
REAP
&
SOW
'Should be on every romantasy fan's must-read list'
Brigitte Knightley, author of
The Irresistible Urge to Fall for Your Enemy
CHARLOTTE B. PLUMB

PRAISE FOR

REAP & SOW

'A fresh voice, an electric and twisty plot, and a romance that strikes the perfect balance between hot and tender. *Reap & Sow* should be on every romantasy fan's must-read list.'
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For Mum and Dad, who introduced me to stories –
and for Tristan, who encouraged me to finish writing them.

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Chapter One

Whenever the shop bell chimed, Eda liked to guess: had they come to trade with their coin or their soul?

She considered their newest customer as he stumbled in, shaking rain from his fur-lined cloak. He hovered by the door uncertainly. *Wealthy*, she decided. *Skittish as a dog.*

This was promising.

'Welcome to Shaws' Antiques and Curiosities. Can I help you?'

The gentleman stared at her. Eda smiled back. She was used to smiling when she did not feel like it. Ben always said a kindly face was difficult to mistrust.

'I . . .' The stranger swallowed. He looked around the shop's interior: the towering shelves that brushed the ceiling, the low chandelier, the assortment of rugs strewn across lacquered floorboards. Cabinets and brass globes and strange pots littered the edges of the room, leaving meagre space to wander. If Lawrie were here, he'd enthusiastically regale the poor man with the origins of all their stock, right down to the hinges on the doors.

Eda tried again. 'Are you looking for something in particular?'

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The man pulled off his brimmed bonnet to reveal tidy chin-length hair. 'Is there anyone else here? Any other patrons?'

'No, sir. You're our last customer of the day.'

Not that there'd been many. A snub-nosed woman spent an hour sniffing around their collection of antique tea sets, and a pair of academics purchased a tome from the Old Weslic collection. But no one else had crossed the threshold.

Eda suspected this man wasn't interested in teapots or dusty books.

He approached the counter, splendid in buckled shoes and velvet doublet. His face was nondescript – but the wild look in his eyes struck her with eerie familiarity. She'd seen it before, a hundred times in a hundred different faces.

'I need a mirror with no reflection.'

Eda's pulse found a new rhythm, fast and flighty as a hare. Her brothers did not share the passphrase lightly; if this stranger knew it, they'd decided he was serious.

She stepped around the counter. 'You know what you're asking?'

'Yes. I – yes.'

Eda peered through the bay windows. Blackbridge was a dark, noisy smear of wet stone and oil smoke, lanterns bobbing through the gathering night. Irregular bubbles in the crown glass made it hard to discern anyone coming up the street, but none of the distorted figures hurrying through the rain seemed like her brothers.

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Never take someone to the mirror alone, Ben always warned. *If they come looking to make a Pact and neither of us are with you, you must turn them away. We're safest in pairs.*

In the glass, Eda's reflection hovered like a pale-haired wraith. She bit her inner cheek.

Ben would be furious. Lawrie would be disappointed, which was even worse. But how long had it been since they last found someone desperate – or stupid enough – to make a Pact? Eda knew from experience that with too much time to think came the niggling whispers of common sense. If she turned him away now, this man might talk himself out of returning. He could run his mouth to the Faithhood, unlikely though it was. What then?

Lawrie called them *dealies*. Those hopeless souls willing to pay the ultimate price for whatever wretched thing they sought. It had been months since the last.

And they were running out of time.

Eda set her jaw and flipped the sign at the door to CLOSED. 'What's your name, sir?'

'I'd rather not say.'

Smarter than he looks. 'He'll need a name, I'm afraid. No use hiding it.' She pulled the drapes along their rail, shutting out the door and windows. In the flickering light of the chandelier, shadows about the stranger's eyes yawned wide: empty sockets in a skull.

'He?'

'The demon you mean to make a Pact with.'

He swallowed. Steeled himself. 'I am Bartholomew. Your

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family name is *Shaw*, I presume?' He scanned her from head to toe with a disdain common to noblefolk. 'You are rather young to be involved in . . . this sort of business.'

'I'm twenty, sir. And I've been involved in *this sort of business* since the cradle.'

That shut him up. Eda led Bartholomew to the back of the shop, through the maze-like shelves as tall as hedgerows and down two steps to a door in the back wall. She withdrew the key from her pocket with a jolt of unexpected dread.

She'd opened this door many times, but never without Ben or Lawrie present. Their absence was a phantom all its own. Eda knew the shop as well as she knew herself – it was her job to mind it while Lawrie ran errands and Ben worked – but this expectant quiet was unfamiliar. Oppressive. She felt it breathing down her neck.

The key rattled in the lock. *Steady hands, Eda, you damned fool.*

The door swung open.

Bartholomew's breathing quickened. She'd interacted with many dealies over the years, and guilt was a persistent companion, but Eda had grown adept at smothering it. This was necessary, and it needed doing quickly. Her brothers were not here to stop Bartholomew if he tried to run.

She lit the sconces as they descended the twisting iron staircase. The cellar was always cold, and the firelight did little to conjure illusions of warmth. It smelled vaguely musty down here, earthen and primal. She was reminded of tombs and catacombs. Places where the living did not belong.

Eda lit the final sconce before turning to Bartholomew.

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He gripped the stair rail with white knuckles, staring. 'Is that it?'

She followed his gaze. The Shaws' cellar was entirely bare of ornament, save for the lonely mirror propped against the wall. 'Yes,' she murmured. 'This is a Gateway.'

The mirror stood more than six feet in height and half as wide. It was carved from a single block of thick obsidian. All Gateways were made of it, centuries ago when no one followed the teachings of the Faith or the Lordfather but instead a pantheon of pagan gods. Now, such deities were only worshipped by witches and heretics, if at all.

A wild age, she recalled Lawrie reading aloud from one of his history books. *A time when false divinities ruled and their unenlightened supplicants crafted for them terrible tools of power. Blackest obsidian from the deep mines of the northern mountains, where the veil between worlds is thin; this was their material. Blood magicks to imbue the rock with life – this is how Gateways were made.*

'How in the Lordfather's name did you *get* it?' Bartholomew tentatively stepped closer. 'And so well preserved. I thought the Faithhood destroyed every last one in Wesland.'

'My father found this mirror. None of us know how he managed it.' Eda's nails bit into her palm. She had no desire to speak of Oswin Shaw, least of all now. Better to move on. 'Are you ready?'

Bartholomew's voice quivered. 'For what, precisely?'

