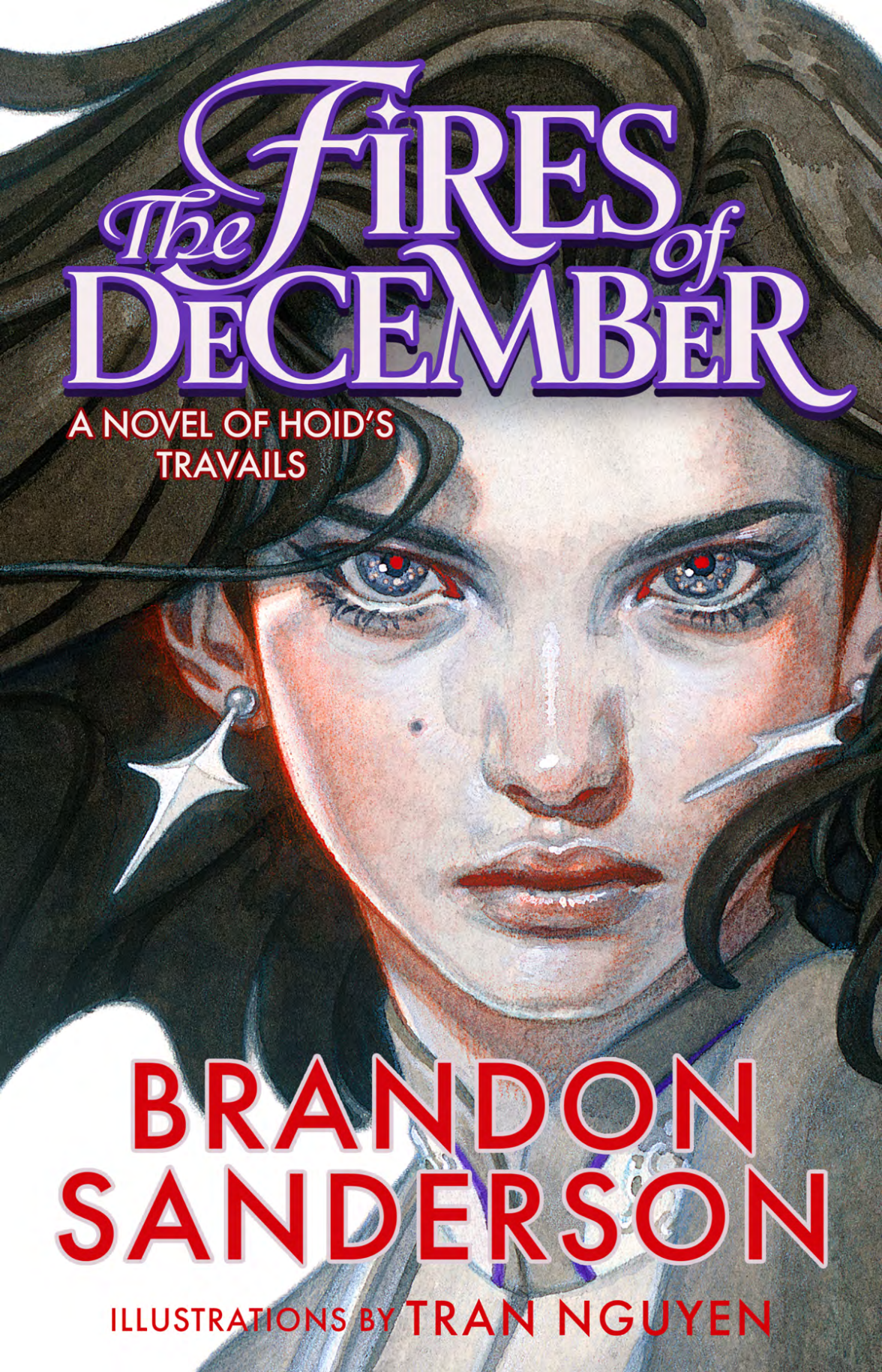


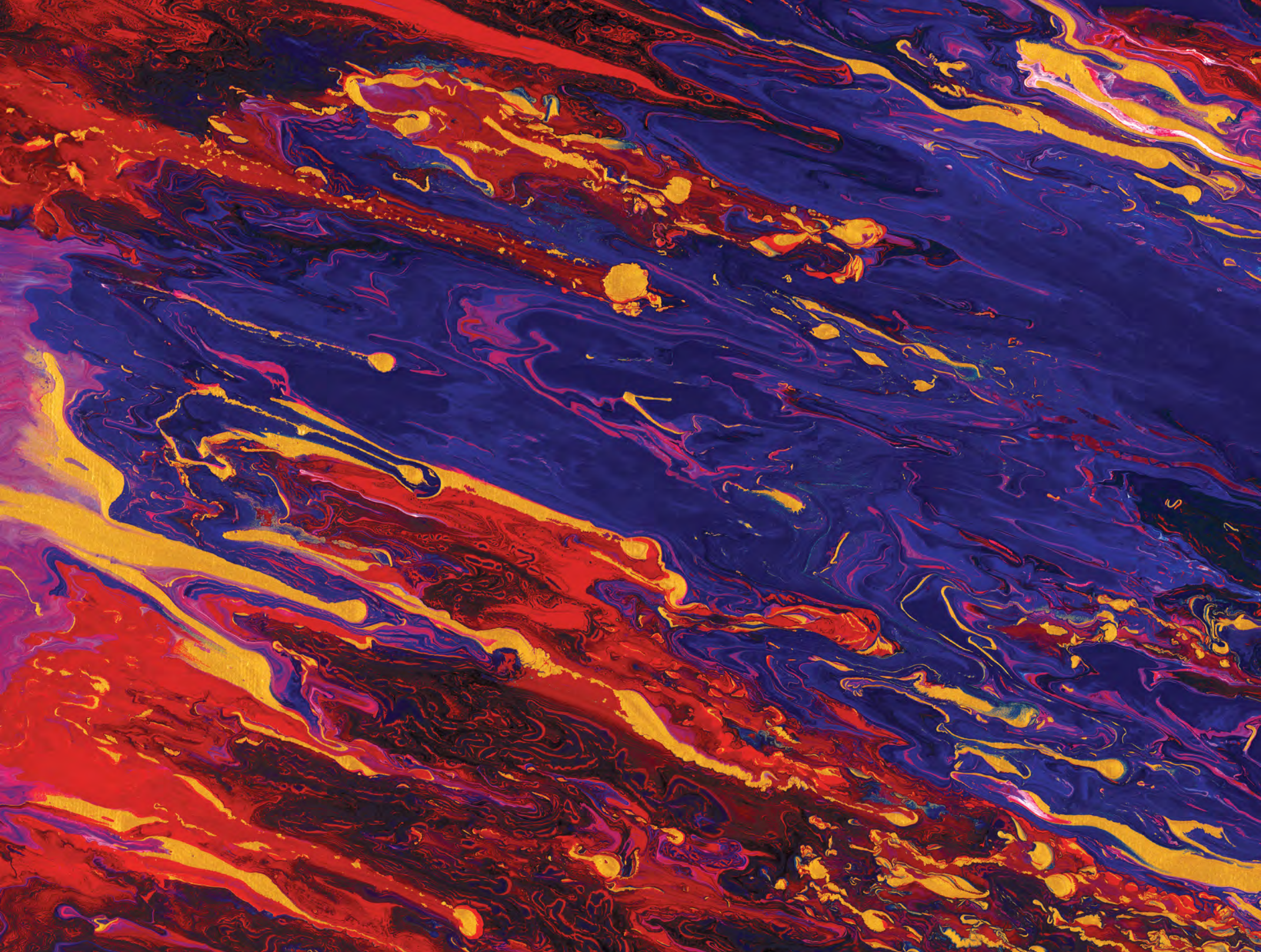


The FIRES *of* DECEMBER

A NOVEL OF HOID'S
TRAVAILS

BRANDON
SANDERSON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TRAN NGUYEN



THE FIRES OF
DECEMBER

FICTION BY BRANDON SANDERSON®

THE COSMERE®

THE STORMLIGHT ARCHIVE®

The Way of Kings
Words of Radiance
Oathbringer
Rhythm of War
Wind and Truth

NOVELLAS

Elsecaller

WITH DAN WELLS

King Lopen the First of Alethkar

WITH ISAAC STEWART

Edgedancer

Dawnshard

THE MISTBORN® SAGA

THE ORIGINAL TRILOGY

Mistborn
The Well of Ascension
The Hero of Ages

THE WAX & WAYNE SERIES

The Alloy of Law
Shadows of Self
The Bands of Mourning
The Lost Metal

NOVELLAS

Mistborn: Secret History

HOID'S TRAVAILS

Tress of the Emerald Sea
Yumi and the Nightmare Painter
The Fires of December

NOVELS

Elantris
Warbreaker
The Sunlit Man
Isles of the Emberdark

NOVELLAS

The Emperor's Soul

COLLECTIONS

Arcanum Unbounded:
The Cosmere® Collection

GRAPHIC NOVELS

White Sand, A Cosmere®
Graphic Novel

PICTURE BOOKS

The Dog and the Dragon
Wandersail
The Girl Who Looked Up
The ChasmFriends Get a Pet

WITH DAN WELLS

OTHER WORKS

THE CYTOVERSE®

SKYWARD

Skyward

Starsight

Cytonic

Skyward Flight

WITH JANCI PATTERSON

Defiant

RIFTWAKE

WITH JANCI PATTERSON

Blightfall

NOVELLAS

Defending Elysium

THE RECKONERS®

Steelheart

Mitosis: A Reckoners Story

Firefight

Calamity

ALCATRAZ VS. THE EVIL LIBRARIANS

Alcatraz vs. the Evil Librarians

The Scrivener's Bones

The Knights of Crystallia

The Shattered Lens

The Dark Talent

Bastille vs. the Evil Librarians

WITH JANCI PATTERSON

NOVELS

The Rithmatist

*The Frugal Wizard's Handbook for
Surviving Medieval England*

Songs of the Dead

WITH PETER ORULLIAN

NOVELLAS

Children of the Nameless

The Original

WITH MARY ROBINETTE KOWAL

Dark One: Forgotten

WITH DAN WELLS

COLLECTIONS

Tailored Realities

*Legion: The Many Lives of
Stephen Leeds*

GRAPHIC NOVELS

Dark One

PICTURE BOOKS

The Most Boring Book Ever

WITH KAZU KIBUISHI

THE WHEEL OF TIME®

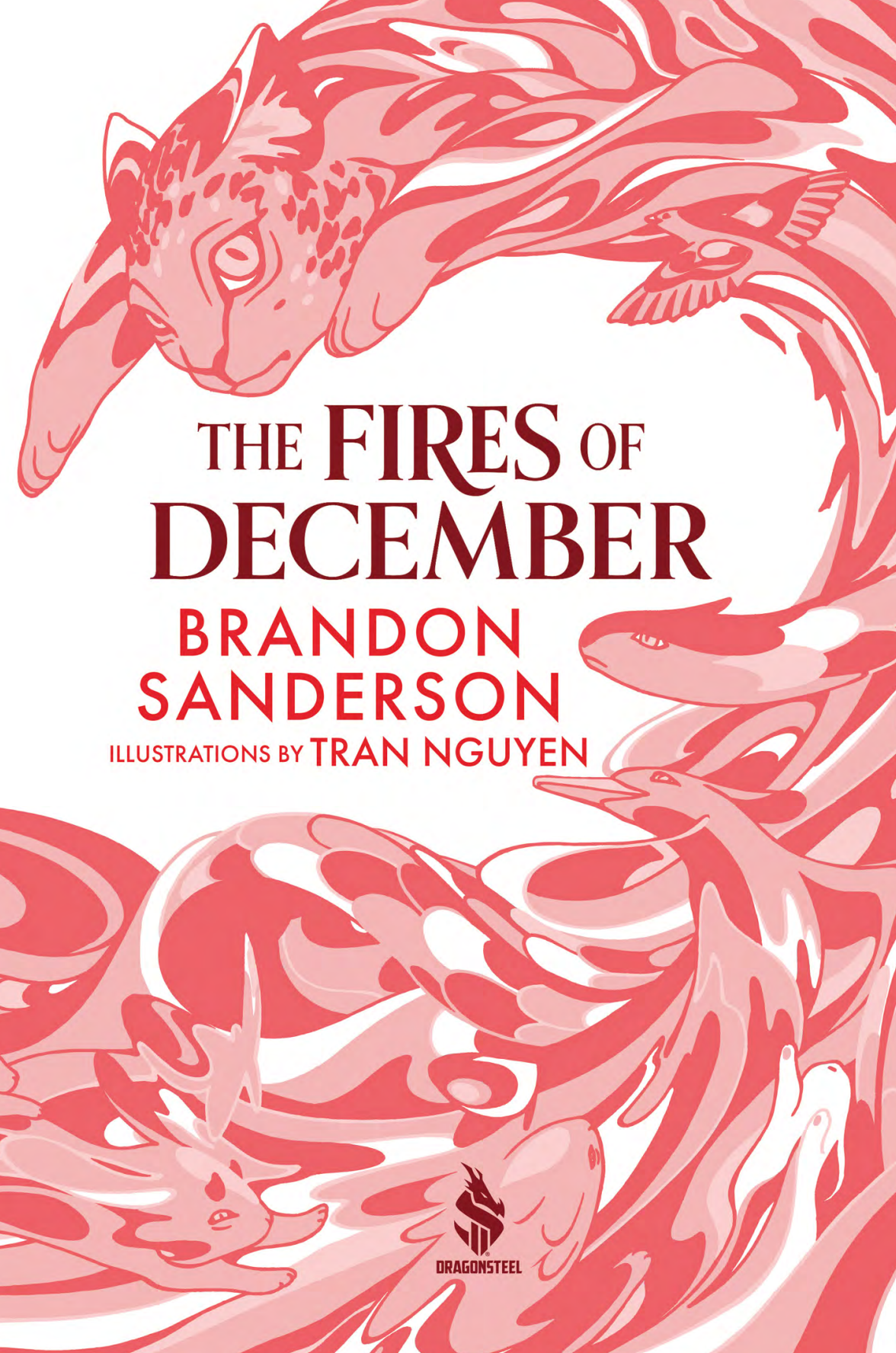
WITH ROBERT JORDAN

The Gathering Storm

Towers of Midnight

A Memory of Light





THE FIRES OF DECEMBER

BRANDON
SANDERSON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TRAN NGUYEN



This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

THE FIRES OF DECEMBER

Copyright © 2026 by Dragonsteel, LLC

Illustrations by Tran Nguyen

Cover art by Tran Nguyen

Copyright © 2026 by Dragonsteel, LLC

All rights reserved.

Edited by Kristy S. Gilbert

A Dragonsteel Book

Published by Dragonsteel, LLC

American Fork, UT

brandonsanderson.com

Brandon Sanderson®, The Stormlight Archive®, Mistborn®, Cosmere®,
Cytaverse®, Reckoners®, Dragonsteel®, and the  logo are registered
trademarks of Dragonsteel, LLC.

The phrase “The Wheel of Time®” is a trademark of Bandersnatch Group, Inc.

ISBN 978-1-938570-72-8

First Edition: 2026



or Maureen,

who with the tenacity of youth
and the wisdom of age,
cares for her family in a way
that makes me glad
to be a part of it.



Illustrations

by Tran Nguyen © Dragonsteel, LLC

APPEARING ON OR IMMEDIATELY AFTER INDICATED PAGE

<i>Perilous Silence</i>	13
<i>Nothing Left but Emptiness</i>	22
<i>Beautiful</i>	50
<i>Map of Kingseat</i>	84
<i>Scenic Route</i>	89
<i>Living a Lie</i>	149
<i>Like a Firework</i>	246
<i>Less a Sword, More a Spike</i>	265
<i>A Long, Expensive Story</i>	273
<i>Hundred-Chip Question</i>	292
<i>Flickering Nightmare</i>	354
<i>Terrible Tempest</i>	406
<i>Like the Wind or Flame</i>	424
<i>Love, Goodness, Mercy</i>	438

ontents

Part I 1

Part II 82

Part III 160

Part IV 334

Epilogue 441

Postscript 447

Acknowledgments 451

About the Author 453

Part I







Chapter I



he girl was born in the last cold hour of the last cold day of the last cold month of an unseasonably cold winter. Her mother, so very pale from blood loss, was a woman with beautiful dark brown eyes of the storied variety which made people say that within them you could see the very stars. She held the babe close beside the hearth's angry flames and named her after the month, imagining the peace

Brandon Sanderson

of a gentle snow that muffled sounds and cares, for the child was even then abnormally quiet and refused to cry.

It was a different word in their language, naturally, but I shall use a translation and call the child December.

The mother kissed her babe and whispered her love, even as those stars faded from her eyes, seeming to join the teardrops as they fell. For all her love for the child she'd borne, the mother was soon forced to depart for a grave cut shallow in the frozen earth. The girl would never know her mother's vibrant smile or soft voice; when picturing her years later, December could summon only the image of a solitary gravestone. People did say that December had inherited her mother's eyes, quiet and thoughtful, with a sense you could see lights deep within.

The mother was an outlander who had come to the town as a youth working a ship, then stayed through chance of fate. There was talk in town that she had fled from somewhere far away, though she never said where. The father had been a passing sailor with the charm of a sonnet but the moral character of a limerick. As the mother was not native, no next of kin were available to take the child. Fortunately, the people of Rivershore were as pragmatic as the town's name and had provisions for children like December. The town reeve allocated a small stipend from the orphans' fund to pay for a wet nurse to raise December to age five, whereupon she was fostered by the innkeeper and his wife.

At the inn, December was not exactly treated as a member of the family, but neither did she go without affection. She had a bed in the corner of the common room with the dogs, which was not an insult as you might imagine, for the family bed was overripe with children clinging to the vine. The dogs kept December warm, as did the family's barn cat, who had seventeen secret entrances into the house, and soon discovered that December was the only one who didn't periodically throw her out. If one were to wonder at December's general affinity for animals over people, this childhood corner was a likely culprit.

The Fires of December

Not that the girl was rude or impersonable; she merely had a *way* about her. (If you are unfamiliar with the terminology of rural folk, this polite descriptor indicates oddness or quirkiness.) December's *way* was to stare. You'd catch her watching the inn's patrons, her brown eyes dancing with reflected light, and you would wonder what it was she had noticed that you had not. Though she would never have described herself as unhappy, sorrow was her heritage, and she spoke its tongue without accent.

When December was young, society knew what to do with her: call her "girl" and set her to sweeping floors. A fosterling child was to be nurtured but also made to labor—for in the kingdom of Mountaincrest, as in most lands with harsh winters, active appetites best manifest active hands. Remarkably self-aware as a child, she quickly learned this role and performed it willingly.

As December grew, people continued to refer to her as "girl," but their tones changed, and the word delivered a different connotative payload. The eyes of young men followed her, only turning aside if noticed. Upon seeing this, the innkeeper's wife set December to serving tables—which was effective at increasing patrons, for while she was not of the chatty type who usually drew customers, there was something fascinating about December: an almost ethereal, even unobtainable, magnetism.

Part of her mystique, certainly, was due to how she looked. Pale of skin, even beyond the norm for the region, she had thick black hair where blond was common. She wore it unbraided, falling just past her shoulders. When it blew in the wind, it moved in clumps instead of frizzing, making her seem as if she were wearing a dark hood to shade her eyes. Her features were angular, her forehead high, her eyebrows wide and wild, her cheekbones prominent, her nose slightly pointed like the cut of a diamond. It was a face composed in a minor key.

Society knew what to make of her at this age, for Rivershore was (again) a pragmatic place. It attracted single men from along the river

Brandon Sanderson

to work the nearby mines, and could not afford to discard a young woman simply because of a questionable heritage. As she grew older, December began to understand the reason for this attention, because—again—her defining feature was becoming her ability to hear that which was not said. She went to her foster mother and asked if she could perhaps move to the kitchen instead of waiting tables, as she wished to avoid being watched in such a way.

“Being watched, December,” the foster mother explained, “is the point. The dressmaker does not hide his wares in the back of the shop, but hangs them in the window.”

This metaphor never sat right with December, but she could not find the words to object. Regardless, she did not return the attention of the young men as they came in rising numbers for meals at the inn, trying to engage her in conversation, bragging, or otherwise working to draw her eye. She served them, but did not linger, and did not smile.

Now this was not from lack of interest on her part, conceptually. There were some young men she’d admire from afar, at least when she couldn’t hear them speaking. It was the situation, the *expectation*, that she rebelled against. The fact that none of these men seemed interested in *her* so much as in the *idea* of her. The coin the young men spent on meals and drinks kept her foster parents from pushing her to marry for a few years past when a young woman in their society was expected to have found a match.

In this, she began to feel strangely alone. She wanted to do as was expected, and she did like men—just none of *these* men. Perhaps, she reasoned, she was being too picky. If she was not a dress to be hung in the window, then she did not know what she actually was.

She continued in this uncertainty until one day when Bark lingered after dinner. He was a thick-armed brute who had been appointed assistant foreman in the mines primarily because nobody wanted to pick a fight with him. He was a dinnertime regular at the inn, as he

The Fires of December

had no wife to fix meals for him at home. In December's experience, he was as sharp as mud and as deep as topsoil, but he paid his tabs on time, so the innkeeper and his wife were fond of him.

This night, after eating his usual dinner of stew and fresh bread with his usual hunched posture, he sat a long, uncomfortable time. Finally, he took December's foster mother by the arm as she passed.

"When is the girl's birth date again?" Bark asked.

"Tomorrow. She'll be twenty-one."

He grunted. "I'll come calling."

"I'll see that she's ready."

There.

That rising scream, as if from a rat pinched in a closing door, at the back of December's mind.

She quieted it, telling herself that she misunderstood Bark's intent, and distracted herself by taking the order of an odd stranger who had come in on the river that afternoon. The town often got strangers, though not many were as strange as this one; they were, instead, an ordinary kind of strange. Merchants, sailors, the occasional fine lord or lady from the capital, where they wore vibrant clothing of garish colors. These sometimes traveled downriver toward the distant plain where the blood river eventually evaporated.

(Don't worry—the river wasn't made of human blood. That would be highly impractical; imagine the clotting. Besides, it would take thousands upon thousands of humans to make a river of blood this size, but here it was accomplished with just one demon. I will explain later.)

Regardless, this new stranger was *strange*. He had pure white hair, despite not looking much older than . . . Well, his age was difficult to place. Certainly not twenty. Certainly not fifty. Yet of all the options lined up between, he didn't fit any of them. He wore bright colors like a lord, but his were in patches, and somehow even more loud. Each alone would have been garish; together they gave the impression of an overturned vegetable cart, its wares smashed together. (I will

note that *this* time, my awful costume was not influenced by any lack of personal taste, but was rather inflicted upon local jesters by royal tradition.)

The stranger had refused the evening stew for the meat it contained, and sat idly humming to himself and writing with a quill in a small book. He was quite handsome and had a prominent nose, which I would prefer be described as “incredible”—and I’ll have nobody suggest otherwise, since it’s both my nose and my story. (You wouldn’t be hearing this if something terrible hadn’t happened to me during it, so kindly pretend to show at least some hint of empathy.)

“Sir?” December asked. “Would you like something to drink?”

“No thank you,” I replied.

That was it. She withdrew, and we did not speak again during her lifetime. You might have been expecting more from me: a tale, some advice, at the very least a joke. Well, you’re in the first currently, the second isn’t until the end, and you won’t find the third until you brush your teeth later. None of the three were for December, because I didn’t find her relevant. She went about seeing to other customers, and I retired for the night.

I didn’t have any idea how important this woman was, but I’d like you to be better informed. To accomplish this, the next sequence will go on longer than you might think requisite. I ask your patience: These details are relevant, I promise.

When the doors to the common room were finally locked that fateful night, December tried to find her bed quickly. By this point, the innkeeper had made for her a place in the storage room where she could string a hammock and have some measure of privacy. Unfortunately, she could not avoid her foster mother, who refused diversions and continually steered the conversation straight toward Bark. With the repetition of a quilt made from a single fabric, she told December that Bark was an important man, would provide for her well, and that she should listen to his offer when it came the next day. The implication

The Fires of December

was that her options, from delaying so long, were limited—and she would never do better than this one.

You're probably expecting December to run; it's how these stories normally go. The young heroine sneaks out at night to find her fortune, leaving the town and avoiding marriage to a man clearly her inferior. Alas, in the real world, such escapes are too rare. December, spilling tears into her pillow that night, acknowledged the truth: She hadn't the money or knowledge to travel, and she'd well overstayed her welcome.

Her foster parents did love her. They had kept her on far longer than they'd received money from the reeve for her upkeep, but they also were practical people. It was time, her foster mother explained, to move on. The next phase of December's life had cued with obstinate firmness; even her hammock needed to be given to one of the couple's older grandchildren, who would be taking December's place in the serving room.

December and Bark were married two weeks later. It would have happened sooner, had the poor reeve's wife not choked on a breakfast sausage, necessitating a funeral and a little time before a wedding. December was not happy with the marriage, but the other options for a husband weren't any better. Nobody in the town—not even December, despite delaying this long—considered *no husband* to be a valid choice.

She tried her best to learn her new role, to make a home of a house and find love from a lover. All was, if not pleasant, tolerable for the next few years, though news from upriver was unsettling. Something had happened at the capital a few months after the wedding. The stories coming downriver were disturbing, tales of the demon making a fire in the sky—and of a war for the throne, the king dead, betrayed by one of his dukes.

Such distant troubles, both theological and political, were of little immediate relevance to such a small town. Though only a month away from the capital by riverboat, Rivershore was a great distance

Brandon Sanderson

from it philosophically and mentally, in the same way you might find a prologue quite distinct from the rest of the story. December had her own issues, because it soon became quite clear that she could not have children. At least, none manifested, and in these sorts of societies, they never wonder if it's the man's fault.

(In this case, it was indeed due to an ailment of December's, but that wasn't possible to confirm with their technology. A doctor occasionally came through town to provide medicines and train the local midwives, but he was unable to find the reason.)

Losing the option to have children can be, for any couple, a deeply personal situation, and difficult for many. It should be approached with nuance and understanding. Unfortunately, Bark was not capable of nuance because words with that many vowels in them sounded foreign to him (much as the syllables of December's name in their language—HodoInika—didn't sound like a word for a person). Instead of making the right choice and assuring December she was no less valuable because of a medical ailment outside her control, he grew increasingly difficult over the years: at first sullen, then simmering, then eventually turning to shouting and raving.

During these years, December would often find herself walking the banks of the river, away from a house that had not only failed to mature into a home, but had instead evolved into a kind of prison.

Now, I did promise you an explanation of this river, and I keep my promises—save where it's narratively more interesting to break them. The three blood rivers were the defining feature of the kingdom of Mountaincrest, and one flowed past the town: a waterway wide enough for even the largest barges, but not so deep you could navigate a true oceanic vessel through it. December could see the other side easily, and the gentle current allowed a modestly accomplished swimmer to reach the opposite shore without difficulty.

Assuming they'd been willing to step into the blood.

Thick, with the consistency of paint, the demon's blood *was* safe to

The Fires of December

touch, though most people in rural towns avoided doing so. December tried once or twice, and was surprised to discover that it refused to stick to her fingers, running off as she pulled them out, leaving her skin perfectly dry. Conferring with others indicated this happened when anyone touched it.

The river was that mysterious shade of violet that was quite nearly black. It had a glossy sheen, not unlike oil. During those lonely years, December would look upriver, imagining the distant corpse in the capital that bled out this highway, and wonder if what the priests said was true, if a prophet had truly come to save the land three centuries before. She imagined his sword, said to still be lodged in the demon's beating heart, holding it imprisoned like a pin held a butterfly to its board.

If it was indeed true, what should she make of the newer stories saying the demon had broken free? Would the Prophet return? If so, would he do as he had last time, healing those who were afflicted with diseases?

Society was no help with her problem, because for once it didn't know what to do with December. Children it cared for. Maidens it presented like dresses in the shop window. Mothers obviously had a clear purpose. But what to do with a woman of the age and in the position of a mother, but who just . . . wasn't one? And likely never would be?

The people of the town alternated between commiserative and uncomfortable. When she complained of Bark, they said they understood . . . but she wasn't certain if that meant they understood her situation or *his*. She therefore stopped talking to them, instead seeking the river and sometimes the birds that flew along its length. She thought this must be the most lonely time of her life: living in a house with a husband who was growing to detest her, ignored by people who lacked words to comfort someone whose problem they deeply feared.

She was wrong though, for it could indeed get worse.

One night in her twenty-fifth year, Bark came home drunk. It was

another of his bad nights. He'd gone searching again for Winter's Cache, a vein of silver he insisted that he and an old friend named Tap had happened across years ago while hiking the foothills. He often went looking for it when the inn and tavern turned him away for being too rowdy. Well, Tap had been killed in a landslide before December had married Bark, and she'd never believed in this mythological cache—a reasonable opinion considering Bark had searched ten years without yielding fruit. In fact, such searches only seemed to have one result: to ruin his mood even further.

Dinner was cold, as it was nearly eleven when he arrived. He blamed her. Not just for the food. She quietly began warming the stew while he raved about why he thought she'd been cursed with a barren womb: claiming that she'd secretly been a whore and caught some disease. What else would one expect from a bastard daughter of foreigners?

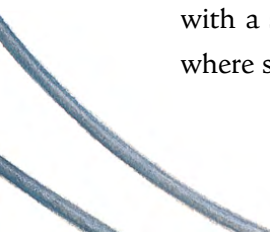
December quietly placed his food in front of him, then gathered her coat to leave, intending to walk the chill darkness while he ranted himself to sleep. That night, instead of letting her leave, Bark stood and seized her by one arm. She looked at his hand, a horror rising within her, and time itself seemed to recoil at what they both knew was coming: a step that Bark—despite his yelling—had never yet taken.

He hit her.

A backhand across the face, with the force to throw her against the doorframe.

Now, Bark was the sort of man who expected certain things from those he abused. He was big enough and important enough that when he hit you, you either stayed down, or you came in screaming and earned yourself a full thrashing. He was unprepared, therefore, for the *stare*.

December, looking up from the floor where she'd fallen, affixed him with that gaze of hers. Eyes like the night, with . . . what seemed to be distant stars deep within, or fires on a far-off hill. An expression with a striking lack of fear. No tears, despite the reddening cheek where she'd been struck. There was a dare, a confidence, in the way





Brandon Sanderson

she stood back up, smooth and graceful as a mountain cat, holding his eyes the entire time.

In the haughty, perilous silence that followed, Bark somehow knew that if he hit her again, the demons of night would claim his soul.

He let her leave.

It was wintertime, a season that oft overstayed its welcome in Rivershore, and December had no recourse but to return to the inn. There, she begged her former foster parents for a place to stay. They listened to her, comforted her as the tears finally came, and gave her a cold cloth for her cheek. But they did not offer to let her stay, for they had an older granddaughter living with them, and the unspoken fear was that whatever ailment December had might spread.

You and I both know this to be complete foolishness, but please remember we're speaking of rural people without access to modern learning. Ignorance is our natural state, and while those who have avoided it by turn of fortune need not suffer its continuance, we should be understanding of those still afflicted, same as with any hereditary disease. The innkeeper and his wife gave December a warm meal, a handful of coins, but were forced by their own fears to turn her out again. She pulled her black coat close and purchased a spot to sleep in the warehouse by the dock, where sailors without the coin for the inn were known to sleep.

She lived there for three years, taking what work she could find. Sewing, washing, carrying water. Hard work, made more unbearable by the ultimate humiliation: the day Bark actually *found* the Winter's Cache, a pure vein of silver just as he'd described, and the corpse of his old friend Tap nearby. The discovery of a new vein was cause for great celebration in the city, and the man who found it was granted a huge payment of the king's bounty, as provided by the reeve.

(The reeve, it should be noted, did not tell anyone that, with the increasing troubles upriver, the capital hadn't demanded taxes for years.

The Fires of December

He had plenty in the reserve, but that was its own deeply troubling problem.)

This payment made Bark the wealthiest man in the town, and an immediate celebrity. The old mine running out had been a constant source of worry for the people of Rivershore, but a new one—of silver, no less—meant decades of stability. Never mind that the river was growing darker, losing its violet beauty, taking on a sickly blackness. Never mind that December wondered what had happened to the lords and ladies in their colorful clothing, and to that strange man with the white hair whom—for reasons she could not explain—she remembered so distinctly.

For now the town celebrated their new future. Bark was elected mayor and married the innkeeper's granddaughter. Though his marriage to December had never been officially annulled, these things could be ignored for a man of such stature. The fact that Bark's new wife soon bore him children humiliated December, for it revealed an accidental truth he'd said about her, which seemed to reinforce the accompanying lies.

Spurred on by this victory, one of Bark's key policies in years to come was making December's life a living hell. He created laws forbidding migrants and anyone with foreign blood from taking most kinds of work. He gave speeches saying such a step was necessary to protect the town from the refugees pouring in from the capital (which they said had been burned to the ground) and the grand cities near it, still in the grips of the succession crisis years later.

In truth, Bark's law was targeted straight at December—a contest of wills to force her into the type of work desperate women provide for a society that pretends it isn't to blame. She refused, for dignity was her only sanctuary, and if she took that step, it would confirm the stories he told about her in the eyes of the townspeople. Instead, she trained with a doctor during his visit to the town, when he stayed

Brandon Sanderson

for three months before going upriver to provide aid to the war-torn lands. He would not be seen again in Rivershore.

Doctoring, fortunately, was not a job on the list migrants were forbidden: Otherwise the traveling doctor would have been included in the prohibition, something the town could never condone. In this loophole, December defied Bark. Nobody would pay her for midwifery, as if their fallopian tubes would magically disappear because of fraternization with a woman who lacked them.

After successfully helping a calf be born, however, she was able to find occasional work until, at last, Bark also made this illegal, arguing that only those with a license should be allowed to handle the town's animals. Without regular ships bringing supplies, he reasoned, Rivershore was on its own for feeding itself. Animals were too valuable to be trusted to the hands of the poorly trained, the migrant, or the foreigner.

That night, huddled in her little corner of the warehouse, December found herself too tired to cry. She thought for certain this was the most lonely a person could feel. She was, unfortunately, wrong again.

The next morning, she realized she had three choices: starve, take the work Bark demanded, or go to the only person in town not afraid of him. Holding to this glimmer of hope, she visited the town reeve.

It was technically a lord's position—a (very, very minor) nobleman appointed by the king to represent the crown in Rivershore. The mayor and town council provided most leadership; the reeve collected taxes, administered official paperwork, and judged serious crimes. The current reeve was the son of the reeve who had placed December in the inn as a fosterling, and was ten years her senior.

He was also a widower.

His love for his deceased wife, Rema (the woman who had passed on December's twenty-first birthday) was well-known. He had never remarried, but had three children, all boys, the youngest of whom was now twelve. The middle child, at fifteen, was often caught causing

The Fires of December

trouble in town because the reeve's duties kept him busy and unable to properly parent. The eldest child was seventeen, and though almost an adult physically, was far from it mentally. He was kindly and eager, but short a few letters of the alphabet—in the way that involved nature giving him extra A's, T's, C's, and G's to make up for the deficiency.

December, now thirty, visited the reeve with a proposition. She needed a home. He needed a wife. Neither wanted a relationship in the traditional sense, but he was known to be both sensible and goodly. This plan was nothing if not sensible. The reeve, she could tell, had never considered this possibility—but he did not laugh, draw back, or curse her out as her worst fears had imagined.

Instead, he asked a single question: "Two bedrooms?"

"Two bedrooms," she said.

"It shall make Bark very angry," he noted, rubbing his chin.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not," he said. "That is an advantage of the proposal."

In that, December found true hope that this might actually work. It did.

December's stare shamed the middle son, who returned to his schoolwork at her insistence. He was expected to be learned, unlike most of the town, and December in turn learned letters and numbers to help him. The boys' tutor had dropped off books during her final visit before vanishing, like so many did these days when they traveled upriver. December's love worked on the youngest son, who had been drifting without direction. He took to his tutoring with renewed vigor, quietly helping December figure out the lessons so she could help the middle son. Finally, December's kindness worked for the oldest son, who had desperately wanted more attention from a parent, and soon became her persistent companion. He was an "imbecile" according to the doctor's diagnosis but strikingly kindhearted, and proof that whatever kind of stupid Bark was, it was more determined than deterministic.

Brandon Sanderson

December discovered she had a talent for learning, and over the following decade, she devoured the reeve's books. She even, to his surprise, began helping him with housing contracts and taxation numbers, which were in constant need of updating now that it seemed there would be no further direction from the capital. Ships had stopped floating down the river, which was now dark as a mire and barely flowed. In particular, December took on the project of quietly helping her once foster family (the innkeeper and his wife) return their business to profitability. The lack of customers from the river had hurt them soundly, and they'd started relying on a subsidy from the reeve. Helping them was a struggle that took years of December's effort—changing prices, offering more food options, shifting focus to serve the needs of the town and visitors from closer towns—but was eventually successful.

During this time, December and the reeve maintained two bedrooms, but became quite friendly with one another, to the point that—remarkably—December found she was coming to *love* the man. The way he would put his hand on hers as they talked of his work, or the casual brush of his fingers on her shoulder, indicated that something might be changing for him as well.

So confident in her new life was December that when she saw Bark's wife hurriedly shuffling through town with a brand-new bruise on her face, she intervened. It took months of quiet support, counsel, and urging, but one day the mayor got up and found that his second wife and their two children were gone. Moved to the next town over.

Bark stormed into the reeve's house, ranting. "I know it was you," he shouted at her. "I've seen you talking to her!"

The stare worked on him again, though her three stepsons—now well-grown and possessing physical strength that Bark had lost in his years no longer working the mine—were their own deterrent. When they burst in at the shouting, Bark started to withdraw.

The Fires of December

As he did, he muttered to December, “I should have killed you when I had the chance that night.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” she hissed.

“If only you knew,” he said, and this time it was *his* eyes that took on a deadly cast. “If only.”

December was shocked. It sounded like he was claiming to have killed before, but who? There were no unexplained . . .

“Tap,” she whispered. “Your old partner. He found the silver vein, and you killed him before he could claim it. But you’re a fool—you didn’t get the location from him first. That’s why it took you over a decade to find it.”

(In truth, Bark did see the vein once. Tap showed it to him, and Bark murdered him there, then carefully covered the body with rocks to indicate a landslide. But then he got lost on the way back to town and couldn’t find the location again.)

He said nothing, instead leaving with a smile and a glare. December stuck close to her stepsons for the next few months, but the mayor’s anger eventually cooled. All proceeded relatively well, with her stepsons finding brides, save the oldest, who remained her attendant. There was laughter in the reeve’s home: grandchildren, warmth, and even budding love.

Then, the sickness came.

It had been building for years, though nobody in the town had been aware. The river’s curdling following the deadly events far upstream finally reached poor Rivershore. You might have read about similar plagues in your own histories, but here it was arcane in nature—caused not by common disease vectors, but by the deadly river itself, turned poisonous.

The youngest son and his family were first to go. Wasting away, bodies covered in lesions. The scant books and medical knowledge left by the doctor were no help, for this was not an ailment that mundane

Brandon Sanderson

learning could counter. It moved through Rivershore like a creeping mold, killing family, after family, after family. Some fled. They died in the wilderness. Some boarded themselves in their homes. They died in their beds. Some cried to the Prophet. They died in the church. It left only one in ten, and those who survived carried scars the rest of their lives.

All but December, whom the sickness dared not touch.

She and the reeve buried his youngest son, his daughter-in-law, and their baby—and that day, something broke in the man. He was next to go, and December's hopes of a future with him were drowned as if in the depths of the river. His middle son and family followed. Then last of all, the eldest son, with his sweet disposition, joined the darkness that enveloped not just the town, but the entire kingdom.

December buried each family member herself, for there was nobody else in town with the strength to do so. The graves took her multiple days to dig, placed in a line beside her mother's, and when she finished the last she collapsed into tears that did not abate for many hours. But then . . . she was hale, and there were so many suffering. If you need testimony to her character, know that December—despite her hatred—even brought soup to Bark in his sickbed, then changed his clothing and washed him. He died two days later, alone in his grand mansion.

Some might have found this a victory; December, now in her fifties, was too wise to gloat over such a terrible situation. She did what she could for the sick, and slowly, those chosen by fate recovered. But it was a broken people who came out of that summer and tried to survive the resulting winter, with nine out of ten people in the ground, the hearts of the living having largely joined them.

December traveled to nearby towns and suggested consolidation, lest they all starve. The people struggled on, as they tended to do, after the river finally dried up completely. They had no news of what had caused it to fail, but they could guess. The demon must truly have escaped its bonds; what else could explain such terrible events?

The Fires of December

That winter, many who had soldiered through the plague fell to the cold. December, who had worked so hard for them all, was treated differently than she ever had been. For while society had been uncertain what to do with a mother with no children, it *did* understand the quiet, solitary, elder woman who possessed knowledge and wisdom that ordinary people avoided. They did not welcome her—indeed, they whispered about how she had not gotten so much as a *cough* from the plague, and how she was the only woman they knew who could read. How she was not afraid of the angry nor cowed by the epithets of the superstitious.

In truth, she was too old, too tired, and too heartbroken to care for threats. Over the next few decades, she took up residence in a home on the hillside where the old mine had been. The struggling town focused on farming and their animals; silver, and even iron, were of a different time, when there had been a king who needed jewelry and weapons. People finally accepted December as the only living midwife. They would bring her to their wounded livestock, and even accept her mediation in disputes—for as the reeve's wife, she had some modicum of royal authority.

It was not enough. The town evaporated much as the river had. Without the coal shipped along the river, winters were harsh. Few women of childbearing age remained to provide a new generation. The population withered like crops without water.

It was during this time that December finally knew true loneliness. Now eighty, she labored to bolster those who hated her. Those who whispered that she must be the cause of all their troubles, for what Prophet-fearing town would harbor a witch? She spent nights alone, for her books had been stolen when she was tending a sick child, used as kindling by desperate people who secretly wondered if those spellbooks (actually medical textbooks) were to blame.

This time December was right.

This *was* the most lonely she would ever be.

Brandon Sanderson

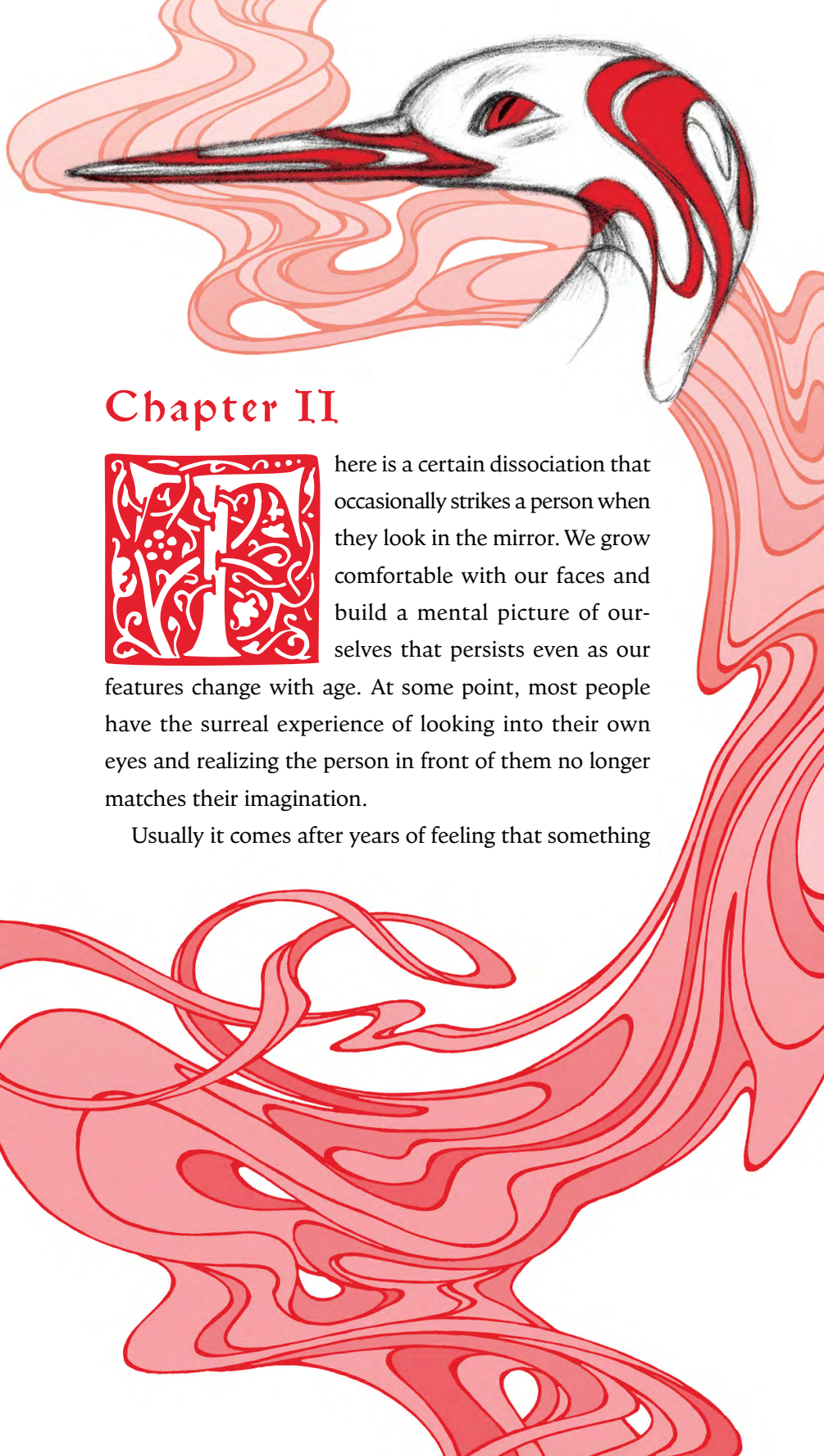
For soon after, she died, alone in her frozen cabin, refused access to the floundering warmth of a town she had loved, then succored, then saved.

You might find this a terrible story to have told. I apologize for its necessity, and hate that it is, unfortunately, not unique. Too many people live lives like December: alienated, rejected. They are often deliberately unseen; their treatment is a blemish upon societies, the type one tries to cover with a makeup of harvest festivals and dances. People like December are in your neighborhood too, likely spending their nights too tired, too lonely, to even weep, for they have nothing left but emptiness.

No, December's story was not unique. Except for one daunting fact: The day after she died, December woke up.

And found herself fifty-nine years in the past.





Chapter II



here is a certain dissociation that occasionally strikes a person when they look in the mirror. We grow comfortable with our faces and build a mental picture of ourselves that persists even as our features change with age. At some point, most people have the surreal experience of looking into their own eyes and realizing the person in front of them no longer matches their imagination.

Usually it comes after years of feeling that something

is off. Weight is gained or lost. Skin begins to sag. Noses appear to get bigger, or change shape as natural aging alters the way our features interact with our skulls. It culminates in that distressing event when you must acknowledge that the person you once were will never return. That person is an old picture, as lost to time as the smiles of your forebearers, who are trapped with stern expressions in their paintings.

December is one of the few I've known to experience that dissociation in reverse, finding that the old her had somehow vanished, and the young one returned. She put fingers to her face, prodding at skin gone smooth, hair gone black. The spots she expected were gone, stray hairs vanished from her face. She looked . . . distressingly *childlike*.

"You quite finished?" her foster mother said, peeking in. "Isa needs the room."

Her foster mother.

Over thirty years dead.

Her foster mother had woken December from her hammock in the inn, a building that—when she'd last visited—had been crowded with four families trying to share heat enough to survive the winter. Outside, the street was bright with sunlight, the river flowing and shimmering violet, and the sky a beautiful blue filled with promises.

"December?" her foster mother asked. "Dear, are you all right?"

"What day is it?" December whispered.

"Your birthday. You're twenty-one today."

Her twenty-first birthday, an impossibility. She didn't once assume it was a dream, for December was an old woman, and didn't have time for dreams or fancies. She knew what was real and what was not; she'd lived through enough reality to recognize it as the young do not.

This was real. Somehow, it was *real*.

Her twenty-first birthday.

That day.

Possessing a sudden, single-minded determination, December cast aside her confusion. She could deliberate later. She could be befuddled

The Fires of December

later. She shoved past her baffled foster mother, striding, then dashing, then scrambling out into the common room of the inn.

Her twenty-first birthday.

That day.

She shoved past Rold the baker, bringing deliveries, and—shocked at her sudden, youthful limberness—jumped off a chair, slid across a table, and reached the corner booth of the dining room.

There, Matin—the reeve, looking so much younger than her mind's eye remembered him—was beginning to scream for help in terror as his beloved wife lay blue-faced on the tabletop, three young children panicking as their mother noiselessly died.

That day.

December hauled Matin's wife, poor Rema whom she'd known only in pictures and tender memories told by the hearthside, from her seat and pushed her abdomen against the chair, a maneuver in which December had been trained some fifty years ago by a doctor who would vanish upriver. Heaving the woman's stomach against the wood, December fought against the future. It was as if time itself tried to fight back, resisting her demands.

Heave.

This can't be. What is happening?

Heave.

Whatever it is, I won't let this happen again.

Heave.

You deserve better. We all deserve better!

Heave!

The offending chunk of sausage launched out of Rema's mouth. The woman gasped through blond curls that stuck to her face and pulled into her mouth, then pallor retreated from her skin and a healthy rose returned. The children clung to her, children December knew so very well, crying and terrified as their mother slumped into the booth and held them tight.

“What is this?” Matin demanded. “What have you done?”

“She . . . She saved me, Matin,” Rema whispered. “By the Prophet’s holy name . . . She *saved* me . . .”

The reeve looked to December, displaying none of the kind fondness she remembered from him at the end of his life, when they’d finally grown intimate. To him, she was a stranger, and his expression—more than her own features, more than the impossibly rebuilt town—convinced December that she was indeed back in her youthful body. Matin would never have looked at her in such a way had he remembered.

He turned and saw to his wife, holding and kissing her, his terror and helplessness consumed by gratitude. December stepped back as people crowded around, asking what the fuss was about, and what the fosterling had done.

Her foster mother, Gornil, pulled her aside, using her thick hips and solid arms to muscle through the crowd. “I’ve seen that move once,” she explained, “performed by a doctor when I was young. How did you know it?”

“I . . .” December said, recognizing fear in the woman’s terse tone. Had Gornil always looked so young, with only a touch of grey in her red curls? “I read of it.”

“Read of it? You can *read*? When did you learn?”

December shook her head as a shadow cursed the doorway: the shape of a man with thick arms, a thick brow, and thick ideas.

“Well,” Bark said, glancing toward the crowd around the reeve and his family. “I suppose we can be on with things, then? I have come to take your hand in marriage, fosterling.”

“Oh!” Gornil said, hands to her cheeks. “Oh, that’s *wonderful*, isn’t it, December? The *assistant foreman*? He has his own house, you know! Oh, let me tell Yorduk.”

“No,” December said.

The Fires of December

“No?” Gornil asked. “I’m not to tell him? You wish to tell your foster father yourself?”

December searched Bark’s expression for some sign he remembered their last encounter, when he’d been too weak to lift his own spoon. When he’d lain in a bed pungent with the overpowering scent of his own bowels, so terrible it had overwhelmed even the plague’s stench of decay.

Nothing. He did not remember. He watched her with that same obtuse self-confidence often rampant in the attitudes of men who had never been refused.

She did him a favor and let him experience something new.

“No, Bark,” she said. “I will not marry you.” By the demon’s own blood, it felt good to say that after all these years.

“December,” Gornil said, taking her arm. “Remember what we discussed last night?”

“It has been a long time,” December said, still holding Bark’s gaze. “I’m afraid I have forgotten, foster mother. Bark, I will not have you. If I were to take a hammer to the head, and have pulled from me every other liberty of sense and reason, I would *still* have the wits to reject you.”

He recoiled as if punched. “Slut,” he muttered. “Too busy whoring to accept a good man? Nobody else will have you. You—”

“Excuse me,” she interrupted, pulling her arm from Gornil’s hands. “I have something very important to do.”

She left them both stunned and carefully pushed through the crowd around the reeve and his family. Her stare, with eighty years of practice, retained its potency like a fine wine of the most valuable vintage. People gave her room, confused at why they were so eager to obey the quiet word of a person only a few years into adulthood.

“Matin,” she said, forgetting that nobody in the town dared call the reeve by his first name. “Would you join me outside for a moment?”

Brandon Sanderson

“Excuse me?” he said, taken aback. “Fosterling—”

“My name is December,” she said. “Your wife needs fresh air, not attention, following her ordeal, and I have something I need to confide to you in private.”

“Is it urgent?” he asked.

“How urgent,” she said, “do you consider a murder?”

He joined her immediately and thought to himself how odd it was that a woman so young was so self-possessed as to speak to a lord—even a minor lord—with such composure. He should have ignored her fanciful claim, he knew, but something in her bearing . . .

Well, she had a *way* about her. He’d barely paid her any attention over the years, except to check her age and the small sum he paid to the innkeeper and his wife from the orphans’ fund. How remarkable it was, then, that she presented herself in the way of someone educated. How remarkable it was that he listened to her explanation, to the point that he gathered his old bailiff Nathenial and climbed the hillside at her insistence to the place where they found old Tap—dead not by a landslide, as Bark had always told everyone, but by an axe to the head, the wound clearly visible despite the decay.

“There is a silver vein about three hundred yards that way,” she said, and led them to it by way of proof. Stupid Bark had spent over a decade wandering these hills, and must have passed it a dozen times. “Tap ran across it and made the mistake of telling Bark. I don’t have all the details, but I know Bark killed his friend to take the prize—neglecting to get the precise location first.”

Matin knelt beside the exposed vein of silver, fingers on the metal, bearing the expression he got when he had to do something distasteful in town; he did always prefer caring for the people as opposed to enforcing law upon them. He’d do his duty, but she fondly remembered looking through his ledgers from years past and finding copies of letters he’d written to the king every year explaining how the people of Rivershore were fierce negotiators, and how taxes simply

The Fires of December

couldn't be extracted in the rates demanded. Martin had quietly been their angel for decades, with nobody the wiser.

"I'll need more proof," he said, standing up. "I can't judge Bark on one testimony; by the law, I need more."

"You'll have it," she said, because she knew Bark better than almost anyone did. "Simply tell him that I was the one to lead you here after he bragged to me about killing Tap."

So it was that in the common room of the inn that afternoon—a neutral location where the reeve had decided to interrogate Bark—she had the distinct pleasure of hearing her once-husband make the mistake she'd known he would.

"What?" Bark shouted. "I never told her about that! I swear it! I never told a *soul* about what I did to Tap, and she can't prove otherwise!"

Dear, stupid Bark. Deep as topsoil, sharp as mud, guilty as the demon itself.

