she first approached where the statue of Adonex stood. Unlike the grand one of the Temple, this statue was only about a foot tall and it had been defiled. The statue, a carving of a man in simple clothes and covered with a shroud, had nails pierced into its eyes and blood spread around his head like a circlet, an iron pendant of a crown hanging from its outstretched hands. Nox pulled back her hood, the smell of bitter-smelling herbs hitting her nostrils, causing her to realize the family members buried here had smudges of burning herbs on their caskets.

“It’s like you’ve done this before,” Eva joked to Corilus as he reached into his belt pouch and removed a small bottle, opening it and dumping the contents into two fingers, which he carefully applied to the wound. Eva sat up and tied the front of her dress together, peeking around at her new surroundings.

“Could say the same about you. Not everyone is as capable of appearing dead as you are.” Corilus reached his arms over and helped Eva out of her coffin. Nox put the desecrated effigy back and wandered over to her mentor.

“Well of course, it’s the only occasion I will wear white for.” Nox grinned at Eva’s words. Eva was among the lesser noble families, but was famous among gossipers for choosing not to marry. Eva wandered over to the scalpel Vald had used to cut her, admiring her blood. Nox’s heart fluttered. Eva was beautiful when she was in her element.

As Corilus got to work binding their prey, Eva set her scalpel down and wandered to the effigy, taking it into her slender fingers. Nox stood beside her and looked at it. “The prey was so small this time,” Eva sighed. “During the Tyrant’s War, Nox, we fought many more vicious enemies. The former king even joined the front lines. Corilus himself witnessed the Tyrant King’s kill, as well as his most loyal servant’s.”

Nox turned back to Corilus, who had paused his binding. After finishing the last knot, he stood up. “The servant is Solinar.”

Eva replaced the effigy, turning towards where Corilus stood. “Was. Solinar is dead, you know.”

“Something wasn’t right about that kill.”

“He was killed by the newly elected king. You saw it, Corilus.”

“Yeah, the now Condemned King Henrei. I just don’t trust it. And this whole case doesn’t help. More nobles turning to the underGod? It’s too soon to rule out the possibility.”

“That was over a decade ago. You have more important things to worry about now. Like Nox.”

Nox blushed. Corilus and Eva were among the first Shadows, created during the Tyrant’s War, and often got along very well, though these disagreements were not uncommon.

Corilus looked at her. “Bring me the effigy, Nox.”

Nox obeyed, picking up the effigy and handing it over to her mentor. Corilus plucked the underGod’s amulet from the effigy, twisting it between gloved fingers.

“You’re right, Eva. And I must say, she performed admirably tonight. I think she can help me handle the Cansten mission in two days, don’t you think?”

Nox’s eyes widened. That mission was a top priority among the Shadows— it was a hunt for a serial killer in the village of Cansten. She looked at Eva, who smiled.

“I think it would be wise to do so. She represents us well. Perhaps if she is successful, we can begin to discuss her performing the Rite of Death soon.”

Nox was fit to burst. Corilus’ eyes glinted at her, reflecting her happiness. He threw the amulet on the ground, stepping on it, performing his own desecration upon the profane piece.

Behind them, Vald groaned.

“Guess that’s our cue to go.” Corilus looked at Nox. “Go to the church and summon the Inoculae. We should hurry so they can be put on trial.”

“Or we could kill them here,” Nox shrugged.

The silence from her superiors was colder than she anticipated. “I know, I know,” she quickly followed. “Leave the judgement to Adonex and his most holy and all that.”

“That way of thinking does not bring you any closer to what you seek, Nox,” Corilus scolded.

Eva smiled, breaking the tension. “Still, we can’t disagree with the girl’s practical thinking. Consider it this way, Nox. We’re only sharing our spoils with the people we are sworn to protect.”

Nox considered Eva’s words and smiled. She liked how Eva thought.

“Go ahead then,” Eva pushed, looking back at Gregor. “Adonex have mercy on them. Because his church certainly will not.”

Nox crossed her arms over her chest, grasping her shoulders. “See you at the trial,” she said before running off, taking the steps out of the tomb two at a time.

Chapter 4

Nox watched from the rafters above as Vald was put through trial. She was not required to attend these courtroom meetings, but after finding a secret way to the top two years ago, she enjoyed listening in from time to time. It gave her a sense of what was happening in Esagend, a luxury not afforded to her in a crypt. She would sometimes daydream about the people who stole her Papa from her in the courts below, imagining her standing as a witness, accusing them of all they stole: his soul, the warmth of his embrace when she was sad or scared, his laugh that

reminded her of a dog bark, the gleam in his eyes when they played games of strategy together, the happy home they had made, just the two of them, for over twelve years...

She leaned against a gargoyle that looked down at the open floor below, where Vald stood in chains. The four Archbishops sat in thrones on an elevated section of flooring, appearing taller and mightier than all others presiding. All except Corilus, of course. Even if he was not their height, nothing ever deterred him.

“I present the body book found in Vald’s possession,” Corilus announced. There were many seats surrounding the courtroom floor, much like an arena, but it was empty right now. This was the preference of the Archbishops when the Shadows brought in their prey. Nox knew this was mere formality at this point, the Archbishops following the law so as to not be counted among the sinful. Gregor would normally be standing beside Vald, but it turned out his heart had failed when Nox had attacked him, so he lay dead in a nearby room, watched by a guard.

Nox took a peek below and spotted Corilus approaching the Archbishops with the book, explaining its contents. Corilus looked sharp, back in his wide-brimmed black hat and proper priest robe jacket. She could not help but admire him— he was in his natural element, being one of the more impressive Shadows of their lot.

The same could not be said for the Archbishops, especially the Archbishop of Midnight, a man named Crede. To Nox, they were exaggerated figureheads. She did not know how to feel about them wielding the power that belonged to royalty only a decade or so prior. Though she admitted this to no one, she felt it diluted the name of the Inoculae who gave their lives worshipping Adonex.

Another voice filled the spacious room below, one that turned her blood cold. “House Aultan has been scoured many times. How could this boy hide such a thing from us?” Archbishop Crede’s voice was not particularly interesting or unique, but it reminded Nox of her

time in the Temple basement, waiting to learn of her fate after Corilus had rescued her from the Unhallowed all those years ago. That alone was enough to despise it.

“We have reason to believe it was a possession of his now deceased companion. The man Gregor bears the brand of silence on the roof of his mouth. It’s possible they worked together...”

Nox heard no more as she snuck back out of the building. It was hours away from dusk, and she still needed to return the catacomb key she had been given before. The sooner she did that, the sooner she could return to the Furst family tomb and ask Corilus about the mission.

Nox hadn’t taken five steps before she caught a glimpse of a young man peeking at her from the rooftops, reflected only by the artificial light of the street lamps. The figure disappeared in a flash of red. Nox leaped onto a nearby windowsill and hoisting herself up the side of the building until she reached the roof. Glancing around, she spotted him leaping on the dark basalt rooftops two buildings down, his hood pulled up. With a predatory grin, she took off after the figure, gaining speed and predicting his every move, for she knew these rooftops well.

As she caught up, his hood fell off, revealing his red hair, noticeable even in the smoggy darkness of Esagend’s cities. She saw his arm cross over himself as they landed on a flat mill ceiling and reached for her own silver dagger, drawing it in time to block his shortsword as it came at her. Their eyes met, as did their matching predatory smirks.

“You’re slow,” Nox taunted between heavy breaths, sliding Loren’s sword away with her dagger before sheathing it.

“And you’re out late. I’m surprised Corilus hasn’t sent the Shadows to hunt you down.” Loren gave a crooked smile, his signature that went with every taunt he delivered.

“He’s running trial right now. We caught two Unhallowed tonight.”

“Two? Damn!” he gasped, sliding his shortsword back into its scabbard. “Strong conviction?”

“Body book as evidence, among other things. Eva helped.”

“Lucky.” Among the cohort, Eva was a delight to work with, both because she was one of the most powerful Shadows and because her novice, Garran, constantly blocked the others from interacting with her.

“Yeah, for once Garran wasn’t able to come dote over her.”

“Gods, I can’t stand when he does that. Just because he beat her in a game, he thinks he’s her equal.” Loren shrugged. “Still, can’t deny he’s as good a craftsman as she is.”

“Whatever. Come with me.” Nox turned to the edge of the roof.

“To where? I ain’t following you back to Corilus.” Loren was intimidated by her mentor.

“I’m stopping by the temple to drop something off.”

“Then why the hell do you need me?”

“In case the Archbishop’s there. You dragged me halfway across the city, he may be back by now.” Nox didn’t have to explain to Loren which one she meant.

“Fair enough, though I don’t know what good I’ll do. He never even looks at me,” Loren answered as they made their way down the mill, careful not to stand in front of any lit windows.

“So how’re you taking the news?” Loren asked as he caught up to Nox, who was pulling a sheer black veil from her belt and tossing it over her head, covering it to her shoulders.

“About what?”

“Your last scholar dying. It wasn’t that long ago, y’know.”

“It’s another death. A plague death at that. What’s there to mourn?”

“Harsh, considering he was your longest-lasting scholar,” Loren replied, tossing his own veil over his head. Neither of them was required to wear them so late, but Nox and Loren always did out of habit. Between her scar and his hair, they stood out to just about everybody they passed, which made them easy pickings to a disguised Unhallowed. The other three of their

cohort rarely followed suit, finding the veils irritating, so Nox found a silent kinship in Loren's physical inconvenience.

"He also got in the way more than he helped. If I had need for that I'd find a sentient book."

"I don't know what it is with you and Corilus, but you're both harsh. Lighten up a bit."

"That's why I'm faster and better with a blade than you," Nox shot back.

Loren smirked under his veil. "That may be, but you need a scholar to take the Rite. And by that rate, I'll be the first of the cohort. I know how to work with mine."

"Bite it," Nox snapped, making Loren cackle. His words were unfortunately true, and for that, put a fire in her gut. She wouldn't lose to Loren.

The two turned the corner and faced the temple, which stood tall with hexagon basalt columns along the outside, giving it the appearance of having an elaborate cave entrance. The glass ceiling was barely visible in the late hours. Two heavy doors of wood and bronze stood closed before them.

"They made the temple like this to resemble the cave village Adonex was born in," Loren commented as they approached.

"Where'd you hear that?"

"My scholar."

Nox bit her tongue. The doors were heavy, but not yet locked. The four Holy Hour offering rituals were sacred to the church and kept hidden from the public eye, but the doors remained open until such an hour.

Behind the altars the wall split into two hallways. Nox and Loren took the right path, knowing the left led to a room that offerings were stored in. Both paused when they reached the second room, which was much smaller, and held the church's greatest relic.

Shards of mirror and obsidian geometrically placed in the ceiling and walls glittered under the flicker of sconced candles, but their shine could not outdo the white statue of Adonex that stood before them. Though the figure was hunched, with arms raised as if beckoning, it stood at around six feet tall, dwarfing the two Shadows Novices. Despite the impressive white stone it was made from, the man carved into it was humble, dressed only in simple sackcloth, his head adorned with a black shroud that fell to his torso. The material, only sheer enough to show the dark, watching eyes underneath, almost tricking the eye into thinking it was just a skull beneath the shroud.

No one had ever seen the face beneath, of course. Loren and Nox genuflected, Loren out of habit, Nox out of necessity. Taking off their veils, they stepped behind the statue, taking care not to step on the combined golden sun and silvery moon dials etched on the stone floor. Loren reached out and pressed a sequence of obsidian shards on the wall behind the statue, causing a slab of the stone floor to open where the dials lined up to symbolize shadow, revealing stone steps leading down below the temple.

“Always amazes me how the church can keep secrets like this,” said Loren as they descended.

It amazed Nox, too, though it did not help her sense of distrust. At least secrets like these had a purpose. Divine Shadows were not supposed to be known to the public, and considering the enemies of the church, secrets were necessary weapons. The less the enemy knew, the better.