Good enough.

She approached the Gateway. Its frame depicted a riotous assortment of imagery, carved in such detail that each subject

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might have simply grown from the rock itself – roaring mountain lions, hissing serpents, thorned flowers. Hiding betwixt the petals and vines were strange, less familiar creatures: the grinning face of a hook-nosed imp, fearsome birds, a fanged horse. Atop them all at the mirror's apex, a group of naked figures knelt in supplication.

Eda shuddered.

Despite the frame's grandeur, it was the mirror itself that held power. Its surface bore no reflection: black as a starless night, smooth as a still lake. Unease danced icy fingers down Eda's spine no matter how many times she looked upon it.

She touched the crystallised rock. Warm, where no warmth should exist. The cellar was frigid, but wherever lay on the other side of the mirror was not.

'Mr Night, I summon you.'

The surface rippled like water about Eda's hand.

Bartholomew made a wounded sound. 'That's its name?'

'The only one I know him by.'

The mirror turned as glossy as a jewel and undulated like tar. Eda retreated to Bartholomew's side, tried to calm her quickening pulse. She knew, logically, that she had nothing to fear. But her body never quite learned the same lesson.

'What's happening? Why is it taking so long?' Bartholomew's upper lip was moist with sweat. He clutched his cloak about himself as though he might disappear within it.

Eda grabbed his arm. He seemed to think she was simply steadying him, which was well enough. She only feared he

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might make a break for it. 'He's not a dog, sir. He will come when he's ready.'

'It's – it's always the same one? I thought any demon might be called through a Gateway.'

'The mirror you see before you also exists on the other side, in the Otherworld. Most demons cannot keep a Gateway all to themselves.' She glanced sideways at him. 'Mr Night isn't most demons.'

This might have been the wrong thing to say, considering Bartholomew's stricken expression, but it hardly mattered. The mirror's surface turned suddenly iridescent, like an oil slick beneath a gloaming. Through it stepped a man.

He wasn't a man, of course. But he looked eerily close.

'*Eda*.'

'Mr Night.'

A silly name, but one that stuck. Eda was a babe in arms when he'd first walked through the mirror. Lawrie had been five. As Ben told it, the little boy had mustered a nervous 'Good night, mister,' every time the demon left them. The nickname soon followed.

For whatever reason, Mr Night found it charming. They'd used it ever since.

'This man would like to make a Pact,' she said.

Bartholomew flinched.

Mr Night's eyes – an icy grey – slid towards him. Eda imagined what it must be like for Bartholomew, seeing a demon for the first time. Mr Night's skin was pale, his hair even more so. It fell halfway down his back in a luxurious

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snow-white spill. His clothes were just as fine: a black tunic and matching silver-trimmed jerkin, so soft they appeared more liquid than material. With his angular features and curved, smiling mouth, Mr Night was undeniably beautiful. There was nothing outwardly inhuman about him, yet something was decidedly *other* in his manner. It made Eda's hair stand on end.

The demon prowled towards Bartholomew. 'You may leave us, Eda.'

His tone was smooth as syrup, but she knew an order when she heard one. Eda gave Bartholomew's arm a reassuring squeeze. 'I'll wait upstairs.'

'Tell me, then,' Mr Night crooned as she retreated up the stairwell. 'What is it you desire?'

She was not supposed to eavesdrop. *Better not to know*, Ben would say. *Their business is none of ours.*

But Eda rarely denied herself the indulgence of morbid curiosity. Lawrie called her pathologically nosy. Perhaps, but Mr Night didn't mind, and he *always* knew when she'd been snooping. That was good enough for her.

Eda pulled the cellar door to – save a few inches – and squatted down to peek. The back of Bartholomew's head was just visible through the stairwell. Clearer still was Mr Night as he paced the room. He had an uncanny stillness about him even in motion, not a single iota of exertion spent without purpose, every step perfectly measured. His head sat preternaturally still upon his neck. No matter which way he turned, his stare never left Bartholomew. It reminded Eda of

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the way some portraits followed you with their eyes in dark, haunted rooms.

Bartholomew said something in a thin voice. All she made out was the word *justice*. Her mind spun with fanciful ideas. Nothing so pedestrian as money, then. Revenge? She'd eavesdropped often enough to know both were common motivators. If only more dealies dared speak of their Pact, perhaps fewer would seek one out at all. Bargains such as these rarely ended well.

Once, Eda recalled, a poor man had come asking for gold – more than his children's children could ever spend. Mr Night turned stones into golden marks, which appeared overnight in the man's crowded boarding house, piled so high they spilled from the windows into the street like rain. Neighbours swarmed the place, snatching what they could in a giddy fervour before the Order of the Blade arrived to seize the rest. Rightly accused of Pact-making, the man returned to Shaws' Antiques, furious and desperate.

You failed to specify where and how you wanted your precious gold, Mr Night told him. *Now leave this place before I gut you where you stand. Unless you wish to strike another bargain?*

The Blades caught and hanged the man within a fortnight.

Sometime later, a young woman came weeping over her faithless husband. *I love him so, but his eyes wander. I fear I'll lose him. Let him see only me.* Mr Night gave her an enchanted ring. By morning, her husband was blind. In his ruined sight, he saw her alone – her gleaming ring, hovering like a spectre no matter which way he turned. He called it a curse.

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Strangled her in their front room. The broadsides reported on it for days.

Eda's disgust warred with her intrigue as she considered Bartholomew. She thought little of anyone foolish enough to make deals with devils – resented that she must bring them to Mr Night at all. But at least when they wished for riches or beauty or power, her dislike felt justified. Greed and vanity were easy to despise. But to come here begging for revenge? To ease the pain of a broken heart or right a terrible wrong?

She pitied them.

Mr Night stopped pacing. 'My price, then.' He rubbed a finger against his lip. 'Twenty years.'

Eda hissed through her teeth. *Twenty!* It was not the highest sum he'd ever demanded, but it was close. Clerics of the Faithhood liked to talk about the perils of losing one's soul to a demonic bargain, but if souls were real, demons had no interest in them. Human *years*, however . . .

'T-twenty? That's absurd!' Bartholomew was no longer whispering. His voice rose in outrage.

'*No.*' Mr Night's eyes flashed. The sconces flickered. Shadows rose up the walls, bleeding across the ceiling like spilled ink. 'It is *exactly* the right price. But if you are not prepared to pay it . . .'

'I . . . I just . . .'

