

Chapter 1: Patterns

“Apotheosis.

The word sits uncomfortably in most mouths, and rightly so—it describes an act that every living god has cause to fear and every mortal alive has cause to dream of: *The usurpation of a deity's Domain.*

The taking of what was never meant to be taken.

It happened several times across history, but only the most recent one is properly recorded.

The God whose name preceded Roth's is never spoken—not out of reverence, but because it is, in all likelihood, simply *gone*.

Forgotten not by accident, but by consequence.

That is what Apotheosis does, when it is done completely.

It does not merely *end* the one who came before. It *unmakes* them, so thoroughly that even the memory of their name becomes something the world no longer holds onto.

What we do know is that Roth was human, *once*.

One of Aevindra's own—born under her light, living under her fire, owing his existence in no small part to the goddess he would one day be asked to help put into the ground.

How he crossed the threshold from mortal to Divine, how he pried the very Domain of Death itself from the hands of a god and made it his own—*that*, nobody living nor dead can tell you.

The mechanics of it are lost, if they were ever known to begin with.

What remains is only the fact of it.

No figure in the Manifold Pantheon carries the idea of *Apotheosis* in their divine beings the way Roth does.

He is its proof and its warning in equal measure.

Proof, that the distance between mortal and Divine is not, in the end, an uncrossable one.

Warning, that whatever waits on the other side of that crossing is not the ultimate goal, for even deities can fall to mere mortals.

Whether that fact in itself is a tragedy or a triumph depends, I suspect, entirely on how badly you want to get there."

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[Excerpt from "The Manifold Pantheon: A Compendium of the Divine," author unknown. Year 263, Era of Strife.]

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I woke up shivering and completely exhausted the next morning.

The hunger is what actually woke me—a sharp, mean pang in my middle that hadn't been there when I'd finally crawled under the pelts.

I hadn't gotten dinner last night.

"Only girls who finish their work get to eat," my mother had said.

I hadn't finished my work.

I also hadn't made it back to hear Edvar, which I already knew meant I wouldn't hear him again for a very long time.

The bard only came around every few summers.

This had been the first time I could even remember him being here—though my father had told me once that wasn't quite true, that Edvar had come through when I was too small to remember.

So the second time, then.

Which meant the next time was *very* far away, and I would be very much older, and it would not be the same at all.

I stared up at the thatch roof and listened to my older sisters breathing on either side of me, warm, heavy and still deeply asleep.

Aisha's elbow was in my back. Sharon had most of the pelts.

'It was worth it,' I thought, despite everything. *'It was still worth it.'*

I believed that. I was fairly sure I would *keep* believing it, even once the hunger got worse.

But laying still wasn't warming me up any, so I wriggled out from under what was left of the pelt as carefully as I could manage, doing my best not to disturb either of them, and padded out to the main room, my feet feeling like they were freezing with every step on the floor.

The hearth was cold and dark.

I crouched in front of the firewood pile and held up both hands to the dim light coming through the gaps in the shutters—the twin moons still up, giving just enough pale light to make out the shapes of things without being able to properly see any of them.

Starting the fire was my job, as the first one up. But the timing *mattered*.

Father had explained it to me more than once.

Too early and we burned through too much wood, which meant he had to go get more instead of doing everything else he needed to do. Too late and the house wouldn't be warm enough by the time everyone else was up and moving around, which meant they'd need more food to warm themselves from the inside—or so mother always said.

Both were very bad.

So I started counting out the bundles slowly, moving them one at a time before looking back at my hands.

"One... two... three..." I ran out of fingers at ten and stopped, frowning at the remaining pile. "...Ehh."

Ten was *always* where I got stuck.

I knew there were numbers after ten—I had heard adults use them—but I had never actually seen anyone count past ten fingers, so I wasn't entirely sure how it worked in practice. I chewed on this for a moment, then decided to just start over with the ones I hadn't counted yet and make a second pile.

All I had to do was remember that the big pile was worth two whole hands.

"One... two... three..."

By the time I finished I had two piles sitting on the floor in front of me.

One that had taken all ten fingers, and one that had taken four.

I stared at them, *hard*.

Father had said once—I remembered it clearly because he had been talking to mother about it and I had been listening while eating breakfast—that we needed at least six bundles to last through the rest of the day and into the next morning. So as long as we had a lot more than six, I hadn't done anything wrong by starting the fire early.

