'Dark fantasy at its most intoxicating … I was completely enthralled'

#1 *NYT* BESTSELLING AUTHOR JENNIFER L. ARMENTROUT



A STAGE SET FOR VILLAINS

SHANNON J. SPANN



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Praise for *A Stage Set for Villains*

"Dark fantasy at its most intoxicating. Shannon Spann delivers a world where gods crave applause, mortals bleed for love, and every truth feels like a curse. I was completely enthralled."

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"Part novel, part script, *A Stage Set For Villains* is a fascinatingly unique world like nothing you've ever read before, where mirrors are to be feared, life-eating curses abound, and vicious humans-turned-gods called Players perform on a voracious playhouse stage, that will have you riveted from the first casting call!"

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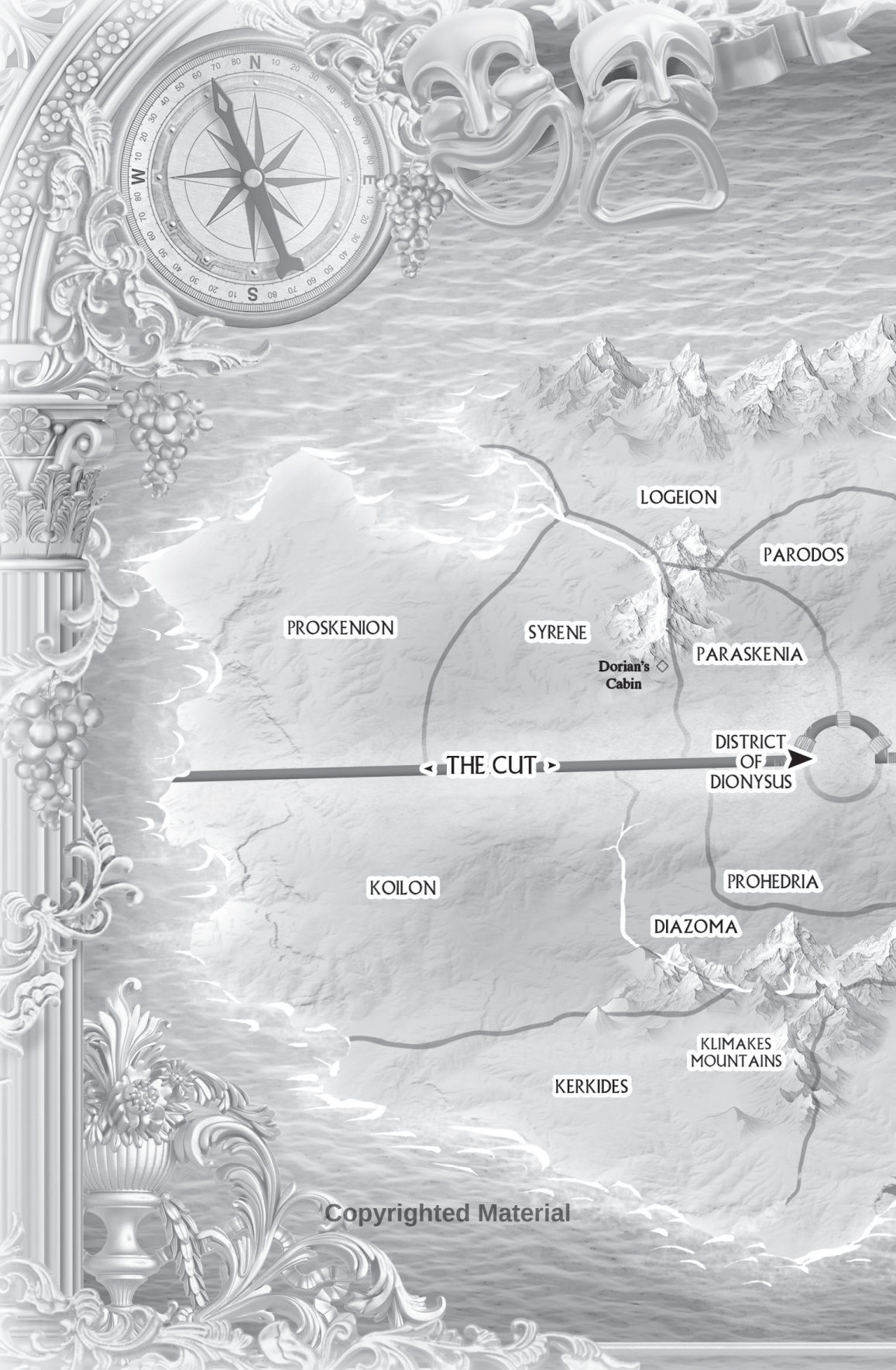
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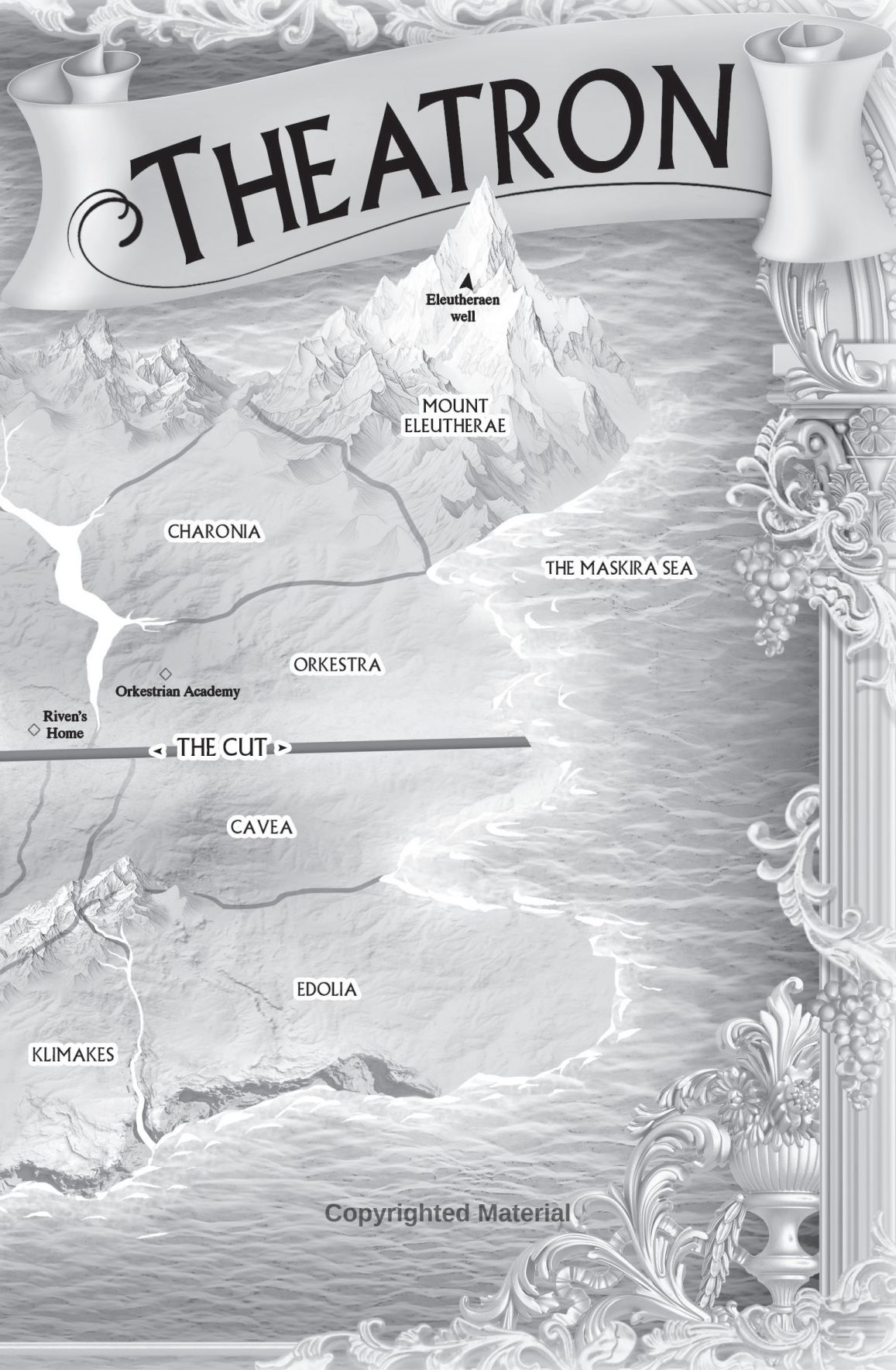
For Grandma
Who always believed in me, but had to go home before this book made its way to shelves. I'm sure you've already requested it at heaven's library. I miss you.