'Listen how the lamb bleats!' He laughed. '*I, I, I.* That is why you come, isn't it, you mortals? You *want and you want* so shamelessly. But no matter. I would never pass judgement.'

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Mr Night slipped behind Bartholomew and touched him on the shoulder, as a friend might. 'I can fulfil your most fervent wishes. You need only offer me a little time in return. And what is *time*, to you humans?' His tone gentled. 'Your lives are so easily cut short, regardless.'

With a flourish, crisp parchment appeared as if from nowhere in the demon's hand. Eda recognised the familiar heading scrawled atop it in bold, swirling letters: *Binding Pact of Mortal Trade*. The details were lost on her save for that core stipulation common to all Pacts: should a demon fail to fulfil their side of the bargain, the proposed number of years would be taken from *their* lifespan instead. So far as Eda knew, this was one of only two ways a dealie might see their years returned to them.

The contract's ruddy penmanship shone in the firelight. Eda had never actually seen Mr Night bleed and often wondered at the art of forging a Pact. Did he cut himself? Dip some fancy quill into an inkwell full of his precious blood and sit scribbling away at a writing desk?

The thought was so silly she might have laughed. But Mr Night was leaning over Bartholomew's shoulder, mouth to ear. 'Sign here, sweet Bartholomew, and you will have your justice.'

The silence hung heavy. Flames crackled.

'I've nothing to sign with.'

Mr Night drew a small bone-white knife from somewhere Eda could not see. He was practically embracing the man from behind, blade and contract patiently proffered in each

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hand. A serpent twined about its prey, neither crushing the creature nor letting it flee. 'Your blood is all the signature I need. Just a little cut, and it shall be done.'

Run, Eda wanted to shout. *Run now, you fool, and don't look back. Whatever he gives you, it won't be worth what you lose.*

But she did not have the luxury of doing the right thing. If she had, she'd never have brought Bartholomew to the mirror in the first place. Eda could only bite her lip and watch.

Bartholomew exhaled. He offered up a shaking hand to the blade –

The doorbell chimed.

Eda reeled and fell on her arse. The cellar door drifted shut.

Shit!

She scrambled to her feet and brushed down her skirts. Checked her plait and hurried back through the shelves. Curly as her hair was, it never suffered containment for long. Already she felt it coming loose around her ears in little wisps.

She rounded the hulking armoire that served as a backdrop to the shop foyer, and her frizz was the first thing Lawrie commented on – Eda knew he would.

'That thicket of yours is fighting for its freedom,' he sniggered.

'And you look like a drowned rat.'

'Still prettier than you.'

Lawrie was tall and gangly, all elbows and legs. The rain only served to make him look thinner, wool cape clinging to his shoulders. His curls lay plastered against his head.

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Ben shut the drapes behind him and shook water from his hood. Where Lawrie was lithe, Ben was stocky and muscular. Square-jawed and rugged in looks, his mop of hair alone lent him some measure of softness. Eda liked to think he scared it straight in the womb, refusing to tolerate the unruly curls inherent amongst his siblings.

'Eda.' Ben looked at her properly. 'What's wrong?'

How does he always do that? Keeping anything from Ben was a fool's errand; he had the nose of a bloodhound and the eyes of a hawk. 'I don't know why you always assume there's something *wrong* –'

'There's a draught.' He looked pointedly at the chandelier's sputtering candles. His tone dropped. 'Is the cellar door open?'

Lawrie had been shrugging off his cape, but now he froze.

No point denying it. 'A man came asking after the mirror.'

Ben hung up his cloak in silence.

Eda scowled. 'He knew the passphrase, was ready to make a Pact. No one else was around. I checked. I wasn't sure when you'd be home, and I didn't want to lose him.'

'You complain that I worry needlessly, yet you always give me cause! How many times have I told you to never –'

'Never take someone to the mirror alone, *yes*. But despite what you tell yourself, Ben, I'm quite capable of handling these things properly. Or would you rather extend our debt as long as possible? We can't afford to turn down Pacts for no good reason.'

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'Your safety *is* a good reason.' Ben took two quick steps towards her; she backpedalled. 'I won't have you alone with that demon more than strictly necessary.'

'Mr Night won't hurt me. He won't hurt any of us. He can't; it's in –'

'In our Pact, yes. I know the clause.'

Eda bristled. 'Not *ours*. Father was the one who got us into this mess.'

Ben's hazel eyes flashed. 'Eda . . .'

Bartholomew came hurtling into the foyer. He sent a bookend flying as he skidded past the shelves but stopped dead at the sight of them. His eyes were as round as those of a spooked horse.

Startled, Ben positioned himself in front of the door. At first Eda feared he was right to do so: that Bartholomew's terror had overwhelmed him at last. That he'd changed his mind, was trying to flee. They would have to threaten him. *Beat him*, if necessary, to keep his mouth shut. Her skin prickled.

Then she saw his hand. His fingers ran with dark fresh blood.

He'd been cut.

It's done.

Bartholomew took an unsteady step forward. He cupped his injured hand and looked at Eda, dazed. 'I don't . . . I don't feel all that different. Shouldn't I feel different?'

'I'm afraid I wouldn't know, sir.' She passed him her handkerchief. It was just sensible, she told herself, not to

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have the man draw undue attention with an injury like that. Refused to consider the act a kindness. Nothing about this work was kind.

Bartholomew took it and wiped his hand. When he didn't seem prepared to say anything else, Lawrie silently pulled back the drapes and opened the door. Outside, rain pattered against black puddles. A dog was barking.

Bartholomew nodded, righted himself and left the shop.

They gathered to watch his distorted figure stumble down the street. Bartholomew wouldn't be able to speak of the Pact he'd made, either aloud or in writing. Such was Mr Night's way. Depending on the agreed details, dealies could not – or simply dared not – discuss their Pacts. Being in Mr Night's service meant Eda and her brothers were protected from tattletales, but the moment their debt was cleared . . .

Signee agrees to the expiration of all stipulations and amendments made upon completion of this contract.

Nothing could protect the Shaws from accusation then.

'Over there,' Lawrie hissed. 'It's that creepy bastard with the moustache again.'

Eda saw him – a tall, still figure cloaked in shadow across the street. He wore a feathered wool cap, the cherry glow of his cigarillo illuminating a thick moustache. The light didn't quite reach his eyes as he watched Bartholomew wander away.

The fine hairs along her nape prickled in alarm.

'I *told* you Lich has people watching us,' Lawrie said.