'So... if I use six... there should still be enough left over... Right?' I decided, staring hard at the two piles until I was satisfied this was correct.

I put the bundles back and got to work, feeling warmer already just from moving around—and somehow even hungrier than before, which did not seem very fair.

We had plenty of dry thatch, at least, and father's old army firestarter made the whole thing easy even for me. I had never seen another one like it anywhere—a strange dark rock and a piece of metal that I didn't know the name of—but when you struck them together they threw sparks the way nothing else did, and the tinder caught on the first try.

By the time the first log had properly started crackling, I had pulled my sleeping pelt off the bed, wrapped it around myself and settled down cross-legged in front of the hearth, and I could feel the cold starting to let go of me, slowly, from the outside in.

Father wasn't long after that. He had always been a light sleeper when it came to fires.

"Morning, mouse," he said, ducking through the doorway, and I smiled up at him.

"Morning."

He looked at the hearth, then at me, then at the window where the moon was still just visible through the shutter gaps. "Bit early for a fire, no?"

"I couldn't sleep," I said, and then rushed to add, "I made *sure* we had enough firewood first, I promise!"

He raised an eyebrow. "Made sure, *how*?"

A cold little stone dropped into my stomach. Had I done it wrong after all?

"There was a pile of ten fingers and a pile of four fingers," I said quickly, sitting up straighter. "You told mother we needed six—so I took four from the big pile and two from the small pile to make sure it was six, and that left eight fingers in the other pile! So we have enough!"

I paused.

"...We have enough. *Right*?"

He looked at me for a long moment without saying anything.

I gripped the edge of my pelt and waited, staring up at him.

"That's right, mouse. You did well," he finally said, and I let out a breath that had been sitting in my chest for a while. "Who taught you how to count like that?"

Our eyes met.

"I watched you do it. And mother. And the other adults—especially on market days!" Which reminded me of the problem I always ran into. "I don't know how to go past ten, though..."

I held both hands up toward him, fingers spread.

"I only have ten fingers. I know there's more after—I've heard you use bigger numbers. But how do you do it?"

"Hmm." He cupped his stubbled chin in his hand, thinking. "You listened to Edvar yesterday. Your mother told me."

I froze, hands still hanging in the air between us.

'Is he going to be angry too? I already did all my chores and I didn't even get dinner. I already paid for it!'

I lowered my hands slowly and gave a small, careful nod.

"*Ten times ten thousand soldiers*," he said. "That's what Edvar always says. The armies with Alveric and the other mages. You remember it?"

I nodded quickly. I remembered it perfectly.

"*That's* how you count past your fingers, mouse. You stop at ten, then start again—just like you did with those piles. Eleven is just a pile of ten and a pile of one. Ten fingers, then starting over, and one more finger. Twelve is ten and two. Thirteen is ten and three. And so on."

My eyes went wide.

"So... a pile of ten and four, like our firewood... that's fourteen? Ten fingers, and then four more?"

He broke into a big toothy grin and nodded. "That's right, mouse."

He looked at me for a moment with an expression I didn't entirely have a name for yet. "I think I'll have to start bringing you to market with me. You'd be a lot of help."

I nodded so enthusiastically I started to feel dizzy.

"Alright, enough of that," he chuckled, reaching over and ruffling my hair until it was completely useless. "Let's get you some breakfast."

I was already on my feet before he finished the sentence...

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Just two days later, on the next fifth day, my father took me to the village market just like he'd said he would.

"Alright, mouse. Stick close and keep your eyes open—watch how it all works. If you have questions, hold onto them until I'm done with whatever I'm doing, then we'll talk. Yeah?"

I nodded so hard my neck hurt.

I was wearing my best tunic—which really just meant the one that had been worn and washed the fewest times, so the fibers hadn't gone all thin and scratchy yet—and I felt very official about the whole thing.

I had been to the market before, technically, but not like this.

Every fifth and tenth day for as long as I could remember, I had watched it happen from a distance, usually from behind a washtub, scrubbing someone else's clothes while the noise, the smells and the back-and-forth of it all drifted over to me from across the way.

I had always watched the adults move through it with the obvious confidence of people who knew *exactly* where they were going and what they were doing when they got there, and wondered what it felt like from the inside.

Today I was finally going to find out.

Aisha and Sharon had already left for the market ahead of us—nine and eight summers old respectively, and already acting like they were very important about it.

'Neither of them have the same kind of chores I do...'