As they reached the bottom, they came to an open stone room, its walls lined with weapons and shelves that held tools for the Shadows. On the left wall, an arch peeked over the bookshelf, signaling the beginning of a hallway blocked by the old tomes. All Shadows knew it was useless, however, as the hallway had been destroyed to prevent intruders. Now filled with stone, it lay hidden, representing the cost of the war from decades before.

Nox crossed the room to this shelf now, pulling the bronze key from her belt pouch. She took a second to admire it and all it symbolized. Most citizens of Esagend would never see the catacombs, yet here was the means of accessing those very places. As the years had gone on, Nox's fascination with death had only grown, and knowing she was so close to exploring such a secret, sacred place tempted her to go look at it once more. Resisting, she set the key down, knowing the next person to find it would deliver it to the appropriate place.

"You need anything else?" Loren asked from the other wall, his hands gliding over the weaponry.

"Just this. I should be getting back, I'm going on another mission in two days."

"What's the job?"

"Tracking down that serial killer in the west villages."

Loren turned to face her, his forehead creased in concern. "The one who kills young men?"

"Yep." Nox stuffed her armor back into the parcel and tucked it under her arm.

"Why's that our job?"

"The deaths line up well with underGodian tactics. The Archbishops think we should check it out." Nox made her way to the stairs.

"Why is it *your* job?"

She could hear the envy in his voice. Taking out the worst of the underGodian cultists sated the bloodthirsty, vengeful parts of the Shadows, the parts fueled by the traumas that came from being victims of underGodian work. The thrill of hunting big game like this was rare in more peaceful times, and if someone else had been chosen for the job, she would be envious too.

“Same reason Demus and Garran weren’t chosen. We don’t use Shadow Novices as bait, and this guy hunts younger men like you three.” Nox took a few steps up before looking back.

“Unless you think Mya would be better?”

Loren snorted. Mya was a capable novice, but was a stronger exorcist than hunter.

The two made their way back up the stone steps, sealing them once more when they reached the top. The sound of a man chanting came from the other room and the two froze.

“That sounds like Archbishop Crede,” Nox whispered. Loren shifted his way to the edge of the hallway, peeking out.

“It is,” he hissed. “He’s at the altar.”

Nox joined him at the wall. “How do we escape?”

“We’re Shadows, yeah? Let’s just sneak past.”

Both of them knew it was a long shot, but it was late enough that Nox needed to hurry. The two of them threw on their veils and stepped out, minding how their feet touched the floor.

Archbishop Crede stood with his back to them, arms out like the statue of Adonex behind them, his old, bulbous nose raised in prayer. Loren went first, going left, and Nox crept to the right. She watched the Archbishop and Loren, noticing how he was scurrying faster.

You’re going too quick! she thought, seeing how Loren made the candles around him flicker. He had made it about halfway past the pews when Archbishop spoke.

“And where are you going, young Loren?”

Loren froze, as did Nox. Loren stood up and turned to face Archbishop Crede, who was making his way towards the novice. After years of learning to be precise with her steps, Nox hated how unbalanced his footsteps sounded.

“Came to look at the gear. Emile wanted me to check in case he missed something.”

As the Archbishop reached Loren, Nox crept forward, minding the candlelight. He was already chastising him, but perhaps that would keep him distracted. She would have to make up for leaving Loren later, but if she got away...

“Nox Galena!”

Nox froze again, gritting her teeth. She straightened up, those uneven footsteps scraping their way towards her. She turned, facing Archbishop Crede head on.

Underneath his vestments and signet ring, Archbishop Crede looked the part of one of the holiest people, and through his burgundy veil he shared words of wisdom and encouragement to the masses. The first time she had met him, though, she was in another basement, Papa’s soul having just been snatched, and all this holy man could see was her scar.

His eyes shone now as they had that night, enthralled. “Our own god-touched daughter graces this holy place,” he muttered through a charged grin, then snapped “What brings you here?”

After four years Nox was still not used to his verbal whiplash. “Returning a key. Corilus and I are leaving soon for mission work, I have to go.” She held her shoulders back to keep herself upright, though all she wanted to do was shrink and scurry off.

Archbishop Crede snatched her upper arm, startling her. Loren loomed behind him, also shaken by his presence, but determined not to leave. Archbishop Crede pulled her closer to him, his eyes not leaving the scar on her face.

“Our Shadows are lucky to have you, Nox,” he muttered. “Archbishops spend their lives hoping to even glimpse a vision from Adonex, or hear his voice for the first time since he left this realm. Yet here you are.” His eyes flickered. “The first among mortals to witness him in a physical way, touched by our most divine...”

“Corilus is waiting for her,” Loren threatened. Nox pulled her arm from him and stormed off, Loren following.

Slamming their way out of the temple, Loren caught up with her pace. “What a creep.”

Nox didn’t reply.

“The way he looks at you is disgusting.”

Nox continued to seethe.

“No one’s entered the other realms since the gods did anyway! He’s a joke—”

“Will you just shut up?”

Loren stopped, his face a mix of hurt and anger. Nox stormed forward, heading to the Furst family tomb.

“No wonder you can’t keep a damn scholar!” Loren called out after her.

Chapter 5

“You really mean it?”

Nox had returned to the Furst family tomb and now sat on her bed, parallel to her mentor, who laid back in his. The room itself was a familiar comfort, their two stone beds covered in blankets making an otherwise gloomy place appear livable. The lantern they shared was lit on top of a nightstand by Nox’s bed, and in the light Nox saw fresh water in their basin upon her return. Corilus looked exhausted, but Nox had pressed him until he confirmed they were going to Cansten.

“Yes, Nox. We leave tomorrow.”

“I’m ready to get out of this crypt for a while and go fight challenging prey.” Nox stretched her arms to the ceiling, looking smug. “It’s my last mission, after all, then it’s the Rite.”

The Rite of Death was the last Rite of the Divine Shadows before she was deemed an official member, but more than that, Nox desired their powers. Any who survived the Rite would be capable of doing incredible things, things Nox needed in order to find her Papa’s soul. Now, over four years later, she was so close she could taste it.

“You won’t be able to do the Rite until you’re connected with a scholar...”

“Do I really have to? I’ve done fine without one. We make a good team.”

Corilus sat up and pressed his fingers to his temple. “We’ve been over this so many times, Nox.”

“You know what I mean, though.” She put her arms under her head. “How come I can’t just work with you forever?” Nox turned to look at Corilus.

“Because I’m an old man.”

“Bull. You’re one of the best.”

Corilus nodded. “True. But it doesn’t change that I’m getting old.”

“What are you even? Thirty-two?”

“Thirty-seven.”

“That’s not old.”

“Old for a Shadow.”

Nox turned her head away from Corilus, tracing a finger over the stone wall. “I don’t get the whole scholar thing. We’re told not to bring bodies to our battles, but the church wants to saddle us with one anyway.”

“Scholars aren’t just ‘bodies,’ Nox. They’re our means of knowing the world around us. We can’t know everything.”

“What’s there to know? We know what relics the Unhallowed use, their behavior when they’re prowling, the kinds of tricks they use with their magic, and how to kill them and their Desecrated.”

“This isn’t up for debate.”

Nox sighed, frustrated. “Can’t I just get a new one and finish this mission to get the Rite?”

“The church has been working to find a replacement for you. However, it may take a little time.”

“Then they need to hurry. I won’t be useful as a mere Novice forever.”

Tension sat in the air between them. Nox didn’t turn to look at her mentor, hoping it would go away on its own. It did not. Corilus spoke up once more.

“The truth is, Nox, I’ve got concerns about how you work with your scholars. You’re always keeping them at a distance, and your lack of sorrow is concerning.”

“They’re usually just in the way.” Nox replied, knowing another lecture was coming. “You taught me that we shouldn’t bring extra bodies to these kinds of fights. If they go down we’ve just armed our enemy.”

“You’re right. But scholars are no mere civilians.” Corilus leaned forward. “Do you even care that Randolph died?”

Nox paused. Randolph had been useful to her in the past, but they’d never been close. He was sickly and stuttered a lot. He was also easily intimidated. She knew, because she intimidated him all the time, sometimes for fun. In the deepest crevice of her heart, Nox could feel sadness forming over his death, but it made no impact on the anger against her enemies.

“I do care.” It was the truth, in the most basic sense. “Randolf was fine. But you can’t deny he was kind of a liability.”

Corilus sighed. “Randolf was fine, but his constitution was poor, that is true. Be that as it may, when you become a Shadow, you will have an appointed scholar. If you plan on keeping this job for a long time, you may as well learn to work with them.”

Another heavy silence sat between them for a moment. Nox dropped her finger from the wall.

“Why would anyone want to become a scholar anyway?” she asked, a bitterness forming on the back of each word. “It all seems like a sick scam from the church if you ask me.”

“Most choose to be because their options are low. The church watches orphans who show signs of intelligence and offer them the position at a young age.”

“Still an odd choice. ‘Join this hidden guild by reading books and putting your life in danger by following our best hunters around in the dark.’ Why would any kid choose it?”

“You chose to become one of those hunters at a young age. Some of them I’m sure find the idea of being given promised work and church protection for their whole life’s a worthy enough reason to work for people like us, especially if they already love to learn and study.”

Nox let that sink in. She remembered what the fear of her future tasted like when her Papa’s soul was taken. Orphans, despite their growing numbers due to the plague, were often turned down as apprentices because of their higher costs. With no parents to pay for tools or even adequate clothing, they held no real appeal even if their talents were worthy of their craft. The church tried to counter this with stipends for particularly useful children, but only invested in those who showed promise or had a skill they desired. The rest became priests or had to find their own ways to success, and those who failed usually fell homeless, where the Catacombs would lure them to the belowgrounds of Esagend.

She sighed a long sigh. “I am sad to hear about Randolph.”

“Hm?”

“Yeah.” Nox sat up, pulling her knees to her chest. “I don’t mean to sound like I don’t care. Without a scholar I can’t go through with the Rite of Death. Him dying puts that back. Again. And I need that Rite. Papa’s been waiting long enough.”

“It’s not too long now. If anything, you should be enjoying the life you have now. The transition into the Divine Shadow is arduous, if you survive the Rite.”

“I will survive.”

“Adonex makes no promises. While it may feel counterintuitive to your emotions, you can honor your father by taking the chance to live while you have it.”

Nox didn't answer. By now this argument was nothing more than the verbal version of running in circles. Corilus seemed to take the hint.

“Will I get a new scholar before we go?”

“Hard to say. I'll talk with Eva.”

Nox sat up and took off her boots, tossing them aside. “Knew you'd want another excuse to talk to her.”

“Don't be cheeky, Nox,” Corilus scolded. She smirked, then frowned.

“They have to give me a scholar before my last mission, right?”

“I'd be surprised if they sent us ahead without giving you one, but I cannot promise anything. Such matters are not up to me. But knowing how the church works, I'm sure it will be no time before they find you a replacement.” Corilus stood up and headed towards the door frame, glancing down the halls, ever vigilant.

“Hope so.” Nox began to remove her longcoat. “I need that Rite.”

“Feh.”

“I do!”

“I know.”

She knew he knew. That was enough. She was tired of arguing with people today. Like a spell, fatigue came over her, the initial excitement she had fading fast now that Corilus had deflated it.

“I'll take first watch,” Corilus said, pulling his mask over his mouth.

“You'd better drink some of your tonic tonight.”

Nox paused, hand on the final clasp of her longcoat. The air grew tense between them once more. “Yeah, sure.”

“I’m being serious, Nox.”

“You’re nothing but serious. That’s what they call you, you know. Serious Corilus. It even rhymes.” Nox was trying to deflect her feelings with the wordplay, but the humor evaporated on her tongue, and it came out harsh. Corilus did not flinch, however, and Nox finished unclasping her longcoat, letting it sag on her shoulders.

“It wasn’t your fault, you know.”

“Doesn’t matter,” she spat.

“It does, to you. And it shouldn’t.”

“Will you just let it go?”

“Will you?”

Nox glared up at her mentor. “You weren’t there. So leave it.”