And for Star
Hey, look! Look, buddy! I did it!!

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A Stage Set for Villains is an atmospheric dark fantasy set in the brilliant and brutal world of Theatron. The story features elements that might not be suitable for all readers, including death, blood, violence, illness, torture, imprisonment, starvation, loss of autonomy, murder, burning, and graphic language. Suicide and poison are discussed in backstory. Readers who may be sensitive to these elements, please take note, and prepare to enter the Playhouse…

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OVERTURE

For as long as I can remember, we have feared the Players. I know of only three ways to survive an encounter with one.

"Never look a Player in the eye," I recite as we shuffle a few steps forward in line. My older brother's hand clutches my gloved fingers a little too tight, and I wonder if he's nervous, too. Last night, I was so excited that I couldn't sleep. But the longer we wait, the more I wonder if being marked will hurt.

"That's right," Galen says. "Remember, that *doesn't* mean ignoring them, Riv."

I nod eagerly. If you're going to bruise a Player's ego, you might as well throw yourself off a cliff while you're at it. It would be less painful.

"What's the second rule?" Galen quizzes as another newly marked boy, somewhere between my eight years of age and my brother's twelve, passes us on his way out of the enormous courthouse ahead.

There's a bandage pressed just below the boy's throat like a necklace, gold bleeding through the layers. He's crying.

"Just ten minutes," Aunt Cassia told us before we left this morning. *"Ten minutes of discomfort for a lifetime of protection against the Players. Against the lure of the Playhouse."*

I touch the tips of my fingers to the dip between my collarbones, trying to imagine the mark that will go there soon.

"The Three Compliments Rule," I finally answer, mentally reading the memory cards I made in class last week. "Pay a Player three compliments and you might satisfy their ego long enough to get away."

"Good!" My brother offers an encouraging smile while I throw another searching look over my shoulder, trying to spot where we left our mother at the gates in the distance. "And the third way to

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escape a Player?"

I press my lips together, my thoughts stalling back to that crying boy. The bandage. My heart begins to pound in my chest. How badly *will* it hurt?

Galen squeezes my hand, and I realize I haven't answered his question. "Oh, um—give them a gift?" I guess, my memory cards momentarily fleeing my mind.

He shakes his head while a voice somewhere ahead shouts out, "Keep it moving!"

They call us next, and we're ushered into a bare, circular atrium, interrupted by a single stone hallway. My brother herds me up to a half-moon granite desk beside a gurgling fountain, our steps echoing.

"Fill these out," instructs a sour-faced woman from behind the desk, extending several pages of parchment to Galen. I snatch the forms indignantly, and the woman startles.

"I can read. I'm *eight*," I announce, plucking a pen from the jar on the desk while Galen apologizes for my brash behavior.

"Eight, is she? Tall for her age, I think." I feel the woman's gaze linger on my pen as I spell out my name: *Riven Hesper.* She inhales sharply.

I peer up to deal the woman a venomous look. It's easy to tell when people are mentally comparing me to my father; they always stare like I've risen from the dirt of his grave. My father's face is nearly as infamous as the Players who murdered him.

I go back to ignoring her and concentrate on filling out today's date.

Until my pen freezes at the sound of a scream.

It all happens at once. The desk woman jumps to her feet as the shriek ricochets off the vaulted ceilings, followed by a second scream—this one, in the shape of the word *help.* Then another scream, and another. At the frantic pounding of feet, my attention startles toward the cavernous hall. Somewhere, a man's voice yells out a warning that makes my blood run cold.

Player.

The word scorches my mind, fear wiping it blank of everything I have been taught. Instinctively, my eyes search for the closest grown-up, but the woman behind the desk has dropped to the

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ground, covering her eyes.

Before I can move, a tall, angelic figure flutters into the atrium, layers of purple rippling behind her. The Player whips around, a curtain of dark curls toppling over her shoulder. As if she senses an audience.

Her eyes glimmer like live embers, and I think she must be the most dreadful and beautiful thing I have ever seen. Catching my eye, the Player smiles—it's a wrong smile, though. It stretches wider and wider until each side reaches the blood rubies that dangle from her earlobes.

Aunt Cassia warned me of their unnatural faces—exaggerated so patrons in even the worst seats of the Playhouse can still make out a Player's expressions. Up close, it's as breathtaking as it is grotesque. She looks like a god.

But we don't have gods anymore.

We only have Players.

Sentries uniformed in black and silver fill the room, encircling the woman and barking orders at one another as she extends her palms out. Broken, golden shackles dangle at her wrists.

There's blood on her hands.

Suddenly, my brother's panicked face fills my vision, his hands clamping around my shoulders. "You look at me, okay? Look *only* at me, Riven," he whispers, frantic.

How could I have already forgotten the first rule?

I nod rapidly and focus hard on my brother's gaze—wide and round and scared. Except something is wrong with his eyes. They're too still—glassy, like a doll's.

"Galen?" I ask. Why isn't he blinking? "Galen!" I try again, alarmed at the sound of my own voice.

Because my voice is *all* I can hear.

The shouts echo into nothing, the world shuddering to a stop. I look from Galen's frozen stare to the fountain behind him, where the water is stuck in midair like it's hardened into ice. Around me, the sentries are locked in place, a museum of lifeless statues. Galen's hands press on my shoulders, cold and heavy as marble.

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I blink a few times, baffled.

The whole world is still.

In the silence, a hand peels over my brother's collar. I shiver, watching as it hooks around his shoulder one long, elegant finger at a time—each adorned with a ring. Several nails are stained red.

Then the Player's face appears, hovering just over Galen's shoulder.

I glance back at Galen, obeying his instructions *not* to look. But the Player's skin glows so bright, it feels impossible to keep my eyes away.

"Oh, dear heart. You look so scared." I shudder at the sound of her voice. It's slow, the timbre light and airy, like silk. It fills the room, sinks into the walls. "At least look at me, won't you?"

Never look a Player in the eye, I chant mentally. My breaths are coming too quick, my vision beginning to swim.

In the corner of my eye, her smile falls at my silence and her hand lifts off Galen's shoulder, glides to his face. To my horror, the Player sets the sharpened edge of her ring against his cheek. Then drags it across his skin, slicing open the soft area below his eye.

Still, Galen doesn't move. Doesn't react.

And suddenly, I forget everything I should—and should *not*—do in this situation.

"Stop it!" I shout, locking eyes on the Player. Fear gathers in my throat, and I spit it back out as fury. "Or *else*," I add, hoping she doesn't notice the way my knees are trembling.

The Player tilts her head at me, curious. "Why, what lovely golden eyes you have."

A compliment? Wait—three! I'm supposed to pay her three compl—

"They're *brown*," I hiss at her. Like my father's were. *"Liar."*

She throws her head back and laughs. The sound ricochets off the stone, ringing in my ears. "What a *beautiful* temper," the Player muses. "*Lying* is a part of living. The truth is too often vile, wouldn't you say?"

I'm not sure, really. Most people I know *can't* lie. Pulling in a breath, I cast a nervous glance around the room. "Why aren't they moving?"

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"Well, I've suspended our reality, you see," she whispers, like

it's a shared secret between us. "Do you know what that means?"

I press my lips into a frown, frustrated. I *don't* know.

"It means this conversation doesn't happen," she says, gathering her robes as she settles on her knees before me. Her figure still towers over me at this height. I straighten my shoulders and stretch my neck a little higher, searching for confidence.

"They're going to take you away," I warn in a way I think sounds threatening.

