

Chapter 2: Seamstress

"Let it be known to all that the practice of magic is *not* a common right.

It is a *privilege*.

One extended by the grace of the Manifold Pantheon and its Church, the authority of the Crown, and the wisdom of the Magistrorum, in equal measure.

To practice without the sanction of all three is not merely a crime of the highest order, but a declaration of war against the very foundations of human civilization itself.

To practice without the Church's blessing is *heresy*—a spitting in the face of the gods who permit magic to exist at all.

To practice without the seal of the Crown is treason—a knife held against the throat of the kingdom and every soul within it.

To practice without the approval of the Magistrorum is recklessness given physical form—a fire lit in a house full of sleeping children.

To practice without any of these is to be an apostate. To be branded. To be cast out.

Forsaken by Church, Crown, and Magistrorum alike, and by every man, woman, and child who shelters beneath their protections.

The apostate has not merely broken the law, but has renounced their very *humanity* and placed themselves beyond its reach—beyond its mercy, and beyond its pity.

The Manifold Pantheon does not forget, nor forgive such transgressions. The Inquisitors they empower do not tire, do not negotiate, and do not stop until the pariah's danger to humanity has been curbed.

There is only one thing more dangerous than magic without wisdom, without oversight, without a leash: The one who has *decided* they do not need any of them."

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[Excerpt from "*The Doctrines of the Manifold Church*," as ratified by the Holy Seat, the Crown, and the Magistrorum in joint congress. Year 92, Era of Strife.]

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Surprisingly, the Old Crone had been right.

My mother agreed to the arrangement, though she'd gone quiet and thoughtful for a while after I told her, in a way I didn't entirely know what to make of.

I made sure to be up before everyone else the next morning, got the fire going, exchanged the usual brief good morning with my father when the crackling woke him, and then headed out into the cold.

And it was *very* cold that morning.

My hemp tunic was doing almost nothing, even with the extra fur my father had thrown over my shoulders when he caught me trying to slip out without one.

I tucked it tighter around myself and walked faster.

"I hope she has a fire," I muttered quietly to myself.

Strangely, I couldn't actually remember whether she did or didn't.

When I tried to picture the inside of the Old Crone's hut, all that came back clearly were the contraptions and the fabric—stacked, hanging and folded into every available space, more of it than I had *ever* seen in one place... Or even several places. The rest of the hut had simply failed to leave an impression, which felt odd now that I thought about it.

'How did she even have all that stuff?'

I had been inside plenty of other homes on errands for my parents, and none of them had come close to that packed.

Our own house had three bronze knives—the cleaver, the vegetable knife, and the small one which was the only one I was allowed to use, and only sometimes—my father's firestarter, his leather armour, the wooden plates and utensils, and a good collection of pelts and furs from his work in the forest.

But compared to the Old Crone, we had *nothing*.

She was *rich*. Richer than the Headsman, maybe.

I frowned at the ground as I walked.

'But that doesn't make sense... Does it?'

The Headsman was the most powerful person in the village, and power meant *things*—I knew that now, after the market and everything.

The Headsman collected the "tax" thing twice a year when the lord's collector came through, and the Headsman always collected more than the collector received, which meant the difference stayed with him.

Chits, grain, wood, pelts, fabric—everything the villagers handed over.

It should have added up to more than anyone else in the village had, because he took from everyone.

But I had been to the Headsman's house once, with my mother, and I didn't remember it looking like much at all.

'Maybe I'm misremembering,' I thought, chewing on it. *'I was a lot smaller then.'*

Several summers smaller. I probably hadn't known what to look for.

It was very possible it would all look different to me now.

The Old Crone's hut came into view just as the last of the twin moons ducked behind a thick bank of autumn cloud, taking what little light it had been offering with it.

The only things keeping the village from being completely dark before the sun managed to crest were the braziers the guards kept burning through the night—two of them visible from here, orange smears in the grey—so people could find the outhouses without walking into a fence... Which had *definitely* never happened to me before.

I picked my way toward the door by memory more than sight, my breath coming out in small white puffs.

I stopped in front of it and stood there for a moment.

'She didn't eat me yesterday,' I told myself, which was a more useful thought than it might sound, because it was true, and it was the main thing I had been uncertain about whether she would or not.