Even behind his mask, Nox could tell his lips were pursed, angry. He let out a sigh before returning to the shadows of the hallway, leaving Nox on her own to rest.

Once out of sight, Nox shrugged her longcoat off and threw it on top of her boots, followed by her mask and belt, ignoring how disorganized it all looked. Part of her wanted to stand up, stomp around, maybe punch a wall, but her head was too heavy. Instead, she swung her legs onto the bed and rested the soles of her feet onto the cold stone just past her blankets. She took a moment to concentrate on the cold entering her feet, calming herself. It was a thing she had done since she had been moved here at the age of twelve. Four years later she couldn’t quite recall when she started the habit, just that it was early, when the nightmare had started happening. Deciding she felt too tired to get ready for bed properly, she pinched the candle’s flame out, curled onto her side, and waited until sleep took her.

Nox opened her eyes to find herself in a dark hall. Except, it was not her tomb. The ceiling was high and the walls some kind of grey stone, smoothed out, ancient.

She knew this hallway. At the end of it would be a large wooden door, fitted with iron pieces that would rattle when she opened it. Over the years she had done everything to change the course of the dream- she had run at that door, snuck up to it, even turned to go the other way, only to find it was an endless hallway. She knew nothing would change. Already exhausted, Nox moved forward now, bracing herself for the incoming torture.

When she reached those horrible doors, she took a breath. Maybe tonight she would push through and everything would be different. As she pushed it open, though, she knew it would not.

The room inside was completely dark, save for a single light. The bloody red light of her Papa's soul was trapped in the center of that iron crown he had grasped that night he was stolen from her. Papa's muffled cries filled her ears, growing louder as she ran, as she had run every time before, to grasp him, to catch the light as it flickered faster and brighter.

“Papa!”

And, like every time before, she was not fast enough. The pale, bony fingers of Papa's captor wrapped around the little light, the edges of his fingers glowing a hellish shade of scarlet.

“Let him go!” Nox commanded as she reached the skeleton, but her words were drowned by a sudden outpour of fire from those condemned hands, the skeleton collapsing to dust in the flames. The fire spread around the whole room, as if every inch had been coated in oil, and Nox

found herself enrobed in flames that made her skin crackle. Nox fell to her knees, choking for air.

Blinking through watery eyes, she watched as a new form appeared from where the skeleton had been, this time the monstrous form of Adonex. Unlike his statue from the temple, he was animated, swaying around like a lumbering beast, the shroud that hung from his unknown face exaggerating every movement. Adonex stomped towards Nox, kicking up ashes as he did, before leaning in close to her, marble white face hidden, yet staring.

“The soul,” he demanded in a voice that echoed from the walls but not his mouth.

“Where is the soul of Geon?”

“I don’t have it!” Nox howled.

“You... are... condemned...” he stomped away from her, Nox swallowing ashes as she tried to protest as she had done so many times before. She curled upon the floor, choking, sobbing, burning, wondering if she would first succumb to the fire or the fear pounding its way through her heart.

“Nox...”

Consciousness came back to Nox as she felt a gloved hand rubbing cold sweat from her forehead. She moved to sit up, but felt a force holding her down at the shoulder long enough that she realized her cheek was resting near Corilus’ knee.

“Corilus!” She said his name like she had been suffocating and finally found air. Nox grasped his knee and sunk her head into his lap like a child, letting his presence scare off the nightmare. Corilus rubbed her now messy hair and gently tapped her shoulder, giving her mind something else to focus on while afterimages taunted her vision.

“You’re alright, Nox. It wasn’t real,” he soothed.

Nox looked at her hand squeezing his knee, amazed at her unburnt skin. They remained like this for a few uncounted minutes as Nox worked to get her mind back into focus, the circular massage on her head easing her way there.

“I thought I could handle it,” Nox confessed as reality finished sinking in. She sat herself up, Corilus letting go as she did so. “It’s been four years. Shouldn’t it be easier now?”

“That’s unfair to yourself, Nox.”

“But it’s true,” she resisted, trying to blink back tears. “I thought I was getting stronger, and my mind keeps...”

Corilus put an arm around her and she let her head rest on his shoulder. “That’s enough, Nox.”

The tears came through. Her voice cracked. “Why am I so weak?”

She pulled her knees to her chest and brushed her tears away, wincing at a stinging feeling as she pressed on her scar. Corilus’ hand wrapped around her wrist and held it up.

“Look at your hand, Nox.”

Nox obeyed. Her hand seemed so small compared to his own. Part of her skin shone where her tears had been wiped away.

“On the surface, this hand is capable of many things. It is a conduit of power from other realms, the source of ruin for disciples of the underGod,” he closed her fingers into a fist, “...and the wielder of many weapons, both within and without. And yet, it’s never enough power.

“But years of seeing bodies alive, dead, and reanimated have taught me to look beyond that.” Corilus pulled Nox’s sleeve down, revealing her pale wrist and the blue-green veins beneath, which were raised like mountain ranges from a globe. “Under the skin, and above the bone, pulses life, something a cultist must destroy to gain any sort of upper hand.” He let go, and Nox lowered her hand.

Corilus rested his head on hers. “The underGod’s twisted magic will do what it can to make you believe your life is not enough. It will get in your head and tear you down from within. You could be weak as a church mouse, but if you are alive, they can do nothing. And if they can do nothing...”

“Then Papa still has a chance.”

She felt Corilus’ smile on the top of her head.

They sat there a moment. “I’m sorry,” said Nox.

“No need. But no more taking this out on yourself. Understood?”

“Understood.”

“Good. Now...” Corilus let go of Nox and stood before reaching into the nightstand and pulling out a small dark blue bottle. “Get some proper rest.”

He handed the bottle to Nox before ruffling her hair and returning to the dead. Nox sighed, releasing her legs so her bare feet touched the stone floor. She stared at the bottle, uncorked it, took a sip, and made a face as she did. As she felt her brain become foggy, she lay

on her side, watching her veins rise as she furled and unfurled her fist until she closed her eyes and dreamt no more.

When Nox was first learning to sleep in a tomb, she would wake up confused about the time, worried she slept too long or not enough. Some mornings it still got to her, but very rarely now, and this morning was no exception to the routine she had grown accustomed to.

Nox stretched as she stood, her muscles sore from yesterday's mission. While she was still bummed out about the next mission likely not being her last one, missions were no less exciting. They were welcome breaks from living in tombs and practicing techniques without real consequences. Taking the time to wash herself with the basin nearby, Nox switched out of her clothes from the day before, changing into more comfortable garb.

The day seemed to drag on slowly. Nox first let Corilus sleep and did her rounds with the dead, later heading out with Corilus to get their clothes cleaned at the church. Nox hid her scar with an oversized scarf someone had left behind, allowing the both of them flexibility to wander Esagend like civilians.

“Corilus?”

“Mmm?”

It took her a second to say the words. “I’m sorry about last night.”

“All is forgiven, Nox.”

The two shared a midday meal on the roof of the grocer they bought food from. Corilus tore into the apples they had bought, while Nox chewed away at strips of dried meat.

“You really love apples,” Nox commented as Corilus went for a third.

“Wrong.” He held up the fruit, which seemed so out of place with the smoggy, metallic backdrop. “I love Merith apples.”

“Merith is Southeast, yeah?”

“Correct. And it happens to be my homeland. But that was awhile ago now.”

Nox gawked. “You didn’t tell me that!” she said, her mouth full of food.

“You never asked,” he grinned, tossing her one of the apples.

After the meal, the pair collected their laundered clothes and made their way back to the tomb. Nox had hoped that she could rest more, but Corilus ran her through more training until the Dusk hour came.

“Go ahead and rest, Nox,” he finally said. Out of breath, she complied, taking the time to wash herself in the basin before collapsing on her bed.

Corilus appeared in the doorway. “I’m going to Eva’s, I will be back later. Don’t wait up.”

Nox wanted to protest and come with him, but she could barely keep her eyes open. Using the last of her energy, she waved him off, took a sip of her tonic, and slept throughout the night.

When she awoke the following morning, Corilus was back. “We’d best get ready,” was all he said to her, making her excited all over again for the new mission.

Unlike their missions in Esagend, where the Inoculae were plentiful and easy to blend in with, the outlying villages were less dedicated to the church, preferring their own deities most of the time. This meant Nox had to prepare herself for a few days without quick, accessible changes in her armor or garments, though by now, that was second nature to her.

She first dressed a comfortable but fitted tunic and stockings, then slid into her one-piece of leather armor, which fit over her like a glove. She grasped the strings and tightened along her back, arms, and legs as she stitched them closed. Being able to undo the strings that tightened the sleeves, back and leg parts was vital to getting the armor off quickly, especially if she had to get

to a wound in her skin right away. During her last mission, her leathers had gotten torn from a particularly nasty scratch given by a Desecrated human. Nox had taken no damage thanks to the armor. She took a moment to admire the detail work on the sleeves, where the church had carefully added images of flowers and wards to distinguish the Shadow who wore them, stitched together to look like it had been part of the design all along. Corilus' own armor looked patchy by now due to his many battles, but it held well, and Nox's armor was following suit.

Her boots came next, their dark material matching the dyed leather on her body. Her belt came next, which held her two daggers—obsidian blade in front, silver along her back. On her hips were two small pouches, which held a few helpful items like coins, medicines, and other useful tools. Her harness was next, though it was less of a harness than it was tightly bound rope that hung from her shoulder to her hip, light enough to not interfere with combat but strong enough to hold her when she climbed it.

Finally, she slipped her vestment over her torso, its flowy and oversized fabrics hiding all of her tools and flapping lightly as she moved. She loved her vestment, though it only ever got in the way once she was deep in her work. All Inoculae wore black longcoats, but some wore vestments with gold and silver lining and decoration, though the Divine Shadows had less decoration in hopes of drawing less attention to themselves. Vestments were used for travel with the outlying villages, as they did not yet understand the long coat as an outfit choice. The outlying villages all wore vestments for their deities, and to wear anything otherwise came across as unusual to most, sacrilegious to the older and more pious villagers. Nox took a moment to admire the silvery threads embroidered along the hem and neck of her vestment, the patterns of nightshade flowers and Adonex's symbol looping their way around the fabric.

Letting go of the vestment at last, she reached for her pendant of Adonex. As she slipped it over her head, Corilus came into the room. He was already geared like her, his own vestment

hiding his lethality, though it still shone in his eyes. In his hand was his wide-brimmed hat and veil.

“Ready?”

“Almost.” Nox reached under her bed and pulled out a plain leather backpack, the same she’d had since childhood, and opened it. From it she withdrew a velvet box and, snapping it open, revealed a simple copper circlet inside. Resting it on the bed, she put her mask on, then her veil, and finally the circlet over the veil. It was a lovely adornment, but one that she only wore for longer travel when the wind might try to rip her veil from her head.

“You don’t need the mask when you have the veil,” Corilus pointed out.

“I still prefer it. Don’t want someone seeing my scar and throwing a fit.”

Taking one last cursory glance at the belongings inside, she spotted her bedroll, copper cup, and waterskin. Satisfied with those items, she swung the bag over her shoulder. “Ready.”

The two entered the world as mere Inoculae, Corilus donning his veil over his face as she did and holding it in place with his wide-brimmed hat. It was not a requirement to wear them, but many priests did as a sign of reverence during the day. It was also meant to be protection from possible Unhallowed, who would have more trouble following who was who without a clear look at their face. Unbeknownst to most Inoculae, it also helped hide the Divine Shadows as they moved in the daylight. Few glanced twice at the two holy people walking together in the morning streets, and those who did would nod or fold their hands, as if to ask for a blessing, which Corilus and Nox gave with mumbles and nods of their own.

“Where are we headed, anyway?” asked Nox.

“Eva’s first. Then to Cansten.”

“On foot? That’s a heck of a walk.” Cansten was one of the smaller villages outside of Esagend, which was the center of eleven other villages.

“Two days isn’t bad.”

“True. Plus it’s through the Northwest Canyon. That’ll be easy for us two.”