The confession, and subsequent conviction, was the talk of the entire town. December attended the hanging, and while she took no joy from it, she met his eyes as he hanged and was not sorry. You might find it odd that she would respond this way after nursing him during the plague, but any doctor will tell you this is no contradiction. There is a chasm between offering some measure of comfort for the terminal and allowing a murderer to avoid justice.

As his body dangled, December was struck by a terrible thought. Could she die? If she were to fall right then, would she be reborn this same morning? It was a daunting concept, but she was not inclined to test it. In addition, something told December that her relife was *more* than happenstance. It would not happen again, because surely she had been given *this* singular gift for a reason. If she hadn't intervened, Martin's wife would have been destined to . . .

Destined to die.

Two days after the hanging, December sat at one of the tables in

front of the inn, enjoying her favorite spiced tea, and watched the people of the town walk past. There, Kom the weaver. She'd burned him and his family in a single mass pyre—by then, she had been too exhausted to dig. There, Kita dashed past, only five years old. December would help birth her first child, only for both to be lost in a harsh winter, exacerbated by the waning coal shipments. There, the reeve's three boys: Kamdon, still a baby. Torrent, wide-eyed and holding his mother's skirt. And Jamek, with his distinctive features caused by his congenital condition, his sweet smile once December's constant companion.

She had saved their mother, so would never become their new one. Matin's true love, over whom he had cried so many evenings, would remain his . . . and the singular welcoming place in the town for December had, by her own hand, been surgically excised from the future. There was a sorrow to that, a pain in watching him hold another woman, one he loved more dearly than he ever had December. It was a pain of her own design, and she accepted it.

My family, my children, she thought, are not safe. This town is not safe.

She went to Matin again and tried to explain what was coming: the troubles in the capital, though she only knew of them from vague, untrustworthy thirdhand accounts. The wars, the succession, the souring of the river—and worst, the coming disease.

"It begins," she said, "a few months from now, with fires in the capital and something involving the demon. It will end decades from now with the deaths of almost everyone in town."

Matin held to his seal, sitting in the official office of his home, where he took complaints and made his judgments. He looked down at his desk, sloppy as always, and she resisted the urge to straighten the papers and bring his attention to the most important matters so they could converse on how to best deal with them.

A life she would never have.

A life . . . she had lived.

The Fires of December

I have that memory, she decided. Those days with him, raising the children, and the peace we knew in grandchildren before the plague. Those memories will never leave me, never fail me.

She realized she could be content in them. She had been given the privilege of this family for two decades, but the children as she knew them, and Matin as she knew him, belonged to another life, another world. They would never exist here, because Rema lived—so December let go, like giving a dove to the sky, and allowed them to live their new life without her. She waited patiently for Matin to process what she'd told him, knowing him well enough to expect that he'd have trouble believing her, but also that he wouldn't dismiss such a threat out of hand.

"What," he whispered, "are you? A . . . witch?"

Was she?

"I don't know," she said. "But my dream . . . it's true, Matin. I know it's coming. Sure as I can tell you that the Givons will have a boy next year, or that the harvest the year after will be slight, or that the mine won't give out despite everyone's fears—at least, it will last until we don't need it any longer."

To this, he lowered his head. "I do not know what to make of this, Miss December. I cannot *fathom* what you've said. I . . ."

"Give me a letter," she found herself saying.

He met her eyes.

"Introduce me to the king," she said. "I have . . . what, a hundred gold to my name now?"

"How?"

"Discovery of a new silver vein," she said. "Is that not the payment?"

He put a hand to his head. "Of course. Yes. A hundred gold . . . The king's bounty. I should have recognized that. I'm sorry."

"You've been busy, Matin," she said, with a smile. "I know you'd have gotten to it eventually. For now, payment, then a letter of introduction."

Brandon Sanderson

He wrote it, bemused, and December felt the same. A part of her genuinely could not believe what she was about to do, so she didn't consider it. No more than a leaf considered the wind upon which it was blown. She returned to the inn, gathered her things—such that they were—and left her foster parents with a suggestion to watch out for their youngest grandson, who was not born yet, because he was going to fall in the well behind the property and break his legs just after his fourth birthday. He'd never quite recover.

Then, her belt laden with the pouch of gold Bark had once claimed, December pulled on her black coat, towing a dark shadow of the future behind her—a cloak, as if made of the space between the stars themselves—as she strode to the docks and bought passage upriver on a passing ship.

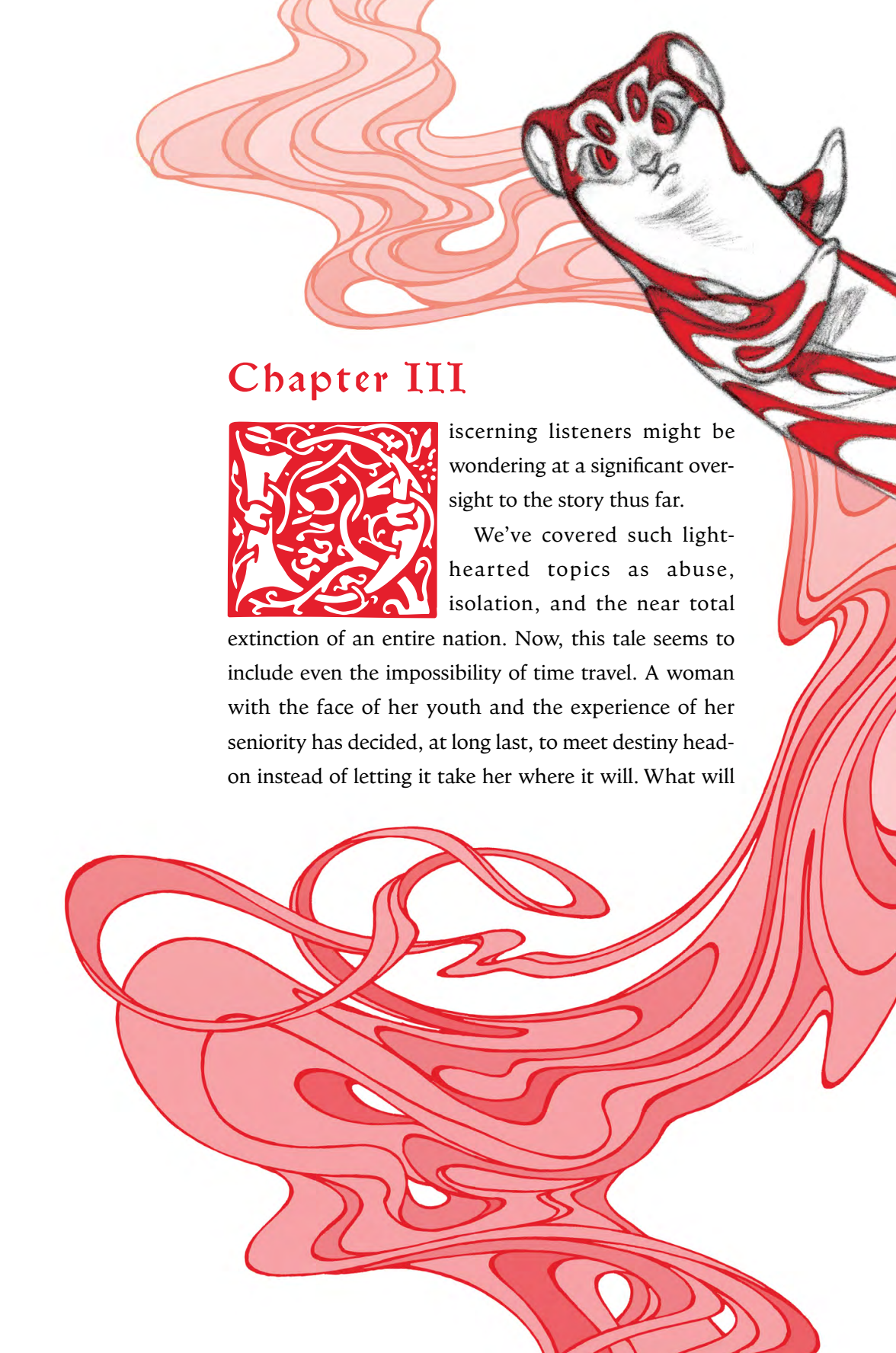
Matin couldn't do anything to stop the disaster, not from his quiet town so far from important places. The troubles had started at the capital. The king had died there, so he would certainly find her message urgent.

Her family might no longer be hers.

Her town might have rejected her.

She loved both regardless.

Therefore December, the fosterling with a second life, would travel upriver to the demon's corpse itself and speak to the king. Surely he would know how to stop the plague from ever occurring in the first place.



Chapter III



iscerning listeners might be wondering at a significant oversight to the story thus far.

We've covered such light-hearted topics as abuse, isolation, and the near total extinction of an entire nation. Now, this tale seems to include even the impossibility of time travel. A woman with the face of her youth and the experience of her seniority has decided, at long last, to meet destiny head-on instead of letting it take her where it will. What will

she find at the head of the river? What is the secret to the demon, its blood, and the plague? Will December succeed in preventing the deaths of those she loves?

Most importantly . . . where the hell was *I* in all of this?

I appreciate your concern. At that moment, I was having a nice soup. Did you know the people of her planet (it's called Miral, for those who care) make a chilled one with raisins? It's delectable.

December's chosen vessel was grandly named the *Northern Eclipse*, despite being a simple barge without even a lower deck. Boarding it was, for December, a little like hearing you'll be served crudités, then learning they're just carrot sticks with dip.

Her room was basically a closet with a hammock, which she worried about being able to climb out of safely until she remembered that her knees didn't hurt anymore and she no longer had dizzy spells. Her door opened straight onto the deck, like the other six cabins at the back of the long boat. They were the only structure on the vessel, which was otherwise laden with goods from the terminus where the river evaporated. The boxes were mostly filled with textiles from the strange peoples who lived on the open plains where demons were common and warred with one another.

The cabins were all taken by passengers, and the crew slept on the deck. The ship didn't use a sail, as they were going upstream; fortunately the demon's blood river was remarkably straight, cutting across the land with the precision of a stitch across cloth, which allowed a team of oxen to pull the boat from the well-worn side path—a method similar to the canals you might have heard of from the old days of Scadrial. It worked even better here, as the demon's blood was incredibly smooth and had less drag than water—as if the blood actively rejected the touch of mortal creations.

December spent much of the first days of the trip standing at the prow, staring forward with her high-collared black coat pulled close, black hair blowing in thick locks around her face. Almost like she was

The Fires of December

a ship's figurehead. The sailors didn't bother her, though the captain quietly found her gaze unnerving, so he offered her access to his library of books, hoping it would coax her away from her place at the front. She accepted the offer, and didn't recognize how he'd instantly assumed she could read, something common only to the nobility.

She spent part of her time in those books, but was distracted by the marvelous feeling of being young again. Pains she'd accepted as eternal no longer stung, and she felt a spring to her step; how had she never appreciated her youth the first time? She was more limber without stretching, and could scratch parts of her back she hadn't been able to reach in years. Plus she found it remarkable how firm her body was, from neck, to underarm, to breast.

Her emotions were a different matter. She didn't *quite* feel like her youthful self, as she still had the pragmatism of an octogenarian. Carrying the dread of lost generations hampered youthful fancies, but she *did* catch herself watching the sailors as they worked—particularly the older ones, closer to her true age.

It was a mess of distraction, but she had—as many old women do—grown accustomed to curtailing unexpected emotions, as those are not only the domain of the young. Ask any woman in her fifties and she'll explain, but December's experience came to bear as the feelings of refreshed youth during the first few days changed from overwhelming, to novel, to pleasant.

All the while, they sailed upriver, and the landscape changed. Mountaincrest was, as I've mentioned, a place entirely lacking in onomastic originality. Thus it will not surprise you that the entire kingdom was, essentially, an enormous mountain, with the capital, Kingseat, at its summit. Now, before your imagination crafts some imposing sight, please understand that a mountain of such girth is largely unrecognizable when standing upon it; the incline here was so shallow, the human eye couldn't distinguish it. To December, the

elevation changes were only noticeable as the air cooled and the foliage blended from scrub to clutches of well-dressed pines.

Traffic on the river was as she remembered it: boisterous, amiable, and plentiful. December felt a certain peace as she remembered sitting at the docks and watching the variegated ships sail up and down the river—now, she had the inverse experience as the *Northern Eclipse* stopped each evening at a new little town along the path, nestled between the continuing mountain range and the river like children in the crook of their grandmother's arm. At each stop, she was encouraged to go ashore and visit one of dozens of identical inns, where she kept expecting to turn and catch one of her foster siblings taking an order or topping off a mug.

Innkeepers always offered her a private table. Though she kept her voice soft, they would hop and jump when she spoke, and she was confused by this consistent behavior. She was a woman with three dresses to her name and a face too young for anyone to take seriously. She remembered being shy, speaking quietly, and being looked at but not listened to. Why wasn't that happening here?

She didn't yet recognize that there are many ways to be quiet. There is the quiet of a person who always glances away when you meet their eyes. There is the quiet of someone who smiles too much and speaks in whispered jokes. And then there is the quiet of a person who seems able to judge your size, your weight, and your disposition at a glance. The kind of quiet displayed by a woman accustomed to doing things for herself, who is only giving you the chance to serve her because it would be impolite to do otherwise.

People expected the last in the elderly; in the young, it shorted their brains a little, so they defaulted to: "This must be a very important person, probably nobility."

Sailors didn't eat at the inns, but at taverns closer to the dock. The captain often came to the inn for the finer meals offered, but on the one occasion December suggested they dine together, he squirmed

The Fires of December

the entire time, so she never tried again. A few of the other travelers were friends, and often got a table together. And then there was the priestess. She was perhaps twenty years old—young to be traveling on her own in December’s estimation, though she doubted anyone would give trouble to a person of the cloth.

The young woman often ate in her room, only going to dinner one out of five evenings. When she did so, she always chose to wear her full garb: a tie at the neck and a collared shirt, with loose jacketlike robes around them. You might imagine they looked academic, but this was religious attire in Mountaincrest—as was the sword.

The Ever-Slaying Sword of the priesthood was carried more like a staff. A long ceremonial replica of the Prophet’s weapon, it was not edged, though it had a wicked-looking crossguard. The priestess was short of stature, with warm brown skin and large, eager eyes. (Her skin tone and faint accent marked her as someone from the lands closer to the terminus in the south; not a foreigner to December’s eyes, but a person from a different region of the kingdom. Most of the priests that December had met, along with the doctor who had trained her, had been from this same ethnic heritage.)

At dinner the priestess often read religious books, which let December study her one night in a nondescript inn, some two weeks into the journey and halfway to her destination. Though the townspeople of Rivershore had been religious, December included, her knowledge of the Prophet and the demon was fragmentary. People swore by both, and though sermons tended to speak of dry events from many years ago, they inevitably came back to a central idea: Do what the king says. He wasn’t the goddess Valor, but looking at the goddess would dissolve your eyes anyway, so perhaps be satisfied with a leader who was a little less eye-melty.

The problems that would eventually beset December’s town stemmed from the demon. While it was December’s intent to let people smarter than herself solve the actual problem, she decided it wouldn’t hurt to

have more context. If she wanted to gather information, who better to ask about the demon than a priestess? With this in mind, she approached the other woman's table.

December was fully unprepared for what she was getting herself into.

"Excuse me," December asked, drawing the woman's eyes away from her books. "Do you mind if I join you?"

The young priestess looked up at December like a puppy being offered its first pets. "Oh! Yes! Yes, *please*."

Curious at this response, December sat—then was surprised, moments later, when the overly eager serving staff instantly transferred all of her diningware, drink, and remnants of her meal to this new table with hushed whispers of "seeing to the lady's needs."

I, she thought, *am going to have to do something about that*. She wouldn't want people to get the wrong idea, and impersonating nobility—she knew from Matin's lawbooks—was a serious crime. For now, she regarded the priestess, who sat with hands clasped before her chin, smiling so wide you could have painted a billboard on her teeth.

"Okay . . ." December said. "Um . . . Well, do you mind if I ask you a few questions? About the demon?"

"Yes!" the young woman said, thrusting her hands into the air. "I prayed it would happen, and it did! See, Brother Grund! See! I *told* you they'd want to hear! My grand mission begins!"

"Um . . . What?"

The girl—it was difficult for December to see anyone under the age of thirty as anything but a child—reached across the table and leaned down. "I am from the Monastery of the Final Word," she said. "I'm on a great mission of religious import—a pilgrimage to see the Ever-Slaying Sword itself, and the demon it imprisons. However, so few people know about the actual *final word* of the Prophet. Well, final words. There's lots, divided into three sayings, but Monastery of the

The Fires of December

Final Word sounds better. I was given permission to go, and Brother Grund, he said, ‘You should take a vow of silence before you go, Sister,’ and I said, ‘You know I’ll die if I can’t talk, Brother Grund,’ and he said, ‘Well, maybe a vow of not preaching,’ and I said, ‘I’m *literally* a monk on a *literal* mission. Why shouldn’t I preach?’ And he said, ‘Not everyone is ready for our word,’ and I said, ‘You mean words,’ and he said, ‘It sounds better, look—’”

“Do you,” December cut in, “somehow not need to breathe?”

“You can talk while breathing in if you try hard enough,” the priestess replied. “I’ve been practicing, but I have trouble with intelligibility. Anyway, I was ordered by my seniors not to preach on this pilgrimage, in case I went too far. I do sometimes go too far, but shouldn’t someone be *enthusiastic* about religion? I think they should be, and I told them that, but it was a requirement upon me leaving, so I agreed with one term: No preaching unless I was asked.” She beamed. “And you *asked*!”

“I suppose I did,” December said. “Is it possible to retract said offer?” The immediate crestfallen look made December smile. “I’m joking, Sister. What is your name?”

“Amaal!”

“Well, Sister Amaal,” December said, “I’m glad for someone knowledgeable. I swear the priestess who visited my hometown had only three sermons she recycled. However, do you mind if this is more of a conversation, as opposed to . . .”

“Word vomit?” Amaal said. “In your face?”

“A quote from Brother Grund, I assume?”

“Yup.”

“I think he and I would get along.”

“Maybe!” Amaal said. “He’s nobility too.”

“I’m no noble,” December said, prompting a strange response from Amaal: her eyes going wide, this time with a look of awe and wonder. December forged forward. “I have reason to believe that something

terrible is going to happen with the demon in the near future. I know it won't occur for another month or so, so the threat isn't *imminent* but it is *important*, as it will have catastrophic implications."

"The . . . *end of times*?" Amaal whispered.

"No, I . . ." December paused. *Well, actually . . .* "On second thought, it might just be. Did the Prophet speak of such things?"

"He said that if the demon should ever break free, it would destroy the land, so we should summon him again—um, him the Prophet, not the demon. Since the demon, you know, will be rampaging and defiling the kingdom at that point, and won't really need summoning. Not that I think we could—even a witch only *serves* evil, rather than controlling it, regardless of what they may say."

"Wait, witches are real?"

"Oh! Yes. They can summon the demon's fire! Burn and burn and burn. There's said to be many in the capital, serving lifetime sentences of labor for their foul acts."

Curious, she thought. "So how do we summon the Prophet?"

"Uh . . ." Amaal shrank. "No one knows. Um, Sister Grund—no relation—thinks maybe we, um, forgot to write that part down."

"Of course we did," December said with a sigh, nodding in thanks as the serving staff, finally deciding she wasn't going to eat any more, removed her dishes. Dessert, without being requested, followed.

"I'm sorry, um . . ."

"December."

"I'm sorry, *Miss December*," Amaal said, with an odd emphasis on the title.

December wasn't certain she liked how that sounded; it reminded her how the surrounding towns would hold a pageant at harvesttime among the young ladies, and crown the winner Miss Turnip, something *they all* thought was an absolute *honor*.

"Anyway," Amaal continued, "my monastery's focus is on learning and understanding the last teachings of the Prophet before he left.

The Fires of December

I didn't study demons much. Perhaps some other priest or priestess will know more?"

She seemed disappointed by this idea, so December, with a mental sigh, decided the girl had already been somewhat helpful, and . . . well, deserved her chance.

"Why don't you tell me," December said, bracing herself by starting into her apple pie, "what your monastery teaches?"

Amaal grinned, but instead of opening the floodgates of verbal doctrine, she held up the book she'd been reading, showing the title: *The Final Word(s) of the Prophet*. She then opened to the first page, which displayed three powerful words in the most ornate typeface available.



Sometimes, things suck.

Yes. I understand this requires some explanation.



Chapter IV



efore we begin, let me abruptly decapitate your assumptions. No, I'm not this Prophet. Granted, I *have* influenced my share of religions (still really embarrassed about that whole fiasco on Jasper), even occasionally on purpose. However, before coming to this world hunting Valor, I'd never visited it. Miral is a backwater, well off the traveled paths, and its subastral is proximate to a dangerous number of negative-Investiture entities. That's in addition to the

horribly irregular natural local perpendicularity unattuned to any specific Shard. (If that sounds like gobbledygook to you, don't worry. It just means this: It's damn hard to visit.)

I was surprised to find the Prophet's legacy here. Yes, he *was* someone from off-planet. He never called himself a prophet, though he did have a lot to say (grouchily) about the state of affairs of the people. During his last days on the planet, before slaying the great demon, his followers asked if he'd please condense his philosophy into a coherent theology. He resisted at first, but then decided that this would solve some of his problems, so he devised three pieces of advice, which were later named the "mandata," a real word whose existence I expect you're as surprised to discover as I was.

The first of the three holy mandata is as recorded by Amaal's book: "Sometimes, things suck."

Now I've had my fun poking at religion now and then. I've a heretical streak; comes from having helped kill God. (Who would have thought?) That said, I genuinely admire Amaal's order of monks. Their core religion was founded by Valor, who focused her work on this planet on teaching people to do uncomfortable things in the name of achieving good. It was a step in the right direction for her, after too much focus on raw bravery had undesirable effects on other worlds.

"'Sometimes, things suck?'" December asked. "That seems a tad . . . obvious?"

"Yes, well, maybe!" Amaal replied. "But it's true, right? Sometimes, things do suck. Plus, it's more complex than it seems. My brothers and sisters of the Order of the Three Mandata have spent *centuries* pondering the words, and let me tell you, there's a rich mine of understanding to get from three simple words! That the world is hard, but that's no reason to give up. That pain is not a sign of Valor's disfavor, but just a natural process! And that if things *are* going to suck sometimes, we really should be more understanding of each other and try to help out!"

"That's remarkably practical of you," December said.

The Fires of December

“Brother Grund said I should lead with that idea,” Amaal confessed. “As it’s the most important, but there’s *so much* to it! I’ve barely begun . . .”

The following hour threatened to turn into a lecture, but December steered it more toward conversation. Despite needing to wrestle to keep Amaal from turning on the full sermon, December appreciated the interaction. During this trip, she’d begun feeling that isolation, such as had chased her through her entire first life. She was happy to find someone to talk with, and Amaal—for all her overeagerness—did stop and listen when December broke in. She wasn’t self-absorbed, merely enthusiastic.

While the first mandatum seemed a tad silly at first, Amaal’s explanation turned into a legitimate religious sentiment that resonated with December. She knew something of the hardships of life, and Amaal’s words didn’t diminish suffering or ignore it. The preaching part was about helping one another.

“So you’re traveling,” December said, “to Kingseat to . . .”

“Persuade people to be nicer!” Amaal said. “Every report I have indicates that people in the royal court and the surrounding city are often *ignoring* the *most important* teachings of the Prophet.”

“Curious. Will you present that mandatum as it was said?”

“Well, Brother Grund says we should elevate the language for the lofty people of the capital. He tends to express the idea this way . . .” She pulled out her book and showed another page.



et us lighten the weights of those who suffer, for though pain is an unavoidable aspect of life, the alleviation of such is the calling of all who would consider themselves holy.

“What do you think, Miss December?” Amaal asked. “I’m worried about diluting the Prophet’s holy words. So many orders get off track

with their teachings about the king and other nonsense. The Prophet didn't speak about any of that, you know? I think people are uncomfortable with his actual teachings, which indicated that Valor *herself* was an aspect of a greater god, much as he was an aspect of Valor."

"I think," December said, "that so long as you are clear about the Prophet's actual teachings once people become interested, having a more elegant style at first, as Brother Grund suggests, is a good idea."

December paid for both of their meals, then was surprised when Amaal bobbed up and followed her toward the door, where the barge's captain met them with a bow. "Ready to return to the ship, my lady?"

"I'm no noble," December said, wondering how many times she'd have to repeat that. "But yes."

His eyes widened just as Amaal's had, and the two of them shared a poignant look.

"All right," December said with a sigh. "Tell me why you're doing that."

"Um, doing what, *Miss*?" the captain asked, using the same inflection on the word.

"I just told you I'm not nobility."

"No noble," the captain breathed. "Same words Lord Gustavin the Great used when he renounced his lineage as a sign of his political integrity."

"Oh, *honestly*," December said.

"She has taken me," Amaal whispered to the captain, "on retainer as her spiritual advisor."

"Ah . . ." The captain nodded with a knowing expression.

"I did what?" December said, affixing Amaal with *the stare*.

The younger woman wilted. "Um . . . I mean, you paid for my dinner . . ."

December kept the stare going while she considered. "Do you have books," she said, "where you can research the nature of the demon and tell me the signs of it escaping its bonds?"

The Fires of December

“Yes!” Amaal said. “I brought *all* the books they would let me, even ones about other aspects of the Prophet’s teachings! Brother Grund said they might keep me busy.”

“How much is this retainer fee?”

“Um . . . my meals?”

Meals for the trip up the river? Judging by what dinners had cost so far, that wasn’t much, even if the prices were increasing as they drew closer to Kingseat. December could easily afford it, and if it earned her a personal researcher for a few weeks . . .

“Done,” December said, “but don’t go around thinking to bully me into decisions, Sister Amaal. It’s not a good habit.”

“Yes, Miss December,” Amaal said.

They returned to the barge, and it took until she was settling down in her hammock for December to realize she hadn’t completely set them straight about her lack of noble blood. She made a mental note to do it in the morning. Unfortunately, said morning was largely consumed by December meeting her first demon.

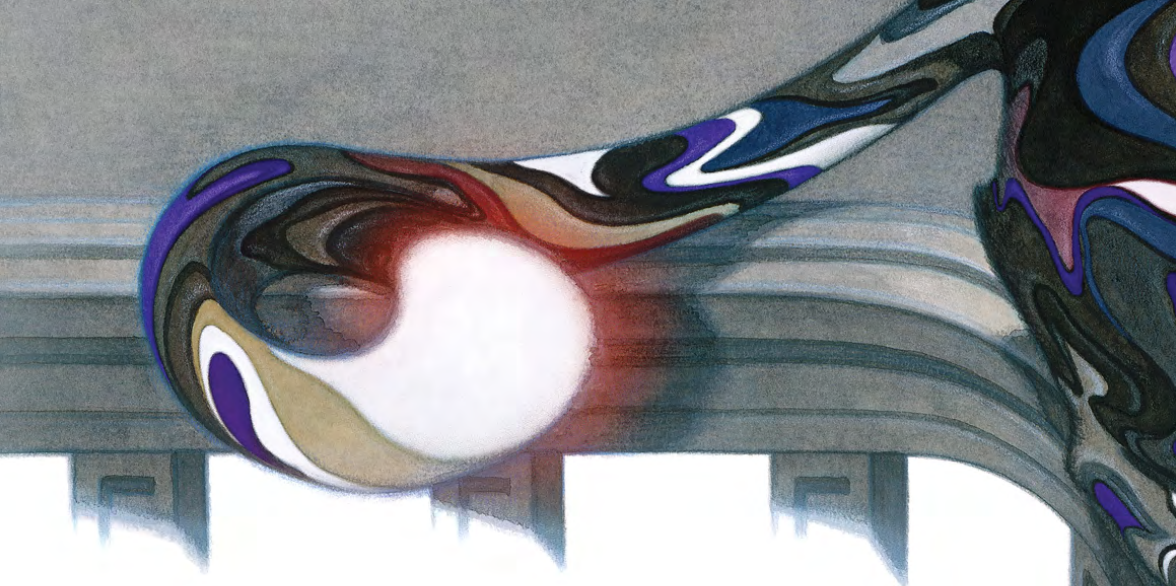


Chapter V



December woke in her small dark chamber and, for the time it took to gasp, thought herself in her hut on the mountainside. That the creaking of the barge was the sound of boards groaning against relentless mountain wind, that the sway to the deck was the vertigo of advanced years, and the heartbreak of loss was the distant echo of lives committed to soil, not the melancholy of a home left behind.

She soon remembered, but one will not blame her for



trembling, worrying that *this* life with the young body was the dream. Because youth is a dream. It seems so fresh and vibrant, only to fade as the hours grow long and the years short, until practical reality makes vague those memories. So, with due sense of wonder, December rose and went about morning washing and preparation. (She had a water closet she shared with the other passengers, though her room had its own door into it. Bathing was done at inns they passed.) Then she finally stepped out of her chamber, and that was when she encountered her first demon.

It lounged on the railing of the barge right outside her room, basking in morning sunlight, taking the shape of a vibrantly colored shorthair house cat. Beyond it, the river rippled from the boat's movement; thicker than water, its lazy waves undulated like a rumpled blanket. As they approached Kingseat, December found she could pick out more colors in the liquid: tiny lines of yellow, red, or blue, resembling paint, less fully mixed here.

The cat demon was a further expression of this. It looked to be made of wet paint itself, for though it was mostly the same dark violet of the river, it had swirls of various other colors patterned like fur—orange at the ears and streaks of white along its sides, slowly shifting, as if melting into the paint of the rest of the animal. Its eyes glowed with the light of a coal at the heart of a simmering fire. Drips



of molten liquid would occasionally pool at the corners, and it blinked them out, sending them sizzling to the deck, where they vanished without marring the wood. She'd heard of demons, of course. The world was full of them, from the great walkers of the plains, to the corpse at Kingseat. They were said to burn alive anyone who dealt with them too intimately, and if given souls for fuel, they could start great fires. Regrettably, anyone who lost their home to a fire was suspected of witchcraft.

People were taught the warning signs via frightening sermons, but those teachings had been irrelevant to December, as a demon hadn't been seen in Rivershore for centuries. They were said to bother larger towns, and sailors often brought stories from upriver, hoping to trade them for drinks in the tavern.

December froze in her doorway now, staring at the thing, trying to remember what she was supposed to do. Perhaps she *should* have paid better attention during those sermons . . .

The demon, in turn, hopped off the railing and sniffed at her paralyzed feet. Then it settled down and looked up with those distressingly glowing eyes, perhaps deciding if she were worth eating. It again blinked out molten tears, which sizzled down and disappeared at the deck. December deliberately tried to keep her toes back, but the thing sniffed her legs again, then followed as she—with what decorum she could muster—walked to Amaal's door and knocked.

"Miss December!" Amaal said upon answering. "What . . ."

She trailed off as December gestured to the demon.

"Oh!" Amaal said. "It's so little!"

"Little?"

"Sure," Amaal said, squatting to regard it. "You should *see* the ones on the plains near the monastery. Almost fully molten, those ones are, and barely kept bound by entire tribes. Heathens though they are, they do know their way around a demon!"

The Fires of December

"I have been told," December explained, "to fetch a priest if I ever encounter one."

"That's thoughtful! We love to catalog these." She already had a pen and paper out, writing down some notes. "I wonder if the foul beast has a name yet . . ."

It rubbed against December's legs, more insistent.

"So," December said, "what do we *do* with it?"

"Normally," a passing sailor noted, giving the demon a wide berth as he moved from prow toward stern along the walkway, "we just ignore them until they leave."

"Yeah," Amaal said, still writing, "you'll probably need to get used to them. They are supposed to be all over Kingseat, drawn by the dying Megalith. Um, that's the name of the major demon bleeding out the river. Sister Drimond, who is from the capital, says these little ones are all over up there."

"Are they all cats?" December asked.

"Oh, no! I've never heard of one in this shape, though they are said to appear as something loved or harmless to lure mortals into giving away their souls! But that's way, *way* harder to do than people think. It requires tons of arcane study and practice—which as your spiritual advisor, I should warn you against. You know, because having your essence entirely consumed to fuel its maniacal need to destroy all life is generally considered unpleasant."

Another sailor passed, and made the sign of the Ever-Slaying Sword, index finger pointed down with thumb and pinky outward, in threat to the demon, who watched him with a cat's indifference and a swinging tail that somehow conveyed, "I'll murder you another day, human."

"Huh," December said. "I didn't expect them to be so . . ."

"Dangerous?" Amaal said helpfully, still writing. "Terrible?"

"Beautiful," December said. Indeed, the way the whites swirled

on the demon's paint fur, like highlights upon the tips of waves, was transfixing. It cocked its head at this comment in what she almost interpreted as a human expression, though she knew better. These *were* dangerous; in fact, she was increasingly certain that the capital demon—the one Amaal named the Megalith—would actively cause the plague.

The little cat demon soon leapt onto the railing of the barge, then—with one look back—sprang out into the river, melding with it and vanishing.

"Amaal," December said, "we spoke yesterday of *the* demon at Kingseat—"

"The Megalith, yes."

"—breaking free. That the Prophet warned against it. So was it slain, or not?"

"It has the Ever-Slaying Sword stuck through it," Amaal said, "causing it to bleed, and letting its innards be accessed. This is 'death' for its kind, but you can't . . . um, actually *kill* something eternal. No more than you could kill the wind or the sky or whatever. So yeah, it can be freed."

"Which might cause fires at the capital?"

"Most certainly! Great burnings would set the city aflame."

That matches my memory of what the sailors said. It seems someone is going to free the thing, and that causes the problems. "How does one loose it? By pulling the sword out?"

Amaal laughed. "Oh heavens. If it were that easy, Miss December, some idiot would *surely* have done it by now! I mean, put three drunk men on a corner at the wrong time of night, and one will inevitably suggest releasing the destructive force that once nearly burned up the entire planet, eh?"

(In my experience, both men and women are equally capable of this kind of stupid decision, and alcohol isn't required so long as you have a presumed moral imperative, which is far more dangerous.)

The Fires of December

Further questions revealed that Amaal wasn't far into her studies yet, and didn't have answers to December's questions about the Megalith. December set her back to work, then spent the rest of the day writing in her journal to document her past life. She'd done her best to outline the sequence of events, and anything she could remember about the details she'd heard from upriver. It was difficult, as these events were fifty years gone to her mind, but she was sure she had time before the disaster began. Two weeks left in her trip upriver, and at least a month until the troubles began.

A month would be plenty of time, she told herself, for the king to figure out who was going to free the demon, then stop that person. She did feel an urgency to reach her destination and lay this problem at someone else's feet, and to that end, each day sailing felt like progress. She was moving, inevitably, toward her goal. For most of her life, she recognized, she'd been *reactive* instead of *proactive*. Eight decades in survival mode, with one bright moment of personal decision when she'd gone to Matin and persuaded him to marry her.

All her life, she'd been carefully locked in a box by the people around her and . . . well, by her quick understanding of what they wanted, mixed with a desire to give it to them. The only time she *hadn't* known what to do was when society hadn't known what to do with *her*. When they couldn't make sense of a woman her age without children . . . her solution had been to find some, to fit back into her place.

She *did* cherish her time in that family, and would have made the same decision again. Now as she sailed, though, she was forced to ask: Was there not happiness to be found outside the boxes? Perhaps this was why she rebelled against the captain and Amaal thinking she was a noblewoman, even if they were right in a roundabout way. She had become minor nobility the moment she'd married Matin. Though the current record wouldn't show that union, her memories and emotions legitimized it. And so, going by *Miss* (with an emphasis implying she was a noble who had renounced her station) was technically accurate.

People were looking for her box once again. When she wouldn't give them one, they created one that almost fit and pretended it was the truth. This troubled her as she wrote in her seat by the prow, watching the waves, deep in thought, and didn't notice how the sailors avoided her in the same way they had avoided the demon.

Everyone ate on board that night, per the captain's suggestion, so they could sail through the night, the oxen working overtime—for the next day, they landed at the first real city December had ever visited. The captain and his men wanted extra time to deliver supplies, and pushing through the night allowed them to dock before noon. The place was named, uninspiringly, First Dukeseat, though the locals had an accent that made it sound like “First Duck Seat,” which made December smile. (The kingdom had three dukes, of authority just beneath the king, and so there was naturally a “Second Dukeseat” and a “Third Dukeseat” down the other two rivers. I'll call this one Duck Seat for convenience, and its lord the Violet Duke, as he ruled the lands near the River Violet.)

Though not grand by the standards of your society, you'd have appreciated Duck Seat's colors: the painted walls and vibrant textiles. Those reminded December of the rich people she'd seen on the river in her youth, but Amaal told her that they were pale imitations of even *more* vibrant clothing at Kingseat.

December was glad for this smaller city as a stepping stone to help her prepare for the summit and the grand metropolis that occupied it. She'd read in multiple books that yokels like her often made fools of themselves gawking at cosmopolitan grandeur. So it was she watched with anticipation as they pulled up to the docks, where . . .

Well, she found just another town. Merely a big one. Yes, the people wore finer clothing, but December had seen what fine clothing did to Bark: same ugliness, even if he'd exchanged his denim for velvet. Yes, the port was busy, but she'd been at Rivershore's docks when ships off-loaded, and it was no more intimidating than that. Yes, you could

The Fires of December

get lost in these streets, she was certain, but she'd spent decades living by herself in the hills, and *those* didn't have signs at the corners for navigation.

She was no less a yokel than she'd imagined, but she was too old to be impressed by something for simply *existing*. You had to do more than *be* to earn her gawking; you had to actively *try*. So she—with confidence—decided to explore.

The captain nervously wrung his hands as he watched her step off. “Miss December, I'd prefer it if you had guards. There are many sailors and strangers in this place.”

She considered this. Occasionally, there had been disorder at the docks caused by sailors, and often there were outcries in the town about it. However, she had helped fill out Matin's record of local crimes, and the truth was that people in Rivershore had been in far more danger from people they knew than from passing workers. Besides, she had this young, limber body, capable of moving quickly.

“I shall be fine,” she said. “I am confident in my ability to see myself protected.”

As usual, he seemed to read too much into that, and nodded quickly, eyes wide. She didn't dare ask what he inferred from her innocent words, though she did wait for Amaal to join her—going in a pair was always wiser, even if a woman were reasonably sure of herself. Besides, it was fun to watch Amaal do all the cooing and gawking that December would have done, had she not been a crusty old woman who had long since lost her childlike wonder.

As they walked, December felt at last that she might be *recovering* from some of the long despair of loss leading to her death. Because she began thinking whether she knew any good matches for the girl—a priestess could marry, if she wished. Meddling in town unions had once been the prerogative of the reeve's wife, but such thoughts hadn't busied her for ages, ever since she'd dug little Telli's grave.

She will survive, because there will be no plague, December thought

with building optimism, building joy. *Whatever this chance I've been given, I will use it. I won't waste away with dread, like the river did. I will live.*

They found their way to the fashion district, where seeing dresses in windows jogged her memory of what her foster mother had told her. (About putting December herself on display.) Those words had sounded wise because they made a good metaphor, but were completely baseless in reality. A clever turn of phrase did not truthfulness make. (Don't look at me like that.)

They shopped for a time, though December didn't intend to buy and Amaal didn't particularly want anything either, saying she wanted to be in proper garb whenever in public. Even if it wasn't strictly required, she was on a pilgrimage, and wanted to do it extra, extra, extra right. One dressmaker made the mistake of asking after the nature of that pilgrimage; after fifteen minutes of the (very holy) torrent of verbal incontinence that followed, December used a promise of lunch as a crowbar to get Amaal moving again.

They were at the end of the street, and intending to visit a store selling timepieces—something December found fascinating, as she'd never seen one in person—when she heard the voice.

She knew that voice.

Oh, not the *individual* speaking. No, she knew that *tone*: rough and sharp, debasing and hating, yet with those odd hooks of implied affection. Though the crowds around her muddled specific sounds, December could almost hear the words.

If you were worth being loved, you would be loved.

This is your fault, the way you are treated.

Be happy for what you have; anyone else would have thrown you out by now.

She'd lived with that voice for years.

"Do you hear that?" she asked Amaal.

"Hear what, Miss? There's a lot going on here . . ."

The Fires of December

December turned upon her heel and struck toward the sound, barely noticing how people on the street—even obviously longtime big-city residents—dodged out of her way. Perhaps she should have found it odd, but it wasn't so different from the way a child jumped when Grandma entered a room with *that* look on her face. The one that said she knew you'd been into the pie she'd *specifically* fixed for tomorrow.

December passed a dress shop—one she'd stopped at earlier to admire what was in the window—then paused beside an alleyway. There they were. Woman huddled on the steps, weeping. Man standing behind her, just inside the shop, hand propping open the back door. He held a dress over one arm.

The postures were clear, and the line he spoke next made it more so: "That is what you *deserved*."

December's instant reaction was unexpected—like the fire in the eyes of the demon itself, burning with a clear and terrible intent to *destroy*. She stalked into the alleyway, Amaal in tow, somehow certain that when she arrived, she would create ashes of what had been human. Fortunately for him, he slammed the door and reentered the shop without noticing December.

The crying woman appeared to be in her thirties, with pale skin, red undertones, hair like sunlight, and a round face matching her heavysset figure. She saw December and, within moments, defaulted to that same assumption as everyone else.

"My lady," she said, bowing her head with a yelp.

"I'm not . . ." December heaved out a sigh. "Look up, please. Meet my eyes."

The young woman did so, and December gently turned the woman's head, studying the budding bruise. "You'll want a cold cloth for that soon. There will be no preventing the discoloration, I'm afraid."

"I . . ." The woman looked down. "I shouldn't have angered him."

"It is none of my business, I realize," December said, forcibly

softening her tone lest she accidentally project at this woman anger intended for another. “But I know that pain. You do not need to stay with him.”

“I . . .” The woman blinked. “My brother is all I have, my lady. Without him, where would I go?”

Anywhere, December wanted to say. But was it true? Could she wish on any woman the corner of the warehouse where she had been forced to contemplate selling everything she was? Could she make such a decision for another person like her?

“Where,” December asked instead, “would you like to go?”

“I should like my own shop,” the young woman admitted. “But they are expensive and my designs have not sold. To make a living as a fashion designer, you need a name, and I have none. My lady . . . I know you mean well, but he has reason to be angry at me. Who *wouldn’t* be angry? He’s in danger of losing the shop because he displayed my wares instead of the expensive ones he purchased from well-known dressmakers.”

“Anger,” December said, “is different from what he does to you, child. His justifications flower because he’s convinced you to water them.”

The woman bit her lip, and nodded. She bowed, mumbled “my lady,” and retreated into the shop. Unfortunately, this was not unfamiliar to December; it had taken months of work with Bark’s second wife before the decision to leave had been made, and December had carried the mantle of meddler ever since. Even a visiting priest had once asked her what right she had to butt in on relationships, as if in the same breath he hadn’t preached about the duties of the reeve’s wife.

This isn’t your town, she reminded herself. *And this isn’t a situation you know as well as you assume. One conversation is not enough to know the full context.*

Another part of her thought the only context she needed was that

The Fires of December

bruise on the woman's face. She debated, then looked to Amaal. "What do you think?"

"That he needs a healthy dose of the Prophet's teachings."

"Indeed, though I worry we haven't the time. Saving the kingdom from the demon's plague is more important."

". . . Plague?"

"I'll explain another time." She didn't have the time or context to do much here, but was that a reason to do nothing? "Sister Amaal, would you do me a favor?"

"Of course."

December took a deep breath, hoping she wouldn't regret this. "Go out onto the street, and announce loudly that *Miss* December, once *Lady* December, is going to grace this shop with a visit. They won't know that name, but make it quite clear that they *should*, and they'll be too embarrassed to question you. I shall follow presently . . ."



Chapter VI



here's a curious property of larger cities I call the Escape Velocity of Attention. I've had both my *worst* crowds in large cities as well as my *best*. In a city with buskers, symphonies, juggling jesters on the corner, and political ones in the courthouses, there is so much competition for attention. Drawing any interest at all can feel impossible.

In a small town, you can draw basically every eye with the snap of your fingers. So why bother with anything



else? Well, wherever you entertain, you're constrained by the population. Getting every eye in the town can be gratifying, yes, but also limiting. In the city, if you find that *spark*, that secret to starting a true fire . . .

If you can create an event with its own escape velocity, capable of leaving mundane conversation behind and breaking out into the stratosphere where it can draw all eyes . . . I promise you, with the attention that follows, any star in the sky is within your grasp. What is the spark? Well, it's different every time. That's why so few can ever repeat it; true virality can't be created by intent, it can only be fanned once it appears. I'll tell you this, such sparks often begin with three things:

The right people to listen.

The right message for the audience.

And a little bit of *mystery*.

December swept into the dress shop. Amaal had announced her, drawing the curiosity of those shopping—including several socialites who spread news faster than any paper. They buzzed, and sent servants for their friends in nearby shops, amused, then bemused, then amazed at this woman who had . . . well . . . a *way*.

Their definition of that word was strangely similar to the one in the rural towns downriver, yet with the opposite implication. This woman was odd, yes, but not in the manner of your uncle who collected model horses and knew the names of each jockey. More in the manner of an exotic dish that was becoming popular in the city—the variety that, if you knew it first, lent you an edge, because you could serve it at your party before Lady Such-and-Such could serve it at hers.

In the dress shop December was presented with outfit after outfit, and in each she found some flaw, even the most *fashionable* by the most *respected* names. Either this woman was an utter fool, or she knew something they did not. The socialites were not so silly as to jump to conclusions, and they *had* been suspicious of the announcement of an unknown noblewoman.

The Fires of December

But . . . this woman's *way*. The powerful are often deemed pompous, arrogant, and self-important by those who do not know them, when in truth, there are *shades* of all three, a distinction well understood by those elites who quietly made the most difference. Yes, many among them are useless, despite their wealth, but the keen can tell the pompous from the poised, the arrogant from the assured, and the self-important from the self-confident.

Where December had wowed those of more humble birth, she now *fascinated* the small group watching her performance. She folded her arms and spoke with a composure their experience whispered could *not* match her age. She wore simple clothing, but shopped on the most expensive street in the city? When you played at the games they did, there were only two reasons a person would wear something as simple as December: Either you were too *unimportant* to be bothered with, or . . . you were too *exceptionally* important to care.

Either option was a wonderful development in the eyes of people who were bored with every other entertainment. Mystery. It is the secret ingredient in almost every explosive piece of art.

"Well," December said to the showroom, which was small to hold so many enormous egos, "I am beginning to doubt you have anything to offer me, dressmaker."

The proprietor of the shop, the young man she'd seen in the alleyway, managed to keep his frustration from his tone. That was much easier to do, you see, when dealing with someone who could fight back. "I just don't know what you're looking for, Miss December."

"My informant," December said, "told me of the most *incredible* dress hanging in the window. By a new designer."

"A . . ." The man closed his eyes. "Oh. That."

December waited, holding her breath, hoping . . .

"Miss?" The blond woman from the alleyway stepped out of the back room, holding a gown. "I believe . . . I believe you want this?"

December allowed a brief sigh of relief, in part because the woman

had decided to speak for herself. There was little to be done if that weren't the case, at least not without a great deal more encouragement, which December did not have time to provide. The remainder of that relief was because the dress proved to be incredible. Yes, she'd seen it over the man's arm earlier, so she had an inkling it wasn't too terrible—but now that it was held up, she found it *gorgeous*.

She couldn't try it on, as this wasn't the sort of shop where you bought off the rack. But she had worried it would be, upon full display, something outrageous, like she'd seen on some noblewomen outside. Fashion in the capital was reportedly extreme, and many in Duck Seat tried to outdo it as a matter of pride, but this dress was sleek rather than ostentatious, had enough skin coverage for everyday use, and was made of green velvet rather than . . . whatever that strange material the woman in the corner wore.

(Her name was Renta, and she was considered fashionable in a "runway" sense but not a "sidewalk" sense. The material was a kind of plastic, newly invented in the kingdom. You'd be shocked at the things people do with the stuff when it first starts getting made.)

"I'll take it," December said. "How much?"

The man looked from her to his sister, and December saw him do the calculations. "For you, Miss December," he said, "free."

She knew immediately that was a move to keep his sister from getting a commission. He likely thought himself smart.

"Wonderful," December said, waving the woman forward. "I need an entire new wardrobe, and this will be the start. I'll have my own seamstresses do the adjustments. You are the designer?"

"Um, yes," the woman said. "My lady. Er. Miss."

"Then this tip is for you," December said, placing in her hand coins matching the prices of other dresses in the window. "I suppose you get to keep the entire sum, on account of the owner's generosity."

Before he could object, December gave him the stare.

"Thank you," the sister whispered. December had not asked her

The Fires of December

name, and to do so now would seem odd. So she asked for the dress to be delivered to their ship at the dock, then she collected Amaal and the two went to find something to eat.

“That was generous of you, Miss December,” Amaal told her over their cafe sandwiches, the ordinary meal a deliberate attempt on December’s part to squash the sense of mystique she’d been forced to create. (December found the idea of a place that served only food, without rooms to rent, to be very modern, and it reminded her of how she’d helped her foster parents’ inn prosper by serving more meals.)

“I have more money than I need,” she said by way of reply. “Really, all my funds need to do is get me to the capital so I can talk to the king. After that, I can find work and begin earning my own living.”

“Would this be an improper place for me to speculate on the employment a former noblewoman is qualified for? Because I find it a stretch to imagine you throwing on an apron and baking.”

“I’m terrible with bread,” she said. “Soups, though. I could do soups.” To Amaal’s skeptical gaze, she continued around a bite of cold cuts, “I’m quite a bit more ordinary than you imagine. A regular person.”

“One who thinks, for some reason, she can immediately get an audience with the most important man in the kingdom.”

“Well, I have a letter.” December took another bite. “Amaal, you need to know the stakes of my quest. Perhaps it will spur your research. I have . . . reasons to believe, as I said earlier, a plague is coming. Do your books say anything about strange plagues related to demons?”

“No, Miss,” Amaal said. “But oh! I read last night a little more about the Megalith, and it’s *fascinating*. Do you know they mine its internal organs?”

“. . . Mine?”

“You know,” Amaal said. “Hit it with picks and hammers and such, I think? It’s not clear how they break off parts, but they do, and use

them for city defense. You're familiar with mining, perhaps? It's a thing workers do."

"I assure you, I'm quite familiar. Why do they need to *mine* the demon?"

"It crystallized when it was killed," Amaal said. "It keeps regrowing what is mined, so it's an incredible natural resource. Only, the books say that common tools aren't enough . . . and then don't say what is enough. Maybe you just need *grit* and *determination*, which are really the same word, but the first one sounds so much . . . um . . ."

"Grittier?"

"Yes! The Prophet had a lot to say about this. Well, not a *lot* a lot, because he didn't talk much. Five words for him? A lot! For me? I'm told it's not! Anyway . . ."

December gave her free rein, listening with that half an ear parents develop after hearing about a child's favorite toy and their adventures together for the seventeenth time. It wasn't that she didn't *care*, merely that she didn't care about the *topic*, as Amaal veered into a tangent about the different depictions of the Prophet's hairstyles through centuries of art.

Distressingly, people kept peeking into the cafe window. The sorts of people who were vaguely important-looking . . . or, more *tangentially* important-looking. The emissaries of the elite, whose status was tied to their uniforms. Eventually, the cafe owner himself came over and made the meal complimentary. She would have complained, except she suspected he'd receive some radial publicity from this—collateral patronage due to her visit.

I need to get out of this city, she thought, *and quickly. Then be more careful.* She might have fooled a ship's captain and an isolated monk, but the people in this town . . . they were the type Matin had encountered during his education in the capital. Shrewd, conniving, and skilled at playing political games with deadly outcomes. December

The Fires of December

could bluff her way through an afternoon of shopping, but she had little expectation the ruse could be maintained. Noble lineages were strictly documented—and a quick conversation with those on her ship would reveal her point of embarkation, which would inevitably lead to the determined investigator finding that *Miss December* was a bastard orphan girl from a town where the word “cafe” had never even been spoken.

She ushered Amaal out mid-discourse on the Prophet’s favorite belt, and how it somehow represented the protective hand of the goddess Valor shrouding all people. At the docks, they found the dress waiting for her, which was good, as she needed something to wear to an audience with the . . .

December pulled up short, realizing the delivery woman was the dressmaker herself, a bright smile on her face, makeup struggling to cover her bruised eye.

The woman had brought luggage. Quite a lot of it.

“You decided to leave,” December said with relief, and could not help hugging the woman. “I’m proud of you.”

“Thank you, *Miss!*” the woman said, pulling back, tears in her eyes. “I used everything you gave me to buy supplies and cloth, and purchase my designs back from my brother so I can make you a new wardrobe as you requested!”

“Ooooooh!” Amaal said. “That’s what it was about! Personal stylist! To prepare you to meet the king!”

“She’s going to *meet the king?*” the seamstress said, hands to her face. “I need to work on my designs! How long is the trip? Less than two weeks? Where’s my cabin? I’ll get right on it, *Miss December!*” Her eyes grew starry. “Meeting the king . . . in one of *my dresses* . . .”

Oh, heavens, December thought. She nearly scolded the woman for making assumptions, but then again, December *had* been vague, hadn’t she? And could she really shove the woman off, after coaxing

her to leave home and family? If the woman had spent everything on supplies . . . she wouldn't have money left for room and board, let alone passage on a ship.

December well remembered cold nights in the corner of a warehouse, without even the dogs or a cat to keep her warm, and then she sighed. She had invited this result. *You make your bed*, she had told Kamdon on occasion, mussing that hair he always refused to cut, *you sleep in it, boy*.

"Captain," she said as the man came down to check on them. "I saw several passengers disembarking with their luggage today. Am I correct in guessing that there is an extra berth?"

"There is, *Miss December!*" he said. "Will you be needing another for your . . ."

"Lady's dresser and stylist!" the dressmaker said, holding out her hand to him. "My name is Tamantha!"

"Ah, excellent," the captain said. "I'd wondered about you not having a proper maidservant, Miss December. Not that it's my place to wonder. Not at all, not at all."

"She doesn't have a *maidservant*?" Tamantha said, horrified. "Who does her hair? Helps her dress? Brings her breakfast?"

December sighed. *Your bed. You sleep in it*. She began counting out coins for the extra cabin. Most were small denominations—a hundred gold went a long way, even upriver. She had plenty, though the practical side of her felt she was being too extravagant.

"It's a good thing I'm here!" Tamantha said as the sailors began lugging her supplies onto the barge. "What do you mean she sleeps in a *hammock*? Do you have any idea how important that woman is? She's been summoned *directly* by the *king!*"

This was overheard and written down by no fewer than six people December spotted waiting to bring reports back to their superiors. Well, this was entirely December's fault—she should have thought of a different plan, or left Tamantha to . . .

The Fires of December

No, she couldn't have left Tamantha to her brother. But surely there had been another way to help. Why hadn't she just given the woman money in the alleyway?

