

## CHAPTER #1 — The Night the Moon Chose Her

On the night Nya turned sixteen, the moon never showed its face above the roofs of the South Quarter.

The people there said that was nothing new. The moon almost never reached them. Its light was swallowed by the smoke of cookfires and the bruised haze that hung over the river, by lantern-glow and coal dust, by the tall, polished spires of the upper city that hoarded the clean sky like a secret.

But Nya noticed.

She noticed because the air felt wrong.

The heat clung too tightly to the crooked alleys, refusing to move. The usual chorus of the South Quarter—arguing vendors, clattering pots, someone cursing because the bread had burned again—had dimmed to a muted murmur. Even the stray dogs, those skinny, stubborn survivors, curled beneath broken carts and did not bark.

From the rooftop of the tenement, Nya stood barefoot on uneven stone and scanned the horizon, waiting for silver to crest above the jagged skyline.

It didn't.

All she saw was the jaundiced glow of the sun-temples in the distance, their golden domes still burning long after sunset, as if midnight itself dared not touch them. Their light bled into the sky like a wound.

“Don’t stare at them so hard,” a voice rasped behind her. “They’ll think you’re praying.”

Nya glanced back.

Old Mara was hunched in the doorway that led down into the building, her shawl wrapped around her narrow shoulders despite the heat. Her gray hair was braided tight against her skull, her dark skin lined by a lifetime of sun and worry. She held a clay cup in one hand and a half-peeled potato in the other, as if she’d simply walked up here in the middle of dinner.

“I’m not praying,” Nya said.

“Good.” Mara shuffled onto the roof, joints protesting. “We’ve enough trouble without the Sun Church thinking they’ve converted the South Quarter.”

Nya leaned against the low wall that edged the roof, elbows on warm stone. From here she could see the maze of the district: clotheslines stretched like banners between leaning buildings, flickering lamps in cracked windows, a tangle of alleys where children played and adults

disappeared. Beyond that, separated by a chasm of dark river and brighter coin, the upper city rose in clean lines and polished stone.

At its center, higher than anything else, the main spire of Celestial Horizon pierced the sky like a spear of gold.

She hated that she knew its name.

"They've lit the high fires again," Mara muttered, squinting toward it. "New sermon, perhaps. Or new decree. Never anything good."

Nya shrugged one shoulder, watching the far-off gleam. The Church of Celestial Horizon loved its spectacle. They said their fires were lit in honor of the First Conqueror, the Moon Who Took the Sky. They said once she had ruled all of Edrithae, and that one day, when the last star fell, her chosen would rule again.

They said a lot of things.

Most of them made Nya's teeth grind.

"Shouldn't you be below?" Mara asked after a moment. "They'll be wanting to shout at you and feed you terrible stew. It's not every day a girl in this building turns sixteen."

Nya huffed a quiet laugh. "They already shouted. And the stew was only half terrible."

"Ha." Mara's eyes softened. "And the gifts?"

Nya reached into the pocket of her patched trousers and pulled out a thin length of braided cord, dyed a deep, smoky blue.

"From Tallo," she said.

Mara took it, turning it in her fingers. "He does good work."

"It's the same cord he uses for binding fish crates," Nya said dryly. "He just washed this one first."

"That's love, for you." Mara handed it back. "Wear it. There's worse things than being tied to the South Quarter."

Nya wound the cord twice around her wrist, tying a knot with deft fingers. The dark braid sat snug against her skin.

It looked like a promise. Or a shackle. She wasn't sure which.

"You feel it?" she asked quietly, staring up at the starless haze.

Mara didn't pretend not to understand. Her gaze followed Nya's.

"The air?" she said. "Yes. It's been wrong all day. Like the world's taking a breath and holding it."

Nya swallowed.

She had felt it since morning. A strange pressure beneath her ribs, like a storm gathering where no one could see. All day her skin had buzzed beneath the surface, the hairs on her arms lifting whenever she passed under a shadow. Even the river had looked strange when she went down to fill the water pails—its surface too still, its reflection too clear.

As if something above was waiting.

As if something below was listening.

"Maybe it's just the heat," Nya said.

"Maybe," Mara replied. "And maybe the sun-temples will decide to share their bread with us tomorrow."

Nya's mouth twisted. "Don't say things like that. Makes you sound like one of their preachers."

"Bite your tongue, girl. I'd rather fling myself into the latrine pit than stand on a Sun Church dais." Mara shuddered theatrically, then sobered. "Still. Nights like this mean change. And change never comes cheap to people like us."

People like us.

The ones the upper city looked down at when they bothered to look at all. The ones whose names never reached the gilded registers. The ones who saw the Church of Celestial Horizon's banners and sermons and holy parades only when they needed new labor, new bodies, new offerings.

Nya had grown up on those streets. Learned to count by weighing coins in her palm, learned to run by avoiding guards and collectors. Learned to listen from the shadows just long enough to understand one thing very clearly:

No god had ever descended to save the South Quarter.

"So," Mara said, nudging her with a bony elbow. "What did you wish for?"

"When?"

"When they sang that awful song. You only pretended to blow out the candle, you know. Children noticed."

Nya grimaced. "I didn't wish for anything."

Mara's eyes narrowed. "Liar."

"I'm sixteen," Nya said. "Old enough to know wishes don't change anything."

Mara's smile was tired and fond. "Then you're old enough to make the right kind of wish."

Nya glanced at her. "And what kind is that?"

"The kind you bleed for," Mara said simply. "The kind you get up and chase yourself."

Nya looked back at the invisible moon.

She didn't say it aloud. That would make it real.

But somewhere beneath the layers of stubbornness and sarcasm and the dull ache of hunger she almost never mentioned, a single thought coiled itself around her ribs and held tight:

I want more.

More than these cramped rooms and thin soups. More than watching priests parade through the South Quarter only to leave it unchanged. More than hearing stories about a world she would never touch.

More sky.

More choice.

More than surviving.

Her hand drifted unconsciously to the left side of her chest, where her heartbeat felt too loud.

Mara saw the gesture and went still.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I don't know." Nya frowned. "Feels like... like when you stand too close to a lightning rod during a storm."

Mara's face lost color. "Come down from the roof."

"It's just—"

"Now, Nya."

The sharpness in her tone made Nya obey without argument. She followed Mara through the crooked doorway, down the narrow stairwell that spiraled into the tenement. The air grew thicker as they descended, filled with the smells of cooking and damp stone and bodies packed too tightly together.

On the second landing, Old Harun nodded to them, his arms full of firewood. On the third, a cluster of children sat cross-legged, drawing chalk moons on the floor and arguing in whispers about whether they'd be punished if someone from the Sun Church saw. On the fourth, the walls sweated moisture, and a spider as big as Nya's hand watched them from a corner.

Mara's steps were quick despite her age. Nya had to lengthen her stride to keep up.

By the time they reached their floor, the strange pressure in Nya's chest had grown worse. It crawled down her arms, into her fingertips, a restless, buzzing warmth. Her skin felt too tight, as if it barely contained something that wanted out.

In the dimness of the corridor, people had left their doors cracked to let in the thin breeze. Voices drifted from inside—murmured conversations, the clatter of pots, a lullaby in a language older than the city itself.

Nya's door was at the very end.

Mara pushed it open and gestured her in. The room beyond was small but familiar—two pallets rolled up along one wall, a low table in the center, a chipped basin near the door. A single window looked out over the alley, where a flapping line of shirts made the view seem like a forest of cloth.

"Sit," Mara said.

Nya sat on the edge of the table, her hands pressed to her thighs to stop their trembling. She hated that they were trembling. Hated that she couldn't explain why.

Mara rummaged in a small chest by the wall, muttering to herself. She emerged with a stub of white chalk and a strip of faded cloth.

"Give me your hand," she said.

Nya obeyed. Mara pressed her fingers to the inside of Nya's wrist, right where the braided cord rested.

The buzzing under Nya's skin sharpened at the touch.

"It's like your pulse is... singing," Mara whispered.

"That doesn't make me feel better," Nya said tightly.

"Wasn't trying to." Mara released her and straightened. "Take off your shirt."

Nya blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Don't argue." Mara's voice softened. "Please. Humor an old woman who's seen too many omens to ignore one."

With a reluctant exhale, Nya tugged her loose, threadbare shirt over her head. The air of the room felt cool against her skin. Goosebumps prickled along her arms.

Mara's sharp eyes scanned her collarbones, shoulders, ribs.

"Turn," she said.

Nya turned so her back was to her. The strange pressure had climbed to her throat now, a tide rising too fast.

"What are you looking for?" Nya asked.

"Signs," Mara murmured. "Warnings. The kind that show up on the skin when the world decides you're important."

"I'm not important," Nya said.

Mara snorted quietly. "Says every fool just before they become a story."

Nya rolled her eyes, even as unease twisted deeper in her gut. She opened her mouth to argue—

—and then the pain hit.

It was small at first. A pinprick of heat on the right side of her ribs, just beneath the curve of her breast. A sting, like a coal pressed briefly to flesh.

Nya sucked in a breath.

"What?" Mara demanded.

"I—" Nya's voice broke. "It burns."

The heat flared.

It spread in a thin, curved line across her skin, searing and bright. Her vision blurred at the edges. The room tilted. It felt as if some invisible brand were being pressed into her flesh not from the outside, but from within, burning its way out.

Mara's breath hissed. "Solara above."

The name jolted Nya like a slap. Solara. The old star. The forbidden word. The one the Sun Church claimed, twisted, locked behind scriptures only the high priests could read.

The buzzing in her blood surged.

The world narrowed.

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Later, when she tried to describe it, Nya would fail.

Words were too small for what it felt like.

But in that moment, there was nothing in the world except the burn, and the way it bloomed into something else entirely.

Light.

*It's inside me*, I thought—no, I felt. *Something is inside me*.

The pain wasn't just pain anymore. It was... recognition. Like a hand pressed to a window, finding another palm on the other side. Like a voice in a crowd suddenly calling your name.

Heat shot along my ribs, sharp as a crescent blade. I gasped, but the air that filled my lungs wasn't air.

It was cold. Clean. Vast.

As if someone had thrown open a door in the middle of my body and let the night sky rush in.

My heart hammered, too loud. Too fast. I could hear it in my ears, feel it in my fingertips, see it pulsing behind my eyes in flashes of silver and blue.

This is wrong, I tried to think.

But another part of me—deep beneath fear and anger and the South Quarter's hard-earned cynicism—whispered:

No.

This is you.

I didn't see the mark as it formed, but I felt every curl of its shape as if a crescent moon were being carved into me with light.

Mara's hands hovered near my skin, not quite touching, as if afraid she'd be burned.

"Nya," she breathed. Her voice trembled. "Listen to me. Stay with me."

I clung to her words like a rope.

The burning reached its peak.

For one terrible heartbeat, I was sure my ribs would split open and whatever was clawing its way out would tear me apart.

Then—

It stopped.

Just... stopped.

The heat collapsed into a single point on my skin, then sank, settling into me like a glowing coal buried in ash. I sagged forward, sweat slick on my shoulders, my breath shuddering.

Silence pressed in around us. The distant sounds of the building—laughter, a baby crying, a pan clattering—felt suddenly far away, as if they belonged to someone else's life.

"Turn," Mara whispered.

My limbs felt like water, but I obeyed. I faced her, clutching my shirt in numb fingers.

Her gaze locked on my ribs.

I looked down.

There, just beneath my right breast, the skin was no longer bare.

A mark curved across it—thin and precise and impossibly clean. A crescent moon, open toward my heart, its inner edge sharp as a blade, its outer edge faintly luminous.

My mouth went dry.

"That's not..." I swallowed. "That's not possible."

Mara's face had gone ashen. "Of course it's not," she whispered. "But here it is."

The crescent shimmered once, almost imperceptibly, then stilled. It sat on my skin as if it had always been there and only now decided to show itself.

A symbol.

A claim.

An answer to a wish I had never dared to make aloud.

"What does it mean?" I asked.

Mara tore her eyes away from the mark and met mine. For the first time since I'd known her, there was no humor in her gaze at all.

"It means," she said slowly, "that the stories weren't as dead as we thought."

A chill raced up my spine, chasing away the last of the heat.

In the alley beyond our window, a bell began to ring.

Not the dull clang of the South Quarter's hour-markers. Not the jingling chimes of street vendors.

This was clear. Piercing. Carried on the wind from somewhere far above us—the upper city, the sun-temples, the tall spires of Celestial Horizon.

A second bell answered it.

Then a third.

Mara's hands shook.

"They know," she whispered.

"Who?" My voice came out too thin.

"The ones who watch the sky," she said. "The ones who twisted the old star into a weapon and called it faith."

She closed her fingers around my wrist, grip like iron.

"Listen very carefully, Nya," she said. "From this moment on, you cannot let them see you. You cannot let them take you. Whatever that mark is, whatever it means, the Sun Church will claim it or kill it."

The bells kept ringing, echoing through the city like a warning or a promise.

Above us, where the moon should have been, the sky remained dark.

But for the first time in sixteen years, I felt certain of one thing:

The world had just seen me.

And somewhere, very far away—in a temple I had never entered, under a roof I had never walked beneath—someone was looking up at the same empty sky, feeling the same burn on their skin.

They just didn't know my name yet.

## CHAPTER #2 — The Sun Without Shadow

Nif woke before the dawn bells.

She always did.

Her cot was narrow, its straw filling flattened by years of silent mornings, but she slept on its hard surface like it was chosen for her—because it was. Everything in the inner walls of Celestial Horizon was chosen for her: the hour she rose, the steps she walked, the prayers she recited, the books she was allowed to touch... and the ones she never would.

She opened her eyes in darkness.

The chamber was quiet, lit only by the faint glow of the sanctum lamps through the arched window. Rows of cots stretched along the stone hall, perfect in their symmetry, each filled by a girl around her age—sixteen—or very close to it. Some breathed deeply, curled beneath their thin blankets. Others lay rigid, as if even sleep was an exercise in discipline.

Nif slid upright without a sound, the practiced motion of someone who had learned long ago that noise was weakness. She stood, bare feet on cold stone, and bowed her head out of instinct—not prayer. Habit.

Her hand moved to her chest.

A heartbeat.

Too loud.

A flutter that felt like... thunder? No. Like a bell struck inside her body.

She frowned.

Something was wrong.

Her skin felt tight beneath her thin linen shift, as if a rope had been wrapped around her ribs in the night. A wave of heat pulsed through her, leaving her breath short. She pressed her palm to the fabric, fingers trembling.

It wasn't illness.

It was illumination.

She didn't know why she knew that word, but it came to her with sharp clarity.

The low chime of the first dawn bell cut through the silence.

She winced.

Not because it was loud—it wasn't—but because her pulse answered it, like a string plucked in perfect echo.

A second bell followed.

Then a third.

Each strike traveled through her veins like liquid fire.

She staggered forward, catching herself on the cot frame. The girl beside her stirred, but didn't wake.

Nif swallowed a gasp and straightened. Her body trembled—small, controlled tremors she forced into stillness. She raised her chin and walked toward the door like nothing was wrong.

Because something was always wrong, and showing it was never allowed.

The training hall beyond the sleeping quarters was washed in pale gold as dawn filtered through high windows. Murals covered the curved walls: great suns encircled by rays of flame, Ileana crowned in light, celestial soldiers prostrating before her. Their eyes were painted as burning gold, their armor gleaming.

Nif stared at the central mural.

Ileana stood atop the world, hands raised, the moon broken beneath her feet like a fallen enemy. A star hovered behind her—a perfect, unblemished sun.

The caption carved beneath it read:

### **THE CONQUEROR'S ASCENT**

Nif had memorized the script at age seven.

She had never believed it.

Not fully.

Not the way they wanted.

None of the girls spoke as they lined up for morning liturgy. The clergy moved among them in heavy robes, face-veils of shimmering gold thread obscuring all but their eyes. One of them—High Precept Sael—stepped forward, raising a staff adorned with a sun-symbol whose rays curved inward like blades.

"Children of the Horizon," Sael intoned, voice echoing through the hall, "on this holy morning we welcome the rise of our eternal truth."

The girls bowed their heads as one.

All except Nif.

She bowed a moment later, as if remembering.

Something under her skin flickered again. A pulse of heat, softer now, but insistent. She gritted her teeth and forced her expression still.

Sael walked the line, passing each girl, tapping the staff against the floor in measured rhythm. Each ring of the staff made Nif's heart stutter, then surge.

When Sael reached her, the staff paused.

Nif felt the High Precept's gaze through the veil—sharp as a blade under silk.

"You are pale," Sael murmured.

"I did not sleep well," Nif replied. Her voice was steady. She'd trained it to be.

"An undisciplined mind dreams loudly," Sael said. "Do not let yours wander where the light cannot follow."

"Yes, Precept."

Sael moved on.

Nif exhaled slowly through her nose, not daring to touch her chest again. Her skin felt like static—full of charge, ready to spark. She stood perfectly still until the staff's rhythm faded.

The liturgy continued—chants of radiant ascent, recitations of doctrine, vows of obedience to the light above all else. Nif's lips moved in the shape of words she had spoken her entire life, but her mind was elsewhere.

On the heat.

On the bell inside her bones.

On the mural of a woman she had never met, whose story felt like a lie dressed in gold.

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After liturgy came training.

The girls filed into the inner courtyard, where polished stone met open sky. The dawn light finally reached them here, catching on spearpoints and the edges of training blades. Instructors barked orders. Lines formed. Movements mirrored.

Nif took her place in the second rank.

Sweat, breath, stone.

Repetition.

Her body remembered the motions even when her mind drifted. Sun stance. Crescent guard. Low spin. Rising cut. Footwork like a dance without joy.

As her blade sliced the air in a precise arc, heat surged again beneath her ribs—sharp enough to steal her breath.

Nif stumbled.

Only slightly. Only a fraction of space.

But here, fractions mattered.

Instructor Laaro's voice cracked like a whip: "Nif."

She straightened. "Yes, Instructor."

"Again," he said. His eyes were dark, unreadable.

She repeated the sequence. Perfect. Controlled.

The heat persisted.

It pulsed with every heartbeat.

She forced herself to ignore it.

Until—

A searing flash tore across her left side, like a brand pressed to flesh.

Nif gasped.

Her blade dropped from her fingers, clattering to the stone.

The courtyard froze.

Every girl turned.

Laaro strode toward her, face thunderous. "What is wrong with you?"

"I—" The word stuck.

The burn intensified. It scalded beneath the fabric of her shift, a crescent line of fire. Her vision blurred. Knees buckled.

She fell to one side.

Gasps rippled through the courtyard like wind through leaves.

Laaro knelt, grabbing her shoulders. "Nif. Look at me."

"I don't—" Nif choked, breath ragged. "Something is—"

Light burst beneath her skin.

It wasn't bright to the eye. It was **felt**. A shockwave, a shudder through the air. The girls nearest her flinched, hands flying to their chests as if their own hearts had misfired.

Laaro froze.

His eyes dropped to Nif's ribs.

The linen shift had darkened with sweat, clinging to her skin—and there, beneath it, a pale glow formed a **curve**.

A shape.

A **crescent**.

Perfect. Clean.

As if a moon had cut itself into her flesh.

Silence swallowed the courtyard.

Nif stared down at her side, breath caught somewhere between her lungs and her throat.

"That symbol—" one of the girls whispered.

Another answered, voice trembling: "It's forbidden."

Laaro rose slowly, backing away as if from a fire.

His voice was a whisper meant to be a shout:

"Summon the High Precepts."

The courtyard erupted into motion—footsteps pounding, cries of alarm, instructors shouting orders.

Nif didn't hear any of it clearly. The noise faded behind a ringing in her ears.

She pressed her hand to her ribs, fingers shaking as they met the mark through the fabric. The heat there wasn't painful anymore—just **present**, like a second heartbeat.

The bells from earlier still echoed in her mind, though no bells rang now.

She looked down.

The symbol pulsed once.

She knew it wasn't a dream.

Not a hallucination.

Not some punishment for doubt.

It was real.

It was on her.

It **chose** her.

A memory rose—one she didn't recognize, but felt like it belonged to her.

**Moonlight on water.**

**A hand reaching through darkness.**

**A voice whispering a name that wasn't hers yet.**

She jerked back to the present as fabric ripped. Someone yanked her shift aside, exposing the mark. Clergy crowded the courtyard's edges, faces hidden behind gold veils, eyes fixed on her like she was an omen—or a weapon.

One of them hissed, "The false star."

Another: "A sign of betrayal."

A third, voice trembling: "A daughter of the moon."

Nif's pulse thundered.

Daughter.

Moon.

She didn't understand.

She only knew she wasn't safe.

Hands reached for her.

Reflex moved faster than thought.

Nif surged to her feet, snatching her fallen blade, and **ran**.

Gasps trailed her like shadows. She sprinted across the courtyard, weaving between startled girls, ignoring the cries behind her. Her feet hit stone, then steps, then corridor.

The mark burned against her ribs with every breath.

She didn't know where she was going.

Only **away**.

Away from hands that would cage her.

Away from a story written in lies.

Away from a church that painted heroes into conquerors and called obedience salvation.

Her lungs burned.

Her vision blurred.

She burst into the hall of murals.

Ileana stared down at her from painted stone—the woman crowned in false light, the moon broken beneath her heel.

A lie.

Nif stopped.

Not because she meant to.

Because her legs did.

She stared up at the mural, chest heaving.

Pain, heat, fear.

And something else:

**Recognition.**

A voice, quiet, from somewhere she couldn't place:

*You don't know me.*

Nif closed her eyes.

Another bell struck inside her ribs.