As they turned the corner of the street, the Coffmin manor loomed before them. A compact mansion made of darkwood and basalt, the house was surrounded by a wrought iron gate that bore the symbol of Adonex every few bars. To any passerby they would appear to be strictly decorative, but Corilus and Nox knew they were symbols of consecration, signaling this was holy ground. They were Eva’s idea, of course. Nox always appreciated how she combined style and practicality in her work as a Shadow.

Corilus stepped ahead of her and pulled the chain beside the main gate. Nox spotted the glimmer coming from one of the upstairs windows, signaling someone was looking at them through an elaborate telescope. Nox only knew this because of Eva’s own Shadow novice Garran, another one of the cohorts, had bragged about it to her.

The gate creaked open and they moved towards the main door. As they crossed the manicured lawn, the door opened. A servant, dressed in simple but fine clothes, beckoned them in. Nox had been in Eva’s house a handful of times in her four years as a Shadow novice, but its subtle splendor always impressed her. The floors were smooth and tiled, leading the eye to a gilded set of double doors that led to a grand room Eva could adapt into anything she needed for hosting. Flanking these doors were two curved sets of stairs with a darkwood railing that shone with polish, meeting at the top, where Eva sometimes stood to greet them.

However, she was not here this time. The servant bowed and went further in, leaving the two to wait for someone to collect them. Corilus and Nox removed their headwear and veils, knowing they were in a safe place, though Nox kept her mask on. A heavy set of footprints from behind the gilded doors caught Nox’s attention. She knew those footsteps anywhere. The doors

swung open and Garran burst forth, his black hair slicked back into a tight ponytail that refused to move, unlike his shoulder cape, which fluttered dramatically as he moved forward.

“Corilus!” he cried out with an overpolite smile, extending a gloved hand, which Corilus took. “Oh, mind the arm, I’ve been commissioned a new hand crossbow. It’s not loaded of course, but I’d hate to see the finish damaged.” He presented his arm from under his cape, showing off a shiny wooden crossbow that fit tightly along his wrist. The piece boasted wealth, and though Nox was never particularly drawn to money and luxury, she couldn’t deny feeling a little jealous.

“Hope your aim’s better than your stealth, Garran,” Nox shot back with her own overpolite smile. “Your footsteps could use some work.”

Garran looked at Nox down his nose, despite only being six inches taller. “I take offense to your words, for they insult our Lady Eva. I spend many hours perfecting my aim, you know.”

“Speaking of,” Corilus cut in, “how is she?”

“She is resting.” Garran turned and beckoned them to follow him up the stairs. “While her gift of appearing dead is a blessing to us all, it has taken a toll on her today. Not to mention her having her heart exposed like that. I admit I’m surprised at you, Corilus, letting it go so far.”

“It was her idea,” Corilus answered simply.

Garran paused, looking back at Corilus. Nox smirked. “I see,” Garran finally said before leading them forward without another word.

He took them to a door at the end of the hallway, past portraits of Eva’s deceased family members. At least, Nox assumed they were deceased, as she had never met any of them. Following Garran and Corilus into the room, Nox smiled to Eva, who was sitting upright in a comfortable, high-back armchair, a blanket covering her lap. Her hair was up today, held together by obsidian and crystal-tipped pins, and her nightgown easily challenged the lines

between casual rest clothes and an elegant dress. Even in recovery, Eva wasted no effort in her appearance. Nox couldn't help but admire it.

She was surprised to see Eva was not alone, however. A young man who looked only slightly nicer than a peasant was in the room with her, contrasting Eva's elegant aesthetic. He crested Nox's height by a few inches, reddish strands of hair hanging just above his eyes as he looked forward. Nox wondered how he could see with such long locks distracting him. He stood just short of perfect posture, his brown cloak alone seeming to wear him down. The cloak also hid the boy's frame, though from under his hair, Nox could see he had a jaw meant for a rounder face, with bits of stubble trying to hide the gauntness. Despite being around the same age as she, Nox got the impression that he was world-weary, which frustrated her, though she showed none of it.

"Welcome, my dears." Eva beckoned them forward with those slender fingers that only two days ago held a defiled effigy of Adonex. While it was dressed as a polite smile, Nox could see she had a knowing grin, as if she knew Nox was confused by the boy. That grin was her greatest accessory, and paired well with her observant eyes.

"How are you faring?" Corilus asked, stepping forward and kneeling beside Eva. Nox only ever saw Corilus kneel for those he cared about, or for those he was trying to comfort. She still couldn't help but smirk a little. Corilus always went soft around Eva. As the two adults chatted, Nox looked back at the young man she did not recognize, puzzled by him. If he was a new servant, he would have to get his appearance in order.

"I am sorry for your loss, Nox," Eva's voice interrupted her thoughts. "Randolf was a good boy. I have prayed that Adonex guide him gently to his afterlife."

Nox wondered if Eva felt sadder about Randolf's death than she did, receiving a pang of guilt in response. "He was good. He's at peace now," she forced out.

“It was a truly sorrowful loss to the Shadows,” Garran said, placing his hand over his heart. Nox wanted to spit. Garran could never let a dramatic moment slip past him, and it made her wonder many times how he was a Shadow.

Nox looked back at Eva, who motioned to the young man. “Still, the time has come that we welcome another into our circle. Nox, I’d like you to meet Tomas Pemberton, your new scholar.”

Nox followed Eva’s hand as it motioned to the young man. Her eyes went wide, and she looked at Corilus, trying to mentally bore the question “Did you know about this?” into the back of his head. If he felt it, he ignored it, taking the time to step up and remove his glove, extending his hand. “Good to meet you at last, Tomas.”

Contrasting his weary demeanor, Tomas shook his hand with a quiet strength. “You’re Corilus Alillot, first generation of Divine Shadows during the War Against Solinar.”

“And how do you know that?” Nox could hear the grin in Corilus’ voice.

“Miss Eva told me you were coming. I remember your writings in the Testimonies of the Final Battle. It’s an honor to work beside you, sir. I hope to impress.”

Nox looked again at her mentor. She had known Corilus was one of the original Divine Shadows, but never knew that he had written one of the Testimonies. Corilus ignored her look, instead smiling down at Tomas.

“You’re sharp. No wonder they chose you to be a Scholar, Tomas. Though it’s not me you’re going to need to impress.”

Corilus looked back at Nox, who sighed. She knew it was impolite to reveal dislike of someone at a first meeting, but her face did not always agree with societal norms. It wasn’t even that she was meeting Tomas that she was frustrated, she realized. It was because Tomas was

new, and new people were not used to her scar. She had seen many reactions to it over the years, none to her liking.

Wanting the moment over, Nox reached up and pulled her mask down. She kept her eyes on Tomas as she revealed her face, waiting for the second he recoiled, or winced, or worst of all, became awestruck.

Tomas did react to it, but not in a way she expected. Under his hair, his eyes seemed to light up, as if curious about her face. In the four years since she'd had the scar, no one had looked at her so... quizzically. It amused her.

"Name's Nox," she said, stepping forward and extending a gloved hand.

"A pleasure to meet you, Nox," Tomas replied, taking it. Their eyes met, and Nox was surprised to feel how firm his grip was.

"We'd best move," Corilus interrupted. "You have what you need Tomas?"

Tomas opened his cloak to reveal the strap of a bag across his chest. Nox could see Tomas was quite thin, almost thin enough that she could snap him if she wanted to.

"Good lad." Corilus nodded to Eva and put his circlet back on, veiling his face once more. Nox followed suit, sliding her mask over her nose and readorning her circlet.

"Take care of the boy," Garran proclaimed, slapping at Tomas' shoulder. Tomas scurried out the door after Corilus, eager to leave. Garran turned to Nox. "I've bet my raven quillfeather to Loren that he'll be sent back in a week."

"As if I'm going to give up being the first for the Rite to someone who can't even get walking right." Nox felt smug until she saw Eva begin to frown. Taking her cue, Nox turned and followed her companions out.

Chapter 7

Save for Corilus giving blessings to the passersby who mistook him for a real priest, he, Nox, and Tomas were relatively quiet as they made their way out of Esagend and into the Northwest Canyon. Esagend's metallic gates and mills were soon far behind them as they made their way along the path.

Esagend's buildings were tall enough and the sky smoky enough that Nox often forgot about the forests and cliffs that surrounded its city. To the west were the Copper Mines, which Esagend relied on for building most of its metal. The mines were found in a dormant volcano, making for the highest point around them. What had spewed from the volcano so long ago were now hexagonal basalt walls that opened only to the river that cut it open, a river which graciously opened the path to the villages in the northwest, including Cansten, their destination. These basalt cliffs went on to surround Esagend, a sort of crescent around the industrial city, a manmade canyon leading to the villages in the southern region. Save for the few fields outside of the city, the area held little foliage or trees. Nox often found the area to be too open for her liking, but it did have an odd, natural beauty to it.

“Have you ever set foot outside of Esagend, Tomas?” Corilus asked as they approached the canyon mouth.

“No, sir,” Tomas answered, pushing his hair out of his eyes to look around. “I’ve read about the paths, of course, and seen the maps. Esagend’s greatest trading power comes from its being central to all the villages.”

Nox knew that Esagend was in the center of eleven villages, making it the twelfth, and that it had become prosperous long ago when it became a trading hub. Esagend produced little in terms of trade goods, but provided much in law and trade practices. Many of the city’s people were merchants for a reason, even though their product tended to reside in another village altogether.

“Eva mentioned we were going to Cansten, if I heard her right,” Tomas said. A low wind picked up and Tomas brushed at his hair again.

“You’re right,” Corilus answered. He kept a pace ahead of the other two, who walked in tandem. Nox kept looking back at Tomas, observing him. She didn’t know how to place him. He wasn’t boisterous like Garran, nor fiery like Loren. Tomas was nothing like Demus either, who was stoic and confident, though he seemed to share Mya’s sense of curiosity, although hers was almost strange and otherworldly, while his was grounded and punctual. Her former scholars-in-training had reminded her many times of a mouse, ready to run from her and too frail to admire. Tomas had the undernourished appearance all orphans came with, but he was no mouse.

“You should cut your hair,” she stated before picking up the pace, leaving Tomas behind her and Corilus.

“So what makes this serial killer our next target? Besides him being a serial killer,” she asked her mentor.

“The church doesn’t care for serial killers, murdered spirits tend to linger and hurt the living.”

“That can’t be it.”

“They also seem to have been taking place primarily around the swamplands, but the target’s moved. The bodies are disappearing from Cansten now. And one civilian’s made a report of a suspicious fellow talking to weak-willed men.”

“Sounds like the Unhallowed,” Nox commented. Followers of the evil, primal underGod often pursued people who were struggling or feeling low and poisoning their minds with dark magic until they committed horrendous acts against themselves or others. It was part of why subtlety was needed when it came to missions. Act too forward in the name of Adonex and the cultists scattered like roaches.

Tomas’ steps picked up and he appeared between the two Shadows, which surprised Nox. Randolph and her previous scholars always stayed behind once Nox moved forward. Tomas was certainly not cut from the same cloth as them.

“If you don’t mind me asking then,” Tomas interjected, “why the Inoculae garb? Won’t it warn off the killer?”

“You’d best keep this scholar, Nox. He’s quick.”

“Scholar-in-training,” she corrected.

“Truth is, Tomas,” Corilus went on, “Esagend is where the church holds the most power. Despite having taken the throne from the Condemned King Henrei some years ago, Adonex’s church is loudest in its own walls. Cansten and the outlying villages all have their own deities they focus on. Priests come and go for business, and they don’t tend to notice us as much. Long as we act like we’re unaware, they won’t look too close.”

“How are we going to pull that off with Tomas then?” Nox piped up. “He’s not exactly priestly.”

“Good point. How should we play this off?”

Nox waited a minute before realizing Corilus wasn’t thinking of an answer. The responsibility of coming up with a guise was now on the two younger members. It was a tactic Corilus used to make Nox think, which she used to hate, but began to understand its worth after a while. Even if it did frustrate her to hell when she just wanted an easy answer.