"Oh, I know!" the Player says, excited. "You see, they've promised to burn me at the stake. And I cannot resist a spectacle." She smiles softly. "What is your name?"

Before I can speak, her gilded eyes fall to the pages in my hands—documents that declare I'm to be marked. Safe. Protected from Players. At the top of them, my name.

"Riven!" She howls another laugh that shakes my boots. "What could divide you so fiercely to merit such a name?"

I don't answer, keeping one eye just to her right, to the blood now trickling down Galen's neck. I wonder if he can feel it. The Player pulls the pages from my hands, the startling warmth of her touch loosening my grip like melting ice. She raises them between our faces, then, in one beautiful, violent motion, tears them to shreds. They fall around us like new snow, landing gently in the quiet.

"You aren't getting marked, Riven," the Player murmurs, and it's then that I notice how white and pointed her teeth look up close. "*You* are coming with me."

I don't even hear myself scream. The will, the *desire* to follow her overwhelms my every thought as the Player reaches for my hand and summons me forward. I watch her golden eyes.

Compelled, my hand reaches for hers. I'm not marked yet. I can't help it.

Maybe *this* is how it feels to watch a Playhouse performance. Galen says Players pluck the heartstrings of thousands in the audience every night like delicate threads on a quilt, wiping away and rearranging their spectators' thoughts, ideas, and beliefs with

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little more than a pretty word.

Players can make you believe anything.

But there is at least one thought she has no hold on: *She's going to kill me*. She's going to force me to follow her, an eternal audience, until my legs give out. Until I die from exhaustion or starvation.

An audience, wholly and solely devoted. This is what all Players crave.

As my mind blurs, I grip the edge of my brother's coat, cling to it, certain I'll be gone forever if I let go. My arm stretches and stretches as the Player drags me away, the gap between Galen and me widening.

Then I see it—a glint of gold in Galen's pocket. Father's knife. Galen carries it everywhere.

The third rule for surviving a Player flashes through my mind: *A Player can only be slain with Eleutheraen gold*. I squeeze my eyes tight and reach for the handle. My fingers scrape at the wood—

"Riven," the Player chimes sweetly. It sounds a little forced now.

I stretch my fingers, clawing at the knife.

"Riven, darling, there's no reason to make this difficult—"

It all seems to happen in a blink. One second my fingers are wrapping around the knife's hilt and the next, I'm bringing the blade down as hard as I can.

The Player's words shatter into the most terrible scream I have ever heard. She falls onto her knees, wailing and clutching her hand. A puddle of gold gathers beneath it, dripping onto the stone floor like drops of sun. *Player blood*. Brimming with power, with *Craft*.

She looks at me with eyes full of hellfire, rising from the ground with a lethal sort of calm. I scramble away, bracing myself, waiting for her to rip my eyes from their sockets. To break my legs and drag me to the Playhouse—

But a gold chain loops around the Player's throat, and a man holding it wrenches her backward. He screams something I barely register, his face white with terror. Almost instantly, a dozen more

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sentries are upon the Player.

All around me, everything starts to move again, free from her charm. *I* am free from her charm. That desire to follow the Player unclenches from my heart, lifts off my shoulders like a bird.

It occurs to me it was never real to begin with.

But before I can realize what's happened, before I can so much as *think* to move, the Player wrenches free and is on me again, gripping my coat collar and holding me too close, like she's about to bite my neck.

She whispers into my ear, and I freeze.

And then it's over. Guards rip her away.

Weight crushes around my arms as Galen whirls me to face him. Relief fills me to see him moving again, *breathing* again. He's blinking, too—wincing as he dabs a hand over the open cut on his cheek, bewildered.

Behind him, the Player thrashes, stretching those long fingers toward me. *"Riven!"* she screams, her anger shifting into hysteria. *"Riven!"*

"How does she know your name?" Galen asks, panicked. The Player's screams ring out all the way down the hall, my name echoing off the stone. Did no one else notice the world go still?

Galen's gaze drops to the knife in my hand, slick with golden blood. The Player's blood. Before I can release the knife, droplets of it drip down the handle and sink into my skin, warm—*too* warm, like I'm holding my hands over an open flame. I cry out and drop the blade.

But inside, my chest feels like it cracks open. Something sharp and hungry rushes in to fill the space.

"Riven, what did you do?" my brother asks, and I think the answer is that I have made a very dangerous enemy. I do not say this out loud to Galen.

And I most *certainly* don't tell him what the Player whispered in my ear.

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PROLOGUE

The mortals made a treaty, to keep the Players South
And when the treaty ended, a wall to keep them out
And if the wall should crumble, then marks will keep us safe
And if our marks should fail us, gods have mercy on our fate

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ACT I

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Act I: Scene I

TEN YEARS LATER

If I had a coin for every time I was warned about the Playhouse, I'd have enough to buy a front row seat.

One for last week, when the papers warned of its rumored grand return and the looming end of the treaty.

And then about a hundred more for this morning, when news broke the Playhouse had posted a bulletin announcing their next tour stop—the District of Dionysus—and all hell subsequently broke loose.

To make things worse, the bulletin listed no date. No arrival, no performances scheduled, nothing. Like the tense speculation of their return—and the fear it drives into the air—is just another glorious part of the show. I'll bet they do it on purpose.

I push myself to tread faster, my eyes focused on the afternoon sun dipping lower on the horizon as I weave through a sea of faded coats and skirts blurring into gray streets, the word *"Players"* swarming in the air. They've been closing in for weeks, their theatre sinking and vanishing beneath the earth, only to impossibly rise up somewhere else.

I tuck my chin and urge my legs to *move*.

You will cooperate, I command my limbs, most of which have already gone numb and cold. *You will work today and not—*

As if to argue with the thought, the wind smacks me with a gust that soaks through both of my coats and unfurls a paralyzing chill down my bones. I buckle and swear under my breath.

"Cursed, I heard—" someone utters to their companion in passing, eyes flickering in my direction. I bristle at the word, straightening. *Cursed*.

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The Player's promise from ten years ago hovers at the edges of my memory, sending a shiver down my spine.

Glass smacks the sidewalk in front of me, shattering, and I shriek, shielding my face.

"Sorry—gods, so sorry!" calls a woman through a window two stories up, who just nearly murdered me with a slab of falling glass. What a way to go *that* would have been. "Can't be too careful."

She isn't the only one. The path ahead is littered with broken mirrors catching the light like specks of gold. The Playhouse is moving closer every day, and people are *still* harboring them? Gods help us.

Mirrors are practically an invitation for a Player to come inside. Or worse, to snatch someone through their reflection. I wait a beat, just in case anyone else feels like chucking more glass out their window, before moving again, taking care to sidestep a large chunk.

I avert my eyes from the shards; I haven't seen my own reflection in years.

From the way people stare, I gather this is a good thing.

Glass crunches under my boots all the way to the Cut—a deep trench of dark water on either side of a wall rising out of it. Both look a little ominous today.

The Cut divides Theatron in half, separating us in the North from the Player worshippers of the South. In the center between them is the only shared territory, the District, which sits low and flat like the bottom of a bowl. It's a wildly unhappy marriage, and probably the only place you can find a temple dedicated to the Players just two streets away from an apothecary that sells the Eleutheraen gold that kills them.

"Did you miss me, Jak?" I call mockingly to the usual guard from the footbridge as I approach the closest gateway.

Jak's face pinches at my greeting. "Riven. Still alive, I see." He doesn't sound pleased by this, nor amused by the little bow I offer in response.

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"When do you think it'll be?" I ask.

He huffs a humorless laugh, but there's a strained edge to it. "I've heard guesses ranging from three days to three months, based on their patterns. What, you want in? Some of us are taking bets."

"I've lost enough on the Players, thanks," I say, throwing a look to the black water below, and the wall rising out of it. Despite its name, the wall wasn't built high to keep the Players out. It was built *low*, sealed with Eleutheraen gold to ward off Players. I've heard rumor that the Cut gained its name because they dug so deep that they accidentally severed Theatron in two.

I hope it does run that deep. That it's enough.