They had far lighter and cleaner work. Work that didn't leave your hands red and raw at the end of the day.

Mother was very careful about that.

Aisha and Sharon were the older ones, and the prettier ones—they had mother's deep black hair. I had gotten father's grey instead, which mother had very clear opinions about.

Along with the whole hair situation, she had *very* specific ideas about what my sisters' futures were supposed to look like—something about good matches, when Altare saw fit to give them their first bleeding.

I didn't entirely understand what that meant yet, except that it was something that happened to girls when they got older, and that it was apparently *very* important for getting a husband, and that mother thought about it a great deal more where my sisters were concerned than where I was concerned.

I had never been entirely sure how to feel about that.

I didn't think about it for long today either, though, because my father was already moving and I had been told to stick close.

The market was not large.

Fifty heads in a village did not make for a sprawling affair—it was two short rows of stalls arranged around the well at the centre, canvas stretched over wooden frames, goods laid out on rough-cut boards, and everyone who had anything to sell standing behind their things.

Being inside it all was a completely different experience from watching it over the rim of a washtub, I immediately realized.

The smells hit me first—woodsmoke, cured meat and the sharp green smell of whatever Hilda the herbwoman had laid out on her table today, bundled, dried and arranged in rows with a neatness that seemed at odds with the somewhat wild look of the woman herself.

The sounds were also slightly overwhelming, which from a distance had always simply blurred into one general market-noise, but up close were a dozen separate conversations happening at once, the clink of chits changing hands, the particular hollow thud of something heavy being set down on a board here and there.

I stayed at my father's elbow and tried to look at everything simultaneously.

And the patterns I could see—*they were everywhere*.

I recognized them immediately from when I had been watching the market from a distance all these years.

Old Renwick, the tanner, going to Bergit's stall for his salt pork, same as every fifth day, same two cuts, same side of the board, standing in the same spot.

Marta from three houses down stopping at the grain stall run by the Folke brothers—always the younger one, Piet, always a small sack, always at the beginning of the market before the "*good stuff got picked over*," or so she always jokingly said, that always got a polite laugh from Piet.

The herbwoman's bundles consistently cost roughly the same number of chits this time of year, but I had watched them get more expensive as autumn deepened, creeping up one chit at a time as winter got closer, the same way every year.

Everything had a rhythm to it—a distinct *shape*—and being inside of it made it all the more obvious.

My father did not seem to be as flashed by it all as I was, instead heading straight towards Aldous the woodman's stall, which also doubled, on market days, as the place to buy metal goods—hinges, hooks, small tools, things that needed replacing and couldn't wait for a trip to the larger town. The two men clasped hands over the board.

"Brandt," Aldous said, then looked down at me. "Oh? The little gray one? What's she doin' here?"

"Figured it was time to let Maret see how this all works," my father said, with a hand briefly on my shoulder. "She's helping me today."

Aldous looked at me for a moment the way adults looked at children they didn't quite know what to do with—which was a look I got quite often—and then looked back at my father.

"Hm. Right."

And that was that.

They talked about a replacement hinge for the storage barn door, and I watched Aldous wrap the bronze working in a scrap of cloth, accept the chits my father counted out into his broad palm, and then we moved on.

The second stop was Bergit's stall—smoked and salted meats, hanging in strips from the frame above and laid flat on the board below, smelling of woodsmoke, salt and something that made my stomach clench with longing.

Bergit was a wide, pink-faced woman with forearms like a *much* larger person's and a laugh you could hear from the other end of the market.

"Bradnt! And—oh, is this the little one?" She leaned over the board to get a better look at me, which brought her face very close to mine. "My goodness, she really *did* get your hair, didn't she."

"She did," my father agreed pleasantly.

"Well." Bergit straightened up, shrugging. "Can't be helped, can it."

And then she and my father began discussing the week's cuts, and I ceased to exist for the purposes of the conversation.

I watched them anyway.

Bergit named a price, my father made a considering sound, they went back and forth twice, and then chits were counted out and meat was wrapped and that was that. Exactly the way it had looked from across the market, except now I was standing right next to it.

A few stalls down, I caught sight of Aisha and Sharon.

They were at the cloth stall—Wenla's, bolts of fabric, ribbon ends and small pretty things that didn't have any particular use I could find—and Wenla herself was leaning over the board talking to them with the wide, warm smile that I knew she reserved for people she was genuinely pleased to see.

Aisha said something and Wenla laughed as Sharon was holding a length of ribbon up to her hair.