The name cracked through the room like a static shock. 'Let them watch,' Ben replied. 'If Severin Lich wants to

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smoke us out, he's taking his sweet time about it. Don't let him spook you.'

'How, exactly, is one supposed to ignore a *crime lord* sniffing about our business, Ben? He obviously wants the Gateway!'

'He can have it,' Eda cut in. 'Soon enough, we'll be done with it for good. Bartholomew gave twenty years, which means –'

'A most welcome addition to my ledger.'

Eda's assurances withered in her throat.

Mr Night stood in the middle of the foyer.

Gathered before him like this, they were little more than children awaiting judgement. His staggering presence chipped away the years like an ice pick.

'Though I must profess, young Shaws, this boon comes late in the making for my tastes. How long has it been since last you brought me a wanting soul?'

'The terms are clear,' Ben bit out stiffly. 'We're to bring you fifty years, every year. We've time still to make the quota.'

The demon smiled without teeth. 'Perhaps. But autumn harvest looms. If sweet Eda had listened to *you*, Benjamin, then tonight you'd be twenty years poorer.'

Ben turned red.

He was right, of course. Rarely had they come so near to the season's zenith with years still owed.

In the darkness of the room, Mr Night was at one with the shadows. Only his pale smiling face remained distinct, hovering like a disembodied mask. 'Your debt is nearly repaid in full. Just ten years left to find! A shame, to falter now.'

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Eda feared Mr Night, but she did not hate him. Not the way that Ben and Lawrie hated him. A demon did what he did because it was in his nature. People made Pacts because they *could*. As their own father had.

Oswin Shaw sought out the mirror. He called on Mr Night and made a Pact he could not afford – more years than any single life could provide. And so, in his madness, he agreed to bring Mr Night the sum required through others. As many as it took.

But should he die, his children were to inherit the debt.

'Your servitude is almost at its end, young Shaws. Your freedom at hand.' The candles in the chandelier danced as Mr Night's form unravelled, like blackest coal smoke. Silver eyes flared the colour of fire. 'You should be *happy*.'

The light steadied, and he was gone.

Shadows were Mr Night's domain – the cornerstone of his power – and he knew well how it unsettled them. Eda had never witnessed his other abilities first hand. She did not need to. The Pacts he forged were proof enough that he was capable of things beyond her ken.

Ben made for the staircase, shoulders high and taut as a bowstring. Lawrie followed with a sigh.

'Lawrie –'

'Not now, Eda.'

Rain pounded on the windows. Eda stood alone in the pool of flickering candlelight for some time, watching uneasily as shadows writhed beyond its borders. She clenched her fists.

Ten more years. Just ten.

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Mr Night was right – they couldn't falter now. Not with two decades of servitude finally at its denouement. What would it be like, she wondered, to live outside his shadow? To be set free into the light, directionless and new as a baby bird? Eda did not know.

Hope stirred, chased by a writhing tendril of fear.

A new life. A new start. A chance to *find out*.

And only one more Pact in their way.

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Chapter Two

Precious few flowers grew in Blackbridge, but Eda knew where to find them.

The city was a sprawling landscape of canals and bridges and towering spires – the oldest conurbation in all of Wesland. Little greenery survived amongst the hard-packed thoroughfares, save for the maintained gardens of the upper city. But Shaws' Antiques & Curiosities was advantageously placed opposite an alleyway that cut through to the Saint's Waterway. The great river bisected the city from the east, and water lilies sometimes grew along its bank.

Eda navigated down the service steps to the river's edge. A cluster of delicate water lilies clung to the algae-thick margins; she pulled a handful free. They were wet and rumpled, but they cost nothing. Aldith Moore would charge two coppers for her pretty floral arrangements, and Shaws' Antiques didn't make enough to warrant such a frivolous purchase every week. Eda preferred it this way. She liked the honesty in doing a thing yourself. In owing nothing to no one.

The foreshore was busy of a morning, thick with opportunistic street urchins. Eda was unsurprised to find a young boy in filthy garments at her back as she straightened. She snatched his reaching hand. 'What are you picking *my*

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pockets for?' she groused as he hissed like an alley cat. 'Do I look monied to you?'

'Geroff!' He kicked and thrashed. She let him go. He fell onto the steps.

'A two-horse carriage is stopped back up the street, with gilding on the doors. Try your luck there.'

The boy spat at her and bolted.

I swear they're getting bolder.

She took the main road westbound. The Waterway was commonly thought of as a border dividing the wealthy boroughs of the upper city and the heaving chaos of the lower. Living along its banks made Eda's world some strange amalgam of the two. Hers was the borough of Crowgate: an odd melting pot of working-class metalwork, whinnying carthorses, shrieking children and barking dogs. Traffic from the inner city brought iron-shod hooves and carriages, lively street fiddlers and busy merchants.

She felt apart from all of it.

Two girls with dirty hems gossiped in a shop doorway, leaning against each other in mirth. The sight made Eda's heart ache. She had no friends of her own. What would she talk about, as other women talked to one another? What precious secrets and vulnerable pieces of herself could she share, when to speak any of it aloud would end with a hangman's noose about her neck? Until her father's debt was cleared, getting close to anyone spelled disaster.

Eda thought of Wymond. The merchant's son had first come to the shop on business but returned over and over

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with small, transparent excuses meant to place him in her path. His dark eyes had set her pulse racing in unfamiliar ways, and it was not long before they were sneaking off together. She'd cherished those stolen moments: fevered, thrilling, all *hers*. Sharing Wymond's bed had made it easy to kid herself.

But when he offered to leave his father's business – to stay in Blackbridge with her – Eda had forced herself to call him foolish. To tell him their entanglement had been a mere tryst. Wymond left broken-hearted. Eda allowed herself to weep, at the time, while Lawrie awkwardly petted her hair and assured her it always ended in tears with the pretty boys, anyway.

Wymond would never know that she'd done him a kindness, for no man should love her. Not so long as her life was paved with shadows.

Eda shook off the reverie like a bad chill.

One of the girls in the doorway wore a vial of colloidal silver upon her breast. A cheap knock-off, no doubt, peddled all across the city as protection from the demonic. The real thing was said to be corrosive as acid upon a demon's skin. Not that Eda had need of such things. It was only a biting reminder of the yawning divide between her and everyone else. She was a mere spectre in this city. Friends, lovers, protection from demons – all wasted on her.

Eda looked away before resentment rose like bile.

