The Moon is one of the most egregious of the old gods. While, on the surface, They appear to be as reliable as the Sun in Their constant dance across our skies, once one digs deeper, they find an insidious underbelly. Fear, lies, and the belief in the unseen . . . all these traits threaten Caelria on a fundamental level if left unchecked in the population.

—EXCERPT FROM *THE MAJOR ARCANA: A TREATISE ON THE HISTORY OF THE OLD GODS*

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CHAPTER TWO

I STAND IN THE doorway of our tiny apartment and just take in the normalcy greeting me. Pika is herding the two littles—Fawn and Colt—out of bed while bickering with Quoll about whose turn it is to make breakfast. Everyone is here and as healthy as can be expected. In a week or two, everything will change for the better. I have to believe that. No matter how morose Mara makes me feel sometimes, the truth is that I have no intention of dying in the Trials. Or before, for that matter.

Pika is lean the way everyone in the Dregs is lean, her light brown skin too pale from lack of sun. She's still wearing the bonnet that protects her braids, and it makes her appear even younger. My chest pangs, but I manage a smile just as she catches sight of me. Pika lights up. "We thought you might have snuck away to avoid saying goodbye."

"You know damn well that saying goodbye is bad luck."

She shrugs. "Still, we all wanted a chance to see you before . . . well, everything."

"I wouldn't sneak out in the night like that." I wouldn't do that to them—or to Mouse. He hasn't come out of his room yet—the only private space in this place—so I do my best to let the stress of what's coming roll off my shoulders. "I have some time. I'll help with breakfast."

It's comforting in its familiarity. Colt doesn't want fish with his breakfast, but he never does. I hope he'll grow out of the aversion, because fish is the one thing not in short supply this close to the Peridot District. The dried stuff is even affordable most seasons. I didn't want fish when I was seven, either, but food is food. Fawn eats obediently, not saying

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a word. We found her a few years ago, wandering the streets. She didn't speak at all the first few months, and even now that she's more comfortable, she is still quiet to the point where I worry sometimes. At six, she's small enough to be mistaken for younger. And Quoll is my problem child at fifteen, only in that he's a bundle of hormones and still thinks he's immortal. He's had more run-ins with the Wands than me and Pika combined, and I'm terrified that one day he won't be fast enough to get away.

Not for the first time, I wonder if I'm doing the right thing by entering the Trials. Or *trying* to enter the Trials; there's no guarantee I'll even make it as far as the dais to become the Moon's champion. The Culling is called that for a reason—its bloodshed is legendary. More people die in the few hours it takes to determine the champions than in the Trials themselves.

Mouse has been training me for years, but surely others with better resources and information have done the same. Doubt threatens to creep in, lured closer by worry about what will happen to the family I'm responsible for while I'm gone. Mara says she'll look after them, but there are no guarantees. Something could happen to *Mara*.

As if sensing my thoughts, Mouse chooses that moment to enter the room. He looks especially run-down this morning, his pale skin almost yellow, the lines bracketing his mouth and eyes deeper than normal. His hair was already going gray when I was old enough to notice such things, and it's nearly white now.

He takes us in with a single look and nods. "Kestrel, it's time."

The mood plummets. Pika wilts. Quoll puffs out his chest, but his eyes are a little too red to fully pull off the bravado. The littles don't quite understand what's happening, but they pick up the tension all the same.

I don't want to go.

I shove the thought down deep. That's my fear talking. I've never once let fear rule me, and I'm not about to start now. "I'm ready." I pull Pika into a hug and whisper in her ear, "If you run into any trouble, go to Mara. She'll help."

"I will." She hugs me back fiercely and steps away after only a beat.

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Quoll is next. He clings a little longer than I expect. "Kill them all and come home. I'll never forgive you if you don't." He moves away, wiping at his eyes.

Colt and Fawn are easier in their own way. They give me big hugs and then allow Pika to guide them back to their breakfast. I turn to find Mouse waiting with a pair of cloaks in his arms. They're both threadbare and faded into a colorless gray that might have been blue at the start of their lives, or possibly black. They're also the nicest things I've ever owned.