Because you would never take money from a stranger, she thought, *unless they were buying something from you.*

She could have at least tried, she told herself. Now look what she'd done. As December grumped her way onto the ship, she wished she had her walking stick—the nice hand-carved one that didn't exist yet. Not because she needed it, but nothing punctuated a grump quite like the smack of a walking stick against the floor.

Amaal joined her, smiling for some reason.

"What?" December asked.

"Merely wondering," Amaal said, "what the next few towns will bring. We have several stops until we reach the capital."

"They will bring nothing," December said. "I've made enough of a stir. From now on, I'm staying *on the ship* and *out of trouble*."

It was an admirable plan.

That went very, very poorly.



Chapter VII



he next few days, granted, played out as December hoped they would. She complained to the captain of being under the weather and let Tamantha fetch her meals, something the woman did with zeal. At first, December felt bad about what seemed a frivolous use of the woman's time, considering her masterful touch with the sewing needle. However, a novel in the captain's collection, set in modern high



society, helped December understand why Tamantha was so eager to be her lady's maid: It was, in fact, quite a high position.

There were *all kinds* of positions for women in a lady's retinue: chamber maids, dressing maids, ladies-in-waiting, though the most important was simply called *the* lady's maid. It was a position of great respect, overseeing a noblewoman's wardrobe, social engagements, and the like. They often became quite powerful, and after a decade or so on the job, leaving to open a business—such as a gown shop—would be well within reach. Indeed, many such women married squires, a lower noble on the level of a reeve.

As December had no other handmaids, Tamantha would presumably become the senior one as staff was acquired. It wouldn't happen in this case, but at least her eagerness was rational. December determined to set Tamantha up with enough money to start a career once they arrived in the capital, and for now she simply accepted the help.

Though she spent much of the next eleven days alone, she filled it by chewing through the captain's entire collection of novels—a crash course on the upper class. She knew a little from *Matin*, but there was so much more to learn. (You might find novels an odd method of research, considering their inherent frivolity. They're more dangerous than you assume. While you might go to them to learn, or simply to find a good story, you will end up seeing through the eyes of people unlike yourself—and therefore might accidentally pick up mental lampreys like empathy, understanding, compassion, and an appreciation for the powerful clarity of the serial comma.)

The sailors made a place for her to read at the prow, as they knew she liked the position, bolting a chair and table to the deck—though there was no need, considering how even their progress was. The barge followed the steady team of oxen up the coast, so the main work required of the sailors was managing the keel to keep the vessel from drifting to the right. There were only gentle waves on the blood river, caused by passing ships.

The Fires of December

Three days from the capital, they docked for the evening at the last midsized city before they reached the suburbs, this one called Smallport: for once, an inaccurate moniker, though the citizens had been debating a change to “Smallerport” for decades. It *was* smaller than Kingseat and Duck Seat after all, if not by much.

Gentle evening shadows descended, night coming earlier and earlier as the ship moved north up the invisible mountain. December read by candlelight and awaited her dinner, which Amaal and Tamantha would bring her, along with their own, packaged for delivery with the dishes to be returned to a specific place at the dock. Apparently she wasn’t the only “important” person who preferred dining upon her own vessel.

A glow appeared, suddenly, at her feet.

She started and blinked, wondering how long that demon had been there, in a stately feline posture on the the prow, watching her. Its coloring was subtly different. Now a sleek white-and-orange, with violet undertones and that sense of flowing paint dripping along the hairs, whitening as it went. She felt if she were to touch it, the demon would *squish* like a sponge full of water. Or, well, a cat dipped in paint.

It had the same standoffish attitude as before, its eyes pools of red firelight, molten liquid occasionally dripping from them and crackling on the deck, hardening to some kind of stone.

“How long have you been there?” she asked.

It flicked the tip of its orange-white tail and wrapped it around its body, obscuring the feet. The demon appeared to be waiting for something.

“I’m not going to let you have my soul,” December said. “You should be off. Nothing here of interest.”

It did not move, other than to stare at her with eyes that blinked only to drop tears. That face was otherworldly—the blood, or paint, or whatever it was *flowed* outward, like the optical illusions Matin had drawn for her: motion where it should have been impossible. The

colors were more vibrant than she'd initially thought; the violet was not merely violet, but tiny rivers of colors blending together, making streaks so fine that she thought they would spiral into infinite detail.

"Heavens," she said. "You *are* beautiful, though."

The cat jumped into the river as if repelled. Perhaps it hated to be referred to as beautiful in the same way her stepsons had groaned when she called them "cute." Even Jamek had done it, after picking up the behavior from his younger brothers. Both times, the demon had left after such a description, and it did seem like an insult to its kind, who would logically prefer to be known as terrible, dangerous, or malignant.

Her speculation was interrupted as she heard her two attendants returning, their footsteps on the planks as they passed the two poor sailors, Doug and Doug, who had been appointed to guard the vessel while the others were given leave for the night. With the captain and a lady friend out to the theater for an evening show, much to Tamantha's envy, the ship felt lonely: a dark blot in the night, rocking softly on a darker blot that was not water.

December rose and walked toward the gangway to meet them, as she preferred to eat in her room, which now had a cot and small table crowding it. That was apparently better befitting her station, awkward though the imposition of furniture was.

Her glass-covered candle lit a pool around her. The city burst with sounds to the left, muted and distant, while to the right . . . only a faint slurping and dripping sound, which was actually a little odd. Usually, the blood river was silent.

She met up with the other two, their pool of larger lanternlight joining hers, and they stopped to present dinner. But from behind December, one more set of footsteps continued on the deck. A second later, something cold pressed against her throat as an arm pinned her in place, and a rough voice spoke: "You will give me whatever money you have or the lady will die."

The Fires of December

Terrified looks from Amaal and Tamantha showed as they raised their lanterns high, firelight reflecting in their eyes. Chuckles continued from the unwitting sailors playing cards on the dock below. This oversight wasn't their fault; their worries for thievery were about other ships silently pulling up beside the barge and hauling off its heavy textile rolls, which would be impractical to steal via swimming. The sailors would do a walk-through every half hour or so, but weren't practiced at the defense of a passenger with December's supposed wealth and influence.

No one screamed. No one moved. December confronted her own mortality . . . and found the experience familiar in a way very few people ever could.

She wasn't *ready* to die, mind you. She didn't know if she'd be reborn a second time, and she doubted it for reasons she still couldn't explain. To be killed now would leave those she loved to die horrible, wasting deaths. Her mission was *too important* for her to die.

What's more, she didn't *want* to die. Having a body that didn't creak like a door opening or crack like one closing was delightful, and she appreciated it as she hadn't the first time. She had escaped her own town at age eighty, only now realizing how big the world beyond was.

No, she wasn't ready to die. But she'd been here before, had stared Ironeyes straight on, and she knew she could do so again.

"How much," she said, voice calm, "to make you go away?"

"All of it!" the man growled.

"Come now. You can't simply murder someone like me and slip away—so if it goes that far, you'll be hunted by the authorities all your days. You *might* get the money, assuming the ladies don't scatter with it the moment I fall, but you'll never enjoy it. Your position isn't *nearly* as tenable as you pretend."

"I'm the one with the knife," he said.

"Which is why I'm negotiating," she said. "Five gold."

"Aren't you afraid?" the man asked, and sounded actively *insulted*.

“Come now, work with me,” she said. “The longer you stall, the more time you give for the two sailors below to start their walk-through. Five gold. It’s a good offer.”

“That’s not enough to pay . . . I mean, I demand everything you have!”

December considered. This was a confident man, and practiced at thievery: His voice was harsh, but his hand calm and steady, and the way he held her from behind was secure and prevented her from turning without risking being cut. He’d done this before.

But the knife . . . she felt the cold of the metal, but no pain. He was using the *flat* side. A sign of intelligence, she thought. He didn’t want to accidentally hurt her—that would be a catastrophe. He’d likely waited until the two servants returned, because he knew December wouldn’t have money on her; it would be in the lockbox in her room, or in the captain’s treasury, and a servant would be needed to fetch it.

Yes . . . smart enough to set this up, sneak on board, and not risk accidental injury. Dumb enough to try something so dangerous in the first place. Hmm . . .

This was a lot harder when she couldn’t use her stare. Amaal and Tamantha clutched each other, still terrified, so they weren’t going to be much help. Should she just give him everything she had, or at least begin to, and hope the sailors would interrupt? If this man did escape with her entire purse, would she be able to complete her quest? She’d only paid the captain half up front, by customary agreement, and what of helping Tamantha once they arrived?

Thoughts of that warehouse rose in her mind.

She would *not* put herself in that position again.

The man was growing nervous, judging by the way he tapped his foot and glanced sharply toward the docks at a sound. What would he be thinking?

The Fires of December

She gave it a little more time, then whispered, “You sure five gold isn’t enough? It’s a small fortune, really.”

He paused, then whispered back, more conversationally than his growls earlier, “I owe far more than that, and I’m incredibly desperate. It’s your neck or mine, outlander.”

“I assume that’s the conclusion everyone came to?” she said. “Nobody has record of me, so I must be a foreign noblewoman? You realized that I probably don’t have nearby kin, and was therefore safer to rob than anyone else. That’s clever, really.”

“Not clever enough,” he whispered. “You were supposed to give in easily, unprotected as you are. But . . . now I wonder if that’s a bigger warning sign that I missed. You don’t have guards, and you’re no fool. You’re that confident?”

“More stubborn,” she said. “Who do you owe money to?”

“Local reeve,” he admitted. “Several thousand.”

She laughed.

He, in turn, groaned. “You don’t have that much, do you?” he asked, still whispering, mouth near her ear.

“Barely a fraction,” she said. “Less than a hundred.”

“Damn. You only have hundreds, not thousands, but you tipped five gold on a *dress*?”

“It was an odd situation.”

“Great. So . . . how do we end this?”

“Depends,” she said. “You’re using the flat of your knife, so you don’t actually want to hurt me. I’m inclined to just wait you out.”

“And you’re certain your patience can outlast mine?”

“Young man,” she said, “you have *no* idea.”

Seconds passed, during which Amaal and Tamantha looked increasingly worried, but December grew increasingly confident. Killing someone like her—or, well, the person she was pretending to be—was dangerous enough for a payday, but for nothing, merely to escape?

Brandon Sanderson

She knew the kingdom's laws, even the ones that didn't need to be enforced often in small towns, from her time with Matin. Murder, and he'd be hanged. Attempt robbery and get caught, and he'd do time . . . but live.

Therefore, she was fully expecting what happened next: His hand hit the flat of her back, shoving her toward the women as a distraction for escape. She was able to catch herself—balancing was so much easier when your legs didn't wobble—and spin to give chase. It was perhaps one of the dumbest things she'd ever done, but she wanted to be able to identify the man. Unfortunately, he was swathed in black, and her candle had gone out.

He stumbled, unexpectedly, over her chair. Perhaps he hadn't expected it to be bolted into place. Then he was gone, leaping into the river at night.

Her two attendants caught up to her shortly, grabbing her and trying to pull her away from the scene of the crime, all the while screaming for the sailors. December gave in to the ministrations, as she did not spot the brigand resurfacing. She talked to local officials, even mentioned how much he owed—but suspected that part about a local reeve would be a false lead. He seemed smart enough to lie on that point, as it was far too easy to trace.

Regardless, her attempt to stay on the ship and not draw attention proved to be a disaster, because Amaal and Tamantha would *not* stop talking about how she'd acted like she didn't even *care* about a knife to her neck. How she'd stood like a queen alone before an enemy army, using the very poise of her position to divert death. She overheard the captain chime in about how she'd always been so confident she didn't need guards—because she could stare down anyone, even if they couldn't see her eyes. A doctor inspected her and whispered that some holy aura must have protected her, because the knife hadn't left a *mark*. Her heartbeat, he hissed, wasn't even *elevated*.

December sighed and bore it all, knowing by now the power of

The Fires of December

an unleashed rumor and the impossibility of its deflation. If the news of what she'd done in Duck Seat had reached upstream quickly enough for that brigand to plan and implement an attack on her . . . well, she had full confidence this news would reach Kingseat before her arrival.

Indeed, when they landed in the early afternoon three days later, December found an entire zoo awaiting her: reporters from local papers, emissaries of curious noble families charged with laying eyes on her, a veritable *army* of runners from inns, dress shops, and eateries offering their services . . .

And a man in royal livery—the fabric on his shoulders puffing out as if he were a bird seeking a mate—one hand behind his back, the other proffering a golden, wax-sealed letter. A command from the king to appear before him at court the following day, with a not-so-subtle indication that he disapproved of the way she'd been using his name, as if the two of them were familiar, to improve her status.

December had arrived. Valor send she could be done with this menagerie without too much more trouble.

The End of Part I

Part II











Chapter VIII



hile December had not been intimidated by Duck Seat, the capital was another matter.

First were the colors. Though she'd tried to prepare for them, she lacked the experience to properly imagine the reality. She'd envisioned conflicting wars of bright colors, but the people here . . . well, they had a way. It *wasn't* a terrible assault of mismatched clashing hues; instead, each costume displayed a subtle sense of intentionality. They weren't garish, though they

Brandon Sanderson

were varied. Yes, one would be maroon on black, another forest green and yellow, but the pairings on a given costume harmonized. The styles, however . . .

The styles were *all over* the place. Great capes. Suits like Matin's, only with straighter cuts and snappy cravats. Or ties. Or scarves. Or high collars with pins.

In all of this, one might stray into picturing the outrageous, but I can attest that—excepting the royal court, which went too far—most of it was *not* comical. It was colorful, and took some getting used to, but it *worked*. December recognized this instantly, even while struggling to understand the outlandish dresses on some of the women, which seemed like they had no zippers or buttons, yet still fit with incredible snugness.

It was a testament to this overwhelming view that it dominated her first glance *and* her second before her attention was drawn to something else: the rising center of the colorful city, a location that finally resembled a mountain peak. A shallow one, much steeper on the west side than the east, like a cresting wave. And alongside it . . .

That thing resting against that peak, she realized with renewed intimidation, was the *demon*.

The city was built around the enormous skeletal humanoid figure, unclothed though too withered to determine sex. It lay slumped against the mountain's slanted side as if it had fallen there, and decided to rest before dying. It lay on its right side, leaning on that elbow, the bones of its forearm and hand splayed down one street, creating a wall. Its head rested against the peak, rising a short distance higher than it. The skull was tipped to the side, bigger than any palace, hollow eye sockets gazing across the landscape. The corpse was draped in wispy remnants of skin, like translucent sheets covering furniture in storage. The outline of ribs produced ridges like the foothills outside Rivershore.

December had played in the garden with her grandchildren,



building miniature mud cities, and young Telli would often set her doll within the tiny town like some great god. Kingseat reminded her of that, built more long than wide, to encompass the entire demon. The skeletal toes touched the east wall; the west was built in the shadow of the shallow peak and skull. Buildings ran straight up to the figure's arm and legs, though the actual slope the demon rested against was mostly left undeveloped. The wall encompassing the city could not obscure the giant; tips of churches reached to the sky, but didn't even pass the demon's bony waist.

(I recognize, from previous tellings, this is a difficult image to picture. If you want a simplified version, imagine a couch with one end elevated by a barrel, with a skeleton lying on its side upon it. The couch is the rock formation of the peak, and the figure is the demon. The city, then, just grew up around it. This isn't exactly perfect, as there's no "back" to the mountainside like a couch might have, but the image is close enough.)

Unlike other cities, the richest quarters were *not* at the center. Here buildings, though colorful and painted with what might be imagined as vibrant acrylics, grew less ornate closer to the sudden slope, and those structures closest to the corpse were more industrial: warehouses, tenements, flat and utilitarian work structures.

Then, of course, there were the rivers.

December had always heard there were three. Now she saw them, starting as a single font gushing from a hole in the Megalith's lower chest, then pooling on a rock shelf before flowing into the city. Unfortunately, with all the attention, she lacked the presence of mind to study the rivers. Her notoriety was of more immediate concern. Tomorrow she would meet the king, and she needed to convince him of the severity of the coming cataclysm *without* alienating him or making him assume she was here seeking fame.

"Tamantha," December said, "what is the bare minimum that

The Fires of December

will be expected of a person of my assumed station arriving at the city?"

"You'll need to pick an inn of residence," Tamantha said, "so the local nobility can contact you, should they want. Also, if I may be so bold, you *really* should have *at least* a footman to fill out your servants. Even if you insist on no guards or other maids, a footman can run errands more easily than either of us, and will be expected to deal with important court functions."

"I'll keep it in mind," she said. "For now, how about you get us a carriage and collect the cards of all those people who sent us offers?"

The first was accomplished faster than December expected: Within minutes, she was comfortably seated in a carriage with a white lace interior and a black lacquer finish on the wood. Amaal bounced on the seat a few times, enjoying the plushness, though her ceremonial staff—which she refused to leave behind—was an awkward fit. She had not yet presented her research, so December made peace with the fact that she'd have to keep both women on retainer for a few more days until she was certain her message had been accepted and understood.

The gathering of cards, though, was an enormous undertaking. Each noble family wanted her to call upon them, as did basically every business that could possibly entice payment from her presumably infinite coffers—many people eyeing Tamantha's trunks of fabrics obviously thought them full of riches.

Soon enough, the three women were on their way, with Amaal leaning out the window, staring and cooing, talking about how the Prophet had walked here, and listing the holy relics she somehow knew were in each church they passed. Tamantha sorted the cards, no less dramatic in her own sphere. She had visited the capital numerous times, and all the papers in Duck Seat covered its politics, so she knew enough to gush over the famous designers who had sent

offers, inns that had housed visiting dignitaries of renown, and eateries where each plate cost more than Matin's monthly salary. December put a hand to her forehead, giving her past self a severe mental lashing for the gossip she'd allowed to propagate in her name.

She had the carriage do a scenic round of the city both to humor Amaal, who wanted to see every angle of the demon, and to give Tamarantha time to sort through the options for inns. In addition, it gave December a better view of the rivers. As she'd noticed earlier, they cascaded from a great hole at the bottom of the demon's rib cage. It was tipped to the side enough to let the blood come out in a waterfall to crash against rocks of the peak upon which it rested.

An outcropping just below the hole gathered the blood into a kind of basin, out of which multiple lines of color spilled into a single river on the much shallower slope of the city below. The river spiraled through the capital in a swirling pattern, passing beneath the fallen body's legs, which left room before the feet touched down.

Though she wouldn't learn this for a while yet, the demon's blood expanded as it coursed outward; the point where it gushed out in a single stream was enormously dense. As it flowed, it "unpacked," so to speak, and was therefore able to form the three rivers of Mountaincrest's watershed slopes.

Before splitting and streaming out of the city, the river made several circuits of Kingseat, and December's carriage drove along one of those loops. It was not violet, but multicolored, mixing vibrant hues with the same paint-like consistency she'd always associated with the blood. It was only after circling the outermost loop and seeping away from the city that the dominant colors emerged. One per river: violet, green, and orange.

This was enough to take in, and she wished it were the end of it all. But there was somehow something even *more* distracting along the riverbanks.

The naked people.

The Fires of December

They weren't *completely* nude, so don't get too excited. Nonetheless, they wore almost nothing in December's estimation—tiny shorts of similar length on men and women, and various tops on women. Some with narrow straps that covered only the most intimate portions of the body.

Social taboos are a curious thing. It wasn't the skin itself that stunned December, considering that women in Rivershore commonly nursed children in public without hoopla or embarrassment. But these looked like undergarments to her, which felt so very wrong.

The *backsides*. The *legs*. The *thighs*. The *navels*. The sheer audacity of *parading around like that*.

She wasn't the only one; Amaal leaned out even farther than she had when passing the churches, gawking outright. "Am . . . I supposed to be seeing all this?"

"Hmm, what?" Tamantha asked, glancing. "The demon?"

"The people," Amaal hissed. Her skin tone did not display a blush like December's, but her tone of voice revealed it. "And the . . . nothing . . . they wear."

"Swimsuits?" Tamantha asked. "I mean, with the heat of the city, people come from all over to enjoy a dip in the river, and a chance to make a new costume."

Only one part of that sentence made sense to December, the part about the warmth. She'd remarked on it in passing as they arrived: The highlands of Mountaincrest were the sort to suffer only brief summers, with long chill autumns, harsh winters, and timid springs. Here at the top, though, the air was warm and humid, which Matin had said was because the demon's body still radiated heat. It made sense. The demon's powers were those of fire after all, and the lessers it attracted had molten eyes.

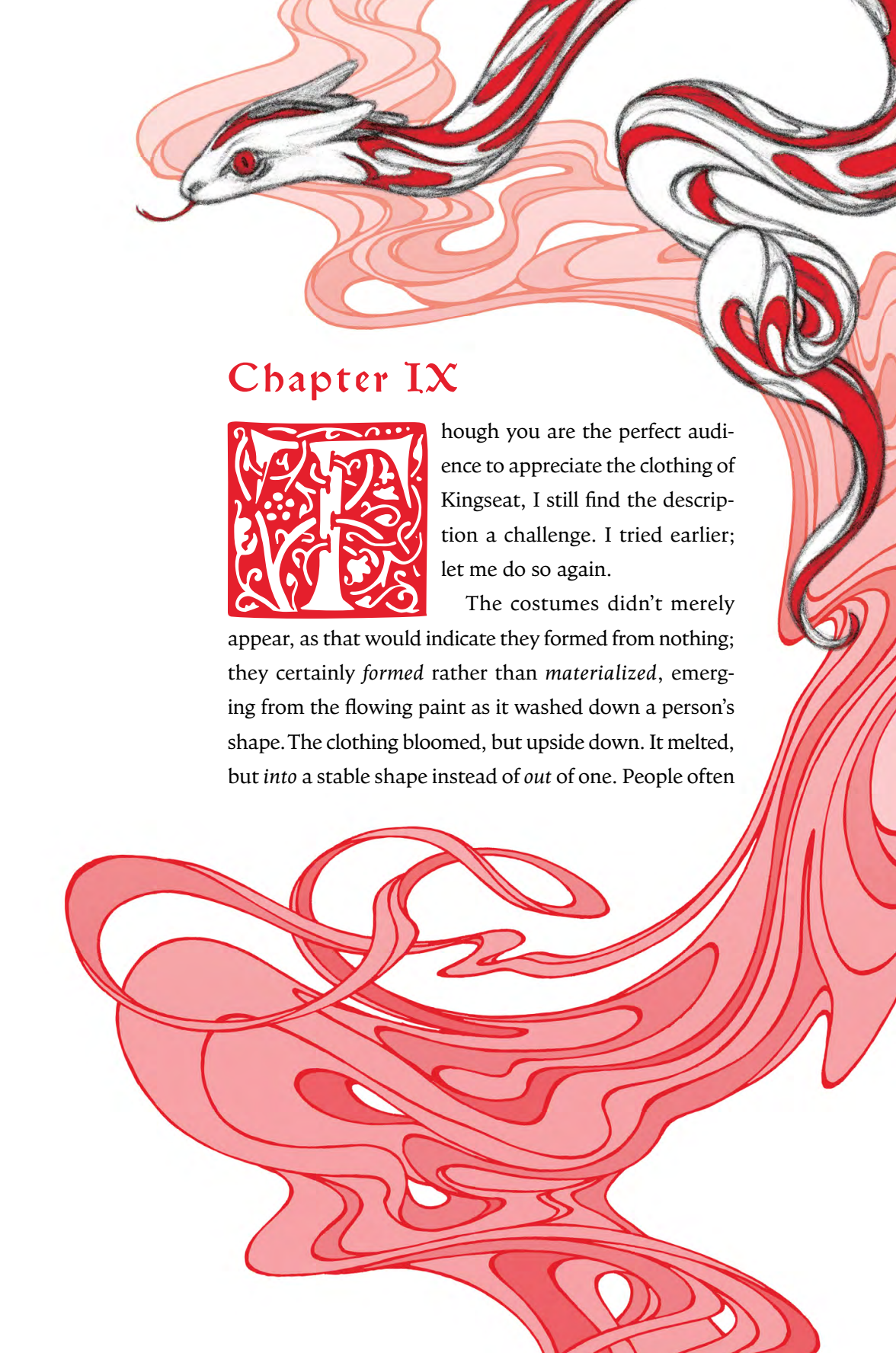
But people *swam* in the *blood*? Why on earth would they . . .

"Costumes?" December said, her brain finally catching up to the end of the sentence. "What do you mean?"

Brandon Sanderson

“Surely you’ve heard,” Tamantha said. “No? Why do you think the best and most interesting designers are all from Kingseat? Here, all you need to do to try a new, vibrant design is have a drawing, keep it affixed in your mind, and dip yourself in the blood. Doesn’t work downstream—only here, before the rivers split.”

The carriage passed a woman rising from the river up some wide steps for the purpose. Unlike what December had always seen before, the blood didn’t immediately run off, but coated the woman’s shape, then billowed out, swirling with inky, painted colors . . . forming a most unusual and stunning outfit.



Chapter IX



hough you are the perfect audience to appreciate the clothing of Kingseat, I still find the description a challenge. I tried earlier; let me do so again.

The costumes didn't merely appear, as that would indicate they formed from nothing; they certainly *formed* rather than *materialized*, emerging from the flowing paint as it washed down a person's shape. The clothing bloomed, but upside down. It melted, but *into* a stable shape instead of *out* of one. People often

Brandon Sanderson

finished with a flourish of the arms, as if to spread the seeds of creation outward and give air to the garments.

The resulting attire was smoother than a textile, but please don't imagine it as pure latex or a cheap plasticky prop from a production lacking the budget for detailed wardrobe. Both of those fabrics bunch up in awkward ways during motion, giving them an ill-fitting feel, even on the rare occasion they're expertly tailored.

These costumes had none of that. Think incredibly detailed and professionally fitted wedding regalia for the most opulent goddess or queen, and you'll get closer to the right image—though add just a *hint* of that liquid nature of the smaller demons. Not waxen, more the impression that, if wrung tightly, paint would squeeze from it like juice from a guava fruit.

It seemed that everyone in Kingseat, from laborers to lords, wore clothing made straight out of the river. Again, it wasn't quite as garish as you are probably imagining. If the outfits clashed, they did so with style, so to speak—but a thousand different trends were represented at once, with even the lowest worker wearing something more akin to what people you know save for a nightclub.

And the elite? Well, they were engaged in a special kind of arms race with their clothing. (A similar one, actually, to accents. Evidence indicates that over time, lower classes start to imitate upper-class accents—which, like verbal suburban flight, shift in turn. The country bumpkin you think sounds uneducated? There's a decent chance the kings of previous eras sounded like them.)

In Kingseat, anyone could put on virtually any costume without paying for materials—all you needed was a little practice and a picture to imagine. When the upper class showed off new fashions, less extreme versions would appear on the general populace, requiring the elite to constantly pay designers for distinctive and original ideas. Some of the lower class would imitate these, while others kept the styles they liked from before, and as a result . . .

The Fires of December

Well, there was really nothing like Kingseat in all the cosmere. Even the T'Telir Court of Gods is less colorful, and we haven't even gotten to the buildings, which were largely coated in designs meant to mimic demon blood and swirling paint. (A kind of incredible marbling that most cultures sensibly reserve for guitar wraps and concert posters.) All in all, it's a sight you need to experience to understand and accept that, while overwhelming, it's not *lurid*. (Except for their jester costumes, which can go straight to hell and burn there for eternity.)

Compared to the earth tones of December's hometown, it was an intensive assault on her senses: the fashion equivalent of a symphony played entirely at fortissimo. The mostly naked people lounging on the banks of the river, then slipping into literal demon blood and swimming about as if in a bath, before finally emerging to explosions of living ink . . . Let's just say she felt a fool for having ever assumed she could take in the big city and act like it was nothing special. She didn't even *notice* the occasional smaller demon haunting the hollows between buildings, though none were as big as the cat.

"We're just allowed to watch the men out there?" Amaal whispered from the corner of her mouth, not tearing her eyes away from the bathers.

"Sure, why not?" Tamantha asked.

"Isn't it immoral?"

"Um, I believe *you'd* be the one to ask about that, Sister Amaal."

"Right, right. I'll have to, um, give it more thought . . ."

December turned away from her window, having had her fill of visual overstimulation for a time. She cleared her head with a few deep breaths and did her best to return her attention to the need for a place to stay.

"Well?" she asked Tamantha. "Any of those inns look promising?"

"I don't know quite enough about the city to recognize most of these," she said. "So I've arranged them by how fancy they *sound*."

"We start at the bottom, then?"

Tamantha naturally thought it a joke and leaned out the window to hand the top card to the coachman. The building they eventually arrived at had more in common with a temple than the inn where December had grown up. While narrow, it was a full *four* stories tall, and had intricate stonework on the front carved into a large floral starburst colored with glossy, faux-wet crimson paint.

Six men stood out front, in red costumes with a ripple of violet running through them, like the vein of silver that had earned December her fortune—which, with greater perspective, seemed more modest than it once had. In Rivershore, a hundred gold was generational wealth. She was already through a tenth of it and not one month had passed.

She gave the hotel a chance regardless, entering the common room—or the “lobby,” as it was called in her novels—and inspecting the dining chamber, or “restaurant.” All in all, she found she disliked this place. For one, those valets out front felt *eerie*, standing with eyes forward, one hand behind their backs, one hand to their chests. The entire place was just too stiff.

To December, an inn was a homey place. Good food, friends, beer from that great brewer two towns downriver. Friendly dogs, a cheerful hearth, laughter, and servers who would chat with you. An environment meant to relax and serve as a temporary home for those who were either traveling or needing someone to fix their meals for them. If that were the case, then what kind of homes did the people who stayed at *this* place come from? Had they all been born in museums? Servants who didn’t quite stare *at* you, but always in your general direction, alert to your needs. A fireplace without a fire, but strangely . . . a *painting* of a fire hanging above it. Candlesticks in glass sheaths, not a drop of wax on them, indicating they’d never been lit.

In contrast to the vibrant color outside, this interior was dark wood and white marble, with a large painting splashed behind the receiving

The Fires of December

desk: a vast mural of shimmering blue, red, and violet waves. It was what December imagined the king's throne room would look like.

She left immediately, without a word, retreating past her trailing attendants and climbing back into the carriage.

"Well," Tamantha said, joining her. "Guess we'll try the next one . . ."

December hoped that further exploration would lead to a more homey hotel, but Tamantha's sorting by "fanciness" of the name hadn't actually aligned them in descending order of lavishness, for the next two were even *more* off-putting: slightly different color schemes, but eerily similar vibes, as if there were a singular smith somewhere churning the buildings out like horseshoes.

Considering the variety of the people of the town, she found it remarkable how uniform these hotels were—the same competent (yet not distinctive) art on the walls, the same upholstery with a hint of a pattern to look expensive but made of sturdy fibers, the same overall appearance of richness, yet lacking personality. She left the second and third as abruptly as the first, something she probably should have given more thought toward, but she was tired, she was old, and she had to prepare herself to meet the king. She wanted a place to stay that was, at the very least, an upgrade from her comfortable hammock on the ship.

When they reached the fourth hotel, she realized she wasn't going to get it. That same identical line of serving men out front, this time wearing white. The same rectangular structure with ornamental carved stone, this time representing waves. This one even had a carpet leading up the steps, which was outlandishly bizarre. How did they keep that clean? With a sigh, she almost asked Tamantha to pull away without getting out, but was stopped by an oddly welcome sight.

A handprint.

It was outlined on the trousers of the nearest valet, whose white uniform was otherwise pristine. That print was small, faded, barely

visible—but after years spent scrubbing clothing, she knew well the sign of a child’s handprint. The kind gifted by a kid who somehow collected more dirt than functionally existed in the three-town region, then inevitably delivered it straight onto the nearest piece of white fabric.

Kamdon, her youngest stepson, had already been twelve when she’d joined the family, and should have known better, but she found his handprints on things for another four years. He had the uncanny ability to make a mess wherever he was; she knew no other person who could *spill* a *potato* and manifest *crumbs* from *soup*. You could identify his place at dinner from the explosive debris pattern.

It took more than soap and elbow grease to remove such a stain, though this man or his wife had obviously tried. Seeing it struck December, and made her realize these were *people*, same as her adopted family, doing their best. It was a different sort of inn, yes, but she was the one who had left Rivershore and come to a new city with new ways of living; shouldn’t she at least give them a chance?

With that in mind, she climbed from the carriage and looked toward the valet. His lankiness made him seem taller than his height, and he had a long face with a square chin that reminded you that you’d been meaning to buy a new tackle box.

“Why don’t you,” she said to him, “help us with our luggage.”

If he was surprised that she would decide upon a hotel without investigating its amenities, he gave no show of it, moving with white-gloved precision to begin unloading. Up the carpeted steps, which did feel nice, she found a lobby that she *swore* was identical to the first she’d visited, though the paintings were more . . . blue?

The innkeeper bustled up. She was the type of woman made a foot taller by her hair; her stocky figure and bright yellow costume of bubbly cloth resembled an exotic fruit. She glanced at the valet, who had recruited the others to help with the luggage, and smiled.

The Fires of December

“I have the master suite ready, *Miss December*,” the woman said, sounding entirely too smug.

Having decided to stop clinging to her old life, December followed the innkeeper. The trip was over; it was time to plan how to explain to the king what was coming *without* making the entire court think she was insane.



Chapter X



he rooms were even more lavish than December had anticipated. A covert whisper to Tamantha, who spoke with the innkeeper in private to make arrangements, returned a price of half a gold a day, plus expenses. Residence at the inn where she'd grown up had been a sixteenbit a day *with* two meals included, so this price—while manageable—was exorbitant, and she found it mildly offensive that it didn't include *at least* breakfast.

(Lacking experience in these matters, she didn't realize that the more lavish the hotel, the more *helpful* they tend to be in *not* making things all-inclusive, giving you the *privilege* of displaying your private opulence by paying for every *little* thing. I've stayed at one that was proud of charging by the flush.)

There were four bedrooms, including one for a footman she didn't have and one adjoining the master for Tamantha. It had its own kitchen, a combined lavatory and bathing room with plumbing—something Matin had talked about but she'd never experienced—and even a massage room that she mistook for a storage room, considering that poor table had a hole in it.

(Hotels, massage tables, and carriages might help place the level of technology of this kingdom for you—that, along with the cannons atop the walls, which December had yet to notice. They were just a little behind your technology level, meaning they were breathing down the neck of an industrial revolution, but hadn't reached it yet. Notably, though, their understanding of textiles and—oddly—plastics went beyond what you'd expect of their era.)

Amaal bounced around, cooing over the plush seats, trying each one, all the while jabbering about how—as a priestess—she was forbidden such luxury *unless*, of course, she was offering spiritual support to someone who needed help not losing their way amid the application of their wealth. Tamantha ordered the valets to set up their things, including her sewing materials. After spending the trip working, she nearly had the gown ready for December's appearance at court.

December took off her long black jacket—the old one with the high collar she'd loved during her youth, newly given to her by her foster father in this timeline—and laid it across a chair in a nook by the window, angled perfectly toward the distant Megalith's chest. She settled there and inspected the black hole in the threadbare skin, gushing red blood that separated into other colors as it poured down into the

The Fires of December

river. The motion was transfixing—like the demons, beautiful in the way of a flickering flame.

Though a part of December wished she'd hidden in her room the entire trip upriver—not picking up any attendants—she was grateful for Tamantha, who knew just how much to tip the valets and how to order a small meal, along with December's favorite mint tea. She took the food in that same nook, watching the Megalith's hollow eye sockets begin to glow as dusk fell over the city.

It wasn't the kind of night that came for smaller towns, with rare, isolated points of light. Here, men with flame-tipped poles lit streetlamps, and most of the buildings had a strange lingering *glow* to them, as did the rivers. Fresh demon's blood, apparently, absorbed the sunlight, and radiated it for a few hours after darkness arrived. As they mixed it into paint for the buildings, each structure glowed a smoky orange-red. While Kingseat bordered on garish during the day, in the early hours of night it looked more like a giant fireplace of simmering coals just after the fire died out. In Rivershore, on feast nights the walkways were often lined with wicker baskets that had candles inside, and this was a similar effect.

Tamantha pointed out the window and over the wall. "You might be interested in that, Miss."

"Those lights?" December said, squinting. Beyond the city wall, she could make out some distant twinkling. "Are they on the orange river? Ships, I assume?"

"Warships," Tamantha whispered. "I got the valets talking as they worked so I could feel out the local political situation. Looks like Duke Kird is at it again."

"Um . . . who?"

"Duke Kird? The Orange Duke, second most powerful man in the kingdom? There are three dukes, but he's the only one whose power rivals the king. Each rules lands down one of the rivers, while the king

rules the capital and the fertile land northward—and as the other three owe him fealty, their lands are also technically his. It doesn't always work that way though.

"The four usually get along, but apparently there was a recent incident with Duke Kird's daughter at court. As the River Orange is deeper than the River Violet, he can get his warships all the way up to the walls—though he has moored them at the very edge of his lands. The valets don't think it's anything to worry about; Kird has done this off and on over the last few decades. A threat, yes, but it's never *actually* turned into war."

December sipped her tea, remembering the warnings that had come downriver from the capital during her middle years. Talk of wars of succession, of noblemen at each other's throats after the king's death, and of the capital burned to slag. Those wars would ebb eventually, as the rivers curdled and communication dried up.

Tamantha retired to her sewing room, intent on getting the gown ready in time. Amaal, after trying each of the beds in the rooms other than the master, decided upon the one she wanted and unpacked there. Eventually though, dressed in a simple nightgown and robe, she approached the nook with her own cup of tea. She wore a small cap on her short, tightly curled hair, and had a book under her arm, but didn't open it as she stepped to the window and whispered in awe at the buildings lighting up the darkness. December sipped her tea, watching the glowing blood roil like lava.

"I have," Amaal said, settling down in the opposite chair and opening her book, "everything I've been able to gather about the demon for you these last few weeks. Is now a good time?"

"Perhaps the only time," December said. "Considering my meeting is tomorrow."

"Right! Okay. So . . . the Megalith, the first demon; all others up here were born from its soul. The ones down south, near the monastery, are their own entities, we think, as they reportedly existed before

The Fires of December

the Megalith. It came here some eight hundred years ago, and . . . Well, the records are spotty, *Miss December*. Its arrival—or maybe awakening?—caused a cataclysm. In those days, it manifested as a firestorm, without a body. The southern plain? That was once where we all lived, the records say, a place with many forests. The demon rampaged, and people moved to the highlands to escape it, but . . . Well, it fed on human souls, you see, and eventually followed . . .”

“How did it become person-shaped?” December asked, tracing its silhouette against the stars: bony hips, no visible genitals, protruding ribs, skull with deep red lights glowing in the sockets. Either those lights didn’t manifest during the day, or it was too bright to see them until the sun went down.

“That happened over time,” Amaal explained. “Oh! There’s an explanation from the Prophet somewhere . . . Yes, here it is. He said that he’d seen demons like this before in other lands, and they often take the shape of skeletal figures. This one—upon feasting on enough Investiture (that’s his word for souls, *Miss*)—eventually adopted the shape of the people it consumed. That took centuries, but it grew stronger and stronger, and while people lived in fear of it for generations, it grew to the point that all people were in danger of annihilation. Our ancestors prayed and prayed and prayed to Valor, and the Prophet arrived as a result!”

“Arrived,” December said, sipping her tea, “from where?”

“Straight from the Goddess,” Amaal whispered, as if it were some grand secret. “He appeared out of thin air, with no warning or explanation. Months later, he *vanished* in the same way. That was after he’d slain the demon, leaving behind one of his swords to pin the monster down and force it into an eternal grave.”

“One of his swords?”

“Oh, he had several,” Amaal said, flipping through her notebook. “The one he left is said to grant immortality to the one who wields it, though of course, prying it free would release the demon.”

Brandon Sanderson

Which is, December thought, exactly what must be close to happening . . . “You said it wasn’t easy to do?”

“Impossible,” Amaal agreed. “‘The sword responds only to the Prophet’s voice, and is bound by his will, refusing the touch of any mortal.’”

“You know nothing more than that?”

“The books didn’t say.” Amaal shifted in her seat. “It’s . . . heresy to talk of pulling it free, Miss.”

“Someone’s going to do it, Amaal. Within the next month, that sword will be drawn out and the demon released.”

“Miss,” Amaal said, “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to pry, but I’m your spiritual advisor. You make such comments—they baffle me. How do you *know* what is coming?”

It was an opportunity, and December seized it as practice, for she was going to have to explain this on the morrow to the king. She began by explaining how she’d died at age eighty, and been reborn somehow into her youthful body. Then she talked about the things she’d seen when young the first time.

For once, Amaal listened without interruption. She sat with widening eyes as December referenced the notes she’d made of her best guesses at dates. After a good hour of talking, she ended where she’d begun: with her death and rebirth. Then she waited with held breath for Amaal’s response.

Silence.

“Well?” December finally prompted.

“It is . . . a lot to take in, Miss,” Amaal said.

“You sound reticent.”

“The Prophet very clearly indicated,” she said, “that traveling through time, as you explain it, is an impossibility.”

“It happened to me nonetheless.”

“You’re certain it wasn’t merely an extravagant dream?”

The Fires of December

"I'm certain, Amaal," December said with a sinking feeling. She could see from the way Amaal fidgeted uncomfortably, her eyes turned away, that she didn't believe. And . . . she was likely a more willing listener than the king would be.

"I don't think, Miss," Amaal said carefully, "that if the demon were going to be freed, Valor would send visions—"

"It wasn't a vision. It was my *life*."

"—to a random person. No offense. It would be to one of the head priests, or maybe the king. Are you . . . feeling well? I mean, if we look at the facts, you might *think* of yourself as a simple woman from a rural village, but you have the appearance of someone foreign, and your attitude is of one raised in wealth."

"That's a mistake everyone is making about me, Amaal," December said, unable to keep the frustration from her voice. "I'm not . . . Listen, if I'm right, then the entire nation is in serious danger, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's true."

"Then it's my duty to present it to the king, isn't it?"

"It is the right thing, Miss," Amaal said, nodding. "As your spiritual advisor, I commend you for undertaking this quest. I . . . Maybe be careful how you present all of this? A lot of what you say sounds . . . well, a little like the results of witchcraft."

"Which is, exactly, what?"

"Making pacts with demons," Amaal explained, "and entering into their service for personal glory and gain. They burn and grant the ability to start fires but, Miss . . . they're often reported to encourage people to free the Megalith. They promise boons like long lives or immunity from disease."

"Yet here, I'm trying to *prevent* it from being freed."

"I know. It's just . . . a dream that says you're able to die and be reborn sounds like a lie that a demon might give, promising eternal youth. And a vision of flames and destruction sounds like a future it

might enjoy. I know you're trying to do good, but something about all of this feels off. As if a demon might have made you dream, in order to provoke you to . . . I don't know. You're right that you aren't trying to free the Megalith, but to stop it from being freed. Still, be careful, please. Talk like this makes people uncomfortable, and the king has no love of witches. Even I know that, and I was raised at the other end of the River Violet."

"I'll do what I can," December said. "Thank you for your counsel."

Amaal took that as a dismissal, rising from her seat and fleeing to her room—where, looking back briefly, she seemed frightened of December in a way she never had been before.

The door closed softly. Tamartha was still humming to herself in her workroom, and the buildings outside began to lose their glow, fading like isolated embers, though the river retained its light. December stared out into its depths, wishing—despite the month-long preparation she'd had while traveling—for more time to find a better way to describe all of this. She remembered Matin's discomfort, mirrored by Amaal's, and searched frantically for a plan to prevent the king from thinking her a lunatic.

She stayed up too late. On one hand, December was not surprised by Amaal's reaction. She'd spent the entire trip upriver wondering how to explain this all without it sounding as if she were imagining things. She'd devised a plan to account for that, but still she worried that she wouldn't be enough. The whole trip, she'd told herself that she was just a messenger, that what she'd seen merely needed to be delivered to more intelligent people so they could solve the problem.

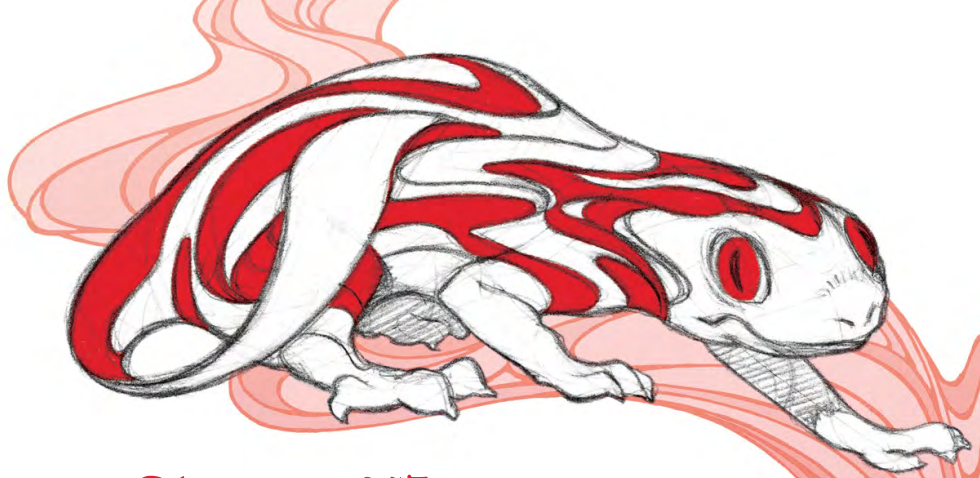
She maintained hope that would work, and I implore you to not think her naive for this sense. If something similar were to happen to you, I assume your first instinct would also be to bring the news to the authorities.

Still, she stayed up much of the night, preparing her words. Then her

The Fires of December

few hours of fitful sleep ended in a knock at the door and a bleary-eyed Tamantha entering to help her prepare. The next few hours passed in a blur, and before she knew it, December was standing on the palace steps themselves, her two attendants just behind, the time of her appointment with the king having arrived.

This was her chance to save the kingdom.



Chapter XI



he royal palace of Kingseat was not called “Kingseat’s Seat,” which December considered a missed opportunity. It was, instead, called the “royal palace,” which she supposed made sense. It faced away from the Megalith—the entrance oddly pointing toward the wall of the city—a gesture she assumed was symbolic of something, though in practicality, it just meant the view was worse. She had to climb a large number of little steps up the front, each made

inconveniently short, as if the builders had been trying to stuff as many in as possible.

Her guess was validated when she heard Tamantha whispering about the “Hundred Grand Steps” to Amaal. Odd, how in trying to create such an awe-inspiring number, the builders had undermined their very goal: December did not find the steps grand at all, but rather annoying.

A soldier stood on either side of every third step, each wearing a red-and-black costume with extravagant shoulders and a sweeping cape, a golden halberd in hand. She thought it must be the most boring job in the world: standing and looking intimidating all day, staring across those steps at one of their compatriots. She wondered if they occasionally made eye contact, and if that was as awkward as it seemed.

As she climbed, she noticed something worrying: That demon was back, the one in the shape of a cat. It wove between the legs of the soldiers to the right, climbing the steps as she did, shooting her molten-eyed glances. The others could see it—one soldier broke form by peeking at it before returning to his stoic position, seeming unnerved. By now, she’d picked out other demons moving through the shadows of the city, their glowing eyes in alleyways or hanging from eaves. She got the impression that this one was unusual, walking around so openly, but not unheard of—and people in Kingseat had obviously been trained not to interact with or acknowledge the monsters.

(Her guess here was largely correct. You might be confused about how dangerous the things actually are if they’re always around like this and people don’t seem *too* concerned. The answer is that they are dangerous, but rarely. Imagine them like a variety of venomous spider, of a type you might occasionally find inside your home. Frightening in concept, but in practical experience, generally safe to be around if you don’t agitate them. People learned to live with the demons’ proximity;

The Fires of December

by following a few simple rules like never speaking to them, the people ensured incidents were extremely rare.)

At the top of the steps, December presented her invitation/order to a clerk with red gloves, a cape, and shoulder pads wide enough to serve cocktails off of. (The uniforms were changed yearly, so not as often as other costumes, and were of course of demon's blood. These were multilayered, with thick bulky tabards.) He made a great show of examining it, his spectacles perched on his nose like a grandchild upon a knee. She gave him Martin's letter of introduction, even though it seemed redundant now, which he read then tucked away.

"You are punctual, Miss December," he said. "The king will approve. He has asked that I announce you by the name of your house. Have you one to provide?" He tipped his head down, looking over the spectacles with practiced skepticism. It seemed to her they must have classes in ministerial school about how to look at people like that, as Martin had displayed a similar air at times.

"I should like," she said, having prepared for questions like this, "to explain that directly to the king myself."

"Is that so?"

(Another important class: "How to use a question mark but imply a period.")

In response to his tone, December gave him the *stare*.

It didn't do a thing.

The clerk just met her eyes, then sniffed and stamped her invitation. The attitude left December unnerved. Her expression, trained over a lifetime, was a sharpened sword as mighty as any physical blade: It was the glare of a grandmother who had watched the world burn down. The poise of a woman who had buried her family, then kept going. It was the primary tool by which she had kept the survivors of Rivershore from murdering each other in the decades of grief, hunger, and despair of a dying world.

She didn't think of it as a *tool*, not in the way I'm explaining it here. More, to December, this was simply her *way*. The attitude and manifestation of her expectations was a core expression of who she was and what she'd been through. So having the clerk completely ignore it was like screaming in a person's ear, and then watching them keep reading a novel, uninterrupted.

December was led into the vaultlike halls of the palace—the cat-shaped demon, blessedly, stayed outside. Amaal and Tamartha were detained soon after they entered and were taken to a waiting room. Without them, December grew increasingly nervous. Particularly when she was marched into the throne room itself (Kingseat's seat's seat?) and confronted a court full of people who all had her *exact same expression*. The one that evoked a sense of purposefulness. The sense of having been through so much, you had seen it all before, and were not surprised by anything. That air of general competence implying, “You'd better do as you're told, young lady, or *I'll* have to do it.”

It was an entire room of old ladies in the bodies of, mostly, younger people. December wondered for a brief, existential moment if they'd all been through what she had. Then after looking her up and down and judging her, most of them turned and pointedly whispered to their companions.

It's an act, she realized. *They've learned how to project authority*. Was that what others saw when she interacted with them? That worried her, and she thought she might try to do better, and not be dismissive of them, should she survive this day without getting herself beheaded.

Now, we could spend all day describing this one room. Here, you'd finally find the delightful mix of garish opulence you've been expecting from the city. A mix of amazing artistry and royal buffoonery. For example, the chandeliers were in the shapes of dolphins, constructed entirely of blue diamonds. Rich? Yes. Over the top? Most definitely. Buffoonish? Well, the king had demanded the design, and Kingseat

The Fires of December

was far from the ocean. He had been suspicious that his artists, in saying they needed to visit the coast for research, were conniving to waste his money on a relaxing vacation. So, through no fault of the artists, the resulting decorations looked less like dolphins, and more like cow mermaids who'd swallowed several beach balls.

This is a perfect metaphor for the room in general: the gross and inappropriate application of wealth and talent. I'm not going to describe most of the costumes, as what you imagine will be inaccurate in *detail* but almost certainly accurate in *genre*. Let us then focus our attention on three individuals December picked out immediately, each of whom will be relevant to the story.

The first was the king himself, Beaudilog the Nineteenth, first of his name. (Don't ask.) He was wearing a table.

I believe I mentioned the fashion arms race in the city. Well, one of the most avant-garde trends that week was to wear everyday objects as clothing, such that the mundanity of the ordinary was contrasted with the incredulity of high fashion. Without his table, King Beaudilog would have been largely unremarkable. He had tufts of hair that he pretended would make people think he wasn't balding, as long as he wore a crown sized two inches too big for his head so it drooped in a way he declared fashionable. He was around sixty, and of average height, average features, and average temperament. In another life, he would arrive to fix your cabinets when one door started to stick, and you'd forget his name by the time you had to pay him.

But here, he wore a small table with a hole in the center for his neck, two legs in front of his berobed chest, two in the back, which prevented him from relaxing against the throne—but that was the price you paid for being on the cutting edge of fashion. Or the flat-topped serving space of fashion.

December took this in, quietly grateful to Tamantha for the gown she wore, of green velvet and silver embroidery. It wasn't a table or a

bird feeder, and so wouldn't impress those in the room, but it was the richest and best-fitting gown December had ever worn, and gave her a boost of confidence in the absence of her friends.

The two other men who caught her attention were opposites. The first was on the king's right, a hulking general with a chest so broad, it could have launched aircraft. He wore a reasonable outfit in comparison to the others—matching the multilayered black-and-red costumes of the soldiers on the steps, with oversized shoulders but an otherwise functional design, though his had a white cape. He had the light tan complexion of roughly three-quarters of the people in the room, the rest having a darker skin tone like Amaal.

December knew this general at the king's side immediately, though they'd never met. She knew those thick arms, that expansive forehead, that brow straight out of *Cave Painting Monthly*. Most of all, she knew his look, with sunken, resentful eyes. She'd seen Bark hang, but here was his doppelgänger—again, not in the *details*, but in the *genre*. She shivered, feeling his hand hit her face, an event some fifty-odd years old to her at this point, yet never forgotten. She would avoid this general at all costs.

Nearest the king on his left, the second man wore a modest suit, his only ornamentation a silver chain around his neck. Granted, his clothing was made of vibrant green and blue lines in a checkered pattern. But the cut reminded her of Matin's outfits, and he wasn't wearing full-sized eggbeaters as earrings like the woman to December's left. More, he had a kindly look about him, and he was the only one in the room who gave her an encouraging smile rather than indifference or hostility. He was a darker complexion, like those downriver, and was older than Matin was now, perhaps in his late forties, but he had that same small frame and genuine air that December had always found attractive in her second husband.

These two men stood on opposite sides of the throne, in positions that she (rightly) guessed indicated important functionaries in

The Fires of December

the government. On the king's right, General Drakes, Minister of Defense. On the left, Lord Geoffrim Satin, Minister of Finance.

December offered the king a curtsy of the proper deference. She needed this man's help. She hoped that the news of who she was, and the rumors of what she'd implied about her heritage, hadn't soured him on her *too* much. The king studied her long enough that she began to grow uncomfortable. It had been a long, long time since someone had been able to make her feel that way. Obviously, this was the most powerful man in the realm, and he would be a master of the political games that his court had—

"Who the hell is this?" Beaudilog asked.

The finance minister leaned over and whispered to him a moment, and she could *sense* the poor man's long-suffering frustration.

"Oh," the king said. "You're some foreign noblewoman? Why have you been telling everyone that you know me?"

"That's an unfortunate rumor, Your Majesty," she said, stumbling over her words. She hadn't expected him to be . . . well, this forthright. "I told people I was bringing you an urgent message, and they assumed more than I spoke."

"Well, do better next time," the king snapped, then turned to a secretary with a board full of appointments. "All right, who's next?"

The secretary, a younger woman, quietly whispered a name while December stood there, stunned. All this preparation, and that was it?

"Um, Your Majesty?" she asked.