The gate groans open, and Jak takes several exaggerated steps backward to offer me an extra-wide berth. Everyone acts scared to *catch what I have*. Like the Player magic that poisoned me will simply leap into anyone who gets too close.

I ignore him and tug my coat tighter as I pass over the other side of the footbridge.

The District of Dionysus greets me with a strange mix of activity—some shoppers make panicked last-minute purchases, while others seem to be putting on a show of indifference to the news, like the world didn't shift under the weight of a single announcement—or maybe that's just denial. It isn't hard to spot the exuberant Playhouse worshippers flocking into shops to purchase offerings of jewelry and fine wine. Though *that* isn't particularly new.

I cast a sideways glance at the news racks as I go, full of sensational headlines about the Playhouse's looming return:

500-YEAR TREATY ENDS, TERROR BEGINS; WILL THE PLAYHOUSE BREACH THE CUT?

NO NEW AGREEMENT REACHED WITH PLAYERS; NORTH BRACES FOR ATTACK

PLAYHOUSE TO RETURN TO DISTRICT FOR FIRST TIME IN 15 YEARS: WHAT WE KNOW SO FAR

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"SPOTLIGHT FALLS ON PLAYER JUDE!" bellows a newspaper hawker over the piercing whistle of the nearby Diolkos Railway.

Enormous, marble statues of famous Players line my path as I breeze past a man trying to barter a playbill signed by the entire cast. Across the street, another woman rivals him, selling copies of the Playhouse treaty.

I duck low while passing the courthouse, just nearly taking an elbow to the face, but my eyes graze over a few of the signs as I round the corner.

NO PLAYERS

Our world is not your stage

The protests have spread almost as quickly as the Playhouse's announcement.

I feel eyes on me as I pass by the most recently erected statue, built in honor of their Lead Player, Jude Stepharros. Face chiseled to sharp angles, hair so artfully tousled it almost looks as if it wasn't made of stone. It stands some twenty feet tall at the center of a rippling fountain, rare gems and coins cluttering the water below his carved sandals—offerings. A dreadful waste, if you ask me. I consider dipping my hand in the water to swipe a few, but I've heard doing so can invoke all sorts of terrible curses.

I can barely afford the curse I have.

"*Riven!* Riven Hesper, you come here," rasps an all-too-familiar voice that catches me mid-step. I turn. The words don't come from the statue, mind you, but from the man propped against its base.

Haris. He's dressed in the same garish robes as always—a discarded costume from the Playhouse that he claims was as red as the auditorium curtain when he snatched it, though with time it's faded to the same gray as everything else. I can't recall a time I've seen him wear anything different. Once, when I brought him

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an old change of clothes my brother left behind, Haris looked at me like I'd suggested stripping off his own skin.

"Hi, Haris," I say, wrestling my bag from my shoulder. "I was just looking for you."

Haris may be a Playhouse fanatic, but he's also just about the closest thing I have to a friend, the only person around here who doesn't call me cursed. In fact, he's under the bizarre impression that I'm *blessed* to have been touched by a Player. Granted, the rest of them assume I was deemed unworthy, and that's why the monster's golden blood is slowly killing me. Maybe they're right.

As far as Playhouse worshippers go—*Revelers*, we call them—Haris is hardly the worst I've encountered.

He smiles, revealing rows of even teeth as he whispers, "It's *coming*, Riven."

Pity fiddles at my heartstrings. Every performance he attended—thirty-two, he claims—is written on his face. The same telltale sign of every Reveler: a filmy coating of gold over each pupil.

During one of the Playhouse's tours, Haris *literally* followed the theatre as it traveled from city to city. On foot for hundreds of miles. At night, he camped outside its gates, leaving the Players expensive offerings with every last bit of coin to his name, including the deed to his house.

And worse, he couldn't help it; Haris was never marked.

"I can hear them," he whispers, grinning wider and raising his most prized possession: a hand mirror. He prays to the Players through it daily. "They're coming *home*."

If I wasn't marked, I'd probably look and talk just like him.

"Oh, I've heard," I mutter and glance up from rifling through my bag. "That's why I'm here—I brought you something." Now, where did I put it…

Most days, I bring Haris whatever food I can hustle out of the house without too much notice—he's often so absorbed with thoughts of the Players it doesn't occur to him to eat. Today,

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though, I brought him something even more important.

"You'll take me to it, won't you? You'll come with me," Haris presses, eyes narrowing. "You and me, we're different—but you understand, don't you? Friends understand."

"The Playhouse isn't even here yet," I remind him, and spot the shine of a thin chain gleaming at the bottom of my bag. *Ah! Found it.*

Pinching the chain, I extract the pendant and approach him.

"*Please*, Riven!" Haris wails, stretching his hands out to me. The sleeves of his robes fall back, revealing the loose skin of his forearms, sagging off the bone like bread dough. Puffy, pink-white scars spell out *JUDE STEPHARROS*. I swallow back the bile that rises in my throat. We're both victims of the Players, just in different ways.

"It's finally coming *home*," he pleads.

"Here," I say, and bend to offer the pendant dangling from my fist. "This is going to help keep you safe—wear it if you go near the Playhouse. Especially if you see one of them, okay? I got it from the Merchant Ring. It's pressed with Eleutheraen gold and should—"

At the word, his face twists with rage, and I barely have time to react before he lunges and grabs hold of my wrist so quickly that I cry out in surprise, the pendant clattering to the ground.

"Take me to it!" he keens. "Bring me to the Players—" His nails dig into my skin, and I gasp.

My wrist breaks mercifully from his grip, and I stagger backward, falling on the stone.

My skin crawls like spiders are skittering over my body. I think I might throw up.

I hate being touched. *Hate* it. I always have.

Catching my breath, I get to my feet again and study my palms. The pale, waxy color is already bruising a deep purple. *Damn it.* Bruises, sprains, everything takes longer and longer to heal these days—if not just failing to heal altogether. Like the poison has made my body forget how.

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Wiping my hands over my coat like I can shake off the touch, I turn to leave. I still have another stop to make before I get home, and even I know better than to hang around the District after dark.

But as I gather myself, I throw one more concerned look over my shoulder at Haris, who coughs and settles his filmy gaze on me. Then grins wide as he raises that hand mirror. Like he knows something I don't.

"It's coming home, Riven."

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Act I: Scene II

I nearly sigh in relief when I finally reach Aletheia's Chronicles, a bookstore wedged between a candlemaker and an antique store claiming to sell old props once used onstage by Players. It's also the only shop in the District that sells the texts I'll need for my first semester at the Orkestrian Academy.

"No, *no*! Out with you, Riven," shouts a man with thick glasses and lightly tanned skin. He moves from behind the counter as soon as the door clicks shut behind me. "Leave and take your curse with you."

"Hi, Sebastian!" I chirp, weaving between tables stacked high with tomes.

"Gods help me," he mutters, running a hand through his hair. The old man was raised in the North, making him one of a small handful of marked people still living in the District. "The Playhouse returning any moment for the first time in fifteen years, and now the work of their hands wanders into my store. And a thief, no less."

I frown. "I brought it *back*," I defend, pulling a leather volume from my bag and plopping it onto the counter between us.

"This is a bookstore. Not a library." The owner narrows his eyes at the leather cover. "Who's going to buy something touched by your hands?"

"Maybe they shouldn't," I argue, tapping the cover. "*This* is useless." It contained next to godsdamned *nothing* about Craft, much less what to do if one finds themselves poisoned by it.

I hand over my Orkestrian Academy acceptance letter. "But never you mind it. I'm here for my school materials, and I need to be quick about it."

Sebastian scowls, pinching the corner of the letter like he's afraid to brush my skin. Then he adjusts his glasses and looks it over in disbelief. "They're letting *you* into the academy?" His

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eyebrows shoot up.

I bristle. "Lucky for you, the semester starts next week. I'll be on a train to Orkestra and far away before you know it."

He shakes his head, almost looking sad. "I happen to have friends in the Healer Quarter, Riven." I stiffen at this. "Rumor is you won't even live to see next month."

The words nearly wipe the smirk right off my face. I've been seen by probably every healer North of the District, to no avail. No one knows how to undo what the Player did to me. No one even knows what's *wrong* with me.