I swing a cloak around my shoulders and walk out the door without looking back, Mouse at my heels. We climb down, taking a different route from Mara's dramatic exit, just as the strike criers sound the eighth strike. It will take too much time to go the usual route, so we have to risk the street and the most direct path. We have four strikes before the Culling, but we have to travel all the way through the Peridot District before turning north to the bridge into the Wands District. It would be faster to cut directly through the Diamond District, but even with the new-to-us cloaks, we'd stand out too much and run the risk of the Wands taking interest. Getting held up by city-sanctioned bullies on a power trip isn't an option today.

The irony of intentionally seeking the Wands arena now, when normally it's a fate to be avoided at all costs, might amuse me if I weren't so nervous. "You don't have to come with me." No matter what happens at the Culling, Mouse will be left to make his way back home alone. His body isn't as spry as it used to be, though his mind is still sharp. He could be attacked. Or twist his ankle. Or . . .

I should have asked Mara to come. It would hurt her to see the violence, but at least I'd know Mouse would get home safely.

"I'm going." There's no give in his tone. The last time—the only time—he escorted someone to the arena to join the Trials, it was my mother. They were both so young and hopeful, at least from the way he tells it. Neither of them could have guessed how that story would end, with her dead and him left to raise the daughter of the woman he loved—or at least cared for very deeply.

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I hear the Peridot District before we turn the corner and see it. The Dregs is hardly a peaceful and quiet place, but Peridot never sleeps. The entire city depends on the resources brought in and shipped out by sea and river, which results in people coming and going at all strikes. Most of the businesses only take time off at midday and the darkest part of the night. I love it, and not only because it's much easier to lift purses and valuables from strangers to Caelria than it is from guild members who live here.

We are one of three city-states that exist on Zaersia, a continent overrun by the wilds and the creatures that call them home. The only way to travel safely is by river, and even that isn't a guarantee that a person or a shipment will reach their destination. Whoever settled Caelria somewhere north of a thousand years ago looked around and realized this was the most strategic place to plant a city. We crouch on the mouth of the Saevus River, and encompass the fork where it turns into the Verso River and moves east to the city-state Grexium. The Saevus runs the full length of the continent, beginning to the north in the city-state Perphodia. Neither of the other city-states have ports and their respective rivers only meet within Caelria's walls. As a result, all trade comes through Caelria, and more specifically, through Peridot.

I can't find my normal excitement to walk through Peridot streets today. Not with the Culling hanging over my head. What if I don't even make it to the dais? What if a lifetime of training has been for nothing? It will kill Mouse to watch me die today, knowing he put me on this path. I can't let it happen. I *won't*.

Moving from the shadow of the wall allows the Sun to brush my face. It's warm and welcoming and, if I were a little more sentimental, I might believe this was a promise that things will turn out for the best. Portents are more Mara's thing than mine, though.

I keep one eye on Mouse—he's not as healthy as he used to be, and this is a particularly long walk—as I study the people around us. We pass a group of Grexs escorting a cart of chickens. They're dressed similar to us in short tunics and pants, albeit their clothing is of significantly better quality and hasn't been mended until it's more patches than original

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fabric. The chickens don't seem happy to be here, squawking and flapping and generally making an absolute ruckus.

We keep going, moving through a small market that pops up a few times a week. It's usually filled with traders about to sail away from Caelria and wanting to make a last little bit of profit—and not have to carry any more goods home than strictly necessary. There must have been a shipment down from Perphodia recently because there are half a dozen people trying to hawk gemstones—they'd have better luck in the Garnet District, seeing as how gemstones are their specialty, but maybe they already tried that. I nearly bump into a woman, her distinctive pink-red cloak marking her as a member of the Ruby Guild. She gives me a faint smile and keeps walking toward the closest gem merchant.

I catch sight of more Grexs, a pair this time, holding up bags of rice and shouting offers. Despite myself, I slow. "Those prices aren't bad." It would set us back, but rice keeps better than most other food staples, and has the bonus of being filling and adaptable to many dishes. Colt would even eat it without complaining.

"Kestrel." Mouse grips my arm and tows me past the traders. "There isn't time to linger."

"Right. Sorry." I note purses on strangers out of sheer habit, though I manage to resist the impulse to pluck them as we stride past. I smell the Saevus River before I see it. There was probably a time when it ran clear and pristine, but these days it's the dumping ground for the Diamond Guild's chemical runoff, the Citrine Guild's dyes, and the entire city's waste. Here at the mouth of the river, it's a particularly horrible mix, especially on summer days when the heat makes everything unbearable. The result is eye-watering.