Two other women I recognized from the village had stopped to say hello as well, and the whole small cluster of them had the easy, comfortable warmth of people who all genuinely belonged to the same world.

I looked at it for a moment, and then I looked away.

"The extra," I had heard someone say once, not knowing I was near enough to hear it. *"The spare. They wanted a boy and got another girl. Deities even warned them of trying again with the hair."*

Much like a lot of other things, I didn't entirely know what to do with that, so mostly I just tried not to think about it.

It was definitely a lot easier on market days when there was *so much else* to look at.

Father's third stop was at Hilde's grain stall—not the Folke brothers, who handled the everyday sacks, but Hilde, who sold the finer stuff, flour already milled, measured out by weight on a small bronze balance that sat in the middle of her board.

My father told her what he needed and Hilde began scooping flour into a cloth sack, then set it on one side of the balance and began adding small flat weights to the other side, one at a time, until the two pans hung level.

Then she looked at the weights, looked at my father, and said a number of chits that seemed to arrive in her head without any effort at all.

My father paid it without question.

I stared at the balance all the way until we had moved away from the stall, and then I tugged his sleeve.

"How did she know?" I whispered. "The number. She just *looked* at it and knew right away. She didn't use her fingers either."

"Knew what?"

"How many chits! She looked at the little weights and just said the number!"

Father glanced back at Hilde's stall thoughtfully, then looked down at me. "Each of those weights has a *value*, same as chits do. A small one might be worth one measure of flour, a bigger one worth five. When she lines them up to balance the sack, she adds up what the weights are worth and that tells her how much flour is in the sack. Then she knows what to charge."

I thought about this carefully as we continued to walk.

"So the weights are like fingers," I said slowly. "But for flour...?"

My father was quiet for a moment.

Then he smiled—not the polite smile he used with the other villagers, but the real one, the toothy one, the same one he'd given me over the firewood.

"Yes, mouse," he said. "*Exactly* like that."

We kept walking after that, until I caught something before anyone else seemed to.

Mostly because I was still doing what I had been doing since we arrived—watching *everything*, turning my head from stall to stall, tracking the patterns around me.

Which was how I noticed the moment one of them *broke*.

It was at Piet Folke's grain stall.

A man I recognized but didn't know well—Tomas, I thought his name was, he had only been in the village for a few summers and lived in the small house near the eastern palisade—was pointing at something on the board, and the way his finger was pointing had a tension in it that normal pointing didn't have.

Piet's brother Cael was standing next to the stall, arms crossed, saying something back with his chin lifted higher than I thought necessary.

I watched them the way I watched the balance weights earlier—very carefully, trying to understand what was happening underneath the surface of it.

Then Cael suddenly *shoved* the grain sack off the board.

It hit the ground and split, and the flour went *everywhere*.

The relative quiet and peace of the market was immediately gone.

Tomas's voice went up immediately—not words at first, just the sound of someone who had been trying *very* hard to stay calm and had just run out of the ability to keep doing it.

Cael shouted back, *louder*.

A few of the nearby villagers stepped back immediately. A few stepped closer.

I felt my stomach tighten.

I wasn't scared... More anxious.

I pressed myself a little closer to the space where my father had been standing just a moment ago, and only realized then that he was already moving toward them with two other men I recognized from the village.

"Hey—*hey*." My father's voice was *different* when he used it like that.

He put himself between Tomas and Cael with his hands out at his sides. "That's enough."

Cael said something I couldn't hear clearly.

Tomas's jaw was tight, his hands in fists at his sides, and he was shaking a little—not from fear, I didn't think, but the same way I had not spoken out yesterday when mother had come into the longhouse.

Someone had already gone for the guards.

Two of them arrived quickly, which meant they'd been nearby, and then someone else went for the Longhouse, and that was when I understood it was going to be *serious*, because that meant the Headsman was coming.

Headsman Borik was a broad, slow-moving man with a grey beard that he kept *very* neat, which always seemed like a funny detail to me—all that neatness around a face that was mostly scowl.

He came out of the Longhouse without hurrying, which somehow made everyone else go slightly stiller as he approached.

The market, which had been frozen since the sack hit the ground, remained frozen.

I watched all of it from where I stood.

Borik listened to both sides. Or he *appeared* to, at least.

He stood with his arms folded and his head slightly tilted, looking at Cael for a while and then at Tomas for a shorter while, and then he said something in a low voice that I couldn't hear from where I was, and then it was over.