At the mouth of the next bridge, a templehouse loomed over the river. It was an aged building of discoloured limestone,

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paler than the sagging, half-timbered stucco houses lining the streets around it. The templehouse marked the centre of Crowgate's parish, and though Eda did not worship she visited the grounds every week without fail.

A gargoyle leered down at her from the steeply gabled roof as she neared. Through the iron gate and up the gravel path, gravestones surrounded her on both sides. They were stacked so closely together it seemed preposterous that any more bodies might fit, even for those with the coin to afford it. She cut across the muddy grass and stepped around each stone with a wince. As if the dead cared.

It didn't take long to find the right one. Eda could walk this same route blindfolded. 'Sorry I'm late, Ma.'

She lay down the water lilies before a grave of pale stone. It was chipped and worn, but the engraving remained legible: *Emmeline Shaw. Wife and mother.*

Eda never knew Emmeline, who had founded Shaws' Antiques and travelled beyond Wesland's borders to seek out their rarest, most coveted stock. By all accounts, she'd been a learned and ambitious woman. It made Eda queasy that *wife and mother* alone should be Emmeline's legacy. Mother to a daughter who'd killed her in childbirth, and wife to a man like Oswin . . .

She glanced at the darker, newer headstone beside her mother's. Scowled.

Oswin Shaw left Blackbridge just once in his entire life. He was not so well educated as Emmeline, nor as adventurous, but he had a head for figures and a good manner with customers.

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Together they'd built a small, well-regarded business. The way Ben told it, the shop once buzzed with commerce all throughout the day.

Then Emmeline died birthing Eda. Oswin could not recover from the loss. For months he barely ate or slept, and his three young children might have been ghosts for all the attention he paid them. The shop remained closed. Oswin spent all hours writing letters, studying Emmeline's books until the candles burned down to nothing.

One day, he just left, Ben told Eda. *He paid Old Mary next door to check in on us and keep us fed. Was gone for weeks. Until he suddenly came back.*

With the mirror.

'Thought I'd find you here.'

Lawrie stepped across the mud towards her, his cape pulled snug around his neck. It wasn't raining this morning, but the grey skies over Blackbridge always threatened it.

Eda crossed her arms. 'Aren't you meant to be home by now? Ben already left for work.'

'The shop will survive. Needed to catch the courier.'

'Ah. So you're bothering the National Library again.'

'They've an extensive collection available for private purchase, and *Pagan Ritualism in Wesland* is on the list – I checked twice.' He sniffed. 'We just keep getting outbid by some collector arsehole.'

'Perhaps you should let them win.' At Lawrie's appalled expression, she added, 'We can only afford so much new stock each quarter. Is one book really worth it?'

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'Yes, and it offends me that you'd even ask. Ben's supposed to be the dreary philistine with the imagination of a teaspoon, not you. I've *told* you how rare that book is –'

'Ugh, don't go on about it again. You'll put me off literature forever.'

He shoved her; Eda pushed him back. Lawrie turned to face the graves, and his grin faded. He plucked one of the soggy water lilies from Emmeline's grave and placed it over Oswin's.

Irritation flared like bellows on a smelter. 'I didn't bring them for him.'

'He's our father, Edie. He was a good man. He just got . . . lost.'

Eda scoffed. 'Is that what you call abandoning his children to hunt down a cursed mirror? Was he *lost* when he made a deal that he couldn't afford, condemning us to pay the price after he was gone? All to bring her back.'

'Don't.' Lawrie's hazel eyes flashed. They were a twin to her own, and in them she saw her reflection: apple-cheeked and freckled, golden hair an angry riot about her shoulders. 'You were a babe. You don't remember any of it.'

'But you *told* me,' she said. 'How you and Ben found him in the foyer, middle of the night. He was covered in dirt, you said, with an even filthier woman dressed in burial clothes. Even a five-year-old could tell she'd come back all *wrong* –'

'Shut up,' Lawrie snapped. 'I know what I said. I know what he did. He was grieving, Eda. He made a mistake. You can't keep punishing him for it. He acted out of love.'

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'That wasn't love. It was madness.'

She tired of rehashing these same old arguments. Her brothers remembered their father before he'd been a mad fool, and their love for that memory clouded their judgement. Eda was not so afflicted. She saw only the facts: Oswin had sacrificed everything to bring his wife back. He'd bargained with Mr Night for something so unnatural, so momentous, that the demon seized his chance to demand a suitably ludicrous sum.

One thousand years.

Oswin would not be able to pay it back in his lifetime, let alone with the seven years he unknowingly had left. He'd agreed that his children would be guarantors – an insurance policy. All to pay for something that even a demon as powerful as Mr Night could not truly give. Oswin got his wish and, against all natural order, Emmeline returned to him. Except she was not Emmeline any more.

Mr Night's words rushed forth like a dark tide. *You want and you want so shamelessly.*

Eda wrapped her arms around herself as she strode away, stone-faced. 'People are selfish, Lawrie. Our father was the worst of them. Some don't deserve forgiveness.'

He followed her. 'I don't believe that, and neither should you. You can't dismiss everyone so coldly.'

Why? she wanted to retort. *Look around you, brother. What good is left in this saints-damned city?*

Eda dreamed of escaping the darkness that bound her, while the self-serving ingrates of this city crawled into it

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willingly. She hated them. Needed them. They followed Ben and Lawrie to the mirror, like supplicants at prayer, hoping to see their most desperate wishes fulfilled. Was it pitiful or merely ironic, that a demon might answer their pleas when the Lordfather did not?

Eda knew Mr Night's power. Saw it in his quicksilver eyes, felt it dance upon her skin whenever he came near. He was indisputably *real*. Yet she'd never sensed the Lordfather as others claimed to. Had never known His touch, the few times she dared to pray.

He'd once gone by a different name.

In the beginning, He ruled with six others, and together they shaped earth, sea and sky, the Holy Codex taught. *But when His fellow gods fell to earthly vice, He forged a golden blade to split the veil between worlds and cast them out. Under His rule, mankind found industry and order. They pledged to follow His teachings, or else be damned to the Otherworld where those false gods await in blackest corruption.*

Eda found it hard to believe that the first demons were corrupted Weslic gods. Sinners being condemned to the Otherworld in death seemed even more unlikely, for Mr Night surely didn't spend his days dodging tortured mortal spirits like flies. But if a benevolent god truly did watch over the people of Wesland, one thing was certain: he had spurned the Shaws. To think they were so reviled by one who was supposed to love them unconditionally . . .