We cut north, the ground angling beneath our feet. The strike callers echo from all around us as we reach the bridge into the Wands District. We're clearly not the only people attending the Culling, but even moving within the relative safety of a crowd isn't enough to set me at ease. There's no turning back now.

The moment we cross the bridge, the street turns to flagstone beneath our feet. The buildings on either side are shorter than I'm used to,

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only a handful of stories tall, because apparently the Wands don't need or want to maximize the space for their people the way the rest of us do. There are water towers on most of the roofs—that, at least, is familiar. We can't drink the sea, and the only people drinking from the river are those desperate or out of their minds. Water towers are vital to gather the regular rainfall we see in Caelria and store it for drinking water. These ones are significantly fancier than the pair of old barrels Mara and I hauled up to the apartment a few years back when the old ones started to rust and I was worried about the littles getting sick.

Naturally, the first building I actually recognize is a temple devoted to the primordial element of fire. It's crafted of columns with no walls, so I can see all the way to the center of it with the wide metal bowl on an altar, fire licking over its edges. A priest in black robes moves around the bowl, carefully adding fuel to ensure the flames never die out. Two more priests meet the queue of people who are lined up, small bundles of sticks clutched in white-knuckled hands as they prepare to petition the fire.

When I was a child, you had to travel to one of the court districts to see a temple devoted to a primordial element. That religion belongs to the Minor Court, with each court claiming one of the elements as their patron. In the rest of the city, the temples to the Major Arcana were significantly more common. Now, so many have been broken down and replaced by temples devoted to the worship of the primordial elements, as the rot of the Minor Court creeps down the hill and takes over everything it touches.

"Kestrel." The tension in Mouse's tone draws my attention back to him. He jerks his chin, and I follow his gaze to where the stream of pedestrians has split around a trio of people in the center of the street. Mouse takes my arm again and tugs me closer to the buildings as we get closer. "Judgment." One of the winners of the last Trials. One of my mother's allies, who turned on her without hesitation.

I keep walking through sheer habit, but I stare hard at the man in the center of the group. He's pale with short, light brown hair and a body gone soft from easy living. After winning, he carved out a slice of territory

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in the Diamond District just east of our home in the Dregs. As a result, he's the member of the Cinque I've brushed up against most. Not him, specifically, but the bands of war dogs he sends to terrorize the Dregs whenever he's feeling bored. This man puts people in cages, tortures them on a whim, and is easily the scariest member of the Cinque—and that's including Death. He could have used his power to better the city, and instead he's a petty dictator who harms those less powerful. He fought and killed at my mother's side, but couldn't bestir himself to speak a single word in her defense.

I didn't expect him to look so *normal*.

Judgment turns toward us, his empty gaze flitting across the people in the crowd around me. Is he using the powers granted to him by the god he championed in the last Trials, identifying the guilt each person carries? It's a horrible, invasive magic. When I was younger and more foolish, I told Mouse I wouldn't have to worry about Judgment because I had nothing to feel guilty for, and if that was his only magic, then I would just cut him down. Mouse laughed in my face and said I wouldn't get the chance—that if Judgment got ahold of me, I'd kneel at his feet and offer my throat just to escape the guilt he wielded over me.

I glance at Mouse, wondering if he's thinking back to that conversation, too. He's staring too hard at the man; he's going to draw attention if we're not careful. This time, it's my turn to take his arm and pull him away. The arena is visible now, a massive building stretching across several blocks and roughly three stories tall. "We're early enough, we should be able to get a good spot." I hope. I don't relish having to fight my way through hundreds of people to step onto the dais and become the Moon's champion. It's an impossible ask. Most people are here today to witness the Culling, not participate, but there's no reason to decrease my chances of making it to the dais alive. Fear licks at me, propelling me to move faster.

We walk through the arching doorway and into the arena proper. It's even bigger than I expected, the oval in the middle cut down into the earth to make the tiers circling it seem even higher. Despite there

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being at least a strike until the Culling begins, the benches carved into the tiers are already half full.

"This way." Mouse takes the lead, and there's nothing to do but follow him as he carves a path down toward the oval of sand in the center.