She leaned her head back, glancing at the blue sky. Having made a decent start into the canyon by now, going back to dress Tomas as a priest wouldn’t work, and he likely wasn’t trained in anything beyond common prayers. They would have to justify his existence with them.

“He could be a merchant’s son speaking for his father.” It was a plausible setup. Wealthier merchants could send employees to do business in other villages, but less wealthy ones would send family members. At their age, Tomas could pass for such a disguise. “We could be escorting him to make sure the business is fully legal. You know, Inoculae as witness, like how Esagend does it now.”

“He doesn’t need two grown priests to do that though,” Corilus pointed out.

Nox grimaced.

“I’ll go ahead after we stop for the night,” he went on. “You two can hold up that guise and find me in Cansten at the end of the day we arrive. Meet me at the inn. We’ll comb the area together. You stay in the village; I’ll check the outskirts.”

“What? No!” Nox protested, stepping in front of the two and walking backwards as she faced her mentor. She pulled her veil off, trying to pierce Corilus with her expression. “We can think of something else,” she seethed.

“I think we all know this is the most prudent course. Besides,” Corilus’ voice lowered, “you’re preparing to do your final Rite. You need to be ready to go on missions without me.”

His words shook her. It was the only element of the Rite of Death she despised.

“Put your veil back on, Nox. Travelers approach,” said Corilus. Nox obeyed, and they spoke very little for the rest of the trip, passing many Esagend-minded travelers as they did.

The road began to thicken with trees and foliage the further they moved, and soon they could only see the sky as a river between leaves. When dusk finally began to fall, the trio wandered off the path and closer to the canyon wall, landing in a spot where the trees were thicker.

Nox and Tomas produced modest bedrolls, laying them out by a fire Corilus had started. After sharing a tasteless meal of dried bread and wild greens Corilus had found while gathering wood, Tomas opened his bag, which looked very heavy to Nox when she saw the books inside of it. Tomas withdrew a crisp piece of paper and a pencil and began to write on it, adding the gentle chiseling sound to the rustle of leaves and crackle of fire. Nox leaned against a tree, enjoying the peace while she could.

Corilus stood after the sun disappeared, rolling his shoulders. “I’m off to sleep. Don’t wait up for me in the morning.” He reached under his vestment and withdrew two gold coins from his belt pouch, tossing them to Nox before making his way into the shadows of the woods.

Tomas looked at Nox, confused. “He’s not sleeping here?”

Nox pocketed the two coins. “He’s a Shadow.”

“While I recognize I’m working with the Divine Shadows, I don’t know a lot about your ways just yet, you know.”

Nox grinned. “Corilus is a full-made Shadow. That means he can do unnatural things, like sleep on stone or in trees without moving. Helps him not be seen.”

Tomas looked at her, still confused. Nox went on. “Shadows don’t have normal sleep. They go somewhere between living and dying. It’s a vigilant kind of sleep. Don’t worry, he’s likely nearby.”

Tomas pondered her words, then resumed writing, only to stop and continue talking to her. “If I’m honest, it doesn’t sound like a pleasant thing.”

She shrugged. “Shadows aren’t meant to be comfortable. Their abilities can tell you that.”

“I’ve heard of some gifts. Like how Eva can slow her breathing and bloodflow to make her appear like a corpse.”

“All Shadows can do that, she’s just the best at it. Her high pain tolerance helps.”

“What other abilities are out there then?”

Nox rested her head against the tree. “You ask a lot of questions.”

“Scholar. In training.” He pointed his pencil at her.

“Heh.” Corilus was right. Tomas was quick. He was more entertaining than her previous scholars, whom she usually just walked over on the way to her next mission. She knew it would be a matter of time before either he let her walk on him or he opposed her and left.

“Shadows can do incredible things,” she went on, her voice growing solemn. “If we survive the Rite of Death, Adonex takes part of our living selves and places it somewhere between living and dying. This way they can hunt for those who thrive in the underGod’s darkness.

“Shadows can see in the dark, for example. They can whisper into shadows and leave messages for other Shadows to hear. They can wield the magic Adonex gives and have learned to craft their own unique magic by adapting Unhallowed magic into Adonexian. Shadows can dispel possessive spirits, resist being possessed, and take on hideous forms to frighten those who take victims from Adonex’s people. They can play dead to the point that even the greatest

Unhallowed can't tell with their wicked magic if they're living or not. Best of all, Shadows can..."

She trailed off.

"Go on," Tomas pressed.

Nox glanced over at him. "The greatest power they wield is the ability to retrieve a soul from the grip of an underGodian and bring them to Adonex."

Chapter 8

Tomas' eyes widened. "That's incredible. They can wield Adonex's actual power for themselves?"

"Not exactly." Nox crossed her arms and rested her head against the tree once more. "Adonex chooses them to be a vessel for his power. If they're worthy, they can ask to have his gift to find a lost soul. Very few Shadows have achieved this. They all succeeded, but only once. The process is either so brutal they retire because they are so crippled, or they disappear."

A heavy silence sat between them. She expected Tomas to question further, but he did not. Nox pulled her knees up and rested her head on them.

"Nox..."

She looked at him.

"Why do you even want to be a Shadow?"

Her eyes narrowed.

"I wouldn't expect an orphan like you to understand."

She stood up and stepped to her bedroll. She laid down in a huff, landing on the belt pouch on her hip, causing her to wince at the pain. It didn't matter to her. She didn't want to turn and face him after what she'd said. It was too harsh, and she knew it. But she didn't know Tomas. If he failed her as a scholar-in-training while knowing her secrets, it would compromise her own goal, and that goal was worth more than his dignity.

Still, she couldn't stifle the guilt. Nox reached into her belt pouch and withdrew a small iron bottle, her tonic. Taking a sip, she corked it once more. Behind her, Tomas' pencil had stopped chiseling at his paper.

The last thing she heard before falling asleep was a bottle of his own popping open.

Morning came all too quickly for Nox, knowing full well she would have to face Tomas after her insult. She half expected him to be gone when she rolled over, but he surprised her once again by being wide awake, poking at two potatoes in their meager fire.

“Morning Nox,” he said, not looking up at her, focusing on the food.

“Morning,” she mumbled back. Nox sat up and ran her hand through her hair. Feeling how tangled it was, she grabbed it by the fistful and attempted to braid it. “Where’d you get those?”

“I bought them before our journey. I realized I should bring my own food along, in case that was expected.”

His words softened Nox. Even if she didn’t like him, she knew that feeling of uncertainty in a new world. Joining the Shadows didn’t come with a manual, after all. Leaving her hair half-braided, she got up.

“Wait here,” Nox ordered before running off towards the river. Its banks were lower than the road this time of year, meaning they were dry enough for her to navigate. It was how Corilus and she ate on the journey when it was warmer out, to help keep their loads light. Nox foraged for thick sprigs of green onions, pulled them from the ground, and after washing them in the cool, clean water, returned to Tomas, who had pulled the potatoes from the flames.

“Have some,” she ordered, handing two sprigs of green onion to him. He looked puzzled, but complied. Nox sat across from him and bit into her green onion, the juices spritzing into her

mouth, their sharp, bitter flavor waking her senses up. Watching Tomas bite into one proved entertaining, as he did not seem to know what to expect and was surprised with each chew.

“I take it Corilus has already left?” Tomas asked.

“The taste gets better when you get to the green, leafy parts,” Nox reassured him. “But yeah. He’s not one for sleeping in.”

Nox finished her green onions and started rolling up her bedroll. “You aren’t going to eat your potato?”

She looked back at Tomas, confused. “Those are yours.”

He nodded. “Sure, but you don’t have any other food. You’ll be hungry by midday.”

“I’ll find more greens.”

“That will slow us down.”

“Just eat the damn potato, Tomas!”

Nox was surprised at how loud she had just been. Even Tomas looked a little taken aback. Guilt ran through her all over again.

“Look Nox,” Tomas stood up, his voice growing angry, “I don’t know what I’ve done to upset you. I’m trying to offer some semblance of, of... I don’t know, companionship? Since we’re going to be working together, likely for the rest of our lives. Neither of us have a choice here.”

Nox also stood, glowering at him. “What do you mean by that?”

“I know you need a scholar to become a real Shadow. And I need you to live so I can go to the university and have a chance at an actual future. Do you have any idea what kind of future lies in store for orphans like me?”

Nox had heard the stories. “You go and work labor jobs.”

“Exactly. Jobs that work us so many hours that we are never allowed to grow as people. Worked until we can only sleep. All because our parents had died while we were too young to have a say in our futures. You don’t have to like me, but no amount of abuse is going to make me leave, because nothing you can do is worse than what will happen if I fail to become your scholar.”

The word “abuse” hung heavy in the air for Nox. She didn’t think anything she had done was abusive. Mean, yes, maybe even a bit cruel, but...

“I’m sorry.” The words finally came out. “It’s not you.”

“Then what?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“You can’t, or you don’t want to?”

His words reminded her of Corilus, able to get right to the point she preferred to beat around. “I don’t want to. You’re not a Shadow, and even if you were, you likely won’t understand what I’m trying to accomplish.”

“Try me.”

The two locked eyes, equally daring the other to back down. Nox hated how Tomas didn’t buckle under her. She was the best of her peers, and she didn’t want to be beaten by an orphan she had only just met.

Still, when she thought about it, Tomas would be her scholar for the rest of her life. If he needed her to not be a labor orphan, she could use that as leverage against him.

“If I tell you, you have to swear an oath.”

“What oath?” he sounded annoyed.

“The oath is to me. If you tell *anyone* what I’m trying to accomplish, I will personally make sure you’re sent to the mines as a laborer. You try to ruin my goals, I’ll ruin yours. Got it?”

Tomas didn't waver, but he did ponder the options. He seemed to come to the same conclusion she did. "Very well. On my future, I swear to not tell anyone about your plans."

"Oath accepted. Now, only you and Corilus will know about this, so listen carefully."

"Before that," he interjected, making Nox sigh in frustration. "Can I talk to Corilus about it? He already knows."

"Yeah, fine. Now listen up." Nox glanced at the road and, upon seeing it was empty, continued. "I became a Shadow so I could find my Papa's soul and bring it to Adonex."

"Find his soul? You mean your father's dead?"

"He's not dead," she growled. "It's a long story."

"Then perhaps we should discuss it on the road. Now eat the potato."

"Forgive me my sins," a traveler bowed to Nox, crossing her arms over his chest.

"Adonex forgives," Nox nodded, the traveler going past them, satisfied with the blessing. The traveler was perhaps the third on the road who asked for a passerby blessing, but otherwise it had been quiet, with only the shiver of leaves to fill the day. The road began to smell more like bark and moss as the trees got thicker around them. Tomas and Nox had been enjoying the natural world, though they still felt confined, the river now hidden behind forest. Still, it helped them feel at ease to talk about harder topics.

Nox returned to her conversation with Tomas. "Where were we?"

"You had mentioned how you were kidnapped by some of the Unhallowed when you were twelve."

“Right. There was one Unhallowed member who seemed to be in charge, and he had this crown made of what looked like iron. It had some points along the top, like little spearheads. They said they were going to force me on it and hold me down until it pierced me.”

“Gods, that’s awful.”

“Yeah.” Nox felt the anger of that night begin to burn in her. “But just as they were about to do so, Papa appeared. The Unhallowed jerk in charge got this horrid smile on his face and said the true prize had come.”

“So they were targeting him? Then why did they want to sacrifice you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they thought it would lure him out faster. Papa was always protective of me. That, and they probably just wanted to for laughs. The Unhallowed kill freely for entertainment at times. They gain favor with the underGod if they give him souls.”

“I don’t mean to interrupt, but I did want to ask about that.”

“Go on then.”

Tomas shifted his bag under his cloak. “The underGod himself does not make much sense to me. He’s one of the primordial beings, an ancient god of disaster, and I know he taunted our ancestors by torturing their souls after they died and hurting the living in doing so. But what makes anyone want to worship that? Are the Unhallowed just sick in the head?”