*But I know you.*

This time, she ran not out of panic—but out of certainty.

Her life in the sun's cage had ended.

And somewhere beyond these walls, under the same sky, someone else had just felt the same burn.

She didn't know her name.

Not yet.

But she ran toward it anyway.

## CHAPTER #3 — The Shape of a Sister

Nya barely slept.

When she closed her eyes, she expected the burn to return—expected her ribs to split open, expected the mark to vanish like a cruel joke or grow brighter until it consumed her. But the room stayed dark, the tenement stayed loud, and the crescent moon on her skin stayed perfectly still, like a ghost that had decided to live in her body.

Every time she drifted toward sleep, the bells echoed again—not outside, but **inside** her.

Three strikes.

A pause like held breath.

Then silence.

She woke with sweat cooling on her skin and Mara's old blanket tangled around her legs.

"Nya," Mara whispered by the door. "Get up."

It was still night—or morning not yet committed to the sky. The window showed only a bruise-blue horizon, streaked with the last of the darkness.

Nya sat up, clutching the blanket around her shoulders. The mark pulsed once, faint as a heartbeat.

Mara handed her a shirt—one of her own old ones, worn soft by time. It was looser, hanging low enough to cover the crescent.

“We move now,” Mara said.

“Where?” Nya rasped.

“Away from the city walls.”

Nya blinked. “You want to run before the sun’s up?”

“Yes,” Mara said. “Before anyone knows what they’re looking for.”

Nya stared at her. “You think they’ll come here?”

Mara didn’t answer with words.

She pointed to the window.

Nya followed her gaze.

Down the alley, near the end of the lane, the shadows flickered with the glow of torches. Not the usual oil lamps. Not the drunk wanderers arguing over cards.

These flames were **controlled**, steady.

And they moved **as one**.

Nya’s breath froze.

“Church,” she whispered.

The word tasted like iron.

Mara nodded. “They’ll search the South Quarter first. It’s where miracles hide themselves. They know that better than anyone.”

Nya stood, hands shaking as she pulled on shoes. Her mind raced—no plan, no direction, nothing but the sick realization that her world had changed while she slept.

“Take nothing heavy,” Mara said. “Food, water, the belt-knife. The cord on your wrist—keep it. Everything else slows us.”

Nya reached for the small satchel hung near the door. Inside: a skin of water, two pieces of hard bread, a wedge of cheese wrapped in cloth, and a blade worn dull by years of scraping fish crates open. She hesitated over a small carving—a wooden bird with wings outstretched.

She left it.

This wasn't a journey where sentimental weight could be carried.

When they stepped into the hallway, Nya's heart stuttered in her chest. Children were waking, rubbing eyes, confused by the torchlight outside. Adults whispered in doorways. Someone cried softly. Someone else prayed under their breath.

Every face Nya passed held the same fear.

Not fear of the church itself—but fear of **being noticed**.

Being noticed meant being taken.

Being taken meant never coming back.

Mara moved quickly through the corridor, guiding Nya toward the stairs. Before they reached them, a small hand grabbed Nya's sleeve.

Tallo.

His eyes were wide, his mouth trembling. "Where are you going?"

Nya knelt instinctively, gripping his shoulders. "It's just... I have to go away for a while."

"Did I do something?" His voice cracked. "I gave you the cord. It's supposed to protect you."

The knot around Nya's heart tightened. She lifted her wrist, showing him the braid still tied there.

"It worked," she whispered. "See? I'm still here."

He looked at it, then at her face, tears shining in his eyes. "Promise you'll come back."

Nya swallowed.

She couldn't promise that.

But she did something else.

She leaned forward and pressed her forehead to his—something she hadn't done since they were small, when such gestures belonged to nights around makeshift fires and stories told in hushed tones.

"I'll try," she said.

Mara's hand touched her shoulder. Time was running out.

Nya stood, releasing Tallow gently.

They reached the stairs.

Before descending, Mara whispered, "Keep your head down. Walk like you're supposed to be there."

They stepped onto the street.

The torchlight was closer now—three figures in white-gold cloaks moving in measured silence, robes trailing clean through mud. Their faces were veiled, showing only cold eyes that scanned the alley.

The Church of Celestial Horizon did not belong in the South Quarter.

Their presence felt like a violation of the rules the world pretended to follow.

Nya and Mara walked away from them, heads lowered, blending into a cluster of early workers heading toward the river. The church figures did not speak. They didn't need to.

They watched.

Mara whispered, lips barely moving: "When we reach the corner, we run."

Nya nodded.

Her pulse beat hard beneath the crescent.

The moon mark felt hot again, as if responding to the danger.

The group reached the corner. The crowd slowed there, pushing against a bottleneck of broken crates.

Mara's fingers tightened on Nya's wrist.

"Now," she breathed.

They broke from the crowd and sprinted into a narrow passage between two buildings. Mud splashed, boots slipped, shoulders slammed against stone. Nya bit back a grunt as her ribs jolted with pain—real pain, not the burning.

Behind them, a voice shouted, sharp and commanding: "Stop!"

Mara didn't slow.

"Faster," she hissed.

Nya ran. She didn't think about the blade in her satchel, the crescent on her skin, the torches behind her. She didn't think about the children she might never see again.

She ran because someone powerful wanted her stopped.

And she wasn't ready to give them her life.

They burst out of the alley onto a wider street lined with shuttered shops. A wagon rattled past, pulled by a tired mule. Mara grabbed the edge of it and swung herself up with surprising agility. Nya followed, climbing into a pile of hay just as the wagon rolled on.

The driver didn't notice.

Or pretended not to.

Either way, it saved them.

Hidden beneath dry stalks, Nya listened to the sound of boots pounding past, to angry voices arguing about direction, to a command spoken in a language she didn't recognize.

Only when the noise faded did she let herself breathe.

Mara pulled herself upright, brushing hay from her shawl. Her face was pale, her breath uneven.

"That mark," she whispered, not looking directly at Nya. "It's not just a symbol. It's a beacon."

Nya pressed a hand to her ribs, feeling the shape beneath the shirt. It throbbed faintly, like a pulse reaching for something unseen.

"A beacon for what?" she asked.

Mara looked away, gaze fixed on the road unwinding behind them.

"For someone like you," she said quietly. "Or someone the world has been waiting for."

Nya stared at her, throat tight.

Waiting.

The word felt too big.

Too heavy.

Too impossible.

She turned her face toward the passing street, watching the South Quarter recede.

The buildings leaned like tired old friends.  
Clotheslines fluttered like scraps of surrendered flags.  
Lanterns flickered above doorways waking to another day.

It wasn't beautiful.

It was home.

And she had just left it because of a mark she didn't ask for.

The wagon rolled on.

The city grew wider.

And somewhere beyond its walls—in temples of polished stone and sunlight—another girl was running for her life.

Nya didn't know her name.

Not yet.

But something inside her—something older than this city, older than the church, older than the lies painted on temple walls—whispered a truth that shook her to her core:

**She exists.**

And the world would not let either of them hide for long.

## CHAPTER #4 — Beneath a Painted Sky

Nif didn't remember the corridors she ran through.

Later she would try to map them in her mind—the turns, the arches, the polished tiles she slipped across—but everything had collapsed into motion and breath and the relentless pounding of her pulse against the crescent mark beneath her ribs.

Her lungs burned.

Her bare feet slapped stone.

Every doorway felt like a threat. Every shadow felt like a hand reaching out to pull her back into the doctrine she'd never chosen.

She passed the Hall of Relics, where sacred texts were kept under lock and prayer. She passed the stairwell that led to the sun balconies, where the favored students knelt at dawn to “receive light.” She passed the threshold of the High Sanctum itself—its entrance framed by carved flames and a gold sunburst set into the floor.

Her pace never slowed.

The world had shrunk to a single truth:

**If they catch me, they will define me.  
If I escape, I can decide what I am.**

She wasn’t ready to surrender her definition.

Not now.

Not ever.

A shout echoed behind her, sharp and commanding: “Seal the doors!”

Guards converged at the end of the hall—armor patterned with burning suns, faces hidden behind gilded masks. Their spears crossed, forming a gleaming barrier.

Nif slid to a halt, chest heaving.

Ahead: polished walls, no exit.

Behind: armed doctrine.

The heat under her skin pulsed harder, as if urging her: **move.**

She turned sideways—there, a narrow alcove behind a mural. She lunged, pressing her palms to the painted surface. The mural depicted Ileana ascending into an artificial sky, her hands wrapped around a star so bright it erased the moon.

The paint beneath Nif’s fingers was cool.

**Not truth, she thought. Just brushstrokes. Just someone’s version.**

She slid through the gap—thin enough she scraped her shoulder—and fell into darkness.

The space behind the mural was not meant for movement. It was a crawlway lined with old beams, dust thick enough to choke on. Somewhere above, the echoing steps of guards passed like thunder. The torchlight from the hall cut through cracks in the wall, slicing the darkness into narrow strips.

Nif crouched low, pressing her forehead to her knees.

Her heartbeat was a drum.

The crescent throbbed.

A whisper of memory fluttered like wings in her mind:

*A valley of scale and stone...*

*A star sinking into a pool of molten gold...*

*Screaming skies...*

She squeezed her eyes shut.

That was not her memory.

That was not her life.

But it was **there**, as if the mark had unlocked a door to something ancient.

Above her, the guards' voices moved away—orders, confusion, panic disguised as discipline.

Nif crawled forward.

Dust coated her skin. Splinters scraped her hands. The mark burned with every inch. The crawlway descended slightly, becoming narrower until she could barely move her shoulders.

Then—light.

A thin seam of dawn bled through a break in the stone.

She pressed her face against it.

Beyond the wall was open sky, tinged with the first suggestion of sunrise. Below: the outer courtyard, where novices scrubbed flagstones as punishment for petty infractions no one remembered by evening.

And beyond that, far beyond the walls—**the world**.

She reached into her memory, into every lesson designed to keep her contained, and found the one they never meant to give her:

*When the sun blinds you, walk in shadow.*

Nif braced her feet against the beam, pressed her palms to the wall—and pushed.

The stone cracked.

Not a dramatic fracture, not a spray of debris—just a hairline break widening under the force of someone who refused to stay where she was placed.

Light burst through.

Cold air touched her skin.

She shoved again.

The stone split, falling outward in a piece no larger than her torso. It crashed into the bushes below with a muted thud.

Silence.

Then a distant shout.

Nif didn't hesitate.

She crawled through the opening and dropped.

The landing knocked the breath out of her, pain flaring in her knees, but she was on her feet a moment later. Bare arms, bare feet, linen shift smeared with dust and chalk. A mark glowing faintly on her ribs.

She ran.

Across the courtyard, through bushes, past shocked novices kneeling with wet brushes in their hands. Someone shouted her name—she didn't look back.

The outer gate loomed ahead, guarded by two sentries with ceremonial halberds. They stared at her in disbelief.

A girl in training linen never ran toward the outside.

Never.

Nif sprinted straight at them.

One moved to intercept, spear lowering—

—and the mark beneath her ribs flashed white-hot.

She didn't see the flash.

She **felt** it.

The guard faltered, his breath hitching, as if struck by a sudden wave of nausea. His knees buckled. The other followed, dropping to the ground with a choked sound.

Nif didn't understand it.

She only moved.

She grabbed one of the spears, wedged it through the gate's latch, and twisted until the iron shrieked. The lock broke. The gate swung open with a groan that sounded almost like mourning.

She fled into the open world.

---

She didn't stop running until the temple spires were distant behind her and the ground beneath her feet changed from polished stone to cracked earth. The dirt road beyond Celestial Horizon was rough, lined with scraggly brush and occasional trees twisted by wind. The city walls curved behind her like an accusation.

She walked then—because she didn't know where she was going, only that she was **going**.

Her chest heaved.

Her throat ached.

The mark pulsed with every step.

She glanced around: fields stretching toward the horizon, scattered farmhouses, the faint suggestion of a river glinting in the distance.

She had never seen the world this way.

Not from the outside of doctrine.

The sky felt too big.

The earth felt too real.

Her breath shook with something close to awe—sharpened by fear.

### **What now?**

The question echoed louder than the bells.

She pressed a hand to her ribs.

The mark was warm—not burning, not painful—just warm, like a small sun resting beneath her skin.

She remembered the way the clergy had looked at her.

Not like a miracle.

Like a threat.

Like a prophecy they hadn't prepared for.

"False star," one had whispered.

"Daughter of the moon," another had said.

Two opposite truths. Or one truth split by agenda.

She walked.

And with each step, something settled into her bones:

If the Church of Celestial Horizon called her a false star... then something real existed behind their lie.

Not their painted lleana.

Not their conquest myth.

Something older.

Something the world had forgotten on purpose.

She didn't know her destiny.

Didn't want one.

But she had something more powerful:

**A choice.**

And somewhere—beyond the fields, beyond the quarters, beyond distances she had never been allowed to see—another girl had just woken to the same mark.

She didn't know where.

But the warmth beneath her ribs thrummed—

—as if pointing.

---

By the time the sun fully broke the horizon, Nif was three miles from the temple walls.

The spires shimmered behind her like ghosts of a story she was done believing.

The world ahead was vast and uncertain.

She stepped into it barefoot.

Breath shivering.

Heart steadyng.

One thought circling her mind like a vow:

**I will not be what they name me.**

Somewhere, under the same dawn, someone else had been named too.

And fate—whatever shape it took—had just begun.

## CHAPTER #5 — Roads That Remember

The wagon rattled like an old bone.

Every jolt shook Nya's teeth and sent a dull ache through her ribs where the crescent slept beneath her shirt. The mark wasn't burning anymore — but it **wasn't gone**. It sat there quietly, too quiet, like a predator lying low in tall grass.

The driver said nothing.

He didn't look back.

He didn't ask questions.

That silence frightened Nya more than the patrols.

Mara sat across from her, hands folded on her lap, shawl drawn tightly around her narrow shoulders. Wind tugged at the loose ends of it, flinging bits of straw into the air. Her eyes stayed fixed ahead, watching the long road spool into a soft dawn haze.

“How far are we going?” Nya finally asked.

Mara's voice answered without turning. “Farther than we thought this life would take us.”

“That's not an answer.”

“It's the only one you get until the road gives us more.”

Nya scowled at the horizon, annoyed less at the vagueness and more at the **truth** inside it.

The road wound away from the South Quarter, passing fields of brittle crops and crooked fences. A scarecrow stooped in a patch of gray wheat, its burlap head split, stuffing spilling like tired thoughts. Beyond it, the faint shimmer of river—the one that always felt like a wall when she lived beside it.

Now it felt like a gate.

A broken one.

The wagon slowed where the road dipped low and became mud. The mule strained, hooves sinking. The driver clicked his tongue softly. The smell of wet earth rose thick and heavy.

Nya glanced back.

The city was shrinking.

She could still see the layered skyline — sagging South Quarter roofs in front, shining spires far beyond them, and rising highest of all: the Sanctum tower of Celestial Horizon, gleaming like a knife held up to catch the sun.

The sight made her jaw clench.

Mara followed her gaze. “Don’t look at them,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because they build their walls out of eyes. The more we stare, the stronger they think they are.”

Nya snorted quietly. “They already think they’re gods.”

“That’s their mistake,” Mara said. “And like all mistakes, it costs other people first.”

A flock of crows burst from a nearby tree, spiraling upward in a ragged whirl. For a second, they blacked out the rising sun. Then they scattered.

Nya watched them go.

She wished her life worked like that — a sudden flurry, wings, a sky big enough to vanish into. Instead, she had a road and a borrowed escape — and something on her skin that wasn’t going away.

A question gnawed its way forward.

“Mara... how did you know?”

“Know what?”

"That they'd ring bells. That they'd come for me. That this"—Nya gestured at her ribs through the cloth—"wasn't just... some curse."

Mara took a slow breath.

"Because I've seen a mark like that once before."

Nya went still. "When?"

"When I was younger than you. A traveler came south. Quiet man — tired eyes, hands that shook when he drank." Mara's gaze unfocused slightly, as if looking backward. "He carried stories like infections. Touched people with them without meaning to."

"And he had the same mark?"

"No." Mara shook her head. "Not the same. A circle. Whole. Sun-bright. He hid it beneath bandages. Said he had touched something he shouldn't. Said it had changed him in ways sleep could not fix."

Nya waited.

Mara's mouth tightened. "He didn't live long. The Church found him. They dragged him back beyond the walls. Called him blessed — then buried him like a weapon they were done testing."

Nya's fingers curled into fists.

"They kill what scares them," she muttered.

"No," Mara said softly. "They **define** what scares them — so no one else ever sees it clearly."

The wagon lurched. The mule grunted. Somewhere, a lark began to sing — bright and fragile.

Nya sank back into the hay, staring up at the pale sky.

The bells she had felt the night before still echoed in memory, faint and distant. Each echo seemed to ripple outward, like rings in a pond.

"What if..." She hesitated. "What if that bell meant someone else has this too?"

Mara's eyes flicked to her. "Why do you think that?"

"I don't know," Nya said honestly. "It just felt... shared. Like the world wasn't ringing **at** me — it was ringing **through** me."

Mara studied her for a long moment.

"You're not wrong to trust that feeling," she said.

Nya waited for the rest.

Mara didn't continue.

Annoyance flared. "You keep talking like you know the answer but won't say it."

"I don't know," Mara replied. "But I have suspicions. And suspicions are dangerous things when spoken too soon."

Nya rolled her eyes. "Then whisper them."

Mara smiled — the faintest twitch of lips. "Later. When the road stops listening."

Nya frowned. "Roads don't listen."

Mara tapped the wagon boards with her knuckles. "All old things do. Stones remember steps. Rivers remember names. Roads remember the reasons people run on them."

Her gaze sharpened.

"And right now, I'd rather not announce ours."

The wagon creaked on.

They passed a shepherd with sleepy goats. A woman washing cloth in a ditch. Two boys skipping rocks across puddles as if they could convince the water to pretend it was a lake.

The world — still busy being itself — did not care that everything had changed.

That made Nya uneasy.

It also grounded her.

She exhaled and closed her eyes, letting the sway of the wagon become almost hypnotic.

And slowly...

The line between thought and sensation blurred.

---

I don't remember when I drifted.

One moment I was on the wagon, straw scratching my back, Mara humming some old song that used to mean nothing and now sounded like a goodbye.

The next—

—there was **water**.

Dark. Still. Vast.

I stood at the edge of it, and the world around the lake felt like a bowl carved from night. Above, a sky without stars stretched wide — not empty, exactly. Waiting.

A shape flickered in the water.

Not my reflection.

Someone else's.

Same age. Same eyes. Same faint frown like the world had given her too many questions with no time to answer them.

Her hand lifted to her ribs.

Mine did too.

Our fingers touched the same crescent — two mirrors breathing the same breath across miles.

A tremor of recognition ran through me.

*Who are you?* I tried to ask.

The water swallowed my voice.

The reflection's lips moved.

I didn't hear the words — I **felt** them:

*I am not where I was raised.*

Light rippled outward.

Then the vision shattered — not violently — like a surface stirred by a single falling leaf.

I jerked awake.

Hay. Wagon. Dawn.

My heart hammered.

Mara's eyes were already on me.

"You saw something," she said quietly.

I wiped a hand across my face. “Not something. Someone.”

Her shoulders relaxed, but her breath caught in her throat — a sound like relief and fear sharing the same space.

“So it begins,” she murmured.

Nya swallowed.

“Who is she?”

Mara considered.

“A correction,” she said. “Or a question the world finally decided to ask out loud.”

The road bent toward the river crossing.

Ahead, mist pooled low over the water, turning the world into shifting silver. A broken signpost leaned at the fork, one arm pointing east with faded letters, the other snapped clean off.

The driver finally spoke.

“End of my part,” he said, voice quiet, not unkind. “Bridge ahead leads out. Path under it leads downriver. Choose careful.”

He pulled the reins.

The wagon slowed to a halt.

Nya stared at the bridge — stone chipped by years, carved suns worn nearly smooth by countless palms. Soldiers sometimes watched crossings like this. Collectors sometimes too.

Then she looked at the path leading under.

Narrow. Wet. Hidden by reeds.

Mara squeezed her hand once.

“Roads remember reasons,” she said softly. “But rivers forget on purpose.”

Nya nodded.

They climbed down.

And as her feet touched the damp earth, the crescent beneath her ribs warmed — not burning — guiding.

She didn’t know toward what.

Only that turning back was no longer part of the world.

Behind her, bells had rung.

Ahead, something answered.

## CHAPTER #6 — The Shrine with No Prayers

By noon, the world had turned to heat.

The reeds along the river buzzed with insects, and the path beneath the bridge narrowed into a thin ribbon of trampled earth. Water whispered beside Nya as she walked. Mara kept pace with surprising steadiness, leaning on a crooked staff she definitely had not owned yesterday.

The crescent under Nya's ribs warmed in pulses.

Not pain.

Not warning.

A **pull**.

Like a compass that only recognized one other point in the world.

They passed under willow branches that draped the riverbank like curtains. The shade cooled them for moments at a time. Birds flashed white and brown across the water. Somewhere far behind, a wagon rattled away into distance and forgetfulness.

Nya tried to pretend they were just traveling.

Just two women on a path.

But every rustle in the reeds made her shoulders tighten. Every bend in the river felt like a threshold they shouldn't cross.

They walked until the sun leaned slightly west and the air smelled faintly of ash.

Mara slowed first.

Nya followed her gaze.