As much as I want to be cool and collected, this entire situation is overwhelming. On second glance, the higher tiers are clearly divided by guilds and Minor Court houses. There is the white of the Diamond Guild directly across from us, then the green of the Peridot Guild, the yellow of the Citrine Guild, the pink-red of the Ruby Guild, and the red-black of the Garnet Guild. Then there are the Minor Court citizens. Most of them won't actually be part of the courts themselves, but they wear the colors of the districts they live in—teal and navy for Cups, white and crimson for Swords, purple and black for Wands, and green and brown for Pentacles.

The lower tiers are more of a mishmash, people wearing the same distinctive colors, but only gathered in small groups instead of whole sections. A good portion of these are prospective champions, just like me. How many of them are here for the Moon? I search for some indication, but it's too chaotic. There could be no one. There could be dozens. I won't know for sure until the Moon's name is called.

Even though there are seats nearly next to the sand, Mouse picks a spot about halfway back and motions for me to sit. I hesitate, measuring the distance between where we are and the dais set up in the middle of the oval. "By the time I reach the barrier, the fight for the Moon will be over." I can't let that happen. This can't all be for nothing. I shift from one foot to the other. "We should get closer."

"We don't need to be closer. You won't have to fight for the Moon." He's said it a thousand times, and I don't believe him now any more than I did the first time. To Mouse, being champion for the Moon is sacred, because it's the role my mother held when she won. When she died. I highly doubt the rest of the city feels the same way. The other prospective champions won't let something like the last Moon being executed for treason stop them from trying to claim power for themselves. There

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are only twenty-two champions each Trials, and there are thousands of people here, eyeing that dais and imagining what they could do if they became one of the winners in the Trials.

Becoming Cinque means gaining access to the Concilium, the ruling body of Caelria. It means having a vote in the policies put in place for the entire city. It means being able to suggest those policies in the first place. Yes, there are riches and luxury attached to the role, but those are less important than the power—literal in this case since the Cinque maintain the magic gifted to them by their respective gods.

"Watch." Mouse points to where Judgment and his pair of war dogs, both clothed in black and bristling with weapons, have entered the arena. People scatter out of his way as he walks directly down to the sand and takes up a position just outside of it. All the Cinque will be competing again in an attempt to maintain their positions. If they don't, they lose their magic to the next champion. Mouse has never heard of anyone in the history of the Trials making that decision.

More and more people file into the arena and fill the empty space. Mouse clears his throat. "There's the Star. She's immune to poison, and she soaks her lace gloves in it. She'll kill stealthily, and she relied heavily on her alliance in the last Trials to see her through." Her alliance that included my mother. Any loyalty she had clearly ended when the Trials did—she didn't speak up in my mother's defense, either.

I clench my jaw to keep from pointing out that he's drilled me on all the past champions more times than I can count. He's not repeating it because he thinks I don't know the information; he's doing it because he's worried. "She looks like a Cup," I say. It's true. I can't see many details at this distance, but the thin woman has short blond hair, pale skin, and is clothed in layers of sheer teal fabric that flow around her body almost like water.

"She's allied with them. They value the alliance and will try to make things easier for her when they host their party. Don't trust them."

I'm not going to trust *anyone*. Since there are five winners, alliances are the name of the game, but Mouse is vehemently against me attempting one. My mother did and, while it technically helped her and

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the other four win, when the Minor Court declared she had committed treason they turned their backs on her without hesitation.

"There's the Chariot." I don't have to have seen him before to identify him—he's a massive man who stands a head and shoulders taller than those around him. His bald head shines in the Sun overhead, and tattoos break up the pale skin on his exposed thighs. He has over a dozen people with him and he ambles through the crowd with long steps that eat up the distance. His magic is momentum—once he's in motion, he's all but unstoppable. The more he moves, the more powerful he becomes. Even once I have the Moon's moonbeams, my best bet to deal with the Chariot will be to set a trap where he can't move. I don't know how I'll manage *that*, but it's a problem for the future. In a perfect world, someone else would cut him down first, but I've never lived in a perfect world and I highly doubt my luck will change now.