She had been strange and sharp-eyed and her hut was full of things I didn't understand, and she had given me what amounted to a job, if I was understanding things right, without asking me whether I wanted one—but she had not, in fact, eaten me.

Which had been very nice of her—and I quietly hoped it was a pattern.

I was still scared. Just... less than the day before.

I took a deep breath—or as deep as the cold air allowed—then raised my hand and knocked, my cold knuckles stinging against the wood hard enough to make me wince.

I waited.

The door opened a crack after a few moments, and a familiar green eye looked out at me from the gap.

"Ah. Girl... Early. You know how to listen."

She paused briefly, which felt like something was being decided I couldn't see.

"Good. Good. Come in."

The door swung wider and the Old Crone looked me up and down, her one visible eye traveling from my head to my feet and back up again with an expression I couldn't read.

"You look like you're freezing out there, you small stick," she said. "Do your parents not feed you or something?"

I knew the true answer to that—that I hadn't eaten on several nights in the last ten-day because whatever work had been assigned to me hadn't been finished, and that breakfast this morning had been a small bowl of thin porridge that had done very little against the cold on the walk over.

But I also knew that saying any of that out loud would make me sound like I was asking for something, which I *wasn't*, and would probably get back to my mother somehow, which would be bad.

Or it would make me even more of a burden for the Old Crone than I already was.

"I'm sorry? Ehh... I ate breakfast this morning already," I replied quickly.

She made a sound that wasn't quite agreement and stepped aside to let me in.

I stepped over the threshold and *stopped dead*.

It was *warm*.

Not just slightly warmer than outside—*warm*, the same deep settled warmth as the longhouse had been the night of Edvar's story, that got into your fingers and your ears immediately and made them tingle.

I stood just inside the door, which was *still* open behind me, and stared straight ahead trying to understand what was happening.

There should have been a cold draft.

Open doors in autumn let the warmth out—mother had said so, father had said so, I had felt it myself every time someone left ours open too long in the cold months. But the door was open and the warmth was *right there*, completely unbothered, as if the cold outside had simply agreed not to come in.

The pattern made no sense.

I turned around to look at the open doorway, then back into the room, then at the doorway again.

"Girl." The Old Crone's voice came from somewhere deeper in the hut. "Close the damn door. I don't pay you to stand around."

I startled, spun around, and pulled the door shut behind me. "I apologize, I—"

"And stop the apologizing for every little thing. What are you, a damn parakeet?"

I looked at her, thrown. "I... I don't know what that is."

"Of course you don't." She had her back to me, moving toward the far end of the hut with a slow, certain gait. "You're an ignorant little village girl. I'd be surprised if you even know the difference between a mouse and a rat."

Something sharp and hot moved through my chest before I had time to think about it.

"I *know* the difference!" I said, and my voice came out with an edge I hadn't put there on purpose. "A mouse is small and cute. Rats make people sick and steal food and nobody likes them!"

The Old Crone stopped.

She turned around and looked at me, and the hot feeling in my chest disappeared so fast it left me cold in a completely different way than the autumn morning had.

'What did I just do?!'

My eyes went wide.

She was an adult. She was the *Old Crone*, specifically—the scariest person in the village, whose house nobody went near, the one whose name children used to frighten each other—and I had just spoken back to her. With an edge. On my first day here.

'She is going to tell mother. She is going to tell mother and mother is going to—'

"|—|—"

"If you say 'I apologize' right now," she said slowly, "I am going to hit you with this stick."

I noticed for the first time, as she raised it towards me, that she had been holding a stick.

A large and sturdy stick, too.

She lowered it back toward the floor and I realized then it was a walking stick, the top worn smooth where her hand had been resting on it, probably for many years.

I closed my mouth and said nothing, which felt like the only available option.

"You're not exactly wrong, girl," she said, in a tone that suggested the words cost her something small. "But you aren't *right* either. There are a great many differences between rats and mice. However."

A pregnant pause as she looked back at me. "I *will* concede the point."

I stared at her.

'Did she just say I had a point? An adult just said I had a point...'

I kept waiting for the rest of it—the *but*, the *however*, the part where it turned around and became my fault somehow. That was usually how it went. But she had just... stopped. Said I had a point and moved on, like it was nothing, like adults said that to children all the time.

'They don't, though. They really, really don't.'

I didn't know what to do with my face, so I probably just stood there looking stupid.