Up a low hill to their right, tucked between three leaning cedars, stood a stone arch almost swallowed by vines. Time had carved its corners soft. Moss crept along its base. At its center,

half-buried, lay shattered tiles — fragments of blue and silver arranged in a pattern broken beyond recognition.

A shrine.

Or what was left of one.

“What is this place?” Nya asked.

Mara’s voice carried both reverence and sorrow. “A memory nobody tended.”

The hill rose gently. The dirt path veered up toward the arch as if even neglect had remembered the way. A fallen signpost leaned nearby, its inscription faded to nothing.

Nya climbed.

The closer she came, the more she noticed: offerings turned to ghosts of themselves — bits of cloth knotted into the vines, stones once painted and now pale with weather, rusted coins sunk into the dirt like tired suns. A cracked pottery bowl lay overturned near the base, as if someone had once knelt there and dropped it in haste.

When she stepped beneath the arch, the air cooled.

Quiet wrapped the ruin like a second skin.

At the shrine’s center, the broken mosaic spread out in a rough circle. Among the shattered tiles, Nya saw curves. Slivers of darker blue. A line of white that might have once been—

A crescent.

Her chest tightened.

Mara stood at the edge, breathing slowly. “They would have come here, long ago, when the world still argued about what Ileana was. Hero. Villain. Guardian. Conqueror. Truth didn’t win that argument. Power did. And power forgets on purpose.”

Nya crouched, brushing dirt from one of the tiles. Beneath the grime, the shard gleamed faintly, like a memory refusing to dull completely.

She didn’t realize she was holding her breath until it left her in a slow exhale.

“I feel like I’ve been here before,” she whispered. “Except I haven’t. I’d remember.”

“Your body remembers older things than your mind,” Mara said. “Sometimes older than your blood.”

Nya straightened.

The crescent under her ribs warmed sharply — a single, insistent throb.

A sound drifted on the air.

Not the river.

Not birds.

Not insects.

### **Footsteps.**

Soft.

Cautious.

Somewhere on the other side of the shrine.

Mara's gaze snapped to Nya. Without speaking, she tilted her head toward the broken wall of the shrine's far edge, motioning for cover.

Nya crouched behind it, heart pounding in her throat.

The steps drew closer.

Slow.

Measured.

As if the person walking expected the earth itself to shout at them if they moved wrong.

A shadow slid across the mosaic.

Then—

A girl stepped into the shrine.

She was barefoot and dust-stained, a linen shift torn at the hem, hair tangled from wind and running. Her posture carried the unnatural straightness of someone raised under constant correction — shoulders squared even though her eyes looked exhausted.

Nya's breath hitched.

The girl paused beneath the arch, scanning the ruin with wary curiosity. Her gaze swept the broken tiles... lingered on the faint crescent shapes among them.

Her hand lifted.

Pressed lightly to her left side.

Where the fabric of her shift glowed faintly with a familiar shape.

Nya's heart kicked hard against her ribs.

**There.**

The pull inside her roared.

Not danger.

Recognition.

Like the echo of a name she had not known she'd lost.

The girl stepped farther in, moving as if listening to something Nya couldn't hear. She didn't see Nya behind the crumbled wall. She knelt near the center, fingertips brushing the mosaic with a gentleness that felt like grief.

A memory slid over Nya again — water, sky without stars, reflections touching.

It wasn't a dream.

It had been **her**.

Nya rose before she could talk herself out of it.

The movement was quiet — but not quiet enough.

The girl's head snapped up.

Her eyes — the same shade as Nya's — locked on her.

Both froze.

No temple guards.

No torches.

No doctrine.

Just two girls standing in the bones of a forgotten faith.

For a heartbeat, neither spoke.

Nya swallowed. Her voice came out rougher than she meant. "You have it too."

The girl did not deny it.

Her gaze flicked — once — to Nya's ribs, as if she could see through cloth. Her hand lowered from her own mark.

“So do you,” she replied softly.

Their words seemed small in the space the moment took up.

Nya stepped closer, slow and deliberate, like approaching a stray animal with equal parts caution and hope.

“Who are you?” she asked.

The girl hesitated — not with uncertainty, but with the carefulness of someone who had been punished for answering questions incorrectly.

“Nif,” she said.

Nya let the name settle into the air.

“I’m Nya.”

They stood a few paces apart.

The crescent under Nya’s ribs warmed again — not heat, not danger — a pulse that seemed to synchronize with Nif’s breath.

Their gazes traveled over each other’s faces.

Similarity was a strange thing.

Not perfect mirror — but reflection enough that every feature felt like a word from the same language.

Nif’s brow furrowed. “You look like—”

“—me,” Nya finished, a thin laugh escaping despite the tension. “Yeah. I noticed.”

Silence again — but different now. Not empty. Heavy with questions.

Nif’s eyes softened, confusion giving way to something that made Nya’s throat tighten: relief.

“As soon as it appeared,” Nif said quietly, “I felt... not alone. I didn’t understand it until now.”

Nya’s breath turned unsteady.

“Same.”

A breeze passed through the shrine, stirring the vines. Somewhere in the distance, a hawk cried — a long, lonely sound that faded into sky.

Mara stepped forward at last, announcing herself with a deliberate scuff of the staff on stone.

Both girls jumped — then relaxed when they saw her face.

Mara nodded once at Nif — not warm, not cold — assessing.

“You ran from the Church,” she said.

Nif tensed. “Yes.”

“That means you still have sense left.” Mara’s gaze shifted between the two crescents neither had fully shown. “Good. You’ll need it.”

Nif’s fingers tightened slightly at her side. “They called me false star. Traitor. Threat.”

“They call everything they don’t own a threat,” Mara said. “Sometimes they’re right. Sometimes that’s the hope.”

Nya looked between them, heart thudding. “What does this mean? Why us? Why now?”

Mara didn’t answer immediately.

Instead, she looked to the broken mosaic.

Then to the sky where no moon lingered even though it should have been climbing toward afternoon.

“It means,” she said softly, “that the story the Church buried has decided to dig itself up.”

Nif sank slowly to sit on one of the fallen stones. The strength she’d held so fiercely seemed to leak out of her shoulders. “I don’t know what to believe anymore.”

Nya sat across from her, knees nearly touching.

“Then we figure it out together,” she said, more quickly than she’d intended — more honestly too.

Nif blinked.

“You don’t even know me.”

Nya shrugged. “Neither does anyone else. That’s kind of the point.”

Their eyes met again.

Something like a smile tugged at the corner of Nif’s mouth — tentative, unpracticed.

The crescent in Nya’s chest thrummed, matching a beat she recognized now not as danger, but as belonging.

Not to the Church.

Not to prophecy.

To this.

To this girl who looked like her and not like her, who had fled a gilded prison and found a ruin instead of safety.

A sister you didn't know you were missing still leaves a shape in your life.

And when she appears, the world feels both wrong and finally correct.

Nif glanced at Mara. "They will look for me."

"They already are," Mara replied. "Which means they are also looking for her. And soon they will realize what those marks mean when they stand side by side."

"And what do they mean?" Nif asked.

Mara's eyes softened with something ancient and wary. "That for the first time in a thousand years, the world has someone who might rewrite its ending."

Nya exhaled.

Nif did too.

They sat in the ruins of a shrine no one prayed in anymore — the sky wide and strangely fragile above them — while somewhere beyond the trees, bells waited to be rung again.

Not for faith.

For fear.

## CHAPTER #7 — A Thread Between Them

The shrine gave them shade, but it didn't give them safety.

By the time the sun dipped lower and the shadows grew long, the air felt different — restless, as if the world itself had leaned closer to listen. Nya kept glancing toward the tree line. Every gust of wind sounded like footsteps. Every bird-call made her shoulders tense.

Nif noticed.

She said nothing about it.

She simply mirrored the caution.

They had not spoken much since the mark-bared truths settled between them. A few questions, a few answers, both incomplete.

They were together.

They were strangers.

They were something in between.

Mara used a fallen stone as a seat. She cleaned her staff with a strip of cloth, as if preparing a weapon she pretended was only for walking.

“Night is close,” she said. “We stay here. Traveling blind is how you stumble into things that like catching sleepers.”

Nya looked at the open sky above the broken arch. “They’ll see any fire we make.”

“Then we won’t make one.”

That answer tasted like cold.

They gathered what they could — a little food, a few handfuls of tinder they wouldn’t light, the broken bowl turned upright as if that small act might correct history. When the last seam of sunlight slid away, the world softened into blue and ash.

The shrine felt different at night.

Not abandoned.

**Expectant.**

Nif sat with her back to one of the standing stones, knees drawn up, arms wrapped loosely around them. In the dim light she looked less like the rigid trainee of a church and more like a girl trying to understand why the world had changed shape without permission.

Nya took a place across from her.

They listened to crickets.

An owl called once, then glided past on silent wings.

Mara dozed in brief, shallow naps — the kind that fooled no hunter and no memory.

Finally, Nif spoke.

Her voice was quiet, but steady.

“They took babies,” she said. “Sometimes. Not from the inner city — not where names carry coin. From the outskirts. From the South Quarter. From places they say the light doesn’t reach.”

Nya’s stomach tightened.

“Why?”

“They said it was to raise them properly. To keep them from corruption.” Nif’s jaw flexed. “We were told we’d been abandoned. Given up willingly to the Church. We owed them gratitude.”

Nya stared at the dark ground between them.

The wind shifted.

She didn’t realize she was holding breath until she released it.

“I wasn’t abandoned,” she said. “Someone tore me away. There was shouting. A bruise I had for a month. Mara never talked about it, but sometimes she’d wake up crying in the middle of the night and I knew it was my fault even though it wasn’t.”

Nif watched her carefully — absorbing, not pitying.

“So,” Nif said softly, “we were separated on purpose.”

Nya nodded.

The words tasted like old blood.

“I hate them for it,” Nya added.

Something flickered across Nif’s expression — not disagreement.

“Me too,” she said.

The honesty landed between them like the first plank in a bridge.

---

Silence returned.

Different now.

Less sharp around the edges.

Nya leaned back, staring up through the broken arch. A slice of moon had finally climbed into the sky — thin, shy, almost uncertain. It painted the ruins silver and turned the river into a slow-moving ribbon of light.

The crescent under her ribs warmed, answering it.

She shivered.

Nif noticed the movement. “Does it hurt still?”

“No,” Nya said. “It just... reminds me it’s there.”

Nif touched her own mark gently, as if testing the truth of her existence. “It feels like when the instructors corrected your posture,” she said. “Not pain. Just constant... guidance.”

“That sounds horrible.”

“It was.” A ghost of a smile touched Nif’s mouth. “This is different, though. This doesn’t want obedience. It just wants... recognition.”

Nya considered that.

Recognition.

Not worship.

Not ownership.

Recognition.

She let the idea settle inside her.

“Do you think it’s from her?” Nya asked after a moment. “From Ileana?”

Nif was quiet for a long time.

When she finally spoke, her words were careful.

“I don’t think it’s from the Church’s Ileana.”

Nya snorted. “Good.”

“I think it’s from the woman they buried under their story,” Nif continued. “The one who didn’t conquer the world. The one who made a choice no one wanted to understand.”

Nya folded her arms behind her head, staring at that thin moon.

“If she became the sky,” she murmured, “then maybe she didn’t need prayers anymore. Maybe she needed witnesses.”

Nif looked at her sharply.

“That’s what the old text said.”

Nya blinked. “What old text?”

Nif hesitated.

“Once, during cleaning duty in the Relic Hall, I found a book tucked behind a ledger. Not copied in formal script — handwritten. The ink was faint. The pages smelled of river clay.”

Nya raised an eyebrow. “You... read something you weren’t supposed to.”

Nif’s lips twitched. “Frequently. Quietly.”

“What did it say?”

“That Ileana didn’t rise to rule. She rose to **hold** something back. Something the world wasn’t ready to slaughter to feel powerful.”

Nya frowned. “The Church says she used the star.”

Nif shook her head. “The text said she **guarded** it.”

Nya’s pulse quickened.

Guarded.

Not claimed.

Not weaponized.

Guarded.

Her fingers dug into the dirt.

“So why leave one behind?” she asked. “Why leave the last star unguarded?”

“She didn’t,” Nif said. “She left it buried — and trusted the world to have learned from her sacrifice.”

Nya let out a humorless breath. “That was optimistic of her.”

“Or desperate,” Nif said softly.

The moon climbed higher.

Their marks pulsed in the same rhythm now — faintly, like a sleeping animal breathing.

Mara stirred and sat up slowly.

“You two will know more than any book by the time this is done,” she said. “But don’t let the knowledge hollow you out. Stories are heavier when you have to live inside them.”

Nya met Nif’s eyes.

For the first time since the bell rang in her bones, Nya didn’t feel like something had singled her out to stand alone on a cliff edge.

She felt like someone had stepped onto that cliff beside her.

Not to save her.

To share the wind.

“Get some rest,” Mara continued, leaning back. “Dawn will ask us questions we can’t answer if we’re tired.”

They lay down on opposite sides of the broken mosaic.

The stones were hard.

The night was cold.

But the air in the shrine no longer felt expectant.

It felt patient.

As if something very old had been waiting for **exactly this** — not worship, not offerings, but the quiet breathing of two girls who should never have found each other... and did.

Nya closed her eyes.

Sleep came slowly, threaded with images she didn’t entirely recognize: a stretch of valley lined with dragon bones, a star pulsing like a heart buried under stone, a church tower crowned with false sun.

Through it all, the same truth pulsed:

Not alone.

Not anymore.

And somewhere beyond the trees, beyond the river, beyond the fractured world, someone in Celestial Horizon lit new fires and rang new bells — not in celebration.

In fear of what had just woken.

## CHAPTER #8 — The Line Between Light and Fire

Dawn arrived quietly — as if it were reluctant to disturb them.

Mist lay heavy across the river. Dew jeweled every blade of grass. The broken shrine, washed in pale gold, looked less like a ruin and more like a scar the world had learned to live with.

Nya woke first.

A chill traced the crescent beneath her ribs. Not pain. Not warning. A nudge.

She sat up, stretching stiff shoulders. Across the mosaic, Nif slept lightly — one hand resting near her mark, her brow furrowed even in dreams. Mara was already awake, watching the tree line as if reading a language written in branches.

“We move?” Nya asked softly.

Mara nodded. “We linger, we get found. And I am tired of losing arguments to people with uniforms.”

Nya stood and brushed dirt from her trousers. The river whispered beside them, indifferent. Crickets had surrendered to birdsong. The world, infuriatingly, went on.

Nif stirred at their voices. She blinked herself to waking, gaze clearing with disorienting speed — the way someone trained to be alert, always, learns to pretend sleep ever held them.

“We should eat,” she said.

“Bread,” Mara replied, rummaging through the satchel. She handed out thin pieces — tough but edible. “Eat like fugitives. Small bites. Quick chewing.”

Nya smirked. “You make hunger sound like a strategy.”

“It is,” Mara said dryly. “It keeps you alive long enough to find better food.”

They ate.

They didn’t talk much while they did.

The morning breeze tugged at Nif's hair. For a heartbeat, she looked almost ordinary — another traveler at a forgotten shrine.

Then a distant bell tolled.

Deep. Clear. Deliberate.

Nif's jaw tightened.

Mara's eyes flicked north. "They're widening their search."

Nya swallowed. Her mark pulsed once, answering the sound like an echo.

"Where do we go?" she asked.

Mara planted her staff into the earth. "East first. Then north. Stay near the river but not on its banks. There's an old road that skirts the Academy grounds. Not as watched as the main one."

Nif glanced over sharply. "The Academy of Solara."

"Have you been?" Mara asked.

"No." Nif hesitated. "We... studied about it. From approved texts."

Nya arched a brow. "And?"

"They called it a mistake," Nif said quietly. "A place where races mingled until they forgot their proper places. A warning."

Mara snorted. "Then it's probably exactly the opposite."

Nya's curiosity sparked despite fear. "We're going there?"

"Close," Mara said. "Not through the gates. But answers collect around places that make tyrants nervous."

Nif nodded slowly, processing.

Nya tightened the cord on her wrist and slung the satchel back over her shoulder.

The three of them left the shrine — no prayers spoken, no offerings left.

Only footprints.

And the faintest sense that the stones themselves watched them go.

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They followed the river east.

The land changed.

Fields gave way to scrub. Scrub gave way to low hills pocked with caves and wind-carved outcroppings. Wildflowers grew stubbornly in cracks. Dragonflies traced quick blue lines over the water.

The road Mara promised finally appeared — not truly a road, more a worn suggestion of one, bordered by tufts of tough grass.

They walked.

They talked in pieces.

Mara shared strange half-stories — of old kings who abdicated quietly and vanished into farms, of floods stopped by witches no one thanked, of bridges built by hands whose names history forgot.

Nif listened like she had been starved for unapproved knowledge.

Nya kept pace beside her, careful not to walk ahead or behind.

Between them, silence existed comfortably for stretches — broken only when something necessary rose to the surface.

“Do you miss it?” Nya asked, after an hour. “The temple. The schedule. The... certainty.”

Nif considered.

“I miss knowing what each day would look like,” she said. “I don’t miss never choosing it.”

Nya nodded. That made sense.

“And you?” Nif asked. “Do you miss home?”

Nya didn’t answer at once.

“Yes,” she said finally. “And no. Leaving hurt. Staying would’ve hurt differently.”

Mara hummed softly. “That’s the price of growing past the fences built for you — grief for the comfort of cages.”

Another bell rolled faintly across the distance.

Closer this time.

They froze instinctively.

The sound didn't repeat — but it left a ringing in the air, like the world had been struck and was still vibrating.

"Move," Mara said softly.

They moved.

---

By midday, the land sloped gently upward. Trees clustered more thickly. A breeze carried the faint scent of parchment and incense — the kind not used by the Church's gold-crowned priests, but by scholars who forgot to eat while chasing thoughts.

Nif slowed.

Ahead, through gaps in the trees, rose towers.

Not like Celestial Horizon's spires — these were earth-colored, practical, softened by ivy. Stone bridges curved between them like careful handwriting. Courtyards opened to the sky, where banners of many colors fluttered not in domination — but in greeting.

Students moved along the paths below — not only human.

An orc woman with ink-stained forearms balanced a stack of scrolls. A merfolk youth, wrapped in damp cloth, laughed with a witch whose hair glowed faintly at the ends. A pair of elves argued animatedly, gesturing with quills.

No one bowed as anyone else passed.

Nif stopped completely.

The Academy of Solara breathed like a living thing — not perfect, not untouched by struggle, but undeniably **shared**.

"This..." Nif whispered, almost to herself, "was forbidden to think about."

Nya felt it too — a ache she couldn't name. A glimpse of a life that could have existed if the world had chosen differently a thousand years ago.

Mara watched them both carefully. "Remember what you see. One day someone will tell you it never was."

A group of young trainees paused near the outer wall. One pointed toward the forest path.

Nya's hand drifted toward the knife at her belt.

But the students only squinted into the light — then went back to their conversation. They hadn't noticed the fugitives in the shadows.

Relief sagged through Nya's shoulders.

Nif, though, remained tense.

"Why does it feel like I recognize this place?" she murmured.

Mara's voice softened. "Because ideas leave echoes. And Ileana's world — the one she hoped for — sounded more like this than the church's sermons."

Nif's throat worked.

Her mark warmed beneath her ribs — not reacting to danger, but to truth.

Nya swallowed.

For the first time since they started running, she let herself imagine a future not defined by hiding — a brief, stubborn spark of a thought:

*What if things could be rebuilt?*

The spark didn't burn long.

A horn sounded — sharp, carrying far.

Not from the Academy.

From the western ridge.

Mara cursed beneath her breath. "Scouts."

Shapes appeared along the tree line — distant, mounted, cloaks of white-gold edged in sunfire thread.

Celestial Horizon.

Moving methodically.

Sweeping.

Hunters.

The peace of the Academy suddenly seemed fragile — a lantern in a storm.

Nif's face went pale. "They're closing the circle."

“Yes,” Mara said. “Which means we need to become the gap.”

“How?” Nya demanded.

“By not being where they expect,” Mara replied. She pointed away from the Academy — toward rougher ground, rockier hills. “They’ll watch roads and rivers. We take stone and shadow.”

Nif glanced back at the towers — longing flickering for a heartbeat.

Then she nodded.

They slipped deeper into the trees, leaving the sight of a world that could have been — maybe still could, someday — behind them.

The forest swallowed them quickly.

Light fractured through leaves. Branches snagged hair and cloth. The smell of moss and bark replaced parchment and river.

Bootbeats echoed faintly — not close, but not far enough.

Nya’s breath came faster.

The mark under her ribs pulsed — urgently now.

Nif pressed a palm to her side, eyes widening. “Do you feel that?”

“Yes,” Nya said. “What is it?”

Mara’s answer was grim.

“It means the Church has brought the Star into play.”

The world seemed to tilt.

Nif swallowed hard. “Here?”

“Near,” Mara said. “They’re testing its reach.”

A distant boom rolled through the woods — not thunder.

The birds exploded from the canopy in a storm of frantic wings.

An unnatural light flared briefly beyond the ridge — bright, cold, wrong.

The ground hummed beneath their feet.

The Academy bells began ringing — not ceremonial.

Alarm.

Nya's heart pounded.

Nif's breath hitched.

The crescent marks burned — not with pain, but with inevitability.

Mara tightened her grip on her staff. "Run. Stay low. And whatever happens — don't let them separate you again."

They ran.

Branches whipped past.

Roots clawed at boots.

The world filled with the sound of bells and hunters and something ancient waking.

Behind them, unseen but unmistakable, the Church's false sun rose where it didn't belong — and the line between light and fire blurred into something dangerous.