Tomas bent down and started gathering what was left of the spilled flour with his hands, jaw still tight, not looking at anyone.

Cael straightened his tunic and walked away.

I stared.

Cael was the one who had pushed the sack. I had *seen* it.

I had been watching the whole thing from the very beginning, before it had even become a thing, and *Cael* had been the one who started it. Yet it was Tomas was picking flour off the ground, Cael was walking away, and Headsman Borik was already turning back toward the Longhouse like the whole thing was finished and not particularly interesting.

'I should say something,' I thought. *'I saw exactly what happened! I could tell them...'*

But even as I thought it, I already knew the answer.

The adults never listened when I said that I was cold. They hadn't listened when I'd said I was hungry. Small things, easy things to fix for them, yet they still hadn't listened.

Why would any of them listen to me about something like *this*?

So I held my tongue and eagerly waited for my father to come back.

He returned to my side a few minutes later, slightly flour-dusted, and looked down at me.

Whatever he saw in my face made him crouch down onto his heels so that we were level with each other, which was the thing he did when he was about to say something he wanted me to actually hear.

"Go ahead," he said.

"Cael started it," I blurted out immediately. "I was watching before it got loud! He knocked the sack off on purpose! But Tomas is the one cleaning it up."

My father nodded slowly. He didn't look surprised.

"Why?" I asked.

He was quiet for a moment, looking at me in the way that meant he was deciding how much of the real answer to give me.

"Cael is Borik's nephew," he ultimately said. "His sister's boy."

I looked over at Tomas, still crouching in the dirt by Piet's stall. "How does that matter...?"

"Tomas has been here three, maybe four summers. He doesn't have family here. He doesn't have history here." Father turned a small stone over with his thumb. "Borik knows Cael his whole life. Cael's family has eaten at Borik's table. *That matters*, even when it shouldn't."

"That's... not fair though?" I said.

My father sighed—not the impatient kind, the heavy kind. "No. It isn't."

He looked at me steadily. "Life isn't fair, mouse. It just isn't, and anyone who tells you different is either lying or hasn't lived long enough yet. What matters is how we *manage* that unfairness. That's the part we actually have a say in."

I thought about this, frowning.

"But Tomas is big," I said. I had noticed this earlier—Tomas was one of the larger men in the village, a full head taller than Cael at least, broad in the shoulders. "He could have just... not let Cael do it. He's *way* bigger."

Father sighed again. "Being big doesn't mean you'd win."

I looked up at him, confused.

Tomas looked like he could absolutely beat Cael.

"Cael is Borik's *nephew*," he said again, carefully, like he was laying things out in a row for me to look at. "If Tomas hits Cael—even if Cael deserved it, even if everyone standing there saw Cael start it—what happens next?"

I thought about it very hard, then slowly offered, "...Borik gets angry?"

"Borik gets angry. The guards come down on Tomas. His stall gets taken away, maybe. Maybe he gets run out of the village entirely." Father looked over at Tomas quietly. "Tomas *knows* all of that. That's why he didn't throw the punch he wanted to throw. He had more to lose from hitting back than from cleaning up the flour."

"So Cael knew that too," I said slowly. "Cael knew Tomas wouldn't hit back, because of that."

"That's right."

"So Cael could do whatever he wanted because Tomas couldn't do anything about it."

My father looked at me for a moment without speaking.

"Yes," he said quietly. "That's about the gist of it. Power comes in many shapes and sizes; not merely in who is the biggest, mouse."

I turned this over in my head, looking back at the market stalls slowly coming back to life around us, the patterns reestablishing themselves like nothing had happened.

'People with power can do anything,' I realized then. *'Even when they're wrong, nothing happens to them...'*

My father watched my face for a moment longer, and something in his expression shifted—like he wanted to add something else and wasn't sure whether to.

In the end he just put his hand briefly on top of my head and stood back up to his full height.

"Come on, mouse," he said. "We're not done yet for the day."

I followed him, kept watching, and didn't say anything more about all of it.

We finished the last of the market rounds without any more problems, which I was glad for.

We walked home with father's purchases wrapped and tucked under his arm, and I turned everything over in my head the whole way back.

I was still thinking about what my father had said about power when we got to the door, which meant I wasn't paying enough attention, and I nearly walked straight into my mother.

She was standing just inside the entrance with her arms crossed and her mouth in the flat, pressed-together shape that meant *something* had already gone wrong and I was almost certainly involved in it.

