

~~I thought of the eyes of the villagers over Cayo's body and Polina's wails. I couldn't return.~~

If going to this city in the Lost meant that Mother would smile and dance again, I wanted her to go there. So, I followed her, although I left a few yards between us.

The rush of the sea ~~quickly had~~ died away and the wind ~~had become~~ became hot. The grass was brittle and cracked beneath my feet, sand seeped into my sandals, and my feet were sore and blistered.

One night I stopped in my tracks as a long, high cry of despair echoed across the sky. "What was that?"

Even Mother's footsteps faltered. "There are a lot of strange sounds in the Lost," she said. "You can't jump at them all or you'll never get anywhere."

My throat was dry and hoarse as I asked, "What is Aran like?"

"It was built on a magical spring. ~~spring, a magical one.~~ It is green there. ~~They and they~~ have orange trees ~~there,~~ and apples."

"In the middle of the Lost?" My voice was sharp. Was she addled from the poisons? Perhaps she wasn't as wise as ~~she'd always thought, as she'd~~ led me to believe.

"That is how the magic works. A reckless man tried ~~to cross~~ crossing from ~~Mera~~ to ~~Tanera~~. ~~Many,~~ and many men in his party slowly died from the heat, thirst, and exhaustion. When they were too weak to resist, the demons pulled them under the sand, one by one."

"Some of the survivors abandoned him and returned to their home. ~~But,~~ but just as the man began to despair, he found a trickle of water in the Lost. He drank from it eagerly, though it was more sand than water. Suddenly a Witch appeared, and she cast a

All night long I lay awake in our chamber with these thoughts spinning through my mind. Mother would return in the morning. She was always flushed and happy, often wearing a gift from the King: ~~sometimes~~ ~~perhaps~~ a sapphire ring or ~~maybe~~ a gold bracelet. Sometimes there would be a finely woven scarf or a cake made of rich chocolate for me. My protests and concerns would ~~soon~~ subside, the bright daylight chasing away the fears that lurked in the night.

Gowns made of materials that were as light as a cloud and dyed ~~to match the~~ shades of the sky were delivered to us. Mother spun in one that flared from her hips; it was perfect for dancing. There were some for me ~~too~~ ~~as well~~, but I stubbornly wore my tunic and pants even though they were stained ~~by~~ ~~with~~ sand and sweat. Sometimes, ~~though~~, ~~when Mother wasn't watching~~, I would finger the delicate fabric of the gowns. ~~when Mother wasn't watching~~.

But Mother hadn't completely forgotten our life in ~~Mera~~. She ~~'d~~ found the remains of a garden that was growing in a forgotten corner of the city behind the kitchen ~~against~~ ~~by~~ the Wall, and together we coaxed it back to life. The earth was cool and damp against my fingers. ~~It~~, ~~it~~ reminded me of ~~Mera~~. The potions and tinctures that we created weren't quite the same as those we'd crafted before, but they had their own unique effects.

Sometimes when ~~we~~ were in our chamber, Mother would call for the musicians. She ~~insisted~~ ~~would insist~~ that I wear one of the new gowns while she taught me new dance steps or ordered sweets. She even let me try on the jewelry ~~that~~ ~~she'd~~ received from the King.

“Ever since we entered the ~~Lost~~ Lost, I can hear my father’s voice calling to me,” he says, his eyes fixed on the Lost. “And now I see him.”

Khalen seems, calm and clear-headed, but even he is haunted. Questions swirl through my mind, but b. Before I can choose which one to ask, a willow branch cracks in the garden below.

Khalen’s head snaps around. I groan inwardly, knowing who has entered with such desperation.

“Diya?” The voice is ragged.

“Wait here,” I tell Khalen, ~~and~~ as I hurry down the stairs, trying to think of how to appease her and send her away.

Yadira stands in the garden, her gaze darting around and her body twitching. Her fingers dance over her cheek, her nails bitten to the quick.

Her tongue flicks out over her lips. “Do you have it?”

I do. The silver powder that makes her eyes look like they are filled with starlight rests in the pouch at my waist. ~~Now~~ It makes her eyes look like they are filled with starlight, but she craves it so much that ~~she’ll have~~ she has nightmares until she ~~can~~ get gets more.

“The payment,” I murmur.

She steps close enough that I catch the scent of roses laced with bitterness; it’s, the scent she always carries with her. She thrusts a little purse at me, and I peer inside. Opals wink up at me.

“Where is the silver?” I ask.

There is a knock at the door. Perhaps it is the poison₅, but I think I catch the scent of debts unpaid. I know before she enters that it is Safiya.

She slips inside as soon as I answer. Despite the heat, she wears a dark scarf around her head and shoulders.

“Well, I heard you had an interesting night,” she says.

I roll my eyes, though it causes my head to pound.

“Ugh, what is that odor? Is something burning?” Her face creases₇, and she pulls her scarf around her nose and mouth. “Oh, you have another victim?” Before I can answer she thrusts a purse into my hands. “Here₃— I owe you.” It is heavy and something jingles inside.

“What is this?”

“The winnings I took from Solena.”

I push the bundle back toward her. “If she finds out that you gave it to me, she’ll kill you.”

Safiya tilts her head. “Or she’ll order you to punish me ~~somehow~~. So let’s pretend that you beat her to it. I will fall ill—deathly ill—and when I recover₁ I will have lost all my luck. I will never win, at least not when she sees, but when she isn’t around₁ I’ll be only too happy to lighten the purses of other fools.”

I shake my head. “I don’t know if that will work.”

“It’s worth the risk, isn’t it? ~~And you~~You know how much I love risks,” she says with a wink.

~~Inside the purse~~ What looks like thirty silver coins gleam up at me from inside the purse. ~~silver gleams, easily thirty coins~~ -

~~With a shriek~~ I shriek as I hurl the jar at the ground, and it smashes into shards that slice my ankles and feet, but I hardly feel the pain. I fly through the door and out to the gallery. It had to be Solena.

Mina stands at the top of the stairs as if she is waiting for someone. She raises her eyebrows. “What’s the matter, Diya?” she asks, her voice honeyed with concern.

“I’ve been robbed,” I choke.

“Oh, no. That’s awful.” She doesn’t even bother to hide her smile.

“What do you know?” I demand. I can barely stop myself from gripping her shoulders and shaking her.

“Oh,” she says, examining her nails. “Only that I saw Yadira moving with more purpose than I’ve seen in a while. She’s been trying to borrow silver for ~~a while~~ some time now.” She looks up at me. “It would seem that your evil ways have finally caught up to you.”

Yadira is even more desperate than I realized. “She can’t pay me with money that she stole from me,” I snap. “I won’t give her the Stardust.”

Mina’s eyes narrow. “Who says you are the only person who can make Stardust?” she asks. “Don’t you think Najma has learned by now?”

There is no chance I will allow this. I don’t bother to ask Mina where Yadira is. ~~I~~ I just push past her and storm down the gallery to her chamber.

“Watch yourself, Diya!” she calls sharply, but I don’t slow.

I pound on her door. “Yadira!” ~~I call~~. When there is no answer, I try to open it, but unlike my chamber, ~~hers~~ has a lock. I move my face close to the door so that I won’t