The world of Edrithae was remembering.

And the hunt had truly begun.

## CHAPTER #9 — A World That Refuses to Forget

They didn't outrun the sound.

No one could outrun something that came from the sky.

The false light pulsed again beyond the ridge — colorless, cold, as if daylight had been stripped of warmth and left only with authority. The ground trembled a heartbeat after, a subtle shiver through roots and stones.

Nya stumbled but caught herself, breath ragged.

Nif didn't stumble.

She slowed.

Then she stopped.

"Nif—" Nya hissed, grabbing her arm.

Nif's eyes were fixed upward through the canopy, pupils blown wide. "Listen."

Nya heard only bells. Distant shouts. The scraping breath in her own chest.

Then — something **else**.

A tone so low she almost mistook it for silence. Beneath it, a strange pressure, like the moment before thunder cracks. Her mark answered, a faint burn threading outward from ribs to spine.

The Star.

She didn't need Mara to tell her.

Mara swore under her breath. "They're rousing it. Not fully — not yet. They don't know how. But they're close enough to harm everything trying."

The trees thinned ahead.

The path opened onto a rocky overlook — a ledge high above a bowl of land carved by ancient rivers and older wars. And there, rising from the far side, stood the first outpost of Celestial Horizon: a fortress disguised as a monastery, white walls gleaming, banners streaming with suns embroidered in gold that caught the wind like captured flames.

At its center, a cage of scaffolding surrounded something half-buried in stone:

A shard of star.

It wasn't bright like fire.

It shimmered — wrong and mesmerizing — like frozen lightning trapped in crystal. Runes crawled across the scaffolding, glowing faintly as robed figures chanted beneath. Each chant built pressure in the air until the shard pulsed again and the valley recoiled with it.

The world did not like this.

Nif gripped Nya's hand without realizing she'd done it. Nya didn't pull away.

Below, Church soldiers moved with militant grace — spreading outward in organized formations, sweeping the woods in widening arcs.

A ring tightening.

Hunters closing.

Mara crouched low, eyes scanning, mapping routes the way other people read maps. "We don't go downhill. We go around. Slow. Every sound here carries."

"Why are they testing it?" Nya whispered.

“Because tyrants never believe a warning unless they can break it first,” Mara muttered.

The mark beneath Nya’s ribs warmed further.

Not fear.

Recognition — laced with grief.

Nif swallowed, throat tight. “It doesn’t... feel hateful.”

“No,” Mara said. “It feels like a door. They’re forcing it open without knowing what’s on the other side.”

Another chant surged.

Another pulse struck the valley.

This time, the earth answered.

Grass bent toward the Star and then backward, like it couldn’t decide where to bow. Birds veered abruptly midflight. The river that cut past the outpost shuddered — as if considering changing direction entirely — before settling with a wounded rippling.

A ripple reached the woods.

Hit the ledge.

Passed through them.

Nya gasped — because for an instant she wasn’t on the ledge anymore.

She was standing in Dragon Valley.

She saw bones — enormous, ancient. The skeletons of dragons resting in dignity under twilight skies. The Last Star nestled at the valley’s heart, beating with quiet life.

A woman stood before it.

Not the conqueror painted on temple walls.

A woman with tired eyes and soft, stubborn hands. She touched the Star as if apologizing to it.

*I’m sorry, I felt her say.*

Not out loud — but in everything about her posture.

Then the world snapped back.

The ledge. The trees. The false Star shimmering, leashed and wounded.

Nif staggered. "Did you see—?"

"Yes," Nya breathed.

Mara didn't say she had. She didn't need to. The look on her face answered for her.

The chant changed pitch.

Higher.

More reckless.

Someone shouted a warning from the scaffold — too late.

The Star fragment flared.

A shockwave rippled outward — invisible but devastating. Trees bowed. Rocks fractured. The fortress walls screamed — a low groan like stone remembering earthquakes.

Nya cried out and dropped to one knee.

The mark seared.

Images slammed through her mind — too fast to grasp:

A crown sinking into river mud.

A field of flowers turning to ash then back to flowers again.

A shrine — this shrine — newly built, full of lantern light and laughter.

Then, suddenly, quiet.

The pulse passed.

The clergy beneath the scaffolding straightened, triumphant. Their voices rose louder — fervor burning away caution. Soldiers cheered.

The Star dimmed, not because it was subdued — but because it had withdrawn inward.

As if bracing.

Mara exhaled shakily. "They think that was success."

"What was it really?" Nya whispered.

"A warning," Nif said, voice soft, certain.

Mara nodded.

The soldiers resumed their sweep. Dogs now. Their barks carried through the trees in jagged bursts.

Nya's heart lurched. "Mara—"

"I know."

Mara scanned the terrain again. "We go south of the outpost. Through stone fissures. It's slow, but dogs hate narrow shadows."

Nif squeezed Nya's hand once more before she realized she still held it — then let go, awkwardness flickering in her eyes. Nya pretended not to notice.

They moved back into the trees.

The hunt sounds grew louder, then softer, then louder again, like a tide.

Nya's calves burned. Branches scraped arms. Sweat trickled between her shoulder blades.

Yet beneath the exhaustion, something else stirred:

Anger.

Not the eruptive, directionless fury of the South Quarter when bread ran out — but a colder, more focused heat.

"They're tearing at something sacred," she muttered.

"Power doesn't call anything sacred," Mara replied. "It only asks if it can be used."

"And if it can't?" Nif asked quietly.

Mara's gaze flicked to the ridge they left behind. "Then it breaks everything around it trying."

They reached the stone fissures — a natural labyrinth cut through the hillside long ago by water and time. The crevices were narrow enough they had to turn sideways in places, shoulders scraping cool rock.

The world outside dimmed. Sound funneled strangely. Each breath felt amplified.

Nya pressed a hand to the stone. It thrummed faintly — the way the shrine had, the way the Star did — as if the bones of Edrithae itself remembered stories politicians tried to rewrite.

"Why does everything here feel... alive?" she asked.

Mara's smile was sad. "Because everything here is. The world doesn't disappear just because someone draws a new border on a map."

A shout echoed somewhere behind them — followed by dogs barking in sudden frenzy.

Nif closed her eyes. "They've caught a scent."

"Not ours yet," Mara said. "Keep moving."

They squeezed deeper into the fissures. The space narrowed, then widened unexpectedly — opening into a hidden hollow where light filtered down in thin columns. Ferns carpeted the floor. Water trickled from cracks, forming a small pool, clear as glass.

Nya exhaled, shoulders dropping.

For a heartbeat, the world was gentle again.

Nif walked to the pool's edge and knelt. Her reflection stared back, half-lit, half-shadowed. The crescent glowed faintly beneath linen — reflected like a second moon beneath the water.

"How can they twist something like this into fear?" she whispered.

"Because fear is easier to teach than wonder," Mara answered.

Nya crouched beside Nif.

Their reflections mirrored each other — same eyes, same stubborn tilt of jaw. But where Nya's held defiance, Nif's held a quieter, sharper resistance — steel instead of flame.

"Does it scare you?" Nya asked.

Nif thought about it.

"Yes," she said. "But not the way they want it to."

Nya dipped her fingers into the water. It cooled the heat of her mark for a moment. The ripples distorted their reflections — blurring them together, separating them again.

Mara drank from the pool, refilled their waterskin, then motioned them onward. "Beauty doesn't make us less hunted."

They slipped out of the hollow on the opposite side and into thicker shadow. The fissures forked again and again. Mara chose paths that bent downward, hugging earth instead of open sky.

Dogs barked again — further away.

Bootsteps faded.

The ring, for now, moved past them.

Nya breathed out slowly.

“We’re ghosts,” she murmured.

“For the moment,” Mara said. “Ghosts still bleed.”

They traveled until the rocks finally opened into a narrow meadow, bordered by pines. The outpost lay somewhere behind them now. The bells had gone silent.

Only the faint hum of the Star lingered — distant, restless.

Nif touched her ribs.

Nya did too.

Their marks pulsed together — less a warning now, more a vow they didn’t yet know the words to.

Mara paused at the edge of the meadow. “From here, the road grows stranger. We will leave maps behind. We will follow older lines — rivers, stones, scars. Places the Church pretends don’t exist because they can’t name them.”

Nya swallowed. “And at the end of those lines?”

“Dragon Valley,” Mara said.

The name settled into the air like a bell tone.

Nif straightened.

Nya’s heart beat faster.

They didn’t smile.

They didn’t flinch.

They simply stepped forward — into a world that refused to forget its own history, no matter how many times someone tried to rewrite it.

## CHAPTER #10 — The Place Where Stories Argue

Evening found them walking beside a line of ancient stones that marched across the hills like the spine of some long-buried giant. Lichen softened their edges. Symbols, worn nearly invisible, traced faint spirals beneath moss.

Mara stopped at the tallest stone and rested her palm against it.

“Boundary,” she said. “Old one. It doesn’t keep people out. It reminds them to behave when they cross.”

Nya eyed the stone skeptically. “Reminds who?”

“The kind of people who still listen,” Mara replied.

Nif didn’t question it.

She stepped across first.

Nothing dramatic happened. No light. No sound. Only the subtle feeling of stepping into a room where someone had been talking long before you arrived.

They followed a faint deer trail downward. The air cooled as the hill dipped into a shallow valley, where the trees opened to reveal unexpected structures tucked beneath the boughs.

Low-roofed stone huts.

A weathered tower.

Lanterns glowing with soft, steady fire.

The place looked abandoned at first—until a door opened and warm light spilled onto the path.

“Welcome,” a voice called gently. “Travelers don’t usually find us unless the world insists.”

Nya tensed.

Nif’s hand drifted toward her mark.

Mara exhaled with quiet relief. “Archivists,” she said, as if that word alone was bread and water.

The figure who approached wore robes stitched from many fabrics—patched not out of poverty, but intention. They had silver hair bound in a loose knot, skin lined by time in a way that looked earned. Their eyes were bright with curiosity and just enough wariness.

“This isn’t a refuge,” the archivist said. “It’s a conversation. People who stay must be willing to listen.”

Nya glanced at Mara.

Mara nodded.

Nif inclined her head. "We're listening."

The archivist studied the girls as one might study two puzzle pieces discovered in the wrong box. Their gaze flicked—briefly, sharply—to each of their ribs.

"...Ah," they said softly. "So the song has returned in pairs."

Nya's throat went tight. "You know about this?"

"We know about many things the church forgot to burn," the archivist replied. "Come. Eat. Then talk. Talking is easier with stew."

They were led to a circular hall built into the hill itself. Shelves lined every curve—scrolls, bound books, stone tablets, strips of painted bark. Tables filled the center, some covered in maps, others in half-finished translations.

The smell of cooking herbs filled the room.

A few other archivists worked silently—cataloguing, copying, whispering debate. They glanced up as the trio entered. Surprise flashed across their faces. Respect followed.

Nya drifted near one of the shelves. Drawings filled a cracked parchment—depictions of Ileana through the centuries. Each era had drawn her differently.

A warrior with a blazing crown.

A healer kneeling with blood on her hands.

A mother, holding nothing.

None of them looked quite like the others.

"History is not singular," the archivist said beside her. "It argues with itself."

Nif moved to a table where a diagram showed the Last Star cradled in a valley, surrounded by sigils. Some marked *Contain*. Others marked *Protect*. None marked *Own*.

Nif touched the table edge. "What did she intend?"

"To delay the world from destroying itself out of hunger," the archivist answered simply. "Delay, not stop. Delay long enough that people might evolve past the need to conquer."

Mara accepted wooden bowls and passed them out.

Nya ate first only because her stomach betrayed her. Warmth spread through her limbs. Exhaustion softened—not gone, only less sharp.

Nif ate slower, thoughtful.

“The Church is testing the fragment,” she said quietly. “We felt it.”

Several archivists stopped moving.

The silver-haired one’s expression tightened. “Then their fear has tipped into obsession.”

“They think Ileana conquered Edrithae,” Nya said. “They want to finish the job.”

“No,” the archivist replied softly. “They want to rewrite what frightened them—sacrifice that asked more than obedience. Empires have always been allergic to nuance.”

Nya leaned forward. “What about us?”

The archivist met her gaze. “You are not prophecy. You are *consequence*. A world that witnessed restraint created reminders. Living ones. When the Star is threatened, the reminders wake.”

Nif’s fingers curled slowly against the table.

“So we’re weapons.”

The archivist shook their head. “You are choices. Weapons are only what hands make of them.”

Silence lingered—thick, complicated.

Mara broke it. “We need to reach Dragon Valley.”

“You will,” the archivist said. “But not alone.”

They gestured to a map spread across another table. Trails inked in green wound through mountains and plains. Symbols marked places the church never charted.

“Follow the river until it divides, then take the branch that flows against logic,” they instructed. “You’ll know it when the water runs uphill. From there, the land remembers its own path.”

Nya frowned. “Rivers don’t run uphill.”

“Old magic is disobedient by nature,” the archivist said calmly.

Another archivist approached carrying a small wrapped bundle. They placed it gently in front of Nif.

“For when the Star calls you closer,” they said.

Nif unwrapped it.

A blade rested inside.

Not long. Not overpowering. Forged simply, with a handle wrapped in worn leather. Along the flat of the blade, a faint crescent had been etched—not as decoration.

As acknowledgment.

Nif's breath hitched.

"I don't—"

"It is not for killing the Star," the archivist said quickly. "Nothing living survives believing that lie. It is for the moments around it. The ones that ask courage."

Nif wrapped the blade again and held it to her chest—not with hunger.

With gratitude she didn't have words for.

Nya watched, heart pulling in two directions—fear for what the blade implied, pride in who it had been offered to.

Mara touched the archway. "We leave at first light."

"You should," the silver-haired archivist agreed. "The Church does not respect boundaries, not even the kind that speak in stone."

Nya looked back at the shelves—stories layered over stories, none fully agreeing, all coexisting anyway.

"Why do you keep all of this?" she asked. "When so much of it contradicts?"

The archivist smiled gently.

"Because truth isn't a throne. It's a table. Bigger than any of us. And some nights, contradiction is the only way the world stays honest."

Night deepened.

Lanterns dimmed.

They were offered pallets in a quiet side room—blankets, clean water, a moment to breathe without running.

Nif lay down first, the wrapped blade beside her like a silent promise.

Nya settled nearby, listening to the murmur of archivists debating softly in the hall. Every voice held care. Every disagreement carried respect rather than hunger.

It felt like the opposite of Celestial Horizon.

She closed her eyes.

Sleep came easier.

And somewhere beyond the boundary stones, deep in the hills, the fragment of the Star pulsed faintly—as if aware the world had gathered its counterargument and begun walking toward it.

Morning would bring movement again.

But for one night, Edrithae allowed them the grace of stillness.

## CHAPTER #11 — The Space Between Two Lives

Morning came with the smell of simmering herbs and wet earth.

The archivists moved quietly, as if even footsteps were part of some long conversation they didn't want to interrupt. Sunlight slipped through the cracks in the stone ceiling, making drifting dust look like slow-falling stars.

Nya woke to the soft sound of cloth being folded.

Nif sat across the room, wrapping the blade once more, hands precise and careful — the way someone learned to be when mistakes were punished.

Nya watched her for a moment.

She wasn't thinking about prophecy.

She wasn't thinking about the Church.

She was thinking about all the mornings they *didn't* grow up together.

And anger rose, gentle and devastating.

“Do they always live like this?” Nya whispered.

Nif didn't look up. “Quietly?”

“Honestly.”

Nif paused, then tied the final knot.

“No,” she said. “Most places don't. Most places shout their truths loud enough that no one questions if those truths are lies.”

Nya sat up, pulling her blanket around her shoulders.

Silence stretched — not uncomfortable.

Just heavy.

Like both of them were holding pieces of something fragile.

---

They ate near the threshold of the hall — warm bread, berries, a tea that tasted faintly of mint and memory.

Mara spoke with the archivists low and serious, tracing paths on a map with her fingertip.

For once, they were left alone.

Nya broke the quiet first.

“What did they tell you I was?” she asked softly.

Nif blinked. Her grip tightened on the mug.

“They didn’t say *you*,” she replied. “They said... ‘the other.’ The one who wandered. The one who did not belong to the light. They never used your name, and I didn’t know enough to question what that cost.”

Nya let that settle.

“So I was a warning story,” she murmured.

Nif nodded once — shame flickering in her eyes.

“Yes.”

Nya stared at the table.

“I spent half my life wondering if I’d done something wrong just by existing,” she said. “Mara tried to protect me from it — tried to make the world smaller so it would hurt less. But the hurt found cracks.”

Nif swallowed.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly.

Nya met her eyes.

“For what you were told?” she asked. “Or for believing it?”

“For... not knowing how to doubt,” Nif answered.

Nya leaned back, studying her sister.

Nif didn’t ask for forgiveness.

She didn’t excuse herself.

She just sat there, honest — raw — and it hit Nya harder than anger ever had.

“You know,” Nya said softly, “I used to pretend I had a sister.”

Nif’s gaze sharpened.

“When I was little,” Nya continued, forcing a crooked smile. “I’d talk to someone who wasn’t there when it got too quiet. I’d imagine she was older, or younger, depending on the night. Sometimes she was brave. Sometimes she was worse than me so I could feel better about myself.”

Nif let out a breath that sounded almost like a laugh.

“And now?” she asked.

Nya shrugged.

“Now she’s real,” she said. “And she’s someone I don’t know how to be mad at properly.”

Nif looked down.

Her voice, when it came, was barely more than a whisper.

“I used to imagine someone outside the walls,” she said. “Someone who didn’t need permission to laugh. Someone who could run without asking. On the bad days, I told myself she was out there so the world had... balance. So suffering wasn’t just inside the Church.”

Their eyes met across the table.

The realization landed between them like something sacred:

They had spent years inventing each other  
because the world had stolen the real version.

Nif reached out instinctively — then hesitated, as if unsure whether touching would break whatever fragile bridge had formed.

Nya didn’t hesitate.

She closed the distance, resting her hand over Nif’s.

Warm.

Human.

Real.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Nya said.

“And it wasn’t yours,” Nif replied.

The truth didn’t erase anything.

But it loosened a knot neither of them had realized they’d been carrying beneath their ribs.

---

Mara returned.

“It’s time.”

The archivists gathered at the doorway — a quiet farewell. No ceremony. No grand speeches.

Just one archivist pressing a scrap of parchment into Mara’s palm, and another touching Nif’s shoulder gently as if saying, *Be careful with the part of the world you carry.*

The silver-haired archivist bowed their head.

“Remember,” they said, “you are not here to be legends. Legends don’t get to make choices. People do.”

Nya nodded.

Nif did, too.

They stepped beyond the boundary stones.

The air shifted again — bigger, louder, less forgiving.

The world resumed.

---

They walked for hours following the river.

No bells.

No scouts.

Just wind and birds and the distant rush of water.

At one point, Nya kicked a stone too hard and it skittered into the river. She cursed under her breath.

Nif startled — then laughed softly.

“What?” Nya asked.

“Nothing,” Nif said. “It’s just... in the temple, we weren’t allowed to swear unless it was part of a prayer.”

Nya snorted. “Seems like most prayers are swears anyway.”

Nif smiled, small but genuine.

They kept walking.

A while later, Nif spoke again.

“Do you ever think about what we could have been,” she asked, “if they hadn’t taken us?”

Nya thought about it.

Really thought.

Then she shook her head.

“No,” she said. “Because then I’d start hating a life I already lived. And there were good pieces in it. Taldo. Mara. The river. The nights we told stories to make winters shorter.”

Nif nodded slowly.

“I had moments, too,” she said. “Books hidden in broom closets. A teacher who taught me to ask questions silently. An old guard who taught me the names of constellations even though he wasn’t supposed to.”

Their eyes found each other again — not searching for sameness.

Recognizing difference without fear.

Maybe that was what family really was:  
not a mirror,  
but a tether.

Something that said,  
*You are not standing here alone.*

Nya bumped her shoulder lightly against Nif's.

"You're too serious," she said.

Nif raised an eyebrow. "You're too reckless."

"Good," Nya smirked. "We'll balance."

For the first time since the crescents appeared, laughter came freely — brief, fragile, and precious.

Mara glanced back at them, a faint smile ghosting her lips.

"Keep talking," she said. "Talking keeps fear small enough to carry."

So they did.

About petty childhood grudges they never got to have.

About meals they loved.

About things that scared them, and things that didn't.

And beneath every word ran the quiet knowledge:

They had sixteen years stolen from them.

But they wouldn't let the world steal the rest.

Ahead, the river forked — one branch flowing as expected, the other inexplicably climbing upward against gravity, shimmering like a reversed waterfall.

Mara slowed.

"There," she said softly. "The road that shouldn't exist."

Nya and Nif stood side by side.

Not chosen by fate.

Not written by prophecy.

Two sisters who had found each other in a world that tried very hard to make sure they wouldn't.

They stepped toward the uphill river.

Together.

## CHAPTER #12 — The River That Forgot the Rules

The water didn't roar upward.

It climbed.

Quietly.

Gracefully.

As if gravity were a polite suggestion and the river had simply decided it had better places to be.

Nya stared, wide-eyed. "That's... wrong."

"It's old," Mara corrected. "Old things don't bother asking permission from the laws that came after them."

Nif crouched at the bank, studying the current. Leaves drifted past, gliding uphill without strain. A fallen twig spun lazily as it ascended, like it was enjoying the rebellion.

"Do we follow it on the bank," Nif asked, "or in it?"

Mara hesitated.

"In it is safer."

Nya blinked. "How is *water* safer than ground?"