I took a quick step to the side and positioned myself behind my father's arm as smoothly as I could manage.

He reached back, took me by the shoulder, and moved me in front of him with the calm efficiency of someone returning a misplaced object to its correct location.

"I've got work to do," he said pleasantly, and stepped around both of us and was gone.

'Father...!'

I stood in front of my mother and tried to look like I didn't know what this was about, which was difficult because I was *fairly* sure I at least had an idea what this was about.

Two tunics hit me in the face in quick succession, one after the other.

"You rubbed *holes* in them, Maret," my mother spat. "Take them to the Old Crone. *Now.*"

I looked down at the tunics in my arms.

There were small holes near the collars, worn through.

I had washed these two nights ago, in the dark, with no fire, because the fire had been put out as part of my punishment for the bard thing. I had done my best to feel which parts I had already scrubbed and which I hadn't, but it was completely dark and my hands were cold and I had been hungry and shaking... I had clearly pressed too hard in places trying to make sure I wasn't missing spots.

'That wasn't really my fault,' I thought as I stared up at my mother. *'You took away the fire! I couldn't see anything!'*

I did not say that.

I thought about Tomas, picking flour off the ground with his jaw tight and his mouth shut, and I thought about the thing my father had explained to me.

Then I looked at my mother's crossed arms and her flat mouth, and I understood that the *power* he had been talking about was entirely in her hands.

Saying the *true* thing would make her angrier. Being angrier would make things worse for me.

There was nothing to win here from speaking.

"Yes, mother," I said instead.

She looked surprised for a brief moment, then waved me off and I immediately left.

Aisha and Sharon found me about halfway across the village, the way they somehow always managed to find me when I was *already* having a bad time, as if they had a particular, extra sense for it.

"Ohhh, did the little gray *rat* mess something up again?" Aisha said, in the sweet voice she used when she wanted to sound like she wasn't being mean—but totally was.

Sharon laughed.

They fell into step behind me almost immediately, sliding into the same-old pattern, their voices switching to the tone they always used when they wanted to sound like they were *just talking* and *not doing anything wrong*.

"Messed up the washing, huh?" Sharon supplied helpfully, leaning around to look at the tunics in my arms. "*Again*. Mother said. Two tunics, holes in both of them."

She made a small, theatrical sound of disappointment. "You've been doing laundry for *years*, Maret. *Years*. Even *I* could do it better and I barely ever washed anything."

"That's because mother doesn't trust her with anything important," Aisha agreed. "She only gets the laundry because what else is she going to do? It's the *one thing* she's good for. The one thing. And even that she can't do right... Haaaa."

I stared straight ahead and kept walking.

'*Don't. Don't say anything. Don't...*'

"Do you think the Old Crone will even be able to fix them?" Sharon asked, in the fake-voice of someone genuinely wondering—which I knew because she was mean and would never be worried about me. "They're probably *ruined*. Mother's going to be so upset."

"She's *already* upset," Aisha said.

"She's *always* upset about her. Oh! You know what I heard her tell Aunt Beryl? She said—" and here her voice dropped into a conspiratorial murmur that she made sure was still loud enough for me to hear every word of— "that she should have just stopped after you. That the deities knew what they were doing when they gave her father's hair."

The tips of my ears went very hot.

'*She didn't say that. She wouldn't—*'

I stopped myself, because the worst part was that I wasn't entirely sure that what I was thinking was true.

"Come on," Sharon said suddenly, apparently losing interest. "Wenla said she had a new ribbon in. Should be at the stall now; she wanted to get it earlier!"

And just like that they peeled away, and I was alone again on the path, holding the ruined tunics, staring at the ground in front of my feet.

'*Say nothing,*' I told myself. '*There's nothing to say.*'

There were two of them and one of me.

They were bigger and older and mother smiled at them in the way she had never once smiled at me. If I had turned around and said something back, *anything* back, it would have gotten back to mother before I reached the Old Crone's door, and then it would have been *my fault* for starting things, and nothing they'd said would have mattered at all.

'*Like Tomas,*' I thought, gripping the tunics tighter. '*I can't do anything.*'

I kept walking after a few more moments of gathering myself.

The Old Crone's house was at the far edge of the village, which I had always thought was probably not a coincidence.

I slowed down as I got close to it, without entirely deciding to.