I clear my throat. "Then I invite you to dance on my grave when I'm gone," I respond, flashing him a toothy grin.

"Studying to be a healer, are you?" he mutters to himself, looking over my letter. "Can't say I expected that from the likes of you."

I imagine that's why no healer has any idea how to help me.

A mortal cannot fix what an immortal broke, a healer once said. But this hasn't deterred me from scouring every book I can get my hands on for solutions.

I figured long ago, if I want answers on how to reverse whatever is happening to me, I'll need to find them myself.

With another shake of his head, Sebastian disappears into the back of the store with my letter.

A bell dings over the door, and I turn to spot two girls entering the store. I swallow, averting my gaze. They bustle between narrow walkways beneath wall-to-wall oak shelves, and I turn away, spotting several other patrons I hadn't noticed huddling in a corner, comparing quills.

"Yes, the dead Peacemaker's daughter…" one of them whispers, eyes flashing up at me, then darting back to their companion. I tense, shoving away the sinking feeling in my chest. Apparently, even the imminent return of the Players isn't enough to entirely drop interest in one of the victims of their work. Gritting my teeth, I focus hard on the wood paneling of the floor, pulling in slow breaths like Galen always tells me.

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"Cursed, I heard—" someone else utters. *"By that Player who*

broke free and attacked the…"

"Taller than I thought. Did you know her brother…"

"Gods, she's ugly. Why do her eyes look like that?"

Anger ignites like a match in my chest as I touch the tips of my fingers to the half-moon creases that ring my eyes, wondering what they *do* look like. And deciding it's probably best I don't know.

"You pay first." Sebastian returns with an armful of books that will probably fracture my spine to carry home. I dump the money my brother sent on the counter and pile them into my bag, turning to leave.

"Do you think they'll give her a roommate?" My eyes flicker to the whispers of another group of students, who seem to be putting as much distance as possible between themselves and me without leaving the shop. But I have a sharp ear.

"Gods help whoever that is. I heard—"

"…looks like a godsdamned corpse."

My blood heats as I track the speaker of the insult—a boy with rusty-brown hair and glasses. An Eleutheraen mark glitters on his collarbone.

He's marked, like me. Which means he can't lie. No marked can.

North of the Cut, we all bear identical symbols of protection, burned into our skin with the same Eleutheraen gold that can kill Players. A vow to truth and a shield against the lure of the Playhouse. It protects our bodies from Players and their lies. But likewise, anyone with an Eleutheraen mark cannot speak an untruth of their *own*, either.

He means what he said. That I look like a corpse.

But it isn't the distaste flashing across his face that makes my blood roar in my ears.

It's the flash of fear in his eyes when I stare back a beat too long. Like the magic that Player poisoned me with makes me just as dangerous as them.

As I shove the door open to leave, a familiar ice seeps over my bones, and the Player's whispered promise plays across my mind.

Come with me, she said. *Come with me or you will suffer.*

Leave it to me to find the only Player true to their word.

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Act I: Scene III

By the time I reach the Dionysian Records, my lungs feel like they're full of pine cones. Aunt Cassia will be inside the archive temple—but at the moment, I'd prefer to sulk peacefully alone.

I drop onto the lowest step of the temple to rest, dragging in sharp breaths. From here, the slope spills out into the District below, washed gold by the last sliver of sun.

Stretching my legs, I peer over my shoulder and up the steps at the statue of Dionysus towering from the top of the temple. I nod at the dead god politely. He doesn't nod back. Statues rarely do.

Some people still pray to the gods for rescue. I stopped doing that a long time ago.

Dionysus is dead. I don't think help is coming.

At best, I think, the gods are cruel for not intervening. At worst, they're cowards for abandoning us with the Players. Though I've heard rumor of places far across the sea that found themselves plagued by monsters even worse than ours.

And right now, I just want to yell at *someone*. A statue will do.

"If you were going to bleed out, did you have to do it in Theatron?" I ask Dionysus. "Surely there are nicer mountaintops to die on."

Dionysus's long, chiseled arms do not move, eternally stretched out to the world. I take it as a shrug.

"Please don't be insulted," I tell Dionysus while studying my nails, which have started turning a funny gray color over the past few weeks. "If I bled out on a mountain, I probably wouldn't have expected monsters to come out of *my* blood, either."

Dionysus does not laugh at this, unmoved as a harsh wind blows through the columns and down the steps.

"One of your Players caused *this*, by the way." I gesture vaguely at my crumbling self, not that I think Dionysus would care. "It didn't start out so bad. Some nausea. Headaches. A bad case of

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influenza, the healers thought."

Then came the aches that dwelled deep in my bones. A chill that settled over my skin unchanged by layers of wool or the heat of a fire. A tiredness eternally unsatisfied by sleep. No amount of nourishment added a thread of muscle to my bones.

The Player's poison leeched the life from my flesh. I shudder, remembering her golden blood all over my hands.

I didn't truly start to panic until the aches and pains dulled, though, overtaken instead by a vengeful ice that blustered through my veins like a winter storm and made my bones seize like frozen branches.

My body seems to have descended into the afterlife and left me behind.

As if to prove that point, the ground suddenly sways, dips beneath me, and my stomach lurches. I clutch the steps, my nails scraping the stone. *Am I dizzy?*

No. It's the ground. The ground is really rumbling, shaking like it's about to tear open.

A strange darkness rips through the clouds overhead, spreading like ink in water.

The world trembles again, and this time, shouts rise from the nearby Merchant Ring.

My heart thuds against my ribs as my gaze darts down the hill to the District.

Golden light blooms in the center like the rising sun. I wince, choking on a sweet, cloying tang in the air that tastes vaguely of perfume.

Move. I should not be here. The thoughts come in fragments.

Then I see it.

A sinister palace rushes up from the soil as if emerging from Hades itself. Its white marble towers tear free of the earth, roots dangling, clumps of dirt cascading down tiers that must span fifteen stories.

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Hundreds of enormous columns glittering with bands of gold surface next, lining the center dome like soldiers standing guard,

a haze of pale dust billowing in their wake. At its top, the carved shape of a crow, its marble wings stretched in eternal flight.

The Playhouse.

It's returned. Today.

Now.

I should be frightened—I know this from my upbringing. The sight is unnatural and unholy, stealing the breath from my lungs. An intense draw to the Playhouse that I attribute to years of rage blankets my mind.

For a strange moment, all is silent. The world seems empty, void of anyone or anything aside from me and the entity that ruined my future and stole my father's. Its glowing stained glass windows peer back at me in the distance like the golden eyes of a beast.

What did you do to me?

A heartbeat later, chaos fractures down below. Worshippers from South Theatron race toward the Playhouse like moths to a flame, shrieking with glee. Meanwhile, those who bear marks scatter back toward the safety of the North's wall, screaming at loved ones to follow.

"Riven!"

I startle at the sound of my name. Aunt Cassia flies down the steps of the archive temple, waving for me to stand, but even she pauses to take in the sight, frozen until she calls, "On your feet—*now*."

The urgency in her face has me scrambling to push myself up, stumbling toward the steps after her.

But halfway there, I don't know what possesses me. I can't help but glance back—in time to see another burst of buttery yellow light. Warm wind breathes across my face, curling through the cool air.

The Playhouse doors have opened.

"Ladies and gentlemen!"

The voice is not human. It's thunderous, beckoning, and everywhere all at once. It shimmers across the clouds and rumbles in the ground. Somewhere, a thrilled audience of Revelers shriek

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greetings. In their joyous cries, I make out a name: *Silenus*.

The Playhouse director.

He scares me almost as much as the Players. In some ways, even more. My hand hovers over my coat pocket, where my father's golden knife hides.

"Thank you for joining us this fine afternoon!" Silenus's voice thrums low, a rich baritone that strangely reminds me of a grandfather clock. It must project halfway across the city. I almost think I can feel it inside my own heart.

My mind goes to the solagraphs in the District Museum. Silenus is always pictured the same way: a head of thick white hair, fair skin, elegant spectacles, a fine suit. Smile lines etched into a face that has not aged in hundreds of years.