Eda glanced back at her father's grave.

It hurt less not to believe at all.

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'As for last night,' Lawrie continued, 'you need to understand where Ben is coming from. He was only –'

She cut him off. 'Look!'

Slowing to a halt before the templehouse gate came a procession of horses. They surrounded a fine carriage, all bedecked in the red-and-silver livery of the Order of the Blade. Each rider bore a silver-alloy sword, glinting in the white morning light. Only alchemists sanctioned by the Faithhood could meld silver with steel like that and make a useful weapon. In the hands of an ordinary blacksmith, it was far too soft.

'What are the Blades doing here?' Lawrie hissed.

Her heart cantered behind her ribs. 'Be calm. We're just two people paying our respects to lost relatives.'

'We're also keeping an *extremely* illicit demonic artefact in our cellar! What if they're here for us? What if someone reported us?'

Keep it together. Eda grabbed his hand. It was cold and clammy. Beyond the gate, the four riders remained mounted. They watched dispassionately as people stopped to look. A child tugged on his mother's sleeve, bouncing in excitement.

'I don't think so. They're escorting that carriage.' No sooner had she said it than the doors swung open. From within, a man of middling height stepped onto the street and pulled down his rich purple hood.

A cleric.

'Looks like a priest,' Lawrie said. 'Or a bishop, maybe. Do you think he's here to take over the templehouse, with Bishop Emery gone?'

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Gone was a very polite way of saying *died of infection after dallying with too many whores*, but Eda supposed the point was moot. 'Must be.'

Lawrie deflated with relief.

As they approached the gate, she observed this new cleric with mute surprise. *Young. Handsome.* In Eda's limited experience, they were all old and warty, with grey hair and rheumy eyes. She rarely spent time outside Crowgate's parish, but she *did* know that it took years of dedicated service to ascend from priesthood to a bishop's mantle. Yet this man couldn't be much out of his late twenties. He was pale and freckled, with striking red hair combed neatly to the side. His face was pinched, but if the perpetual waft of the canals – damp and vaguely mouldy – offended his nose, he hid it well. He wore a cream-white cassock with amethyst panelling and golden trim. A matching riding cloak hung clasped about his neck. The brooch's design was that of an open palm bisecting a sun: the symbol of the Faith.

He seemed very clean and bright amongst the drab greys and browns of the street.

Before Eda could open the gate, his gaze found hers. 'Allow me, madam.'

It felt distinctly wrong for such an esteemed cleric to wait on her. Eda made herself smile in thanks as they slipped by. *He doesn't know us. There's nothing to fear.*

Lawrie flushed. 'Thank you, sir – er, Father. Many thanks.'

She resisted the urge to elbow him.

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'Are you both local to Crowgate?' The bishop's eyes were a fetching blue.

'Yes,' Eda jumped in, anticipating Lawrie blabbering himself into a conniption. 'We live just east of here, further down the Waterway. I'm Eda. This is my brother Lawrie.'

'Lawrence.'

'A pleasure. I am Bishop Florian Fane.' The bishop held a hand to his chest, where a pointed vial of colloidal silver gleamed. Eda eyed it with trepidation. The *real* kind, of course, produced by the Alchemists' Cloister – that esteemed guild of enchanters devoted to the Faithhood and its many edicts. Eda saw them sometimes, traversing the inner city in their pale-blue robes.

'Are you here to take over the temple'ouse, Father?' a woman called.

There were noises of interest from a small crowd gathered about the carriage. The Blades glared from atop their horses, but they didn't warn anyone away.

Bishop Florian was unperturbed by the attention, smiling beatifically. 'I'm pleased to say that I am, madam. May Bishop Emery be at rest.' He held his index finger against his forehead in blessing. A few others hurried to do the same. 'I come to you today all the way from Alderport. It is His Grace the Patriarch's fervent wish that a successor be named before his passing. The next Clerics' Conclave shall be held right here, in Blackbridge.' The crowd tittered excitedly. 'In anticipation of this most holy day, I have pledged myself to your service, where the Faithhood's guiding hand is sorely

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needed. Blackbridge is a proud and ancient city – the oldest in Wesland! But with such history as this, less savoury echoes of the past still linger.'

A Conclave. It had been decades since the last, and decades more since the one before that. Each city was bestowed the honour in turn. The choosing of a new head cleric – successor to the Patriarch himself – was bound to have Blackbridge in a great tizzy once the word spread. Piety might have lost its lustre here, but an excuse for revelry certainly hadn't.

Eda stood and listened to Florian Fane speak, intrigued. There was something charismatic about him she could not place. His warm smile. The confident, brassy tenor of his voice. Perhaps it was simply that he was young and handsome, too handsome for a cleric's garb.

'Gateways of old still linger across our fair isle. It is the opinion of the Patriarch that *this*, good people, is why you have struggled against the foul influence of demonic bargains, beyond any other great Weslic town.' His tone shifted. 'If Gateways are being used to prey on the vulnerable in Blackbridge, those responsible will be swiftly brought to justice. This I swear.'

Eda's cheeks ran cold. Beside her, Lawrie stiffened. Her mind spun like a runaway cartwheel. *They've never brought someone from the capital before.* If the Patriarch thought to blame the depravity and lawlessness of Blackbridge on the demonic, rather than poor housing, corruption and unemployment, that was no great surprise – but it meant the Blades would have their noses to the ground. Founded

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upon the Faithhood's ideals, the Order of the Blade enforced all city-state law in Wesland, but opposing the demonic remained their core principle. It was no wonder the Grand Marshal had lent them to the bishop's mission. Not with a Clerics' Conclave looming.

Eda bit the inside of her cheek. *We need to make that final Pact. And soon.*

Bishop Florian held up his hands. The anxious chatter died. 'Be not afeard. I mean to work tirelessly alongside the Order of the Blade to restore Faithfulness to Blackbridge, not merely for the sake of this Conclave, but for the city itself. We shall not fail. Your salvation is at hand.'

A smattering of cautious clapping quickly swelled with enthusiasm. It was a horrible tuneless buzz in Eda's ears.

The people clustered around him like bees to a hive. The bishop shook a man's hand. Bent down to greet a small boy.

'Let's go,' she whispered, grabbing Lawrie's wrist and pulling him through the crowd. The eyes of the Blades pressed upon her back like a chill wind heralding a storm.