It was a good question. Most common folk just knew that the underGod was bad and asked nothing more. But as he was always proving, Tomas was no simple commoner.

“Well, you know how Adonex was a man who became a god, right?”

“Yeah, all the human deities were the same. They each became gods upon finding ways around some terrible being, either by destroying it or pacifying it. Cansten’s god Lyla was the one who discovered how to make medicine from the land, for example, and she gained godhood

by giving medicine to the primordial being of disease. That's why Cansten deals in medicinal herbs and techniques."

"Right. Adonex was similar, albeit more mystical. The other deities deal with things that do not matter so much after we die. Disease does not affect the soul, for example. But some things do. Strong emotions like fear, revenge, and euphoria can linger for years on the mind, and that can influence the soul when it moves on.

"The underGod gains power when it can torture and consume the souls of the restless dead. When Adonex became a god, souls were delivered safely to their true afterlives. He could show them the way out of the underGod's realm where those dark emotions otherwise torture the souls of the dead."

"That much I get. But why worship something so heinous at all?"

"I'm getting to that." Nox kicked a rock out of the path. They were getting closer to Cansten now. She could tell by the clusters of trees getting taller as they moved along. "A lot of the Unhallowed follow him because they believe in false promises or want cures and power at the costs of others. Medicine as we know it can't cure all ailments— it can't undo what aging does to a body, for example. Some prefer to extend their lives by cutting others short, and the soul of another is the underGod's currency.

"However, there are those who believe Adonex is the unnatural god. The Tyrant King who started the war a couple decades ago was one of them, as were his closest allies. Before Adonex, the underGod had his own dedicated worshippers, and unfortunately, the underGod gave them incredible power, including long lives. Those original worshippers are why so many continue finding ways back to the underGod— as long as they exist, they can corrupt the world, and in doing so, take away Adonex's power as a god."

"So to summarize, they're sick in the head."

Nox laughed.

“That helps clarify a few things for me though. But back to your story.”

“Hold on.” The pair waited until two riders on horseback galloped past them towards Esagend. “Not going to lie, I wish we had horses. Walking goes on so long.”

“I’ve never ridden a horse.”

“You haven’t?”

“Nope.”

“That’s a shame. I should teach you. Esagend has these beautiful black horses. They’re born white, but they grow darker over time.”

“I’ve heard of those! Some people think it’s the pollution, but that’s how they’ve always been.”

“I want to ride one someday!” Nox shared. “I hear they’re the swiftest horses around. Very rare to find though.”

“I agree. But we’re getting off track again. Your father.”

“Right, right. Papa.” Nox sighed. “He arrived just as they were lifting me up. The leader said to hold off and that the true prize had come. Papa commanded they free me, but there were so many. He was overrun. The leader just laughed at him. He said, ‘I know what you are, Geon.’”

“Geon?”

“That’s Papa’s name. Geon Galena.”

“I see.”

“I don’t know what else they said, if I’m honest. Papa had dropped his voice down to a whisper. He was so serious. His jaw was clenched tight, like when he was angry or focused, but

this time it was more than usual. I felt so helpless. I was being held down by two other Unhallowed men, and they had me pinned so if I moved my arms would break.

“After some back and forth between the two, Papa was forced to kneel down. He looked at me, then looked down, I thought I saw his chin quiver. The Unhallowed picked up that hideous spiked crown and held it over Papa’s head, they didn’t see his mouth was bleeding but I did. I knew something was going to happen but didn’t know what. Just before the crown reached his head, though, he reached up quick as lightning and grabbed it, one of the spikes. Then there was this... explosion.”

“Explosion?”

“It’s not the right word, but I don’t know how else to describe it. This explosion of light came from the crown. Papa was in the blast, and the leader was flown back. He crashed into the wall and his head split open. I saw the blood all over the wall after.”

“That sounds awful, watching someone’s head split open like that!”

“I didn’t see it happen. Just the aftermath. Some debris had kicked up from the blast and hit many people. That’s how I got my scar. Something sharp pierced my face. I flew backwards too, landed on top of one of my captors.”

“So that’s the story behind your scar.”

“Mmhmm.”

“I don’t mean to pry, but why are you so keen to hide it? It’s noticeable, sure, but not hideous.”

Nox had never been asked why she hid her scar before, and the question struck her as odd. Maybe it was only odd because she hadn’t heard it before, or perhaps it was in the way he worded it- a scar being “not hideous” suggested she hid it out of insecurity. To her, that had never been the reason. It was always because of what people did when they saw it.

“Because the Inoculae make a bigger deal out of it than it deserves to be.”

“How do you mean?”

“The Archbishops think the explosion was Adonex, and that I was touched by him. They called me the god-touched. The Inoculae like to gawk at me for it. Some are envious and make it known. They’re mad that they can dedicate themselves so hard to Adonex, but some random girl was the one blessed by Adonex.” Nox realized her shoulders were high and she forced them to drop. “Others are just annoying. They think my blessings are more potent, or being near me might bring them good fortune. Even worse is there is a possibility someone who survived that explosion is out there looking for me.”

“Others survived?”

“Yes. Not many. I’ll be honest, I don’t remember much. The explosion happened, my face was struck, and when I looked up again there was some... some kind of ethereal being that reached for me. Its hands went through me, I felt like I was being choked.” Nox refused to admit the visual of the creature frightened her, even to this day. For as much as Tomas was learning about that night, Nox didn’t trust him enough to share that information. “But I saw Papa’s soul.”

“Wait, you *saw* his soul?”

Nox nodded, solemn. She reached up and brushed her fingers along a low hanging branch, feeling its scratchy bark, trying to keep herself present as she spoke about the past. “He grabbed the being and tossed him away. Papa looked at me, he reached for me. But whatever Unhallowed man was underneath me suddenly got up and ran for it, dropping me on the ground in the process. When I recovered from that, Papa was gone. His body was gone too.”

“That’s... wow.” Tomas digested the words. “I confess, I don’t know how to take that in.”

“You don’t need to,” Nox snapped. “It’s for me to carry.”

“Calm down, I know that.” Tomas pushed his hair from his eyes. “How did you escape?”

“Corilus found me. I don’t know how. After everything, I had collapsed. When I woke up I was in a cave. Corilus was there. He explained Papa was gone, and that he was one of the Divine Shadow. When I learned what that meant, I demanded he turn me into one.”

“Fascinating.” A low breeze swept through, forcing Tomas to push his hair out of his eyes again.

“We need to get you a haircut. I don’t know how you see anything.”

“I see just fine, thank you.”

“Why do you hide so much anyway?”

This seemed to prick Tomas. “How do you mean?”

“You hide your face behind your hair, and that cloak is too big for you. If it weren’t for your shins and feet peeking out I would think you were a sentient piece of clothing.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that maybe I can’t afford things that fit me?”

“Haircuts only need a sharp object.”

“You’re obnoxious, you know that?”

His words stung a bit, but she also found them amusing. “I’m not going to be soft on you. If you’re so insistent on working with me, you need to keep up.”

“I’m not exactly coming in on your level, you know.”

“Hold there!”

The two adolescents jumped at a loud man’s yell. An armored guard on his horse approached them at a trot. “You approach Cansten. State your business.”

Their conversation must have gone longer than Nox realized, she hadn’t noticed they were approaching the border. “W-We’re coming for business. His family’s business.” She wanted to wince at her own stutter.

“Family business, eh?” The guard glowered at them from under his helmet. “And what sort of family business are we talking that this kid needs one of your kind?”

Nox felt flustered. They had been talking long enough that she was forgetting what they talked about last night. Tomas surprised her, then by opening his cloak and withdrawing a folded piece of paper.

“Really now, no need for such suspicion,” Tomas answered, handing the paper over to the guard. “We’re here to finalize a trade deal with the local smith. She’s my Inoculae representation. I’m sure you’ll find everything is in order.”

Nox had to blink twice. Tomas had switched on an act, standing tall and with confidence in his voice. The guard read over the paper before handing it back to Tomas.

“Very well. But no funny business. If I catch you smuggling...”

“Believe me, if I tried to smuggle anything my Inoculae would rake me over the coals. Now, if you’ll excuse us...”

Tomas brushed past the guard, Nox following suit. Once there was good distance, Nox grabbed Tomas by the shoulder. “Let me see this paper.”

“By all means, Inoculae.” Nox ignored his jest and snatched the paper from his hand as he passed it to her. It was a close copy to an official business document, written in ink and with a carefully traced fake family symbol. “Where did you get this?”

“I made it.”

“When?”

“Last night. After you went to bed I inked it. I’m just glad it didn’t smudge this morning.”

Nox thought back to Tomas writing yesterday. An approving smile crossed her face. “Clever Tomas. Very, very clever.”

Chapter 9

Nox had rarely done missions in Cansten, but smelling its rich air made it feel familiar to her. The soil was potent in these parts, and farmers of alchemical plant life flocked here to grow strange mushrooms and flowers. Unlike Esagend's metal and brick buildings that were cramped together, Cansten's buildings were spread out and made of clay and thatch, with some wooden buildings popping up every so often to change the scenery. Despite the simple appearance, the greenhouses that lined the outskirts of the city made for an impressive display of agriculture. The village was otherwise walled in by the thick forests, making for a natural defense.

Horse-drawn carts rattled over the dirty, cobbled streets as Nox and Tomas wandered about. "So on missions like this, where do you start?" Tomas asked.

“Usually we set up a base. That way if we have to separate we have a spot to meet up at.”

She looked at him. “Granted, I don’t intend to leave you alone.”

“Grown that fond of me already then?”

“No. Let’s go to the inn.”

The pair made their way to the large, wooden inn near the border of the town. The inn had two floors, the bottom a space for eating and drinks with tables and chairs around the floor space. Horned chandeliers and sconces lit the room with a warm glow, and a stone fireplace sat cold on the far right. To the left was the long counter where the innkeeper worked, the smell of stew and cooking meat wafting from an open door. Taking out the two gold coins Corilus gave her, Nox approached the innkeeper, who was sorting glass bottles of spirits on the shelves behind the counter.

“Two rooms please.”

The innkeeper turned to face them, and Nox was surprised to see the strands of grey hair at the top of his head. From behind, his hair was a rich brown color. He almost looked like he was twenty with how tall and lanky he was, until he turned around. Nox dropped the gold coins on the polished wood counter and pushed them his way.

“Been awhile since I’ve seen an Inoculae,” the innkeeper said. Nox’s heart dropped a little. She didn’t want to make small talk with him.

“Here on business,” Tomas stepped in. “We’re both fairly new to it. Never been to Cansten before myself. Could you tell me where the smithy is here?”

“Oh yeah, sure! You see the two-story greenhouse to the west when you came in? Assuming you’s from Esagend with her look.”

“That’s right.”

“The smith is a few blocks east of that greenhouse. Look for the smoke and listen for the hammerin’ noise. Anyway, two rooms, you said?”

After collecting the room keys, Nox led Tomas up the stairs. Nox decided to take a few minutes to freshen up before they left again to look around. Her room was identical to all the other rooms, with a single-person bed in the corner, an oil lamp on a table beside a basin and pitcher of water, a window that lit the room naturally, and a single chair made from sanded wood. The bed was nice enough to have a plain blanket and pillow on it, though its feathered mattress was flat from how many guests had been in it over time and the frame creaked when she sat on it.

Her feet tingled as she sat, but she chose to keep her boots on. They would have to be moving soon. Tomas had been right, the potato carried her for most of the journey, but she found herself feeling hungry once more. Looking at her belt pouch, she saw she had a couple copper coins, enough for a few simple meals.

She had never had to worry about affording food. Sure, there were days missing a meal was part of the job, but she had never truly starved. Thinking back on the morning, Tomas having two potatoes suggested he had almost no money. For some reason she had figured the orphanage would have given him some, but in hindsight, that didn’t make much sense. From what little she understood about the orphanage, she knew they often preferred to give the orphans away to people who could potentially care for their needs, since their own beds were often overfilled. Was Tomas just going to go back to his orphanage when they returned? He couldn’t stay with Nox and Corilus in their crypt. Even if there was enough room, it was hazardous, and Tomas would probably hate it anyway.