"Go stoke the fire and get yourself some of the gruel from the pot," she said, already turning away again, the moment apparently finished and forgotten as far as she was concerned. "I need you to put some weight on or you won't last the winter, which would be a *considerable* waste of my efforts."

I blinked, came back to myself, and looked around properly for the first time since coming in.

There—tucked into the far corner of the hut, just beside the second—and only other—door I hadn't noticed the day before—was a fireplace. Small and deep-set, with a pot hanging inside it, simmering quietly, sending a thin curl of steam up toward the low ceiling.

That explained the warmth, at least partially.

It did not explain the open door or how the warm hadn't left earlier, however.

I crossed the hut toward it, stepping carefully around a tower of folded fabric. There was a wooden plate and a spoon already set beside the fire, and a ladle resting inside the pot.

'Is this hers? Do I just... use it?'

At home, touching Aisha's or Sharon's things without asking was a reliable way to have a bad afternoon. Using my parents' things without permission was even worse.

I had learned that lesson more than once.

"Is... this plate and spoon for me?"

"Who else would I have put it there for?" she shot back immediately. "Did you fall on your head since yesterday? I thought you were more observant than that."

I winced and looked at the plate again.

It was clean. Untouched. And given everything else crammed into this hut, the Old Crone clearly had more than *one* of everything. She had put it there before I arrived, which meant she had put it there for me, which was obvious now that I was actually looking at it properly.

"I'm s—" I caught myself and snapped my mouth shut, the reflex dying partway out.

I glanced sideways at the Old Crone. She was already looking at me. Then she gave a short nod and turned back toward the desk she had been working at yesterday.

I let out a quiet breath and reached for the ladle.

I ladled some of the gruel onto the plate and stopped.

It was *thick*. Properly, genuinely thick, the spoon standing in it for a moment before slowly tilting over. The gruel we had at home was thin enough to see through on bad days, and even on good ones it was nothing even close to this.

The pot alone could have easily fed my entire family with enough left over for the neighbours.

I took a small portion and set the ladle back carefully.

The first spoonful hit my tongue and I stopped chewing entirely.

It was—I didn't have a word for it.

I had never *needed* a word for food tasting like *this* before, because food had never tasted like this before. I let it sit on my tongue for a moment before swallowing, warm all the way down, and then I took another spoonful almost before I'd finished the first one.

"What... what is this?" I asked quietly, mostly to myself.

"Gruel, child." The Old Crone's voice came from across the room without any pause, which meant she had the ears of a bat apparently. "Just gruel."

"This doesn't taste anything like gruel," I said, taking another spoonful. "It's... *really* good."

There was a short silence then in which I simply enjoyed the taste in my mouth.

"Village life is rough, huh," she muttered, and it didn't sound like a question, and she didn't say anything else about it.

I finished my small portion and sat looking at the pot for a moment.

Whatever was in there that made it taste like that, it was almost certainly expensive. The spices alone, if that was what it was, would undoubtedly cost more chits than I had ever seen in one place. Which made it all the more strange that the Old Crone was using them on gruel, of all things... But the taste was definitely unlike anything I had ever had, so it had to be.

I put the plate down and picked up the spoon to clean it.

"Where can I wash these?"

The Old Crone looked back at me. "You're *done* already? You're *full*?"

I looked at her.

'What does that...'

I had eaten.

I had gotten food, which was more than I could always count on, and I would be fine with what I'd had. But she was asking me a direct question and I had already learned exactly, many times, what happened when I didn't answer those.

"I ate. I'm... not full."

"Then keep eating, you dumb idiot girl." She rolled her eyes and turned back to her work.

"What is wrong with these villagers," she muttered, under her breath but not very far under.

I sat very still for a moment.

"These villagers." Like she wasn't one of us.

But she lived here, in the village, in this hut, same as everyone else—except, as I looked around slowly, not *really* the same as everyone else at all.

Her clothing, which I hadn't looked at properly before, wasn't hemp, I now realized. I didn't know *what* it was made from, but hemp went rough and pilled at the edges and this was nothing like that—it was finer and smoother, looking far less scratchy.

The hut itself was full of things that I had never seen anywhere else inside the village, too.

The food in that pot didn't belong in our village either.

Nothing about the Old Crone's pattern made sense.

'But I won't figure any of it out on a half-empty stomach,' I decided, and picked up the ladle again...