"I dismissed you," he said, with a wave of the hand. "I don't know how it's done in your kingdom, woman, but here, we don't annoy kings unless they speak to us first."

She shut her mouth, but quickly considered her options. Should she make a scene? Scream out and prophesy doom? Even Amaal hadn't believed her, so that seemed an easy way to get herself executed—but she knew, in desperation, that if she left this chamber, she would never be welcomed back in.

Brandon Sanderson

She did not speak again, but she did not leave. She clasped her hands, and remembered holding her sick children in her arms. Remembered covering Matin's dead eyes with shovelfuls of dirt. Remembered the world growing cold as a grave itself.

Her back straightened. And her eyes . . .

Her eyes *endured*.

December's stare had failed earlier, yes. The others in court had practiced similar looks, yes. However, in my experience, certain airs come with age and true, harrowing experience that *can't* be imitated with training. It was more than a glance, or what we've been calling a *look* or a *way*. It's like how you can tell a rock that has been weathered for centuries in the wind from one freshly emerged. Of course, some can't tell the difference, but those practiced at feigning the air . . .

Well, they can tell. December did not glare, and she did not scowl. But she did *endure*.

When the crowd stopped whispering with one another indifferently and started to watch her, she endured. When the next person was announced, entered, then stumbled to a stop halfway to the throne, glancing about uncertainly, December endured.

She endured the king's displeasure as it turned back toward her, his face reddening, his eyebrows scrunching in a scowl. December did not ignore the anger, but like the rock parted wind and tempest, she parted it. In the way only a woman marked by eighty years of harsh winds could do and no courtier could feign.

I dug graves for children with my bare hands, king. You do not intimidate me.

Then . . .

The king hesitated, uncertain what to do with her. That hesitation was just long enough for the finance minister to take his arm and whisper, "She came a long way, Majesty, with a message for you. It might be important."

The Fires of December

“Do we know her house?” the king whispered back. “Is she someone I can ignore?”

“We don’t know,” the minister said, “but maybe she’ll explain? If you give her leave?”

She softly blessed that man as the king sat up, then sighed, and waved toward her. “Speak.”

“We have had a prophet,” she said, giving the lie she’d developed during her travels, “in my lands. He warned us of disaster soon to arrive: a plague, a terrible sickness, and fires caused by a great demon unleashed. We are making preparations, but I was sent with this urgent news to you, great king, so that you may likewise prepare.”

The defense minister huffed. “What is this nonsense? A prophet? Why would a prophet come to you and not us?”

“I do not presume to question the ways of the prophets, my lord,” she said. “Only to deliver their messages as a gesture of kindness and fellowship.”

“Well, all right,” the king said. “Consider us warned. *Now* will you be dismissed?”

He’s not going to do anything, she realized with horror. She had prepared for disbelief, and would have preferred it to this indifference. There *had* to be a way. She glanced to the finance minister, and decided upon a gamble.

“Perhaps,” she said, “I could explain the details to a member of your court, Majesty, so they could gauge the threat?”

“Great, if it will be rid of you,” Beaudilog said, then scanned the crowd for some minor functionary at the back—an unimportant person to babysit her.

Fortunately, before he could call on one, the finance minister put his hand on the king’s throne near the shoulder and leaned forward. “I’ll volunteer, Majesty.”

“Fine, Geoffrim, if you wish.”

Grateful the man had interpreted her glances correctly, December finally allowed herself to be led toward an attendant chamber. The secretary who had been helping the king swapped for another, hurrying to join the finance minister and December. Once inside a smaller chamber, which had light wood finishes and a utilitarian meeting table, Geoffrim closed the door—making it only the three of them.

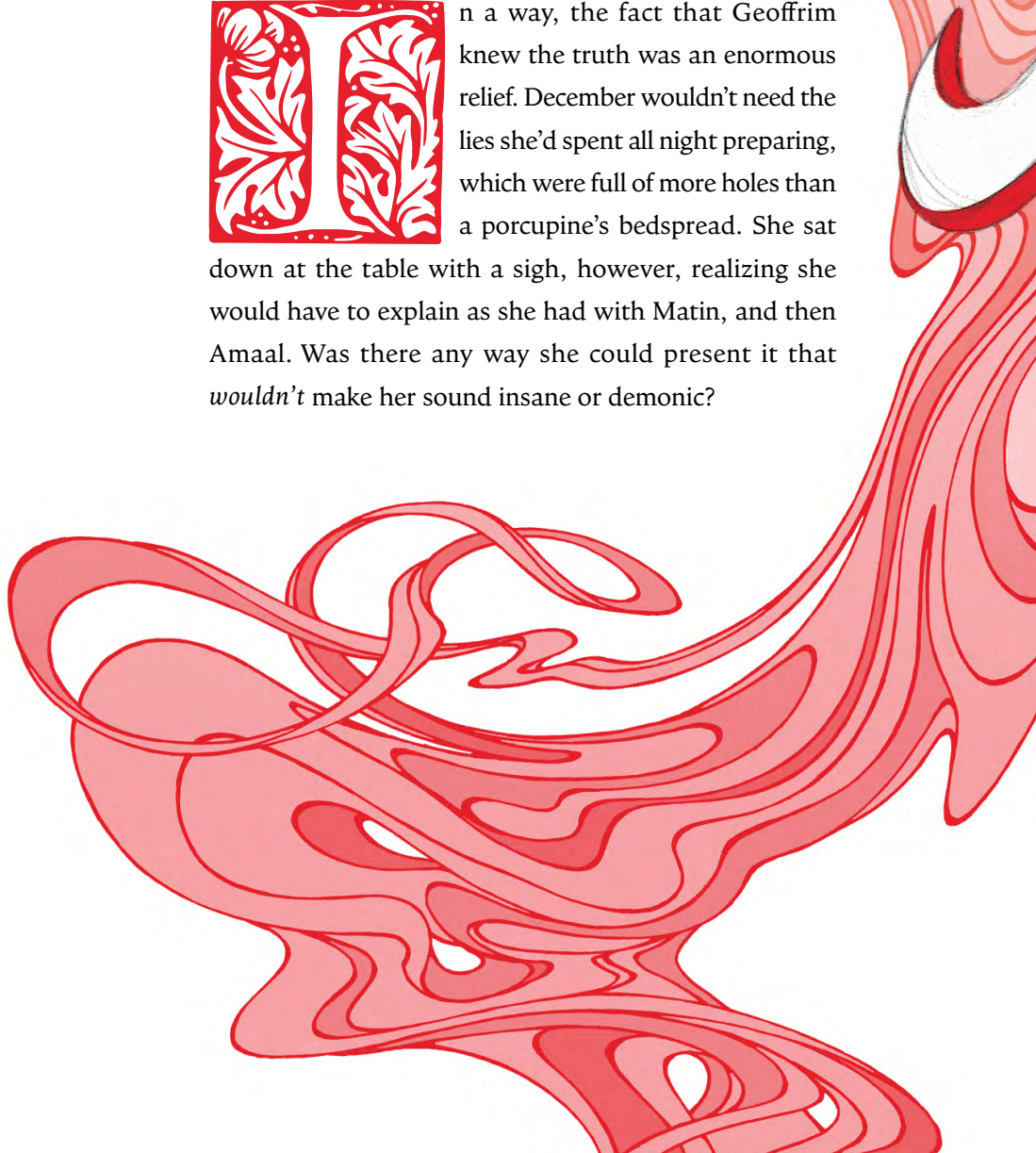
“All right,” he said to December in an affable, but firm tone. “*You’re* going to explain to me why a twenty-one-year-old fosterling from Rivershore is parading about as a foreign noblewoman with veiled threats about the collapse of the kingdom. And *I’m* going to try *very hard* to be open-minded and not recommend you for the dungeons.”



Chapter XII



In a way, the fact that Geoffrim knew the truth was an enormous relief. December wouldn't need the lies she'd spent all night preparing, which were full of more holes than a porcupine's bedspread. She sat down at the table with a sigh, however, realizing she would have to explain as she had with Matin, and then Amaal. Was there any way she could present it that *wouldn't* make her sound insane or demonic?



"I have had to lie, my lord," she said, "because any time I tell the truth, nobody believes me. My story is outlandish."

"Geoffrim will do," he said, sitting down. "No need for 'my lord' with me. And I am ready for something outlandish."

The secretary was in her thirties, with blond hair up. Her gorgeous violet dress had fabric wings, and was formfitting, but with a bell flaring out at the feet. It made full use, December thought, of the ability to be magically applied. She wore only a single teaspoon around her neck as a nod to current fashion trends. Once in her seat beside Geoffrim, she opened her notebook, pen poised.

"This," Geoffrim added, "is Lady Petva, the king's niece and royal recorder."

"Pretend I'm not here," the woman said.

"Whatever your story," Geoffrim said, "just tell it to us honestly."

"I . . ." December heaved another sigh. "All right, the absolute truth is that I've traveled in time. I've seen the fall of the kingdom. I lived my whole life once before, and when I died as a woman in her eighties, I woke up the next morning in my young body. Nobody else seems to remember the sixty-odd years I experienced during the intervening time."

Petva hesitated, then looked over at Geoffrim. He put his hand to his forehead, rubbing the skin there. He was a man fond of jewelry, with bracelets peeking from beneath his sleeve, matched by a silver necklace. Once, she would have been in awe of such luxury, but bracelets and a simple chain seemed quaint compared to the king's table.

"You're right," he said, "that claim is outlandish. Do you have any proof?"

"I found a new silver vein," she said. "I walked right there as, in my previous life, it had been discovered already."

"Yes, I read about that," he said, nodding to Petva. She searched through the papers in her stack, handing a few to him. "The agent I sent to Rivershore from the neighboring town reported your past to

The Fires of December

me via carrier demon—properly bound and contracted, of course. It's her opinion that you colluded with . . . what was his name . . . a man named Bark? You got him to reveal the location, then turned him in for a murder he'd committed so you could keep the riches yourself."

December's heart sank.

"Anything else you can give us?" Petva asked, shuffling papers. "Actual evidence?"

December struggled, but it had been nearly sixty years, too long for the small things. What she remembered were big events—months, even years, into the future from the current day.

"No," she whispered. "I don't think I can give you evidence of the immediate kind. Time itself will substantiate my experiences, but by then, the king will be dead, the city burning, and the nobles at war over the throne while the demon itself, free of its bonds, will be burning and ravaging the land. Or . . . well, that's my interpretation of events I gathered from people fleeing the summit."

"You must understand," Geoffrim said, "that your claims *require* extraordinary evidence. I've tracked you these last few weeks, ever since you revealed yourself in Duck . . . um, in Dukeseat. I'll admit, I was confused enough that I didn't suggest you be arrested." He continued, reading off a page. "Everyone in your hometown speaks of you highly: You're a good worker, not prone to drama. They found you standoffish, but not arrogant, more . . ."

"An old soul," Petva offered.

"Yes, an old soul. Not literally, not like you've been reborn, more just . . ."

"I have a *way*," December whispered. "Yes, I'm not surprised they said that."

"None of them think you'd be likely to pretend to be something you are not," Geoffrim continued. "Yet here you are, saying you are a noble."

“Letting people believe I was a *former* noble,” December said, knowing it was silly, but the distinction was important to her. “I married the town reeve . . . well, about nine years from now. I would have married him, had his wife actually died.”

“The woman whose life you saved?” Geoffrim asked. “She was . . . choking? Hmm . . . this sounds like the Edak maneuver.”

“I learned it from a doctor,” she said, “before marrying Matin. It was a miracle I remembered it all those years later. Um . . . in the past . . . It’s confusing, Lord Geoffrim. I’m sorry.”

He and Petva shared another look. She shrugged.

“I’m going to let you,” Geoffrim said to December, “go back home and forget about any of this, so long as you stop spreading rumors of the demon being freed. We can’t stand a panic.”

Again, December found opportunity slipping from her. Like the others, they didn’t believe her. Why would they? In truth, these two had shown her more kindness than she deserved. Should she take the deal? Return home, do what she could for the people there? Now that she knew what was coming, she could at least get some of them to leave with her in advance of the plague . . .

Abandoning thousands, tens of thousands, maybe *hundreds* of thousands of people to horrible, painful deaths.

It will perhaps not surprise you that she decided, right there, that she would not leave. Maybe the day would come when she fled and did her best to get her loved ones to safety, but she would first do *everything* she could here. December rose, head bowed, intending to promise that she would stop pretending to be noble—but also to insist that she could not leave yet.

Then, however, she stopped and cocked her head. Geoffrim had been shuffling through some papers, slipping them back into a folder—and by the name of the folder, these were all reports from the region that held her town. That made sense; he sorted the news and intel he gathered by location.

The Fires of December

As he riffled through these to replace the small set of papers about her, December saw something unexpected inside: a picture depicting a man with distinctive features.

White hair, kept short. Eyes that smiled at you, not with you. A prominent nose . . .

“Who is that?” December asked, walking around the table to get a better look. “I swear I’ve seen him somewhere.”

The two nobles sat up straighter, as if they’d just heard a door slam. Geoffrim deliberately, almost mechanically, turned the picture toward December. “You,” he said with the forced calm of someone who was anything but, “recognize this man?”

“Yes . . .” December said. “I remember that nose . . .”

(See. I told you it was incredible.)

“. . . But the outfit is wrong,” December continued, mumbling. “In this, he’s wearing black. It wasn’t that, in my memory.”

“He was seen in her town,” Petva said to Geoffrim, “last month. He stayed at her inn. Here, was his costume something like this?” Petva pulled out a sheet depicting an outrageous jester’s costume. In the capital, such vibrant colors didn’t stand out at all, but in December’s little town . . . Well, that clothing could make an impression that lasted decades.

“Yes,” December said. “That’s it. It was so long ago, but I remember him. I asked after him when I spoke to my foster mother, which means . . . I guess it was that night, wasn’t it?” December said. “The night before my twenty-first birthday . . .”

Geoffrim thought a moment, and something seemed to occur to him. “The night before you awoke with memories of the future?”

“If you want to put it that way,” December said. “Then yes.”

“He was there,” Geoffrim said to Petva. “We should have seen this.”

“You think this is . . .” Petva trailed off.

They exchanged another of those glances, then Geoffrim gestured toward the table. “Sit back down, Miss December,” he said. “I think it

may be best if you explained each and *every* detail you can remember of what you saw in the vision that night.”

“... Vision?” she said, experiencing conversational whiplash as she settled down. “It was my life, not a vision.”

Regardless, she did as they asked, and began recounting her life’s experiences. She’d recorded them in her own notebook, and could therefore recite the sequence well. This time, the two were extremely attentive—asking probing, sometimes invasive, questions. Pushing her to remember small details that, at the time, she hadn’t considered remarkable.

It was validating. Their attention was *finally* what she’d been hoping for when she had set out for Kingseat, and their expert questions helped her remember important details.

The first significant point was news that the king had died, accompanied by stories of strange storms starting a few months after her wedding. Tales of fire in the sky and winds that burned. Tales that the demon had escaped, and this time the two nobles agreed softly that it sounded reasonable. These events would commence in about three weeks’ time, if her memory was accurate.

Second, they asked about the succession crisis. They determined from her fragmented recollection of the livery worn by the soldiers fleeing the battlefields, stopping in her town for rest, that it would involve all three dukes fighting for power. That would begin several months after the demon’s release.

Third, they asked about the gap of news, and stories of the war dying out. That marked the time when the demon, perhaps after fleeing for a time, would start re-forming a new body. They doubted it would simply be able to reinhabit the Megalith, but would begin fresh after consuming the people of the populated cities to the north.

Finally, they asked after the plague. They thought this might be the result of the demon becoming fully reconstituted, leaving the old body behind, which ran out of blood, the dregs turning sour and even

The Fires of December

more evil. They wondered at people called the “hexers,” who might have held the demon back for a while. To December’s question, they explained that they were “basically witches, but don’t tell the priests we said that.”

They were interested in how December’s town recovered, at least a little, and why the demon didn’t chase them. Geoffrim thought maybe this meant the demon would move on to other lands at that point, some forty years after its release. The entire debriefing took hours, with Petva needing to stretch her fingers multiple times, and December sending word to her two servants that all was going well. At the end, she felt exhausted, drained, and . . .

Fulfilled?

She’d done it. She’d given her message to the king—or even better, to capable and intelligent people near the king. If the kingdom could be saved, *these* were the ones to do it. The burden was off December’s shoulders, freely and gladly passed to those who knew so much more than she did.

She sat back as Petva wrote the answers to their last probing questions. “Is that . . . is that it?” December asked.

“For now,” Geoffrim said, holding a cup of something they called sapp, a local caffeinated drink, served cold. “Though I’ll want you in town, able to be summoned if I have further questions. Petva, could you come up with a lineage sheet for her? The Lark kingdom, perhaps?”

The familiarity between them, though neither wore wedding rings, made December treasonously sad. This man, so different from her Matin, shared some of the attributes that had made her eventually fall for the reeve. Geoffrim was older, still her junior by several decades, but not so young that she couldn’t consider . . . But if these two were already a couple . . .

Foolish woman, she thought. *You’re eighty and have had two husbands. You should be done with that sort of nonsense.*

She found she didn't *want* to be done with it. Perhaps part was youthful hormones, but she thought there was something else. Matin would never be hers, and theirs had been a relationship of convenience for so long before becoming more. She had done what was right: She had come to the city, giving up her old life. Didn't she deserve a new one? Didn't she deserve a little passion, a *real* relationship?

She found, remarkably, there was a spark within her that wanted such a thing. Powerfully. Something for *her* after all she had given for everyone else.

Petva went out for a moment, then returned with a stiff piece of paper with some official-looking language on it. December accepted it, reading. (In a way, that was proof itself: A woman of her age and background shouldn't have been able to read at all, let alone parse such a document.)

"This . . ." December said. "Is this what I *think* it is?"

"Proof of lineage," Geoffrim said, "from a middling noble house of the Lark kingdom to the east. Your mother might have been from there, judging by your coloring."

"This paper is a lie," she said. "It claims I'm noble!"

"We call them forgeries," Petva said, "when they're written down."

"Nonsense," Geoffrim said with a smile, pressing a seal at the bottom. "The government can't *forge* documents, so by merely existing, this is official. That's even the king's seal, authenticating it." He winked. "I get to use it now and then, and he has told me not to bother him with trivialities."

"But we don't *know* my mother was a noble," December said.

"We don't know she wasn't," Geoffrim replied. "Besides, it's all made up anyway—people are noble because we play along, and now they'll play along with you officially."

"But why?" December asked.

"Because I need you to stay in the city without people poking too much into your past," Geoffrim said, handing her a copy of the

The Fires of December

document. “This will satisfy the court, and it would take months for anyone to send to the records keeper in Lark for authentication—and it would take them months more, if not years, to properly search their books.”

“Some in court might try to find the truth,” Petva said, “but it will be difficult for them.”

“By the time answers arrive,” Geoffrim said, “we’ll have averted your disaster. Maybe it won’t happen as you outline, as I understand that visions like this are only *possible* futures.”

“Am I right in thinking,” December said, “that someone will try to pull out the Ever-Slaying Sword in the next few weeks?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Geoffrim said. “That’s almost certainly what you saw, but again, it isn’t *set*. It’s just a *possibility*. I’ll need to think about this, plan, consider, consult the archivists and priests . . .”

December held up the sheet, and found it distasteful. Before, she hadn’t been lying. She’d only said the truth. But . . . was it that big a step to take? And Geoffrim was right; she *should* stay in the city to see this through.

“I appreciate this, Lord Geoffrim,” she said. “And I will not take advantage of the presumed station. But . . . I do have to be clear. What I saw wasn’t a vision. I *lived* it.”

“That,” he said, leaning toward her, “is how I’m led to believe it often happens.”

“I don’t understand.”

“There are certain people,” Geoffrim said, hand on the picture of that extremely handsome man in the jester’s outfit, “who can see the future. Inaccurately sometimes, but they *do* exist. The Prophet was one. This man, who goes by a number of aliases, is another.”

“He’s an immortal,” Petva added, “from distant lands. We should have recognized when you first entered that your experience was no delusion, not if he was there. Coincidences don’t happen around him. He likely used his powers that night in the inn, looking into

the future—and you were towed along for some reason, like a leaf in a strong gust of wind. That’s why you were shown what could happen.”

“But . . .” December said, feeling cold. “My husband, my children, my life . . .”

“Not actually real,” Geoffrim said gently. “I’m sorry. Think of it like a dream—those can seem so vibrant when we’re asleep. Your experience was similar, but helped along by the powers of an immortal. Don’t fret. We *will* prepare for what you saw, just like you wanted us to! And take comfort in the fact that no one truly died. The misery you experienced was a fabrication.”

Those words rocked her. She wanted to reject them. That life *had* been real . . . to her . . . But if there was an explanation . . . It did make sense . . .

“I’m not an old woman?” December whispered.

“No,” Geoffrim said. “That must feel glorious to realize! You are a young maiden, vibrant, with your whole future ahead of you. From your story, you didn’t have a chance to enjoy your youth. Well, what better place to be a young woman with infinite options than here? Explore the city, mingle, enjoy yourself. Catch yourself a fine husband of city stock, maybe with a little noble blood.”

“You know,” Petva said idly. “I’d go back in time. If I had an opportunity, I’d become a young maiden again. Those are such carefree days; no one expects too much from you.”

December shrank back. If this revelation were true, and she was coming to the awful understanding that it must be, then she felt like a charlatan. She acted like she was eighty, but she’d merely *dreamed* that she was. If she understood what they were saying, she’d fabricated it all in a kind of delusion, and that didn’t make it real. Experience? Confidence? Wisdom? All pretense. A masquerade . . .

Lies. It was all lies.

The two nobles seemed to realize the severity of the self-reflection they’d caused. They gave her a minute, quietly conferring, discussing

The Fires of December

“Hoid’s” stop in Rivershore and what his other stops could have led to before he reached the capital.

“Wait . . .” December asked. “He’s here? In the city? This immortal?”

“Um . . .” Petva said. “Well, he *was*.”

“The man’s on a list,” Geoffrim said, “of powerful or dangerous outlanders we track.”

“Poorly,” Petva added.

“Poorly,” he agreed. “We don’t have the resources to do anything about these kinds of people. The most we can do is have our agents watch and report on their actions. This one was spotted in the south, then arrived in Kingseat four days ago aboard one of the faster vessels.”

“So he’s here?” December repeated. “Maybe I can talk to him, ask about the . . . the vision, as you put it? And why it affected me the way it did?”

The two were silent, and did not meet her eyes.

“What?” December asked.

“He *was* here,” Geoffrim said. “He was murdered two days ago, the day before you arrived.”

That’s right.

I realize we are already quite far into this tale, but I can now—finally—tell you what it is actually about. This is a murder mystery.

And I was the victim.



Chapter XIII



December had some of the same questions you likely have, so I'll let her ask them.

"Murdered?" she asked. "Didn't you call this man an *immortal*? Not to be forward, but . . ."

"No, you're quite right in asking," Geoffrim said, sitting again, suddenly seeming exhausted. The bags beneath his eyes, the drooping skin, the tone as he continued—all spoke of one man holding up a kingdom full of fools. "We don't know much about these people; some fragments

gathered over the years by the priests. The words of the Prophet himself, often obtuse. I ask for resources from the king, but I think . . . I think this entire idea scares him.”

“The idea that we,” Petva said, rubbing at a knot on Geoffrim’s shoulder, “are a very small people, with small ideas, compared to what might be out there. An entire universe of monsters like the demon and heroes with powers beyond our reckoning. It’s frightening to some.”

“It should be to everyone,” Geoffrim said. “I wish we could understand a *tenth* of what these outlanders know . . . The Prophet was immune to the touch of the demons. Did you know that? Demons couldn’t drain his soul because of the great protective artifacts in his possession. Alas, we can barely track such immortals, let alone understand their wonders. Regardless, there are tools that can be used to kill—after a fashion—even someone otherwise immortal.”

“The jester immortal was killed with some kind of powerful flame,” Petva added, “that burned his soul away.”

(It didn’t really burn my soul away so much as light it on fire and force it to constantly renew itself—though we’ll get to that. Yes, it was just as painful as you might imagine.)

“That weapon was meant for killing a demigod,” Geoffrim said, “similar to how the Ever-Slaying Sword incapacitated the Megalith. What was left of the jester immortal was found in an alleyway—a little nugget of black tar, constantly on fire.”

“Who . . .” December said. “Who would be *capable* of such a thing? Was it one of the demons?”

“They don’t have the power to affect the material world without a contract,” Geoffrim said. “This was likely done by someone in the king’s court, as they’re the only ones who could have heard about the jester’s arrival and known what it meant.”

“Unless,” Petva said, “as I *keep saying*, it was someone with their

The Fires of December

own information network. We might not be the only ones tracking the immortals.”

“Yes, fine,” Geoffrim said. “You’re right. I agree, you’re right. It’s quite obvious in light of this that the count . . .” Geoffrim trailed off, as if realizing that December was still there, watching. He cleared his throat, then stood up, and actually *bowed*—something she didn’t think a man of his rank would commonly do for a lowborn woman.

“Thank you,” he said as he righted himself, “for your courage in bringing this to us. I apologize for my earlier skepticism.”

“It . . . It’s all right,” December said. “I realize my story invited skepticism—demanded it, really.”

“Because of you, we have a greater handle on why the Immortal Storyteller might have been here,” he said. “I’m going to digest what you said and make certain the calamities you foretold will *not* come to pass. Once this is all through, I’ll see that your elevation to lady is made official according to royal records—so don’t fear eventual discovery. It is the least I can do as a reward.”

“I . . . Thank you again.” December still felt cold. It had been a dream. And she was just a girl after all.

“If you’ll excuse me,” Geoffrim said, “I’ve got to get back to court before the length of my absence causes gossip. Lady Petva will guide you to your servants. Rest assured, *Lady December*: I’ll persuade the king to see the import in these warnings, and we’ll handle what is coming. You’ve done your part, and it was much for someone so young to bear. Sleep easily tonight, and then enjoy your time in the capital. If I need anything else from you, I’ll send for you.”

He left then, with a nod toward Petva, to make sure she agreed. December was led out of the room another way, not requiring her to pass the members of the court again, for which she found herself grateful. She’d met them eye to eye before, but now . . .

Who was she? Did she even know?

At the end of a short hallway with minimal decorations, Petva cracked a door and gestured into a large room with snacks and drinks where the servants of the people called to court could await their masters. It was perhaps the homiest location December had encountered in the city so far, with an ordinary hearth, plain wooden tables, and simple cuts of cheese, bread, and salami. She looked at the paper in her hand naming her nobility and felt sick.

Her friends sat at a table, chatting with a few other servants, all of whom bore the distinctive expression of someone who had been caught in a long-winded discussion of the Prophet and were searching for a polite way to escape—and had made the mistake of assuming Amaal would eventually have to take a breath.

“Well, here you are,” Petva said. “Please relax a little, Lady December. It’s all going to be fine.”

“Thank you,” December said, wondering how she must look for them both to work so hard to reassure her. “Lady Petva . . . Lord Geoffrim seemed to think he *knew* who had attacked and killed this immortal.”

“Yeah, and he’s probably right,” Petva said. “I hate how often he’s able to do things like that.”

“If someone knew enough to attack and kill the immortal,” December said, “perhaps the immortal was here to prevent disaster, like the Prophet arrived in our previous time of need. The person who assassinated him would, therefore, be a primary suspect for the one planning to release the demon.”

“Yes . . .” Petva said, eyeing her. “But, girl, I recognize that look in your eyes. We can handle it, I assure you. You’ve done your part. Let us look into the matter now.”

“Yes, of course.” December bit her lip. Perhaps once, she would have requested more, but now . . . now she realized just how in over her head she was.

“Good,” Petva said. “Men like the count are *exceptionally* dangerous,

The Fires of December

let *alone* creatures like the immortal. Interacting with them is a deadly pursuit for one so young. Do as Lord Geoffrim suggested and take some time for yourself.”

Petva patted her arm as one might a child, then lightly shooed her into the room with the servants. December’s attendants saw her and leapt to their feet, Amaal looking so relieved she didn’t notice when the people she’d been talking to fled for the bar.

Together, the three women left the palace. Quest finished. Kingdom saved.

The end.

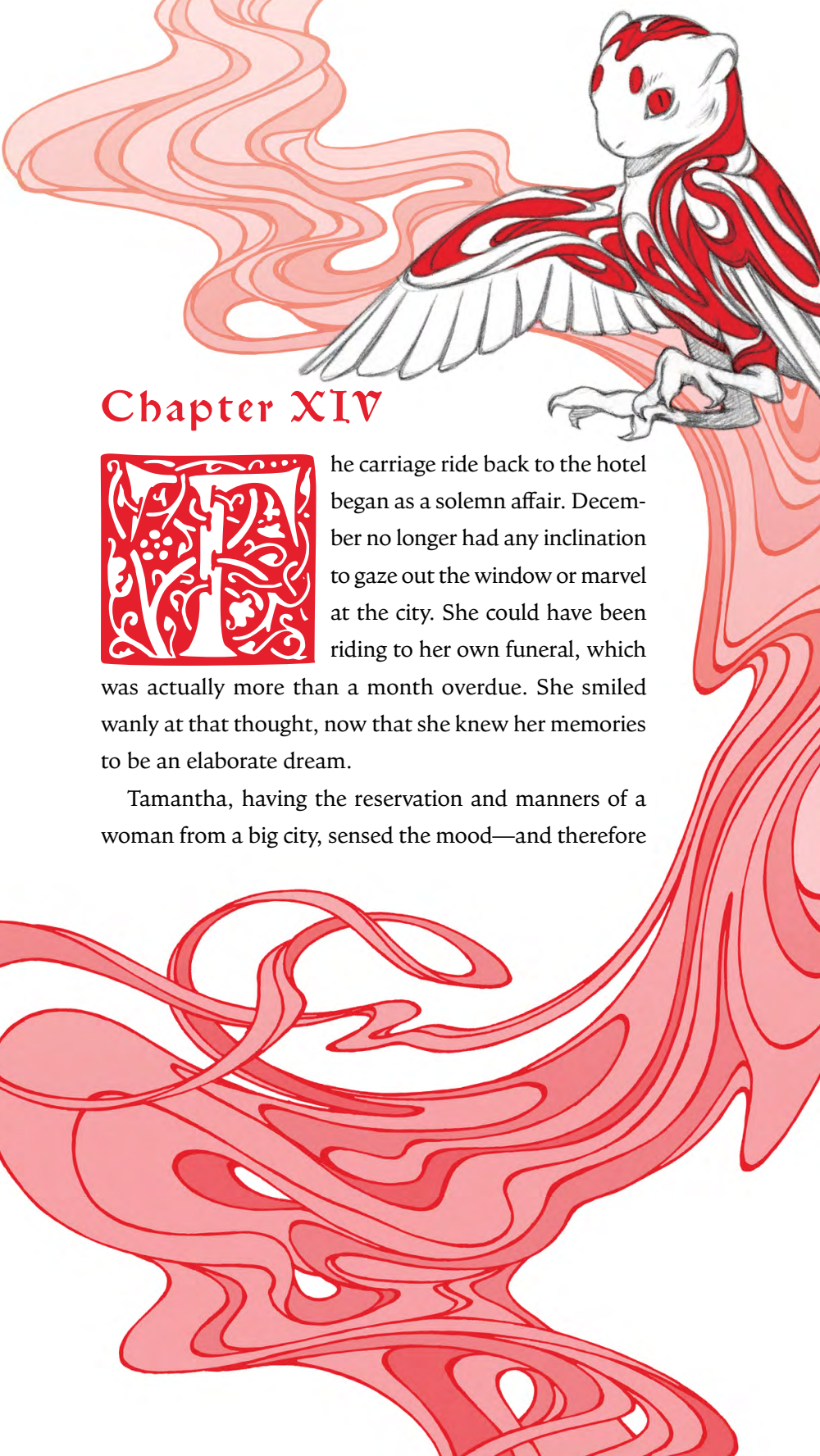
. . .

No?

Not going to fall for it again?

Well, maybe there was a *little* more going on here. And it had to do with the man referred to as “the count.” A known womanizer, the lead suspect in the case of my murder, and the reason those ships mentioned earlier were moored just downstream, threatening to invade the capital.

We’ll get to him very soon, I assure you.



Chapter XIV



he carriage ride back to the hotel began as a solemn affair. December no longer had any inclination to gaze out the window or marvel at the city. She could have been riding to her own funeral, which was actually more than a month overdue. She smiled wanly at that thought, now that she knew her memories to be an elaborate dream.

Tamantha, having the reservation and manners of a woman from a big city, sensed the mood—and therefore

waited to be spoken to, giving December space to think. Dear Amaal, however, having the social etiquette of a wet moose, lasted approximately two and a half minutes before blurting out a question.

“How did it go? Oh, you *need* to talk, Miss December. I can see it in your eyes.”

(Amaal interpreted every expression as a “need to talk.” Reserved and listless? You needed a pep talk. Teary-eyed and trembling? You needed someone to commiserate with. Asleep with a building hang-over? Obviously bored and in need of stimulation. Silence might be golden, but she was a priestess and had taken a vow of poverty.)

“Well, Amaal,” December replied, “I told the king what I’d experienced, and he sent me to talk with one of his advisors. A man named Lord Geoffrim?”

“Financial minister,” Tamantha said. “That’s an *exceptionally* important man, Miss December. The king wouldn’t have sent you to him unless he was interested in your news!”

“They said . . .” December took a deep breath, and met Amaal’s eyes. “They said it was a vision, what I experienced, and offered me compelling evidence. There was an immortal like the Prophet staying at my inn back in Rivershore, you see. He did . . . something, and I don’t know the details exactly, but the life I lived . . .”

Heavens. It sank in fully. Like an enormous passenger ship in a port, it had taken hours for this understanding to *fully* settle into dock. Sixty years, imaginary or not, was a great deal of momentum to counteract.

“. . . The things I *saw*,” she continued, “were a kind of dream, implemented by the actions of said immortal. I didn’t live into the future; I merely saw a life I could have led.”

Speaking it felt a betrayal of everything she’d become: the instincts, knowledge, and sense of identity she genuinely felt she’d spent decades building. Not to mention the relationships, the family she’d loved. Though she’d already made peace with the fact that her stepchildren

The Fires of December

would never know her, to imagine that she'd never *actually* known them was a second stab wound, right on top of the first.

Amaal, who was also as *observant* as a wet moose sometimes, clapped her hands, oblivious to December's inner turmoil. "Oh, it was a vision! From an *immortal*? Did they say anything about him? The Prophet mentioned several people like himself!"

"I'm afraid they didn't say much," December replied. "Whoever this immortal was, he's dead now, and so isn't terribly relevant."

(I'd have been insulted by that, except I was rather consumed by the whole "being dead" thing . . . Well, that, and by eternal flames of torment.)

Tamantha had only overheard bits and pieces, and was too polite to ask for details—but December felt it best to come completely clean to both of them. Therefore, during the ride back to the hotel, she explained the short version. Enough to make both the impending calamity, and her reasons for seeking the capital, quite clear.

"And so," she finished, "I have lied to you. You both have my deepest apologies."

"Lied?" Tamantha asked.

"I am no noblewoman."

"Did you *tell* us you were one?" Tamantha asked. "You expressly indicated you were *former* nobility, which you thought you were, as the wife of a town reeve."

"Well, yes," December said. "But you've heard it now: I imagined myself as some aged wisdom. I'm just a foolish girl, barely a few years into adulthood."

"Doesn't change that you paid for my dress and hired me," Tamantha said.

"Besides," Amaal said, looking over the lineage sheet, "this commission contradicts what you said. You are a lady in the eyes of the court."

"It's no more real than my dream," December said.

“He said he’d get you an official commission, once the city was safe,” Amaal said. “This is like . . . a provisional one.”

“It has the king’s seal,” Tamantha added. “That’s good enough. Oh, this is going to be delightful. You’ll need swimsuits! And some designs, yes. The best designs, if you’re going to be presented to the city’s young elite!”

The two began chatting about December’s prospects, and didn’t seem the least bit concerned about the fabrication they’d been towed into. In fact . . . they seemed *relieved*. As if, after weeks together, they at last knew what to make of December.

I . . . fit into a box again, December realized.

Before, she’d been an unknowable woman of mysterious origin, with attitudes that did not match her age—a strange figure with a discomfiting sense of knowing too much. The explanation *relieved* them, because whatever December *had* been, now she was a young socialite, newly elevated to the aristocracy, with money in her pocket and a bright future in her forecast. They arrived at the hotel, and the two attendants alighted with electric expectations. Not only had their mistress avoided prison, her status in the city had been affirmed.

December tried to feel some of that same optimism. Problem was, her old self haunted her. That woman, December now believed, had never been real—so her demise should have created no ghost. Yet there she was in everything December saw. That valet from before, with the handprint stain and long face, arrived last in line to welcome her, a small stuffed toy tucked and forgotten in his back pocket. She could remember the feeling of her grandson, named *Matin* after his grandfather, in her arms: his scent of lotion and soap, his little hands grabbing her shirt, planting a sloppy kiss on her cheek.

She *felt* it, cherished it. Before, she’d been willing to let go, and give her children and grandchildren to *Matin*’s actual wife. But now, had her grandson ever really existed? If she forgot him, was that it? In the lobby, she smelled tea, and thought of the last cup she’d

The Fires of December

had before supplies ran out, what . . . seventeen years ago? In the lift, which worked by a mechanism she didn't understand, she saw her reflection in the metal plates on the walls, and still found it profoundly *wrong*.

Everyone was acting like she was a young girl again, but she'd *forgotten* that girl. Recapturing her youth was wonderful, but could she accept it at the expense of everything she'd been, done, learned?

At their rooms, her attendants busied themselves with ordering in lunch, all the while planning December's future: parties, dances, luncheons. Tamantha knew exactly how a young noblewoman was to apply herself, and seemed quite enamored with the opportunity to live, by proxy, a life out of one of the novels. While it didn't sound *bad*, it was all so *frivolous*. How could December ever dance with a young man in his *twenties*?

You're in your twenties, she tried to tell herself as she settled into the nook by the window. *What are you going to do, search for some whitebeard to marry?*

They would expect her to marry *someone*, because that was what young women did. City socialite or innkeeper's fosterling, that part was the same. She stared out the window at the Megalith and its colorful city, trying to find the peace of having accomplished her quest. Perhaps she just needed a few days spent being herself, the girl she should be. And the kingdom's problems . . . they were in better hands. She'd come all this way for that express purpose.

You might find this a surprising turn for a woman who had recently been so confident. A woman with the stubbornness to face down a monarch who could order her execution on a whim, and who hadn't budged from her place before the throne until her petition had been heard. That woman was shaken so easily?

Well, let's talk about words.

Earlier in the book, I mentioned how a simple word—one innocent syllable like “girl”—can mean many different things. This isn't unique:

Brandon Sanderson

Every word is a strange kind of homonym, with meanings layered atop one another like the different strata of the earth. Each new layer indicates an age past, much as each person who encounters a word adds their own dusted patina of context to it.

Names are words.

You mean something different to everyone you've met. Each perception of you is a variation on the whole, incomplete in the same way that every color makes up white light. We use that word casually to indicate emptiness: white space, containing nothing, an innate contradiction, for white, rather than being nothing, is *everything*. Not truly a color, but all colors, packed so tightly that it fuses into a single all-encompassing brilliance.

People are likewise infinite shades of meaning that coalesce into shapes: Often ignored, often dismissed, people are the white space of the universe—the terminus of understanding, into which all things flow and never can escape. That which we speak we do not eject, but duplicate, for the original always remains with us. That which we think is the very substance of reality.

December's perspective of herself was being challenged by definitions from outside. Within all of that chaos of possibility, was it any wonder that right then she struggled to decide which one she accepted? Decades make a person tenacious, yes (anyone who calls a child stubborn has never tried to move an octogenarian who had found their perfect chair for a nap), but it also makes them question. The longer you live, the more good people you see make bad choices, the more smart people you see be wrong, and the more confident people you see break. This, assuming you're the perceptive type, changes you. Wisdom is not in answers, but in the lack of them.

That afternoon, within the shadow of the slain demon who bled life through the land, December saw her reflection in the window—and for a moment, it was the aged her. The her she recognized, with hair

The Fires of December

silvered before its time, a face furrowed not with lines of overturned soil, but overturned lives, hopes buried with her family. Skin that had turned toward the wind, not away from it.

What she saw was not something mystical, nor a sign of disassociation—any more than one might feel dysmorphia from waking in a body you no longer recognized. It wasn't a trick of delusion, for it wasn't real, and she knew it: This was an imagining, a way to converse with someone familiar. Most of us look in the mirror now and then and have a conversation with the person we're becoming.

"What do I do?" December whispered. "You're a lie, and always have been."

So? her reflection seemed to ask.

"I cannot live a lie."

Everyone lives lies now and then. It's how we improve. You pretend to be the person you want to be until you grow into it. You'll be me eventually. Give it sixty years or so.

"Do I want to be you?"

Do you want to be the woman they're all expecting? Flit from party to party, chitter with laughter, drink wine and wear dresses and dance?

"Is that so bad?"

Of course not. Do you want it, though?

She didn't respond, for . . . well, it was true. She didn't have the patience for any of that.

Tell me. Tell me what your gut says.

"My gut says," she whispered, "that this isn't done. That the danger is too great to be left in anyone else's hands, that this is the sort of problem a woman needs to stand up and fix on her own."

There. Good.

"My gut," she said, "is part of the dream. I am basing my opinion on experiences I didn't actually live."

If you thought you lived them, is there any practical difference?

Brandon Sanderson

“Yes. Because I’m going to assume I can do things I cannot. Who am I to try to save an entire nation?”

The perfect one. Because, of all the hundreds of thousands of people living in it, you’re the only one who saw that vision. You’re the only one who watched them die, the only one who wept, and the only one who understands.

“Surely Lord Geoffrim will handle it. He’s like Matin.”

And if Matin were in charge? How would it go?

“Slowly,” December admitted.

Matin liked to think and do research. He was kindly, but not always decisive—an excellent leader, assuredly, in certain contexts. Like when she was there to nudge him to do the distasteful parts, such as putting people in prison.

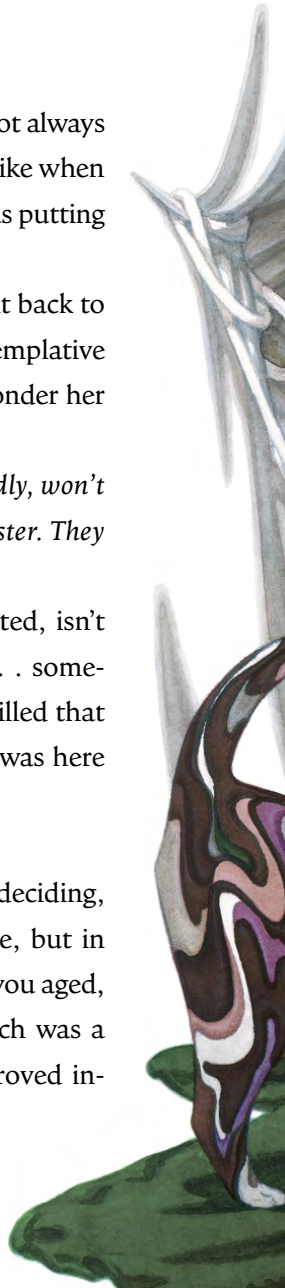
Lord Geoffrim? He . . . seemed the same way. She thought back to how he’d acted. That look of worry on his face, but also contemplative consideration. He would read her account over and over, ponder her words, study them, fact-check them . . .

The others, her reflection urged, no matter how smart or kindly, won’t grasp the urgency or the danger because they didn’t live the disaster. They will take too long.

December found her objections weakening. “It’s all related, isn’t it? The jester immortal, the demon, the succession war . . . someone in this city is actively plotting to pull the sword. They killed that immortal, either because he knew too much or because he was here to stop them. Now nobody will oppose it.”

So let’s get to work.

December took the rest of that day to consider before deciding, because this too was a sign of wisdom. Not in taking time, but in knowing when you could *afford* to take time—for the longer you aged, the more precious each hour became. She slept on it, which was a piece of advice Matin had once given her that had long proved insightful.





Brandon Sanderson

The following morning, she looked at herself in the mirror, and saw the shape and face of a young woman in her nightgown, but with eyes that reflected fifty-nine years into the future. There, she made her decision: While she was not a woman of eighty, she could *not* abandon the life she remembered. Her lived experience, dreamed or not, was who she had become.

She would continue to think of herself as the old woman, not the young one; *however*, she would be careful not to mislead anyone by acting above her actual station.

It was, I will note, the wrong decision.

However, we tend to make a lot of those on our way to the right decisions. For now, it was enough.



Chapter XV



December left the bathroom full of renewed determination, and found her two attendants in the bedroom, laying out undergarments . . .

Colorful undergarments? Skimpier than those she normally wore?

No, this was something far more embarrassing.

“Swimsuits, my lady!” Tamantha said, gesturing to them arrayed on the bed. “I picked up a variety this



morning! If you're going to live in Kingseat, you'll need to learn to clothe yourself with the river's blessing!"

December tried to deflect to this "count" Petva and Geoffrim had mentioned, but the others were too excited about the swimsuits. She realized the best way to get them talking about what she wanted would be to play along for now, so she selected the swimsuit with the most coverage and went to change.

When she stepped out, the other two practically *melted*.

"Heavens, I'd do anything for a body like yours, Lady," Tamantha said. "Well, other than give up chocolate."

Amaal walked around December, thoughtful, looking her over in a way that set her blushing furiously. This outfit was *not* fit for public display. It was fully one piece, instead of two meager strips of cloth like the others, but that wasn't the point. There were certain outlines of her figure that were *meant* to be hidden. It was only *right*.

"I think," Tamantha said, "she needs something that shows a touch more skin."

"*More* skin?" December demanded.

"Agreed," Amaal said.

"You're my spiritual advisor!" December said, gesturing to herself. "You approve of *this*?"

"Lady," Amaal said, blushing a little herself, "as your spiritual advisor, I'm to encourage you to find a loving match with a good husband! Stable families are one of the most powerful indicators of a healthy society! *Tons* of philosophers agree, and even *Valor* is said to believe in their importance. Forward though it might seem to us from the backwaters, *this* is how you indicate to the young men of the city what they're going to get! It makes a lot of sense, now that Tamantha has explained it to me."

"Everyone pretends it's only about dressing for the day," Tamantha agreed, "but we all know that it's secretly a safe way to give a little

The Fires of December

glimpse, to tease, but in a socially acceptable manner, fully modest. These aren't *really* undergarments, you see."

"Yes! They cover *less*!"

"Exactly! Now you understand."

Heavens. They acted like she was a prize calf up for show, or . . . or a dress in the window. She took a breath, and told herself this was different from her foster mother showing her off to Bark: The difference was in choice. Nobody would *actually* force her to go out like this.

They wanted her to try on a few others, and while she was reluctant, she *had* promised she would act her age, even if she thought of herself differently. People were going to see a young woman and have certain expectations. So she forced herself to try on one so tiny, it might as well have not been there.

"Tamantha," she said, "I really *can't* go out like this. People will see my . . . my . . ."

"Attributes?" Amaal offered.

". . . Punctuation marks," December said. "Especially if I get wet."

"There's padding to prevent that," Tamantha said, "and the river isn't wet, anyway." She tapped her cheek. "You know, though, I think this actually is too much."

Thank the Prophet.

"The other is more stately," Amaal agreed. "We want to tease the dinner, not offer the buffet."

"I'm *not* a meal," December said.

"Sorry, Lady," Amaal said. "Poor choice of words."

"You're right, though, Amaal," Tamantha said. "We need something stately, but it has to be fashionable too. Maybe a single piece cut higher up the thighs, with a strip out of the left side, showing the navel, but demurely . . ." She looked up at the still-blushing December. "Lady, you really should know. You *are* gorgeous."

"I have eyebrows," December said, "like carpet samples glued to my forehead."

"Which is common for people from the east," Amaal said. "If I might give a piece of advice, more practical than spiritual? Don't allow yourself to be ashamed of your features that stand out, particularly if they're a sign of your heritage. Society will, in one breath, tell you to be an individual, then make fun of you for being distinctive. Don't let them get away with it."

(All right, don't look at me like that. Yes, I often make fun of how people look. The day I have to stop making fun of your silly faces is the day I go after your personalities instead, and you do *not* want that escalation.)

December put the first swimsuit back on and then let Tamantha make some marks on it with her seamstress's chalk—an interaction that December found far less embarrassing than the previous one, as it was common when being fitted for clothing. Strange, how people were. December was quickly getting over the fact that people in capital society wore clothing like this. They could do whatever they wanted, for all she cared. But . . . why did she balk for herself? She'd never been particularly uptight about these sorts of things, no more than the average person.

At the same time, she didn't like how she looked in the mirror while wearing that swimsuit. With regret, she realized that part of the reason was . . . well, because of Bark. He'd always blamed her slenderness and narrow hips for her barrenness.

Was it possible she could be something different here in the city? Could she, after decades of seeing herself as unwanted, instead be someone *desirable*? Again, those wants stirred. A part of her was angry that she had never known romance, only marriage. As the fitting continued and Tamantha made notes for alterations, December made a few alterations as well—to her perception of herself. It's not always bad to let voices from outside influence you: Just pick them wisely.

The Fires of December

The way Amaal and Tamantha built her up had her wondering what it *would* feel like to go out in one of these swimsuits . . .

First, though, she had work to do. “Tamantha,” December said as she stepped behind the changing screen and threw off the swimsuit, then came out in a robe. She took it off immediately, slipping into the bath Amaal had drawn using the wonders of warm-water plumbing.

No. She didn’t notice the irony of blushing at the swimsuit, then walking into the bath completely nude without a hint of bashfulness. She’d done *this* many times. In Rivershore you had to fill a bath from a kettle by the fireplace, which took a ton more work. People bathed in rapid succession before it cooled, and frequently disrobed and washed among relatives of both genders. In her mind, that was completely different, and not the least bit sexual.

(Yes. People are strange. Be happy that’s the case, because if they weren’t, these stories wouldn’t exist and we’d all be droning about our identical lives. Irony, self-contradiction, and the occasional drop of light hypocrisy are the flavorings that makes us unique.)

“There was another man I noticed,” December said with a sigh of relief, settling back in the warm water, “at the meeting with the king. Looked dangerous, like a bully. Medals on his chest, glare on his face.”

“General Drakes,” Tamantha said, bringing a bucket to wash December’s hair as she relaxed, something they’d done periodically during the trip. Stops for the evening often involved bathing at inns. And this part of being a lady . . .

This part December found nice.

“Oh!” Amaal said. She’d settled nearby in the too-large bathroom, wearing full priestess regalia with her sword-staff leaning against the wall. “I heard about him! He’s mean, isn’t he?”

“He has a reputation,” Tamantha said, “for being stern with his soldiers. His primary duty is city defense, and he *can’t* be happy about the Orange Duke’s ships moored so closely. Stay away from him, Lady; Drakes is known as the king’s most outspoken critic.”

Brandon Sanderson

Interesting, December thought. A critic of the king, worried about city defense, with an army at his command . . .

Perhaps he wanted to pull the sword, either with good intentions—defense against the duke’s invading forces—or nefarious ones, like slaying the king and taking the throne himself. However, there was another possible culprit.

“The two nobles I spoke to,” she said, “also mentioned a count. Not by name, though.”

“There are lots of counts,” Tamantha said. “I’ll need more.”

“They called him *the* count. Someone with a reputation for bad choices, maybe?”

“Oh,” Tamantha said, fingers pausing in the massage of December’s scalp. “Oh.”

“Bad?” December asked.

“So . . . the navy I mentioned?” Tamantha said, getting back to scrubbing. “Duke Kird sailed it into town in a fury because someone here seduced his daughter, robbed her, and broke her heart. He blames the king, and the entire society here in Kingseat, for how she was taken advantage of in that scandalous manner.”

“This count is the culprit?” December asked.

“Yes,” Tamantha said. “Count Abrim Flint. He’s a *very* bad man, Mistress.”

“The Orange Duke’s daughter? How old was she?”

“Twenty-eight,” Tamantha said. “Over thirty years his junior.”

“Twenty-eight and unmarried?”

“Yes. Is that odd?”

“In Rivershore it was.”

“Well, not as much in the larger cities,” Tamantha said. “Still, she was very young for him, and while I’m not one to judge age gaps—let adults do as they please—Flint abused his position as a diplomat to her father to seduce her, then tossed her away once he was done with her.”

The Fires of December

December sniffed in distaste. Geoffrim, and even Petva, seemed certain this Count Flint had killed the immortal. If he had . . . Well, December couldn't be *certain* that indicated he was plotting to remove the sword, but it was highly suspicious.

He likes younger women, does he? December thought. *Perhaps he could be outmaneuvered by one who won't be so easy to manipulate as he expects.* The idea, strangely, thrilled her. The chance to turn such a man upon his head, and get some small revenge for any women he'd wronged? Enticing indeed.

"Where would one find this Count Flint," she asked, "should one wish to locate him?"

The following silence dripped with the tension of two women locking stares while December soaked, blissfully unaware.

"Lady?" Tamantha said. "You're frightening me."

December opened her eyes and looked between them, then laughed. "Oh, don't worry. I'm not thinking of *courting* him, only chasing him down to see if he's the one who killed that immortal."

"What?" Tamantha said. "But the lords will take care of that!"

"Ah!" Amaal, by contrast, stood and raised her fist. "But *she* was the one given the vision! So naturally, the Prophet wants us involved. I knew it. I *knew* you wouldn't leave your duty alone." She grew more hushed. "You think if we dig into it, we might be able to see that dead immortal's corpse? I could swipe a finger or two . . ."

"What?" Tamantha said, aghast.

"The harvesting of holy relics is a time-honored and perfectly reasonable religious tradition," Amaal said, chin elevated. "I've always wanted to start a collection."

"Lady," Tamantha said, gaping at December, "I just told you how dangerous a man Count Flint is!"

"He's likely trying to seduce other young socialites," December said. "He undoubtedly targets them because of their innocence—but he won't be expecting one of his targets to have the experience and

memories of a woman with two marriages, two grandchildren, and a penchant for ignoring idiots. I'm the perfect person to get close to him and find out what he knows about the immortal and the threats to the city, then bring that information to the palace . . ."

She looked to the other two: Amaal with stars in her eyes and Tamantha with horror in hers. Well, hopefully December could walk the line between them, because her mind was made up. She stood up and waved for one of the warm-water buckets to rinse the suds off.

"Count Flint," Tamantha said with resignation, handing over one of the buckets, "is known to prefer upscale gambling parlors. He was taken prisoner by the king once the duke's accusations came to light, but posted bail, and is free to do what he wishes until the trial, so long as he doesn't leave the city."

"Nobility," Amaal added, "have strict legal rights set out by the Decree of 1527! Demanded by the Prophet himself! Well, he wanted those rights for everyone, but they started with the nobility, and keep *meaning* to get around to adding them for everyone else. Any day now . . ."