Mouse goes tense beside me. "Death is here." He points, but it still takes me a moment to pick the man out of the crowd. Unlike the others, he has no entourage. He's a pale man with dark hair, lean to the point of being cadaverous, wearing simple black armor. "You mustn't let him touch you. A single scratch is all he needs to kill you." Mouse's voice goes hoarse. "That bastard murdered your mother in cold blood. The Minor Court gave him an order, and he followed it without question. There was no trial, no public explanation. One day she was here, and the next, he cut her fucking head off."

My throat goes tight. Mouse doesn't talk about my mother's death often. It hurts him. It hurts me, too, but the only memories *I* have of her are the faint impression of soft hugs and the smell of wintergreen. I still drink wintergreen tea when I want to feel close to this woman who is both a stranger and also the guiding light in my life. "He won't survive the Trials," I promise.

"Stay away from him, Kestrel." Mouse grips my wrist too tightly. "His magic is the least of his power. He has a way with words that twists the truth. You may think you're not susceptible—your mother thought the same thing. She was wrong, and you will be, too. You can't trust anything he says."

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"I'll stay away from him," I lie. Before I get my revenge, I *will* get answers about my mother's death.

Below, thirteen people file out onto the sand. The colors they wear mark them for what they are—the remaining members of the Concilium, comprised of the five guild leaders, and the kings and queens of the four Minor Courts. One of the Wands steps forward and raises their hands, commanding silence from the arena.

The Culling is about to begin.

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While it is understood that the Culling is a necessary evil—and a necessary entertainment for the city—it perfectly demonstrates how barbaric the old gods are. No matter Their domain, They crave blood and violence in Their honor.

—EXCERPT FROM *THE MAJOR ARCANA: A TREATISE ON THE HISTORY OF THE OLD GODS*

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CHAPTER THREE

"WE HAVE COME to this place on this day to honor the old gods by conducting the Tarot Trials to determine the members of the next Cinque." The Wand's voice is low and pleasing, and yet seems to reach every corner of the arena. I'm not sure how they're doing it, but ultimately it doesn't matter. They continue, turning slowly to encompass the entire crowd. "The members of the Concilium are present in order to oversee the Culling. We will announce each god, one by one. Once the god is named, you may make your attempt to reach the dais. The first person to step up will become the next champion of that god." A pregnant pause, in which no one in the arena seems to breathe. "We will begin, as always, with the Fool."

The master of the Ruby Guild steps forward. Of the five guilds in Caelria, Ruby is the only one that has people working in the Dregs. If you participate in sex work in Caelria, you're required to be a member of the Ruby Guild. Violating that law is unwise in a number of ways, but I don't see why anyone would bother. Rubies take care of their own, even those who join from the Dregs. The guild provides safe living quarters, private bathhouses, and a number of other perks in exchange for the percentage they take out of each Ruby's income.

I've never seen the guild master before, but I know them by reputation—Guild Master Fox. Their name suggests they were once one of us, and I've always found the mystery of how someone from the Dregs rose to be a guild master at a relatively young age fascinating. They have

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warm, light brown skin, short, dark red hair, and flaunt their generously curved body in a flowing deep-pink dress that looks impossible to walk in. They manage all the same, moving gracefully to stand next to the Wand. They smile at the audience, and a number of people around me give little sighs in response. Even at this distance, I can see that they're beautiful, but of course they are; they're a Ruby.

"If you would like to be a champion for the Fool . . ." They smile. "Now is the time, lovelies. Step forward and prove your worthiness!"

Even though I'm expecting it, the surge forward makes my stomach twist. It's chaos. Some people attempt to sprint directly across the sand to the dais, but they only get a few steps before those behind them cut them down. Then it's just a brawl. The scent of death—blood and shit and other things best not mentioned—reaches me and it takes everything I have to breathe through it and keep still.

There's no telling how long it lasts. Time has a way of stretching oddly in a fight, even when you're not participating. Screams blend with the cheers of the crowd. They're enjoying this, and why not? Death and entertainment are why this arena was built. I swallow hard and try to keep my expression locked down.

The one who emerges in a victorious spray of blood is a tall man with pale skin, red hair, and a mace easily as long as my arm. He laughs as he smashes it against the head of the last person standing, not missing a step in his path toward the Concilium and dais. As he approaches Guild Master Fox, he says something that makes them shake their head, and then he's upon the dais. A gong rings from somewhere, announcing the first champion, the Fool.