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I ate two more full plates until I couldn't have fit another spoonful if I'd tried, and then I sat in front of the fire feeling warmer, heavier and more settled than I could ever remember feeling in my whole life.

I was so full, and the fire was so warm, that I didn't even notice the Old Crone had moved until her voice came from directly beside me and I nearly dropped the plate from my hands.

"Now *that's* how a girl should look after a meal." She studied me for a moment. "Good. Digest for a few minutes. Then we start your work."

I nodded vigorously enough that I felt slightly dizzy and had to stop.

I would do anything she asked. I would do it with everything I had.

This was the best meal I had ever eaten in my entire life—barring the feast for the Headsman's grand birthday two summers ago, but I hadn't gotten anywhere nearly this much of that, so the Old Crone was winning by a considerable margin.

'If she feeds me like this every day,' I thought carefully, trying very hard not to want it too much, because I had noticed over my seven summers that the Manifold Pantheon seemed to enjoy giving me things to hope for specifically so they could be taken away—*'I will do absolutely anything she asks of me.'*

I stared into the fire and tried not to hope too hard.

But secretly I hoped very hard anyway.

Several minutes passed. The fire crackled gently. My stomach was warm and heavy and I was trying very hard not to fall asleep sitting upright, which felt like a real possibility.

The Old Crone came back around and I got up immediately, hands ready.

She held up a finger and gestured back at the bench.

I sat down again.

She settled onto the bench beside me, utterly unhurried, and I took the opportunity to actually look at the table properly for the first time.

Our table at home was a slab of rough-cut wood laid across two stumps, which wobbled if you leaned on it wrong and had splinters along the edges that I had learned to avoid by feel.

This one, instead, was smooth, even and properly fitted together, with bronze nails along the joins that caught the firelight—the same kind of construction as the tables inside the longhouse.

In the Old Crone's hut it just sat there being a table, like it was nothing special.

I was beginning to notice that a lot of things in here were just like that.

"What do you know about seamstresses, then, girl," she said. "Tell me everything. What they do, what they work with, how they do it. Be detailed. Don't leave anything out."

I thought about it genuinely, turning it over, trying to find all the pieces.

"I don't know much," I ultimately admitted. "I know they work with fabrics—hemp, mostly, from what I've seen. I know they sew and stitch and cut."

I paused, checking whether there was anything else I actually *knew*, but I'd never actually even heard anyone use that word before the Old Crone had yesterday.

"That's everything I know."

She looked at me for a moment, her eyes narrowing just slightly.

"Alright..." she said slowly. "Then tell me what you *think* they do."

That was a *much* easier question to answer.

"Measuring," I started immediately, because that felt like the most obvious place—I had seen women in the village hold lengths of cord against each other before cutting, making sure things came out even. "They measure people, so the clothing actually fits instead of just... being a shape you hope is close enough."

I glanced around the hut as I talked, letting what I could see fill in the gaps.

"They cut the fabric into the right pieces and sew them together. And they can alter things—make them bigger or smaller, take them in when they get worn through in one spot but are still good everywhere else."

I thought of the Old Crone's fingers moving over the tunic holes yesterday, which reminded me that I needed to pick those up before I left today and not forget them by the door.

"They fix damage, too. Holes, tears, places that have gone thin from too much washing."

The list came easier as I went.

"They'd know which fabrics are good for what—something thick for winter, something lighter for summer, tough stuff for working in the forests and something finer for—" I gestured at the Old Crone's sleeve, because that made the point better than trying to find the word for it. "For *that*."

She said nothing, so I kept going.

"They'd know how to put things together so they hold up past two washes, and how to keep the stitching flat so it doesn't rub and scratch all annoyingly. And cutting carefully so there's no waste—because waste means spending more chits, and nobody wants that."

I stopped and looked around the hut again, at the strange wooden contraptions I still had no names for, at the bolts of fabrics stacked in different weights and colours.

"I think a seamstress can do just about anything with the right cloth and needle and thread," I said slowly. "Everything about clothing, start to finish. Like how a farmer doesn't just do one thing—he sows and tends and harvests and all of it together is the whole job."

The Old Crone looked at me steadily.

"That," I added, glancing sideways at her and trying not to actually meet her eyes, "is what you seem like, anyway. From what I saw."

She observed me for a long moment without saying anything, which made me want to fidget badly, but I pressed my hands flat against my knees and held still.