"Because the Church expects feet," Mara said. "They don't track current lines. They've forgotten to."

Nif tested the water with her fingers. It wasn't cold — just startling in how alive it felt, like touching a muscle instead of a stream.

Nya sighed. "If I drown, I'm haunting you."

"Get in slowly," Mara instructed. "Let the river decide if it wants you."

Nya muttered under her breath but waded in.

The current wrapped around her calves, then knees, tugging her gently uphill. Not dragging — guiding. Like an unseen hand pressing at her back.

Nif stepped in next. The water brightened faintly around her, as if recognizing something. She steadied herself, then nodded.

Mara followed last, staff held just above the surface.

They moved carefully, letting the current carry them against logic.

The forest thinned as they climbed. The river carved its strange path through rock and meadow, slipping between stone arches and under hanging roots like a story retracing itself.

Dragonflies hovered beside them, following as though curious. Once, a deer appeared on the bank, stared at them with ancient, unafraid eyes, then vanished into the trees.

The world here did not feel like the same world they had run from.

It felt quieter.

Listening, yes — but without malice.

As they walked, Nya spoke softly.

“Did you ever swim?”

Nif shook her head. “We were warned against water deeper than a ritual basin. Said it hid temptations.”

Nya snorted. “It hides fish.”

“And rocks.”

“And freedom.”

Nif smiled faintly. “Especially that.”

A gentle wave lifted them slightly, carrying them over a shallow stone shelf. Nif stumbled, and Nya caught her elbow before she slipped.

“Careful,” Nya said. “Freedom’s slippery.”

Nif rolled her eyes — but the grin stayed.

---

They followed the river for hours.

The uphill climb never felt like strain — only persistence. Sunlight faded behind distant peaks. Twilight turned the river to liquid dusk.

Mara finally motioned them toward a small bank where the ground rose dry and moss-soft.

“We stop here.”

They climbed out. The strange pull of the water let go reluctantly, as if disappointed. Nya wrung out her trousers. Nif brushed droplets from her hair.

The crescent marks glowed faintly in the dimness — calm, not urgent.

For a while, they sat in companionable quiet.

Nya broke it first.

“What do you think our mother was like?”

Nif blinked at the suddenness of the question.

“I don’t know,” she said honestly. “But I wonder if she ever forgave herself for letting us be taken.”

Nya picked at a blade of grass.

“She probably didn’t have a choice.”

“People rarely do when power reaches into their homes,” Nif murmured.

A pause.

Then Nya whispered — so quietly even the river had to lean closer:

“I don’t remember her face.”

Nif swallowed.

“Neither do I.”

Nya’s voice cracked — a ragged edge. “I hate that most of all. Not the Church. Not the hunters. Not the crescent. That they took even *that* from us.”

Nif leaned over and rested her forehead briefly against Nya’s.

The gesture was simple. Fierce.

“I’ll remember with you,” she said.

Nya laughed weakly through tears she refused to let fall. “You don’t even know what you’re remembering.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Nif said. “We’ll build something out of what we have left.”

They sat like that for a long moment.

Not talking.

Just existing with the same hurt in different bodies.

---

When night deepened, they slept.

Nya dreamed again — but this time the valley wasn't burning.

She walked through Dragon Valley as it once had been: wildflowers growing between enormous rib bones, birds nesting in ancient skull hollows, wind carrying songs in languages older than cities.

The Last Star rested in the valley's heart — not shining violently.

Beating quietly. Alive.

A voice spoke beside her.

Not Ileana.

A voice like earth turning, patient and sorrowful.

*Guardians break first*, it said. *That is their burden and their mercy.*

Nya turned — but the dream blurred and slipped through her fingers.

•

She woke at dawn with that sentence echoing in her chest.

Nif was already awake, sitting on a rock, blade resting across her knees like a promise she was still deciding whether to accept.

Mara packed their few belongings.

Nya touched the crescent under her ribs.

It pulsed once — not warning, not pain.

Acknowledgment.

They stepped back into the water.

The river accepted them again.

Carrying them gently upward, toward lands where logic bent and history remembered — toward Dragon Valley, where choices waited like storms on clear horizons.

## CHAPTER #13 — The Bones That Still Breathe

They knew they were getting closer before Mara ever said it.

The air changed.

It tasted older.

Heavier.

Like rain about to fall — except there were no clouds, only endless sky stretching over jagged ridges that rose and fell like an ancient heartbeat frozen into mountains.

The river finally ended its rebellion and spilled into a high plateau, vanishing beneath cracked stone. Wind howled softly through fissures, carrying with it the faintest scent of ash and wildflowers.

Mara stopped.

Her voice dropped to something like reverence.

“Dragon Valley begins there.”

Nya and Nif stepped forward together.

The world opened.

And it was not what Nya expected.

It wasn’t fire and terror and legends carved into rock.

It was quiet.

A vast hollow stretched out below, ringed by mountains. Wild grasses waved like a soft sea. Flowers grew in broken earth. Small creatures darted between shadows.

And everywhere —

**bones.**

Not piles.  
Not trophies.

Resting.

Great arcs of ribcage, bleached and beautiful. Vertebrae as big as houses. Skulls half sunk into ground, their eye sockets filled with birds' nests and vines. Time had not devoured them.

Time had **accepted** them.

Nif stood frozen, staring down at it all. The wind tugged her hair backward. Her hand pressed to the crescent beneath her ribs.

Nya swallowed. "It's like they... laid down and never got up."

Mara nodded.

"They chose this," she said softly. "When the last wars ended, the dragons decided they would no longer be tools. They came here to die where no one could claim them."

Nya felt something shift inside her — grief, awe, guilt, all tangled together.

Nif whispered, almost afraid to disturb the valley:

"Do you hear that?"

Nya listened.

At first — nothing.

Then — the faintest sound.

Not a voice.

Not quite.

A **low hum**, threaded through the wind and ground. It vibrated in bone and soil and skin, rising, falling, like breath that never quite stopped.

The bones,

**were not silent.**

Mara watched the sisters carefully.

"From here forward," she said quietly, "this land will speak more plainly to you than to me. I'm only a guide now. You two are what it has been waiting on."

Nya's palms went clammy.

Nif's eyes remained fixed on the valley.

"I feel," she murmured, "like someone is watching us — but not in the Church's way. Not like hunters. Like... like a door that's been locked is deciding if we deserve to knock."

Mara nodded once.

She pointed toward the valley center — where the ground gently dipped downward into a shallow cradle.

A faint shimmer pulsed there.

Not bright.

Not violent.

A soft, steady glow — like a heartbeat beneath skin.

"The Star lies buried under that," Mara said. "Deep. The Church doesn't know exactly how deep yet — and the valley resists their digging."

Nya exhaled. "Good."

Mara's expression darkened.

"It won't be enough."

Wind swept through the bones, and the low hum grew stronger.

Nif took a step forward.

Then another.

And something extraordinary happened.

The ground beneath her feet thrummed — then **answered** her step with a vibration that matched the rhythm of her pulse. The air around her warmed. A few strands of her hair lifted gently, like a hand brushing past.

Nya moved to join her.

The same warmth.

The same hum.

But different — like two notes of the same chord.

And the valley **noticed**.

The hum deepened.

Birds startled from a ribcage. Somewhere, unseen, a stone cracked — slowly, deliberately — like an old eye opening.

Nya swallowed hard.

“Okay,” she whispered. “That’s definitely not in my imagination.”

Nif nodded, though her eyes were distant — focused inward.

“There’s... something trying to speak,” she said. “But it doesn’t use words.”

Mara motioned them onward.

“Come.”

They descended into the valley, weaving between bones, walking paths that seemed to exist not because feet had made them — but because the valley **approved**.

The deeper they went, the louder the hum became — and the marks beneath their ribs began to glow, faint but steady.

Nya breathed in time with it without meaning to.

In.

Out.

Living heartbeat.

Ancient heartbeat.

Theirs.

---

They reached the center by dusk.

The ground beneath them had turned smooth — worn by countless years of wind. The glow pulsed below the surface, visible through hairline cracks like light beneath frosted glass.

Mara stopped at the edge of the shallow hollow.

“This is as close as I go,” she said gently.

Nya turned. “Why?”

“Because there are truths that belong to bloodlines,” Mara replied. “Not caretakers. And what waits below... will not speak to me.”

Nif looked down at the glowing cracks.

Her voice trembled — not with fear.

With enormity.

“What do we do?”

Mara’s eyes softened.

“Listen.”

---

They stepped forward.

The ground brightened beneath their feet.

Heat surged — not burning — *recognizing*.

The glow spread outward from where they walked, tracing veins across the earth until it connected — bone to stone to star.

The hum rose.

Nya’s vision blurred.

The world tilted — not violently — but like a curtain being pulled back.

The valley fell away.

The bones grew shadows — and then flesh.

For an instant — just one impossible instant —  
Nya did not stand in a graveyard.

She stood among living dragons.

Massive. Magnificent. Watching the horizon. Some scarred. Some tired. None afraid.

Their eyes glowed with ancient, weary intelligence.

And towering above them all, wings folded like mountains resting —  
stood **the last elder dragon**.

Black as night.

Scales etched with faint lines of starlight.

Eyes molten gold and sorrowful.

He turned his head.

Saw them.

Saw **her**.

Saw **both**.

Nif inhaled sharply — and without realizing, slipped into **first person**:

*He wasn't angry.*

*That terrified me more than rage would have.*

*He looked at us the way someone looks at a wound that already knows how it will scar.*

His voice didn't shake the air.

It shook **truth** itself.

“So the moon's daughters have come.”

Nif's throat closed.

Nya stood beside her, gripping her hand so hard it almost hurt — grounding her.

“We didn't choose this,” Nif whispered — not aloud, but into the space his presence filled.

The dragon lowered his head.

“Neither did she.”

Images flashed — Ileana, standing before him — smaller than his talon, but unyielding. Tears on her cheeks. The Star pulsing behind her.

Her voice echoed — broken, determined:

*If they cannot stop wanting power... then I must stop being something they can take.*

The dragon closed his eyes — grief woven into every line of his massive form.

“She saved the world from itself.

But saving is always a loan.

And every loan comes in due time.”

Nya's breath hitched.

“What do you mean?” she whispered.

The elder dragon's gaze fell on both of them.

Ancient. Compassionate.

Unwavering.

"When they awaken the Star fully, neither it — nor the world — will choose restraint again.

Power remembers the hands that misuse it."

The vision trembled.

The valley flickered back into reality — bones, grass, dusk.

But the dragon's presence remained.

Closer now.

Inside the hum. Inside the mark. Inside the ache.

And then —

He spoke the words that settled like a blade laid gently across their hearts:

"To silence the Star, one must become it.

And one must let them."

Silence sprawled.

Heavy.

Unbearable.

Nya shook her head weakly. "No. No — there has to be—"

"Balance," the dragon said softly.

"Stars devour. Moons guide.

One sister will anchor the world.

The other... will burn for it."

Nif felt the world tilt.

Not shock.

Not even fear, exactly.

Something colder:

## **Recognition.**

Like she had known, somewhere deep under denial, the entire time.

“But if one becomes the Star—” her voice cracked — “she dies.”

The dragon did not soften the truth.

“Yes.”

Nya’s fingers dug into Nif’s palm.

“We won’t do it,” she said fiercely, tears burning. “We’ll find another way. We’ll — we’ll break the Church. We’ll destroy the fragment. We’ll—”

The elder dragon’s gaze turned unbearably kind.

“Children always believe they can outrun the shape of things.”

The vision dimmed.

The hum faded to a slow, inevitable rhythm.

“You will not be *forced*.

Sacrifice is only sacrifice if it is chosen.”

The last thing they heard before the valley fully returned was not prophecy,

but a plea:

“Make sure the one who remains remembers why.”

And then —

He was gone.

Only the bones.

Only the night.

Only the two of them standing in a valley that had just told them  
their story would not end with victory —

but with a choice sharp enough to cut the world in half.

Nya broke first.

She stumbled backward, shaking, tears threatening to spill.

“That’s not fair,” she whispered. “That’s — that’s not a choice. That’s cruelty dressed as destiny.”

Nif stared ahead, expression unreadable.

Inside her, something had turned over.

A weight.

A truth.

A seed.

She didn’t speak.

She couldn’t.

Because somewhere in the bottom of her heart —

she already knew

who the valley had been looking at longest.

## **CHAPTER #14 — The Weight of a Word**

Night swallowed the valley.

The bones caught the starlight and glowed faintly, like constellations that had fallen and never climbed back.

They made camp beneath the shelter of a ribcage taller than a house. The wind threaded through the hollow spaces and sang — low, mournful, endless.

No one spoke.

Not while Mara gathered a small fire that barely dared exist.

Not while water boiled.

Not while dusk became darkness entirely.

Nya sat a little apart from the flames, arms wrapped around her knees.

The dragon’s words looped in her mind, relentless.

*One must become it.  
And one must let them.*

She heard the part he hadn't said out loud — not to both of them, anyway.

When the vision had flickered, the elder had looked *right at her* — and his voice had been softer, almost apologetic:

*You will want to take her place.  
You cannot.*

The memory scraped like broken glass.

Her throat tightened.

She glanced at Nif across the fire.

Nif sat rigid, as if still carved from the vision — hands clasped tightly in her lap, jaw clenched, eyes unfocused. Her crescent glowed faintly through the fabric of her shirt, pulse uneven.

She looked brave.

She looked strong.

She looked like someone trying very, very hard not to crumble.

Mara stirred the pot and didn't look at them.

"This is where I say nothing," she murmured. "Because this part isn't mine."

Then she quietly stood and stepped away into the shadows — giving them privacy that felt too big and not big enough at the same time.

The silence pressed.

Nya swallowed hard.

"Nif," she said softly.

No answer.

"Nif."

Nif blinked — as if surfacing from someplace deep and dangerous. Her eyes shifted to Nya, hollowed and sharp at once.

"Yes?"

Nya's chest trembled.

She hadn't meant to cry.

The tears came anyway.

"I have to tell you what he told me."

A twitch of dread crossed Nif's face — quick, controlled — like a door someone tried to close gently even as it was kicked open.

"He already told us," Nif said. "We both heard it."

Nya shook her head slowly.

"No. Not all of it."

Nif's shoulders stiffened.

A crack ran through the quiet.

"What else?" she whispered.

Nya took a breath — and the truth hurt on the way out.

"He said... there isn't another path. Not if the Star wakes fully. He said one of us has to—"

Her voice broke.

She forced it back.

"One of us has to *become it*. And the other has to stand there and let it happen."

The fire popped.

The valley hummed.

Nif's expression didn't move.

For a heartbeat.

Then it shattered.

"Don't," she whispered.

Nya blinked. "Nif—"

“I know what he said,” Nif snapped — louder now, breath hitching. “I know what it meant. I know what you’re circling around like it’ll hurt less if you don’t land on it.”

Her voice trembled, rising.

“You’re going to say it like it’s noble. Like it’s fate. Like we should bow to it because a creature older than the sky told us to.”

Nya swallowed, tears burning. “I’m not bowing. I’m—”

Nif shot to her feet.

The firelight snapped across her face, catching wetness gathered at the corners of her eyes.

“I’M NOT READY TO DIE.”

The words ripped out of her throat — raw, unpolished, honest in a way sermons had never allowed.

Her hands shook.

Her breath came fast.

The crescent mark burned bright — anger, fear, grief all tangled and desperate.

“I don’t want to be remembered, Nya!” she cried. “I don’t want to be a story they tell because it’s convenient! I don’t want to be the girl who *burned* so the world could feel righteous about surviving!”

The valley swallowed her voice and echoed it back in softer pieces.

Nya stood slowly.

Her chest hurt just looking at her.

Nif’s voice cracked further.

“And everyone talks about sacrifice like it’s beautiful — like it’s this shining, glorious thing — but it isn’t! It’s cold and it’s lonely and it steals every future you never got to decide on!”

Tears spilled freely now.

“I haven’t seen the ocean,” she whispered. “I’ve never kissed anyone. I don’t know what it feels like to grow old. I don’t even know how to live without asking permission first — and now the world expects me to *die for it*?”

Nya crossed the space between them in three quick, shaking steps.

Nif tried to turn away.

Nya grabbed her.

Hard.

Not to trap.

To anchor.

“I know,” Nya whispered, voice breaking in its own way. “I know, I know, I know—”

Nif shoved her weakly once — then collapsed forward, forehead pressed hard into Nya’s shoulder as if she hated needing the contact and needed it anyway.

And suddenly it wasn’t an explosion anymore.

It was a sob.

Ugly. Violent. Honest.

*I’m not ready.*

*I’m scared.*

*I don’t want to be the one who doesn’t get to come back.*

Nya wrapped both arms around her — tight. Fierce. Shaking.

Her words came in a rush — half-choked, half-vowed.

“You don’t have to be brave right now. You don’t have to agree. You don’t have to accept any of this. I will fight the whole valley if I have to — I will tear down every lie, every tower, every altar — before I let them tell you your only purpose is to disappear.”

Nif clutched the front of Nya’s shirt like she might drown without something to hold.

Her voice was small.

“I’m not her,” she whispered. “I’m not Ileana. I’m not some legend who wakes up knowing how to save everyone. I’m just—”

“—my sister,” Nya said fiercely.

Nif froze.

The word didn’t comfort.

It grounded.

"You're my sister," Nya continued, forehead pressed against Nif's temple. "And that means your life isn't something the world gets to claim by default. If — *if* — this happens... it won't be because dragons expected it. Or because the Church twisted things. Or because sacrifice sounds poetic in old songs."

Her voice softened — and broke anyway.

"It'll be because you chose it — and I'll hate the world for making you have to."

Nif cried harder.

Not because anything had been fixed.

Because nothing had.

Because the truth had finally been said out loud where it could hurt properly.

After a long time — minutes, or centuries — the sobs quieted.

Nif's breathing steadied in shaky stages.

She didn't step back yet.

Neither did Nya.

They just stood there, held together, both facing a future that had teeth.

Nif finally whispered — hoarse, exhausted:

"I don't want to fight either."

Nya exhaled slowly.

"Then we fight only when we have to," she said. "Not because someone wrote it down once and decided it sounded heroic."

A beat of silence.

The valley hummed — softer now.

Listening.

Nif pulled back slightly — eyes red, cheeks wet, jaw still trembling.

"I might be a coward," she murmured.

Nya shook her head.

“You’re not. Cowards pretend they aren’t afraid. You told the truth.”

Something in Nif’s expression softened — like a knot loosening.

She took a slow breath.

Then another.

Then, quietly:

“If... if it ever comes to that choice — promise me something.”

Nya’s heart stuttered.

“What?”

Nif swallowed.

“Don’t let them make it beautiful.”

Tears blurred Nya’s vision all over again.

“I promise.”

They sat again, slowly, side by side — shoulders touching. Breathing the same air. Sharing the same dread.

Mara watched from the shadows — eyes shining, jaw tight — and said nothing.

Because there was nothing left to say.

Only the valley spoke — a low, long note of empathy and mourning, as if it grieved in advance for a girl who wasn’t ready to die...

and for a world that might still ask her to.

And high above, unseen beyond clouds and distance,

the Star pulsed once,

cold and expectant.

## CHAPTER #15 — The Shape of Tomorrow

Morning came slow.

The valley felt heavier than it had the night before — not hostile, not cruel — just aware. Like it had heard every word spoken beneath the dragon bones and filed them away with all the other griefs this world had ever asked of its heroes.

Nya woke first.

Nif slept beside her, curled in on herself, breath soft and uneven. Tear tracks still marked her cheeks. One hand rested unconsciously over the crescent at her ribs, as if she were guarding it — or asking it to be quiet.

Nya watched her for a moment.

Not out of duty.

Out of love — the fierce, protective, inconvenient kind that did not care what destiny thought of it.

Mara sat nearby, staring into the cooled ashes of the fire, hands folded loosely.

“You heard,” Nya said quietly.

Mara nodded without looking up. “I heard what mattered. I did not hear everything — and I’m not going to ask.”

Nya swallowed.

“What happens next?”

Mara finally lifted her gaze — steady, tired, and painfully kind.

“Next,” she said, “you do something terribly difficult.”

Nya braced.

“You live anyway.”

Nya let out a shaky exhale — half laugh, half despair. “That feels wrong. After hearing all that?”

“It will feel wrong,” Mara said gently. “Until it doesn’t. Knowing death may wait at the end of a road doesn’t mean you rush toward it. You still walk. You still learn the turns. You still gather every moment along the way like it matters — because it does.”

Nya nodded slowly.

The advice didn't make the future hurt less.

But it gave the present a purpose.

Behind them, Nif shifted and groaned softly as she woke. She blinked at the daylight, at the bones, at Nya.

Her face went blank for a heartbeat — remembering.

Then it softened.

"Morning," she murmured — voice raw, but steady.

Nya forced a small smile. "Morning."

Mara stood and dusted off her hands. "Eat. The world rarely pauses for grief, but empty bodies make bad decisions."

They shared bread and dried fruit. Quiet. Simple. Ordinary.

The normality of it felt almost rebellious.

Nif ate slowly, each bite careful — like someone re-learning how to exist in their own skin.

When she finished, she wiped her hands, stared out at the valley, and said softly:

"Just... tell me what we do. Today. Not tomorrow. Not at the end."

Mara nodded once, approving the question.

"Today we move east, toward the fault lines," she said. "The Star's fragment the Church controls will be drawn to the Valley's heart eventually. Their priests are stubborn; their generals are worse. They will bring their weapon here because they think this place belongs to no one."