Corilus likely had an answer, so she would just wait for him, she concluded. Pushing her thoughts aside, she got up and pushed her backpack under the bed before going over to Tomas' room. She knocked twice before opening the door as he answered "Come in!"

"You're so skinny!" she caught herself saying aloud. Tomas had removed his cloak and was emptying out his backpack on the bed when she had entered. His shirt was loose, the sleeves bouncing around his wrists as he pulled books and writing utensils from his bag, and his pants were held up by a belt made of thin rope.

"How astute," he grumbled back, pulling out a fourth book from his backpack. "Anything else about my appearance you want to comment on today?"

Nox felt embarrassed. "It wasn't supposed to be a criticism." She spied the books on his bed. "You brought all of that?"

"Of course. I thought it might be useful."

The covers were worn and faded, but the books themselves were intact. "Where'd you even get these? The university?"

"Don't I wish." Tomas held up one of the smaller books with a green cover, the title *Introduction to Village History* etched in faded gold letters on the front. "There's an older woman who lets me borrow books in exchange for some help in her apartment. Honestly I think she's just lonely. Lately the work has been making a meal for us both."

A pang of guilt rose in Nox once more. She wondered if the older woman he spoke of was just giving him a handout disguised as labor, but it wasn't for her to judge.

"Anyway, she has a meager library of her own, so she lets me read them. I'm hoping to finish this one while we're here."

"Eager to give it back?"

“Yes and no. I don’t have much time to read. By the time I get back to the orphanage, it’s only a short time before they turn the lights out. Learned the hard way years ago not to strain my eyes reading in the dark.”

Tomas didn’t speak like his life was so tough. In fact, he made it all sound plain and normal. He was likely not aware of the effect his words were having on Nox. All of her cohorts had their own intense, tragic histories that drove them to become Shadows, but it was a motivator to hunt and make something good of their trauma. Tomas seemed to have no one incident that led him to move forward, but was aware of his circumstances enough to take a risk in becoming her scholar-in-training for a shot at a better life.

All this did was make Nox feel worse for how she had treated him yesterday. Still, she felt justified. Papa’s soul was also suffering, and she was going to save it. Instead of rebuking Tomas, though, she reckoned she would just help both of them.

“Well, you can read later. We’d best get out there again.”

“Right, next steps.” Tomas put the book back down, lining it perfectly beside the other three. “Base is settled. Now what?”

“Now we gather information.”

“What sort of information?”

“Uhh…” Nox wasn’t sure how to answer that. Corilus usually took point in what to look for. “Well, I guess first we should figure out what we already know.”

“Excellent.” Tomas went to his chair, the same kind Nox had in her room, and sat down. “Enlighten me, please.”

“Well, we know we’re looking for a serial killer.” Nox began to pace the room. “Originally there were disappearances in the Swamplands that were excused as just people being swallowed by the swamps, but lately there have been disappearances in Cansten here, only a few

miles from the Swamplands. The people who have disappeared didn't go to the swamps, and they were all young men. The places they were stolen from all showed signs of violence."

"How many have disappeared that are specifically from Cansten?" asked Tomas, who got up long enough to grab a piece of paper and a pencil and set them on a book so he could write notes.

"Four that we know of. All of them are a couple of months apart." Nox grasped her hands together and held them to her face, thinking hard. She was once again caught off guard by Corilus not being there, ready with the details. "I can't recall if there were any specifics on who they were."

"That's fine. Let's start with the smithy."

"The smithy?"

"Well, we have to keep up appearances in case our friend The Guard shows up again."

"Point. Let's get going then."

Donning her veil and his cloak once more, the two made their way out of the inn, locking their gear in their rooms. Following the innkeeper's directions, they made their way to the local smith, following the sound of hammering.

"Excuse me?" Tomas called out as they approached the open forge. A sweaty man with a full beard looked up from the horseshoes he was making, his balding forehead wrinkling up in confusion.

"Who're you?"

Tomas struck up a conversation with the smithy, making up stories about his family's growing business and their imaginary offers to bring copper to Cansten. Nox looked around the shop, which was open to them. Though Esagend boasted few artisans of their own, they did pride themselves in their coppersmiths and silversmiths, as well as those who could work with

obsidian, to create beautiful weapons, jewelry, and elaborate infrastructure. Here the smithy seemed humble by comparison, his works more practical. Nox spotted a broken plow on a table and shelves of nails, tools for farming and maintenance, and horseshoes for sale.

“Look kid, I appreciate your offering, but until I see something in writing I’m not interested,” the smithy waved Tomas away. “I got enough here without that.”

“Oh, very well then.” Tomas backed out of the conversation and looked to Nox. She stepped forward.

“Your work is well-crafted,” she began. Seeing the smithy prepare to tell her off, she held up her hands. “Please, I come with no business deal.” As Tomas began to wander off to give them room, she added, “His family is ambitious, but not experienced in such things. Do not mind him, he’s only trying to make his father proud.”

The smithy cracked a grin, buying her tall tale. “Well, your words are appreciated, miss.”

“Allow me to make it up to you,” Nox offered, hoping her Inoculae disguise would help. “Do you have any deceased I could pray for?”

“Nah, miss. But you could pray for the ones who are lost here. Don’t know if you’ve heard, but we have a bit of a disappearance problem. One was supposed to be my new apprentice two months back. Never arrived, though someone found his bag with his papers near the river. Would’ve thought he’d just drowned, except his bag was cut, and no body washed up. Well, that and he’s not the first.”

Nox suddenly turned to make sure Tomas was nearby. “But why would someone target young men? Can you think of any reason?”

“None. But I sense it’s something to do with the underGod. Lyla protects us. Hey, when you next go to Esagend, let them know we’re worried, alright? Cansten tries to move on, but it’s

afraid.” The smithy leaned in close, and she could feel the heat radiate from his head. “And I wouldn’t leave your friend alone for too long. Just in case.”

Nox thanked him for his time and returned to Tomas’ side. “Any luck?” he asked as they headed back down the road.

“One of the victims, if I am to guess right, was his apprentice on the way here.” She recounted what the smithy had told her.

“Have any of the bodies been recovered?” Tomas asked. “Maybe we can ask to see them.”

“That might be a good next step.” The two asked their way around Cansten for the doctor in charge of preparing the bodies for burial and found him as the sun was beginning to set, though he gave no helpful information, except that no bodies of the victims had ever turned up.

“That makes me nervous,” Nox admitted as they headed back to the inn.

“Because the killer is so thorough?”

“Because he may be using their bodies for components. We may have an experienced Unhallowed cultist here.”

There was a pause as they considered the thought. Tomas broke the silence.

“I really hate to ask, but what are we doing for dinner?”

“I have some coins. We can get something cheap.”

Chapter 10

They walked in silence the rest of the way, exhausted and hungry and with nothing new to say. Upon opening the door to the inn, Nox was surprised to hear Corilus' barking laugh from across the room. The fireplace was lit, and its flames contributed to the animated going-ons of the restaurant part of the inn. Men and women of all ages yelled and filled the space with chatter and drinks, and it took the two a second to find Corilus. Spotting his wide-brimmed hat, Nox saw Corilus sat with his back to the main door, and Nox knew it was to hear the person who was standing above him without giving away his deaf ear. She was surprised to see it was the innkeeper himself who was talking to Corilus, smiling and laughing as they chatted.

"Amazing, amazing!" Corilus laughed, slamming his mug onto the table in a kind of mock-applause. "I can see why you were the one hired to take over!"

"You flatter me, sir," the innkeeper laughed. He spotted Tomas and Nox as they approached. "Ah! Here are those two I mentioned to you earlier! Your fellow Inoculae!"

Corilus turned and looked at them, surprised. "I'd best sober up then," Corilus joked, putting a hand over his cup. "Please, bring them two hot meals. It's on me. Come, sit with me blessed ones."

Nox and Tomas sat down at Corilus' table, Nox taking the spot where she could keep the left side of her face turned away. Corilus smiled at them, his face flushed a bit. "And what brings you two here?" he asked loudly, leaning forward.

Tomas looked confused at Corilus' new personality, but Nox had seen this act before. Sliding her veil into a hood and readjusting her circlet, she answered in a kind voice, "Family business. Tomas here was sent to speak with the smith, and I was chosen to help represent him. I must say, it's an honor to see a friendly Inoculae here."

"Blessings of Adonex to your family," Corilus raised his mug. The innkeeper came back just then with bowls of what looked like beef stew and a plate with a fresh loaf of bread on it. Tomas looked shocked at the feast before him.

Nox reached over and grabbed the bread, tearing it in half and handing him the bigger half. "Dig in." Tomas wasted no time doing just that.

While they got through their meal and made small talk with Corilus, the door swung open over and over as people came and went. Nox kept an eye on them, but none stood out as threats until the innkeeper came over to take their dishes away.

"I hate to interrupt, but I was wondering..." he glanced around the room, his demeanor anxious. Corilus' smile fell flat. "I'm sorry if this is out of line, but there has been this woman, you see..."

The trio followed the innkeeper's gaze to one of the back corners. A woman, with a hood pulled over her head was sitting across from a young man who was twitching, almost as if he were trying not to cry. Her expression was hard to see, but they could all feel that something was off.

"Who is she?" Corilus asked. "Are they together?"

“N-Not in the way you’d suspect. She’s been coming here off and on for a while now. Always finds a young man to talk to, always sweet at first, then they begin to break down. That’s not her first.”

“I see. I will speak with him when she leaves.” Corilus finished off his mug and looked to the other two. “I’m sure you both are busy, so why don’t you leave this to me, alright?”

“Of course.” Nox began to stand, Tomas following suit.

“Thank you for the meal.” Tomas gave a short bow to Corilus. Nox sensed it was a genuine statement.

The two of them headed upstairs and slipped into Tomas’ room. “We should wait for Corilus,” Nox suggested.

“Do you think that’s the killer?”

“Hard to know. It would be immensely lucky if it were.”

“I feel foolish now.”

“Why?”

“Innkeepers are among the best people to ask about the happenings of the city. We could have started with him.”

He had a good point. “Don’t stress about it, okay?”

“He could have told us sooner though. I’m concerned we wasted time.”

“Why are you so worked up over this?”

Tomas opened his mouth to answer, but a knock made them stop. Tomas opened the door and Corilus came into the room.

“We need to move. She stepped out and he was not responsive to me. Wherever he was looking, it wasn’t anywhere on this plane of existence.”

Adrenaline burst through Nox. She undid the rope around her shoulder and began tying it off to the table.

“I’m confused, what’s happening?” Tomas asked as Corilus went to open the window.

“That man she was speaking to is in a late state of being manipulated by an Unhallowed. She could be claiming him tonight.” Corilus turned back to Tomas. “As soon as we’re out of here, bring the rope back up, and wait for two small stones to strike the window. That’s our signal to let us back in if we can’t use the front door. Keep yourself sealed in here. Don’t open the door for anyone. Understood?”

“Y-Yes sir!”

Nox glanced out the window and found a solid place to land before tossing her rope out. In minutes, the two Shadows were sneaking along the streets, ready to hunt.

“He turned east when he left. Let’s go, Nox.”

Staying close together, but never too close, they found the young man wandering the dark streets. Being outsiders, the two followed him as living shadows, their veils over their faces once again. Their following brought them to the forest, and Corilus took the lead.

Nox couldn’t understand how people thought living out in the villages was quieter than Esagend. The wind had begun to pick up, making the leaves shiver with an anticipation Nox tried to suppress within herself. Trying to step through foliage without being seen was proving difficult, though as the wind got worse, it became easier to pursue. She was surprised there was any light, really, having forgotten how bright the full moon could be when no city was there to dim it. Corilus had the advantage of seeing even in perfect darkness, but Nox had no such gifts yet. In the moonlight, the forest was haunting, yet beautiful.

Corilus turned back to her, his dark eyes suddenly blue with his special vision. “Small house ahead. He’s gone in.