Then she finally nodded. "That's a good list. And you are correct. A seamstress *can* do just about *anything*, given the right tools."

The way she said it—and the small strange smile that came with it—sent a shiver straight down my back for reasons I couldn't explain.

"But you are missing one important part," she said, getting to her feet with her walking stick.

"Which I can't fault you for. You wouldn't have come across it here."

She gestured for me to follow as she moved toward her working desk.

"A seamstress's most powerful tool is not the needle. Not the thread. Not the cloth." She paused and looked back at me to make sure I was listening. "They are mere mediums. *Tools* used to bring something to life. Never mistake them for the thing itself."

She stepped up to the desk.

"Their greatest tool is *this*."

She moved aside a spool of thread, two needles, and a folded piece of cloth, and revealed a piece of parchment underneath.

My eyes went wide.

It was unlike any parchment I had ever seen.

The only type I had seen, the little of it, had been rough and uneven with visible fibers running through it and blotchy edges. This one, however, was smooth and clean and flat, and I forgot about *that* almost immediately because of what was actually drawn on it.

Lines—curved ones and perfectly straight ones with small, neat writing beside them, shapes and outlines of different sizes, all of it so precise and exact that I couldn't understand how any hand had possibly made them.

Charcoal did not leave such nice and tidy lines, I knew that much.

It was, by far and away, the most beautiful thing I had ever seen in my entire life.

It was the most beautiful array of—

"Patterns," the Old Crone said, and my eyes snapped to hers in a panic, convinced for a split second that she had somehow read my thoughts.

But she was still looking at the parchment, not at me.

"*Patterns* are a seamstress's greatest tool. They contain the exact truth of any garment—how it is cut, how long each piece must be, where the seams go, what fabric and thread and needle to use, how to put it all together and where to begin. *Everything*. They are the complete and total truth of every piece of clothing that has ever existed, and every piece that ever will."

I could not stop staring at her.

She turned, and our eyes met, and there was a small smile on her lips.

"A seamstress does not merely follow them, girl. She *creates* them. She imagines the piece first—holds the whole of it in her mind—and then breaks it down and draws it out exactly as it needs to be, so that any other seamstress anywhere in the world could reproduce it *perfectly*. A universal language, understood regardless of where you are."

She looked at the parchment, then back at me.

"Once the pattern exists in your mind, you can create *anything*. The thread, the needle, the fabric—they are what carry it into the world. But the *pattern* is what makes you a seamstress."

I had never heard anyone talk like this before.

I could barely follow her words properly—not in the way where you truly understand something, deep down where it settles and stays. But I felt something shift anyway, somewhere underneath the part of me that was trying to keep up.

'*She gets it,*' I thought, and my eyes went hot and blurry before I had any idea it was going to happen. I felt the tears on my chin and didn't fully know why they were there. '*She makes the patterns. She knows how to follow them, to make sense of them, put them in order...!*'

Nobody had ever put words to it before. Not like this.

"Now, girl." The Old Crone's voice was quieter than usual. "I ask you again: Have you ever considered becoming a seamstress?"

I nodded, without a single moment of hesitation.

—

The next eleven days flew by faster than any I could remember.

I woke early, started the fire at home, and headed straight to the Old Crone's hut without breaking my fast—because the Old Crone, against all reasonable expectation and almost *certainly* in defiance of the Manifold Pantheon's general attitude toward my life, had a full pot of gruel waiting every single morning.

Eleven days in, it was still the best thing I had ever eaten.

I was starting to fill out a little too—the Old Crone had noted this on the tenth day with a single satisfied nod, which felt like the highest possible praise coming from her.

The work itself, however, was hard and the days were very long.

I was in her hut from before sunrise to well after dark, with breaks only for meals—there were *three* of them, which had genuinely surprised me.

The Old Crone ate all manner of things for what she called "lunch" as well as supper, foods that looked and smelled like nothing I had ever encountered, all of it mouth-watering enough to make me forget what I was doing mid-stitch.

She didn't offer any of it to me, just the gruel, which was *more* than fine.

The gruel was already the best food I had ever eaten.

I had no complaints whatsoever, truly!

The work itself was mostly moving fabric—I was learning the names of everything as I handled it—and learning to sew and stitch with hemp. It took several hours and more than a few firm taps of the walking stick before I stopped apologizing every time I made a mistake.