Nya glanced at the bones. "They'll be wrong."

"Yes," Mara said. "But the valley does not kill for us. It remembers. It protects. It asks us to make its arguments in the world that forgot how to listen."

Nif tightened the wrap around the gifted blade, then slid it into her belt.

Her voice steadied.

"What do you need us to do?"

Mara didn't say *fight*.

She didn't say *bleed*.

She said:

"Learn everything the valley is willing to teach before they arrive."

---

They walked.

Not far — not fast — but with intention.

Among ribs that arched like forgotten cathedrals.  
Past skulls that had grown gardens instead of fear.  
Across stones etched by time into spirals and lines.

And as they walked, Nif began to hear it differently.

Not just the hum.

### **Patterns.**

Breath in the earth.  
Memory in the wind.  
Patience in the bones.

She touched one of the massive rib arches gently.

A warmth moved through her palm  
and into the crescent beneath her ribs.

Not a command.

A question.

*Will you see this through?*

She didn't answer out loud.

She didn't know yet.

But she didn't pull her hand away.

Nya watched her, eyes soft.

And quietly, quietly — the fear between them began to evolve.

Not into acceptance.

Into **understanding**.

Because fear spoken aloud can change shape  
from a cage  
into a companion.

---

By noon, the valley floor opened into a flat expanse.

Carvings filled the stone there — huge, spiraling, intersecting. Not runes. Not symbols of ownership. Diagrams of cycles.

Stars.

Moons.

Life rising.

Life ending.

Life continuing anyway.

Nif knelt, tracing one with her fingers.

“It’s not a prophecy,” she whispered.

Nya crouched beside her. “What is it?”

Nif swallowed.

“A reminder that everything ends,” she said softly. “And that sometimes... endings are gifts the world doesn’t recognize until afterward.”

Nya stared at the etched moons turning into blank space.

Then at Nif.

Her chest tightened.

A breeze swept across the stone, lifting hair, stirring dust.

It almost felt like the valley exhaling.

---

They rested in the shade of a dragon skull when afternoon faded.

The sky burned orange and violet, clouds thin as scars.

Nif sat with her back against the bone, knees tucked up, arms wrapped loosely. She wasn't crying anymore — but she wasn't pretending she was fine, either.

Nya sat close — not touching, not crowding. Just there.

After a long silence, Nif spoke.

Her voice was fragile and fierce at once.

"I'm still not ready."

"I know," Nya said.

"And I'm still angry."

"I know."

"And I still don't want to fight."

Nya paused — then nodded slowly.

"Then we only fight to make sure no one else has to be ready either," she said. "That's enough."

Nif tilted her head, eyes searching Nya's face.

"You're not going to try to talk me into bravery, are you?"

"No," Nya replied softly. "But I will stand in front of you when you're not feeling it."

Something eased in Nif's shoulders.

She leaned her head sideways — just enough to rest against Nya's.

A small, quiet anchor.

"I'll stand in front of you too," she whispered. "Even if I'm shaking when I do it."

Nya smiled — aching and proud.

"That's the best kind."

---

Mara watched them from a distance.

Not intruding.

Not guiding.

Just witnessing — the way one witnesses the most important parts of stories that have nothing to do with magic and everything to do with love.

Because the valley could teach them ancient truths.

The elder dragon could deliver impossible choices.

The Church could bring weapons dressed up as faith.

But this —

this vow made quietly between sisters under the skull of a creature older than empires —

this was the thing that would matter most  
when tomorrow sharpened itself into inevitability.

Night came slowly again.

They built no fire this time.

They sat beneath stars that felt heavier now — as if one of them was watching more closely than the rest —  
and they listened to the valley breathe.

The world outside Dragon Valley kept moving.

Priests marched.

Scouts tracked.

The Star hummed.

But for one last stretch of night,

Nif and Nya let themselves be

not chosen,  
not marked,  
not inevitable —

just two girls,

caught in the terrifying beauty  
of knowing the future might break them

and deciding to walk toward it anyway.

## CHAPTER #16 — When the Wind Changes Direction

They sensed the shift before they saw anything.

A ripple moved through the tall grasses of the valley — not wind, not animal. A pressure. A subtle tilting of the world, like a breath being held too long.

Mara stood suddenly.

Nif and Nya followed her gaze toward the northern ridge.

Thin lines of smoke rose there.

Controlled. Measured.

### **Campfires.**

Nya's jaw tightened. "They're here."

Mara didn't blink. "They're *close*. And they won't stop until they believe the valley belongs to them."

The hum under the ground deepened in response — not fearful.

Protective.

Nif felt it climb her spine and settle at the base of her skull. Her crescent warmed like a second heartbeat.

"They're bringing the fragment," she whispered. "I can feel it."

Mara nodded grimly. "And the priests who believe they control it."

A moment of silence stretched between them — heavy, stretching thin, threatening to snap.

Then Mara said something that startled them both.

"We don't stay at the center anymore."

Nya turned to her sharply. "Why not? Isn't that where the Star is—"

"Exactly," Mara said. "It's where they'll push us. Where they want us. The valley protects, but it doesn't shield foolishness. We move along the edges. High ground. Secrets first. Confrontations last."

Nif inhaled slowly.

Her fear didn't vanish —  
but it settled into something steadier:

**alertness.**

A readiness she hadn't asked for, but no longer denied.

They gathered their few things and began toward the valley's eastern rim — climbing over fallen vertebrae, following narrow paths carved by long-vanished titans.

As they walked, the sound of distant voices faintly reached them.

Chants.

Low, rhythmic, hungry.

Nya's hands balled into fists. "They sound like they're praying to a knife."

Mara didn't disagree. "Faith is the sharpest thing there is. And the easiest to turn the wrong way."

Nif's steps slowed as they reached higher ground. She looked back across Dragon Valley.

The bones no longer looked still.

They looked **watchful**.

The wind carried dust in careful swirls. Grass leaned outward from the valley center, as if bracing. Tiny stones rolled gingerly across smooth stone slopes — not falling.

Choosing where to rest.

"Do you see that?" Nif whispered.

Nya followed her gaze.

Then she did.

The valley wasn't resisting the Church's approach—

It was *preparing*.

Mara's voice softened. "This place has witnessed the end of ages. It understands timing. We should listen to it."

---

They reached a ridge that overlooked both the valley heart and the distant tents of Celestial Horizon.

White and gold cloth stretched across the ground like a spreading disease. Watchtowers rose overnight. Lines of soldiers moved in disciplined rows.

And at the very center of their camp, surrounded by scaffolding and runes —  
**the Fragment.**

It pulsed faintly, like an arrogant imitation of the true Star resting deep below.

Even from this distance, Nif felt it tugging.

Not at her body.

At her *resolve*.

Like a voice whispering:

There is another way.  
There is a way where no one has to die.  
Just open the door.

Her throat tightened.

Nya noticed. "Hey."

Nif blinked.

Nya's hand rested firmly over hers.

It was grounding in the simplest way.

"I'm here," Nya said softly. "Stay with me."

The whisper faded — resentful.

Nif exhaled shakily.

"Thank you."

---

They crouched low as Mara pointed out figures around the camp.

"That one," she murmured, indicating a slender priest with intricate tattoos winding up his neck.  
"He's *Speaker of Horizons*. He thinks the fragment answers to him."

Nya narrowed her eyes. "Does it?"

"No," Mara said. "And that makes him dangerous. People who believe the world owes them obedience always are."

Another figure moved beside the priest — armored, stern, eyes hard.

"That one commands the military," Mara continued. "General Corren. He thinks faith is only useful if it can win wars."

Nif stared.

Their alliance didn't look harmonious.

It looked... strained.

Faith vs. power.

Doctrine vs. control.

Two wolves pulling the same carcass apart in different directions.

Nif's voice was quiet. "They're afraid of each other."

Mara nodded. "As all tyrants eventually are."

The information wasn't hope — not yet —  
but it was something like *leverage*.

Nya leaned forward, thoughtful. "If they're divided, we don't just fight them. We let them pull against themselves."

Mara gave her a long, unreadable look — then nodded slightly.

"You're starting to think like someone who survives," she said.

Nya almost smiled.

Almost.

---

They stayed hidden until sunset, watching, learning.

Priests argued over ritual positions.

Soldiers argued over defense structures.

Messengers ran.

Orders shifted.

Fear disguised itself as confidence.

The fragment glowed brighter by the hour — drawn by proximity to the true Star buried below.

Nif pressed her hand to the dragon bone beside her. The warmth there steadied her breathing.

*You are not here to win*, the valley seemed to say.

*You are here to matter.*

She didn't know yet what that meant.

But she was listening.

---

Night fell.

Torches flared across the Church encampment.

Mara motioned them back from the ridge.

“We move under darkness,” she said. “There are things the valley hides that only appear when night is brave enough.”

Nya raised a brow. “That sounds like you made it up.”

Mara smiled faintly. “Maybe I did. Maybe it’s true anyway.”

They descended along a different slope — one that curved toward the valley’s lower rim. The deeper they went, the more the shadows thickened — not empty, not threatening—

Present.

Nif slowed when something ahead glimmered faintly.

A pool.

Clear.

Still.

Resting in a crevice between rib bones, reflecting the stars perfectly — but with one difference:

In the reflection, the sky *moved faster*.

Constellations drifted, rolling forward like time sped up.

Nya peered into it and frowned. “Is that... the future?”

Mara shook her head.

“Possibility. Not promise.”

Nif knelt beside the pool.

In the reflection, she saw herself—

Standing at the valley’s center, sword raised, light pouring out of her until she vanished.

She flinched.

The pool flickered—

—and showed another image.

Nya at the center instead.

Nif gasped and grabbed the rock edge.

The water stilled.

Her heart pounded.

“It doesn’t choose,” Mara reminded gently. “It only shows the roads your hearts know exist.”

Nif hated that — hated how true it felt.

She rose slowly.

Nya’s eyes met hers.

Neither spoke.

They didn’t need to.

---

They found a place to rest beneath a rock ledge where glowing moss cast gentle, green light.

It wasn’t quite shelter.

It was permission.

Mara settled first, leaning against stone. “Sleep in shifts. I’ll take first watch.”

Nya lay down beside Nif.

The valley hummed softly — not ominous. Protective.

Nif stared up at the sliver of sky.

After a long moment, she whispered:

“Earlier... when the pool showed you instead of me... did you think about it? About being the one?”

Nya turned her head slowly.

“Yes.”

Nif swallowed. “And?”

Nya exhaled.

“I wanted to take it from you,” she said honestly. “I still do. But wanting doesn’t mean I’m allowed. And the dragon was right — sacrifice isn’t something we *assign* each other like chores.”

Nif’s throat tightened.

She nodded.

The space between them felt fragile and strong at the same time.

Then Nya added—

“But whatever happens... I’m not standing anywhere that isn’t next to you.”

Nif closed her eyes.

Not to hide.

Just to feel the weight of those words settle somewhere safe.

She whispered back:

“Good.”

Because the truth was terrifying.

And it was bearable

**only together.**

Outside, the wind shifted again.

Far away — at the Church camp — the fragment pulsed brighter.

The valley answered with a low, ancient hum.

And somewhere beneath the earth,

the Last Star —

patient,

waiting,

aware —

opened its eyes a little wider.

## CHAPTER #17 — Fault Lines

They woke to thunder that wasn't thunder.

The sound rolled through the valley in slow waves, vibrating the bones, humming in the soil, crawling up their spines. Birds burst out of grass in startled clouds. Pebbles trembled and skittered downhill.

Nya sat up fast. "What was—"

Mara was already standing, eyes trained toward the northern ridge.

"They've begun the alignment rituals."

Nif's stomach tightened.

The fragment pulsed over the camp — brighter than the night before, now tethered by runes like chains of light stretching into the earth.

Each pulse made the valley flinch.

Not visibly.

Inwardly.

Like a living thing clenching around a wound.

The thunder came again.

Deeper.

More insistent.

Nif pressed her hand over her crescent.

The mark **answered**.

She swallowed.

“It feels like... something’s tearing.”

Mara nodded grimly. “They’re forcing the fragment to mimic the Star’s original descent. They want to ‘rewrite the moment’ — place themselves at the center of creation so history bows to them afterward.”

Nya’s mouth twisted. “They want to steal a miracle and call it leadership.”

“Yes,” Mara said. “And if they succeed, the world will believe them — because worlds prefer simple lies to complicated truths.”

A tremor shook the ridge beneath their feet.

Nif stumbled, catching the rock with one hand.

The dragon bones resonated again — not song.

Warning.

Mara turned, her expression sharpening — decision settling into it.

“We don’t wait anymore.”

Nya blinked. “For what?”

“For the valley to protect itself,” Mara replied. “It isn’t meant to. It’s meant to *witness*. We’re the ones with hands.”

Nif’s throat tightened.

“Then what do we do?”

Mara swept her gaze across both of them — measuring their fear, their resolve, their exhaustion.

“We move along the fault lines.”

She pointed toward a jagged seam that cut across the valley like a scar — disappearing into the deep center.

“Those lines were carved when the dragons chose their deaths. They don’t lead to the Star—but they circle it. Safest path that still gets close.”

Nya frowned. “Close for what?”

Mara looked toward the Church camp.

“Close enough to break something that needs breaking.”

---

They descended carefully.

The fault line was a narrow split in the earth, no wider than a man’s shoulders in places, opening into sudden drops in others. Roots hung like tangled ropes from the crack’s sides. The air was cooler down there — dense, metallic.

Every so often, the tremors rolled through again.

Each one seemed louder.

Closer.

The fragment’s light pulsed higher above the ridge, like a false dawn.

Nif’s steps grew slower, but steadier.

She didn’t rush.

She didn’t freeze.

She simply... stayed.

Nya walked ahead for a while — then drifted back, then ahead again. Not restless.

Protective.

Mara followed behind, staff tapping carefully, attention everywhere at once.

At one point, the fault widened into a small hollow — a natural alcove carved smooth by ancient forces. Strange carvings covered the walls — spirals converging on empty circles.

Nif brushed the stone.

The image shifted faintly — not physically.

Memory layered over it.

Suddenly she saw:

Dragons standing in a circle.

Humans inside it — afraid — being shielded without understanding.

Ileana kneeling at the center — hands pressed to the earth, tears dripping onto stone.

*Let them live*, the memory whispered.

*Even if they do not deserve it yet.*

Nif pulled her hand back, breath shaking.

Nya's voice softened. "What did you see?"

Nif hesitated, then told her — quietly.

Nya leaned back against the wall, absorbing it, jaw clenched.

"They protected us," she murmured. "And we wrote them into monsters."

Mara's voice echoed gently in the chamber.

"That is the human gift," she said. "We fear what we owe."

The thunder rolled again.

Louder.

The valley's hum deepened, like a voice bracing itself for a painful truth.

"We move," Mara said.

---

The crack led them to a narrow ledge overlooking the valley's true heart.

Nif stopped in awe despite everything.

From here, the glow beneath the earth was unmistakable — a soft, deep light pulsing slow as sleep. The ground above it looked unremarkable.

No altar.

No crown.

No monument.

Just earth that had chosen to hold something too powerful to trust the sky with.

Nya exhaled. "It's peaceful."

Mara nodded. "Until someone tries to own it."

Her eyes shifted.

"Down there — see the stones arranged in a crescent?"

Nya followed her gesture and spotted them — half-buried, nearly invisible. Old. Intentional.

"That's where the anchoring circle connects. It's where the valley focused Ileana's last breath into guidance instead of destruction."

Nif's heart twisted.

Guidance.

Moon.

Anchor.

Words that suddenly felt heavier than they had before.

Before she could think further, voices echoed faintly from the opposite ridge — raised, angry.

Nya squinted.

General Corren stormed across the open platform toward the priests. The Speaker of Horizons stood unmoving, hands raised in ritual, eyes shining with zeal.

They argued.

Fiercely.

Nif couldn't hear all the words — just enough.

"—not stable—"

"—faith will hold—"

"—soldiers dying—"

"—necessary loss—"

The fragment pulsed, interrupting both of them, throwing sparks across the scaffolding.

A soldier fell screaming as light burned across his armor.

The priest didn't stop.

Nya's stomach churned. "They're breaking their own people to prove they're right."

Mara's voice hardened. "This is why the world needed guardians."

Another tremor hit — harder than before.

A crack split open near the Church camp.

Tents collapsed.

Men scrambled.

The fragment flared brighter — agitated.

Nif's breath hitched.

"It's responding to us."

Mara nodded. "To you."

"And the valley?" Nya asked.

"The valley is deciding how much it is willing to let happen," Mara answered.

That terrified Nif more than any weapon could.

Because the valley was wise.

And wisdom accepted losses.

---

They retreated into the fault line to give themselves cover.

For a while, they rested — not physically, but mentally — letting the shock of everything settle.

Nif sat with knees drawn up, chin resting on them, staring at the glow through the stone.

Her voice, when it came, barely disturbed the air.

"It's strange."

Nya turned. "What is?"

“I’m still terrified... but I’m starting to understand the shape of the fear.”

Nif tried to smile, failed, and tried again. “It’s not just dying I’m afraid of. It’s being *used* by the world even in death.”

Nya nodded slowly.

“That’s fair.”

She shifted closer.

“If it ever comes to that moment — it’s not going to belong to priests or legends. It won’t even belong to the dragon. It’ll belong to you.”

Nif looked at her.

Really looked.

And something inside her — something that had curled into itself the night before and screamed — unfolded just enough to breathe.

“Then promise me something else,” she said quietly. “If I choose wrong... don’t turn me into perfection afterward. Remember that I was scared.”

Nya’s throat tightened.

“I promise.”

Mara listened from a slight distance — eyes glistening, jaw tight — pretending not to.

---

The next tremor shook dust from the crack walls.

Mara stood.

“Time.”

Nya swallowed. “Time for what?”

“To stop them before their mistake wakes every old wound on this continent,” Mara said simply.

Nif rose.

Her legs trembled.

Her heart did, too.

But she didn’t collapse this time.

She steadied.

She wrapped her fingers around the hilt of the crescent-etched blade — not like a warrior.

Like someone holding onto courage.

Nya squeezed her shoulder.

“You’re not alone.”

“I know,” Nif whispered — and for the first time, she did.

They followed the fault line further,

toward the center,

toward the fragment,

toward the place where choices sharpened into edges.

And as they walked,

the Last Star pulsed beneath the world,

feeling them approach.

Recognizing.

Waiting.

## **CHAPTER #18 — The Weapon They Built Out of Fear**

Night swallowed the camp.

Torches burned along the ridge like a jagged crown. Banners snapped in the restless wind. The fragment hovered above its scaffolding, chained by runes that glowed like veins on an angry god.

And beneath all of it —

movement.

Orders murmured. Armor shifting. The low, relentless murmur of prayer.

Nif, Nya, and Mara crouched in the shadows of the fault line's mouth, close enough now that they could see individual faces, hear snatches of conversation. Sweat. Suspicion. Devotion. Doubt.

The Church was not an unbroken thing.

It was a machine held together with fear.

Mara's voice was barely a breath. "We need to understand what they're building before we decide how to break it."

Nya nodded, eyes narrowed. "So we sneak."

Nif swallowed.

The idea scraped against instinct — temples punished curiosity — but something else inside her rose to meet it.

Resolve.

"Where?" she whispered.

Mara lifted her chin toward a large tent reinforced with wooden struts and guards posted at each corner. The canvas was stamped with a golden sigil — half sun, half fractured star.

"The reliquary tent," Mara murmured. "That's where they hide the truths that don't fit sermons."

Nya smirked faintly, tension sharpening it. "Then that's where we belong."

They waited for a patrol to pass.

Then they moved.

Low. Silent. Careful.

The valley seemed to bend shadows around them — not invisibility.

Permission.

They slid between wagons, ducked beneath ropes, hugged the backs of stacked crates painted with warning sigils. The closer they got, the more Nif felt the fragment's pressure — a steady push at the back of her mind.

*Come closer.*

*Open the door.*

She grit her teeth.

Nya touched her wrist.

Stay.

They reached the reliquary tent unnoticed.

Mara pressed two fingers to the canvas seam.

“Ready?”

Nif nodded.

Nya nodded.

They slipped inside.

---

The tent smelled of incense and metal.

Shelves lined the walls — scrolls bound in leather, relics encased in glass, bones labeled with neat, reverent handwriting. A lamp burned low at the center table, illuminating piles of diagrams.

The diagrams stopped Nif cold.

They depicted the Star — sliced into neat sections, labeled like anatomy. Arrows indicated “flow,” “containment,” “extraction.”

Someone had tried to turn awe into a blueprint.

Nya picked up one parchment.

Her jaw tightened. “They’ve been planning this for years.”

Mara’s eyes darkened. “Longer. Faiths don’t become weapons overnight. They calcify.”

Nif’s gaze drifted further down the table — and froze.

A chalk drawing of **two crescents**, side by side, lines connecting them into the same circular anchor symbol she’d seen carved into stone in the valley.

Words beneath:

### **CONVERGENCE AS CATALYST**

Two vessels.

One sacrifice.

Star stabilized.

Her stomach turned.

“They know,” she whispered.

Nya looked — and color drained from her face.

“They wrote it,” she said tightly. “Like it’s a recipe.”

Mara leaned closer.

Her voice was rough.

“They don’t believe sacrifice is noble. They believe it’s *useful*.”

That single difference made Nif’s skin crawl.

A sound outside snapped their attention — boots, heavy, approaching.

Mara gestured sharply.

They slid behind tall shelves just as the tent flap opened.

Two voices entered.

The Speaker of Horizons.

And General Corren.