And always, *always* in his hands: a small leather-bound book, pages that emit a warm, soft glow. "The Script," it's called, an item long suggested to have belonged to Dionysus himself. I can't imagine anything less than a god's treasured possession could give Silenus the power to direct the Players.

"Wonderful people of Theatron, it is always a privilege to be amongst old friends. But none of us are here for sentiment, I understand." He laughs softly, but it seems to echo through the sky.

My legs cramp as Cassia and I fly up the steps to the temple, and I push myself to keep going.

"Such wicked rumors lately." A sigh. *"But the Playhouse is most happy to negotiate a new agreement with our friends in the North as our revered treaty comes to an end. But! In exchange—"*

I can't catch my breath. My lungs burn.

"We expect utmost cooperation as we hold our most beloved tradition here in the District, one that was so unluckily disrupted last time."

At this, Cassia freezes. My mind races. *Beloved tradition—*

"We are proud to announce a casting call—and a Great Dionysia!"

My heart stutters, shocked as an explosion of cheers rocks the District.

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A casting call.

The words send a shudder through me. I don't know much about casting calls, only that they involve a mortal taking the place of a Player. *Becoming* one. Through the most brutal and violent of means, should they win—part of a five-day festival known as the Great Dionysia. A massive spectacle, during which the Players are released from the Playhouse and allowed to roam freely.

Cassia whirls, her eyes widening.

"Perhaps a new Player stands amongst us here today," the director calls. *"We hope to see you all later this evening for this most exciting opportunity."*

A great cracking sound splits the air as the Playhouse doors slam shut.

If anxiety were a person, I think it would look a lot like my aunt Cassia right now. She made us wait inside the Dionysian Records for several hours before she'd so much as entertain the idea of letting me go home, claiming it would be safer once the Revelers are inside the Playhouse for the casting call and not causing trouble outside of it.

Then again, if I devoted as much time as she does to studying Theatron's darkest corners of history, of what has happened and what *could* happen again, I might be anxious, too. But Cassia says our best weapon against the Playhouse is our knowledge of it, devoting her life to protecting what historical records the Players failed to destroy.

"Let me take you home," she says. "While the Revelers busy themselves with all this casting call foolishness."

My pride wants to be stubborn about accepting the arm she offers, but the ice twisting around my stiff spine wins. I loop my arm through her sleeve, just this once.

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As we depart the Dionysian Records, my eyes stall curiously on a set of oak doors that remain forever locked. Unlike most,

I know what sleeps beyond them: empty storybooks. Thousands, robbed of their words, their contents devoured by the Playhouse.

Which is for the best. Stories are nothing but lies. Tools of manipulation for Players.

"Gods damn it all," Cassia mutters under her breath, taking in the empty streets. The Revelers are nowhere to be seen, and anyone North of the Cut has clearly made themselves scarce.

"I'm pretty sure they already have," I point out. "What do we do?"

The question feels vague and awkward under the circumstances. The papers have speculated of the Players' return to the District for ages, long before their bulletin confirmed it, but a *casting call*—

It doesn't make sense.

"Absolutely nothing," Cassia replies, like the answer has been waiting on her tongue for a while. "We knew they were coming. Stay home, stay away from mirrors. Let the Players have their bloodbath. It's no business of the North."

Unless the Players will *make* it our business. They've been confined to South Theatron for nearly five hundred years, an agreement they were forced into. And they haven't risked coming this close to the Cut in over a decade.

"I don't see how a building itself can move." It doesn't seem possible.

"It can't. But buildings are also *built*," Cassia replies glumly. "The Playhouse never was. It just appeared around the same time as the Players." She shakes her head. "One big illusion, if you ask me."

I think for a moment. "What if the Players try to cross the Cut—"

"Let's not dwell on what is not yet a problem."

Not *yet.* A half-truth. But I've played mental gymnastics with my mark for as long as I've had it. I can *think* an untruth to myself easily enough. On occasion, I've written out a few lies just to see if I could. But every time I open my mouth to speak a barefaced lie, the words never seem to find my tongue.

And right now, there is something Cassia is trying to avoid admitting.

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"While I do *not* approve of you traveling into the District alone," Cassia begins, running a hand over her slicked-back hair. New threads of white peek out of the auburn. "I have something to show you."

She peers down the quiet side street we turn onto, her eyes narrowed at the dimming light. Then, she extracts what looks like a faded solagraph from her pocket.

The Player depicted in the image has a sharp grin and silver-blond hair that tumbles down her back. Searing eyes that look like they might burn through the paper.

My shoulders slump. I've probably studied the Players almost as obsessively as Cassia has and don't recognize this one. Much of my childhood was spent immersed in their histories, a means of distraction when kids my own age stopped including me in their games. In a strange way, the Players' faces are as familiar as those of old friends.

Loneliness does strange things to your brain.

"This is Player Iris—one of the cast members executed in Syrene," Cassia explains. "It's been suggested that some of the cast could have escaped the destruction—if *she* is the one who poisoned you, it's possible that—"

"That's not her." I shake my head, picturing the guilty Player's face. "I know what I saw."

The only thing more infuriating than being cursed by a Player is being cursed by a Player who *doesn't exist.* I should know. I've studied every gold-encrusted inch of the Playhouse's history, searching for answers in its chronicle of lies. I have learned the faces of all its remaining cast members.

There are five Players left.

The Player I saw as a child—whoever she was—is *not* among them.

There's no record of her. Then again, there's no record of someone being *poisoned* as I have, either. Only cases of minds tormented with never-ending songs, or claims of madness evoked by Playhouse performances.

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My curse, though—this strange, slow decay that rots me from the inside out—it's an anomaly. One that Player is *surely* responsible for.

Come with me or you will suffer.

Cassia frowns, slides the picture back in her pocket. "I'll keep looking, Riv."

I drag a hand through my hair and laugh bitterly when a few brunette strands fall right out, floating to the ground. That started happening about a week ago. "Yeah," I say. "Me too."

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Act I: Scene IV

"Is that you, Riven?" calls my mother's voice, a hint of apprehension in her tone. Like she hopes it's anyone *but* me.

I sniff the air as I kick my boots off in the hall, suspicious of the scents of fried cabbage and braised rabbit. My mother does not cook dinner. Or anything, for that matter.

My eyes fall on the stack of three envelopes that must have arrived while I was gone—but one stands out from the others. The envelope is too rich, too expensive.

My name is scrawled over the back, the seal of the Orkestrian Academy stamped in navy blue over the front.

Before I can break it, my mother's laugh burbles from down the hall, sending a chill along my spine. She has both emerged from her room and is *laughing.*

A second, lower voice answers my mother's, and my eyes widen.

Stuffing the letter into my pocket, I hurry down the hall, a smile stretching across my face. "Galen?"

"Riv!" my brother calls back.

Galen has our aunt Cassia's wolfish grin and our mother's chestnut hair. He makes no move to greet me, aware I enjoy hugs about as much as I enjoy having my nail beds ripped out.

"*Two* coats today," he comments, one eyebrow raised at my attire. "Isn't that one mine?"

"It was," I say with a grin. He left his old jacket after his last visit. It's far too big, but thicker than my own.

The gold scar below his left eye stretches when he smiles. While my injuries from encountering a Player sank deep beneath my skin, Galen escaped with a two-inch scar that turned him into the stuff of legends at school. Proof that he "fought a Player and won."

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"What are you doing here?"

"Imposing on Mom for dinner at the moment," he answers.

Ah. That explains the cooking.

Our mother rolls her eyes in his direction as she sets a plate on the counter, though even her feigned annoyance at Galen looks more like admiration. She's doted on my brother since I can remember.

This doesn't bother me. I like being doted on about as much as I like being touched. Still, I've never gotten used to the peculiar way our mother's eyes go anywhere *except* me. Like I'm a ghost she can't see. Occasionally, growing up, I'd catch her staring, lips pale. Then she'd just shake her head. *You look so much like your father is all*, she'd say before going back to pretending I don't exist.

Galen always watched these interactions with his lips pressed together. *Don't mind her*, he'd tell me. *She just misses him*.