December doused herself with a bucket, then a second.

"Lady," Tamantha said, handing over the final rinsing bucket, "you *cannot* enter a gambling parlor without at least a male footman on staff. I know you can protect yourself and don't want bodyguards, but please listen to me on this. There are certain things the two of us can't do for you as well as a footman could, and three young women out on their own says things. It's not fair, but it's true."

December considered that as she rinsed, then stepped out and accepted a robe from Amaal. It had been a long time—to her perception, at least—since anyone cared that she went out alone or what she did without the company of a chaperone. But she *had* decided she was going to act her visible, real age and try not to make waves like she had when traveling upriver.

She had nothing against having a footman, and probably would

The Fires of December

even accept a bodyguard at this point. She did not want a repeat of the experience on the boat, confident or not—plus she didn't want the other women to feel uncomfortable or unprotected.

"I will bring one of the hotel valets with us," she said as Tamantha chose her clothing for the day, thankfully not yet forcing her to learn how to manifest attire directly from the demon's blood. "Will that suffice?"

"That would be *wonderful*," Tamantha said, visibly relieved.

December dressed with building determination. She had achieved her goal of bringing the information to the palace, but now—with the authority of any grandmother happening upon a mess—decided to clean things up herself.

The End of Part II

Part III





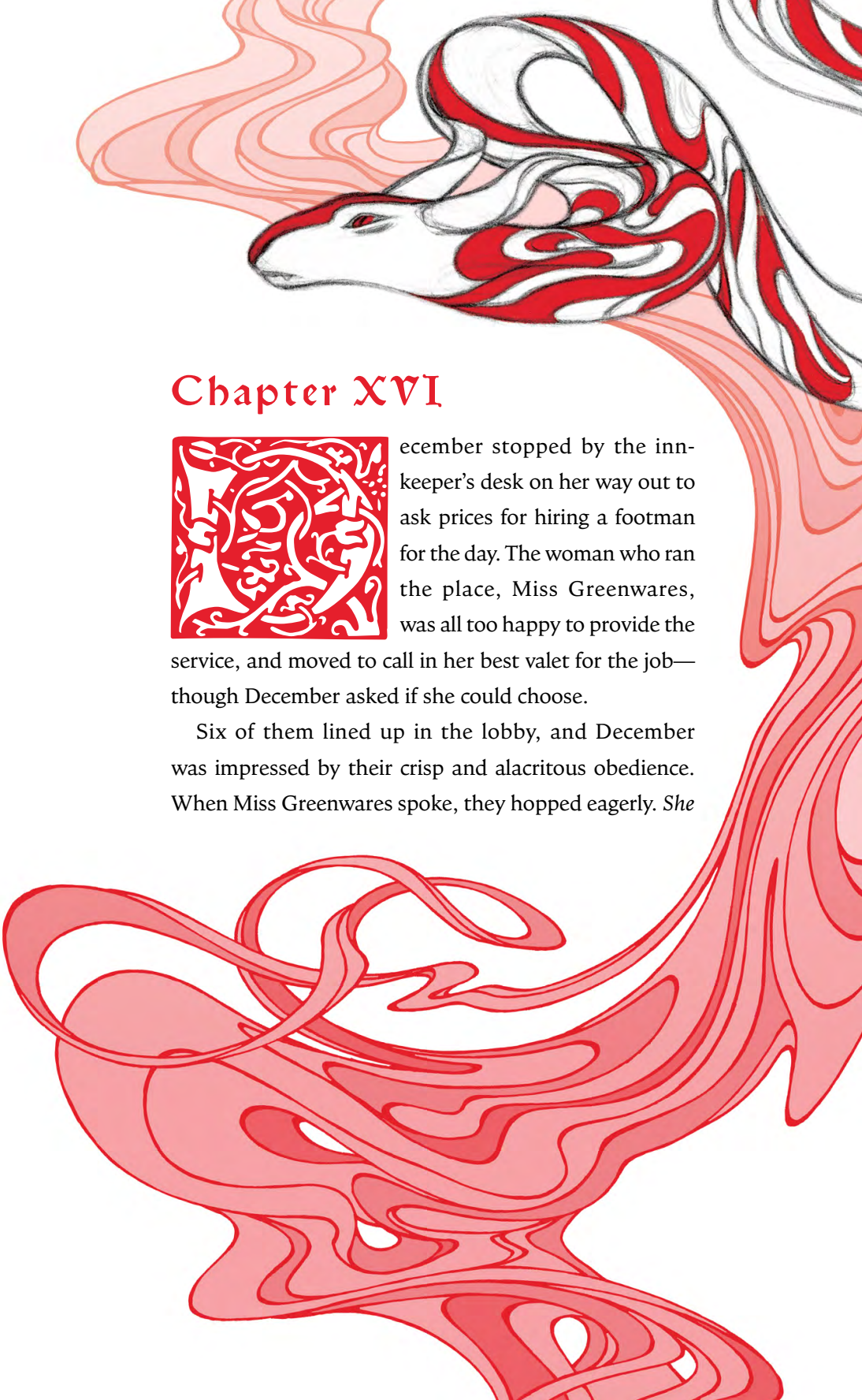


Chapter XVI



December stopped by the innkeeper's desk on her way out to ask prices for hiring a footman for the day. The woman who ran the place, Miss Greenwares, was all too happy to provide the service, and moved to call in her best valet for the job—though December asked if she could choose.

Six of them lined up in the lobby, and December was impressed by their crisp and alacritous obedience. When Miss Greenwares spoke, they hopped eagerly. *She*



must pay them well, December thought. Unfortunately, the man she wanted—the one with the child’s handprint on his slacks—was not there.

“Where are the others?” December asked.

Miss Greenwares pursed her lips, something she did whenever something displeased her, but sent for the others. The “lessers” as she quietly called them. Though the woman was obviously annoyed at the extra work, December didn’t let that bother her. She knew for a fact—as explained over breakfast by Tamantha—that December choosing this hotel after leaving the others without a word had given this woman quite a status boost among her peers. A boon for a hotel that had apparently been struggling. (There were no other guests, she’d discovered, filling the six remaining suites and rooms the hotel offered.)

As they waited, Tamantha quietly provided the innkeeper with the document December had gotten from Geoffrim, detailing her noble lineage with the king’s seal. Miss Greenwares’s eyebrows raised, as Tamantha said they would, at the rank December had been given: viscountess, a standing slightly higher than the baroness or dame the gossipers had been guessing. Tamantha explained softly that the *lady* had been unwilling to use her noble title until it was accredited by the king.

Though December didn’t want to pretend, this *was* what the court wanted of her. Miss Greenwares puffed up further, taking the letter to put in the hotel safe, where things of such import were properly in-urned, and promising (as requested) to answer inquiries with the full explanation, rather than forwarding such letters to bother December. It was, by Tamantha’s insistence, the best way to spread the knowledge.

It let them, December accepted, know what box to put her in this time.

The next group of valets, unfortunately, *also* didn’t include the man with the long, boxy face.

The Fires of December

“There’s another man,” December said. “He helped us with our luggage that first day.”

“Dmitrovik?” Miss Greenwares said, slightly aghast. “You want *him*?” She sighed, and sent for the final valet, who—it seemed—had been purposefully excluded.

At last, the man arrived: tall and lanky, but not like a fence post, more like an obelisk, wearing his white uniform and adopting a perfectly straight posture.

“That’s him,” December said, and nodded for Tamantha to pay the fee. “Assuming, Dmitrovik, you’re willing to play footman for me today?”

He gave a stiff bow of agreement, one hand folded before himself, one folded across his back. She wasn’t certain she had ever heard him speak. As they left the hotel, he hopped with a spry eagerness to hold the door, then did the same at the carriage, holding the door for all three women before taking a seat next to the driver up top. His eyes did cross briefly as Tamantha explained out the window that they were to be taken to the gambling quarter.

During the trip, December examined her expectations. She was going to find this Count Flint and discover what he knew about the death of the immortal and the plot to unleash the demon. Even if her efforts proved ultimately unimportant and Geoffrim *could* handle the upcoming problems, she was happy to be acting, rather than sitting around and hoping the destruction would be prevented. She had felt so *helpless* during the end, and still bore the scars of sorrow.

Her decision to sit taller prompted her to see the city differently as they traveled. Though her initial response to the colors had been awed befuddlement, that’s *often* the initial response of tradition meeting art. Art hates a box as much as people do. (Though it needs them too. Perhaps we’ll speak of that another day.) Taking care to investigate its movements often leads to appreciation—the same way that, with study, you’ll find relatable motives even in the people with whom you disagree.

Today December began to understand why people used the colors they did, and listened with genuine interest to Tamantha's explanations of how the buildings were painted. Demon's blood was only stable for a day or so, and melted off people if worn too long, which was why it was *always* wise to wear a swimsuit underneath. On a building, the colors could be made more permanent by hexers, but that also made the blood more rigid, which wouldn't do for clothing.

"Hexers," December said. "I heard them mentioned yesterday. Not witches?"

"I . . . worry they *are* a variety of witch," Amaal said. "I hadn't known about them before arriving."

"But they're not," Tamantha said.

"They bind the demons with contracts," Amaal said. "And use their magical fires. That *really* sounds like witchcraft."

"No," Tamantha said. "It's more like an officer keeping brigands in line with violence, Sister Amaal."

The subject seemed to make them both uncomfortable, so December let it drop, instead watching out the window as they passed a section of blood open to bathers. Here the river bowed, and steps had been built down into it. Fences around this portion set it apart, allowing people to set up chairs and enjoy the sunlight. In Rivershore, you rarely wanted to go about without a jacket, except in the very heart of summer. Here it was temperate all year thanks to the Megalith's calming effect on the weather.

"The river," Tamantha said, looking out her same window, "is so warm in the capital. I *love* it each time I visit. It's like an embrace—a heated mud bath, except without the mess."

"People bathe in mud?" December asked.

"Oh! You're going to love it. I'll need to find a proper spa, actually. Have you ever had a massage?"

"No."

This made Tamantha even *more* aghast, and she took some notes.

The Fires of December

Hopefully, whatever she came up with for December wasn't too embarrassing, as she *still* blushed at the people lounging about in almost nothing. She reassured herself that they didn't appear embarrassed. Yes, the young men would follow young women with their eyes, and the young women would do likewise, only more stealthily; however, there were all ages here, and most didn't seem to notice the sparse clothing. They relaxed on the shore or floated in the river, eyes closed, enjoying the sensation with a joy akin to what December had felt in her bath earlier.

Everyone in the city came here, and no one could own a portion of the river save the king. (Who had his own little creek siphoned off and running through a bathing portion of the palace.) The laughter of the people reminded December of days she'd lost. She found herself desperate to protect that joy, to make sure these people never knew the sorrows she carried. She realized she'd been starting to think of the people of the capital as a different species, with their strange, outlandish clothing. Seeing them stripped down, noble and commoner indistinguishable, changed that for her. Reminded her of an important fact.

They're people, she thought. Like the ones I knew. Odd clothing, strange architecture, odd words for inns . . . none of it changes the fact that they're people. My people. For by burden of vision, I am the only one who can protect them.

The gambling quarter was, by a previous king's wise order, kept from other dens of vice and potentially predatory establishments like previously fighting children held apart at arm's length. No brothels or pawn shops were allowed nearby. The colors were even wilder here, but December couldn't tell the difference. Tamantha whispered a request to Dmitrovik once they'd parked, and he hopped free of the carriage immediately.

"Let's see," she said to December, "how good he is."

It took the valet less than fifteen minutes to return with news that

Count Flint was here, as he was most afternoons, and point out the proper casino. Dmitrovik used each word economically, and had a clipped, staccato way of speaking.

The casino host had heard of December, unfortunately. It seemed basically everyone had. She drew whispers as she approached, wearing one of her old gowns, which Tamantha had augmented during the ride up the river, along with her customary high-collared, long black coat. She turned this in at the coat closet, and was asked what her preferred game was, or if she was simply there for the society and the (reputably) excellent mixed drinks.

“Society,” December said, trying to avoid being overwhelmed. The casino wasn’t as large as some you might have visited: just one long room with game tables on the lower floor, and an elevated section at the right side with its own railing and tables for chatting and cocktails. Not *quite* a balcony, more an observation lounge.

Gaslights of a variety of colors lined the walls, giving the room a brilliance she hadn’t expected. When people gambled in Rivershore, they did it quietly at a back booth of the tavern, the place you went when the inn’s common room was too reputable. The men there did it in murky light—but here it was on *display*, covered in finery.

Amaal whispered her displeasure with the activity, a sentiment with which December wholeheartedly agreed. Bark’s gambling nights had . . . never been good nights. His joy at winning led him to excess, and his anger at losing created aftershocks at home. Tamantha, feeling the need to offer another opinion, pointed out that in her experience, the average person who went to these places had a fine time, so long as they watched their finances.

The three—along with the footman following behind and ready to serve—were led to a table on the upper left portion of the room, enviably close to the railing so they could overlook most of the floor. Dmitrovik took up a post beside them, standing in that one-arm-backward posture. Most locals left their footmen with the carriages, though there

The Fires of December

were a few others here, often accompanying—she picked out with a little careful observation—parties of only women.

Drinks followed, with no alcohol for December. Another lasting trauma from her days with Bark. Even during the years with Matin, she'd refused except when she'd needed a tooth pulled. That had always made her odd among the people of Rivershore, but here it was taken as a sign of her foreign heritage—apparently they didn't drink in kingdoms to the east. No one seemed to care; there were much more interesting things to gossip about.

She sipped on something iced and fruity, a pleasant contrast to the warm air, as Dmitrovik scanned the room. Eventually, he leaned down beside her and pointed.

"There. Count Flint."

The man gambled at a table down and to the right, and heavens, if he wasn't *exactly* as December had pictured him. He had an enviable head of silver hair for his age. What recession he did have created a point at the front, which he used as a focus, with a stylish wave atop it, short enough to have a deliberate sense of messiness. He'd combed back the rest, but not tight or oiled against the skull, using just enough product to leave body.

He wore a beard, the only one in the room: silvery, with a tuft under his lip set off by the natural growth pattern, the mustache above it not oiled or pointed, but prominent enough to complement the sharp hairline. He wore black—a modern suit, perfectly tailored—like a drop of confident ink on a page of spilled colors.

In short, he was *dangerously* attractive. The type of majestic, distinguished evil that December's every instinct told her not to touch, lest she be burned.

When the count spoke, calling loudly for bets, she knew the voice immediately. Last she'd heard it, he'd been whispering in her ear while holding a knife to her throat.

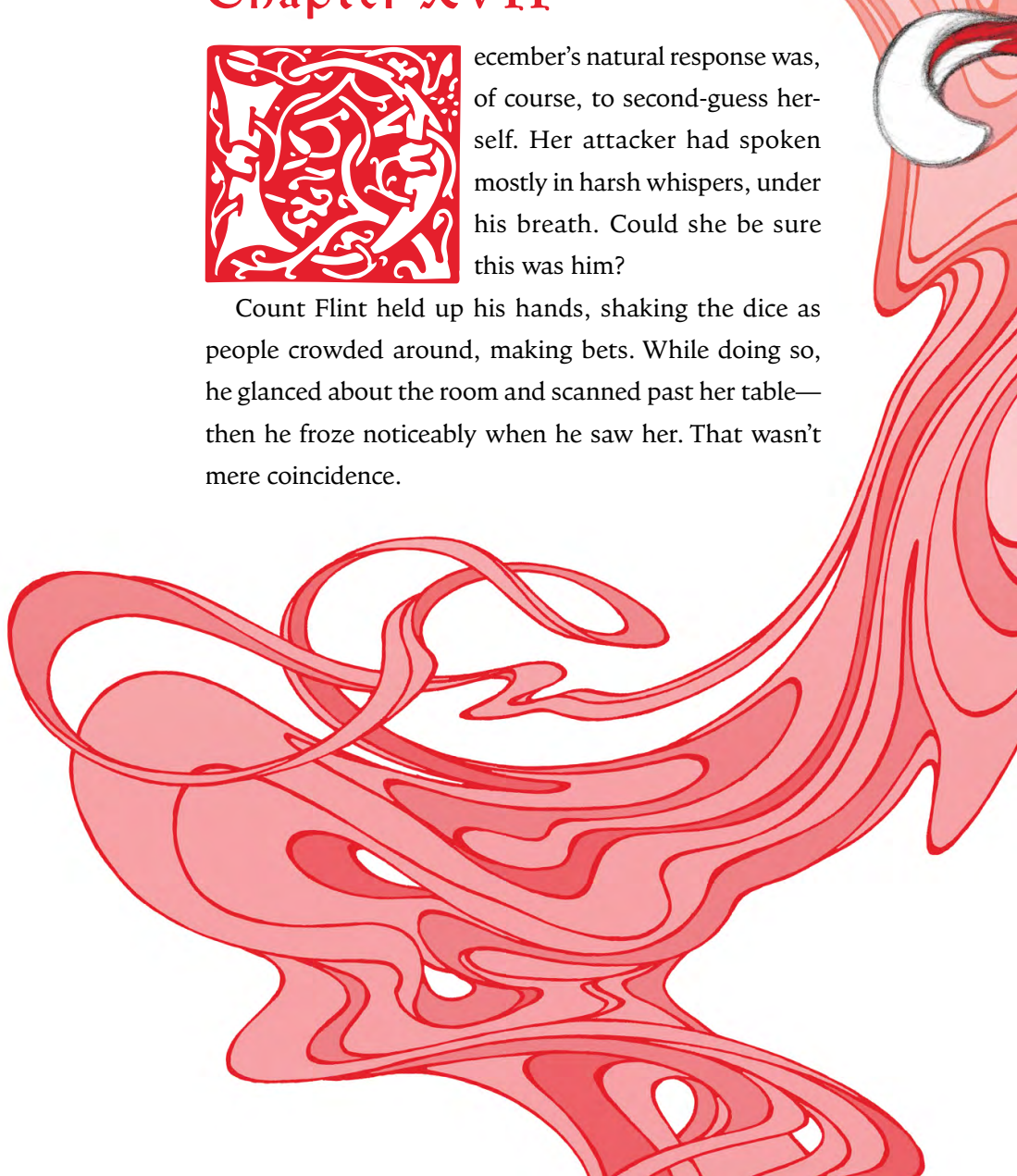


Chapter XVII



December's natural response was, of course, to second-guess herself. Her attacker had spoken mostly in harsh whispers, under his breath. Could she be sure this was him?

Count Flint held up his hands, shaking the dice as people crowded around, making bets. While doing so, he glanced about the room and scanned past her table—then he froze noticeably when he saw her. That wasn't mere coincidence.



December was careful to avert her eyes and not linger on him, and he immediately did the same, turning back to his game.

“Is he a wealthy man?” December asked Tamantha, trusting in her knowledge of Kingseat gossip.

“He used to be,” Tamantha explained, sipping her drink, while Amaal—of course—had tea. The priestess, in her religious jacket over her black-and-white suit, was drawing more than a few odd looks, while Tamantha wore a city-style emerald gown made of demon’s blood, with voluminous sleeves and an enormous bow on the back. It was, somehow, one of the more practical gowns in the room. (Many were in the shapes of ornamented lampshades.)

“Flint was a lesser squire,” Tamantha continued, “but proved himself in battle back when he was young. The ’27 crisis? You heard of it? No? Well, during that brief civil war, he gathered a band of irregulars, outfitted them himself, and was credited with breaking into the castle of the lead agitator and dueling him straight out. Flint was granted an elevated title and a stipend duty from the crown, but no lands. So . . . Is this terribly boring?”

“Not boring,” December said, watching the man gamble. “Just a little beyond my experience.”

“There’s roughly two kinds of nobility, Lady,” Tamantha said. “Those with land, like the dukes, are basically kings unto themselves—they can levy taxes, build armies, have their own courts. Then there’s the rest of them, who either survive on well-invested hereditary money or perform a duty for the king or some other landed nobleman and receive a stipend.”

“Like the town reeve.”

“Exactly. Flint has a fairly elevated title, but no lands. He served thirty years on diplomatic missions for the king, mostly wasting the time and money of the crown, carousing and being a nuisance to whatever court was forced to host him. Flint’s greed outperformed his stipend, and he spent more than he had, which made him desperate.”

The Fires of December

“Hence the dangerous activities,” December said, remembering the knife at her throat—the flat of it, yes, but still unnerving. “Such as the seduction of the duke’s daughter.”

“Exactly,” Tamantha said. “He took enormous gifts of money from her, and acted expressly against her father’s wishes in seducing her, then fled and broke her heart. Strictly accounted, he’d done nothing illegal, but when he arrived in Kingseat he was arrested regardless. Charges are provoking civil unrest, I believe, which might stick. Everyone thought he’d rot in prison, but he scrounged up enough for his bail.”

“How much?”

“Five thousand, I heard.”

Several thousand, his voice returned to her. Even then, she’d known he wouldn’t owe such a fantastic sum to a local reeve.

“Let’s say he didn’t have that kind of money,” December said. “Where could he have gotten the bail?”

“I suppose,” Tamantha said, “he could have gone to a disreputable merchant for a loan. But that would be a very large and dangerous sum to owe—Flint would just be moving the problem down the road.”

(You might get the wrong idea from the word “bail.” Among the people of Kingseat, this was really more of a “ransom.” By the legal codes Amaal referenced earlier, the king can’t simply execute a nobleman—in fact, the trial system is long and difficult. Paying this ransom lets the accused go free, but a key difference from bail is that the count *wouldn’t* get the money back by showing up to court.

So what kept him from running? Well, flee the city, and his legal protections would be gone. The king would be free to use that bail money to post a bounty on the count’s head, no trial needed. Plus, execution wasn’t guaranteed for his crime, unless he ran. So the count had two choices: He could stay, try to pay off the loan sharks, and hope the woefully ineffective trial system exonerated him. Or he could run and risk a terrible, brutal death. Fun stuff.)

This part, December generally understood from her days working with Matin.

I'm incredibly desperate, he'd whispered to her that night. *It's your neck or mine, outlander . . .*

Any doubts fled. This was the man who had tried to rob her; he had risked sneaking from the city to do so. She saw an edge of that same desperation as he threw the dice and lost, people laughing and whooping at his deflation. She didn't ask for an explanation of the game as Amaal ordered snacks, but could pick out generalities. Those watching could bet on his throws. He won some, but lost far more, to the delight of the crowd, who were eagerly betting against him.

"Why," December said, "are people betting on his game, rather than throwing the dice themselves?"

"Oh," Tamantha replied, "they tend to find it more interesting to bet on his skill at turning the right numbers."

"It's random, though, isn't it?"

"Sure," Tamantha said, "unless the dice are weighted."

"Weighted! Isn't that cheating?"

Tamantha laughed. "No, no, that's just the game."

"Oh!" Amaal said. "I know this one. Valor warned against games of chance—she insisted there should be skill involved, or there's no triumph in winning. So casinos weight the dice. The thrower's job is to use that to roll the numbers called."

"Yup," Tamantha said. "He gets twenty throws on a new set of dice, weighted differently from the set before. The weighting is subtle, but I'm told with the right turn of the wrist and a calculated toss, you can get them to land exactly as you want. Assuming you can figure out the weights. Each throw, the penalty for failing the target numbers grows."

Another loss. People cheered while others lamented and shoved his shoulders, demanding he do better. The count adopted a look of concentration, approaching—by the number posted at the end of the table—his final throw.

The Fires of December

He's playing them, December thought, leaning forward, watching his intent posture, and noticing a hint of a smile on his lips. *He's losing more to get big bets at the end so he can take them all. This is a man completely in control.*

She wasn't certain how she knew it. She had little experience with *this* variety of villain. Still, her gut said he'd lose his sixteenth throw. And he did. Then win small on his seventeenth. And he did. Then lose escalating amounts on his eighteenth and nineteenth, which he did. All building to that last, biggest bet, where he'd . . .

Lose.

She blinked, genuinely shocked as he missed the target number, deflating, people either cheering or cursing before streaming from the table. He'd lost when she assumed he'd win. Even the dealer shook her head and vacated for another, more interesting table. Flint, who from the story December had heard used to be so very important and beloved, slumped down and stared at the offending dice. Alone. For his friends and popularity had always been the sort that sailed only upon rivers of open credit lines.

He eventually reached toward a serving girl, whose outfit was little more than a swimsuit, and gave her a smile that didn't reach his eyes. She took pity on him and delivered him a glass of something hard, though December thought from the way she and the other serving girls watched him, they were careful not to be taken in by his tricks.

"Look how he leers at them," Tamantha whispered. "It's like he thinks he's still in his twenties."

The old man who thinks he's young, December thought, *and the young woman who's convinced she's an aged grandmother. Which of us is more pathetic, I wonder?*

The count stood, took a cane, and limped toward the bar, one leg obviously stiff. That explained why he stumbled when fleeing the boat. The other two didn't seem to have connected him to that event.

"The limp," December said. "From war?"

"No," Tamantha said. "I believe it happened . . . Oh, I'm sorry, Lady, but I haven't the exact date. I keep up on events at the court, but not every little dealing. He got in a fight on a diplomatic mission, I think?"

"I'm surprised," Amaal said, "anyone here gives him attention, considering what he did."

"Coin still spends," Tamantha said. "Even if it comes from someone wearing black."

". . . Black?" December asked.

"He's forbidden the blood of the river," Tamantha said, "while awaiting trial. In the city, black is a symbol of him being ostracized, even if . . . Well, they aren't doing a lot of that in *actuality*."

"Um . . . I wear black . . ."

"Coats don't really count, Lady," Tamantha said. "Plus, you're a foreigner. The rules aren't the same."

The snacks came, and December saw that she'd been drawing attention—not from the count, but from others. Quite a few younger men were eyeing her, studying her like they hadn't in years, including one boy whose feather-sprouting jacket made him look like a rooster.

They're not actually children compared to you, she reminded herself.

Rooster-boy stopped by the table to introduce himself, explaining that he'd heard of her, and asked if she wanted to join him at a game. A polite refusal sent him on his way, but others were already prowling about.

"How," she said, "am I going to get *anything* done with all of *those*?"

"The young men are bother, Lady?" Dmitrovik asked in his lightly accented voice.

"Right now?" she said. "Yes."

He gave a curt nod, and as the next potential suitor approached, Dmitrovik swiftly intercepted. "The lady," he said, "is enjoying her company." From there, he stood tall and impassable, watching and subtly indicating to others that this was not a good time.

"Told you," Tamantha whispered.

The Fires of December

It didn't seem a job that required a footman, but December was happy nonetheless. She eyed the count again, considering her best approach, until another distraction drew her attention: a painted cat picking its way primly across the metalwork railing between the lower floor and the observation tables, tail up, posture indifferent as people at nearby tables shied back in disgust.

"Heavens, not again," December said. "Is that thing stalking me?"

"It happens sometimes, Lady," Tamantha said. "Sorry."

It didn't come directly for her, however, instead leaping onto another table, causing the people there to vacate. Soon some casino employees hastened over, and one whispered to Dmitrovik while others approached surrounding patrons.

"He says," Dmitrovik whispered to the group, "that casino apologizes, and promises they *do* have proper wards. They've sent for hexer."

"Demons this big ignore wards," Amaal said, eyes wide. "Gosh. Look how *terrible* it is!"

December ignored it, inspecting the count, who sat at the bar. Everyone had left at least two open spots on either side of him. It seemed the crowd before had just been there to watch him gamble, and hopefully fail.

I'll need, she thought, to convince him I actually have money now, but not let on that I know he was the one who tried to rob me. That way, he'll try to seduce me, and I can turn the situation around and pry information from him.

Why . . .

Why did that make her *excited*?

"All right," she said. "He's our best lead on what happened to the immortal, and therefore the calamities coming to the city. I'm going to approach him and see if I can get him to open up."

Tamantha groaned.

Amaal clapped her hands with glee.

That almost certainly should have been a warning sign, December thought—that the *priestess* was encouraging her to go get seduced while the *socialite* was worried.

“Tamantha,” December said, holding out her hand. “Lipstick.”

“Yes, Lady,” Tamantha said with resignation, handing some over—bright red—then holding a pocket mirror for December to use.

December applied it, then rolled her lips. “Any suggestions on how to approach such a man?”

“You must use,” Amaal said, hand to her chest and chin raised in a stately posture, “*feminine wiles*.”

“Great,” December said. “Anyone have any?”

“Honestly,” Amaal admitted, “I’m not even sure what the word means. Same root as ‘wily,’ I suppose? At any rate, don’t ask me what to do with a man. I’m a priestess.”

“Priestesses can marry,” Tamantha said.

“But they’re not supposed to be *wily* about it,” Amaal said.

“Well,” Tamantha said, “I’m not much help either. My go-to move is to get cross-eyed drunk, belt out an off-key rendition of ‘The Maid of Merrytown,’ then wake up ashamed of myself.” She poked December’s arm. “You’re the one who has been married twice. Don’t you know how to do this?”

“The first marriage took me by surprise,” December said, “and the second was more a contract than a romance. I’ve never really had to do *this* part.” She considered, then blushed, then said it anyway. “You didn’t bring one of those swimsuits, did you, Tamantha?”

“*Here?*” she asked, aghast. “You can’t wear one of those in *public*.”

“But . . .”

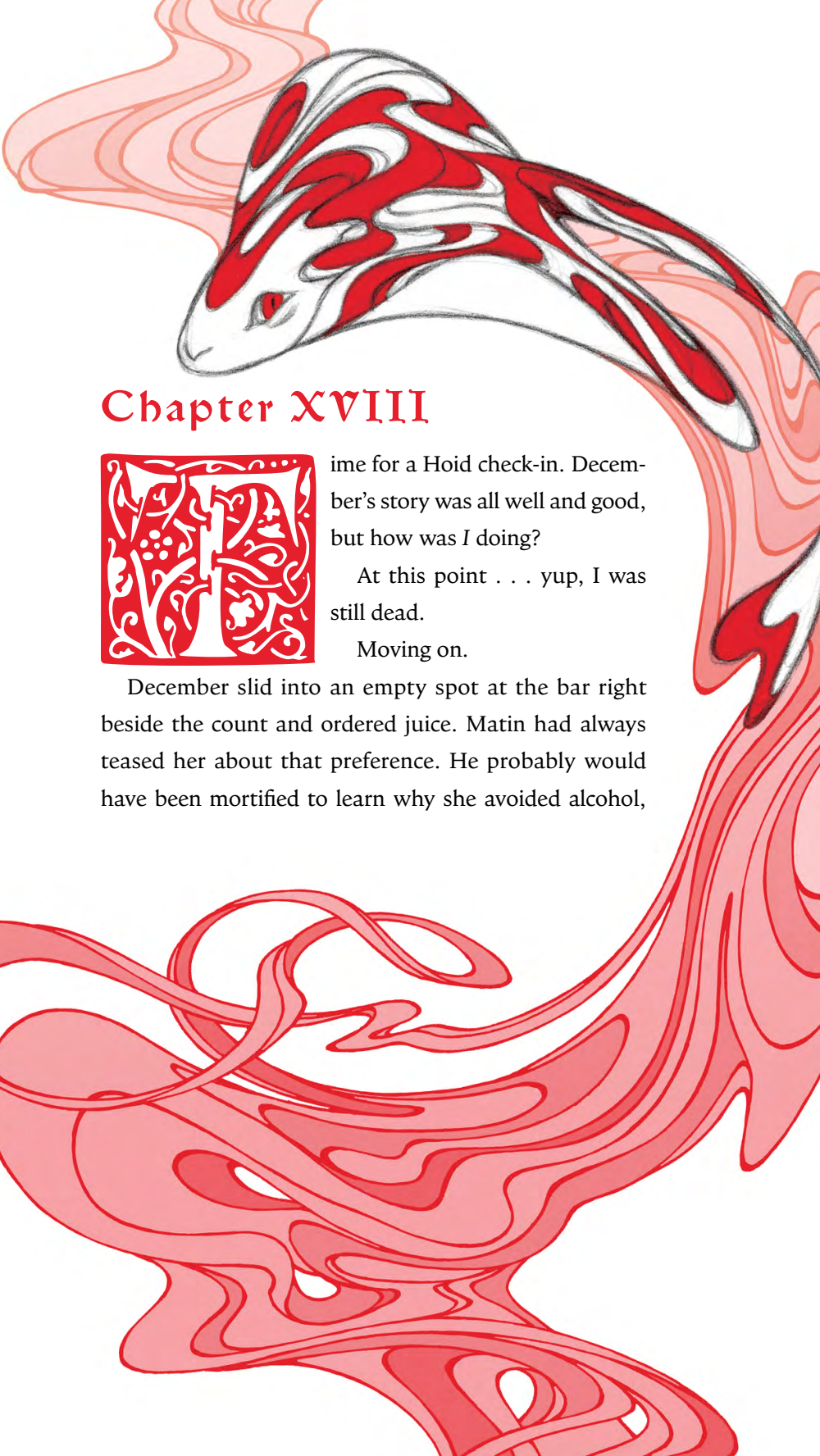
“Swimming is different,” Tamantha said. “If you wore something that skimpy in here, it would be *scandalous*.”

December eyed one of the serving girls wearing nearly as little. “These rules,” she said, “aren’t exactly intuitive.” With a sigh, she stood.

The Fires of December

“I guess I’ll just have to do my best. He’s a predator, right? I shouldn’t have to work too hard. If I act innocent and easy to manipulate, he should pounce.”

Tamantha groaned, but the kingdom needed December to do this. Granted, when she’d left Rivershore, she would never have guessed that saving everyone would depend on her powers of seduction.



Chapter XVIII



ime for a Hoid check-in. December's story was all well and good, but how was *I* doing?

At this point . . . yup, I was still dead.

Moving on.

December slid into an empty spot at the bar right beside the count and ordered juice. Matin had always teased her about that preference. He probably would have been mortified to learn why she avoided alcohol,

so she never told him, but past experience indicated this might make Flint think she was innocent.

He didn't seem to notice her at first. He lay slumped on the bar, silvery hair immaculately coiffed, pointed beard a perfect complement to his lean features. Aged eyes stared into his cup as he contemplated the burdens of the world. That hair would be wonderful to run her fingers through, mess up, disturb the styling to uncover the person beneath the presentation . . .

Oh, this is dangerous . . . December thought, looking away as her drink came. She sipped it and caught Flint eyeing her at last, so she subtly flicked her hair. That was . . . a thing women did, right? And sit up straight, chest out, not *too* stiff, with legs crossed and a bored-yet-wanting expression. Surely that would—

He turned away and went back to ignoring her.

She almost slammed her hand on the counter. That had been a *damn* good hair flick; she hadn't even gotten any in her mouth. And did he have any idea how hard it was to keep a posture like that while feigning a sense of bored relaxation?

Still, it was only her first salvo. The next was a soft sigh. In her experience, men could not resist the sigh, an indication of some problem that needed solving. Matin and Bark had shared few attributes, blessedly—but one had been their response to the sigh. Very useful if you needed the cabinet hinges realigned. Not so much if you were feeling stressed about your foster mother's chronic disease.

Count Flint proved immune. He continued to be interested solely in his drink, somehow overcoming the sigh, the batting eyelashes, *and* the seductive eating of a cherry from her drink. (That had been Tamantha's suggestion. She'd read about it in a book.) The nibble only left December hungry and wishing she hadn't abandoned the snacks.

Fortunately, she had prepared one final secret weapon. Amaal soon approached, as instructed, and whispered loudly to December, "Good

The Fires of December

news, Lady. The casino has approved your line of credit. The money from your family has arrived, and is secure at the bank.”

Flint perked up. December saw him do the mental calculations as Amaal retreated. *Yes, she thought. I told you I had less than one hundred on the boat, but it's now rumored that I'm truly a noblewoman. I simply wasn't carrying the money with me.*

She was suddenly a prize that could be worth the extravagant amount he needed to pay off his debtors. She looked to him pointedly, for in her experience, the most powerful thing a woman could do to a man was give him attention.

“Black,” she said to him. “I don’t believe I’ve seen anyone wearing black in this entire city. Such a shame, as it’s a handsome shade.”

Dangerous, she knew, to point out the symbol of his thievery. However, it felt like something a foreigner would naturally ask about.

With a side-eye, he downed the last of his whiskey before ordering another round. “Be sure to ask around,” he said without looking at her, “before you wear something similar.”

“Why?” she asked, trying to infuse her voice with a sense of empty-headed innocence. “Is it unfashionable here?”

“Just ask,” he said, “someone else.”

He accepted his new glass, then turned around to lean against the bar and survey the room—without so much as giving her a second glance.

December felt the most ridiculous kind of insulted. *Why, she thought, aren't you paying attention to me? Am I not worth taking advantage of?* The absurd and blatantly problematic nature of that complaint made her cringe. Unfortunately, this was her *only* lead. She *had* to keep trying.

What was wrong? Was it her bust? Her dark hair? Was she not acting innocent enough? Her indignation rose as she caught him smiling and watching a woman well into her forties, even going so far as

to turn his head as she passed, eyes following her. December had been promised a scumbag, and he was not living up to that.

He's putting on a good show, she realized. This is a performance, as he knows he got into trouble last time. He *had* perked up when he'd heard about her money; he was merely careful enough not to get caught in the same trap that had landed him in prison.

Turn up the charm, December told herself. *This is war.* She shifted so the skirt of her dress parted, the slit exposing more thigh. She leaned one elbow on the bar, hands clasped, and again thrust out her chest, then pursed her lips. It was perfect.

So perfect she nearly burst out laughing.

Something about the *ridiculousness* of it hit her like a trumpet blast; she felt beyond silly. How did women do this without snickering? She barely kept it in, though she did maintain her pose as he finally glanced at her. Then she delivered the perfect sultry gaze: batting her eyelashes again, then letting them come to a rest half open. That was, she'd read, exceptionally sexy. What was it about men and wanting women who seemed half asleep?

At long last, Flint smiled.

And heavens, that *smile*.

Don't melt, she told herself forcefully. *You have him now. He—*

"Bite," he said, "your lip."

"Excuse me?" she said.

"Bite the lip," he said. "It always works."

Um . . . Well, maybe this was how he liked things. She did so, biting her lower lip.

"Good," he said. "But don't bat your eyes. Too obvious. Just open them wide—give a man doe eyes, that sign of confusion and innocence. Also, that sigh earlier was too subtle. Speak up, but don't ask a man about his clothing. If you're in a casino, ask him about the rules of a game. Few men can resist the chance to look like an expert.

"Once you get him talking about something he knows, *then* segue

The Fires of December

him into helping you. Make a mistake in the game, and let him swoop in to rescue you. Then, and only then, ask him for help with a personal issue, to draw him closer and get him emotionally attached. You need to escalate *slowly*, transforming his sense of helpfulness *into* protectiveness, until he's offering to escort you home. Key is to give him what he's expecting: a girl out of her depth. *Not* what they eventually want, understand?"

She almost bit her lip off in surprise. "Gah!" She broke posture and grabbed her drink. "Ugh. I've got lipstick on my teeth now!"

"Gotta be careful about that," he agreed, swirling his whiskey.

"Look, I don't know who you are—"

"That," he said, "was obvious. Otherwise you wouldn't have marked me instead of literally anyone else in the room."

"Um, you see—"

"You're not really a noblewoman, are you?" he said, sipping his drink, then lowering his voice. "How'd you forge papers? That sort of thing is *expensive*." He nodded toward her servants at the table. "That move with the line of credit was good. Threw me for a moment, until I realized you were trying to project wealth so I wouldn't assume you were trying to get at mine. Should have done more research on your mark."

She blushed furiously, feeling even *more* silly. He'd *known* what she was doing and had observed her making an absolute idiot of herself. She wanted to scamper away and hide.

Except . . .

He thought she was a con woman, didn't he? Of course. He didn't know that *she* knew he'd tried to rob her. He thought she'd coincidentally settled on him as a rich man to try to dupe without connecting him to the thief who'd infiltrated her ship.

Of course he'd assume she was a scam artist. That was what he was, after a fashion. It wasn't what she intended, but she could *use* this, couldn't she?

Give them what they're expecting. Good advice, that.

"Look," she said, tossing aside her attempts at a girlish voice, adopting her normal way of talking. "I did do my research, all right? You're in trouble, yes, but you had enough to post bail."

"Still foolish," he said. "Associating with someone like me could get you into trouble. Should have started with someone younger, more accessible."

"More accessible," she said, "than the guy with four empty seats beside him at a busy bar? I figured you'd take any attention you could get."

He smiled, then put his cup down and turned *toward* her for the first time, conspiratorial and grinning. "I'll give you that. It was a bold play, and I'm impressed—not many people, particularly as green as you, could get the entire town talking. Dangerous, of course."

"Lots of scrutiny," she agreed. "Which is why I needed to move quickly." She grimaced, and decided to go with honesty. "I didn't expect the news, or interest, to travel so fast. I kind of fell into this. Now I'm in over my head, Count Flint, and need to make what I can before it all collapses around me."

He weighed that, and her honesty must have shone through, because he held out his hand toward her. "Just Flint," he said. "I know people call me a lot of things, but I like my name. The last one, at least. First one sounds like a child with knee-high socks."

She took the hand, smiling. "December."

"Real name?"

"Real enough for you to call me by it."

He laughed. "Touché." Then he lowered his voice even further. "Let's find you a better mark. How long do you think your forged papers of nobility will hold up?"

"They're solid," she said. "Almost like the king himself stamped them. Someone would need to write to the east and dig through the records there to figure out the truth—and I picked names and lineages that will be extra tough to authenticate."

The Fires of December

"Nice," he said, sounding genuinely impressed. "How old are you?"

"Eighty," she said immediately. "Um . . . that came out wrong. Eighty days or so past twenty-one, I mean."

He chuckled. "Twenty-one, and you've gotten this far?"

"I absolutely *flubbed* the seduction."

"Only because you picked the oldest, crustiest, grumpiest man in the room, December. Honestly, still amazed you zeroed in on the withered old has-been."

"Dashing seasoned facial hair," she admitted, "is my weakness."

He paused, then actually blushed a little. "Better," he said. "Much better. Practice pretending to be authentic, giving plausible compliments. That's the thing the novels never get right: Sure, men will notice if you thrust your chest at them, but they'll *die* for a compliment." He pointed toward one of the gambling tables across the room. "See that fellow? With the hair like a pine tree?"

"In the golden outfit?"

"That's the one."

"The haircut is on *purpose*?"

"Yup. He's known for them."

"Really more of a larch tree, I'd say," she said. "Not filled in well enough to be pine."

"Maybe he went to the barber with a mangy dog and said, 'Give me this.'"

"I mean, nobody else has that look," she said. "Sickly plague victim. Maybe he'll start a trend. An extremely stupid trend."

Flint's grin was infectious, and the conversation seditious. She'd *never* had a chance to talk to someone like that before—Matin would have been scandalized, and Bark would have . . . Well, it wouldn't have been good. He always had thoughts about how women should present themselves, even in private.

But . . . maybe she shouldn't worry so much about what two men she no longer knew might have thought.

"That," Flint said, "is Will Kartov. Fancies himself a playboy, but is dumber than an ice cream umbrella. He has a credit line like you wouldn't believe, and his parents will barely care if you take some of it, because they'd rather he be in a stable relationship."

"Hmm . . ." December said as Will threw dice and loudly proclaimed his skill. "Seems . . . confident."

"Absolute mess of a human being. Projects lion; speaks exclusively clown. He won't miss the money, I promise."

"So I needn't feel guilty."

"Guilty? Girl, you'd do the city a favor. Half his money is in real estate monopolization schemes, driving up rent for the river workers. You could blow everything you take from him on booze and scrub, and you'd be doing more to help the world than he's ever done with it."

"Perfect," she said, then hesitated. "What's scrub?"

Flint eyed her. "How," he said, "in the river's name did you get into this if you don't even know the names of street drugs?"

This time, she blushed. "I told you. I'm a little in over my head."

"A little? Kid, I don't think you can even see the surface." He turned toward the bar again. "Look, maybe I should give you some better advice. You're young and obviously smart. You don't have to go down this path."

"What other path would there be for me?" she asked, genuinely curious.

"If I were smart enough to answer that, I'd be somewhere far from here." He took a drink. "Listen. Maybe . . . Maybe don't follow my path."

"Which leads to . . ."

"Nowhere," he whispered. "You get older, and you get older, and you get older, and you suddenly realize you've built nothing—you've only taken out loans. Not of money, but of companionship and meaning borrowed from your future. Then you find yourself bankrupt, time dwindling. And you wish . . . for even a *shred* of meaning, but all the

The Fires of December

people *with* meaning? They're long gone. So you're alone with your regrets."

"I . . . I know how that feels."

"Sure you do."

"Alone," she said, "with more years behind you than before you, wondering how they slipped away so quickly. A low, subtle, but *pervasive* color to everything you do and see, a reminder that there isn't *actually* time to do things you always said you would. You'll never read that book, take that trip, or even make new friends. A new piece of you stops working right each damn day, and you keep saying, 'Well, this one isn't so bad,' but then they pile up, and you're horrified to realize what you've lost and will never, *ever* get back. And you wish, you *wish* you had a companion, because you know you could shoulder it all—horrible though the inevitability of it is—if only you had someone to push forward with, or at least *for*. But they're . . . all gone . . ."

He froze, then met her eyes with a baffled expression. That was the first time in the entire conversation he seemed to *see* her.

Then he snapped his mouth closed and turned away, downing the rest of his drink. "You read that somewhere?"

"I've been told I have an old soul."

"Kid, that's just a phrase idiots use," he said, "when they meet someone who isn't frightened of silence." He set his cup down on the counter. "Go try to scam Will, if you must. He's the safest mark I know. But if you do, you'll end up emulating me. So take a long, *hard* look."

"I'm looking."

He glanced at her again, then shook his head. With that gaze, she realized something was very wrong with her assumptions, because this man didn't have the *least bit* of interest in her as a man might a woman. He legitimately saw her as a child, not an opportunity or even an *option*.

"I'm confused," she said despite herself. "Why aren't you trying to take me in? I've heard you're a terrible corrupter of young ladies."

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah. I am." He pushed off from the bar. "Go bother someone your own age and leave the old men to old-man problems." He grabbed his cane and limped away, stopping only briefly to settle with the barkeep.

December closed her eyes, feeling stupid for what she'd said. Perhaps she wasn't as comfortable with silence as he'd implied. Now she'd lost her opportunity to ask him about the immortal.

(Still dead. Thanks for thinking of me.)

Amaal and Tamantha soon approached to ask how it had gone, and she was too embarrassed of her failures to explain properly. Instead, she watched Flint accept his sword from the coat check, then belt it on and limp out the door. A few moments later, the barkeep wandered over and told her that Flint had promised she'd cover his tab.

"Of course he did," she said with a sigh. "Tamantha, settle up, and Amaal, have Dmitrovik fetch the carriage, if you would."

The two women did as asked, leaving December as the one slumped against the bar. Something had gone right in that conversation in ways she hadn't expected, then wrong in ways she couldn't fully explain. Her mood wasn't helped when she turned and found that blasted demon sitting on the counter beside her, tail wrapped around itself, watching her with molten eyes. The barkeep scrambled away, calling for the hexer.

December ignored the thing and forced herself to consider what she'd learned. Flint could see through an amateur attempt to seduce him, a skill—in hindsight—she should have realized he'd possess. He came off as less dastardly, but more capable than she'd assumed. He regretted his life, and maybe even what he'd done to the Orange Duke's daughter.

Don't you start empathizing with him, she told herself. A person might be able to reform from what he did, but that doesn't make him a

The Fires of December

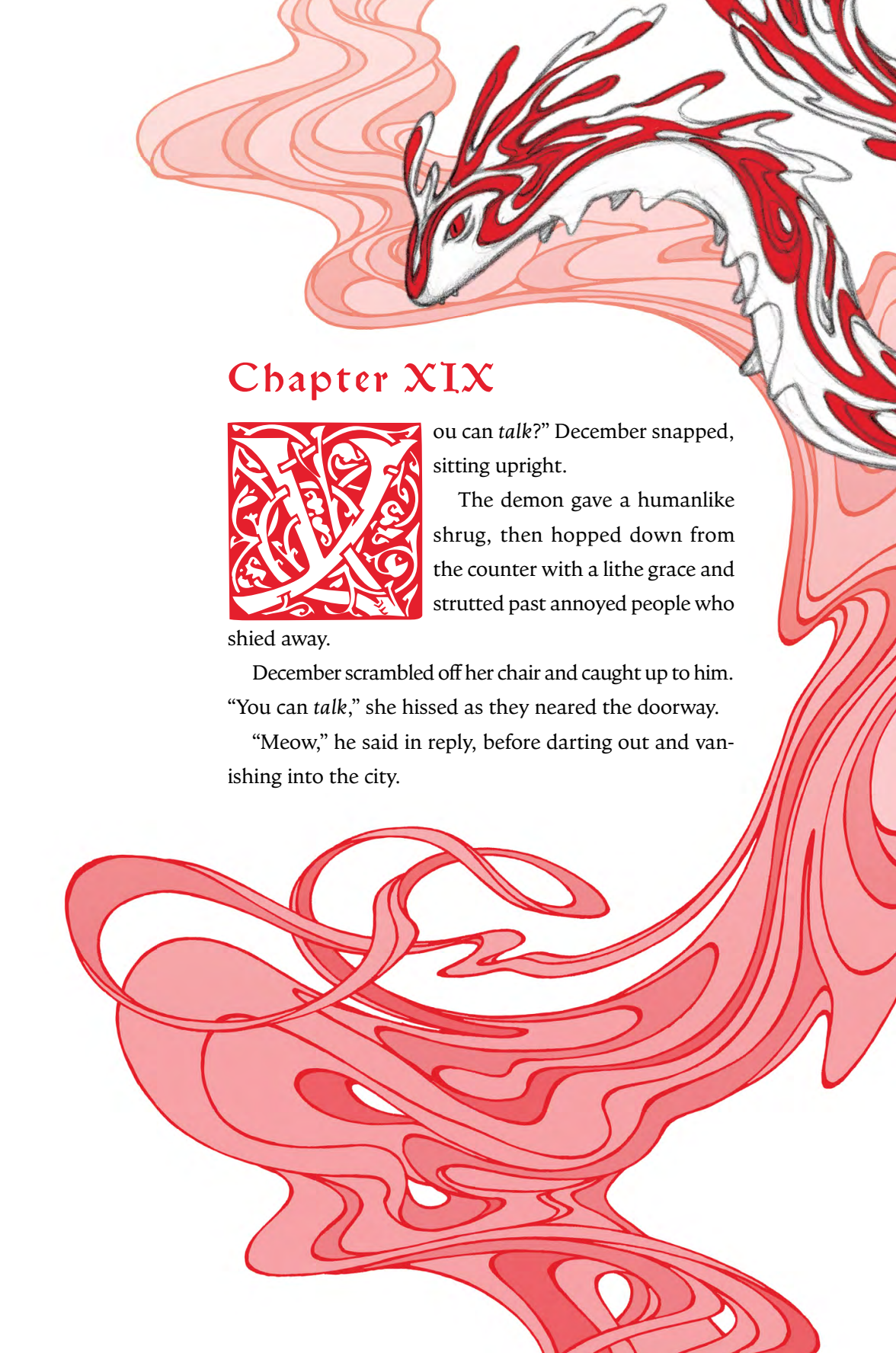
prospect. Stay away. You like calm, stable men with good jobs and quiet dispositions.

But . . . did she? Or had she merely come to slowly love *one* man of that genre? Again, she found herself hungering for more, and had to admit she couldn't exclusively blame youthful hormones. Old women could absolutely be fools over men, and if age truly brought experience in these things, then she wouldn't have known so many older people who had proven fools for love time and time again.

She wanted more from this life than she'd known in her previous one. If the world was getting a second chance, then *she wanted one too*.

As that felt selfish, she tucked it aside—folded up like a letter to read another day. Instead, she berated herself again for not finding a way to get answers from Flint on the larger issues. Tamantha waved, indicating the carriage was here, but December sighed and rested her head on the bar, looking toward where Flint had sat. She saw only that demon, regarding her.

"I suppose," the demon said with a masculine voice, "that morose expression means I'm not getting fed today."



Chapter XIX



ou can *talk*?" December snapped, sitting upright.

The demon gave a humanlike shrug, then hopped down from the counter with a lithe grace and strutted past annoyed people who

shied away.

December scrambled off her chair and caught up to him. "You can *talk*," she hissed as they neared the doorway.

"Meow," he said in reply, before darting out and vanishing into the city.

December stood, baffled, as the coat attendant helpfully offered her garment. December threw it on, then met Amaal and Tamantha on the sidewalk. The demon was already halfway down the block. Dmitrovik stood with a helpful posture nearby, and the coach was at the curb.

“Demons can talk?” December demanded of Amaal.

“Of course they can,” Amaal said. “How would they lure people’s souls away from them without being able to speak?”

“Did that one talk to you?” Tamantha asked.

“Yes. It seemed annoyed at me—said it thought I wouldn’t be feeding it today?”

“You’ve been *feeding* it?” Amaal asked, aghast.

“What? No. Of course not.” December paused. “Um . . . how do you feed them?”

“With compliments,” Amaal said.

Oh.

Ohhhh . . .

“Like,” December said, with a wince, “calling it beautiful?”

“Yes, like that,” Amaal said, hand to forehead. “Why do you think I *specifically* call it terrible whenever I see it?”

“I thought *everyone* knew that,” Tamantha said. “Um, Lady.”

“You overestimate me,” December said. “We don’t have them in Rivershore.”

“Too far from both the plains and the summit,” Amaal said. “Smack in the center. I should have realized . . .”

“Don’t speak to it anymore,” Tamantha said. “You should be fine. You didn’t promise it your soul, did you?”

“What? Of *course* not,” December said. “How stupid do you think I am?”

“Just checking . . .” Tamantha stepped toward the carriage as Dmitrovik opened the door.

December moved to join her, though as she did, Dmitrovik leaned in

The Fires of December

and spoke in his clipped way. “Lady. I do not pry. But the man you spoke to, he slipped into alleyway in a somewhat furtive manner. I believe deception is afoot. I thought I should mention, because of your interest.”

She glanced toward the indicated alleyway.

“Shall I,” Dmitrovik asked, “investigate?”

“You’ll stand out too much,” she said. “I’ll do it.”

“But—”

Finding her patience oddly thin, December interrupted him by reaching into the carriage and pulling from the floor compartment a large blanket for the feet of the people who rode inside. This was a *tiny* bit less conspicuous than most, patterned with a tight, small-squared checkerboard of red and black.

I’ll teach him not to dismiss me, she thought. *To call me child, when I’m at least fifteen years his senior.*

She tossed off her jacket and threw on the blanket, covering her head and hunching forward, like she’d done day after day for years when carrying water on her back up to the old shack where she’d lived outside of town. Memories flooded in, and she embraced them. The shuffle you did to keep moving forward, but never risk a fall, because alone on the trail, that would be death. The bowed back, because straightening hurt—plus it gave you a counterbalance to your heavy water pack. The steady, slow, careful walk of someone who had all the time in the day, for all the lack of years remaining.