"I *told* you this is nothing to me, girl," she said more than once. "Stop apologizing and focus on your work."

She never sounded as genuinely angry as mother did, even when she said it for the fourth time in an afternoon, which was something I noted as another oddity of the Old Crone.

I learned how to hold a needle properly, how to thread it, and since then had been on what the Old Crone called "getting your hands to work the way your brain tells them to" duty, which didn't really mean anything to me.

In practice, however, this meant fixing a hole, pulling it open, and doing it again. Over and over, the same hole in the same scrap of hemp, all day long until she told me it was time to go back home and rest.

Every time I did it, I found something I'd done wrong, or something I could do differently, or a way the needle could move that I hadn't tried yet.

So I tried them all.

My hands ached by the end of *every* day, without fail—not the dull, heavy ache from laundry, but something sharper and stranger, like my fingers were actively protesting about being asked to move in ways they hadn't been built for yet.

I kept going anyway, because I was *going* to be a seamstress.

All the while, she talked.

About seamstressing, about the village, about the world outside it, about things I had no frame of reference for yet and could only file away and hope made sense later.

There was so much knowledge packed inside the Old Crone that just thinking about the patterns she must have built up over her lifetime would have kept me awake all night—except that I was so thoroughly exhausted by the time I got home each evening that I was asleep the moment I hit the pelts, usually still thinking about whatever she had last said.

I tried to absorb everything, but I knew I was missing a lot anyway.

There was simply way too much.

The majority of the time, however, wasn't spent on these stories. They were the reward.

The reward for answering a lot of her questions correctly.

At random intervals throughout the day, while I was busy with the stitching work she had given me, she would throw numbers at me without warning.

"Seventeen minus four?"

"Thirteen."

"Eighteen plus one?"

"Nineteen."

I had to answer *fast*, and because my hands were occupied, I couldn't use my fingers.

It was *genuinely* really, really hard at first. But I had found a smart trick, which I was not going to tell the Old Crone about yet—not unless she asked about it.

'If I imagine my hands inside my head, I can still count fingers, even while my real ones are busy. And I can add more hands too!'

I had worked this out on the third day, and my answers had gotten considerably better after that.

By now, I often didn't even need the imaginary fingers.

The answer just... *arrived*, the same way the answer for ten minus five had arrived that first morning because of market days. Just known deep inside of me, somehow.

I knew this with a lot of numbers now.

Numbers I had no real use for, like *nineteen*.

I knew how to get to nineteen from ten, or from twelve, or from fourteen or eighteen.

I just knew, without counting anything!

It was all so strange... It was also, quietly and secretly, the most exciting thing that had ever happened to me.

Today, however, was different, because it was twelfth-day—church day.

Which meant I wasn't going straight to the Old Crone's hut after starting the fire, as much as I would have preferred that over just about anything else.

"Remember to put your good tunics on, girls!" Mother's voice came through from the main room while Aisha, Sharon and I were all in the bedroom changing.

The room wasn't big enough for three people to move freely, so we had to take turns, which left gaps that they apparently felt needed filling in their minds.

I was perfectly happy with the silence.

"So what does the Old Crone actually have you doing, *rat*?" Sharon asked with even more venom in her voice than usual. "Drinking blood? Cutting up strange animals? Washing her clothes?"

"Probably dancing for her," Aisha offered, muffled, her head halfway through her tunic. "What else would the rat be good for, except something to laugh at."

Sharon laughed—It wasn't funny.

I looked at them and felt something I hadn't quite felt before in these moments—a kind of distance, like I was watching something I'd already seen too many times.

The same words in the same order, despite them never having been spoken before. Like they had run out of new things to say summers ago and kept using the old ones anyway, wearing them smooth, despite this particular line obviously never having come up before.

There was a hidden pattern here, that, for some reason, I was only now realizing existed.

I was far more interested in it than the actual words they were saying.

"I'm not even surprised mother sold her off," Aisha said, moving on, glancing past me at Sharon as she started weaving ribbon through her hair. "It's been better without her around anyway. More food, and the Old Crone's chits are finally getting us something decent to wear."

"I just wish I didn't have the laundry on top of everything else," Sharon muttered.

I felt a small smile pull at the corner of my mouth when hearing that before I could stop it.

Which proved immediately to be a mistake.