Their footsteps paced the tent.

Corren’s voice was low, clipped. “We are losing men.”

“They are martyrs,” the Speaker replied calmly. “History will remember their obedience.”

“History does not bury sons,” Corren snapped. “Mothers do.”

A beat of silence.

The Speaker’s tone cooled. “Your concern is noted. But the fragment responds only when pressure is applied. If we hesitate, the valley will reject us — and the Star will remain out of reach.”

Corren exhaled, long and furious. “And if we push too far?”

The Speaker smiled.

They could *hear* it.

“Then the world will need us more than ever.”

Nif’s hands curled into fists.

Corren’s boots scraped the floor. “And the girls?”

Nif went cold.

“Two crescents found,” the Speaker said. “One already documented as temple property. The other—feral. They are converging with the valley.”

“Then why haven’t we captured them?” Corren demanded.

“Because the valley listens,” the Speaker replied. “And because destiny is easiest to mold once it has walked itself into exhaustion.”

Nya’s jaw clenched.

Mara’s fingers tightened around her staff.

The Speaker continued, almost gently:

“When the time comes, we will allow one girl to perform the sacred death. The other will be crowned with our blessing. The world will believe what we tell it.”

Corren said nothing.

But the silence was enough.

He was not horrified.

He was calculating cost.

Nif’s chest burned.

It wasn’t fear this time.

It was rage — sharp and clean.

They weren’t guardians.

They weren’t even villains in their own story.

They were accountants of sacrifice.

---

The tent flap closed.

Footsteps faded.

Silence returned — heavy, trembling with what had just been said.

Nya turned slowly toward Nif.

Her voice trembled — fury riding just behind grief.

“They think they own your death.”

Nif swallowed hard.

“No,” she said quietly. “They think they own our story.”

Mara stepped out from hiding, eyes burning.

“Then we take it back.”

Nif stared at the diagrams again — the crescents, the convergence lines, the cold handwriting that treated lives like ingredients.

And for the first time since the dragon spoke, something shifted in her fear.

Not acceptance.

Not resignation.

A boundary.

“I’m not dying for a church,” she whispered. “If I die, it will be for the world — not the ones who broke it.”

Nya nodded — firm, certain.

“And if you live,” she said, voice steady, “it will be because you chose that too.”

Mara folded the offending parchment slowly, deliberately, then tucked it into her cloak.

“Knowledge is leverage,” she murmured. “And leverage topples structures.”

A shout rose outside suddenly.

Distant — but urgent.

Torches flared brighter. Men ran past the tent.

Nya tensed. “What now?”

Mara listened — expression shifting.

“They’re moving the fragment,” she said. “Toward the valley center.”

Nif’s blood went cold.

It was beginning.

Truly beginning.

Mara extinguished the lamp.

“Go. Quietly. We regroup at the fault mouth. Tonight we plan. Tomorrow...”

She hesitated.

Then finished softly:

“...tomorrow, we stand where they expect—and make sure the world does not end the way they want it to.”

Nif and Nya slipped from the tent into the restless night, hearts pounding,

no longer running just **from** something,

but walking — trembling, unwilling, determined —

**toward the place where fate thought it had already won.**

## **CHAPTER #19 — The City That Forgot to Be Afraid**

They left the valley at first light.

The path east wound through broken hills and low forests, the air thinning of that ancient hum — replaced bit by bit with noises that felt painfully familiar:

Markets.

Cart wheels.

Distant voices.

Life that did not yet know how close it stood to the edge.

By dusk, walls appeared.

Old stone. Cracked. Repaired with wood and iron patches. A city built not for glory — but survival.

**Rellith.**

A crossroads.

A thousand races passing through.

A thousand grudges pretending to rest.

A thousand stories pretending they didn't rely on one another.

Mara slowed as the gates came into full view.

"Remember," she murmured, "cities don't recognize danger until danger decides to walk through their front door."

Nya's stomach sank.

Nif felt something worse:

Hope.

She hated it — because she knew what the valley had shown them, what the Church planned — and yet the sight of children chasing each other near the gate, of vendors shouting, of laughter drifting up from somewhere unseen...

...made the future feel like a betrayal waiting to happen.

The guards were weary orcs with scarred tusks and bored expressions. They barely looked up as the trio entered.

Inside, the city pulsed with chaotic harmony.

Elven scholars at a stall argued with dwarf smiths about metal purity.

Werewolf couriers jogged through the streets with strapped bundles.

A pair of vampires leaned over a bookshop counter, debating poetry with the owner.

Human children tossed a ball made of wrapped cloth.

Everything coexisted by sheer, fragile agreement.

Nif whispered:

"They don't know."

Mara's gaze softened.

"They never do. Not until the sky changes."

---

They found lodging with a fae innkeeper whose silver hair sparkled faintly even in the dim hall.

Rooms upstairs. Straw mattresses. Thin blankets.

Enough.

Later, they walked the streets quietly, listening.

Rumors fluttered like moths around lamplight.

“The priests passed through yesterday—”

“—camped north—”

“—said the valley will be blessed—”

“—General Corren bought half the city’s grain—”

“—strange lights at night—”

“—something old waking—”

Fear threaded through the talk, but not preparedness.

Not yet.

Nya clenched her jaw.

“How do you warn people about a storm they can’t see?”

Mara hesitated.

“You don’t warn them about the storm,” she said. “You warn them about what they *can* control.”

Nif frowned. “Which is?”

“How quickly they can leave.”

---

They gathered in the corner of a crowded tavern that night.

Silence for a while.

Then Mara spoke as if she were teaching a difficult lesson.

“Tomorrow this city hosts a conscription sermon — ‘volunteers’ for the Church’s holy endeavor. They’ll promise blessing, reward, salvation. They’ll promise safety in exchange for obedience.”

Nya’s lip curled. “And when the battle comes—”

“They will use those volunteers as shields,” Mara finished.

Nif felt cold.

She looked around the tavern.

A fairy woman laughing with a human baker.

An orc boy carving a toy for his sister.

A vampire scholar quietly reading by the door.

All of them — unknowingly — already standing in the blast radius of faith.

“I want to scream at them,” Nif whispered.

Mara nodded.

“So do it. But choose how.”

Nif blinked.

Mara leaned forward.

“Fear spoken poorly causes riots. Fear spoken honestly makes people pack bags.”

Nya smirked faintly. “So... speeches?”

Mara shook her head. “Conversations. One table at a time. People believe warnings when they recognize the voice saying them.”

So they split.

Nif spoke to mothers carrying infants, to merchants who had seen too many wars, to elders whose skin knew the language of storms. Her voice was steady — not dramatic — just real:

“If you feel uneasy, trust it.  
If you can leave, leave.  
If you can’t, prepare.”

Some brushed her off.

Some listened.

Some quietly began to plan.

Nya, blunt and fierce, found fighters — humans, orcs, elves — and spoke of tactics, not prophecy. Where to run. Where *not* to gather. Which streets bottleneck. Which doors will hold.

They didn't believe in chosen ones.

But they believed in maps.

And Mara... simply moved through the city like a ghost guiding currents — nudging, redirecting, planting seeds:

Buy extra water.

Keep children close.

Don't go to the square in two days.

It felt like nothing.

It felt like everything.

---

Later, sitting on the inn roof beneath worn shingles, the sisters watched lanterns float along the streets like grounded stars.

Nif hugged her knees.

"I hate that they're living," she whispered. "I hate that they're laughing. It makes what's coming feel crueler."

Nya didn't answer at first.

Then:

"It *is* crueler. And it's also the reason we don't run back to the valley and hide."

Nif swallowed.

Below them, a small parade passed — young trainees of different races, armor mismatched, banners stitched together from scraps, chanting some city song about unity.

Hope.

Stupid, beautiful hope.

Nif whispered:

"They don't deserve what's coming."

Nya's voice was soft — but fierce.

"Then remember that. When the fighting starts. When the sky turns wrong. Remember they were people *first* — not casualties, not numbers."

Nif nodded — and the promise slid quietly into her bones.

---

At dawn, the Church arrived at Rellith's gates.

Horns.

Banners of gold and fractured white.

Priests on high platforms speaking about “destiny” and “divine positioning.”  
General Corren riding through the city like inevitability in armor.

Crowds gathered.

Mara kept the sisters at the back, in an alley.

“Watch,” she said. “Not their words — their faces.”

And they did.

Some eyes glowed with belief.  
Some with hunger.  
Some with fear.  
Many with confusion.

The Speaker lifted his hands.

His voice rolled like silk and stone:

“Rellith — crossroads of races, child of every nation — the Star calls, and your city  
will be remembered as the place that *answered*.”

Applause.

Uneven.

Reluctant.

Practiced.

Rellith didn't know it yet—

but it had already been drafted into history without consent.

And somewhere beneath all of that, faint and terrible,

Nif felt the fragment calling,

not with words,  
but with gravity.

Drawing faith.

Drawing armies.

Drawing the future into one narrow corridor.

Mara leaned close, voice barely a breath:

"This city will be the first line when they march on Dragon Valley."

Nya's hand tightened around Nif's.

Nif closed her eyes.

And in the darkness behind her eyelids she saw flashes — not prophecy, not certainty — but possibility:

Streets burning.

Bodies lying across cobblestone.

Wings broken.

Fangs bloodied.

Children crying for mothers that weren't coming back.

Moonlight landing on ruins that had once been a place where laughter lived.

She gasped and opened her eyes, shaking.

Nya was already there, steadying her.

"What did you see?"

Nif swallowed.

"Not fate," she said hoarsely. "Just... what happens when faith and fear meet in the same city."

Nya didn't argue.

Because she saw it too,  
standing in the posture of soldiers,  
written across the careful lines of strategy,  
echoing in the priest's hollow promises.

Seeds.

Planted.

Watered.

Waiting to bloom into tragedy.

And though neither sister said it aloud,

they both understood:

When the battle reached Rellith...

the world would measure not their power,

but **who they became while everything around them broke.**

## CHAPTER #20 — When the Sky Finally Breaks

Rellith woke to horns.

Not the ceremonial kind — not the practiced, triumphant calls of parades — but the long, low blasts meant for one message only:

**They are here.**

Nif jolted upright.

Outside their window, the city was already in motion — doors slamming, boots striking stone, voices overlapping in a rising tide of panic. Somewhere, a child cried. Somewhere else, someone prayed too loudly.

Mara was already standing, staff in hand.

“It begins,” she said quietly.

Nya looked to Nif.

Not for guidance.

For grounding.

“You ready?”

Nif shook — once — and then managed:

“No. But I’m going anyway.”

They stepped into the street.

And the world changed.

---

Black banners crested the hill beyond Rellith’s outer fields — not the Church’s white-and-gold, but the sigils of mercenary houses and conscript battalions pressed into “holy service.” Behind them, columns of armored soldiers stretched toward the horizon.

Above them, the fragment drifted.

Not tethered now.

Radiant.

Cold.

Like a second sun that had forgotten warmth.

As it passed overhead, shadows twisted unnaturally. Dogs whimpered. Vampires recoiled with pained hissed breaths. Even fae lanterns dimmed, as if the fragment stole light simply because it could.

Mara’s voice was grim. “They’re using the fragment as a standard. It forces belief — even out of those who only meant to obey orders.”

Nya stared as the Speaker of Horizons walked at the army’s center, hands lifted, smiling a slow, practiced smile.

A priest flanking him raised a staff.

Golden energy surged outward —

—and the first blow fell.

Not sword.

Not fire.

### **Song.**

A harmonic note spread across the fields, smashing into the city walls like invisible fists. Metal screamed. Stone cracked in spiderweb patterns.

Rellith shook.

Screams rose.

The guards on the wall — elves, humans, orcs side-by-side — clutched their heads, blood seeping from some of their ears. Two toppled.

Nif flinched, covering her ears.

“It hurts,” she gasped.

Mara steadied her. “It’s designed to. That frequency compels submission.”

Nya’s eyes darkened.

“I don’t submit well.”

She sprinted toward the nearest wall stair.

“Nya—!” Nif called.

Nya didn’t stop.

Mara touched Nif’s shoulder — urgent.

“Go. Stay with her.”

They ran.

---

The city erupted.

Militia scrambled into position. Smith hammers became weapons. Archers climbed rooftops. Werewolves shifted in tight alleyways, fur bristling, eyes burning — ready to defend their homes.

The first volley of arrows arced over Rellith’s walls.

Some struck shields.

Others pierced throats.

Blood sprayed.

Bodies collapsed into dust-stirred fields.

Nif’s breath stuttered.

She didn’t turn away.

She forced herself to see.

*Remember they were people first.*

Nya reached the parapet and ducked as another sonic wave cracked the mortar beneath her palms.

General Corren barked sharp orders across the battlefield. Siege engines rolled forward — crude, heavy, brutal. Massive stones, inscribed with shimmering glyphs, were cranked into position.

The Speaker lifted both hands.

“LET THE STAR JUDGE.”

The catapults released.

Stone meteors screamed through the air and slammed into the city.

A tower exploded in a rain of rock and flame.

Elves manning the battlement vanished into falling debris. Orc guards were flung like rag dolls. A vampire clung to the wall with shattered fingers before being crushed beneath a collapsing parapet.

Nif choked.

Her knees wobbled.

“This is wrong,” she whispered, voice breaking. “This is... *all* wrong—”

Nya grabbed her wrist, eyes filled with equal horror but hardened in purpose.

“We can’t stop the whole battle,” she said through gritted teeth. “But we can stop parts of it. We make choices smaller — and save whoever fits inside those choices.”

Another impact rocked the city.

A section of wall buckled.

The Church army surged forward.

Rellith broke.

---

Chaos swallowed streets.

Civilians ran, clutching children and bags. Fae conjured sharp illusions to mislead invaders. Dwarves used sledgehammers to collapse side streets, sealing escape routes *toward* safety rather than away from it.

Nif and Nya became motion.

They pulled a wounded werewolf free from a shattered cart.

They dragged a trapped elf child from beneath a fallen sign.

They guided a terrified human baker into an alley Mara indicated would hold.

And everywhere—

screams.

“HELP!”

“They’re inside!”

“WHERE IS THE GUARD?!?”

“PLEASE—!”

Fire spread across rooftops.

Smoke clawed at the sky.

Somewhere, bells tolled desperately —

until the fragment pulsed,

and the bell tower simply **ceased to exist**.

Stone vaporized.

The shockwave rippled outward, flinging bodies into walls, snapping bones.

Nif stumbled back, ears ringing, vision spinning.

She saw a fairy pinned beneath rubble — wings torn, eyes wide.

Nif crawled to her, hands bloody, straining to lift the stone. “Hold on—!”

The fairy coughed — blood bubbling at her lips — and grabbed Nif’s wrist with surprising strength.

“Go,” she rasped. “Others—”

Her hand went slack.

The world narrowed.

Nif froze.

*This is what sacrifice looks like.*

Not prophecy.

Not glory.

Bodies that would not rise.

Lives that would never continue.

The fragment pulsed again, brighter — feeding on the chaos like a starving thing finding feast.

Nya shook Nif hard.

“HEY. Stay here. With me.”

Nif blinked back tears — furious, shaking.

“They’re killing the city *because* they want the valley—”

Nya nodded — jaw clenched, rage glowing behind her eyes.

“And we’re going to make them regret every street they thought they could write on.”

---

The front gates finally failed.

They fell inward with a thunderous crash, burying three defenders instantly.

The Church forces poured through.

Orcs roared and met them head-on. Vampires blurred into motion, tearing at lines where they could. Elven archers rained death from what high ground remained. Humans fought because there was no other option.

But it wasn’t enough.

For every soldier Rellith cut down, two more advanced — driven by command, by faith, by the fragment’s suffocating gravity.

General Corren’s formations pressed inward.

The Speaker walked untouched through the carnage, robes unstained — eyes bright with a fanatic joy that made Nif's stomach twist.

He raised his hands.

Light lanced outward.

An entire street — homes, stalls, memories — ignited and vanished in seconds.

The screams cut off mid-sound.

Silence fell briefly.

Not peace.

Shock.

Nif collapsed to her knees.

Tears streamed freely now, blurring the devastation.

“I hate them,” she whispered.

Nya knelt beside her, voice trembling but fierce.

“I know. But don’t let hate aim your hands. Aim them yourself.”

Mara appeared through smoke, cloak scorched, coughing — but alive.

“We can’t hold,” she said, honest and brutal. “The city will fall. Our task here isn’t to save Rellith — it’s to save whoever we can from *being erased with it*.”

The words cut.

They were cruel.

They were necessary.

Nif nodded — sobbing quietly — then rose.

And for the first time,

the shaking inside her did not stop her from moving.

She moved *through* it.

---

They worked till their bodies burned.

Guided refugees through side tunnels.

Collapsed bridges the Church needed but civilians didn't.

Created choke points where fewer defenders could stall larger waves.

Nya fought when forced — swift, surgical, sparing strength.

Nif, blade in hand, defended fleeing families — parrying, blocking, pushing enemies away rather than hunting them.

She didn't want glory.

She wanted survivors.

But still—

too many didn't make it.

A werewolf father torn apart trying desperately to shield his pups.

A dwarf smith crushed beneath his own anvil when a blast hurled it back at him.

A vampire who burned in the rising fires rather than abandon the mortal lover trapped in her arms.

Their losses piled everywhere Nif looked.

Her heart kept breaking  
and breaking  
and breaking

without ever finishing.

At some point, weary and blood-smeared, she looked up at the sky.

The fragment hovered directly overhead —

like an accusation.

And beneath it,

she felt the Last Star answer from far away,

deep beneath Dragon Valley.

Two powers.

One twisted beyond recognition.

One waiting for the choice no one wanted to make.

Nya followed her gaze.

"You feel it too," she murmured.

Nif nodded — exhausted, voice raw.

"It's all one road."

Mara joined them at the mouth of a smoke-choked alley, face ash-streaked.

"Rellith falls tonight," she said. "But because of what you did, thousands are already gone — south, east, into the forests. You didn't save the city."

She looked at them both, eyes shining despite the devastation around them.

"You saved lives."

Nif looked at the ruins.

At the fires.

At the bodies.

It didn't feel like enough.

But she understood — deep in the marrow of her grief — that sometimes *enough* doesn't look like victory.

Sometimes it just looks like someone being alive who wouldn't have been.

She whispered to the dead, to the broken streets, to the sky that had betrayed them:

"I'm so, so sorry."

And the moon — barely a sliver through smoke — seemed to answer with a soft, aching light,

laying itself gently over the ruin,

as if saying:

*I know.*

The Church banners rose among the burning city.

The fragment pulsed triumphantly.

And somewhere far off, the valley felt the first echo of what was coming

—an echo shaped like grief sharpening into resolve.

## **CHAPTER #21 — Cities Don't Stop Breathing When They Break**

Rellith didn't die all at once.

It lingered.

Like a body refusing to understand that its heart had already stopped.

Smoke hung low across the streets, drifting through ruined archways and shattered windows. Embers glowed where homes used to be. The smell — burnt wood, scorched flesh, wet stone — clung to everything, a grief that would not wash off.

Nif walked through it in silence.

Her boots crunched over fallen tiles, over shards of glass, over ashes she refused to look at too closely.

Every few steps, she saw something that didn't belong in a battlefield:

A child's wooden horse, blackened.

A wedding ribbon caught in a cracked door.

A book with half its pages burned away.

Cities didn't stop breathing when they broke.

They just learned how to breathe around the pain.

Mara moved beside her, speaking quietly with the living when they appeared — an exhausted elf leaning on a broken spear, a fairy with her wings wrapped in bandages, a human mother trying to count children she couldn't find.

Nya stayed close behind Nif.

Not hovering.

Just there.

Always there.

They helped where they could.

Clearing rubble from a blocked doorway.

Carrying water.

Holding someone's trembling hands until the sobbing turned to exhausted sleep.

And every time Nif thought she couldn't feel anything else, the city found a new way to hurt her.

At the central square, they came across a line of makeshift shrouds — sheets, cloaks, banners — covering bodies laid side by side.

Dozens.

Maybe hundreds.

A dwarf elder oversaw the grim work, marking each with chalk symbols.

He paused when he saw them.

"You're travelers," he rasped.

Mara bowed her head. "We passed through."

"Then you remember how it was," he said softly. "Say it aloud someday. Someone should know that Rellith laughed once."

Nif swallowed.

"I promise."

She meant it.

---

Later, as evening bled into a bruised sky, they found the survivors' camp beyond the southern wall — a patchwork of tents, scattered fires, injured bodies lying on cots.

Nif drifted through like a ghost.

People murmured thanks.

Some cried when they recognized the girls — the ones who had guided them out.

Nif didn't feel like a savior.

She felt like a crack trying to hold back a flood.

She sat eventually beneath a twisted tree, back pressed to the bark, hands dangling uselessly between her knees.

The silence inside her hurt worse than the battle had.

Nya lowered herself beside her, not touching yet.

They stared out at the survivors.

Children clinging to parents.

Old warriors staring blankly into the fire.

Healers with blood up to their elbows.

After a while, Nya spoke.

“Say it.”

Nif blinked. “Say what?”

“What you’re holding back.”

Nif clenched her jaw.

Then — slowly — she let the words bleed out.

“I keep thinking... if I had been someone braver, or stronger, or destined the way they said I was supposed to be... maybe fewer people would’ve died.”

Her voice shook.

“But I wasn’t. I’m just me. And me wasn’t enough.”

Nya didn’t argue.

She didn’t rush to comfort.

She let the confession sit between them, real and ugly.

Then she said quietly:

“You’re confusing power with responsibility.”