They cleared past the thick of the forest and came upon the house he spoke of—a simple cabin, with a window left of the front door glowing an ominous red. Smoke billowed from its chimney into the wind, swept away as soon as it appeared.

“Wait for me to reach the house, then follow.” Corilus crept forward.

Nox waited, but felt twitchy. She was a far better hunter and tracker in tombs and crypts, and being out in the open made her feel vulnerable. Her hatred for the Unhallowed kept her going forward.

Corilus reached the cabin and hid under the windowsill. Nox moved forward next, barely able to hear the voices of the young man and a woman inside.

“It is good you have come, my friend. Now tonight, you will find purpose.”

The other man was sobbing. “I... oh Divine’s bones, these dark thoughts won’t leave me...”

Nox peeked her head just past the window to look in. The man from the tavern was on his knees, clutching his head, his torso seizing with each sob. The woman stood before him like a corrupted priest, wearing a white robe with reddish brown splotches painted upon it, a far scarier look than her common clothes from before. Her hood was down, revealing light brown hair that framed her shadowy face and murderous smile. In the back right corner, the fireplace glowed with red fire, casting odd shadows over the sparse furniture in the single room.

Nox withdrew her head and looked at Corilus. They listened on.

“P-Please... take these thoughts from me...!” the man was begging now.

Nox’s eyebrows furrowed in anger. Corilus finally looked up at her, shaking his head. Nox indicated she wanted to go inside now, but Corilus looked away again.

“These thoughts you have... my friend, you do not know the blessings you are receiving. The one who gives them to you is telling you dark things, yes, but they are truths you must know to achieve true godly intervention.”

Corilus gave one quick nod and Nox turned, taking her place by the front door. Corilus appeared on the other side almost as quick as it took Nox to turn around.

“Wait,” he whispered as Nox went for the door.

“For what?” she hissed.

“Shh.” He pressed his ear to the door.

“Oh come on...” Nox pursed her lips together when Corilus’ eyes turned to her, forcing her silent. Nox pressed her ear to the door and listened.

“There is no true cure for these thoughts...” the Unhallowed woman’s words came through. “...but, there is a way through them. A path... to the underGod.”

“Now?” Nox hissed.

“Now.” Corilus stood and Nox went for the handle, only to find it locked.

“Move!” Nox had but a second to get out of the way before Corilus kicked at the door, sending it flying open, Nox seized the chaos to run inside. Nox raised her right hand, muttering the Old Tongue for violet flames to pour from her palm, intending to volley them towards the Unhallowed. It was no use, they flickered and went out before they got farther than a match’s flame, giving the woman enough time to grab the sobbing man, placing him as a human shield between them.

“Not another step!” she hissed, revealing yellowed teeth, her hands around her prey’s shoulders, digging into the fabric of his shirt.

“You are condemned, fiend.” Nox kept her voice steady, reaching a hand into her robe. “Release him, and sin no more.”

“W-What is happening?!” the sobbing man cried out. Nox saw his eyes begin draining of their color. She withdrew her hand.

“That’s better,” grinned the Unhallowed woman, her yellow teeth shining in the red light of the fire. Color returned to his victim’s eyes. Nox wanted to spit on the ground the underGod’s mind magic was nothing to underestimate, and unfortunately, her enemy was more than capable of killing with it.

She realized Corilus had not followed her in and tried to buy him some time.

“What game are you on, cultist?” she growled. “Four victims in the last half year, half-moon deaths, you’re getting ready for something big, aren’t you?”

“And how do you know of my prey, girl?” Her voice had lowered. Nox took in her features: her hair was thinning, and she had uneven fingernails and bloodshot eyes. The hair suggested decay from her unholy magic, the nails a mania, the eyes an overuse of her power. Taking a gamble on her assumptions, she aimed for her ego first.

“I admit it wasn’t easy. You’ve been hard to track.” She risked leaning to her left. The woman tensed, but did not harm the young man in her grasp. That was good. The less dead bodies she had to raise, the better her odds. “And no underGod worshipper worth his bones kills like that without a plan.”

She spat out a laugh, making the victim jump. This wasn’t going fast enough for Nox, seeing how the poor man was fading from fright. The victim began to cry out in agony, a cry that sent shivers down Nox’s spine. She could see the woman’s lips moving, her mouth forming the dark words of the underGod. The color was fading from his victim’s eyes quick, and for a second, Nox began to panic.

A smashing sound made the Unhallowed and Nox look to the window behind her. The glass window had shattered from the outside, sending red shards over the unholy caster.

Realizing her moment, Nox ran to the left of the woman, dipping low. With her right leg she kicked at the feet of her victim, forcing the poor man to fall, taking the Unhallowed holding him with. Nox was ready, however. She swept around, taking out her dagger, using the momentum of the spin to rise. The evil woman managed only to begin her next word before Nox's blade sliced her throat, silencing her forever.

The woman clutched at her throat, blood pouring through her fingers, its ruby color enhanced by the red light of the room. Nox grasped her shoulder, meeting her bloodshot eyes.

“In the name of the Divine Adonex, I declare thee...”

“Condemned.”

Corilus interrupted, standing suddenly at the front door. Nox glared daggers at him.

“Condemned,” she added, before letting the body drop. She pulled a rag from one of her belt pouches and wiped her dagger clean as Corilus shut the door behind him. “Thanks for stealing the moment.”

“Can't let you have all the fun,” Corilus smirked under his mask. He nodded his head towards the victim, who had scuttled into the corner during the chaos. Nox gave a nod back to Corilus, sheathing her blade and stepping over the Unhallowed woman's body towards him.

“Peace, friend. We won't hurt you.” Nox knelt before him, lowering her mask, revealing her scar.

“D-D-Divine...” the young man was shaking, cold sweat beading on his forehead.

“You've been through a lot lately, haven't you? Come on, let's get you up.” Nox reached out a hand, but the man buried himself further into the wall.

“Who are you?!” It was almost a yell.

“We were sent by the church of Adonex. That Unhallowed woman has been putting dark thoughts in your head, poisoning your mind.” Nox fished under her vestment and withdrew her amulet of Adonex, showing it like a badge.

“You’re priests?”

“Something like that. Consider us... specialists.” Nox rolled back on her heels and landed on her backside, sitting across from him. Behind her, Corilus began muttering last rites over the corpse. “How long have your dark thoughts been going on?”

The man’s shaking began to fade. His chin dropped, as if he was ashamed, and tears brimmed his eyes. The first time Nox had seen a man cry, it had shaken her up a bit, but now, she was relieved, almost glad, when it happened.

“About six months ago... I lost my brother. And since then, I’d been... I’m ashamed to confess this, truly I am, I don’t understand it, but I’d been considering... joining... him..”

“Taking your own life?”

He nodded, hot tears falling down his cheeks. He had curled up without thinking.

“I know...” he whined through his tears, “...that it is a sin to entertain taking my own life...”

“You were in a lot of pain, weren’t you?”

The man did not answer, new tears gliding down the paths of the old ones.

“That’s what happens, you know. Our minds hurt so, so much, and sometimes those thoughts appear because they don’t know what else to do. And that’s what the Unhallowed prey on. Because they have a victory if you give in to them. They get your soul, and Adonex loses a child.”

He sniffed, still not looking up. Corilus appeared by the fireplace to their right.

“Loud pop,” Corilus warned before throwing a handful of consecrated salt into the fire. It gave off a small explosion and a sulfur smell filled the room, but the light changed into a soft yellow glow. Nox could feel the magical suppression fading, the tension in the room becoming light once more.

Nox spoke again to the young man. “Do you have a name?”

“...Darian.”

“Well, Darian, I think you’ve suffered long enough. Do you want one of us to take you home?”

“No, I think I can handle it.” His eyes wandered to the Unhallowed woman’s corpse, its arms crossed and eyes closed, the blood from her throat beginning to dry on her neck and torso.

“We’ll make sure she can never return,” Nox reassured. “You sure you’re safe going home?”

“Yes.” He walked around the body to the door, almost as if to run out into the darkness.

“The Church does not hate those who experience what you did,” Corilus said, watching the him with his steely gaze. The young man paused and looked back. “And if you are concerned, there is a priest in Esagend, goes by the name Bennet. He will listen to you.”

He paused, pondered Corilus’ words, then gave one more nod before running out. Nox sighed. She had hoped for a more satisfying ending to the hunt.

“Think that’s the best we’ll get from his case,” Corilus said, tapping his boot on the wood floor.

“You’d think realizing the Church had just saved your ass would make someone ecstatic,” Nox grumbled, crossing her arms.

“If that was enough you’d be their strongest worshipper.”

She didn’t argue that. Corilus began to pace the floor.

“You think this was our killer?” Nox asked.

“Hard to say. Her target tonight matched what we were looking for. There’ve not been any bodies for us to find clues to, so we don’t know their cause of death.”

“She was draining Darian’s life with her magic. That might explain how she could have grabbed other victims. Even the strongest people can fall for that darkness.”

Corilus landed on a creaky spot and knelt down, feeling around until he opened a hidden trap door. The smell of rotting corpses hit both of their noses, making Nox wish for the sulfur smell to come back.

“Think we found our other victims,” Corilus grimaced. “Explains where she got the bones to create the fire.” He stood up and looked down at Nox, pulling down his mask. “Let’s start by embalming the Unhallowed. You want the heart or the eyes?”

“You’re always asking such easy questions,” Nox smirked, taking her embalming tools from her belt pouch. “You know I love taking out their eyes.”

“Thank the gods you came back,” Tomas muttered as Nox pulled herself through his window, Corilus helping her.

“Of course we’d come back. Never doubt a Shadow.” Nox pulled the rope up behind her and shut the window.

“Right,” mumbled Corilus. “Nox, I’ll leave it to you to tell your scholar about what happened tonight. I’m exhausted.”

“Have a good night, Corilus,” Nox whispered after him as he unlocked Tomas’ door and closed the door behind him. Nox sighed and sat down in the chair.

“So was it our killer?” Tomas asked, sitting on the edge of his bed.

“A lot of signs point to yes. She was using magic to drain his life force when we intervened, and before she was convincing him to join in worship of the underGod. We did find a few bodies under her floor too, and her fireplace was using deathwax to suppress our magic.”

Nox exhaled. “She must’ve been grooming Darian for awhile.”

“Darian?”

“Victim’s name.”

“I see.” Tomas pondered her words. “Were the bodies the victims?”

“We couldn’t tell. They were all skinned. But there were enough to be the victims.”

“And you said she used magic?”

“Yeah. Most do.”

“That’s not my concern.”

Nox looked over at Tomas. “What?”

“Did she... have any sort of sharp weapons?”

Nox thought back over the scene. “Just some small pieces for embalming. Why?”

Tomas leaned forward. “It just bothers me a bit. I mean, if she was using magic, then who cut the bag of the smithy’s apprentice?”

“She could have just tossed the weapon somewhere if it was actually cut. Either way, we caught an Unhallowed, a nasty one at that, and Corilus will do the usual work of examining the remains of her victims. We’re heading back to Esagend tomorrow to report what we found.”

“Corilus isn’t coming back with us?”

“It’s not efficient.”

“I won’t lie, I don’t like that,” Tomas confessed.

Nox rolled her eyes. “The more the church knows, the better they can move us around for missions.” She yawned. “Anyway, don’t worry about it. Get some sleep, we have a long walk back.”

“I will worry. While you were out someone tried to get into my room.”

Nox tensed. “What?”

“Someone rattled the handle.”

“Did they try breaking the door down?”

“No, they just tried opening it twice.”

“Did they threaten you?”

“No...”

“Then don’t worry about it, okay? Maybe it was just a drunk who got his rooms confused. Besides, we got the enemy. The body count matched and everything.”

Tomas didn’t look content with her answer, but they were both too tired to push it. “Well, you’re back now. That’s a small comfort.” Tomas sat back on his bed and opened his book once more.

Nox wanted to retort, but could only yawn. Leaving Tomas to his books, she went to her own room and took enough time to remove her vestment and veil before laying down to sleep, the first light of the dawn creeping over the horizon.

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