The King of Cups is a short, slight man with warm, medium-brown skin, gray hair, and a beard. He's wearing the distinctive Cups clothing, layers upon layers of navy and teal fabric with little accents of copper that shine in the light of the Sun. He leans heavily on a cane as he walks across the sand to announce the Magician.

Just like with the Fool, it's a complete bloodbath. Bodies litter the sand now, their blood painting crimson patterns and pools around them.

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People fight and scream and die, all while the crowd roars in approval. I expect it to go on and on, but the gong rings again, loud enough to rattle my bones and freeze the fights.

The king laughs, the sound seeming larger than his slight body should be able to create. "You'll have to be faster than that if you want to become a champion." He motions a shaking hand to where a second person now stands on the dais. "We have our Magician."

So. Stealth *is* an option. I study the Magician as prospective champions still among the living file back off the sand. The new champion is short—standing next to the towering Fool, they appear even shorter—with cool, medium-brown skin, coiled black, shoulder-length hair, and a petite body.

Guild Master Diem of the Citrine Guild announces the High Priestess. This time, I identify the champion before they reach the dais, a short woman with dark brown skin, her black hair in twists. She cuts through her opponents with an ease that makes my skin prickle. When the last one falls, she flicks the blood off her knives and steps forward to take her spot as champion of the High Priestess.

And so it goes. The guild masters alternate with the kings and queens calling out the gods in sequence and watching with delight as the wave of death crashes at their feet. Empress, Emperor, Hierophant, Lovers. Each fights their way to the dais and claims their position.

"The Chariot is next." Mouse practically vibrates in his seat next to me. Is he seeing this Culling or the one twenty-two years ago, where he sat by my mother's side and watched as champion after champion was named? Her strategy at the time had been to wait until one of the later gods was called, hoping that the majority of the prospective champions were either already dead or too tired to put up a good fight. The Moon is nineteenth out of twenty-two, so it wasn't a bad strategy. I hope it holds true for me today.

The Queen of Swords steps forward, a tall and broad woman with deep, dark brown skin and tight curls going gray. She wears the distinctive Swords style of ornate armor crafted around her shoulders almost like waves cresting, and seems like she could fight her way to becoming a cham-

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pion with ease. She looks around the arena, commanding silence without lifting her hands. In the new quiet, she simply says, "Chariot."

I had wondered if people would be willing to fight past champions. Apparently the answer is yes, though fewer people leap forward than for the previous gods. The Chariot bellows out a laugh, easily leaps the short wall around the sand, and starts running. Even knowing how his magic works, I'm not prepared for how he seems to grow with each step, easily topping seven feet by the time he's in a full sprint.

The other hopefuls don't stand a chance. It's clear the Chariot has gained speed and could make it to the dais before the others easily. He doesn't. Instead, he runs loops around the dais, trampling each of his competitors with the sound of crunching bones I swear I can hear over the shrieks and hoots of the crowd around me. Some of the people, seeing the writing on the wall, attempt to retreat. He runs them down, laughing all the while. *Enjoying* the slaughter.

"Do you understand better now?" Mouse says in my ear. "The Cinque have had twenty-two years to become comfortable with their gods' gifts. You must avoid fighting them at all costs."

No wonder my mother brought the Chariot into her alliance. Having him on her side had been instrumental in winning the Trials last time. Beating him is going to be . . . I don't even know if it's possible. My concept of a trap was a thin one, especially after seeing the Wands District. There are fewer places to hide and flee than I'm used to, and even if the roads were mud instead of flagstone, the idea of digging a pit to contain him is an impossible one. He's going to be a problem.

The champions for Strength and the Hermit slaughter their way to the dais with efficiency. The Wheel of Fortune takes a note from the Magician and sneaks their way onto the dais. The ornate armor covering their narrow shoulders makes me raise my eyebrows. It's all silver, which indicates they're a high-ranking Sword, one of the nobles. What are they doing *here*? They also have a cane, likely related to the brace I can see peeking from beneath the hem on their left leg.

Despite the Trials specifically being held during the year of the Wheel of Fortune, Mouse couldn't find records of the last time one of

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Their champions ascended to the Cinque. It seems a strange choice for someone who clearly has every privilege afforded to the Minor Court.