The house itself wasn't much different from the others—same rough timber, same thatch, same general shape—but something about it sat *wrong* in a way I had never been able to put a name to.

I had never been this close to it before, and I had *certainly* never knocked on the door.

I stopped at the threshold and stood there holding the tunics, not moving.

I didn't move for quite a while.

Then, suddenly, I heard Edvar's voice somewhere in the back of my head. "*All it took was determination. Grit. The willingness to stand in the path of something that could kill you and hold the line **anyway.***"

I hadn't really cared about that part when he'd said it.

I had been thinking about Alveric—about the gemstones blazing and the lightning and the ice meteors, about the kind of name that got *remembered*. The soldiers had felt like background noise to me then, and if I was being honest, they *still* did now.

But the words had somehow decided to stay anyway, whether I had wanted them to or not, and standing here in front of this door with my heart going faster than I would have liked, they were the only thing I really had.

Edvar had been talking about ten times ten thousand—whatever a thousand was—soldiers standing in the path of a goddess.

He had *not* been talking about a seven-summer-old girl with two ruined tunics standing in front of a door that frightened her for reasons she couldn't fully explain.

But it was what moved my feet forward anyway.

And I knocked.

A silence. The sound of movement inside.

Then the door opened—just a sliver, just enough for one green eye to appear in the gap and look at me with an expression that was not remotely friendly.

"What do you want."

It wasn't a question.

I took a breath and made sure my voice was going to work before I used it.

"I—I accidentally put holes in two tunics," I said. "My mother asked me to bring them here."

The eye moved from my face to the tunics in my arms. It went back up towards my face, then my hair, then back to my face.

She simply stared at me for a few moments, then the door swung open.

"Come in then," the Old Crone muttered, already turning away. "Mildred and Brandt's girl, you must be."

It didn't sound like she was asking, so I didn't answer.

I stepped inside.

And stopped dead immediately.

Every surface had *something* on it.

Fabric folded and stacked in columns taller than me, bolts of hemp and cloth I had never even gotten close to wearing, leaning against the walls, tunics and cloaks and things I didn't have names for hanging from wooden frames and racks and a series of strange contraptions

built from dowels and crossbars that I had never seen before and couldn't immediately understand the purpose of.

The smell was old cloth and something herbal.

It was dim, compact and the ceiling felt lower than it probably actually was, and the whole place pressed in on me gently from all sides like it was deciding what to make of me.

"Come now, child."

I startled badly enough that I took a half-step backward, and turned toward the voice.

The Old Crone was standing near the far end of the room, next to a low table with a candle on it, holding out one hand for the tunics.

I made myself walk over and give them to her.

While I did I actually looked at her properly for the first time.

She was *old*—really, truly old. Like at least three times ten summers, if I had to guess.

You could just tell. She had deep lines all across her face and hair so white it almost looked like it was glowing in the candlelight, pulled back tight against her head.

She was also small—almost as small as me!—and a little hunched at the shoulders, but her hands moved with a certainty that made me feel like a clumsy rock just watching them.

She was also—and I would never, ever say this out loud, because I knew better now—*prettier* than my mother, I realized then with a bit of a shock.

I didn't entirely know *how* that was possible given how old she was, but it was true.

Her face simply had "*good bones*," like father said about the horses he liked when he was still with the army.

You could just see it. Even I could see it!

But her green eyes were the strangest part. They were sharp in a way that made me want to take a small step backward every time she looked at me—and I didn't know why.

She tilted her head slightly as she held the fabric up to the candle, as she inspected it.

I stood *very* still and tried to take up as little space as possible.

"Two needles," she said, without looking up from the tunics. "Three spools of thread. Hand them to me. There, on the table."

I looked at the table.

There were several needles and several spools, all jumbled together with a collection of other things I didn't have names for.

I reached out carefully and picked up one needle, then a second, pressing them both against my palm. Then the spools—one, two, three—and I held them in my other hand and checked both counts quietly against my fingers before I held them out to her.

She took them without comment and went to work.

I forgot to be scared almost immediately.

Her fingers moved over the fabric like they had their own separate understanding of what needed to happen, finding the holes without looking for them, the needle going in and out and in and out in a rhythm so fast and clean it barely seemed real.

The holes simply *disappeared* behind her work.

I had watched my mother sew, and the women at the market sometimes, but this was *completely* different from that.

My mouth was wide open.

"You can count, girl."

It wasn't a question.

I blinked and tried to look like I hadn't just been standing there with my mouth hanging open.