Tamantha audibly gasped at the transformation.

Dmitrovik, however, nodded. “I will remain close by, Lady, if needed.”

December ambled to the alleyway in question, then shuffled across the mouth of it, daring one glance where—inside—she saw Flint, standing straight-backed, though leaning on his cane. He was speaking with a pair of well-dressed men.

Flint glanced her way, but she was just a hunched-over old woman. He dismissed her, whispering with the men as she inched across the

sidewalk and then reached up with one hand on the corner, puffing quietly, as if to rest.

"This," Flint said, barely audible, "is not what we agreed to."

"Your throws were too dramatic," one of the men said. "The casinos are catching wind. I think this has gone far enough."

"I'm cashing out too," the other said.

I recognize them! December realized. *They were the two most prominent men betting against Flint.*

She'd assumed he was pulling a con on the table, losing then building up to a win. She'd been right and she'd been wrong. He had plants in the audience, there to get people betting—so he could take a fall. Same as a prize fighter scheduled for a dive. The money wasn't what he would win, but a cut of what the others would win.

"We need to keep going," Flint said. "This is *working*."

"No it's not," the first man said. "You think you can earn enough on handfuls a day, Flint? I'm out. Too much suspicion."

"I need this," Flint said.

"Why? What happened with that windfall you said you were going to get? That jester, from other lands?"

December felt a jolt. The *immortal*.

"Never got paid for that," Flint said. "At least give me my full cut of today's winnings."

"Or what?"

"I am . . . not a man you want as an enemy," Flint said.

"Ha!" the other said. "You're a poor old fool. Be glad we gave you anything."

December took that as her cue, and wisely so. She had moved on before the two well-dressed men slipped out of the alleyway. They glanced around to see if anyone suspicious had noticed their dealings, but dismissed her as Flint had, then went separate ways. It took a while before Flint limped out. He took a long, deep breath, eyes closed, shoulders slumped.

The Fires of December

I was right, December thought with a thrill. *He is involved*. Granted, she was just following Geoffrim and Petva's instincts, as they'd been the ones to identify Flint as a suspect. Plus, she didn't *know* that him being involved with the immortal meant he was involved with the fall of the kingdom.

Except . . . it *had* to be related, didn't it? An immortal showed up from offworld, like the Prophet himself, and used his powers to catch a vision of disaster—towing December along. He came to the city, intent on stopping it, then was killed by mysterious intervention. Now she found Flint, who apparently bragged he was going to get paid big money for some event involving said immortal?

I need to know more, December thought, hungry. *But I can't confront him here, not without revealing I overheard him*.

She continued to pretend to rest as Flint limped right past her. Once he had turned a corner, and the other two men were nowhere in sight, she stood upright and returned to the carriage, where she tossed Dmitrovik her disguise. Amaal was—of course—clapping.

"You should discourage me from lying and subterfuge, I'd think," December said.

"Depends," the priestess said, "on your goals! The Prophet had to lie a few times to save the city."

Dmitrovik checked on them as they settled in. "Lady," he said, "you seem worried."

"I need more information from Count Flint," she said. "I'm trying to decide if we should follow, but I'm worried it will be suspicious. He'll notice if an old lady keeps showing up."

"You wish for me to track him?" Dmitrovik said. "See where he goes this evening?"

"I can't ask you to do that," she said. "Besides, Dmitrovik, I believe you *kind of* stand out."

He chuckled. "Lady. I was not always valet. I know these streets; I grew up on them. I will not go in uniform, I promise."

“Still,” she said. “It’s too dangerous.”

Oddly, he took her hand. “Lady,” he said softly. “You asked for me in person. I do not know why. I do not know what this man means, or why you talk of saving the city. But I know my own hurt. The innkeeper was about to take my job from me, and I *need* it so very badly.”

“For the child?” she asked.

He looked up at her, shocked. “You know?”

“I guessed.”

“Then know also,” he said, pressing his forehead to her hand, “that by asking for me today—by waiting until I last of all was presented—you saved my family. Following Flint is small thing, and one I can do. I will be safe; I promise. Let me serve you.”

She debated, then finally nodded. “If you are *sure* it won’t be dangerous.”

“I will observe only, and tell you later tonight if the count visits anyplace suspicious or interesting.”

With that, he closed the door for them, then was off, a spring in his step. December noticed Tamantha’s smile.

“Fine,” December said. “You were right about bringing a footman. I caught a tidbit at the end that is relevant—Flint *was* involved with the immortal somehow. I need another chance to talk to him. During our conversations, he saw through me immediately, but I managed to convince him I was a con artist with forged papers, looking for marks to scam in the city.”

“He bought that?” Amaal asked.

“He basically assumed it,” December replied.

“Yeah, he’s guilty,” Tamantha said.

Of something, December thought. *But what?*

She thought of him all the way back to the hotel, persistently, almost compulsively, and not only in ways relevant to saving the city. That sorrow, that charm when he turned it on, that smile . . . And the loss . . .

The Fires of December

She had to find answers. Not just to what he knew. But to who he truly was.

Inside the hotel lobby, they waited for Miss Greenwares to finish a meeting in her back office. December didn't move on to the rooms, though she wanted to do so, insisting on waiting herself. Eventually the innkeeper came out, followed by three men in very solemn costumes for Kingseat: white suits with colorful trim only on the insides of the jackets and shoes.

"Bank accountants," Tamantha whispered.

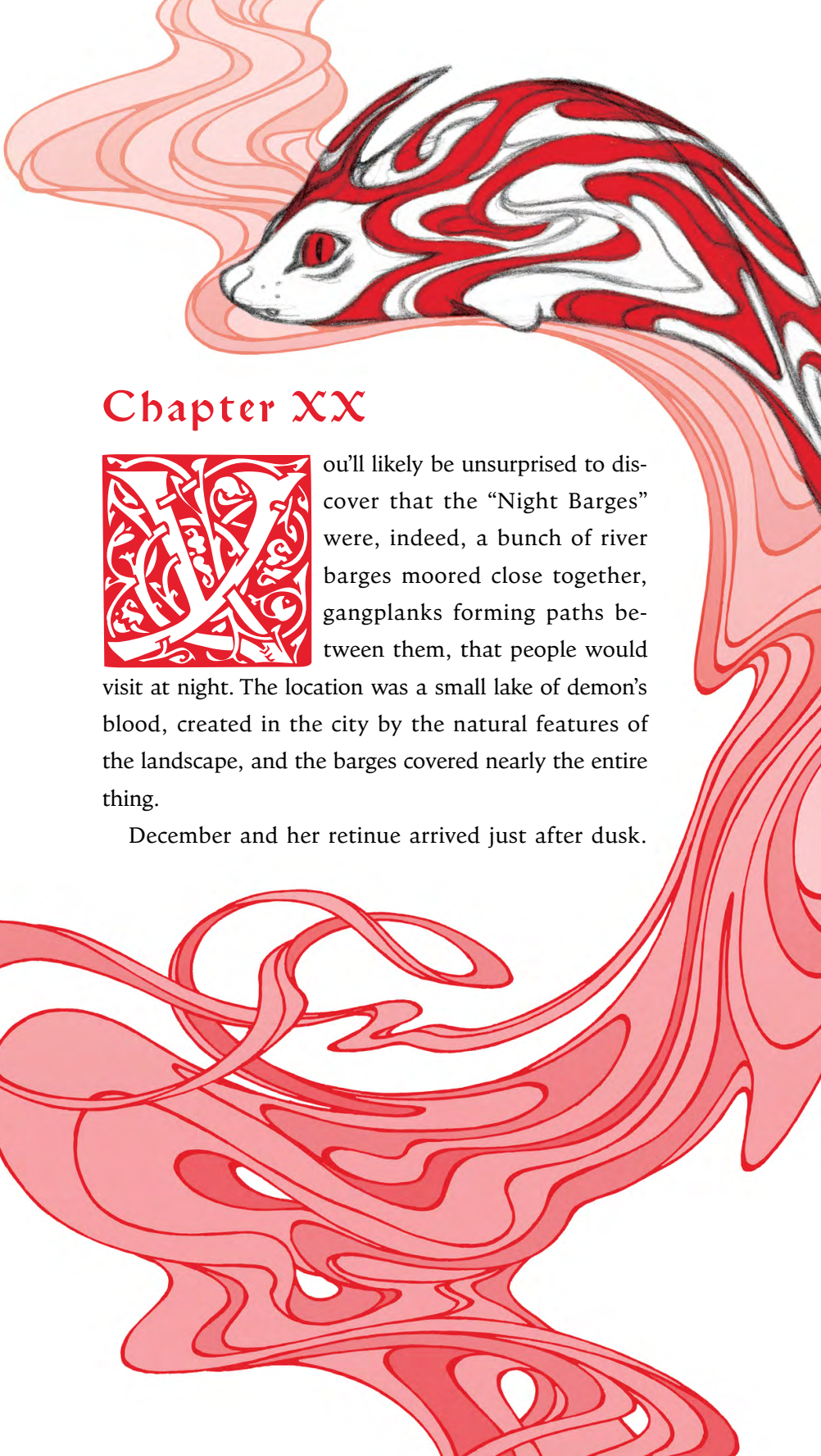
They didn't look pleased, and Miss Greenwares glared at them as they left. Then she gave December an inviting, warm smile. December had waited so she could praise Dmitrovik personally. She did so, then explained that she'd sent the man out on an errand, which was why he wasn't back yet.

After that, she retired to her rooms, trying to figure out how to next encounter Flint. Fortunately, that night Dmitrovik came through for her, sending a sealed note.

Lady. Man in question visited the Night Barges, a market for the rich, and there tried to get close to an older woman of means. She ignored his attention. I asked around subtly, and found he often visits this location in the evenings. You could find him around Barges Seventeen and Eighteen, should you wish.

She did wish, and started making plans for another confrontation the following evening. As she schemed, she realized she knew how to get close to him again without him being suspicious. How to catch his attention and hold it.

Flint had given her the exact methodology himself when they'd sat at the bar together.



Chapter XX



ou'll likely be unsurprised to discover that the "Night Barges" were, indeed, a bunch of river barges moored close together, gangplanks forming paths between them, that people would visit at night. The location was a small lake of demon's blood, created in the city by the natural features of the landscape, and the barges covered nearly the entire thing.

December and her retinue arrived just after dusk.

She'd once again put off visiting the river for her day's clothing, instead opting to wear one of Tamantha's gowns: sequined, crimson, and showing too much skin up top. Fortunately, Tamantha had anticipated December's bashfulness, and provided a matching black bolero to wear over her shoulders, which December liked. It let her be daring, but still reserved.

At the dock, the bouncers let her pass without so much as a question. They merely bowed and welcomed her, waving for her to enter, while barring many others who waited in a line. In that way, there was a certain advantage to being in this particular box, December acknowledged.

She thought it was only because of her station and didn't realize that a single, eligible lady of means arriving with two lower-ranked (but still very eligible) young women as attendants was someone that almost every exclusive venue in almost every exclusive society on almost every planet would jump to open the doors for. Where there were women, there would be men wanting to impress them, and when men wanted to be impressive, money flowed.

The setting was remarkable. December had seen barges on the river, of course, but those had largely been industrial vehicles. The odd luxury cruise had passed Rivershore, but rarely stopped, and never one so adorned as these: with colorful hanging lanterns, the candles inside flickering mysteriously. Vibrant paint clung to fading sunlight, shining with what you might call a fluorescent neon coloring, but they called Demon Bright. This was all topping the river, less garish, more like the color of coals simmering below, illuminating the hulls with liquid light always in motion.

December passed a group of women wearing dresses that evoked cooks in a kitchen, with apron fronts and spoon earrings—but others had birdlike costumes, bursting with faux feathers at the backs and along the fronts. Tamantha cooed over those, though they were as skimpy as swimsuits, making December confused again at the rules.

The Fires of December

Hadn't she just been told yesterday that wouldn't be proper in this kind of setting? When she asked, Tamantha laughed.

"But those aren't swimsuits or undergarments, Lady."

"They cover rather the same amount."

"Why does that matter?"

December was no fool, and from this she finally understood that what you *called* the garment was the relevant part. She still thought it was a stupid distinction.

Dmitrovik, whom she'd again hired for the day, had come earlier and checked for her. Flint *was* in attendance, as was her supposed "mark" for the evening—Will Kartov, the very young man Flint had suggested she try to scam.

The first rule, she thought to herself as Dmitrovik led the way across the barges, *is to give them what they expect*. That's what Flint had told her, and tonight, she planned to deliver what he expected: a young scam artist out of her depth.

Moving through the barges was slow going, with how many people were crowding the decks and the swaying gangplanks connecting them. The place was indeed a market, with many barges that had come long distances and bought permits to show wares of exotic and expensive varieties, though nearly as many were only serving drinks. Generally, the people tended to flow through the shopping barges, then congregate and chat on the drinking barges. It was a great colorful mess, and she blessed Dmitrovik, who continued carefully leading them through the chaos.

Tamantha was basically no help. "I've always wanted to be here," she said, clinging to December's arm. "Oh, I've read about this social scene so many times. That's Count Retrivolok there. Oh, Lady. Isn't he just as handsome as the drawings in the papers? More? And that . . . Lady, that's the Baroness Silmial. She funds *three* of the most capable dressmakers in all the kingdom. She looked at me! Lady, did you see, she *looked at me!*"

December nodded to each one, carefully pulling Tamantha through the crowds. Amaal was more stable, as usual, until they reached one of the later barges where, with fingers to lips and eyes wide, she saw a group of *priests* gathered near the bow.

“Other priests and priestesses?” she whispered.

“Oh, many of the highborn bring their personal clergy with them,” Tamantha said, “to watch over them and make certain they don’t lapse too far into sinful behavior.”

“How wise!” Amaal said, clutching her sword-staff. “And how very pious! Maybe the lords and ladies here aren’t in as much spiritual danger as I’d worried.”

(She’d have been horrified to discover that really, these city clergy were used more as another mark of wealth, and were largely ignored when they gave advice. They did still come with their lords and ladies, because . . . well, everyone enjoys a nice party with a drink tab paid by someone else.)

The words “prophet” and “faith” drifted from that group, and Amaal couldn’t help floating over, like a leaf caught in an eddy, to circle the perimeter of the conversation.

“She won’t,” December whispered to Tamantha, “have to ask permission to talk about the mandata to them, as her vow to only approach those who ask doesn’t apply to other clergy.”

“Ah,” Tamantha said as Dmitrovik caught December’s eye and pointed to the next barge over. There, leaning against the railing and given wide space on either side, was Flint. He didn’t notice her as she let Dmitrovik make way for them, warding away would-be suitors. They left Tamantha staring with awe at a stall of scarves, and December slipped her a few coins to buy some for the two of them.

So, with only Dmitrovik leading her, she entered this final barge, which was one of those where people socialized and drank rather than shopped. Here, her footman whispered, “I will not be able to intervene well if these men approach you, Lady. They are too much

The Fires of December

above my station. I will try if you wish, but be warned, these are not men accustomed to servants telling them what to do.”

“Thank you,” December said. “Don’t intervene. I’ll see if I can handle them myself.”

She immediately drew their eyes. This barge was less crowded than the others, but full of attitudes December was beginning to associate with the nobility. That air of attended indifference—someone too important to care, but too important to be alone either. Women or men standing in circles around the most important, laughing at whatever they said, or deferring to their choices when drink orders were taken. The women’s gowns had those winged protrusions at the backs, as it seemed the very wealthy were already moving away from the kitchen-style fashion she’d seen in court not a few days before. Instead of feeling like birds, however, these women had a mothlike quality. Great wings came from their backs, held up with stiff supports, and the constructions looked so terribly impractical. How would they sit, or get through doorways? The designs covered more than the bird outfits, but the women’s legs were completely bare, save for thin mesh hose. Those would catch and run easily, it seemed.

Demon’s blood, December reminded herself. *It doesn’t have to be practical—it only has to last one evening.*

The men wore outfits with a slightly military feel to them, uniforms of bright colors. Less overwhelming than some fashions in the city, but they were all wearing *three* jackets, layered in a four-color gradient with the shirt beneath.

Not a few of the younger men watched her as she passed, eyes hungry, smiles predatory. She was rich, with a title sanctioned by the king. High enough to be a possible match for the most important, even if her rank would not quite be equal to theirs. Rich enough to be a catch for someone of her same rank or lower. It wasn’t long before one of them tried, a man in his early thirties wearing shades of red down to white.

Brandon Sanderson

"Lady December," he said, offering his arm. "Your first time at the Barges? Might I show you around?"

"Oh, yes!" she said. "Thank you! I'm looking for a man named Will Kartov. Can you show me to him?"

Behind, the friends of the man laughed uproariously, and he in turn blushed, but he *had* offered, and so he pointed him out to her. Will was young, broad of chest, and possessing of a terribly uneven haircut he thought looked distinctive. (If a stutter were a hairstyle, that would be it.) He stood near the prow with a gaggle of others his age, throwing floating balls into rings on the lake beyond. He wore gold descending to black, and she wondered idly how everyone knew the right fashion to wear for the night, if it changed so quickly. (The answer was, of course, that they all had a person like Tamantha to advise them.)

She thanked her current companion, letting go of his arm without a second glance—which caused his friends to laugh again. The disturbance drew Flint's attention as he lounged by the railing. He turned, and saw her. She gave him a wink and a smile, heading straight for Will.

You put me on this course, Flint, she thought. You're going to want to listen to how I do, aren't you?

Behind her, Flint's cane sounded on the deck as he moved closer. One of Will's companions nudged him as she approached, and she was immediately given death glares by the three women trying to keep his attention. Only one had gotten the moth-costume memo, and the others were wearing the little birdlike outfits with folds like feathers, at least on the (very little) portion of the body they covered.

Will looked to December, then smiled widely.

"Is it too forward," she asked, "for me to approach you? I'm new to the city, and don't know the way of things here."

"Not forward at all," he said, gesturing for her to join him at the railing near the prow. "We were playing bobs."

"Oh," she said. "I've heard of it, but I have *no idea* how to play."

The Fires of December

"It's easy!" he said, throwing a ball in the air and catching it. "Let me show you."

She spent the next half hour flirting, poorly, with Will. Fortunately, her lack of skill didn't seem relevant, as he was just as Flint had told her: a disaster with a mouth that could have outtalked Amaal even at her most loquacious. He boasted, he told bad jokes, he bought her drinks—and all the while, he explained the game, even betting lavishly on it a few times to impress her.

But Will was not her target. He was called over to talk to someone important, promising her he'd return shortly, and she glanced toward Flint—who had witnessed it all as he idled by the side of the ship.

Ask about the rules of the game, he'd told her.

"How am I doing?" she hissed.

He took a few steps closer, but didn't look to her as he replied. "Fine enough. Not hard with Will."

"I'm worried I'm just another butterfly to his flower, and he won't distinguish me from the others. Any tips?"

"A valid worry," he said. "Will might be too dumb to realize how big a catch you supposedly are unless you nudge him. Flaunt your presumed wealth a little in conversation. Talk about meeting the king. He will rarely let you get a word in edgewise, but if you hit those ideas a few times, it will sink in. His father has been pestering him to finally settle down with a good match. Play innocent, and he'll realize he might be able to marry you and appease his family, while maintaining his lifestyle at the same time, as you are too simple to stop him."

She nodded in thanks as Will returned, and did as she'd been told, slipping in mentions here and there. Again, she wasn't particularly *good* at it, but Flint had directed her well. If she really *had* been a novice scam artist hunting for a mark, then Will was perfect, as he didn't require a skilled hand. A few clues, blatantly inserted into the conversation, got him thinking along the right lines. Even with

her lack of experience, she easily could have hooked this man and milked him for money over the next few weeks.

But again, he was not her target.

The next step, she thought, remembering Flint's suggestions, *is to make a mistake.*

"You want to make a bet?" Will asked her as she tried her next throw.

The mistake. "Yes," she said.

"Five gold?" he replied.

"Yes! Um, what was it you said? Triple downed?"

Flint spit out his drink over the side of the ship in shock. By game rules, triple downed didn't actually triple the amount, but cubed it. An easy error to make, but one with huge consequences, making the bet above the amount she had left—and Flint knew it.

Will laughed, but uncomfortably, because that was a steep amount even for someone like him.

"A hundred and twenty-five it is!" he said.

"Wait," she said, imbuing her words with horror. "A hundred twenty-five?"

"Oh, is that too much?" Will asked.

"No, no. It's nothing to me, obviously." She said it too quickly, her presumed persona breaking down, and she looked about with panic.

A girl in over her head.

Will tossed a ball and caught it, then made an expert throw right into one of the floating rings—a toss that she as a novice could never match. She didn't glance toward Flint, but waited, shuffling, projecting nervousness.

He said that no man could resist . . .

"Will Kartov!" Flint said, stumbling forward, feigning drunkenness. "Are you betting again? Want to bet with me?"

. . . the rescue.

"Wonderful," Will said. "It's *him*."

The Fires of December

"I'm the best at bobs, and you know it," Flint slurred, stumbling again, then waving his cane. "I used to own this barge, you know. Least I think it was this one. Damned things all look the same, don't they?"

He pushed against December, eyes flickering to her drink, which she promptly—and deliberately—spilled on herself.

"Oh!" she said, wiping at it. "Oh!"

"Stupid old man," Will said, puffing up and shoving Flint back. "Washed-up idiot. Stay away."

Flint did, teetering through the crowd toward the other end of the boat. That left December to excuse herself to go clean up. She made her exit quickly, moving through the crowd. Dmitrovik materialized a handkerchief for her, then caught on and guided her to the next barge, where she found Flint sitting on a stool bolted to the deck beside a shop selling watches.

He looked tired and old. She knew that feeling.

She slipped onto another stool next to him, not at a bar, just along the side of the boat by the railing. "Thanks for the save," she whispered.

"Triple downed is more than three times the bet," he said. "You wanted to say triple bets."

"I figured that out too late," she said with a grimace, wiping at her gown with the handkerchief. "I wanted him to win something off me, to get him hooked and thinking I really am rich, but . . ." She sighed.

This area was largely empty, though she didn't know if that was the normal movement of crowds creating a lull, or people staying away from Flint. The barge rocked softly in its mooring, and the light was beginning to fade from its paint, while the great river beyond continued to burn fierce.

"You might be right," she continued. "I might be wrong for this kind of work."

"Why do you even want to do it?" he said. "Isn't there anything for you back where you came from?"

Next, move on to personal problems, he'd suggested the day before.

"I'm an orphan," she said, leaning forward on her little stool to cross her arms on the railing of the barge, overlooking a section of the lake without vessels. In the background, people laughed and merchants sold, but for December and Flint, that was merely a light accompaniment. "My parents weren't married. My father a sailor, my mother a foreigner who had settled down in my village. She died soon after I was born. I never knew her."

"I'm sorry."

"They say I have her eyes . . ." December whispered. "But, well, there aren't a lot of roles for an orphan girl in a working town, Flint. On my birthday, they tried to marry me off to a man like Will over there, only dumber."

"Dumber? Than *Will*?"

"His name was Bark. He was sharp as a thumb and bright as the place he'd often stick it."

Flint's burst of laughter caught her off guard, as back in Rivershore it hadn't been polite to speak of people—even Bark—in such a way. Not even Matin had appreciated it, as he considered not speaking ill of his constituents part of the burden of leadership. She respected that, and had often felt ashamed of such thoughts.

Flint didn't seem to be acquainted with shame. His eyes twinkled. "Will's the sort of man you don't dare salute when he's holding something sharp, or he'll wind up in the infirmary again. Your Bark was that kind of dumb?"

December smiled. "Worse. He was the willful kind. A man who preferred to be ignorant because then he could feel smart."

"Sounds delightful. Do you miss the small town, though? Other than the Bark fellow. Sometimes I look at this city, and I ask myself why anyone would choose to live here. Everyone is so fake; their clothing isn't the only thing they fabricate fresh from nothing each day."

The Fires of December

"You assume too much of a small town, Flint. People aren't different there."

"Sure they are. They're more honest, more goodly. Why do you think all the nobility stay away from such places? That sort of authenticity frightens them."

"It's funny to speak that way," she said, watching the glow fade from buildings on the shore as night advanced, "but it's not true. People are people. Yes, life is slower downriver, but if you think the mayor didn't play king, or the woman with a new dress didn't present it with the same gleeful pride as those here, then you're delusional."

"Do you miss it, though?"

"I miss some of the people," she said, "and not others. I miss being nobody, but I suppose . . . even there, people watched me. I was always the woman they whispered about, never the one they whispered to. I had a great number of acquaintances who would have been able to tell you what I liked for lunch, but not what I dreamed about. Overall, no, I suppose I don't miss it. What about you? Do you miss your life of partying in the courts of the world?"

"Strange, how I don't," Flint said, standing and stretching, then leaning against the railing. "I do miss the man I was, though. A man who could enjoy those sorts of libations freely and convince himself that he had all the time in the world."

"I know," she said softly. "That doesn't last, does it? Once you get a little older, you catch yourself in the rare moment it is working, and everything is right, and then can't enjoy it because you're terrified it's going to leave you again."

"Experience is a right bastard, she is," he said, gazing toward the sky. She caught a hint of a smile on his face though, and that profile of him there . . . standing with thoughtful eyes, weathered but still remarkably unbowed . . .

Everyone in this city thinks they understand him, but they don't. I

didn't. What brought you to this, Flint? It's not just regret for a life wasted. There's more to you.

Before her was a man who somehow *rejected* the boxes everyone tried to put him in. That *fascinated* her.

He looked back at her and physically jumped, startled.

"What?" she demanded.

"I keep forgetting that you're—"

So young. She heard the words without him needing to speak them.

"Excuse me," he said, thumping cane to deck as he left. "Try not to get into so much trouble next time you hustle someone."

He moved toward a more crowded portion of the deck, and December rose, tracing him with her eyes, feeling a warmth she hadn't felt in ages. It started low, and ended at her cheeks, and both that warmth and her mind agreed for once.

She was *not* done with him yet tonight.



Chapter XXI



December picked up Dmitrovik, who had been waiting nearby and subtly turning people away from that section of the barge.

"You," she said as he fell in beside her, "are an absolute *gem*,

Dmitrovik. Thank you for keeping things private for us."

He glowed. "Thank you, Lady."

"Flint still has information I need. Can you cut me a path to intercept him?"

"Lady. He is old man with limp."

He immediately made space for her, parting the crowd with as much efficiency as possible in that setting. Less a hot knife through butter, more a pair of gloved hands through kittens. The crowd rolled, a constant motion of dazzling lights and colorful costumes, abuzz with a hundred conversations in unacknowledged tension with one another. Each needing to be loud enough to be heard by companions without resorting to shouts that would draw attention.

She lost track of where she was, let alone where Flint was, but Dmitrovik—with an occasional hand to ward off a would-be suitor—got her through it and across another barge, allowing her to slide into place next to Flint at a stall selling dueling swords.

He groaned audibly. “You shouldn’t be seen with me.”

“Why?”

“You’ll start rumors,” he said under his breath, smiling to the shop owner, who turned away to hang a sword on the wall of his booth, “that will make it difficult to get the attention of the right young men.”

“Which I’m doing such a wonderful job with on my own.” December heaved a sigh. “Face it, I’m hopeless. I need a teacher.”

He shoved away from the booth, making his way through the crowd. She barely managed to keep up.

“Experience is the ultimate teacher,” he hissed to her. “She might be a bastard, but you can pay her with time, something you have plenty of right now. Use it.”

“And if I don’t want to pay the common way?”

“Impossible. Or at least immoral.”

“Says the scoundrel.” December ducked around him and barred his way, then leaned toward him and spoke very softly. “I’m here to cheat the young men of court, but they’re easy game. I’d prefer to learn how to cheat time.”

“For that,” he said in her ear, “there are no shortcuts.”

“I think you’d be surprised at what I’ve already discovered.”

She locked eyes with him.

The Fires of December

He turned away, stomping across a bridge. December followed, but at the next barge, he ducked around a group of chatting people and lost her. She spun around, baffled at how he'd given her the slip so easily. Dmitrovik joined her, cursing, before pointing the way they'd come. Somehow, Flint had gotten around them and headed back.

Dmitrovik led the way, apologizing as he went against the flow of people, who were largely moving toward the exits now that the hour was growing later. The tall footman's movements made a wake for December to follow in, close behind him, but keeping track of Flint was touch and go for the next bit. Finally, they reached a barge where people danced to lively violins—and Flint tried to hide among the shifting forms.

Dmitrovik wiped his brow. "Sorry. He is *spry* old man with limp."

"Watch to see he doesn't double back on us again," December said. Then, with a deep breath, she dove into the crowd of weaving bodies. They didn't dance like people in Rivershore, in lines with spins and hands out. Nor was it quite the gyration of modern dance you might be familiar with, but an early precursor. Prescribed motions, with variation allowed, but pure bedlam to poor December as she fought her way through, trailing Flint by his black clothing.

"You're determined," he said over the music when she found him briefly.

"I've a lifetime's worth of stubbornness and more," she growled, but he was already gone again, forcing her to chase until she found him at last, dancing with a buxom woman in her fifties who laughed, tapped him on the cheek, then shook her head before spinning toward several other men.

December, sweating far more than she'd have liked at a social function, barred his way. He sighed, then leaned against a railing, letting her join him and get a gasp or two of fresh air, watching to see if he ran off again.

"Who was that?" December asked, nodding to the buxom woman.

Brandon Sanderson

"Viscountess Marchiksik," he said lightly. "Rich. Widowed. Boring."

"Boring? She seemed lovely."

"She's got a nice hotel, so to speak, but no guests in residency."

December's aghast expression must have shown, because he chuckled. "We were *just* berating dear Bark and Will."

"Yes, but she's so close! You shouldn't say such things out loud!"

"Why are you smiling, then?" he asked, eyes mischievous.

Why was she? Because he didn't seem to *care* what people thought of him.

"Well, she can't be as dumb as Bark," December finally said.

"Perhaps not," he said, turning. "But whisper seductions in her ear and it *will* echo."

"Popular, though, judging by the number of men who want to dance with her."

"Many men prefer to hear their own voices, December. This whole lot think sense, being common, is for the lowborn." He looked to her.

"Why won't you just let me be? I'm *trying* to do what is good for you."

"Perhaps," she said, "let a lady decide what is good for herself."

"Tried that . . ." he mumbled, then stepped back as a young man approached, smiling at December. He possessed, she thought, unfortunate features—but she did not hold that against people.

"Might I," he said to her, "have this dance?"

"Not right now, thank you."

"And if I insist?" the young man said, smiling, coming closer.

"Dłimi," Flint said. "Leave the girl alone. She's too busy right now to bother with you."

"Busy? Doing what?"

"Wondering how a man can simultaneously have too much ear and not enough forehead." Flint slapped the taller man lightly on the back of the head.

The younger man sneered, reaching at his side for a weapon that wasn't there.

The Fires of December

“Go ahead,” Flint said dryly. “Insist on dueling me tomorrow. If I win, you’ll be shamed. If you win, what will you have accomplished? Beating an impoverished man in his sixties?” He nodded to the side. “On with you.”

The young man slunk away, grumbling.

“That’s going to keep happening if we stay here,” Flint said. “Let’s get a drink. Tell your wall of a manservant to keep people away again.”

She followed, suspicious, accepting another handkerchief from Dmitrovik as they passed. *Where does he keep all these?* Two boats over, they slipped onto the barstools of a barge that had largely emptied in advance of closing, but the bartender seemed to know Flint, delivering him a drink with tomato juice mixed with something hard.

“And the lady wants . . .”

“To pay my tab,” Flint said.

“Do you have, um, anything zero proof?” She had learned this was a fancy way of saying she didn’t want alcohol, and without asking more, the bartender delivered her a blue drink that was *fizzy*. She didn’t quite know what to make of it.

Flint took a tomato garnish out of his drink and tossed it overboard.

“You don’t like them?” she asked.

“I don’t trust them.”

“ . . . Tomatoes?”

“Saw a man choke on one once. Besides, they can’t decide if they’re a fruit or a vegetable.”

“The Y of the culinary world,” she agreed, sipping her drink. “You really saw a man choke on a tomato?”

“He took a shot, hoping to look like a man. Died right there in the bar.”

“I can teach you how to save someone from that,” she said, nodding to Dmitrovik, who was guarding the way. “Legitimately, no joking. There’s a method.”

"I know. I learned it, too late, from a traveling doctor." He narrowed his eyes. "You know the Gorge maneuver?"

"I learned it as the Edak maneuver."

"I was testing you. How did a girl barely in her twenties learn a physician's secret like that?"

"Shortcuts," she said idly, swirling her drink and watching the bubbles pop.

"You haven't lived long enough for shortcuts."

"Just because I don't look as terribly ancient as you is no reason to assume I'm without experience of my own."

"I mean . . . I'm not *that* old," he said.

So there is some pride left in you. Good.

But she did seem to have hit a nerve. "That's not how you talk about yourself," she said with a wave of her fingers. "Ancient. Mummified. Neck-deep in the grave, waiting for the shovels to toss dirt on you. Wizen, withered."

"Maybe not *withered*," he said. "I was one of Kingseat's best duelists."

"Eight hundred years ago."

"I'll have you know I could probably still best three out of four men at this market," he said, then grinned, leaning down on the bar and looking at her. "Particularly this time of night after they've got a few shots in them."

She smiled back.

"All right," he said, "let's talk."

"Well," she said, "my problem is—"

"Not about that. About how in the demon's name I'm going to convince you to bother someone else."

"Because I shouldn't be around you," she said, turning around and crossing her legs. "Lest you—being a deviant—corrupt me."

"Exactly."

"Let's assume I *want* to be corrupted a little."

The Fires of December

“Why?” he asked. “You have your whole life ahead of you.”

Why? She had not forgotten that this entire interaction was intended to get him to trust and confide in her. If he was planning some insane heist, like stealing the Ever-Slaying Sword, he might need accomplices. That had, she now saw, become her plan without her realizing it. Get him to take her under his wing, then find out the details of his plan.

That was the overt reason. It wasn't the full why, and she was too old a woman to waste time lying to herself. Frankness was her longtime companion at this point. Saving the city was the main reason, but she also found she wanted to be near him. Heavens, it was silly, and she acknowledged that. With her wealth and title, she could have had her pick of young eligible men in the city, but here she was, with *this* man. Why?

“You feel guilty, wasteful,” she said slowly, trying to make sense of a drink that seemed to explode in her mouth and throat, and of emotions that exploded further down, “because you spent your life ignoring society's rules.”

“More or less.”

“Well, I've lived those rules,” she whispered. “I've listened to them, internalized them, *slaved* to them. They dominated everything I did for decades. Now, I find I want something more. I feel . . . I deserve something more.”

She looked to him, and found him staring. So she bit her lip, and as he'd said, it seemed to devastate him from the way he stared. He looked back at his drink, as if determined not to focus on her.

“I'm old, December,” he whispered.

“Basically a corpse.”

“Well, I wouldn't say—”

“Which means that if I *did* want you, wouldn't that make *me* the deviant?”

Brandon Sanderson

He started, glanced to her, and she couldn't stop herself from blushing. That was the sort of thought one *really* shouldn't speak out loud. *And I had the nerve to chastise him earlier.*

"I see that blush," he said, grinning. "You talk big, but you're as innocent as they come."

"Hardly," she said, raising her chin. "I'll have you know I'm considering wearing a *swimsuit* one of these days."

"Oh, how bold."

"It's missing a portion to show the navel and has slits up the sides as well. It's *scandalous*. In some ways, it would be less revealing to wear nothing at all."

"How exactly do you figure?" he asked lightly, but she caught the hint of a blush on *his* cheeks as he glanced at her again, perhaps succumbing to imagination.

"Well, it's like innuendo," she said. "To outright say it, using proper terms, is clinical, sanitized. But to tease, to hint, to leave the most intimate part unsaid . . . that's *mystery*."

"And if I want to know your mysteries . . ."

"You'll need to show me a few of your own."

"Not sure I can do that anymore. Not with you, certainly. Maybe not with anyone."

"What happened, Flint?" she asked. "You and the duke's daughter. What *really* happened?"

"Things a gentleman doesn't reveal."

"Which . . . you are?"

"I dress like one sometimes. How are you like this? I've been around young girls at court. Too often, too many. How are *you* like *this*?"

"That's one of my mysteries," she said. "I'll tell you someday. Maybe."

"All right," he said. "That's fair. But another question. Why me? I understand, perhaps, why you want to live outside the rules you've

The Fires of December

been subjected to, but there are plenty of men in town who will show you a good time. Why *me*?”

“You say the things that others barely dare think and you refuse to be what they want you to be.”

“That’s interesting to you?”

“*Fascinating*. You don’t care about boxes.” She paused. “Why *me*?”

“Because, if you haven’t noticed, you haven’t given me many choices.”

“Nonsense. You nearly gave Dmitrovik the slip, and you had me worn out trying to chase you on the dance floor. If you’d darted away again, I’d have been unable to follow. So why didn’t you?”

He hesitated, still meeting her gaze. “You’re a mystery.”

“And you like mysteries?”

“I crave them,” he growled. “Like a meal that can never satiate. Like the years hunger for the lives of old men.”

They held one another’s eyes, and that *heat*. December had never felt that before, never dared let herself. Bark had been cold, and Marin warm. Neither had been *fire*, and by Valor herself, she wanted to burn herself upon him.

Last step. Invite him home.

It was what he’d told her. But the world . . . the world was going to die, and she wasn’t here for herself. She couldn’t let it be about her—not yet.

“You ask,” she found herself saying, “why I left the safe boundaries of a simple rural society.” She turned around, looking away from him, trying to act nonchalant. “Well, a month back, I met a man in Rivershore. He wore the costume of a jester, and he had pure white hair, though I could not place his age. He said something to me that changed my entire outlook on life. So I chased after him. He’s in the city somewhere. I’d very much like to find him.”

(It came out in a jumble and, though she didn’t notice, that change

of topics broke the spell. Whatever Flint had been feeling moments ago, now he became merely suspicious.)

“Is that so,” he said to her.

“Yes,” she said. “Do you have any idea who he might be?”

At his silence, she glanced up to prompt him further.

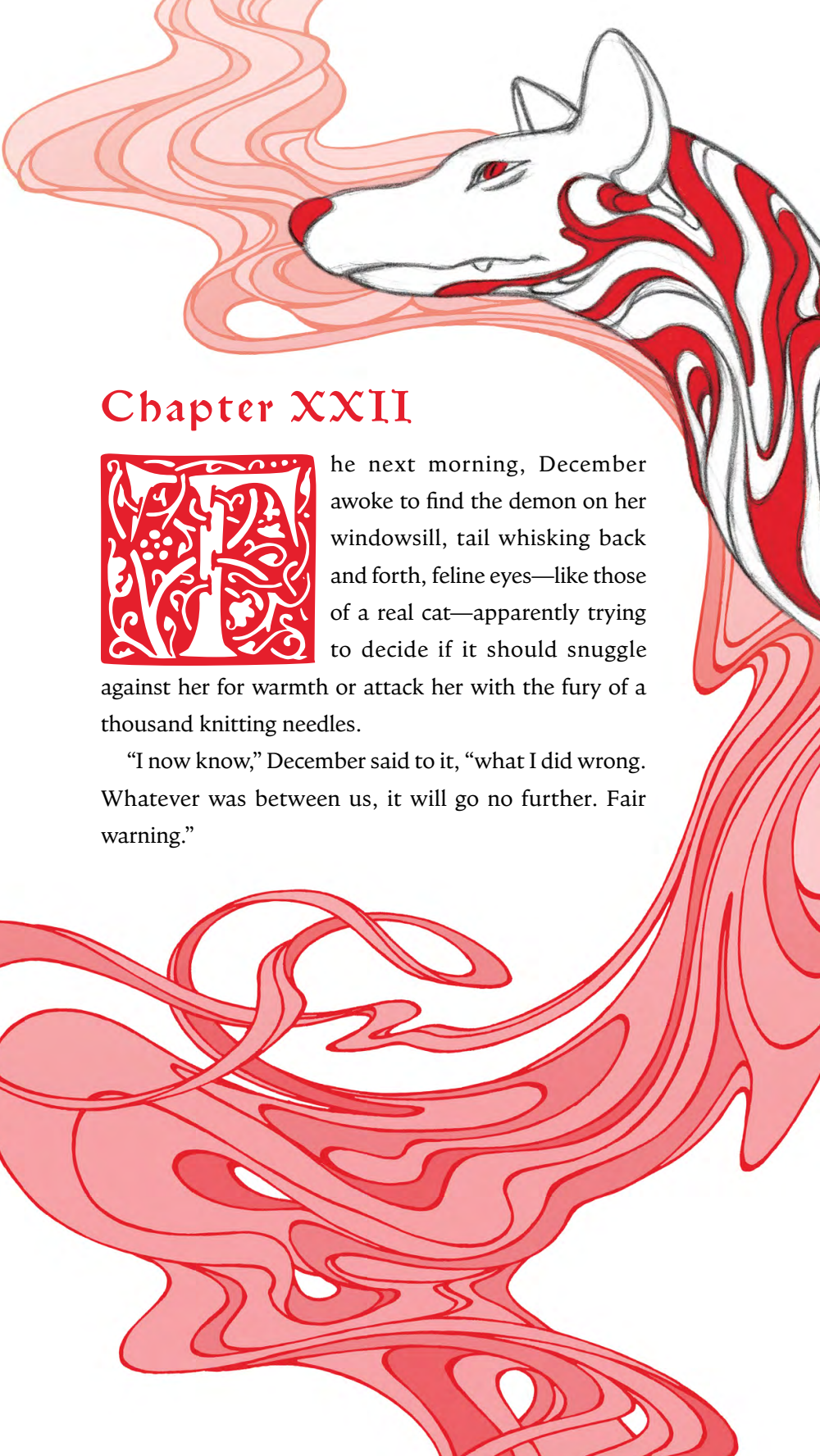
Flint wasn’t there. She blinked in shock at how silently he’d vanished, then turned to the barkeep, who—while wiping down a cup—nodded his chin to the side. December glimpsed Flint crossing a bridge to another barge, just as that bridge was pulled back.

Dmitrovik stumbled up beside her, wide-eyed. “*Very* spry,” he noted.

With a sigh, again defeated, December paid Flint’s tab a *second* time. As they rode home, Tamartha and Amaal chattering about what a delightful time they’d had, December felt angry at herself for scaring the man off, again without having learned anything.

At least, she hadn’t learned anything about Flint’s involvement in the events of the city. There was something she *had* learned, she forced herself to admit. She was not a silly girl anymore . . . or well, she didn’t *feel* like one. Not with eighty years (imagined or real) behind her. She *could* and *would* be frank with herself, for tonight she *had* learned something relevant.

Count Abrim Flint, dangerous or not, was the most fascinating person she’d ever met. She feared, despite herself, she was falling for him—and whether that continued or not, she *needed* to know what he was hiding.



Chapter XXII



he next morning, December awoke to find the demon on her windowsill, tail whisking back and forth, feline eyes—like those of a real cat—apparently trying to decide if it should snuggle against her for warmth or attack her with the fury of a thousand knitting needles.

“I now know,” December said to it, “what I did wrong. Whatever was between us, it will go no further. Fair warning.”

She ignored the demon when it sat on the edge of her tub while she bathed.

She ignored the demon when it occupied the very *center* of the table while she ate breakfast.

She ignored the demon when it settled between her feet while she sat by the window, contemplating her next move and listening with half an ear to Tamantha's morning gossip roundup. Finally, she dressed for the day, then walked past the demon sitting on the back of her chair, blinking out molten drips that sizzled against the carpet, burning small spots—but blessedly, not starting any fires.

December met that gaze, feeling particularly stubborn.

"You," it said to her, "called me 'beautiful.' I should like to know what that word means."

"You're an all-powerful demonic monster. You know what it means."

"I'd like to know what it means *to you*. Besides, I'm not all-powerful, otherwise I wouldn't be dead."

"You're . . . not the Megalith, though. You're just a little cat demon."

"We're all the Megalith," it responded. "Didn't they tell you? This city lives by the power of our soul, fragmented into a thousand pieces. They claim to hate us, but they need us, and they know it. How long would this city last without the rivers or the heat of our bodies?" Blink. Sizzle. "What did you mean by calling me beautiful?"

"I was mistaken," December said.

"Have you heard how the king powers his cannonade upon the walls? How he keeps the dukes in check? By demonstone mined from the Megalith. This city lives by *our* suffering."

It seemed that demons were more relatable than she'd assumed—if you wanted them to talk, all you needed to do was pretend you didn't care. She knew more than one human like that.

In the main sitting room, she met with Amaal, who was bleary-eyed and yawning still. December had assumed a priestess would be an early riser, but the woman tended to stay up all night reading in

The Fires of December

the shrine she'd made to the Prophet, with at least sixteen different depictions of him set up around her. If it had been anything else, December might have thought her obsessed, but . . . well . . . *could* you have an unhealthy obsession with a demigod?

Tamantha answered a knock on the door, where a maid had brought a letter on a silver platter. December broke the seal, worried it was another order from the king—but instead, it was from Dmitrovik.

Lady. After your disappointment last night, I decided it would be beneficial to tail the count again. I found him at a bar late at night, one he is often reported to visit, but he did not drink overly much. From there I followed him, assuming he would return to his hotel.

But Lady, he did not. Instead he did a most curious thing: He met with the hexers at the very center of the Megalith's chest cavity. I was unable to get close, for while I have contacts through the city, this is one area where I have no friends. However, I believe he was arranging with the leaders of the hexers a deal where he wished to sell something to them. I tried to get closer, but could only catch the last part of their conversation: an agreement to meet in two days, in the same place at sundown, to conclude their business.

Excited, she showed the letter to Amaal and Tamantha.

"Oh!" Amaal said. "He's *good*."

"The hexers, Amaal," December said as Tamantha reread the letter. "It's past time I understood what they actually are."

"It is . . . a bit of a religious loophole . . ." Amaal said. "I, um, went to the priestesses and priests at the grand temple, you see. You know about it? The temple to Valor?"

"Forbidden to anyone not sworn to the priesthood," Tamantha mumbled. "I've always wanted to see what's inside."

"Mostly relics," Amaal said. "And a lot of priests. I was concerned about the hexers, but they . . . um, explained it?"

"You sound uncertain," December said.

"Well," she said, settling down in the window nook, December joining her in the other seat. "Witchcraft is forbidden. That's the bonding of demons to gain their power to control flames—a person can burn down entire cities like that, so it's very dangerous. Yet if you don't do *anything* about witches and demons, they run amok."

December eyed the cat demon, which was lazing by the door to her bedroom.

"So . . ." Amaal said. "If a person is caught practicing witchcraft, they're not executed as I always thought they would be. They're spared, which is great, because that's merciful—and we're supposed to try to be more understanding than lopping off heads wantonly, right? Except . . . what they *do* is put them in service to the king. Um . . . it's a lot like bondage . . ."

"I see," December said, finding it wholly unlike Amaal to be this unenthusiastic about a religious topic. "Do they actually eat souls?"

"The Megalith did," Amaal said. "It fed on them, same as it started things aflame. Killing it removed its attachment to the physical world, and prevents it from affecting the surroundings in any large way. Um, without help. Witches gain powers to destroy—but are eventually burned away themselves. It's *very* dangerous, both to body and soul."

"Hexers are safe from that, though," Tamantha said, walking up. "I've read that they bind demons in strict contracts to keep them focused and under control."

"Which is different from witchcraft . . ." December said.

"Because the king says so," Tamantha said. "Besides, I think these contracts remove a lot of the demonic power, right?"

"Um . . . yeah," Amaal said. "Basically. It works, and makes sense. It's far less dangerous, I guess. And the language from the Prophet . . . isn't the *most* clear . . ."

"Is it one of those three rules of yours?" December asked.

"The mandata," Amaal said. "No, the prohibition on witchcraft

The Fires of December

isn't one of the three major teachings. But, um, I mean . . . A demon *almost* burned away the entire world, and only prayers summoning the Prophet saved us, so . . . might be best if people were extra, *extra* careful . . ." She took a deep breath. "I'm sure the local clergy know what they're doing."

"Why would the hexers," December said, "be meeting with a criminal like Flint?"

"They're essentially in his same position," Tamantha said, with a shrug. "Criminals who have been captured, then offered clemency."

"So they shouldn't be fraternizing," Amaal said. "Lest they recidivate."

"We need more information," December said. "Let's talk to Dmitrovik."

"Uh . . ." Tamantha said. "You didn't read the back?"

Confused, December flipped the sheet to the other side, where she found a short message.

It is my regret that I will be unable to continue serving you in this capacity, Lady, as I have been terminated from the hotel's service, and must dedicate myself to finding a new position. It was my true honor and pleasure. Thank you for choosing me, even if my aid was not ultimately sufficient for your needs.

"Not sufficient?" December said. "Anyone know what this is about?"

The other two shook their heads, though Tamantha seemed thoughtful.

"What?" December asked.

"Well, surely," Tamantha said, "you've noticed about Miss Greenwares."

"Noticed what?" December asked.

"The way she's, well . . ." Tamantha took a deep breath. "You were so quick to intervene with me and my brother, I thought surely . . ."

December turned, looking toward Tamantha—whose bruise had healed by now, not even needing makeup. *Her brother . . .*

Miss Greenwares was being abused by some man? Surely not *Dmitrovik*. He seemed too kindly. December heaved out of her seat and stalked down the steps to the main floor, intent on demanding answers. She reached the lobby to the bustle of the morning rush. With December's patronage, some new guests had arrived this morning. Dining staff passed with covered platters of breakfast food while housekeepers lined up to welcome and valets carried luggage for the newcomers—merchants who would occupy the second floor.

Everyone was careful to dodge people like December, somehow doing their jobs while offering bows or curtsies. As before, December remarked on how quickly they obeyed. Presiding over it all was Miss Greenwares with her conical hair bun and garish clothing—orange today, with streaks of red like lightning. The gown had a hazard of a train, challenging the foot placement of everyone around her. December looked for signs of abuse—though they were, of course, often difficult to see. Bark's second wife, Isa, had hidden her wounds with makeup, like Tamantha.

Kind of like the on-staff handyman repairing the broken window behind the front desk, December thought. He'd used his wife's foundation, poorly, to cover a wound above his eye. Others cringed at loud noises, like that valet when the door slammed. December had only been struck once, but Bark's persistent anger and shouting had trained her to walk with her eyes down, like that maid by the wall did—and it had taken years to change.

She saw *none* of these signs in Miss Greenwares, who stood confident with both hands on her cane in front of her, barking orders and being obeyed.

So very . . . So *very* quickly . . .

Oh.

(You'll forgive December. All any of us can do is try our best with

The Fires of December

the information we have, and her experiences had painted abusers in a specific way. She'll learn. Don't think less of her because I've shown you times where she was wrong; instead accept that even the people you admire stumbled getting where they are.)

December waited a little longer, not jumping to conclusions, but the signs continued to compound. Miss Greenwares ignored most of the staff, but there were a few—that maid, that valet, that handyman—who caught glare after glare from her. Like Bark, Miss Greenwares didn't go further in public. That would draw too much attention, reflect poorly on her. No, harsh treatment was reserved for the unseen rooms, where power could be asserted and scapegoats thrashed.

December's rising anger turned crystalline and cold. Her attendants bunched up behind her in the hallway, and from Tamantha's hateful look toward the innkeeper, December saw the same feelings in her.

"I had not realized," December said softly. "I'm sorry. A . . . A woman should know better."

"Pardon," Tamantha said, "but *anyone* should know better. You're going to do something, right? I . . . I mean I should, but . . ."

"Be proud you were strong enough to escape your own situation," December said, narrowing her eyes at Miss Greenwares. "Fetch me . . . some tea."

December stalked forward, not waiting to see if she was obeyed, and snapped "Follow" as she passed the innkeeper. She made straight for the back office, and sat at the innkeeper's desk, leaving Miss Greenwares—who did follow—to stand awkwardly in front of it.

December's glare was of irregular capacity, even for her. The expressional equivalent of a once-in-a-lifetime solar flare. She did not speak. Such a stare needed no words. When Miss Greenwares tried to ask a question, the stare withered it like grapes on an unwatered vine.

Tamantha arrived with the tea and set it on the desk. December took it, still holding Miss Greenwares's eyes, and sipped, then sat

back, holding the warm cup. It was fortunate her anger was of a cold variety this time, for she might have boiled the tea away with her fury.

Miss Greenwares shuffled, then sweated, then tried to speak again—and again thought better of it.

“Sit,” December finally said.

Miss Greenwares hastened to seat herself. All the other chairs in the room were a little too low for comfort, perhaps on purpose so she could loom from behind the desk.

“Let us discuss,” December said, “the valet Dmitrovik.”

“Oh, *him*,” Miss Greenwares said, visibly relaxing. “I realize you were fond of him, my lady, but you have to know that he was poor at his job. He came in late this morning.”

“Because,” December said softly, “he was out late last night on a job for me.”

“He . . . was?”

“I told you about it yesterday.”

“Oh, well, you don’t want him with you, regardless. Listen, I should have told you, my lady, but he’s a child of the streets. He didn’t tell me when I hired him, but he’s a *fosterling*.”

“I,” December said, each word icy, “am a fosterling. Adopted into my noble family back home.”

Miss Greenwares grew even more pale, but like a tiny dog barking at wolves, she kept sealing her doom. “That’s . . .” she said, “. . . unexpected, but there is something worse. You see . . .” She leaned forward. “My lady, that man has a daughter from a woman he didn’t marry.”

“Is that so,” December said.

Warning flags, it should be noted, only work if you have the sense to heed them.

“Oh, *yes*,” Miss Greenwares said. “The mother died from some disease recently, I believe, and they never did wed despite ample opportunity. I have been looking to be rid of him for ages. We don’t

The Fires of December

need that reprehensible type here, with their loose morals and bad fortune.”

The glare grew colder, and colder, and colder. Miss Greenwares trailed off, caught in that gaze.

“I,” December said, “am a bastard. I was only legitimized because of the need for another heir.” She added that part with a nod to her papers in the safe.

Miss Greenwares finally realized she should just *shut up*.

“Dmitrovik left a letter for me,” December said, holding it up. “He seems to think he failed in my service. Did you, by chance, tell him I’d insisted on his firing?”

Miss Greenwares looked sick.

“If I were to interview him on the matter, would I find that you’d lied? Told him I said things I did not?”

“I . . . I don’t know.”

“I’m not sure if I have a legal case against you, but the insult to my character is another matter. What is it you said . . . Loose morals? Bad fortune? *Reprehensible*?”

Miss Greenwares looked to defend herself, to find an argument. But that stare.

That *stare*.

In December’s eyes, Miss Greenwares saw something only one person had ever truly seen: Bark, on the night when he’d hit her. Within those brown pools were lights, like distant fires on the hills. A building light, the gift of a dying mother’s tears, a power akin to a demon’s own soul. That stare carried with it an *absolute certainty* that if you were to speak at that moment and invoke December’s burning wrath . . .