Justice and the Hanged Man slip past the other contenders. Then it's Death's turn. I hold my breath as the King of Wands—a short, older woman with beige skin and long, straight gray hair pulled back tightly from her face—announces Death.

There's a rustling among the crowd and a few people look like they might jump the half wall and charge the dais, but everyone falls still as Death walks calmly forward from his seat. He doesn't look at the crowd, doesn't seem to be worried about the possibility of an attack. And why would he? Everyone knows what he's capable of. Still, I thought at least *someone* would attempt to take his position as Death's champion.

Even the crowd is near silent as he steps over bodies on his way across the bloody sand. He nods to the King of Wands, cold and polite, and steps onto the dais to stand next to the Hanged Man.

It takes several beats for the gong to sound, as if whoever's responsible for it is as taken aback as the rest of us. I thought the Chariot would be the scariest foe I'd face, but this is so much worse. I can *feel* the fear of those around me and, no matter how I try to resist, I share that emotion. He's terrifying . . . and he holds the answers I've been seeking my entire life. I dig my nails into my palms in an attempt to center myself. Death was always going to be a problem. I knew that. It changes nothing.

Temperance takes the stealthy route. I don't even see them until they appear on the dais. The Devil seems to be from the Wands District, dressed in purple and black, and he uses a massive sword to slice his way to victory. The Tower does the same, though his clothing is strange enough that I have a moment of wondering where he's from because I don't recognize the style of armor, one shoulder oversized in a way that looks designed to protect his neck. Why only one?

The Star is next, announced by the King of Pentacles, a frail-looking person with gray hair and pale skin. Unlike with Death, several people appear to take her delicate stature as evidence of a lack of danger. They learn quickly how wrong they are. She moves through them, easily

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shifting away from attacks, and brushes her gloved hands over their bare skin. One by one, they go down, bleeding from their mouths and eyes and ears. I shudder. A horrible way to die. She steps daintily onto the dais and curtsies. The crowd loves it.

"It's time, Kestrel." Mouse squeezes my hand. "Make me proud. Win. I'll be waiting on the other side."

Guild Master Fortuo of the Peridot Guild steps forward. He's a grizzled old bastard with a reputation for being as fair as he is difficult. He's tall and built like a barrel—all chest and a gut I wouldn't want to break my fist against—with light brown skin and a rapidly receding hairline of gray curls. He clears his throat and barks out, "The Moon."

I surge to my feet, ready to sprint down the stairway and vault over the half wall to beat the other prospective champions to the dais. I'll kill if I have to, but clearly stealth and speed work just as well as anything else, so that's my preferred choice if I have a choice at all. It takes three steps before I register the stillness of the arena.

None of the other prospective champions move. They don't even shift the way they did when Death was called.

"Cursed," a man next to me mutters as I take the steps down toward the sand.

"Bad luck for sure," another says.

"Liar."

"Betrayer."

"Dishonorable."

"Definitely cursed."

One by one, the murmurs of individuals become something so much larger. Not a roar for violence the way I've gotten used to through the process of the Culling. This is stranger, quieter, and yet no less insistent. A buzz that climbs behind my skin and makes me want to scream.

The sensation gets worse when people realize someone *is* descending to become the Moon's champion. Heads turn in my direction as the whispers reach a crescendo that makes me want to turn and flee. It feels like every eye in this place is pinned to me; it's every thief's nightmare to be so perceived without a single place to hide. I make myself continue,

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head held high, and use one hand to leap over the half wall and into the oval.

The Sun is no longer directly overhead, but it still feels too damned bright out on the sand. The scent of death is so much worse now that I'm here; the blood almost immediately soaks through my thin boots. I step around and over body after body. Looking at their pained expressions won't do anything but give me nightmares, but somehow staring down the champions and the Concilium is worse. Some of the kings and queens actually seem shocked. Most of the champions are mildly curious, but the three members of the Cinque standing on the dais watch me far more closely than I like. Death, in particular, has a strange look on his face, his already pale skin going ghostlike.

I nod at Guild Master Fortuo, and he gets over his shock to give me what appears to be a genuine smile, his weathered face creasing and eyes practically disappearing. "Well, girl, get up there." The words are brusque, but not unkind.

I climb onto the dais and claim my destiny.

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