"That is unusual for someone your age." Her eyes stayed on the tunic. "Can you do other math?"

Her fingers hadn't slowed at all, and I couldn't quite make myself stop watching them, but I also knew I needed to answer.

"I don't know math," I answered honestly. "What is that?"

She humphed.

"What is seven minus five?"

I held up both hands and quickly counted out seven fingers, then folded five of them down.

Two left standing.

"Two."

"One plus eight?"

One finger, then eight. "Nine."

"Ten plus six?"

I opened my mouth and then closed it again.

'Oh.'

I saw it immediately—she had gone past ten on purpose. I thought of father, two days ago by the hearth, and carefully counted out ten fingers, started over, and counted six more.

"Ehh... Sixteen?"

"Hmm." A pause in which I couldn't read anything from her face at all. "Without fingers. Ten minus five."

My eyes went wide.

'*Without fingers?! How am I supposed to—*'

But then I stopped, because I realized I already *knew* this one.

'*Market days. Every fifth day and every tenth day...*'

Five was exactly halfway between no fingers and ten fingers, one full hand, right in the middle.

"Five," I said fairly confidently—more confident than I really felt, honestly.

"No hands again. Ten plus eight?"

I felt sweat prickling at the back of my neck. That was much, *much* harder.

I couldn't count it on my fingers and I couldn't use market days to cheat my way to it.

I stood there for a moment and thought about the numbers I did know above ten, the ones father had shown me, and I noticed—or thought I noticed—*something* about the general shape of them.

'*Thirteen is three and ten. Fourteen is four and ten. Fifteen is five and ten... They all just say the actual number first, with teen draped over the back of it...*'

So ten and eight would be...

"Eighteen?" I tried.

The Old Crone's fingers stopped.

I instinctively took a step backward without deciding to and walked straight into a stack of fabric that came up to my chin, catching myself against it awkwardly and knocking several folds loose.

Her eyes were trained on me now.

"Your family didn't teach you," she said. It was not an accusation.

Just a fact being placed on the table between us.

"My—my father told me about numbers above ten two days ago," I offered, talking a little faster than I meant to. "I don't actually know what ten and eight is. I can't count that without fingers. I just guessed."

"*Guessed.*"

"There's a pattern!" I said quickly, because the way she repeated words back at me was somehow even more frightening than if she'd just shouted at me, or hit me. "After twelve! Everything is just roughly the actual number with '*teen*' after it. Thirteen is three and ten... Which is a bit weird, but close. But then, fourteen is four and ten. And fifteen is five and ten, which is a bit weird again, but also close. So I thought... ten and eight would probably be one or the other..."

She stared at me.

I gripped the edge of the fabric stack behind me and tried not to fidget, my heart going very fast, a lump sitting at the bottom of my throat that I couldn't swallow around.

"The Twins smiled upon you, child. You are correct," she said. "It is eighteen."

My eyes went up to hers so fast it nearly made me dizzy.

"Have you ever considered becoming a seamstress?"

I opened my mouth. Then closed it.

The question had arrived so far from anywhere I had been expecting that I couldn't immediately find where to put it.

Had I ever considered it? *No*.

I had absolutely never considered it.

I didn't even know what that word *meant*; so how could I have possibly considered it before?

"I... no?" I offered carefully.

The Old Crone cackled—a short, sharp sound that bounced off every surface in the cluttered little hut and came back twice as loud.

"Well. Too bad."

She was already looking back at the tunics and letting her hands do the things they did. "Tell your mother you will be helping me with my work for the next few summers. Tell her I will pay in chits. She will agree."

I stared at her.

Summers. Plural.

Multiple summers, in this hut, with this woman, surrounded by all this fabric and these strange contraptions and those eyes that looked at too many things at once...!

'Is this my punishment?' I thought, slightly wildly. *'Is this Roth's revenge for not covering my eyes that one time at the church service when his name came up...?'*

I had been *very* sure nobody had seen that, but apparently *someone* had.

"Go, child. *Now.*" She waved one hand toward the door without looking up. "First light tomorrow. Don't be late."

She said it the way my mother said things when the conversation was over, except that my mother's version of that tone had never *once* made the hair on my arms stand up like this.

I went quickly.

I bolted through the door and out into the late afternoon air and I didn't slow down until the Old Crone's house was well behind me, and even then I kept looking over my shoulder the whole way home, for reasons I couldn't entirely explain...