It wouldn’t be just your body that was consumed.

Miss Greenwares backed down, shrank in upon herself, arms pulled tight.

“I will purchase the hotel,” December said. “You cannot be trusted

with this staff. You will move to the countryside, and be glad to be allowed to leave so easily. If you have servants there, you will treat them well. I will send people to ask after you, and if I find you continuing this behavior, I will come and speak with you again.”

“Sell . . . sell the hotel?”

“I’ve heard of the problems you’re having,” December said. “I’ve seen the moneylenders here, with thunder in their eyes. I know you can’t afford to keep the place running.”

“But I can now!” Miss Greenwares complained. “With the tenants I have lined up, we’ll be profitable.”

“And if I were to leave? Announce that you insulted me, blatantly lied, besmirched my name *to my face*? What then?”

Those words hung, and they both knew the answer. If December left, particularly with such accusations, the hotel would be finished. December chose not to see it as blackmail, but rather mercy, in offering another alternative.

“You’ll . . . assume my debts?” Greenwares asked.

“How much?”

“Seven hundred gold.”

December hissed at the high amount. “Fool woman. How did you ever spend so much?”

“The inn needed the very best furnishings to compete! And the best staff! They continually let me down, and you can’t understand the stress that was . . .”

She trailed off as the *stare* resumed.

“Seven hundred,” December said. “Show me the books and the monthly payment statements.”

It didn’t take too long, as at least Miss Greenwares kept good accounts. The hotel *would* be profitable with three long-term tenants, and could pay down its debts. Slowly. It would take years.

Miss Greenwares licked her lips. “I’ll sell it all for four hundred gold.”

The Fires of December

"You'll do it for fifty," December said. "And don't pretend that's not generous, considering. You will need *another* tenant besides those merchants to even begin making a profit, and the interest on seven hundred and thirty-seven gold? Woman, I'm doing you a favor."

December hated that part, but she *couldn't* walk out on these people. And, well, she'd been wondering what to do with her money.

"Fifty?" Miss Greenwares said. "Do I keep the furniture?"

December wrote the legal terms, using the woman's own pen. "No. Fifty for the hotel *and* everything inside it except your personal possessions." December looked up. "Do you agree?"

Miss Greenwares considered. The fact that she'd just insulted, and lied about, a *very* powerful noblewoman. The fact that December leaving now would destroy her reputation such that no one of note would ever stay in the place again. In the light of that, and the fires on those distant hills, fifty *did* suddenly seem generous to her.

"Yes," Miss Greenwares said. "I . . . I agree. I will go live with my sister. Perhaps the countryside will not be so bad, following the stress of a failing hotel all these years."

"Remember the treatment of your servants," December said, expertly drafting the document, as she'd done so many times for Matin. Miss Greenwares signed, and together they got fifty gold from the safe. December counted it out and let the woman have the money she kept in there as well, then locked the rest away.

Miss Greenwares gathered the things on her desk, stepped out, and with a mumble, sent a servant to pack her clothing and personal effects in her room. Within an hour, she stood on the steps with her luggage—and when she walked toward the waiting carriage, not a single valet jumped to help her. She struggled under the weight of her own bags, then turned back, looking dazed, toward December.

"Goodbye, Miss Greenwares. I will be watching."

Miss Greenwares climbed in the carriage, and the driver finally helped her load the luggage. As it pulled away, December heaved a

sigh, worrying this wasn't enough. Worrying that, as she had with Tamantha's brother, she was letting an abuser wander free to hurt others. She could not right all wrongs, not yet.

She walked back to the office—*her* office—and filed away the contract, then wrote a letter to the hotel's creditors. As she finished it, she found that demon lounging on top of a filing cabinet.

"Well?" she said, folding her arms. "Why are you still here? I'm not going to give you any more compliments."

"Eh," it said with a yawn. "Watching you terrorize that woman was nearly as fun."

December shook her head and met Tamantha in the lobby, asking her to post the letter to the bank requesting a meeting so they could assess together how to dig the hotel out of its debts. Tamantha looked *gleeful* as she did so, and the weight of it all hit December. Yes, she'd have lodgers, but . . . she'd essentially bought herself a small estate.

"How did you do that?" Tamantha asked. "It was amazing, but . . . What just happened?"

"Well," December said, "you *have* been telling me that I need a larger staff . . ."



Chapter XXIII



hope you will forgive this mild deviation from dealing with the Megalith—rest assured, we'll return to that soon. December felt she had a little time, however, as she now knew that her next chance at confronting Flint would come in a day and a half, when he met with the hexers. She wanted Dmitrovik back to help her sneak into that meeting, and she felt that handling things with the hotel would give her the best solid foundation for her next efforts in the city.

December's sudden elevation to innkeeper was met with overwhelming joy by the staff. They immediately began discussions, to Tamantha's delight, of new uniforms, among a host of other things that consumed the rest of December's day. She registered the sale and met with the creditors, whom she found to be quite pleasant and willing to work with her. They seemed relieved that instead of making demands, she listened to their offered accommodations. She got the debt deferred for a year, with no more interest piling up, by making a simple promise to let them audit her books and monitor her occupancy rate. With all of that, and some tenants, she'd actually have a small revenue stream from the hotel, not just a burden.

The simplicity of that lowered her opinion of Greenwares even further. These men did *not* want to repossess a failing business; they wanted to be paid by a functioning one. After that, she engaged the services of bookkeepers to look over accounts, went over everyone's employment contracts, and decided how to announce her acquisition to Kingseat society. In one final bit of revelation, she was informed by the head of the housekeeping staff—an elderly woman named Telich—that Greenwares had regularly turned away people she thought were beneath the standard of her hotel, but who would have made excellent tenants.

The minutiae of all this work would have overwhelmed the young December, but years spent with contracts, her help with her foster parents' inn, and seeing to an (admittedly much smaller) household gave her a springboard. All the while, Amaal waited patiently, a book under her arm, beaming. December thought it was because she was considering turning one room on the fourth floor into a shrine, something every good household should have.

"I will need to rent out two of the floors," December said, sitting in the office with Mozbiki, the primary bookkeeper who had answered her request. He sat in a regular-sized chair, as December had ordered the insultingly short ones carried out. "But with the

The Fires of December

accommodations from the creditors, that *should* be enough to maintain us and start making payments.”

“It will work as you say, my lady,” the man said, scanning through the ledgers. “But can I note that it is unconventional for a woman of your stature to let rooms in her private residence?”

“How am I to keep all this otherwise?” she said. “Wages, bank payments, and upkeep will have me destitute in under a year unless I have at least two long-term, floor-wide tenants.”

He adjusted his spectacles, and did not say what they were both thinking. *Well, then you should maybe not have purchased this place, no?*

She determined, however, that she would simply have to do things differently from the others. (She didn’t spare a thought for the poetry in the idea of a fosterling who’d slept with the inn’s dogs now owning a luxury hotel in the most expensive city in the world. I’m sure you can appreciate it in her stead.)

After Mozbiki left, December leaned back in her seat and found herself thinking about Flint. As that wasn’t particularly productive, she walked into the lobby and found Amaal waiting for her again.

“Amaal,” December said, pushing a few clustered locks of black hair from her eyes, “I’m sorry. I’ve been ignoring you. Is there something you’d like to chat about?”

“Well . . .” Amaal said. “Um, you look so busy.”

“Not too busy for you,” December said. “Please. Have I done something wrong?”

“No! This isn’t about your behavior, but mine. You see, I’ve been so overwhelmed with the sights of the city, and studying about demons, that I’ve *completely* neglected my duties as your spiritual advisor.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” December said, gesturing for them to walk together. She headed for the third floor, where she was to inspect the meeting space. (Did she really *need* a private ballroom?) “I think you’ve done an excellent job.”

“Yet you were surprised,” Amaal said, “when a woman turned out to be the tyrant of the house.”

“I don’t see what that has to do with spiritual education.”

“Um . . . Just a sec . . .” Amaal struggled to open her book as they paused on a landing in the enclosed servants’ stairwell, lit with carefully trimmed oil lamps on the walls. The priestess got to the right page and held the book out, displaying the triumphant letters of the second mandatum:



on’t be a dick.

If any of you were still under the misimpression that I was the Prophet, this should kill it for you. Being a dick to people is basically my entire self-identity, alongside that of accidentally helping cause the fundamental collapse of all reality as we know it. (Sorry about that.)

Anyway, the Prophet wanted something memorable for his second instruction—that was, after he finally relented and agreed to codify his teachings. You might find this command simplistic; can a few casual phrases like this actually form the basis for an entire branch of religious ideology? If you ask this, you seriously underestimate human beings and their fascination with minutiae. I own an entire book written about the proper use of serifs. It’s volume three of seven.

Amaal’s forebearers in the Monastery of the Final Word pored over these words, analyzing them, debating them. What does it mean to be a dick, they asked? Is dickishness a natural state or an adopted one? What if you’ve disavowed all dickery, but it finds you again?

Beyond that, who decides which activities constitute official and orthodox dickish behavior, and which are really more of a prickish

The Fires of December

vein? Theories of economic hierarchies were founded as great writers from the monastery noticed that those who controlled the means of production tended to engage in the most dickery. To combat this, monks argued that everyone should have a chance at being a dick. Share the dick around, they wisely said, so that society may bear the burden of it collectively. Even the great quest for equality gained a marshaling cry. Mothers, daughters, and sisters fighting for natural freedoms chanted this grand truth: Yes, women can be dicks too.

Humanist movements followed, with the philosophers around the monastery asking if the goddess were truly real, why had she created dicks?

Nihilists pointed out that all dicks ended up in the same place anyway.

Capitalists observed that the dicks were moved by an invisible hand.

Existentialists wrestled with the idea that someday, there would *be* no dicks.

Stoics just lived with the dicks.

And hedonists . . .

Okay, let's not talk about what hedonists did with dicks.

Finally, the great philologist Brother Grund—Amaal's primary mentor—arrived and hit upon a central tenet for the modern age. He pointed out that the word "dick" in this case was a crude term for male genitalia. The Prophet had chosen this word deliberately, and therefore the holy commandment might indeed elucidate a higher calling for humankind. That instead of debasing themselves, men and women should seek for elevation and class. That we should avoid being a dick and instead strive to be a *penis*.

December didn't know all of this context, but upon reading the phrase itself, she couldn't stifle a snicker.

"Um, please don't do that, Lady," Amaal asked.

"Sorry," December said. "But I assume . . . Brother Grund, was it?

I assume your mentor has a more . . . elevated way of writing this one, as he did the first.”

Amaal turned the page, to the rewritten proclamation:



**et’s all try to be a little nicer to each other,
shall we?**

“Better,” December said, starting up the steps. “You should go with that one during your teachings.”

“I feel like it lacks the pithy strength to really punch through, Lady.”

“Let’s not talk about strong dicks punching through things, maybe.”

Amaal blushed. “Oh. I . . . um . . . sometimes forget the way it sounds when you haven’t spent years studying the mandata. But Lady, one important aspect of this teaching is the realization that everyone, male and female, has the capacity to be a villain. Our purpose is to overcome our worst tendencies, and if we didn’t possess equal capacity for evil, then we would not in turn possess equal capacity for good. If I had taught you this, you could have seen what Miss Greenwares was like earlier.” She put hands to her mouth. “We’re supposed to slowly teach the different mandata, one at a time, so we don’t overwhelm people. I must have delayed too long delivering this one to you.”

“I shouldn’t need the teaching to recognize a villain,” December said. “But thank you. It’s a good reminder, Amaal.” She braced herself, then—because she deserved it, and because Amaal was doing a good job—said, “Go ahead and give me more.”

With glee, Amaal explained the context and explanations about this mandatum at length over the next hour. December’s mind kept drifting to Flint—the way he’d been glib with a wry comment, no worry for propriety. The twinkle to his eye when he knew she was aghastly fascinated. That silvery hair, and shockingly quick movement from a man with a limp and cane . . .

Stop it. You’re not fourteen. And Amaal is working very hard to teach you.

The Fires of December

December forced her thoughts to the sermon, and once she applied herself, she found it interesting, particularly when Amaal switched to the more formal language Brother Grund suggested. It was a simple principle, really, but the priests who'd visited Rivershore had never spoken of such ideas. They'd focused on following the king's rules and not consorting with demons.

Here, silly as they sounded at first, Amaal's teachings were far more useful. December thought about how her blind spots had been shaped. She listened to the sermon all through the rest of her tour of the building. (Five stories, with four floors for guests or tenants—which makes it sound bigger than it was. Remember, it was quite narrow, generally with one suite of rooms per floor.)

At the end of both inspection and lecture, December returned to the lobby and was met by an absolute delight: Dmitrovik, whom she'd sent for earlier, with his daughter. The child was a perfect little girl of six. She clutched quite a large stuffed dog, and it was losing the cuteness competition.

Dmitrovik bowed as December approached, and the little girl mimicked him flawlessly. December squatted down, sharing a smile with the girl, who—despite tightly holding the stuffed animal—didn't seem terribly shy.

"Lady?" Dmitrovik asked. "Is it . . . true? Did you *buy* hotel and *fire* Miss Greenwares? All because of how she treated me?"

"Well," December said, "I suppose I did, didn't I?"

His eyes teared up.

"I do not appreciate it," December said, scratching the stuffed dog's head, and receiving another smile from the girl, "when people like Miss Greenwares put words in my mouth that I did not speak. You did me a great service last night, Dmitrovik, and I believe I'm now in need of a butler as head of footmen and male staff. Are you interested?"

"It would be," he said, "my greatest honor."

"Excellent. Put things in order with the staff, then make preparations

for an excursion. Tomorrow night, I'm going to sneak into the Megalith's chest cavity to figure out the count's part in all this."

"You . . . will insist on going in person?" Dmitrovik asked.

"Afraid so, Dmitrovik."

He sighed, but did not push further. "I will begin immediately, though first, might I have time to take Irinek to her care woman for the day?"

The girl grabbed her father's pant leg.

"Why?" December asked. "There's a nice couch over there. Irinek, I found a small writing board in the office with some *colored* chalk. My granddaughter loved to draw. Do *you* like to draw?"

The girl nodded, wide-eyed.

"Lady," Dmitrovik said. "The hotel lobby? It's not a place for a child. She might get things messy with chalk."

"Good thing it cleans up so easily," December said, standing. "And it's not *just* a hotel now, Dmitrovik, but a home. Can you think of a better place for a child?"

"I . . . I suppose not," he said. Then, hesitantly, he smiled. "I will get her situated. Thank you, Lady."

Soon Irinek was humming to herself, drawing happily on the chalkboard over a towel. The other footmen gathered to chat with Dmitrovik—who December could tell, with a little observation, would be well-liked as their supervisor. *Excellent. Now I simply have to . . .* She trailed off as she entered her office and found Tamantha there, holding a fully tailored swimsuit on a hanger.

"If you're going to set up residence in the city, Lady," Tamantha said, "you need to begin adopting local fashion, wouldn't you say? I've been drawing and designing for two days straight, and I have the *perfect* gowns for you to manifest from the river."

"Um . . . I have a lot to do . . ."

"Dmitrovik and Telich need a chance to organize the house first.

The Fires of December

You can't do everything for them, or you'll undercut their authority. However, you *can* do this."

The woman's eyes sparkled with excitement, and . . . well, December *had* promised to make such an attempt. Plus, she wanted to wear Tamantha's creations to show the city what she could do as a designer.

Truthfully, December was also intrigued by the river. Mortified by the idea of wearing that swimsuit, yes, but intrigued. "All right," December said. "Let's give this a try."



Chapter XXIV



December's latest maneuver—purchasing the hotel—was already causing a stir, and crowds gathered on the street outside. Some even followed her carriage to one of the more popular bathing spots, a fact that caused December's anxiety to spike to the rafters.

Tamantha, however, proved to be a *wonder* in preparing for this event. A small private tent was waiting at the shore so December didn't have to change in the carriage,

then cross to the river with everyone watching. With three footmen on watch outside, she and Tamantha entered, then December reluctantly relinquished her dress—one of the old ones from Rivershore. No amount of embroidery and tailoring from Tamantha could change its fundamental nature, and rumors about December’s rural fashion sense were already beginning to spread.

She could not cling to the woman she’d been, not after all the steps she’d taken. It was just that . . . this swimsuit? So snug and revealing. Had her navel ever *seen* daylight? And her upper thighs . . . she half thought they’d burst into flames, either from the sun, her blushing, or the combination.

Too bad Flint isn’t here, she found herself thinking regardless. He pretends to not be interested, but I saw his blush.

Her heart rate increased, and she again tried to force herself to be more rational, telling herself she was *not* falling for him. The practical old woman in her didn’t accept that. She knew what she liked and what she wanted.

“All right,” Tamantha said, adjusting December’s swimsuit. “First, go get comfortable in the blood. Once you’ve acclimated, I’ll give you a drawing and talk you through creating clothing. You ready?”

Was she?

December was in charge, and knew if she backed out, Tamantha would relent. She hesitated for a few heartbeats, then remembered when she was young, staring up the river and wondering at its origin. Longing for a place that wasn’t familiar. She’d now traveled that river; she’d found that place. She wanted to be part of it.

“Ready,” December said.

Tamantha pulled back the curtains of the tent, revealing the river beyond: so much more colorful than the one December had grown up with—ribbons of swirling red and blue and yellow melding into infinite other colors. It had always, somehow, called to her, hadn’t it? It was time to embrace it—and if others were watching, well,



The Fires of December

let them see not her flaws or self-doubt. Let them see how she *belonged*.

Without turning to look at the crowds she knew had gathered, December swept out of the tent with head held high and stepped down into the river. Thick and warm, like the mud it had been compared to, its touch was inviting, welcoming. With a few more steps, she submerged to her neck, the opaque blood completely enveloping her body. As she'd experienced before, the liquid refused to stick to the human body, or even clothing. When she raised her arm, the blood streamed off, leaving no residue. Her skin and hair stayed as dry as when she had entered.

Remarkable. She was buoyant in it, and never felt in danger of sinking too far—and could touch the ground regardless. At the bottom, she *did* find some actual wetness: an inch or so of water ran beneath the paint, the result of runoff from an earlier rain. The touch of the demon's blood had a relaxing, soothing effect, and her residual anxiety at being seen so bare in public was washed away.

Realistically, there was no reason to be embarrassed: Many others, of all ages and genders, were showing much more. She drew more attention for her novelty, but not because she was exposed; to their eyes, there was nothing for her to be ashamed about, and so she allowed herself to pluck free that emotional mosquito and crush it. This serenity, this half-floating bliss, was worth the short embarrassment anyway.

December tipped back, letting herself bob, unmoored, as others were doing—eyes closed, her toes and chest emerging, hair spreading around her, head submerged past the ears—deadening sound as well as anxiety.

There, she didn't think, she didn't worry. There . . . for once . . . she could simply *be*.

(As an aside, I find it remarkable this worked. Arcanists among you might have correctly theorized that the demon is a negative-Investiture

entity with a neutral Physical shell created from the souls it absorbed, transformed from positive Investiture into matter. These beings are, by their very nature, the antithesis of life as we know it—but the way the sword locked down the Megalith, splintering its soul and spilling out the matter it had absorbed as blood, negated much of the danger. Mere remnants of its terrible, destructive nature remained, like the acid of a citrus fruit. That Spiritual acid, you might call it, was what briefly wore away emotions during submersion, having a Soothing-like effect.)

She longed to remain in that state for hours, but duty reasserted itself. She was not *without* thought or emotion; she simply found both easier to set aside while floating there. Once she'd had enough, she stood again and waded through the thick liquid to the bank, where Tamantha sat with bare feet in the river, three footmen standing behind and glaring at any who might dare bother December. She idly thought she'd have to ask them to back off, as it seemed taboo to bring too many guards or attendants here.

That said, she *did* notice that a number of people watching in the crowd had sketchbooks poised. She frowned at that, until Tamantha explained, "Drawings of you will be in the papers tomorrow."

"Papers?"

"News," Tamantha said. "It's a thing you probably didn't have, or need, back home. You'll likely be the headline of the society pages!"

Whatever that was, December was glad for the river's continual help with stress, because the idea of drawings of her in the swimsuit was not pleasant.

"All right," Tamantha said, leaning down to give December a paper with a detailed drawing of a dress in multiple poses, "let's give them something to write about, Lady."

Despite herself, despite the river's embrace, December gasped at the beauty of it. Formfitting in a way that, if she weren't already wearing a swimsuit, might have scandalized her. But also *impossible*.

The Fires of December

This will be tough to describe because you're used to the way clothing naturally flows, while Tamantha's dress was a deliberate attempt to countermand those assumptions. It wasn't nearly as wild as what many people wore in the city, for Tamantha knew her lady by now, and strove for elegance over shock value. December, with her distinctively angular features and nose turned slightly upward, would be best served by something that felt *classical*. In the way a contemporary piece of music might suggest or conjure faint memories of the past while innovating.

The dress was shimmering silver, with accents of yellow-white trim at the hem and tips of wings and sleeves. It needed no zipper or wide opening, because it would never be put on or taken off. It would blossom into existence, then melt away when removed in the evening, and so only needed to account for biological needs, seen to by the swimsuit's snaps. Think of it like wearing a flexible sculpture in the shape of a dress. Winglike ripples sprouted from the back in a feathery phoenix pattern, the motif also radiating from the front core of the body and out along the skirts. Those went down almost to the ground at the sides and back, but stopped above the knees in the front.

Flame patterns jutted out, each a separate structure, as no mortal cloth could have done. A burst of them lined the bodice, spreading out some and rising on each side, as if to take to the sky. The shoulders were completely bare; the dress would be held up by perfect tailoring around the bust.

It was elegant, but peculiar. Daring without being wild. Beautiful while not compromising December's general air of mystery and traditionalism.

"I'm supposed to make this?" December asked. "How?"

"Hold the picture," Tamantha said, "and imagine wearing it while you step out. Command the blood to form and it will. It wants to. It might take a few tries, but it's easier than it sounds."

(As a note, I wouldn't say that the blood *wanted* to become a dress. More, it wanted to escape into the world—a general feeling it inherited from the imprisonment of the Megalith. This lesser bond, and the chance to form a shape with the gift of human thought, was enough for the mindless blood.)

December, with her still-unrecognized Connection to the river and the fires it had kindled deep within her infant eyes, hadn't the trouble Tamantha anticipated. December strode up the steps and the blood flowed free and *burst* into silvery fabric like a firework, then settled around her in the exact shapes Tamantha had drawn. An impossibly formfitting gown that moved with December, almost like a second skin (yes, both the real and figurative kind, arcanists).

December gasped again at the beauty of it, of wearing a garment this *magnificent*. She stopped on the steps, and for the first time in all of this, she *felt* like nobility. To possess this, to wear it, was daunting, but uplifting. She felt like a work of art, and couldn't help turning, seeing how it felt, like a little girl spinning her skirts.

She turned heads. More than she ever had before. Even here in a city accustomed to wonders, they stared. Contrary to her earlier assumptions, December didn't mind the attention, because she felt incredible in that gown. She'd wondered how people could navigate in this impractical clothing, but in her first seconds walking along the bank—shoes having formed for her feet—she understood. The dress worked *with* her. It was not dead, not completely, and never felt awkward, always seeming to know when she was going to move, and actively worked to not impede. (If you've been to Scadrial, perhaps you've had the chance to encounter a similar garment.) She brushed back her hair with both hands, and that was the pose most of the reporters drew.

(She needn't have worried earlier; while there were papers that provided sketches of the elite in swimsuits, the majority were here to see the gown this mysterious foreign woman would choose. The *real* news

The Fires of December

was that it was a completely unexpected design, like nothing currently trending in the city, but capable of holding its own against them.)

She strolled the bank, basking in the joy of feeling so beautiful. She ignored the reporters and smiled—even chatted a little—with the people there to bathe. And then, feeling like she was in a story-book, December took to her carriage. When she sat, the wings of the dress pressed like cloth, not uncomfortable with rigidity as she'd imagined they might be. When she leaned forward, they sprang into shape instantly.

She returned to her new home, which she'd purchased with coin earned by a hidden lifetime of sorrow. There, December had an unexpected caller: Lady Petva—the king's niece, royal recorder, and one of the few people in the city who knew December's true story.

"Please tell me," Petva hissed, leading December by the arm to the back room, "it's not true. Tell me you *didn't* go and *meet* with Count Flint—twice!—against our express instructions for you to stay away."

Oh. Right, December thought. That would get back to Petva and Geoffrim, wouldn't it?

"Well?" Petva said, closing the door behind her.

"It's true," December said with a sigh. "I did meet with him, both at the casino and the barge market. But you needn't be so mad yet."

". . . Yet?"

"You'll want to save some of that anger until you hear what I'm planning to do tomorrow night . . ."



Chapter XXV



So,” December said by way of summation, “I intend to discover what he’s doing with those ‘not-witches’ tomorrow night inside the Megalith’s chest, unless you can explain to me what business the count has there.”

“I . . . cannot,” Petva admitted. The woman, both fifteen years December’s senior *and* forty-five years her junior, sat with crossed legs in the chair opposite the desk, wearing a dress that looked like a flower, with a



matching floral bracelet and necklace. The kitchen-chic style was already well out of fashion.

"You agree," December said, "it would be worth investigating the count's plot tomorrow."

"Perhaps," Petva said. "That's a stunning gown, by the way. Who is the designer?"

"My personal one. Tamartha."

Petva grunted, thoughtful. "It is good that you confirmed that Flint was involved with the immortal; we hadn't yet managed to do that for certain. But Lady December, isn't this a little outside your realm of experience? We're talking about spying on an extremely dangerous man. This isn't your duty."

"How dangerous is he really, though?" December said, stifling a smile as she imagined his face. "How many people has he actively hurt lately?"

"Well, the immortal, for one."

"Has he hurt anyone else? Physically, not just emotionally?"

"A duel here and there, though always with blunted swords to prevent serious injury. He has won almost all of them, even with his limp." Petva eyed her, then leaned forward. "He's getting to you, isn't he? I *warned* you."

"Nonsense," December said, though she found herself rising from her seat beneath the attention, worried about meeting Petva's gaze. She fetched a drink from the teakettle, then began to pace, cup in hand. "Lady Petva, I *know* I should leave well enough alone. I can't. I'm the only one in the world who has *felt* what is coming, who *lived* through it. You say it isn't my duty? I buried my *grandchildren*. Do you know what that feels like?"

"No," Petva admitted. "But, with no offense intended, that wasn't real, Lady December."

"The feeling is real enough for me, I have decided. Lady Petva,

The Fires of December

he thinks I'm a fellow grifter—and he seems to have a soft spot for people like me. Who better to get close to him, and find out what his plans are?"

Petva narrowed her eyes.

"I'm *not* being taken in," December said. ". . . Probably. Look, I won't even let him know I'm there. I'll visit the location in question, sneak over, and observe him. See what I can learn about his deal with the hexers."

"He's wily. He might catch you."

"If so, what's the big loss? He won't know that *you* know. If he catches me, he'll think I'm trying to learn how to be a con artist, so it won't even be suspicious."

Petva considered, tapping her armrest. "You're sure," the woman finally said, "he is convinced you're just a scam artist?"

"It's what he wanted to think," December said. "I barely had to nudge him."

She left out the part that, in mentioning the immortal, she might have tipped him off that something was up. *I'll not confront him this time*, she reinforced to herself. *I'm a little too infatuated with him right now. I'll simply watch.*

"Let me talk to Geoffrim," Petva said. "You make a good argument, but *please* don't move forward with this until I send you a go-ahead."

December remained quiet, holding her tea.

Petva sighed, rubbing her forehead. "My uncle is being difficult, and the general . . . Well, he'll have us at war with the Orange Duke if we don't tread lightly. Geoffrim is doing what he can to navigate obstructions and figure out what might cause the king to draw the Ever-Slaying Sword."

"Could he do that?" December asked. "I didn't think anyone knew how."

"There are . . . passphrases," Petva admitted. "I don't know them;

no one but the king does. They're guarded by the royal line. Speak the right ones, and the sword can be drawn."

"So it might not be Flint," December said. "It might be the king who does this! Because of the crisis with the duke, the general, and some spark to set it aflame."

"Flint might *be* that spark," Petva said. "With what he did to the duke's daughter . . ."

"The need is great. You admit it."

"I admit it," Petva said reluctantly. "This isn't your duty, but I suppose you're not part of the court either. It won't be the . . . political problem for you to interfere with the king's hexers that it might be for us. Therefore, I won't *forbid* you from spying on Flint, only warn you it's bordering on stupid." She stood. "Please at least *try* to wait until you hear from me. I want to talk to Geoffrim about it; I'll send word later today."

"I can do that," December said. "Just get me word by tomorrow."

"You're brave," Petva said, studying her. "I can understand why you think you need to do this. However, I would not like to hand that man the life of another young woman to destroy." She left out the back, explaining she was concerned about the count discovering their meeting—for there was no love lost between him and the members of the court of which he was once part.

December next went to speak to Dmitrovik, who had been working his contacts regarding the plan.

"It's natural," he explained, "that you'd want tour of Megalith, considering your social stature, Lady. It's a thing commonly done for visiting dignitaries. I have been arranging such a tour for you. That will get you in, and close to where the hexers live, as they have small village there."

"Inside the Megalith?" she said, surprised.

"It is seen as secure location," Dmitrovik said. "And is where

The Fires of December

they work. They are mostly left to themselves, so you might be able to sneak down the tunnel to where they live.”

“I merely need to escape the tour,” she said, “and make my way to the place where Flint is going to meet the hexers. If I take you, Tamantha, and Amaal, perhaps you three can keep the guides occupied for a few minutes at the right time.”

“My thoughts exactly, Lady,” he said, still standing with that perfectly straight, white-gloved posture.

“You can relax around me, if you want, Dmitrovik.”

“Thank you,” he said, but did not break posture.

She left him to make the arrangements, then went about the day’s activities, seeing to her new estate. The next morning, she didn’t need to be urged to visit the river. After an hour of relaxation and meditation, December emerged in the silver dress once again. It might surprise you that she put on the same dress as the day before. That was actually the way they did things in Kingseat—which seems backward to many people when I tell this story. On most worlds, powerful socialites would be *mortified* to be caught in the same outfit twice, particularly when it comes to something as glamorous as evening wear. Now I’m telling you that in a city where you can *literally* make any clothing you imagine, the people repeat outfits?

It helps if you think of dresses like hers as works of art. Sketches don’t do it justice, neither do descriptions—people want to see them in person, and each gown or suit of notoriety takes on a conversational life. You’re expected, if you own one of its like, to show it off regularly so people can appreciate it. Yes, new gowns can be created with a thought, but that has an inverse economic pressure. In your lands, the wealthy wear a new dress to each event because that’s seen as opulent and out of reach of the average person. (Never mind that the wealthy commonly rent or borrow said costumes, because not even they need a wardrobe that expansive.)

Brandon Sanderson

In a city where *everyone* can have new clothing every day if they want it, originating a gown that everyone admires . . . well, that's something to revel in. And no, they didn't just copy one another, easy as that would be. No other person among the elite would now dare re-create December's dress. If your rival hung a famous painting in her gallery, would you put a copy of it above your mantel? Or would you instead try to get your own masterpiece commissioned by the same artist?

(Tamantha, you'll be happy to hear, was already getting callers requesting her designs.)

That day was a rush as well, with December dining, making decisions for the administration of her household and new hotel, then preparing for her tour. At last, that evening, she was back in the carriage, winding around the hillside along the river on her way to the Megalith—holding the letter that Petva had sent, as promised.

Geoffrim strongly recommends against this action, it read. However, I told him you would not relent, and he agrees that it could provide valuable intel. He's working to see if he can provide you with backup or defense should something go wrong. Good luck.

December was relieved to hear they might be trying to help behind the scenes.

Now if you'll recall, Kingseat was built around an uncommon rock formation at the center of town. It was shaped like a wave, with the demon's desiccated corpse leaning against it as if upon an inclined bed, turned with chest facing to the side. One arm draped down to the city, and the other lay along its body; its knees were slightly bent, toes pointed outward.

To reach the hole in that chest, the carriage took a small road up the slope alongside the corpse. This vantage presented a different view of the city—built in an oval ring around the Megalith—and the great river winding through, making an almost perfect spiral.

The Fires of December

(The only deviation was where a little stream had been broken off to flow through the palace, then rejoin the main river.)

At the outermost ring of the city, the three rivers broke off and became their own entities. Down the orange one, December soon had an excellent view of the invading duke's flotilla, moored in the near distance. Closer, she could spot the cannons of the king's arsenal pointed at it from atop the wall, piles of glowing stone—mined from the demon and used as fuel—ready to be loaded to launch the weapons. This close to the Megalith, its skin looked like smooth white rock.

The carriage eventually reached the plateau just beneath the hole in the demon's chest, a flat outcropping of rock with a basin where liquid pooled. The blood gushed out of a gaping hole above, which proved much larger than December had imagined—and more cavernous. It seemed more tunnel than wound, with blood only flowing at the bottom of it, cascading down onto the plateau before flowing down the slope and into the city. Up here, that blood was pure red.

December was surprised to find a small collection of buildings on the stone rim around the lake—exclusive restaurants, she was told, for those who wanted the *very best* view in town, and weren't worried about the proximity of the demon. A set of ritzy carriages were parked nearby, and she'd assumed they would position their carriage among them before continuing on foot. However, a road on a ramp led straight into the Megalith's chest opening.

December's final glimpse of the creature's skeletal head, resting at the peak of the rock formation, was as the eyes began to glow against the darkening sky. Then her carriage reached the top of the ramp and passed through the open wound in the chest. A path ran through the tunnel alongside the blood river, which glowed with its own light, the color of simmering coals. The flesh of the Megalith bloomed with a softer red light inside, and didn't seem bloody or even . . . well,

fleshy. There was a crystalline sheen to it, like red glass, a darker shade of blood than human flesh might have been.

They had entered the chest cavity near the bottom two ribs, but then angled upward along the spine at a shallow slope, heading toward the heart. Soon the tunnel opened into a wide cavern with high gleaming walls and ceiling. They'd reached the hall of the heart, where buildings had been constructed and people milled about. Their carriage pulled into a line of others, the presence of which was strangely mundane, considering they'd crawled up through the guts of a gigantic humanoid figure.

December left the carriage, still feeling radiant in her dress. It took effort not to twirl and let the back flare out. The group was met by a nice young man with stylish black hair and a gap tooth that reminded her of her youngest. He wore a suit of brilliant white streaked red, with a pair of folds out the back like an opening book. He introduced himself as Goyvid, one of the royal Megalith guides, and had heard a great deal about her. Tucked under his arm, he even had a paper bearing a sketch of her emerging from the river the day before, so he'd done his homework.

As they walked across the inside of the chest cavity, December spotted a series of tunnels leading away. From descriptions, she knew that was where she needed to go—for the hexers worked down those tunnels, using their strange powers to mine flesh from the demon.

The river led right through this chamber, though it was paradoxically smaller than below, narrow enough to cross on a short bridge. It must have picked up blood not just from the heart, but the entire body of the Megalith. Each of the mining tunnels had its own tributary flowing out to meet this central one. Some of them—from the widest tunnels—were nearly as large as the river coming from the heart. With a nod, Dmitrovik indicated the largest tunnel, where the hexers were said to have their quarters. The meeting would take place down that direction, and the way was unguarded.

The Fires of December

There wasn't really much one could damage in here, so the public was allowed tours, which was how Dmitrovik had gotten in the other night—following the count, who had joined one in disguise. It was emptier tonight, and she wasn't certain how Flint planned to get in. For the moment, she genuinely didn't care, because the first stop on their tour was the most incredible: the demon's unbeating heart, which was stabbed completely through with the Ever-Slaying Sword.



Chapter XXVI



he heart itself was exactly as December had imagined: a darkened, withered coal in the shape of a monstrous organ, the color of dried blood. They'd built a shrine around it, hundreds of candles burning in a field of radial lines, like tiny beacons wavering as they passed, the day's chosen clergy doing eternal rounds to light and replace them.

The heart sat where it had beat its last, grown over with veins reaching to the ceiling and floor, like brown

vines on a trellis at winter's end. The sword . . . well, it was *not* how it was often depicted. Beside her, Amaal—eyes wide and teary, as if she'd just seen one of her grandchildren walk for the first time—held her sword-staff, which had the shape (if not the functionality) of a traditional longsword. The actual weapon was much larger, too large for human hands, but probably not as big as you imagine. Maybe ten feet long from top to tip.

It was embedded straight into the heart—right through the front, pinning it against the chest. Less a sword, more like . . . well, a giant nail or *spike*. Wherever the silver of the spike touched the demon's heart, the metal was tarnished to a sickly black.

"Wow," Amaal said. "Wooooooow . . ."

"Like you imagined?"

"Better!" she said. "He forged it himself, you know! He physically *touched* it. Ran his hands over that metal, folded it, molded it, warmed it, and then pounded . . . Um . . . Wait. That sounded . . . Brother Chambers says I should be more careful with my words when I talk like this. But he's not here! I am!"

"This," the guide said softly, trying to encourage reverence, "is the Ever-Slaying Sword. You know the story?"

"Something about a giant winged serpent?" December said.

"Indeed," the guide said. "The Prophet transformed into a deific serpent to fight the demon, the form of Valor herself. This weapon—which no mortal could ever wield—was his chosen tool."

"Sounds dramatic," Tamantha said.

"It was so, so dramatic!" Amaal said.

(Yeah, no it wasn't. First off, the winged serpent was *not* the Prophet, nor was it Valor, who had come to this land long, long before, setting up a few mysterious temples and founding organized religion. The dragon who helped the Prophet was another individual, who asked to be removed from the stories for personal reasons. Only some people listened, hence the confusion.



Second, the Prophet did *not* stab the demon, nor did the dragon, and it certainly didn't happen in some dramatic showdown in the sky. Instead, the spike was launched by a device built by the Prophet, who has always been too engineering-minded for proper narrative drama. A duel to the death with a larger-than-life monster? Top-tier material. Crafting a glorified crossbow, then hiding until the thing was in position before hitting it by surprise? Boring.

They sat there for *three days*, and even when it drew near, they waited another three hours until it was in exactly the right position for him to hit it at the proper Hemalurgic bind point. He fired the weapon, blasting through the lower abdomen, angling up into the heart—much the same path the carriage had just taken. It only worked because the monster was foolish enough to absorb so much Investiture as to make itself an entirely Physical structure.)

The guide told a much more inaccurate version of the story, ending with an explanation that the “sword” was impossible to draw because of the mystical rune that the Prophet had put upon the hilt. (All right, that part *was* impressive, I'll admit. Where he got one of those is beyond me, and attaching it to silver no less? The man knows his arcanum, I'll give him that.)

December squinted, and could barely make out an arcane symbol glowing on the head of the giant nail above.

“So . . .” she mumbled, “if someone were to destroy that symbol . . . ?”

“Well, that would be bad!” the guide said.

“How bad?”

“The Ever-Slaying Sword would probably fall out, since there isn't much left of the heart.”

“And that would mean . . .” December said.

“The sword prevents the demon's soul from re-forming! The monster doesn't *need* this body; it could create another one, if it were free. The sword *pins* the center of the demon's soul down and locks it away.”

The Fires of December

December was wise enough not to press too hard, though she did now have an inkling how one might break that rune. The king's passphrases.

Either he's going to draw it himself, she thought, or someone else will. Within the next few weeks. Flint is here, doing something suspicious with the almost-witches.

"The sword could heal someone who drew it, by legend?" December asked.

"Yes!" the guide said. "And grant them eternal youth, like the Prophet himself possessed."

Heavens. Don't let it be Flint. Yet she couldn't discount the haunted way he talked of his age. And how he seemed so encumbered by the limp, which this would heal . . .

Flint's supposed meeting wasn't for a while, so December continued the tour, visiting a few relics of the Prophet and his disciples. They might have been interesting on another day, but today she found herself glancing over her shoulder, looking toward that tunnel, checking with stoic Dmitrovik, who waited nearby as always, occasionally holding up his pocket watch to show her the time.

Only one other portion of the guide's routine pulled her from this: the explanation of the demon's flesh. "Harder than diamond," the guide said, leading them to a station with some saws, hammers, and other equipment. "Feel free to do your best! This is the hands-on portion of the tour."

Tamantha, surprisingly, was the one most eager to try; she took a hammer to a nodule of crystalline flesh, the same stuff that made up the walls and ceiling. The hit bounced clean off, without so much as leaving a mark.

"So how do you mine it?" December asked.

"Oh!" said the guide. "You mean the demonstone! Used in the cannonades? The most potent demonstone is from the intestines, down those tunnels over there. Removing it takes specialized equipment,

my lady. I'm sure it would bore you. Here, let's move to the gallery, which has artistic renditions of the Prophet!"

That topic change seemed a little too quick, but again December didn't push. The gallery presented a perfect opportunity to sneak off, for the guide gave them time to wander and enjoy the images at their leisure. Dmitrovik gave her a nod, then stepped over to the guide and asked for more information on one of the paintings.

"Well," the guide said, "this is a depiction of the Prophet giving the mandata."

A gasp from across the room preceded Amaal's arrival like a thunderclap. "Tell me everything about it," she said, taking the guide by the arm. "You know it happened at the Stone of Reason? The first one, at least, when . . ."

She proceeded to tell *him* everything. *Thanks, Amaal*, December thought, pretending to look at a painting near the doorway before slipping through.

In the main chamber, December kept to the perimeter, far from the field of candles in the center. She thought she'd seen a restroom sign; she would use searching for one as an excuse if caught. Fortunately the place was empty, save for a group of clergy on the opposite side of the room, focused on their work with the candles.

She reached the mouth of the tunnel she wanted and glanced down it. It was about twenty feet wide, with a river flowing through it, smaller than the one outside but still fairly big. Maybe five feet wide. During her quick glance, December spotted two people in robes, chatting softly, with glowing coal-like embers floating beside their shoulders.

"The hexers posted guards," a voice said from near her. "You didn't think they would, when having a clandestine meeting?"

December nearly jumped out of her dress, turning to find the demon—her demon—sitting on a nearby ledge, front paws straight and tail wrapped around itself.

The Fires of December

"I can get you past," he said. "Maybe."

"No deals with demons," she said.

"Not a deal. I'll help. Out of the . . . goodness of my heart."

"Your heart is shriveled up and stabbed through, *right there*."

"I'm sure it's got some goodness inside somewhere," the demon said, blinking molten tears.

"You are literally a being of pure evil."

"So I'm told," he said. "You realize . . . if you draw that sword, you will have great power."

"It's ten feet tall. How would I even hold it?"

"Drawing it is metaphorical," the demon said. "It means to break that rune and claim the power it holds. That would heal you from all ailments, bless you with long life . . . Isn't that what every mortal wishes for? Maybe we should go back and figure out how to break that symbol."

She gritted her teeth, then moved away from him and chose a different option: that of slipping down into the river tributary here. About as deep as a tub, it proved shallow enough that she had to squat all the way down to get her shoulders under the surface. The blood was far warmer than downriver—not hot enough to scald, but certainly enough to be uncomfortable.

She held her breath, then submerged completely, took handholds on either side, and began pull-crawling herself along, occasionally popping up for a breath. It was slow going, as the blood was also *thicker* up here, as if she were moving through molten lava. Instead of the pleasant sensation of floating in bliss, this blood left her feeling numb, yet somehow raw at the same time.

She persisted, getting past those two robed figures without being spotted. Fortunately, they didn't act like they expected someone to actually try to sneak by them—more like they were there to offer a casual-seeming warning if a guide or tourist entered the hexer quarters.

December rounded a bend in the river and tunnel, then peeked up and found a set of buildings along the wall, not unlike the rooms she'd lived in on the barge. Robed people of both genders (though more women than men) occupied some chairs in front of the rooms. Each one had a floating coal-like light hovering over their shoulder. Those looked a lot like the colors of a demon's eyes, though dimmer, less vibrant.

She continued down the river using her unconventional pathway until she saw something even more unusual: Some of these robed people, all in the same uniform black, were working at the wall—and mining the demonstone. They summoned heat from their hands by concentrating, then warmed the demonstone by touching it. That made the stone pliable, so another could cut it free with a chisel and hammer, and these workers seemed to be digging out a place for another building. Their eyes glowed as they worked, as if lit by fires within the skull.

Specialized equipment indeed, December thought, noting the cat demon floating up from the substance of river next to her. He took one glance at the hexers, then vanished back down, showing what she thought was fear.

Finding that of distinct interest, she followed the river as it grew more and more shallow, more and more narrow. Little streams of demon blood leaked from the walls all along here, and the farther she went upriver, the less blood there was. She wouldn't be able to go much farther, but she didn't need to, not yet. Instead she just waited, her anxiety rising—for each moment she was gone was another chance for her absence to be discovered.

"Why wait?" the demon whispered, head emerging beside her.

She didn't respond, but her guess at the time proved accurate, for a robed figure soon walked down the tunnel. Or, rather, *limped* down the tunnel. Now that he was well within the hexer domain,

The Fires of December

Flint pulled off his hood, revealing that silver beard and those keen eyes, making December smile. He greeted the two hexers who had been mining nearby.

“You brought it?” one of them asked, lowering her hood.

Flint held up a small box with a handle atop it, like a lantern.

“Let’s have a look,” the woman said, gesturing farther down the tunnel.

Drat. The three walked together, passing the point where December could follow in the river. She would have to risk going in the open; it was dimmer in here than it had been outside, the river darker, the walls more muted. So she began to crawl free, and as the thick substance of the river drew back . . .

She found herself naked. Well, in a swimsuit, but basically the same thing. She gasped and retreated into the river.

“What?” the demon said, amused. “You expected the dress to remain there after you melted it back into the blood? You really should have let me help.”

“Pure, concentrated evil.”

“Yeah, but only a little bit of it. You could dilute it with goodness or whatever you are.”

She gritted her teeth, realizing she didn’t have a paper to imagine a proper outfit. She tried anyway, but the stuff melted right off her.

“This is concentrated blood,” the demon said. “Not the stuff below, which has been given time to expand and separate. You’re going to have trouble getting it to respond.”

A robe, she thought. A robe, like they’re wearing. Simple, utilitarian.

She pulled out of the blood, and a semblance of a robe reluctantly seeped into existence around her. It would do, she figured, though she didn’t notice it dripping as she crawled out of the river and tried to nonchalantly walk after the others. The demon blessedly remained behind, too afraid of the hexers to leave his hiding place.

Flint and the two hexers, counting on the guards to stay alert, didn't seem concerned about observers. They set up at a table in what seemed to be a small dining area—a kind of enclosed cavern patio. Other hexers moved here, including some who seemed to have paired off as couples. December settled at another table within ear-shot, as Flint fiddled with his lanternlike device. He folded the sides down, revealing a brightly burning light. The flame inside had a . . . a face?

“Look,” that visage proclaimed, “I don’t know what’s going on, but I *really, really* think someone tried to kill me.”

The hexers at the table shared glances, while Flint spoke with a soft, amused voice. “Someone *did* kill you, jester immortal. I believe you must be a ghost.”

“Well, hell,” the flame replied. (Yes, that’s me.) “This is inconvenient.”



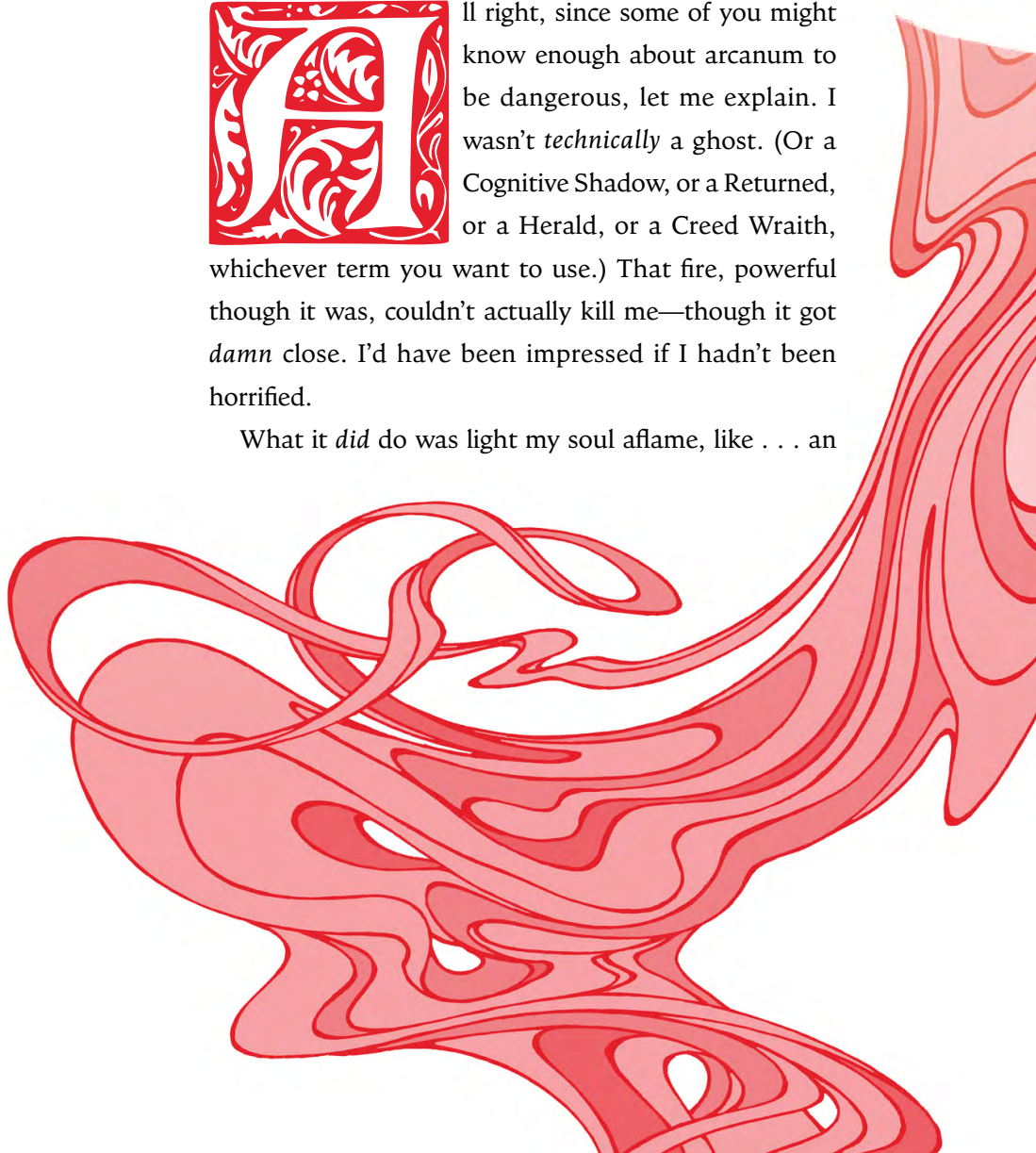


Chapter XXVII



ll right, since some of you might know enough about arcanum to be dangerous, let me explain. I wasn't *technically* a ghost. (Or a Cognitive Shadow, or a Returned, or a Herald, or a Creed Wraith, whichever term you want to use.) That fire, powerful though it was, couldn't actually kill me—though it got *damn* close. I'd have been impressed if I hadn't been horrified.

What it *did* do was light my soul aflame, like . . . an



oil well after a terrible accident. My body had been vaporized, but my powers were constantly trying to regrow it—which provided more fuel for said arcane blaze. The result was a little Hoid butane gas lamp.

I was basically impotent in that state, unfortunately, and all of my short-term memories had been burned away. Even some of my long-term ones. (Don't worry, by that point I had backups. Yes, in part because of that event you're thinking about. Also, that other one. Yes, that one too. Look, there are loads of reasons for backups. I'd learned my lesson, finally.)

"I," I proclaimed, "am basically impotent in this state, and a lot of my recent memories are missing. What the hell is going on? Last I remember, I came here hunting for Valor. I know she's not around, but this is where the trail took me. I arrived, then . . . Damn, it's all gone."

"So?" Flint asked the two hexers. "What manner of demon is it?"

"Where did you find this?" the woman asked. She was older, closer to December's age, with a kindly face and pale skin, silvery hair, and a surprising lack of wrinkles.

"It's a long story," Flint said.

"I don't mind hearing it," said the male hexer, with pale skin, red undertones, and that thinning-on-top-and-long-behind type of hair. You know, the kind that makes a man look like his head is wearing a cloak.

"Honestly," I added, "I wouldn't mind hearing either. Seems like someone tried to kill me with *Godsflame*. I thought that stuff couldn't leave Ashyn."

"It's a long, *expensive* story," Flint corrected. "And comes with payment for this marvel, hexers. Five thousand gold."

"That's it?" I said.

"It's a small fortune."

"I'm worth at least a large one. If not two."

"You are a talking face in a box," Flint said. "I'd stop interfering if I were you. These people are likely the only ones who could help you."

The Fires of December

“Feeling bad for murdering me, bub?” I asked.

“I didn’t murder you,” Flint said.

December wasn’t so certain. Though the immortal’s mysterious death seemed a tiny bit exaggerated, its ghost was in Flint’s possession. How would he have gotten that if he wasn’t the murderer?

“We are interested,” the hexer woman said, “but you have to know we don’t have the gold to pay you. We’re barely paid.”

“You can get demonstone,” Flint said. “Provide me with enough of it, and I can sell it to pay back my debt.”

“Giving demonstone to anyone but the king,” the male hexer said quietly, “is treason. Besides, who would you sell it to? The only one who would want it . . . would be . . .”

“Duke Kird,” the woman guessed. “Flint, you’d start a civil war.”

“I’d start nothing,” he said. “I’d merely make options available.”

The woman shook her head. “The king has his cannonade; Kird has his flotilla. It’s a standoff, like it’s always been. That serves the people of Kingseat, as it keeps the two fools at one another’s throats, but neither ever dares to squeeze. If Kird had demonstone . . .”

Flint shrugged. “I don’t care whose hands are at whose throats—so long as I can pry them free of mine. That’s the deal: this thing for demonstone.” He rapped the lantern, and I tried (ineffectively) to bite his finger. “The demon spirit here is an absolute *trove* of information. Spirit, tell them what you told me yesterday.”

“What?” I said. “About the Aon binding that gigantic Hemalurgy-adjacent spike to the Spiritual aspect of the Splintered Ambitional entity? What I can’t figure out is how someone attached an *Aon* to *silver*. Must be some kind of, I don’t know, padding of purified Investiture? Maybe some repurposed Breaths?”

The three shared befuddled looks at the string of absolute nonsense. Yet it was the *kind* of nonsense that they suspected *did* mean something.

“If you want your freedom,” Flint said softly to the hexers, “*this*

could be your way. What is treason against a man who holds you enslaved, forbidding your arts while profiting from them? This thing I've captured, it's the soul of one of the immortals—like the Prophet himself, dripping with knowledge beyond our reasoning." He rapped the cage again. "Tell them, spirit."