Eda had been chained to the shop – to Blackbridge – her entire life. The history of her family's pain was etched into every cobblestone. If there was a place where the Faith did not loom over her and soul brokers did not lurk below, she was determined to find it. Leaving this cursed city would be the first thing she chose for herself, after a lifetime without choices at all.

Until then, they had a job to do.

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Chapter Three

'We'll lie low.' Ben was pacing. Boots still muddy from the day's work, he didn't seem to care that he was treading dirt into the rugs. 'There's nothing else to be done. Lawrie and I will stop searching for dealies until this bishop grows bored and things cool down.'

'Didn't seem the type to grow *bored*, Ben,' Lawrie said, brooding on the stairs. 'He's been petitioned by the Patriarch himself to sort out Blackbridge's little demon problem. He means business.'

Eda rubbed her temple. It was early in the evening, but she felt weary enough for bed already. Green light flooded the shop, tinted by the windows. Cluttering the casements were some of their most visually interesting stock: a huge brass globe, a Forisian dining service, a taxidermy peafowl complete with a train of shimmering tail feathers. Ben nearly knocked the thing over with his pacing, and she couldn't hold her tongue any longer.

'Lawrie is right. Gateways, Pacts, soul brokers like us – Florian Fane isn't going to stop hunting them down after a few weeks, Ben. I saw his face. He's committed.'

'This *Conclave* business has got the Faithhood riled up, is all. It isn't the first time the Blades have declared crackdowns,

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and the investigations always pass. You think someone like Severin Lich lasted this long without knowing when to pause trade?'

Severin Lich had fingers in many nefarious pies. Illegal bookmaking, racketeering, exports. But the man was whispered of throughout the same dens and taverns Ben and Lawrie haunted for one particular reason.

He had a Gateway.

Lich had been running a soul-brokerage business longer than the Shaws ever had, and far more successfully. His influence was strongest in the upper city, where the more underhanded nobles of Blackbridge flocked to him for Pacts. Lich had obviously learned of the Shaws and their Gateway – their elusive moustachioed voyeur proved as much – but they'd never poached his clientele. That alone might have spared them his ire.

'Lich is a businessman, not indentured like us. He takes coin, and a lot of it. He can afford to pause his operation for a time.'

'We *can't* afford to get caught, Eda.' Ben scrubbed a hand over his face. 'Not now.'

His weariness roused her sympathy. She remembered when he used to play on the street outside with a wooden sword, stern little face taut with concentration. He'd wanted to be a Blade. Eda suspected he still did, though he never said so. The Order of the Blade represented everything Ben was not permitted to be – noble, honest, free of shame. A champion of the commonfolk. Thanks to Oswin's Pact, he was instead forced to act the shadow dogging their steps, preying upon

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their weaknesses like a starved wolf. He hated demons all the more for having to work for one.

Ben had the heart of a knight. It was a special sort of cruelty, Eda thought, to be twisted into the monster you were born to slay.

When Oswin died, Ben took whatever work he could find to keep his siblings fed. His current role as head stablehand for the Blades was as close as he might ever get. He liked horses, and the pay was fair, but he was surely only punishing himself. To watch those men and women in their shining armour pass him by, day after day, while he cleaned up their steeds' muck . . .

Still. The position brought in coin, and being employed by the Blades meant Ben was mostly beneath suspicion. No simple stablehand would moonlight as a soul broker right under their noses. Or so they thought.

Eda slid from her perch on the countertop. 'This bishop doesn't seem like any we've had before. The Faithhood has always denounced Blackbridge as the most depraved city in Wesland – now they're finally trying to clean it up. We can't wait around and hope they'll ease off. We don't even know when this Conclave will be held, and autumn harvest is just three weeks away.'

'You suggest we carry on as normal? It's only a matter of time before we're caught. We can't go around telling folk where to go for Pacts with the Blades pushing so hard for information. They'll increase the reward money, and the bishop is already whipping up religious fervour –'

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'There's a reason you choose marks so carefully. Those people want a Pact far more than whatever petty sum the Blades might offer for information. We only need *one* more, maybe two.'

'I'm not arguing with you.'

She clenched her fists. 'Well, I'm arguing with *you*. Lawrie?'

Lawrie was silent, but she knew he would be. This was an old tableau: Ben would snarl, Eda would snap, and Lawrie would hover at the fringes of the skirmish, calling for peace. It wouldn't bother her, except that Lawrie's idea of mediation invariably meant taking Ben's side. Easier to pacify Eda than challenge the elder brother he so admired.

She was not pacified now. 'You know the terms. If we don't bring Mr Night his fifty years by autumn harvest . . .' Her voice shook. 'He will *kill* us, Ben.'

The silence was stifling.

'Perhaps –' Lawrie cleared his throat – 'perhaps we could finish it ourselves. If we had to. Ten years between the three of us . . . That's not so bad, is it?'

It took Eda a moment to grasp his meaning. She laughed shrilly. 'Be serious.'

'He's right, Eda.' Ben stared at the floor, jaw tense. 'It would be a last resort, but it's an option.'

'Option?' She looked between them, increasingly tempted to lob that bloody peafowl at their thick heads. 'What sort of *option* is that? We've already given Mr Night countless years of service, thanks to Oswin, and now you want to give him even *more* –'

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'Don't bring Father into this,' Ben snapped. 'I wouldn't ask it of you, anyhow. Lawrie and I would do it.'

He said it as though it were already decided. Eda nearly choked on her rage. 'You – *what*? Have you lost your mind? I won't let you take my share of that burden. Not ever. It's a ridiculous idea, besides. We are *not* dealies.'

'Enough!' Ben's eyes flashed in warning. 'We lie low, and that's final. I'm doing this to protect you.'

'You're doing this because you have to be *in control of everything*,' she cried, jabbing her finger at him. Indignation roared like wildfire. 'If you'd only allow me to *help* more, we could have cleared our debt years ago!'

'You really think Mr Night will let us go, even if he gets his precious years? You forget, Eda – there's always a loophole. We still have that mirror in our cellar. His doorway to our world. You think he'll just let us get rid of it?'

'He's not interested in making us his prisoners –'

'He's a *demon*!' Ben roared. 'Are you really such a fucking imbecile?'

Lawrie inhaled sharply. Cold shock fell over her like rainwater.

Ben never talked to her like that.

They stared at one another. After a strained silence, Eda found her voice. 'I'm clever enough to know that there's nothing good left in this city. You won't have to bother yourself over me for long, Ben. When our Pact is done, I'm leaving.'