I think all of Theatron misses him. An emissary of the council, my father was the North's hope—our best shot at peace. That peace shattered the moment a Player threw his body from the Playhouse and left his blood to dry on the marble steps.

The Playhouse fled from the violent uproar that followed, and it hasn't returned to the District of Dionysus—or ventured near the Cut—since.

Until now. And I'm guessing it's not interested in *peace*.

"Have something to eat, why don't you?" Galen slides his plate toward me, probably to draw attention away from the fact that our mother only prepared dinner for one of us. "If you're going to be taller than me, you might as well eat like I do," he teases, though I only have my brother's height beat by an inch as of this year. While Galen's built like one of the massive statues in the District, I'm all overly long limbs and—well, that's about all I know.

I push the plate back toward him, my stomach uneasy thanks to the palace of monsters that arrived this afternoon. "You're home early," I prompt.

"Business in the District. Seems like I got here just in time." His expression tightens. "The Playhouse requested an audience with the council as soon as it arrived."

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Galen only graduated a year ago and was immediately granted a position on our mortal council's board of advisers. It's no secret that everyone expects him to fill our father's role, to somehow mediate a new treaty to keep the Playhouse from the North, now that the old one is finally coming to an end.

Like clockwork, our mother excuses herself and vanishes upstairs. She always does when the Playhouse enters a conversation. Or when I enter a room.

My brother watches her go, the worry plain on his face.

I stare at him, stunned. "You mean…you *saw* them?" I whisper. "The Players?"

"From afar—one of them." He keeps his voice steady, but I know Galen too well. I sense the quiver of fear beneath his tone. "The council met with the director and Lead Player after they arrived. Said they wished to negotiate the terms of their *casting call*."

"Did you?" I ask, leaning in. "Negotiate?"

"What was there to discuss?" Galen laughs, but the sound is dry of any humor. "He's as violent as they say, you know. Player Jude. Snapped a guard's neck for stepping too close to Silenus. Announced he'd do the same to anyone who dares disrupt the casting call tonight. Said any talks of peace would wait until after it concluded."

"Gods," I say under my breath.

For creatures with such great egos, it must be deeply humbling for the Players to be governed by the mortals they once ruled over. To *need* us. Players require worship, attention. They rely on it to survive the way we mortals require food. Otherwise, they might as well wipe us all out.

But if they're denied an audience altogether, gods know what they'll do. Players are dangerous when they're angry, but they're godsdamned *lethal* when they're bored.

"You know, everyone keeps looking at me like I'm Dad." Galen shakes his head at the absurdity of it. "Like I should know how to bargain with these monsters like he did." He shakes his

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head again, leaving the rest unsaid.

Desperate to change the subject, I unfold the mysterious letter from my pocket and show it to Galen. "Any idea what this is?" I break the seal, but stall at the startled look he gives me.

"Riv," Galen begins slowly. "That's partly why I came home—to talk to you." He looks like he's about to tear the letter from my fingers. "I hoped to beat the notice here, but—"

My gaze drops down, and I scan the first line.

Riven Hesper: We regret to inform you that upon further inquiry…

"What is this?" My voice comes out sharper than I meant. Dread freezes like a block of ice in my chest as I blink, willing the words to change. To vanish.

"They've revoked—" I swallow, my tongue dry. "They revoked my acceptance?"

But why? The semester starts so soon. I already bought my passage to Orkestra—

I exhale. I know *why*. I can read it all over Galen's face.

"The university board…" Galen trails off. Like he isn't friends with the whole godsdamned board. He was the Orkestrian Academy's golden boy for four years. And before him, our father. "Questions were raised about how safe your attendance would be."

Safe for me," I ask through my teeth, "or safe for the other students?" I mean the words, but I don't mean them to come out of my mouth with the ferocity of a lightning bolt. "Which is it?"

Cursed by a Player. The words have followed me since I was a child. Like the Player's magic—*Craft*—that poisoned me is going to spontaneously spread to anyone who gets too close. The same questions were raised in grade school until I was eventually placed on a bench on the far side of the classroom. Sometimes I felt like one of the Player statues in the District: watched from afar and rarely addressed directly. It gave me ample time to debate which is worse: to be abandoned by society or to be famously hated by it.

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The former, I've decided.

"Both," he admits.

My heart cracks, exposing the simmering coal at its center.

"Who." My voice is deadly calm.

Galen stills. "What do you mean?"

"You said *questions were raised*," I force out. That's half the truth. My eyes flicker down to the Eleutheraen mark at the base of his throat. I bet if Galen could lie to me, he would right now. "*Who* raised them?"

He presses his lips into a thin line, the truth on his tongue. "I did, Riven."

I stare back frostily, daring him to go on.

"And I was right to. The last time I saw you, you looked—"

"What?" I interrupt. "Go on. Say it."

He averts his eyes. For a moment, I wonder if he's frightened of me, like the neighbor's children who throw pebbles at my window. But when he meets my gaze again, his voice softens. "Riven, please. I know this was important to you. But you're worse off now than the time before—and the time before that. And *now*…"

I stare down at my hands, trying to see what he sees. Long, bony fingers. Gray nails. Dark veins pucker from my wrists. About a month ago, my skin started fading to a pale stone-like hue, not dissimilar to the underbelly of a fish.

"No," I say in blunt response.

That Player *doesn't* get to take this, too. The Orkestrian Academy is a door to a life different from this one. With a new home. And access to the greatest library in Theatron, with probably my best chance at finding answers to what's happened to me.

Answers to *why* it hasn't happened to anyone else.

Maybe even a chance to be recognized on my own merit. Not *Galen's sister.* Not *the dead Peacemaker's daughter.*

"We need to be honest about what's happening." Galen's tone is steady, firm. Infuriating. "Whatever…*ailment* this is—"

"Poison. You were there. You can call it what it is."

"*Clearly*, it's serious," he concludes. "You'd be too far from home, not to mention exerting yourself. You may only worsen

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faster—" He takes a breath. "I'm just not sure it's a good idea anymore, Riv."

Anymore. The word echoes in my head, like a seal on my fate. *Anymore* sounds final.

Anymore sounds like the Player from ten years ago has won.

I shove the thought down as soon as it surfaces. If I make *one* decision for myself, it will be that a Player doesn't get to finish me off.

"I am not helpless," I bite out, but the words taste sour. *Yet*, my mind adds. "I'll take care of myself—"

"Riven, you are not *capable* of taking care of yourself." Galen immediately winces, like he wishes he could pluck the words out of the air and put them back in his mouth.

Blood rushes to my head, eyes falling to my brother's mark once more. He believes that.

The possibility that he's right only enrages me further.

He pulls in a breath, then utters, "Stay here. I spoke with Mom—" I huff a laugh. Our mother has been counting down the days to my departure as eagerly as I have. "Please—at least until you get better."

Until. As if I'm not dying a little faster each day.

Like a godsdamned corpse. The insult rings in my ears.

"This isn't fair, Galen," I seethe.

"The world isn't fair," he answers. "No one chooses the hand they're dealt. Leave fate to the gods and their whims. It bows to no man." I cringe at the reference to a phrase we all learned in school. *Fate guides the feet of the willing and drags the heels of the defiant.*

"I don't believe in fate," I say. "Certainly not a fate written by gods who abandoned us. Was I *fated* to be poisoned by a Player?" I ask, daring him to agree. "Was *Dad* fated to be ripped apart by one?"

His face hardens, both of us equally shocked at my words. We don't bring up our father's death.

"It doesn't matter. This conversation is over," Galen says, standing.

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"No!" My raspy voice shoots out of my throat like an arrow, startling both of us. It ricochets off the walls. There's an abrupt creak upstairs, like my mother has shot to her feet.

Too much, I scold myself. My fingernails bite into either side of my chair. Galen's silver gaze hones in on me. "What?" I snap, failing to reel my voice in again.

"That temper, Riv," he says softly, shaking his head. "If you don't get control of it, that anger will be the death of you."