Aisha's hands went still in her hair. Her eyes found mine in the way a cat's eyes find a scurrying rat.

"Are you laughing at her, *rat*?" Her voice had gone flat and sharp. "It's your damn fault her hands are going rough! She's your big sister, you freak!"

Sharon moved before Aisha had even finished her sentence.

Her hand found my hair from behind and *pulled*—yanking me backward and sideways, slamming me into the wooden wall hard enough that the air left me in a startled scream.

Stars flickered at the edges of my vision.

"You think that's *funny*?" Her voice was right next to my ear, hot and furious. "You think *any* of this is funny, you little rat monster?"

She shoved my head against the wall again. "The God of Death should have put his Gaze on you the second you crawled out of mother! The very second! Nothing—*nothing* good has ever come from you being here!"

I grabbed at her wrists, trying to get purchase, which ended with us tangled together against the wall, her still gripping my hair with one hand and swinging with the other.

"You can't even do the *one* job you were useful for!" she spat, landing a sharp impact against the side of my face. "The laundry! That's *all* you were ever good for and now I have to do it—*my* hands, rat, look what it's doing to my soft *hands*—"

Something hit me hard in the back and I lurched forward.

Aisha had stepped onto the bed and was kicking, finding me whenever Sharon's grip shifted.

"Worthless," Aisha said, with the flat certainty of someone reading from a list. "Completely worthless. *Vraeth-cursed* hair and nothing behind the eyes; not even capable of doing laundry without *ruining* it—"

"What is even the *point* of you?!" Sharon wrenched my head sideways and cracked it against the wall again, and I tasted copper. "You eat our food, you take up space, you ruin *everything* you touch—the God of Death should come for you *now* and spare the rest of us countless summers—"

I was grabbing at anything I could reach, trying to get my feet properly under me, eyes stinging too badly to see straight.

Then the door hit the frame.

"*What is going on in here?!*"

Mother. Her tone landed on all three of us like a bucket of ice water.

Sharon let go immediately. Aisha stepped off the bed.

I half-fell sideways onto the pelts and stayed there, chest heaving, tears running freely down my face and mixing with something warmer near my hairline that I was fairly certain was blood.

Everything hurt.

My scalp worst of all, then my face where the wall had met it, then my back where Aisha's shoes had found me.

I pressed the back of my hand against my mouth and focused on breathing quietly.

"You are back for *one* single day and you're already making trouble, Maret?" Mother's voice was cold and level. "On *twelfth-day*? Have you no shame in front of the gods?"

The anger that rose up in me then was different from anything I could remember feeling before. Hot, deep and shaped like words—*very* specific words, the true ones—and I pressed

my lips together and held every single one of them in by sheer force, because I knew with complete clarity that letting any of it out would make everything that had just happened feel like a warm greeting by comparison.

I wiped my face on my sleeping tunic's sleeve instead. Snot, tears, a little blood.

I breathed through my nose until the hot shape of it all settled back down.

"Finish putting your tunics on, girls. We're leaving."

Sharon was dressed in moments, ribbons in, looking perfectly arranged before she left without a word. Aisha did the same, smoothing her skirt, catching her own reflection in the small bowl of water with quiet satisfaction before dumping it out on the floor, giving me a smug grin and walking out.

I put my tunic on alone.

"*Maret*." Mother's voice from the main room. "You're making everyone wait again!"

I came out quickly and found the family assembled by the door.

Father looked up when I walked in and his expression shifted.

"What happened to you, *Maret*?"

I looked at him.

He looked genuinely puzzled.

I could see it clearly, and it landed somewhere in my chest that hurt more than my head did.

I thought about *all* the summers, then. All the patterns I had watched and memorized and filed away. I thought about how a man who had taught me to count firewood in the dark and explained leverage and power to me between market stalls was standing in front of me right now, *genuinely* unable to complete this particular pattern—my hair pulled in three directions, marks on my face I could feel with my own fingers, blood drying at my hairline, Aisha and Sharon standing right beside him with their faces smoothed carefully blank.

I held his eyes for a few long seconds.

Then I simply walked past him and out the door.

I heard him go still behind me.

I knew why: I had never not answered him before, not once.

But I was more than seven summers old, and I had finally understood enough about math to run the numbers on what saying anything would accomplish.

The answer was *nothing*.

So I walked towards the longhouse for the church meeting, and didn't look back...