She stormed upstairs. Lawrie called her name. Eda ignored him. She despised the juvenile stinging of her eyes, the pain

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lancing her throat. She kept the tears from falling until her bedroom door slammed shut behind her.

Eda was a restless sleeper. Most nights, she crept along their hallway to draw herself a cup of water in the early hours.

Perhaps that was why he knew to wait for her.

The Shaws' resided above the shop. Their little kitchenette connected to a cramped, cluttered living space that seemed a mere extension of the chaos downstairs. Eda usually ended up tripping over some book or trinket Lawrie left lying about.

This time, she only tripped because Mr Night was sitting in front of their fire.

'Good evening, Eda.' He inclined his head. 'Or, perhaps, *good morning*.'

Flames crackled merrily, rekindled from dying embers. Mr Night sat on the padded bench they used as seating. He gestured for her to join him. Her mouth ran dry. She could count on one hand the number of times he appeared without first being called.

The night of her father's burial – she remembered that well. Mr Night had never agreed to protect Oswin from natural illness, and it had taken her father swiftly. After he was put in the ground, the demon came calling.

Perhaps she'd been too young to understand the danger, or the weight of the day had sapped her of all common sense. But Eda had watched Mr Night sit on the end of her bed with only fleeting unease. Said hoarsely, 'I'm just crying

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because I don't know what we'll do. I'm not sad he's dead. I should be sad, but I'm not.'

The demon merely smiled, reaching out to wipe at the tear rolling down her cheek. 'You are wise to save your grief for one more deserving, sweet Eda. Now sleep. All will be well.'

Eda, seven years old and weeping and desperate for a father she did not have, clutched her blanket and whispered, 'You promise?'

'I know it.'

Now I'm a woman grown, and he looks just the same.

She sat beside him – at a healthy distance. 'I wasn't expecting to see you again so soon.'

'Indeed. I mislike your mortal world. So full of noise and mess. But I enjoy speaking with *you*, dear one.' He sat angled towards her with hands clasped neatly in his lap. There was artifice in it, as one might sit for a portrait. He smelled like something wintry and ancient.

She chose her words carefully. 'What would you like to speak about?'

'Our Pact, of course. I meant what I said. You should be happy with your freedom so close at hand. But dear Benjamin is ever dour. He mistrusts me, though I've never acted false.' Silver eyes narrowed. 'Do *you* mistrust me?'

Eda recalled the tears he'd wiped away when she was seven. The constant presence he'd posed throughout her life, seen and unseen. He was frightening. He was dangerous. He held her life in the palm of his cruel, pale hand.

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Besides her brothers and this shop, he was the only constant she'd ever known. 'Perhaps I should.' She watched the flames dance in the hearth. 'Ben thinks you intend to trick us.'

'Benjamin is foolish. You are not.' The praise warmed her. 'You see the greed and the selfishness of man as I do, Eda Shaw. Your brothers and all the rest despise my kind, yet they yearn for our gifts – our *power.* Hypocrisy is in your nature. As an attraction to precious things is in mine.' He looked abstract in the nebulous orange light. 'And nothing is so precious as time itself.'

This was why he never seemed to age. Demons siphoned years off a mortal life to extend their own. *And once our Pact is done, Mr Night won't have anyone to bring him his years like grapes on a platter.* He hadn't needed to lift a finger in two decades; would he so easily give that up?

'What will happen once our debt is paid? The Gateway is still here. Do you . . . expect us to continue looking after it?' The words came thick as treacle, reluctant as she was to give them voice.

'I've no expectations beyond the fulfilment of your father's Pact. Bring me those ten years, and your life shall be your own.'

Eda chewed her lip. Logically, there was no way to trust Mr Night, though he'd never done anything to earn that distrust beyond being what he was. Why should she resent *him* when it was her father who'd placed them in Mr Night's thrall? For all his terrible power, all the years he'd stolen, Eda could rely on his selfish nature. To demand what he was owed and nothing more.

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Humans, she found, were rarely so straightforward.

'A new cleric has come to the city looking for people like us. Ben and Lawrie don't want to carry on hunting marks. They think it'll pass before autumn harvest, but . . .' She could not say it. *But if it doesn't, you'll kill us.*

She wanted him to tell her that he would never do it, no matter their agreement. But it was easy to imagine him looking at her with those cutting eyes, saying, *A deal is a deal*, as if her life meant nothing. Perhaps it didn't. To him, these twenty years must have passed like twenty minutes. What care could he have for such a fleeting acquaintance?

Eda wanted him to care. She was mad, probably – something deeply askew in her grey matter – but couldn't help it. Her brothers had ever been terrified and hateful of him, and so Mr Night did not come to them of his own volition. But in Eda, he'd found a willing ear. A girl both unnerved and fascinated by the creature from another world. He'd watched her grow up, and she had watched him back, this strange shadow of a man. Mr Night showed her grace where Ben criticised, encouraged her where Lawrie doubted. He listened to her. He *knew* her, sometimes better than her own brothers did. Certainly better than Oswin ever had.

Mr Night was not her family. Eda wondered what it said about her, that she craved his favour as though he were.

'I don't want to wait for my brothers,' she confessed. 'Ben's hesitation could damn us all. I could find us one final Pact. I know I could.'

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Mr Night leaned forward. Eda held her breath as he brushed her hair over her shoulder. 'Do this thing, sweet Eda, and you will be free of fear. You are more than capable. I have never doubted your ability.' His voice softened. 'I have never doubted you.'

She considered him. Eda's most scathing inner thoughts often echoed Mr Night's voice – perhaps because he dispensed his disparagement so freely, and she dreaded it ever turning on her. But that made his approval all the headier. He was right: Eda was as much affected by her father's deal as Ben and Lawrie. She had a right to act. Lying low to avoid the hangman's noose was well and good, but what use would it be if Mr Night executed them just the same?

Better the devil you know . . .

Eda searched his eyes. 'You're so certain.'

He smiled, wolfish. 'I *know* it.'

Two days passed before she gathered the courage to act.

Finding potential dealies had always been Ben and Lawrie's task, but Eda wasn't ignorant of their routine. She knew the way of things.

First and most important – keeping identities hidden.

She frowned at herself in the mirror. Having an attic room meant that the wall sloped sharply, leaving little space to stand back and evaluate her outfit, but she managed. She'd borrowed a pair of Lawrie's dirty trousers from the washing basket, since he wouldn't notice them missing, rolled up

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