When I say nothing, Galen moves for the hall but pauses at the door. "I'm sorry, Riven—I really am. And I mean it." I don't meet his eyes. Galen pushes the door open. "If we figure out how to… *reverse* whatever this is, I'll take you to Orkestra and enroll you myself."

With that, he's gone.

I give him a full three-minute head start before I tug on my boots and follow him.

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Act I: Scene V

I have *never* been in the District alone at night.

It feels different, vulnerable. Like I'm running through the street naked, shaking the frost from my bones.

I'm deep in the District before realizing I can hear the echo of my own feet pounding against the stone. On either side of me, I notice dark windows and boarded-up storefronts, illuminated by blinking limelights that hang over the street. In all my visits across the Cut, the District has bustled with activity, the market bursting at the seams with busy shoppers and peddlers selling their wares.

Tonight, it's deserted.

No one is here to stare or call me cursed. No one to skitter away like I'm a rabid rodent.

It's godsdamn *liberating.*

It occurs to me I don't actually know where Galen went. But whatever speech I had for him is long forgotten as I march up to one of the abandoned booths.

Those, please—yes, the ones on the shelf there, I mouth, imagining myself buying a sack of potatoes, a loaf of bread. All by myself. Like a normal, *uncursed* person. *How much? Oh, sure.* I'd nod and then reach into my pocket for—

Something skitters in the dark behind me.

I whirl around. A rat? Must be—

Nothing.

My stomach twisting, I step over discarded bits of paper and wood. The words "No more Players" and "Our world is not your stage" are inked across several—ghosts of protests from earlier today. Anyone from North Theatron has clearly surrendered their objections to the casting call to hide safely behind the Cut and out of the District tonight.

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Like I should, too. This is silly, being out here alone. *Dangerous.*

But gods, it feels good.

A swell in the air swarms my mind, dampens my focus. I scrunch up my brow, struggling to put a label to the noise. It thrums deep in the ground, crawls up my legs, and digs its hooks into my chest. My feet stagger forward to the bizarre sound—long, drawn-out rhythms that weave together like…

Music?

A prickle spears up my spine.

I've read about music. It heralds the presence of Players. Music is what Players used to summon the Dancing Plague—an inexplicable phenomenon that made thousands of people dance in the streets like puppets. They danced, they danced, and they danced. Then they promptly stopped dancing.

Not because they were tired, but because they were dead.

The Playhouse, I think, enraged. *That's* what's responsible for this. For me. All of it.

My feet move faster toward the sound, anger fueling my resolve. The growing ache in my feet only eggs me on until I'm at the end of the block and turning the corner into the very heart of the District.

The Playhouse is a sight to behold up close. A behemoth of gold and marble bursting with light. Shadows in the shapes of expensive gowns and delicate wreaths flutter just behind paned glass. Chatter and laughter claw at my ears.

The casting call, I think with a chill. Thousands of Revelers will have crowded into the Playhouse tonight, risking life and limb in hopes of becoming the next Player. Gambling their lives for power, fame, beauty, and *immortality.*

I stare down at the cold, translucent skin clinging to my hands. For a moment, it doesn't sound entirely outrageous.

But there it is again, that strange rhythm—*music*. It spills through the cracks of the Playhouse doors, down steps that shine like wedges of starlight. But there's something else, too. Woven deep into the melody of plucked strings and the steady hit of a drum, I hear a *voice*—full as the moon and sparkling just as bright.

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The voice reaches around my wrists and tugs me gently forward.

This is music? The descriptions I've read have been vile. Like a sinister snake that slips through your ears and eats away at your mind. *This*, though—it doesn't match the taunting cries of the Underworld I imagined.

It sounds like the clinking of stars. The flicker of a warm candle. The whisper of a loved one.

I like it.

I startle at my own thought, unsure where it came from. *No. No, I don't.*

The massive Playhouse gates gape open at me like a smile. The voice, otherworldly and enchanting, beckons me forward, bringing me to the threshold.

Stop here, I tell my feet.

A soft breeze brushes my cheek. The pearly Playhouse steps gleam like an open pool of moonlight.

"What did you do to me?" I ask the Playhouse out loud. It doesn't answer, the voice gone.

That's not good enough. I ball my fists.

"My life would be different. If it weren't for you," I add, louder, "I would be a normal person. With *friends*. I would probably talk to fewer buildings." My voice is far too loud. "People would call me by my *name*. And they wouldn't treat me like I'm a rabid animal. And my own mother wouldn't be frightened of me. So, tell me!" I'm shouting now, waving my hands. "Tell me what you did! *Tell me—*"

"What have we here?"

The voice startles me so badly, I jump and—too late—clutch Galen's coat at the collar to cover my mark.

A figure, cloaked in black, emerges from the darkness. A blessing. Of all the things my shouting outside of the Playhouse could have summoned, I'll take a stranger in the dark over a Player any day. My boldness forgotten, I scurry back like a mouse. "Who are you?"

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He steps in the light, his face hidden behind a Comedy mask—

popular among Playhouse fanatics. A horrific smile is carved into the bronze.

My heart starts to hammer.

"Did I see a stain there on your neck?" I don't know the voice, but I know he's much bigger than me. My hand creeps to my inner coat pocket where my father's Eleutheraen dagger stays tucked away, just as a second figure appears behind the first. This one behind a Tragedy mask. I take in the overstated frown, my breaths coming quicker.

"What is a marked doing outside the Playhouse tonight?" Tragedy Mask asks.

I draw inward and keep my mouth shut. *Who are they?* Overzealous fans from the South, taking it upon themselves to patrol the casting call?

"Well, go on, then," a third voice chimes in—feminine this time. I spin around, finding another Comedy mask, silver and scraped at the edges. That exaggerated smile sends a chill up my spine. "Tell us."

My eyes fall to the blade in her hand.

Fuck. I've read about this. Revelers who target and slash through Eleutheraen marks to honor the Players. A story broke months back about Playhouse fanatics sacrificing some marked soul on a Dionysian altar.

What was I *thinking*? Venturing out here at night on my own—

"Did you not hear me, girl?" she repeats.

My mouth opens, closes. *I'm lost!* I think frantically, but the words won't form on my tongue. I can't lie. "I—I'm…" My eyes flicker up to the Playhouse.

This isn't how I'm supposed to die.

I recoil from the thought, unsure why my mind jumped to it so quickly.

"What, here to audition?" The first Comedy mask roars with laughter. "Well, girl. Has no one told you? A marked can't audition." He's right. Eleutheraen marks are an insult to Players and their egos. The man takes a step forward, but I can't back up

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anymore—not with the woman behind me. "Nasty consequences for that, actually."

With no option left, I bolt, throwing myself forward. But my sly attempt to dive between them and into the nearest alley is intercepted when one grips my arm, nearly ripping the bone from its socket.

The pressure feels like a door slammed on my shoulder, crushing it. I yelp and thrash like a wet cat as they drag my body forward through the Playhouse gates.

"Come, we can do a little play," one of them jeers. "You can be the lead."

They're taking me to the Players.

My knife. My knife is in my pocket. If I could just reach—

I flail, curling down and clamping my teeth over one of their hands as hard as I can.

A violent force collides with my side, the air punching out of my lungs as one of them shrieks, "The little animal *bit me*!" and drops me like a sack of potatoes.

Something is wrong, I realize, unable to breathe. I don't even know who's hit me. All I know is my lungs feel like they're full of shattered glass. *My ribs. They crushed my godsdamned ribs—*

Then I hear it again. That voice—a song that flutters in the wind like a bird—slows the commotion to a standstill. To my shock, my attackers stop advancing on me, dropping their hands to their sides. I stare up in confusion as their bodies freeze.

The voice sings on, spellbinding and overwhelming. My eyes dart around, searching for its owner as I crawl away at the speedy pace of a sick turtle. The stone feels like sleet beneath my fingers.

When I peer up, I see three flashes of silver emerge. Blades.

They're going to kill me. I claw frantically at the ground, dragging myself across the stone. My lungs feel like they're caving into my chest as I scream for help, but no sound makes it out of my throat.

Strangely, the sting of their blades never comes.

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In fact, when I dare a look, they're all staring blankly at one