Nif frowned, wiping at her eyes. “What?”

"You think because you were there, it became your fault," Nya said gently. "But the Church chose this. The Speaker chose this. Corren chose this. Every person who marched because they wanted glory chose this."

She turned her head, meeting Nif's eyes.

"All you did was refuse to turn away."

The words didn't fix anything.

But they loosened something tied too tightly around Nif's chest.

She leaned sideways, resting her shoulder against Nya's.

"I still hate surviving," she whispered.

Nya let out a soft, tired breath.

"Yeah. Me too."

They sat like that until the stars crawled out, one by one.

---

Later, around the campfire, Mara unfolded a worn map.

"The Church marches at dawn," she said. "Rellith was never their destination. It was a warning shot. They head for Dragon Valley next."

Nif's stomach twisted.

Nya reached across the map — tracing the road east with a fingertip.

"And us?"

Mara looked up at them — something softer, almost sorrowful, behind her eyes.

"You go too."

The words felt inevitable.

And heavier than anything the dragon had said.

"The valley still listens to you. The fragment is drawn to you. And the Church knows it. The next battle won't just be about land or control."

She hesitated — which was rare.

“It will be about the shape the world takes after this war ends.”

Nif stared into the fire.

Flames crackled and folded inward on themselves, burning bright and disappearing.

She thought of the dragon.

Of the pool that showed two possible sacrifices.

Of the valley that hummed like a heartbeat waiting to break.

A tear slid down her cheek before she could stop it.

“I don’t want the world shaped by my death,” she whispered. “I don’t want to be the reason it moves on.”

Mara’s voice softened.

“Then perhaps your role is to be the reason it *remembers*.”

Nif didn’t answer.

The question that had been haunting her since the vision rose again, relentless:

*Why must the world demand a cost it never has to pay itself?*

Nya reached for her hand under the blanket.

Their fingers laced.

No speeches.

No vows.

Just the quiet understanding that whatever waited ahead —  
they would walk toward it side by side.

Not because fate required it.

But because love did.

The fire burned lower.

The survivors slept.

Rellith smoldered against the horizon like a scar the world refused to hide.

And somewhere far east,

the Last Star pulsed,  
steady,  
patient,  
counting down a future only two sisters could still change.

## **CHAPTER #22 — The Road That Knows Where It Leads**

They left Rellith before dawn, slipping away with the first column of refugees moving toward safer lands.

The city faded behind them slowly — first the broken towers, then the smoke, then the thin memory of noise. Eventually, there was only open countryside and the sound of tired feet on dirt.

The road east wound through rolling fields and whispering groves. Birds dared to sing again. The wind carried scents of morning dew and wildflowers — the kind of ordinary beauty that made grief feel like an intruder.

Nif walked quietly.

Not numb — not anymore.

Just... aware.

Every crunch of gravel.

Every distant dog bark.

Every life that continued in spite of the world collapsing somewhere else.

Nya walked beside her, hands tucked into her cloak, shoulders brushing Nif's every so often — a steady line of presence. She looked different somehow.

Not older.

More certain.

Like she had chosen something inside herself, and was now carrying it carefully.

Mara led with the map, speaking softly to travelers along the way, steering pockets of families toward safer splits in the road, suggesting villages they could rest in without being turned away.

The flow of people eventually thinned. Refugees took their turns down side paths. Wagons creaked off toward new beginnings.

By noon, the sisters were alone again.

Just the three of them...

...and the horizon.

---

They stopped in a meadow for lunch — stale bread, brittle apples.

Nif lay back in the grass, staring at the moving clouds, feeling the slow thud of her heart in her ears.

The valley tugged at her again — faint, patient.

She closed her eyes.

And she saw it:

the circle of stones,  
the glow beneath the earth,  
the empty space where a choice would eventually stand.

She exhaled shakily.

*Nif?*

Nya's voice.

When Nif opened her eyes, Nya was lying beside her, both of them framed by tall grass.

"What?" Nif asked softly.

"Don't go somewhere I can't follow yet," Nya murmured. "Even if it's only in your head."

Nif swallowed.

"Sorry."

Nya turned onto her side, propping her head on her arm.

"Don't be. Just... let me be scared with you."

Nif turned too — their foreheads almost touching.

“You’re scared?” she whispered.

Nya laughed — soft, genuine, tired. “Terrified.”

Nif studied her face — the freckles, the faint scar near her eyebrow, the warmth in her eyes that she hadn’t noticed when they were strangers.

“I keep thinking,” Nif said, “that if I die... it’ll finally make sense to everyone. They’ll say it was always meant to happen. They’ll write songs about it. They’ll forget that I cried in the middle of the night because I didn’t want to be brave.”

Nya’s expression tightened.

“They won’t get that chance,” she said quietly.

Something in her tone made Nif blink.

“What do you mean?”

Nya smiled softly — not answering. Not yet.

Instead she whispered:

“Look at the sky.”

So Nif did.

Two birds flew together, circling, separating, finding each other again.

No prophecy.

Just life.

She breathed in the moment slowly — and it didn’t erase the fear...

...but it gave it a place to sit.

---

They walked again by late afternoon.

The mountains crept back into sight — distant silhouettes with jagged crowns. The closer they came, the more the world felt familiar in a way that wasn’t comforting.

The air carried memory now.

Mara slowed as the road narrowed through a rocky pass.

“From here on,” she said, “the Church will watch every approach.”

Nya scanned the cliffs. “So we avoid being obvious.”

Mara nodded.

They left the road and slipped into the forest. Shadows cooled the air. Moss softened the ground beneath their steps.

A small stream cut across their path, clear and cold. They paused to drink.

Nif watched the ripples, thinking about the uphill river — how it had quietly refused gravity.

“Do you think we could do that?” she asked suddenly.

“Do what?” Nya asked.

“Refuse the shape of things.”

Nya considered the question.

“Sometimes,” she said slowly. “Sometimes the shape refuses us back. But I think... I think the parts we choose on purpose matter more than the ones that choose us.”

Mara looked over with a faint smile.

“You’re both starting to talk like the valley,” she said.

Nif snorted softly. “That’s either a compliment or a warning.”

“Both,” Mara replied.

---

Evening fell in soft layers — violet, indigo, then deep blue stitched with early stars.

They made a small fire in a sheltered hollow of rock. The flames cast a gentle glow on their faces, gold and flicker-warm.

Mara slept first.

The sisters stayed awake.

For a long time, neither spoke.

Then Nya said quietly:

“Do you remember the first night we met? At the shrine?”

Nif nodded. “You looked like you wanted to punch destiny in the face.”

Nya smiled faintly. “I still do.”

They shared a small laugh that turned sad at the edges.

Nif looked at the flames.

“If I... if it happens,” she said carefully, “promise me something?”

Nya tensed.

“Say it.”

“Promise me you won’t let them turn me into a symbol. I want to be a memory, not a sermon.”

Nya’s throat worked.

“I promise,” she said — too quickly.

Nif noticed the speed.

She frowned.

“Nya... what aren’t you telling me?”

Nya looked away toward the mountains.

Her silence said everything and nothing.

Nif leaned in.

“Nya.”

The older sister took a slow breath.

Then turned back — eyes softer than moonlight and heavier than gravity.

“I’m telling you,” she said gently, “that I would burn the world before I let it steal you from me.”

The words landed.

Not like comfort.

Like truth.

Nif stared at her for a long moment, heart suddenly racing — not from fear.

From something dangerously close to understanding.

But before she could say anything more,

Mara stirred beside the fire,  
the wind shifted across the trees,  
and the night pressed quietly onward.

---

They slept, eventually.

Nif dreamed again — not of battle, not of the Star.

She dreamed of a simple table.

Two cups of tea.

A window with rain.

She and Nya sat across from each other, older — laughing about something meaningless.  
Just... alive.

The dream didn't feel prophetic.

It felt like longing.

When she woke, the ache of it lingered behind her ribs.

They packed at dawn.

The mountains loomed closer.

Dragon Valley waited beyond them —  
patient,  
enduring,  
ready to test every promise love had dared to make.

Nif tightened her cloak.

Nya touched her shoulder, gentle.

“We’re almost there.”

Nif nodded.

And somewhere deep inside,  
where fear and courage shared the same small room,

she whispered silently,

to the Star,  
to the dragon bones,  
to the future she didn't want to meet:

*Please... don't let the story decide for us.*

## CHAPTER #23 — The Battle That Was Never Really Ours

Dragon Valley rose ahead at dawn — not sudden, not dramatic — simply *there*, spreading beneath the world like a truth that refused to be hurried.

Mist curled through the ancient bones. The low hum returned, deeper than before, vibrating through stone and skin. Birds did not sing here this morning.

They knew.

Everyone did.

The Church arrived at the northern ridge in a river of armor and banners. Siege towers. Lines of priests. A thousand different faces wearing the same expression:

*This is it.*

Mara led the sisters along the eastern rim, staying in the shadows of rib and rock.

“The valley won’t fight,” she murmured. “It will only refuse to die. That’s different.”

Nya nodded, eyes sharp. “Then we fight for it.”

Nif swallowed and said nothing.

Because the truth was already curling coldly through her chest:

*The valley doesn’t need us to swing swords.*

It needed something else.

Something unbearable.

---

The Speaker of Horizons stepped forward onto a raised platform carved hastily into the ridge. He lifted his arms as if addressing creation itself.

“The Star calls! Today the world is reborn!”

His voice carried impossibly far — carried on magic stitched into lies and certainty. The fragment hovered above him like a crown, feeding off the moment, burning brighter.

General Corren signaled the army into position.

Lines. Shields. Bows.

A perfect diagram of obedience.

Mara exhaled quietly. “When they push the fragment into alignment, the ground will open above the Star. Whoever stands there controls what happens next.”

Nya glanced at Nif.

Nif already knew.

She could *feel* it — like gravity personalized — tugging her toward the valley’s heart.

Toward that circle of stones.

Toward the place the dragon had shown them.

Toward the cost.

---

The first wave hit the valley like a storm.

Priests chanted. Runes flared. The fragment sent down columns of golden force that tore trenches through the earth. Soldiers charged in behind the devastation, using destruction like pathways.

But the valley bent.

Not breaking — bending.

Ridges shifted just slightly beneath marching feet. Roots tangled around wheels. Bones angled to redirect movement. Arrows lost their trajectories.

Confusion rippled through the Church lines.

Corren barked orders, stubborn, furious, efficient.

The Speaker smiled — unfazed.

“PRESS FORWARD. SURROUND THE CENTER.”

They advanced.

And still — the valley did not strike back.

It simply refused to yield.

Nya moved along the broken ridge, intercepting soldiers who slipped too close, striking with efficiency, then disappearing again. She fought not like a hero — but like someone buying time wherever seconds still existed.

Mara disrupted priest circles, scattering ritual lines, breaking chants with quick strikes and well-placed spells.

Nif...

stood at the valley’s edge,

watching the inevitable shape of things take form.

---

The pull deepened.

Her crescent burned.

The stones at the valley’s center glowed faintly, like a heartbeat beneath dirt.

And in the hum, she heard a voice —

not the dragon,

not the Star,

her own thoughts reflected back at her:

*Someone has to steady the world.*

*Someone has to become the door that closes.*

She took a step forward.

Then another.

Nya caught her wrist.

Their eyes met.

No words.

Just shared recognition.

And unbearable silence.

---

They reached the center together.

The Church's forces circled the valley at a distance now — hesitant, contained by terrain and confusion — but tightening like a noose.

The fragment drifted overhead, aligning with invisible lines only priests could see but Nif could *feel*.

Mara stopped a short distance back — knowing, by instinct and awe, that this next moment no longer belonged to her.

“Nif,” she whispered, voice breaking despite her control, “whatever happens — don’t let them own it.”

Nif nodded faintly.

Then stepped into the circle.

Light flared beneath her feet.

Not pain.

Not yet.

Just recognition.

The valley’s heartbeat synchronized with hers.

She felt — impossibly — every living thing across the valley:

roots beneath stone, ants in soil, a fox curled in a burrow, the bones remembering what it was like to fly.

And the Star —

deep below —

stirred.

Nif's breath trembled.

She turned to Nya.

And for the first time since they had met, she wasn't torn.

Her voice was soft. Certain. Terrified.

"I think... this is where I stop."

Nya's expression cracked.

"No," she said — too fast, too sharp. "We're not there yet. There's still another path. We'll—"

Nif shook her head.

"You heard the dragon. You saw the pool. You read the Church's plans. There has *always* been a cost hiding at the end of this road."

Tears slipped down her cheeks.

"I don't want it. I hate it. I wish it wasn't mine. But—"

Her gaze drifted to the burning horizon.

"If I don't, the Star becomes theirs. And then everything dies slower instead."

Nya stepped forward — hands trembling.

"Then let it be mine," she whispered fiercely. "Let me take it. I'm older. I've lived more. You still—"

"The ritual won't take you," Nif said gently. "You're the anchor. I'm the flame."

Nya's jaw clenched in desperate refusal.

"I won't let you."

Nif smiled — the saddest smile she had ever worn.

"You don't get to choose this part."

Lightning raced across the fragment.

The Speaker spread his arms.

“NOW!”

The valley split — just enough.

Light surged upward.

Starlight met fragment-light.

Everything screamed.

And Nif stepped forward—

into brilliance—

into the beginning of the end.

---

From a distance, soldiers saw only a girl standing in light.

Priests saw a miracle aligning.

The valley saw history repeating itself.

Nya saw her sister

and felt the world trying to pry them apart.

She dashed forward — grabbing Nif, pulling her into a fierce embrace before the ritual could fully lock.

Their crescents touched — a shock of cold heat radiated outward.

Nif gasped — stunned.

Nya whispered shakily against her ear:

“Whatever happens... don’t be alone in it.”

The light tightened.

Mara shouted something lost in the roar.

The ritual deepened.

And Nif understood —

if she let it continue,

she would burn,  
and Nya would be forced to stand there,  
watching,  
unable to follow.

A horror she almost couldn't accept.  
But she also felt the Star waiting,  
like a door that could not close from the outside.  
She lifted her hands.

The light answered.  
The world tilted toward sacrifice.  
And somewhere,  
in a quiet place beyond fear,  
Nya made a decision  
she did not say out loud.

---

Above them,  
the fragment cracked.  
The Speaker's smile widened into rapture.  
General Corren steadied his stance.  
Priests braced.  
The sky dimmed,  
swallowed by the false light.  
Dragon Valley hummed louder than it ever had,  
ancient,

pleading,

resigned.

The choice was about to be sealed.

And neither sister yet knew

that love,

not destiny,

was the thing most likely to shatter everything next.

## **CHAPTER #24— For the Moments that make Memory**

The ritual tightened like a closing hand.

Light poured upward from the cracked earth, threading into Nif's chest, pulling, weaving, binding. The Star below beat faster — an enormous heart waking after a thousand years — and the fragment above answered it like an echo that had learned all the wrong lessons.

The world narrowed to brightness and sound.

Pain hadn't come yet.

But the promise of it waited like a blade hovering over her throat.

Nif braced.

She was shaking — terrified — but ready anyway.

Because someone had to be.

She glanced at Nya.

And froze.

Nya wasn't crying.

She wasn't pleading anymore.

She was looking at Nif with a softness that hurt more than any magic could — the kind of love that had never asked for permission.

“Nya...?” Nif whispered.

Nya stepped back from the circle.

Then forward again —

deliberate,

purposeful,

crossing the boundary with a calm the world did not deserve.

The ritual recognized her immediately.

The light shifted.

The hum deepened.

The choice changed direction.

Nif's breath hitched. “No. No — Nya — don't—”

Nya moved faster than protest, faster than the ritual, faster than fear.

She grabbed Nif's shoulders and pulled her close.

Not gently.

Desperately.

The crescents flared between them — mirrors becoming one shape, one pulse, one impossible truth.

Nif clawed at her arms. “STOP — IT'S ME — IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE ME—!”

Nya smiled through trembling tears.

“No,” she whispered. “It was never supposed to be you. It was just supposed to be **someone**. And I was never going to let that someone be my little sister.”

The words broke.

So did Nif.

“Please—” Nif sobbed. “Please don't take this from me — don't make me watch—”

Nya's forehead pressed to hers — breath shaking — voice small and fierce all at once.

"Listen to me. I love you. Not because fate said I should. Not because we share blood. I love you because every mile we walked together... every stupid joke... every time you were scared and kept going anyway... you became my favorite person in this world."

The ritual surged — heat curling through their bones, binding skin to light.

Nif's heart shattered. "I'm not ready to lose you."

Nya laughed through tears — soft, aching.

"I'm not ready either."

She cupped Nif's face with both hands.

"But sometimes the world doesn't wait for ready."

The ground split wider.

The Star roared.

The fragment cracked down its center — light spilling like molten glass.

Priests screamed.

Soldiers faltered.

Mara stood rooted a few paces away, tears streaking her face — unable to stop it, unwilling to dishonor it.

Nif shook her head wildly. "You'll die — Nya — you'll die—"

Nya's thumbs brushed away her tears.

"Then remember me," she whispered. "Not as a legend. Not as a sacrifice. Remember me sitting on that inn roof with you. Remember the meadow. The stupid birds. The moments where it didn't hurt yet. Remember us the way we lived — not the way stories will write it."

Nif sobbed so hard she could barely breathe.

"I don't want a memory. I want you."

Nya kissed her forehead, lingering — as if imprinting the feeling into herself too.

"I know."

Then she moved —

subtle,  
inevitable —  
shifting Nif a single step backward,  
and taking her place in the center.

The ritual locked.

There was no pulling her out anymore.

Nif lunged — but the light slammed between them like a wall.

“Nya!”

Her scream tore through the valley.

Nya turned back —

bathed in starlight,  
hair whipped by invisible wind,  
face wet and shining with love.

“For the record,” she said — voice cracking — “this wasn’t destiny.”

She pressed a hand to her crescent.

It blazed.

“This was my choice.”

The symbol ignited —  
and then shattered into pure light.  
It rushed outward,  
into Nif,  
into the Star,  
into everything.

Nif staggered backward as power slammed into her — not fire, not pain —

**becoming.**

Her crescent didn't disappear.

**It completed.**

The half-moon filled into a whole, radiant disk — bright as the real moon overhead, but edged with something older, deeper, infinite.

Her breath caught —

and her hair darkened,

bleeding from its natural shade into pure, cosmic black —

threads of starlight shimmering within every strand like constellations moving through night.

Her eyes changed too.

No longer simple irises.

They mirrored the sky:

endless space,  
distant galaxies,  
a quiet, terrible beauty.

The Star below recognized her.

Not as fuel.

Not as prey.

**As keeper.**

Nif's voice came out steadier than she felt.

"Let go."

The Star resisted.

The fragment screamed — a sound like metal breaking against faith.

The Speaker fell to his knees, clawing at the air, disbelief tearing his expression apart.

"This isn't the script!" he shouted. "This isn't—"

The fragment split completely —

shattering into a thousand shards that dissolved into harmless, drifting light.

General Corren dropped his sword, stunned.

Soldiers stopped fighting.

The hum of the valley rose into a single, resonant note that sounded like a prayer finally answered honestly.

Nya stood at the center — light carving her silhouette, burning through her veins.

She was fading.

Piece by piece.

Nif stepped as close as the barrier allowed.

Their eyes met one last time.

Neither smiled now.

There was too much truth for that.

Nif pressed her hand to the barrier.

Nya mirrored it on the other side.

“I love you,” Nif whispered — voice breaking.

Nya nodded.

“I know.”

Her voice softened into something only sisters ever learn to speak:

“And I’m glad... that even if we didn’t grow up together... we got to find each other in the end.  
Goodbye Nif”

Light swallowed her fingertips,

her arms,

her chest.

Nif shook her head over and over, tears falling silently now.

“I’ll remember,” she whispered. “I swear it. Not the songs. Not the statues. Just *us*.”

Nya's final tear fell upward —

caught by the Star,

absorbed into forever.

“Good.”

She closed her eyes.

The Star opened fully.

The valley exploded with brilliance —

and then,

silence.

The light collapsed inward,

sealing,

stilling,

sleeping again.

The barrier dissolved.

The air cleared.

Nif fell to her knees in the quiet center of the circle.

The world did not cheer.

There were no trumpets.

Only the wind,

moving gently through dragon bones,

like fingers tracing the memory of wings.

Mara came forward slowly, dropping to a crouch beside Nif, placing a trembling hand on her shoulder.

Nif didn't look up.

Her cosmic hair hung like night around her face.

Her whole moon mark still glowed —

not triumph,

not destiny —

**grief given purpose.**

“I didn’t want this,” she whispered.

Mara’s voice was soft.

“The world rarely deserves its heroes.”

Nif closed her eyes —

and for a moment, the Star hummed in answer beneath her skin.

Not hungry.

Not demanding.

Just... present.

Waiting.

Listening.

She whispered into that vastness,

like a promise carved into the seasons themselves:

“I’ll live. For both of us. And I won’t let them forget who you really were.”

High above,

the real moon broke free from the clouds,

full and bright,

laying silver light across the valley like a blessing.

Nif rose —

slow,

steady,

different,

but still herself.

The Church's banners lay torn.

Their power broken.

Their story rewritten by a girl who refused to let them own her sister.

The world would talk about the sacrifice one day.

They would build myths.

Compose songs.

Erase the fear, the tears, the laughter, the arguments.

But somewhere — always —

there would be a truth humming inside that legend,

quiet and stubborn,

like a heartbeat that couldn't be silenced:

This wasn't destiny.

This was love.

And love — not prophecy, not power —

was what saved Edithae in the end.