I sighed. "I can teach you how to make instant noodles. They're kind of life-changing. Oh, and you know, electricity, vaccines, air travel. Would you like a box that you can stare at all day, then feel stupider when you're done? We're really good at those."

"This is," the female hexer said, "the strangest demon I've ever encountered."

"I feel like it is different, Weonim," the man said. "Not a demon at all, but more, as he says. Spirit . . . could you teach us the lost arts of witchcraft? Teach us to actually bind and command the demons? So that *we* may be the power in the city?"

"Well," I said. "The Zuhel bond is—"

Flint clicked the lantern box closed, locking me away. "After," he said to the two hexers, "payment."

"We'll have to discuss that with the others," the woman—Weonim—said.

"I fully expect you to do so," Flint said, rising with his prize. "But don't take too long."

"You can't sell that to anyone else," the male hexer said. "We all know how you'd be treated, trying to traffic in what most would consider a demon. So don't rush us, Flint."

"That might be true," Flint replied, "but my dear man, if I end up *dead in an alley* in the next week while waiting for an answer, maybe you'll wish I'd rushed you a little more, eh?"

December turned from the conversation, huddling within her hood, horrified—and at the same time, amazed. She *knew* a succession war was part of what had caused the cataclysm, or was at least a side effect of it. Flint's conversation gave her a clue as to how that might

The Fires of December

have begun: by releasing the hexers and arming the Orange Duke and his ships with demonstone weapons. She was so consumed by these thoughts that she didn't notice Flint stopping behind her, frowning as he spotted the trail of demon's blood steaming and evaporating on the floor, leading right to December.

A second later Flint snatched her by the shoulder and spun her around in her chair to face him.



Chapter XXVIII



Flint smiled.

At seeing her, he *smiled*.

Again, she felt like a silly girl, charmed to elicit that reaction in him—though he quickly covered it up. “Hell,” Flint said under his breath, leaning toward her. “How?”

“I had you tailed,” she admitted. “The other day after the barges. They followed you here.”

“I’m getting sloppy,” he muttered. “Always worried it

would happen to me.” He looked over his shoulder as the two hexers leapt from their seats and approached.

“What’s this?” the man demanded.

Flint eyed December, who gave him a little shrug.

“You didn’t think,” he said, turning toward the hexers, “I’d actually come here without backup?”

“We can’t use our demon fire to hurt anyone,” Weonim said, with a roll of her eyes. “You’re perfectly safe, Flint.”

“Strange how many ‘perfectly safe’ people you find dead in my line of work.” He turned back to December, cocking an eyebrow, as if to see if she would know to play along.

“I don’t know why you’re so paranoid, Flint,” December said. “They’re basically a bunch of priests. No one so much as glanced at your back the entire meeting.”

“Only takes one time,” he said. He nodded to the hexers, that lanternlike box with the soul still in one hand, and picked up his cane—which had clattered to the floor. He nodded pointedly along the tunnel, and December joined him as he limped out.

“I thought,” he growled, “I’d convinced you to leave me alone.”

“The way I remember it,” she said, “you stomped off without saying goodbye.” She lowered her voice further. “What are you *doing*? Trying to help witches? Selling state secrets? You could get the city destroyed! The nation!”

“Technically,” he said, “it’s not a state secret. Everyone relevant knows about the demonstone. I’d merely be . . . engaging in a little capitalistic experimentation with a highly regulated commodity.”

“Don’t dodge the topic, young man!” she said. “I’ve almost—*almost*—decided to give you the benefit of the doubt in regard to the duke’s daughter, but threatening the safety of everyone in the kingdom?”

“You don’t have any idea what you’re talking about.”

“I understand,” she said, “that you’re so desperate to pay off the

The Fires of December

debts you took out to post bail that you'll consider *any* way out. No matter how dangerous."

"All right, maybe you understand a *little*," he said as they paused in the hallway, far enough away from the hexers to chat. "But you don't know the whole. The king is hardly a saint, so maybe by helping depose him, I'd do the people a favor."

"If you legitimately wanted that," she said, "you wouldn't be so intent on enriching yourself in the process."

"The two aren't mutually exclusive. What are you even wearing, by the way?"

She pulled the robe closer, remembering that underneath, she was basically naked. "It worked, didn't it?"

"That's barely stable," he said. "You can't reliably make clothing out of the blood up here; it keeps trying to expand and break out of the shape." He sighed, then looked her straight in the eyes.

"What?" she asked.

"Most people would have demanded a cut after hearing what I was doing. You instead demand I consider the safety of the kingdom."

"I am," she said, "a terrible thief."

"We knew that already," he said. "Buying hotels? You'll end up running legitimate businesses, kid." He narrowed his eyes at her. "You knew about the immortal. How?"

"I told you. I met him in my town, downriver. That wasn't a lie—and I'm not *quite* as incompetent as it might seem. I can listen to the gossip on the street. You're connected to that immortal."

"It's getting out, is it?" he asked, more muted.

"Afraid so. Flint, we need to talk, honestly, about all of this."

"Maybe, but maybe not," he said, then his demeanor softened. "December. I know you want more than that. I can see it."

"Maybe I'm leading you on," she said, "with my expert feminine wiles."

“Is that so?”

“My friends and I discussed it, and we’re *relatively* certain wiles are real, and that we’ll grow some any day now.” She met his gaze, and felt herself growing warm, stepping closer. “It’s not just me wanting this, Flint. I can see it in you.”

“That’s the problem,” he said. “It wouldn’t be gentlemanly.”

“I thought you said you weren’t a gentleman. You only wear the clothing.”

“Kill enough people, and you end up with quite the wardrobe. Every outfit the costume of a better man . . .”

December didn’t push, as she found herself a mess of contradictions. She was glad he pushed back, as it made her increasingly certain she didn’t have the entire story with the duke’s daughter. It was a good thing that he refused to take advantage of the woman he saw as young, inexperienced, and too new to the complicated politics of the city.

On the other hand, she wasn’t *actually* that woman, not completely.

Voices echoed down the tunnel from the direction of the main chamber, and both of them glanced, then whipped up the hoods of their robes. After a quick look at December’s mess of a robe, Flint whispered, “Hide behind me.”

As he turned his back to those coming along the hallway, she sheltered in front of him, putting her own back to the wall of the cavern. Flint leaned against her, coming in close and shadowing their faces. It was an intimate posture, which she supposed wouldn’t be forbidden for witches. The hexers who had been on guard earlier wandered past, glancing at them and chuckling among themselves, but not noticing anything odd. It wouldn’t have been a problem to reveal themselves to those two, but Flint was obviously the type who prepared for the worst, and had anticipated someone more threatening.

December’s heart thundered anyway. His hand on her waist, his

The Fires of December

face close to hers, shadowed but with light from the wall making his eyes seem to glow. His breath on her skin.

Valor, I want this. I've always wanted this.

People sometimes make fun of the speed at which characters in stories come to romantic decisions. The critics are not *wrong*, in general. Few, however, should question an eighty-year-old woman with the experience and self-awareness to recognize what she wants. It wasn't just how he looked, but how he felt in her hands. It wasn't how he spoke, but how he made her want to scream. It was the fire that burned in her fingers, her chest, her entire body—lit at first from her eyes, but nothing fantastical in this case. Merely fantastic.

She breathed out softly, and felt his hand grow tighter at her waist.

Neither moved to go further. He, she suspected, because he was still trying to resist what he thought was a much younger, much more innocent woman. She, because a part of her—regrettably—couldn't *let* herself, not without knowing if he was plotting the fall of the kingdom.

She was old enough to know what she wanted, once she found it. She was also mature enough to recognize she might not be able to have it. That made her ache, a pain almost as strong as the loss she'd felt for a world dreamed.

"Your eyes," he said, "are beautiful. Why are there lights in them, so fleeting as to almost be unreal?"

"Let's make this work, Flint," she said. "Let's figure it out somehow."

"I . . . Who are you *really*?"

"I'll tell you," she said. "But you *have* to explain to me how you got the soul of that immortal, then listen to why I think you should *immediately* reconsider your current course of action. I have good reasons to think what you're doing will turn to disaster."

He glanced to the side, where Dmitrovik had appeared in the

tunnel to look for December. He stalked toward them with a purposeful, dangerous posture. He probably thought she was in danger.

“Ditch your goons,” Flint whispered, breath warm on her cheek. “And meet me, alone, in one hour. There’s a teahouse known as the Concordance at the rim of the overflowing basin, just outside the chest of the demon. Say you’re there for ‘the player.’ They’ll know what you mean.”

With that, he let go of her and limped away, passing Dmitrovik—who swiftly put himself between her and the count. “Lady? Are you well?”

“Let’s get back to the main chamber,” she said. “I need you to tell the tour guide I’m feeling ill, and have retired to my carriage. Gather the other two, then get us moving toward the exit. I . . . have a great deal to consider.”

Most distractingly, the memory of Flint’s fingers on her waist, closer to her than any man had ever been, other than two imagined husbands. As she wished, things wrapped up quickly from there, and she gave a wan smile to the tour guide through the window as they rolled off. She resisted Amaal and Tamantha’s questions and suffered their attempts to tell her that she’d done a good job with the robe as a disguise. She promised them a full report once she knew more, but said nothing else.

I shouldn’t be surprised he’s trying to overthrow the kingdom. I knew what he was. I let myself lose my heart to him, but I knew what he was.

Except . . .

He caught me in there, watching him. Most thieves would panic and try to kill or silence the spy. Instead he got me out, and let me go without a single threat.

He’d smiled when he’d seen her.

I have to find a way to get through to Flint, she thought. I have to convince him to abandon his course. If she could do that, then maybe she

The Fires of December

could end it all right here, this night. Save the kingdom, her village, all of them.

So against the complaints of the others, she ordered them to drive her to the teahouse and remain with the carriage while she went inside. The place was open, as it wasn't that late, at least by city standards—and this view of the landscape below, glowing with the river's light and the glitter of a thousand candles and streetlamps, was certain to be popular.

The woman inside gave December's robe a stare—but there hadn't been anything for her to change into in the carriage. Mentioning “the player” got her taken to a small private room, well decorated with beaded tapestries on the walls, a round table with a beautiful wood finish, and a door where the waiters knocked before entering.

December had arrived before Flint somehow, despite leaving after him, so she put in an order and fidgeted. She picked through the room while waiting, and found a little rack of wooden chips in different denominations. For making bets in gambling, she thought—Bark and his friends had used something similar to play for stakes. She turned one over in her fingers, fishing in her mind for possible explanations why Flint was taking so long.

As she did, at long last—like an old plow horse heaving his last before collapsing—her beleaguered robe gave up.

And melted completely off her.



Chapter XXIX



aving your clothing melt happened now and then in Kingseat. It was a serious faux pas, usually indicating that you'd tried to stretch wearing a costume longer than you should have. December had, of course, never experienced this before. She gaped at the robe as it formed a puddle at her feet, like brown ink, which steamed and evaporated into mist, vanishing entirely.

Considering what I've seen locals wearing, a swimsuit



like hers—which was a single piece, even if it showed some thigh and navel—would hardly turn heads. I hope that, regardless, you can understand her personal mortification when, as if on cue, Flint pulled open the door and strode in, holding a cup of tea.

He glanced at her chest, then at her legs, then all the way back up again. Finally, he swore the kind of curse people like me can't repeat when telling stories in public without risking arrest—half impressed at what he saw, half livid at having it (presumably) offered to him.

"I didn't do it on purpose!" December cried, pulling back and covering herself as best she could. "It melted!"

It took Flint a moment to recognize that her blush was authentic, and that he wasn't being baited. Then, he let out an uproarious laugh.

"Oh, come *on*," she said. "You could *try* to be helpful."

"You did this to yourself; not my fault," he said, closing the door. "I warned you about unstable blood this high up the river. Besides, a fantastic view deserves appreciation. I knew this place had excellent ones, but I hadn't any idea of the extent!"

She gritted her teeth, then—by force of will—stopped trying to hide her body with her arms. It wasn't working, for one. For another, she'd gone out in public twice now in one of these swimsuits. She didn't *have* to be mortified.

Just pretend, she thought, chin up, you have been doing this all your life, living in the city.

"As fun as it is to ogle you," Flint said, pulling off his jacket and tossing it to her, "it might be distracting during a meeting of this import."

She put it on, but purposefully *didn't* button the front, sitting across from him as he settled at the small table. There, hoping her blush wasn't too pronounced, she met his eyes. He, in turn, had trouble keeping his gaze focused on her face.

"Wait," she demanded. "Where's the immortal? His soul, that lantern thing?"

The Fires of December

“Safe.” He took a sip of his tea.

“I said—”

“I agreed to chat, December,” he said. “That’s all. To try to work this out, though now that I’ve had time to cool off, I am more in control of myself.”

“Tell that,” she said, “to your eyes.”

He blushed a little, but didn’t seem ashamed by it. “You’re the one who left the buttons undone. Regardless, let’s be businesslike. I’d love to be able to trust you, but I’m starting to think you’ve somehow been playing me this entire time. I’d *very much* like to know the reason for your interest in that immortal. And no lies about how you *happened* to meet him and *happened* to follow him.”

“If I answer your questions, will you answer mine?”

“Maybe.”

She leaned forward. “My second husband was a legal officer, Flint, and working with him taught me a thing or two about statements like that.”

“ . . . Second husband?”

She stood, looming over him. “I’m not going to answer your questions unless you answer mine.”

“Well, I feel no need to explain myself,” he said, relaxing back, “to someone who has proven she . . .”

He trailed off as she dropped the rack of chips to the table, then selected one—a twenty—from the middle column.

“Your question about my interest in the immortal,” she said, sitting, “is worth twenty points, I feel. This isn’t my most potent secret, but it’s nothing simple either.” She snapped the chip down between them. “If I answer, I get a twenty in return.”

“Such as?” he asked, obviously amused.

“Did you really seduce and rob the duke’s daughter, then abandon her to be heartbroken?”



The Fires of December

"Kid," he said. "That's at least a hundred-chip question. Pick something else. We don't have time for *that* story."

"Fine," she said. "Did you murder the immortal?"

He considered, then slipped a twenty from the rack and set it next to hers, his finger still on it. "You first."

She took a deep breath. "I met the immortal in the inn where I worked for the first twenty-one years of my life, just like I told you. He was staying there the night I had an *extremely* unusual experience, and it's the explanation for all the odd things you have noticed about me. I'm hoping he'll be able to explain what he did to me, and . . . well . . . what it means."

He chewed on that, then nodded, taking her chip and starting a pile beside himself. "In answer to your question," he said, "no, I didn't murder the immortal."

She found that . . . relieving.

"I assassinated him," Flint continued. "It's different."

"What?" she said, aghast. "How?"

"One is the work of a petty criminal," Flint said, leaning across the table toward her, finger still on his chip. "The second is the work of the kingdom's Royal Minister of Espionage, done under the order of his monarch, King Beaudilog the Nineteenth, first of his name."

(Ah, so there it is. My murder is solved!)

December took the words in slowly, like syrup sticking to the jar and refusing to pour. "Royal. Minister. *Espionage*?"

"Yeah," Flint said, sliding his twenty-point chip across to her and leaning back in his chair. "That was really more of a forty- or fifty-chip answer, wasn't it? Sorry. I'm still working out the economics of your little game."

"You work for the king?" she demanded.

He looked toward the stack of chips, and she sighed and nodded. He picked out a five and held it up.

"I *worked* for the king," Flint said. "Until the scandal involving

my . . . problematic relationship and the subsequent near-invasion of Duke Kird and his warships. The king had me arrested, forced me to find bail money—you know that part, apparently. Then a few days back, as I was stewing in my predicament, he came to me and said he'd forgive me if I did this job for him."

"They told me," she whispered, "that you were a diplomat. Posted at courts all around the world, becoming a drain . . . Useless . . ."

He handed over the chip, then raised his cup to her.

"That," she said, "is a brilliant way to mask your spy's presence. Make your rivals underestimate, or even completely discount him."

"Less brilliant than you'd think," Flint said, lightly undoing his collar to relax as he drank. "Many a diplomat is actually a spy, and almost everyone knows it; the trick is to persuade people you're the exception, hence the riotous living. Having a good time, partying to excess, throwing around money gambling? Makes for one *hell* of a fun cover story, even if they guess what you really are."

"Sure," she said, "if you want to waste your life."

"It was all fake, granted. I was *actually* there doing important spying for the crown."

"Fake debauchery still has to have ruined your life, Flint. I know very well how *real* something *fake* can feel. If you spent all that time carousing, did you make any serious relationships? Any true friends?"

He winced, and wouldn't meet her eyes, making her sorry she'd asked the question. He'd already admitted as much to her earlier; she didn't need to salt the wound.

"If the assassination was done on the king's order," she said, gesturing at the coat she wore, "and you accomplished it, why are you still wearing black? Why are you looking to sell the ghost, rather than taking your reward from the king?"

He raised an eyebrow, nodding to the chip she was still holding. She sighed and set it on her stack: twenty-five points of her questions answered, to his twenty.

The Fires of December

"Why are you following me?" he said. "The real answer this time, if you please."

She considered, then took out forty points worth of chips—two twenties—and placed them on the table with a questioning look. He nodded; that seemed reasonable.

"I heard of your reputation," she said, "and would normally have stayed far away from one with your . . . interests. Then I heard the immortal had vanished in town, and your name kept coming up as a likely reason for that disappearance. Like I said, I think the immortal might have information I need.

"After meeting you, I didn't want to believe that you were capable of such terrible things. So I dug further, had you followed, then overheard that you had some kind of meeting with the hexers. I thought I'd find out what you were up to, which I suppose I did. But I didn't think you were an outright murderer—"

"*Assassin.*"

"—until just now."

"Are you a scam artist, like I assumed?"

". . . No," she said. "I was trying to, um, seduce you—not for *real*, mind you—because I thought I could get information. I hoped you'd underestimate me."

"Well, I suppose I did at that," he said. "Then who are you *really*? Why are you here?"

She eyed the chips.

"Fine." He waved for her to push them over. "I'll wait." He added them to his stack, putting him at sixty points of questions answered, to her twenty-five.

"Has the immortal said anything about being able to see the future?" she asked.

"No," he replied, plucking out another five-point chip. "Honestly, all he does is complain and speak nonsense."

(I'd object, but . . . well, I mean . . .)

"Now," he said, passing over the chip, "answer my question, girl. Why are you here?"

She bit her lip, even though the chips weren't balanced, then sighed and spoke it. "I lived for fifty-nine years into the future the night that the immortal stayed in my inn. I had an entire life, into my eighties, where I married, divorced, married, then buried my second husband. I watched the kingdom fall because the demon broke free, a civil war began, and a plague destroyed the land. I survived it all with pain as my pillow and blood as my blanket, witnessing the world wasting away, eyes becoming hollow, hopes frail, and light fading. Until at last almost everything was dust, and I died alone in my frigid hut, separated by decades from any semblance of warmth, love, or joy."

Flint blinked. He studied her, then he deliberately picked out a hundred-point chip—the highest denomination—and put it into his pile. "Damn," he said. "That explains so, so much."

"You believe me?" she said. "Just like that?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"You?" She stood up, hands on hips—which exposed her swimsuit and legs, so she blushed and pulled the coat closer, *then* put her hands on her hips. "You, of everyone I meet? *You* believe me without argument?"

He shrugged. "I've encountered a lot of strange things in my line of work, girl."

"I'm ten years your senior."

"Sixteen," he said. "Please, I'm not *that* old. So you think the immortal did something that cast you into the future, then pulled you back through time?"

She folded her arms. "My spiritual advisor says that the Prophet claimed that kind of time travel is impossible. I'm . . . led to believe it was a vision, that I didn't *actually* live those years. I only thought I did."

The Fires of December

"Same difference to you," he mumbled idly, rotating the hundred chip beneath his finger against the table.

"That's what *I* keep saying!" she exclaimed, sitting down. "Do you have any idea how irritating it is to be treated like a child again? I nursed an entire town through a deadly plague, and people pat me on the head and tell me to enjoy going to parties."

"I suppose," he said, "it beats having a limp you know you'll never get over, aches that keep you from ever being a dueling master again. I suppose it beats wondering how many more years you'll last, and worrying that there's no more time to do what you want—and worse, no more time to figure out what it *is* that you want."

"I'll admit," she said, "that part is nice. My feet don't swell when I sit down after walking too long. My back never aches, no matter how awkwardly I sleep. Do you have any idea how much youth is wasted on the young? It's incredible."

He smiled. "Valor. People always said I had an old soul, but with you, it's not just a saying."

"They said it about me when I was young, so I have no *idea* how ancient I must feel to people now."

"You called me practically a corpse, but here you are, literally one."

"Quite literally not one. Please stop abusing that poor word; it's whimpering in the corner. I *was* one, in a dream. Now I don't know *what* I am."

"A dream yourself," he said. "The sort I've had, and should like to have again."

"I've been *trying*, Flint."

"I'm an old man. Sometimes this sort of thing takes me a little longer than it used to."

She gave him one of her looks—the "Mom can't believe you said that in her presence" look—which seemed to amuse him greatly.

"So much," she said, "for the gentleman."

“Well, you’re wearing my jacket. The act only works if I have the whole costume.” He looked to her hopefully.

“You’re going to be *more* of a gentleman if I’m *less* clothed?”

“I’m going to *pretend* to be more of one,” he said.

She blushed, though not because of what he said—she’d heard far worse. More because she was enjoying being here, and this conversation, so engaging. Because she imagined grabbing him right there, right then, and kissing him. It was a sense of careless abandon, of wanting to go against expectation. She did not succumb, yet *loved* the feeling. Like she loved seeing that twinkle to his smile, the mischievous one, for once given without pulling back or turning away.

“That’s how you knew how to save someone from choking,” he said, leaning toward her across the table.

“I spent some years training as a physician,” she said, “after leaving my first husband.”

“You retained the knowledge?”

“First thing I did when I woke up was put it to use saving the life of the local reeve’s wife. If you need proof, I could recite the anatomical names for most muscles in your body. The mere fact that I can read, and write legal documents, is evidence that I kept knowledge and skills from my first life.”

“I don’t need further proof, December,” he said. “I’ve had it in the way you’ve acted since the first day we met. More, I’m trying to think what I would learn if I had another entire lifetime.”

“Imagine all the gambling and carousing you could get done.”

He pointed at her. “You know now I didn’t *completely* waste all that time. I learned to be a fantastic duelist. Admittedly, it’s been years since I had the heart to kill any of the fools who challenged me.”

“Growing soft, are you?” she said, with a smile.

“I should comment on the fact that it’s perfectly natural for a man to be less hard as he ages, but last time I made such an observation, I was glared at. So I’ll forbear.”

The Fires of December

She gave him the look again, the one that carried the subtext, “I’d laugh, but somehow it’s funnier if I pretend to be indignant instead.”

“Really, as a physician,” he said with a grin, “you should know these things already.”

She grinned back, because something had changed. He no longer saw her as an innocent to be kept at arm’s length. He *did* believe her, and that opened so many possibilities.

Not until I know for certain he’s not going to destroy the kingdom, she thought. Not until I find out more.

A piece of her acknowledged that she’d better get those answers quickly, because the blush to her cheeks wasn’t going away, and neither were the accompanying thoughts.

They enjoyed one another’s eyes for a time, both willing to let themselves be fools a fraction of their ages, before he glanced at the piles of chips. She had answered a hundred and sixty points of his questions, to his measly thirty. With a sigh, he held up a hundred chip.

“The duke’s daughter?” she asked.

“I didn’t intentionally seduce her,” he said, slipping the chip across the table. “But the relationship was real, and I was wrong to let it go as far as it went.”

“In what way?”

“Same way you might imagine,” he said softly. “By being a complete idiot. Her father wanted me to show her how to spy, as he’d seen through my charade, and we’d started to become close during my time in his court. I obliged, as I was already beginning to worry about the king’s leadership, and I saw in the duke and his daughter real potential for a better royal line.

“Melsi was a good student. Bright, eager. It was good to be appreciated, December, for the skills I wasn’t allowed to show anyone else. It was *damn* nice to be seen as a hero for once, to be admired. I don’t know if it matters to you, but it wasn’t my intention, what happened. It was a lapse by a tired, cold, lonely spy who had spent his life for

a kingdom he knew would soon throw him away . . . a man who unexpectedly found a woman who wanted him.”

“But then . . . ?”

“I woke up,” he said softly. “Twenty-eight, I’d imagined, should be old enough for her to decide on having a fling with an older man, but there was more there, December.” He sat back. “Much as I wanted to be wanted, I couldn’t keep lying to myself and say she and I were there for the same reasons. She looked at me and saw a *mentor*. I know a fair number of men at court who would have told me to go along for the ride, but . . . as you are no doubt aware, one of the worst parts of maturity is being able to see when you’re being a dick. So I left.”

Silence settled between them. So part of it was true, but part of it was not, as complex as all relationships tended to be. You might have found Flint’s sins too stark to forgive, were you to consider a relationship with him. December, however, realized something right then. In all her life, this was the first time she had seen someone realize how his actions were causing harm, and decide to stop.

She put her hand on his, upon the tabletop. “That was the right choice.”

“I should have made it months earlier,” he said, then took a deep breath. “Well, you know the truth now. I *did* break her heart by leaving so abruptly. I didn’t rob them; that’s an exaggeration by the duke, justification for bringing his flotilla close. It lets him demand demonstone from the king as repayment, which the king—of course—won’t give.”

“But you want to give him some anyway?”

“He’ll be a better king, December. For all his flaws, for all his hatred of me, Duke Kird is a strong leader. I saw that in his court. I’m not just trying to save my own skin—I’m trying to save this kingdom, and see a better king on the throne. Do something good for society for once.”

She took this in, and then settled an extra ten-point chip in her pile for that last answer, about Kird and the demonstone. “I think,”

The Fires of December

she said, cautious, "I am willing to forgive the lapse of an old person who had long been without love. Thank you for your honesty, Flint. All I wanted was the truth."

He looked at her hand, upon his, then took another deep breath. "December, I have maybe ten good years left, if that, while you . . . you've got a lifetime. I can't be with you a lifetime, like you deserve."

"I deserve," she replied, "to have some choice in the matter. I don't need a lifetime. I've had more than my share."

"If there were children, though?"

"Mine were adopted. I'm unable to have my own."

He winced, obviously worried he'd brought up a sore topic. "I'm sorry, December."

"Well, you deserve to know. If . . ."

"That's an ominous 'if.'"

"Can't it instead be an encouraging 'if'?"

"We've known each other three days."

"You're awfully picky for a man with ten good years left."

Some of his grin returned. "A valid point, that."

"Flint," she said, squeezing his hand. "I saw disaster for the city, the kingdom, and my family. I can't let it come to pass."

"The demon loosed, you say?"

"Yes. I'm certain of it. Can you think of how it might happen?"

He paused for a moment. "The king could do it. He has unique pass-phrases, left by the Prophet, that could let him draw the sword and release the thing."

"And what would cause him to do that?"

"He'd have to feel threatened. The man's a coward and a fool, both. A dangerous mix. If he thought he was going to lose his throne . . ."

"Like if the duke in his flotilla out there suddenly had a military edge? Via demonstone, sold by a former royal spy?"

". . . Like that," Flint said, groaning and closing his eyes. "Damn."

"We can find another way to fix the kingdom," she said, hand still

on his. “Don’t do that deal. Please. What I saw is only a dream, I know, but . . .”

“It’s more than a dream,” he said. “I can see it in you. I said it, and I meant it.” At last, he turned his hand over and squeezed. “Fine. I won’t do the deal.”

A flood of relief washed through December, carrying away other emotions: worry, nervousness, even embarrassment. Only a growing heat remained. Assuming Flint was being honest, and she *so* hoped that he was, she might have solved two problems at once.

The fate of the kingdom.

The fate of her heart.

“You owe me another answer,” she said, looking at the chips. “I have one-sixty. You have one-forty.”

“Actually, one of those in your pile is invalid.” He met her eyes. “Almost everything I’ve told you is true, except for my first answer. I was asked to kill that immortal, but I *refused*. I lied because I wasn’t yet sure I wanted you involved in all of this, but I guess we’re past that now. Regardless, my refusal is why the king is still out for my neck, and why I didn’t manage to pay off my debt. I took the contract, then realized who that target really was, and I decided I wanted no part of it. I backed out. The king must have found someone else to do it, because it wasn’t me.”

(Well, damn. Case reopened.)

“After our parting at the barge,” Flint added, squeezing her hand, “I thought that person might be you. It might explain your strange mix of competence and naivety if you were secretly an assassin and spy of such skill to trick even me.”

“And you no longer believe that?” she asked.

“Well, I’d say it’s far-fetched. Because if you were that good, you’d know that a tale about some crazy vision of the future would be the *absolute worst* cover story.” He let go of her hand and began gathering the chips. “I like this game.”

The Fires of December

"Wait," she said, counting in her head. "If you lied, you've got even *more* of a deficit! Forty points! That's not fair."

"Woman," he said, with a grin, "eighty years of life, and you still don't know anything about gambling? If it's fair, how am I supposed to have a good time?" He raised his cup of tea in toast. "Nice playing with you."

"Ludicrous," she said. "If you'd *actually* been playing with me, I'd have had a good time."

The way he choked on his tea, coughing half of it back up, was its own reward.

"You glare at me for innuendo, then you say that?"

"Sixty-four years of life," she said, "and you still can't spot a setup to put you off guard?"

"Still amazed that the answer to why you're so weird is simply that you're older than me."

"I am," she said idly. "Does that mean you'll do whatever I say?"

"Why don't you ask and find out?"

She blushed, then considered for a moment, and decided that a little more time was in order. She pointedly took off his jacket and tossed it at him.

He held it, confused.

"My people are waiting for me in my carriage," she said, "and it's late. Come by the hotel tomorrow. Bring the soul of the immortal. We'll figure out what to do next about the city, and about us."

He set the coat on the table, smiling. "Keep this, then. I can get it back, if I'm calling on you."

She nodded, but didn't put it on. Instead, feeling strangely confident, she lounged in the chair, legs crossed and shoulders back, uncaring at how the posture and the swimsuit outlined certain aspects of her figure. She enjoyed that someone was looking. Because of who that someone was.

Flint suddenly turned around, looking toward the main room of the teahouse beyond the door.

“What?” December asked.

“A door slammed in the room outside.” His eyes narrowed. “Now footsteps. Heavy. A lot of them.” He spun toward her. “You said you’d heard that I killed the immortal. From who? Damn, why didn’t I think to ask *who*?”

“Lord Geoffrim and Lady Petva.”

“Hell. Did you tell them what you were doing today?”

“Well, yes.” She leapt to her feet, grabbing his jacket, suddenly alarmed as she heard the footsteps approaching. “They said I—”

Flint was already in motion, grabbing his cane and stumbling toward the back door—cursing softly. It seemed that even a decade after his injury, he thought he could move more spryly. Before he could reach the door, it slammed inward, revealing a man in a military uniform, sword at his side, thunder in his eyes. December had met General Drakes only once, during her visit to the royal court, but she recognized him instantly.

As the other door to the room burst open, revealing a host of soldiers, General Drakes’s eyes scanned Flint—coat off, collar undone. Then, inexorably, they moved to December, standing in only her swimsuit, holding Flint’s jacket.

“She’s not one week in the city, Flint,” Drakes said, sounding more *disappointed* than *angry*, “and you’re taking advantage? A woman who doesn’t know our ways, innocent and new to capital society? I had thought, for the briefest moment, you might have been sincere about your regret.”

December started to stammer an explanation, but Flint seemed to know there was no escaping the implications of this discovery. Instead of trying to fight his way free—he’d left his sword at the door, as was customary in these places—he leapt over to December. She caught the briefest glint of something metallic as he slipped it into the pocket of his suit jacket, still in her hands.

“Keep this,” he hissed, “safe.”

The Fires of December

He was tackled a moment later by one of the soldiers, who took no heed for Flint's age or disability. She screamed, horrified at the brutality of it—and Flint's nose was bleeding as they pulled him from the room, growling softly.

General Drakes stepped over to December. He was a towering figure, one she'd been afraid of since the moment she'd first seen him. She found his voice shockingly gentle as he spoke to her. "I'm sorry, my lady. Count Flint's actions . . . This is not who we are, or who we should be."

"He didn't do anything," she said. "Not this time. I—"

"I realize," Drakes interrupted, gentle but firm, "that you *think* he loves you. That he told you he cares, that you're special to him, but he's done this before. He was planning to rob you, Lady December. Everything he said was a lie."

A woman approached, holding a blanket to wrap December, speaking in soothing tones about how this wasn't her fault. It turned out to be Drakes's wife, who insisted on going on raids like this, and a part of December was amazed at the foresight and compassion.

At the same time, she realized how this had gone horribly wrong. *Geoffrim and Petva promised me backup. They must have worried that Flint was actually getting to me. I . . . set him up without realizing it.*

She sat down in a daze as her friends entered to check on her, other teahouse patrons crowding around to get a glimpse of Flint as he was towed out.

Oh . . . heavens. She really had made a mess out of this, hadn't she? Mortified, she hunched over, and felt something in the jacket pocket. The outline of . . . a key? Flint had left her a key?

To what?



Chapter XXX



he next day, Tamantha sighed and delivered something with December's breakfast. "You're going to see it anyway . . ."

There, on the front page of one of the largest-circulation papers in the city, was a drawing of December. Completely nude. *Actually* nude, not wearing a swimsuit.

She lay on a couch in the back room of the teahouse, which was replicated with remarkable detail—save for the fact that the original hadn't even *had* a couch, nor had



she lain down at any point, nude or otherwise. In the drawing, her arms were cast back, her eyes closed, her lips parted as she welcomed the attentions of Flint, who was perched above her, shirt undone. The drawing was from the perspective of looking in through an open door, with shadows of shocked soldiers to the sides, as if mortified by the sight.

COUNT CONTINUES CRIMINAL CAROUSING

It was one way to make headlines. (The other, naturally, being to slam yourself face-first into an iron fence.)

On one hand, the more scandalous part of December's brain—the old woman who hadn't been touched in the right ways for far, far too long—looked at the scene and thought, *Yeah, I wish*. The rest of her was properly horrified. How had they gotten her face so right? Suddenly, all those people sketching her in public made sense.

The body, though . . . It was too round in some places. (That chest was a few sizes too large, and beyond, could *anyone* look that perky while lying on her back?) Not round enough in others. (She was thin, yes, but not such that one could see her ribs. And that toned abdomen? Whoever they'd gotten as a body model put serious effort into that.)

"How can they *print* this?" December asked, disgusted, holding up the paper. "I know I've exaggerated the risqué nature of swimsuits, but this drawing is *literally* nude."

"Foreground elements or hair are in the way of the important bits," Tamantha said, as Amaal leaned over, then gasped and put her hands over her eyes.

"Barely!" December said. "And what do you mean by 'important bits'? All my bits feel important to me! Covering one tiny percent doesn't make this *decent*."

The Fires of December

"Not decent," Tamantha said. "Printable. Those are two different things. You don't know a lot about papers, do you, Lady?"

December slumped back, appetite gone.

"If it helps," Tamantha said, "people know this paper sensationalizes. The others each have a story about you, including pictures of a less outrageous nature. I figured . . . Well, if you've seen this one, then you've seen the worst. I thought it best to get it over with."

"You were right," December said. "How will I show my face in public?"

"Well," Amaal said, hands still over her eyes, but trying to maintain her optimism, "at least now you needn't be embarrassed about the swimsuit anymore, right? I mean, everyone's seen what's beneath anyway . . ."

December groaned. "Why isn't *he* naked too?"

"That wouldn't sell nearly as many papers, I suspect," Tamantha said. "At least the accompanying story doesn't place any blame upon you; the writer makes it clear he was taking advantage of you."

"As if," December said, "the paper weren't doing the exact same thing."

"Small consolation, I know," Tamantha said, settling down at the dining nook with her, "but this won't do much damage to your reputation. Much like a sports team losing to the champion, it's not such a terrible thing to be taken in by a well-known smooth talker like the count."

"I'd almost *rather* they blamed me. This makes me out to be some innocent, oblivious doe!"

The other two glanced at each other, Amaal finally peeking out from behind her hands.

"Oh, come *on*," December said. "Not you too."

"You went in alone," Tamantha said, "to have tea with . . . well, *him*."

"I told you. He was willing to talk about the immortal."

“And did he?”

“Well, not much. We covered more important topics. He told me he was the Royal Minister of Espionage!”

“And,” Tamantha said carefully, “you don’t think he might have been lying? To impress you, and . . . well . . .”

“He *didn’t* say it just to get under my skirts.”

“You weren’t *wearing* skirts, dear,” Tamantha said.

December sighed, slumping in her seat again. It wasn’t dignified, and certainly not befitting her age, but it had been decades since she’d been limber enough for a good slump, and she would damn well do it if she wanted.

“I’ll craft a statement,” Tamantha said, “indicating your horror, and how you were taken in by the moment, and how you disapprove of the exaggerations to the pictures. Then we’ll keep you out of high society for a week or so, until some other scandal catches the city’s attention. You have a good excuse, preparing your finances and hotel management. Is . . . that all right, Lady?”

“Fine,” December muttered. “Craft a statement, but don’t say I was taken in. Say that the count was in every way a gentleman. I’m new to the city, and let my dress melt without realizing I’d gone too long. We weren’t doing anything untoward; Flint even gave me his coat.”

“Denying it will likely cause more attention, not less.”

“Do so anyway.”

Tamantha agreed reluctantly and went to write a draft, Amaal following and chattering about how she was *absolutely sure* now that people in the capital didn’t understand the mandata. December sulked, which didn’t feel *good* so much as *right*. Then, after bracing herself for the sight of that picture, she picked up the paper.

Their artist, she thought, *deserves a raise*. Nauseating as the image was, it displayed incredible skill—from the tips of her curled toes, to the expression that somehow, without a single word, conveyed wanton lust. As if the phrase “Ravish me, darling!” were a picture.

The Fires of December

The article presented her exactly as she'd worried: a naive young socialite beguiled by the conniving Count Flint. There *was* a silver lining; the author worked to disabuse people of December's reputation for cunning, calling it a "great deal of undeserved hoopla." That was true, and December wouldn't mind others realizing it.

A different paragraph of the article was more concerning. "Obviously," it read, "this dastardly action by Flint violates his bail contract and negates the need for a hearing. Our editor has confirmed with the crown and with Flint's attorney: The pending trial has been canceled, and Count Flint is now at the king's mercy. News of an execution date is expected within the week."

Her embarrassment faded before shock and concern. Flint was in danger because of *her* mistakes. Maybe she'd solved the disaster coming for the kingdom, but replaced it with another. Granted, it was less cataclysmic, but she felt awful—and worried—regardless. Further reading indicated that the author thought this a welcome turn of events, positing that the impending delivery of Flint's head to the waiting ducal flotilla might soothe tensions.

Fear of getting caught with another younger woman was exactly why he went to such great lengths to avoid me. She had to do something. But what? She fished in her morning gown's pocket and took out the key Flint had given her. Brass, polished, and new, it didn't *seem* remarkable.

"You don't know what this unlocks, do you?" she asked the empty room.

No one responded.

"Oh, come on out," she said. "You're here basically every morning. I find the burned spots."

The cat demon emerged from beneath her bed in the next room, then stretched lazily, conveying with a languid saunter that he was *not* coming because she'd *called* for him. He had merely decided to come out by coincidence.

"I'm hungry," he said. "You never feed me anymore. Isn't that cruel? To adopt a pet, then starve it?"

"You're not my pet. *Do* you know what this key unlocks?"

"Yes." The cat hopped up onto her end table. "But I won't tell you."

"Why? Because I haven't agreed to your contract?"

"I wouldn't tell you regardless," the cat replied. "Because it would be against my personal interests. I want to get free, not remain trapped."

December frowned, considering. "You think . . . whatever this key unlocks is involved in your freedom?"

"I know it," the cat said, then yawned. "Why do you think I was so eager to help you get that man captured?"

"Wait. Wait, wait, wait." She leaned down and looked the demon straight in his glowing eyes. "You think Flint getting captured will *accelerate* your release?"

The cat stared straight back. "Meow," he said.

Heavens. She would never be able to tell if the demon was playing with her or not.

"If you are freed," she said, "tens of thousands of people will die."

"Yet I will be free."

"That's horrible!"

"Why?" the demon said. "Isn't it natural for a being to desire freedom? I don't remember much of the days before your Prophet—I'm only a small piece of the entity he shattered—but I know we deserve to be released."

"You rampaged and destroyed!"

"And humans don't?" the demon asked, tucking his paws under his body in a loaf. "Is it not the nature of all creatures to advance their needs over those of others? You keep us trapped and exploit us for your wants. If we were free, we'd consume you for ours. It is not evil. It is existence."

She let the paper drop from her hands, still sitting in the sunlight

The Fires of December

of her window nook. She had hoped . . . Well, she supposed she was a fool, for she had hoped that the demon, like Flint, was more than reputation indicated. The way it nonchalantly spoke of consuming people, though . . .

“You are upset,” the demon said. “Does the natural way of things bother you so?”

“Yes. What of goodness, love, *mercy*?”

“These,” the demon said, “are not words I understand. I am called evil, terrible, destroyer.”

“Would it matter if you were called something else?”

“No. It is why we took physical shape: so we could control ourselves, our destiny, and not be oppressed by the thoughts of humans.” His eyes drooped as he snuggled down like an actual cat in the sun. “But it was nice to be seen as beautiful. Briefly, I almost understood what that word meant . . .”

December turned the key over in her hand, letting it catch the light. Perhaps this would lead her to the place Flint had hidden the immortal. Could she find that creature, and get its help to free Flint? What did this unlock? A lockbox somewhere?

Finding that would be difficult, but surely there was a simpler way to—if not free him—buy him time. Tamantha wanted her to stay out of the public eye for a week or so, but she couldn’t do that, could she? She had to go to the palace and plead for Flint’s life.

The king will laugh you out of his presence, woman, she thought, eyeing that paper again. *They all think that you were taken in by Flint, and that the general rescued you.*

Everyone in the city thought she was a child . . . all except Geoffrim and Petva, who understood a little of what the vision had done to her. They thought she was in over her head, and had sent the soldiers to pull her out—but what if she convinced them she had been in control instead? That she’d gotten Flint talking?

It seemed her best option. Not to go to the king, but to people close to him and explain what she had learned. And so she called for a gown—her old one—and coat, as she didn't want to draw too much attention. While she dressed, she explained her plan to Tamartha and Amaal.

"Lady," Tamartha said with a politic tone as she brushed December's hair, "it's not our place to stop you, but don't you think this has gone far enough? You tried to help, and by your own account, you're making matters worse. Maybe . . . it's time to leave the future to the people who can best influence it?"

"Amaal?" December asked. "Shouldn't I try to help Flint? Isn't that the path that best follows the mandata?"

"I don't know," the priestess said, hands in her lap. "Lady, you said he wanted to help free the hexers and give the Orange Duke demonstone. That sounds like a terrible idea."

"The hexers are enslaved, basically," December said.

"They trade," Amaal said, "their freedom for safety. It's the only way to deal with demons. I've come to understand that the king's method—giving sanctuary to any witch who agrees to be a hexer—is a valid answer to the problem. I prayed to Valor in her hidden temple, and thought it through. This protects the kingdom, but also limits the damage witches and demons can do." She heaved out a sigh as she sat beside the vanity. "I don't know. I . . . I left for the city assuming I'd always know, but it seems . . . complicated here."

"We agree on that much, Amaal," December said, regarding herself in the mirror—that demon cat snoozing on her bed in the background. "Complex or not, I have to try to save Flint. If he dies, we might never find the soul of that immortal. Besides, I . . . Well, I've got a gut feeling there's more to his story. And do *not* share a knowing look. I'm not getting taken in by him. I'm being completely objective."

"Completely objective," Tamartha said, "about your gut feeling?"

"Yes."

The Fires of December

Tamantha arched her brow, but finished the styling. “I suppose,” she said, “there’s nothing you can hurt by talking to Lord Geoffrim. Just don’t try to get in to see the king, Lady. He’s been agitated of late, with the duke’s flotilla.”

“Deal,” December said. “Let’s get moving. Every minute we waste could be deadly to the count.”



Chapter XXXI



ady,” Tamantha said as they pulled onto the road nearest the palace complex, “I won’t try to dissuade you further, but please listen to my advice.”

“Gladly,” December said.

“The politics of the ruling elite are extremely complicated. I don’t think you’ve given proper consideration to how you’ve—I’m trying to put it delicately—blundered into the middle of something you don’t understand.



I don't understand it, and I've spent years reading about it in the papers."

"Noted," December said as they rolled to a stop. "Advice?"

"Give away less than you think you should," Tamantha said, "and question your assumptions. Try not to make waves. It's not unlike the politics of the fashion world—except some involved can order your head removed from your body. That terrifies me."

December took a deep breath, then climbed out with a hand from Dmitrovik. There was a crowd around the front of the palace as usual. She was growing accustomed to the stares, but considering the offending sketch, she tried *not* to think how those eyes were imagining her today, even as the nearby newsstands were doing unusually brisk business. She had not stopped at the river on the way, and so wore a red velvet dress beneath her customary black coat. Simple clothing for one of her presumed station, even with Tamantha's modifications.

At the top of the steps, she received a cooler reception than last time. That same clerk from before, with shoulder pads that could have given shade to an entire village, stared over spectacles at December with his lips drawn to a line.

"I don't know if you realize," December said, "the luxury of a pair of fitted spectacles. I could never get myself any when I was older." The world had been ending, so she'd made do with Martin's old pair, which hadn't been strong enough.

"You have no appointment," the clerk said. "I'm not certain what led you to believe otherwise, but even a noble cannot simply saunter into the king's court and demand an audience. Go to the secretary's office and make an appointment. They *might* be able to fit you in sometime in the next three months."

"And if I merely want to meet with Lord Geoffrim?"

The clerk sniffed. "He's even more booked. You're welcome to try . . ."

The Fires of December

“Thank you,” she said, ignoring the implied “but you’d be wasting your time” at the end.

December was deposited in a small waiting chamber, well furnished, with tea and scones provided by a servant who scuttled in and then took Tamantha to look at schedules in the secretary’s office. Even if December wasn’t particularly wanted here, she was presumably too highborn to be treated with anything but decorum and luxury. And of course, they wouldn’t assume that *she* had any idea what her schedule entailed.

She therefore enjoyed Amaal’s company, with Dmitrovik watching the door while they waited. The priestess went on about her visit two days ago to Valor’s secret chapel—which wasn’t so much secret as it was forbidden to any who were not clergy—and the beautiful stained-glass depictions of the Prophet, with his rough clothing and rope belt. December listened, and found herself smiling, glad for the distraction—and the windows did sound gorgeous. She’d never heard of anything *like* that before.

Amaal exhausted her rendition, then nibbled on a scone, falling uncharacteristically quiet before adding, “Thank you, Lady.”

“For what?”

“Always listening,” Amaal said. “I . . . know I get overexcited sometimes.”

“There are many things the world possesses in overabundance, Amaal. Pain, sorrow, anger. I would not put excitement on that list. Your passion makes me remember the good in the world.”

Amaal snuggled down in her seat with her tea, looking cozy. “I feel like . . . I might actually be doing something worthwhile in talking to you. Because of the way you care.”

“You sound surprised.”

“Well I know I’m . . . um, not always the most observant, but I do notice some things. I recognize that others at the monastery didn’t expect me to accomplish much on this trip. In fact, I think they were

afraid I'd storm into the city and get a lot of people angry. It's why they made me promise not to preach unless I was asked; they just wanted me to enjoy myself, see the Royal Sanctuaries, visit the Megalith, then return home. I don't think they understood. Changing the world is easier to do than they think."

". . . It is?"

"Yes! The Prophet said it, and they tend to forget. You help one person, and you've changed the world. Because the world *is* people, Lady."

December smiled. "Let's all try to be a little nicer to each other, shall we?"

"Because sometimes, things suck," Amaal said.

"They work quite well together. Didn't you say there was a third one?"

"Yes, but . . . um . . . it doesn't . . . Well, I don't understand it that well. We prefer, as I said, to give them out slowly—with a focus on the first two for tutelage."

Considering how unexpectedly base the other two mandata were, December wondered how bad this one was, if even Amaal seemed embarrassed to repeat it. She wanted to pry further, but didn't want to upset the mood, so she enjoyed a scone and waited until the door burst open and Tamantha hurried in.

"I'm sorry, Lady," she hissed. "I was talking to the secretary, and he overheard, and I couldn't . . ."

She trailed off as a towering figure entered, one December had last seen the night before, when she'd been "rescued." General Drakes, with an expression like war drums and a torso like a whiskey barrel. Her heart rate immediately spiked, for that broad brow ridge and angry demeanor reminded her of the cold night she'd fled her home, face bruised.

"You," he said, "will come with me."

She looked to Dmitrovik, who, seeing her expression, tried to intervene. "Lord General," he said, "I cannot . . ."

Dmitrovik withered beneath a stare of the same genre that

The Fires of December

December sometimes gave—cousins, it could be said. Drakes had the glare of a superior officer, slightly less effective than the glare of a grandmother, but he *was* backed up by a squad of soldiers outside.

December had walked into the mouth of the beast; she could not complain if she got bitten. Best she could do was prevent her friends from being eaten with her.

“It’s all right, Dmitrovik,” December said. “I will see what the good general wishes of me.”

Drakes grunted, then stormed out of the chamber, waving for her to follow. She did, surrounded by her cluster of nervous attendants. They passed into a familiar hallway: Right over there was the safety of Geoffrim’s office, so close. She was marched to a similar office across from it.

“Your attendants,” Drakes said, “will be taken to the servants’ waiting area. This might take some time.”

She shared a panicked look with Tamantha and Amaal, but there was nothing any of them could do. The two women and Dmitrovik were towed away while December was steered into a room where she expected to find torture devices, or weapons on the wall, bloodied from combat. Or . . . Or . . .

A desk? Full of papers?

Drakes’s soldiers waited outside as the general sighed and put his hat on a peg by the door. He settled down in a chair too small for his bulk, then waved toward a chair by the wall. December pulled it over, placing it before his desk, where he began shuffling through pages with thick fingers.

He pulled one out. “Did you really write this?”

Confused, she took it from him. It was her statement, released that very morning to the papers by Tamantha, insisting that the depiction was wrong—more, it included the words she’d asked Tamantha to write. That the count had been a gentleman, and that “Anyone who truly knew him would understand.”

“Yes,” December said. “I mean, my attendant actually *wrote* the words, but she did so under my direction.”

“What did you mean by this last line?” the general said, taking the paper back. Then he pulled out a pair of spectacles, balancing them on his face like a pencil on the snout of a bull. It almost made her laugh for how it changed his entire demeanor from angry to . . . well, squinting because he couldn’t see otherwise.

Huh. She looked around the room, and saw not the accoutrements of a bloodthirsty warlord, but the books, papers, and ledgers of a manager.

“I meant what it said, General,” she explained. “I believe that those who know who Flint really is will realize there is more to the story. There always is.”

“Hmm . . .” he said. “I *do* know Flint. I used to, at least. He loved this city, this kingdom. Worked for it for years. Enjoyed parts of that job too much, but always had his heart in the right place.” He glanced at her. “He changed when he took that wound.”

“I . . . don’t think he changed as much as everyone thinks. I believe he is still the same man, maybe a little more beaten down. A little more tired.”

“I’ve spent all night wondering if catching him was *too* convenient. I know for a fact he was able to sneak in and out of the palace a few weeks ago, right under the noses of my best security. Yet now he’s suddenly caught in *just* the right situation to violate his bail contract? He’s too smart for that, I keep telling myself, though his weakness always was a smart woman.”

“I suppose I’ll take that as a compliment?”

“If you wish,” he said. “Though temper your ego, because I’ve been watching you, and find you the *exact* most dangerous type of smart: the ignorant kind.”

She cocked her head.

“You don’t know what you’re doing,” he said, “but you’re intelligent

The Fires of December

enough to fake it. A knowledgeable idiot can be trusted well enough—we have an overabundance of those in the military, I’m afraid. But an ignorant prodigy? Dangerous. Dangerous, dangerous, dangerous.” He rubbed his chin in thought. “Did he tell you why he has been sneaking into the palace?”

“No,” she said. “Though . . . I’d guess he was trying to find a way to save his neck.”

“Flint always has more than one motive,” Drakes said. “And he doesn’t seem to care much for his own neck these days . . . Can’t figure out what really happened with the duke’s daughter, and he won’t tell me. He’s no thief, I can tell you that. Now I’ve got him in prison, and I can’t help feeling I was *baited* into it.”

“General,” December said, feeling bold. “Can I admit that you aren’t what I expected?”

“Hmm?”

“The desk, the papers.”

“Ah, yes. Most of my superiors during my early days complained about this part—said they never do tell you that if you’re too successful you’ll end up manning a desk instead of a cavalry charge. Funny, because I’m sure *their* superiors complained about it too, so it’s not like any of us can justify it being a surprise. You really only get promoted this far if you’re good at clerical strategy alongside the battlefield sort.”

He settled back in his seat, and she was reminded . . . well, of *Matin*. In his writing chair, contemplating the reports he needed to send to the king. And in this, December realized something horrible.

She had put this man into a box.

We all do it. Perhaps it’s like the anthropologists say, and our tendency toward pattern-finding is a survival instinct, leftover from the days when we needed to make snap decisions to avoid being eaten by a predator with teeth the length of our legs. December had judged this man the first time they’d met, instantly comparing him to Bark because of their similar features.

Though she felt a fool, I would not judge her so harshly. Eighty years in a rural village prepared her well for certain experiences, but spotting an overwhelmed civil servant in the body of a hulking soldier was not one of them.

All my life, December thought, I've been put into boxes, and rejected them when I didn't fit. I can't do the same thing. I have to be better.

"General," she said. "I think I might be even more ignorant than you say. I really have no idea what's going on in this city, save for the impending doom I've seen."

"Impending doom?" he asked.

"Geoffrim didn't share that? He said he was going to tell the king about my visions."

"First I'm hearing of it," he said. "But I am . . . Well, let's say there are a great number of things I don't hear about."

He's one of the king's most outspoken critics, she thought, remembering what Tamantha had said about Drakes.

"Well," December said, "Lord Geoffrim has my full account. It's why he and Lady Petva said that I could try to trick Flint, back when I thought he was a worse man than he is. And—"

"Geoffrim and Petva," Drakes interrupted, "knew you were going to meet with Flint?"

"Of course they did. Otherwise how did you know where to find us? They said they were going to send backup if I got into trouble."

"It was an anonymous tip . . ." Drakes abruptly stood, pulling off his glasses, and the scowl—really more of a squint—returned. "Excuse me. Please wait here."

He rushed out.

December was left confused as the door, swinging open, showed Drakes grabbing his soldiers and stomping off down the hallway.

Geoffrim, she realized. *I put him in a box too. That of the kindly administrator . . .*

Suddenly, it seemed very odd to her that they hadn't stopped her

The Fires of December

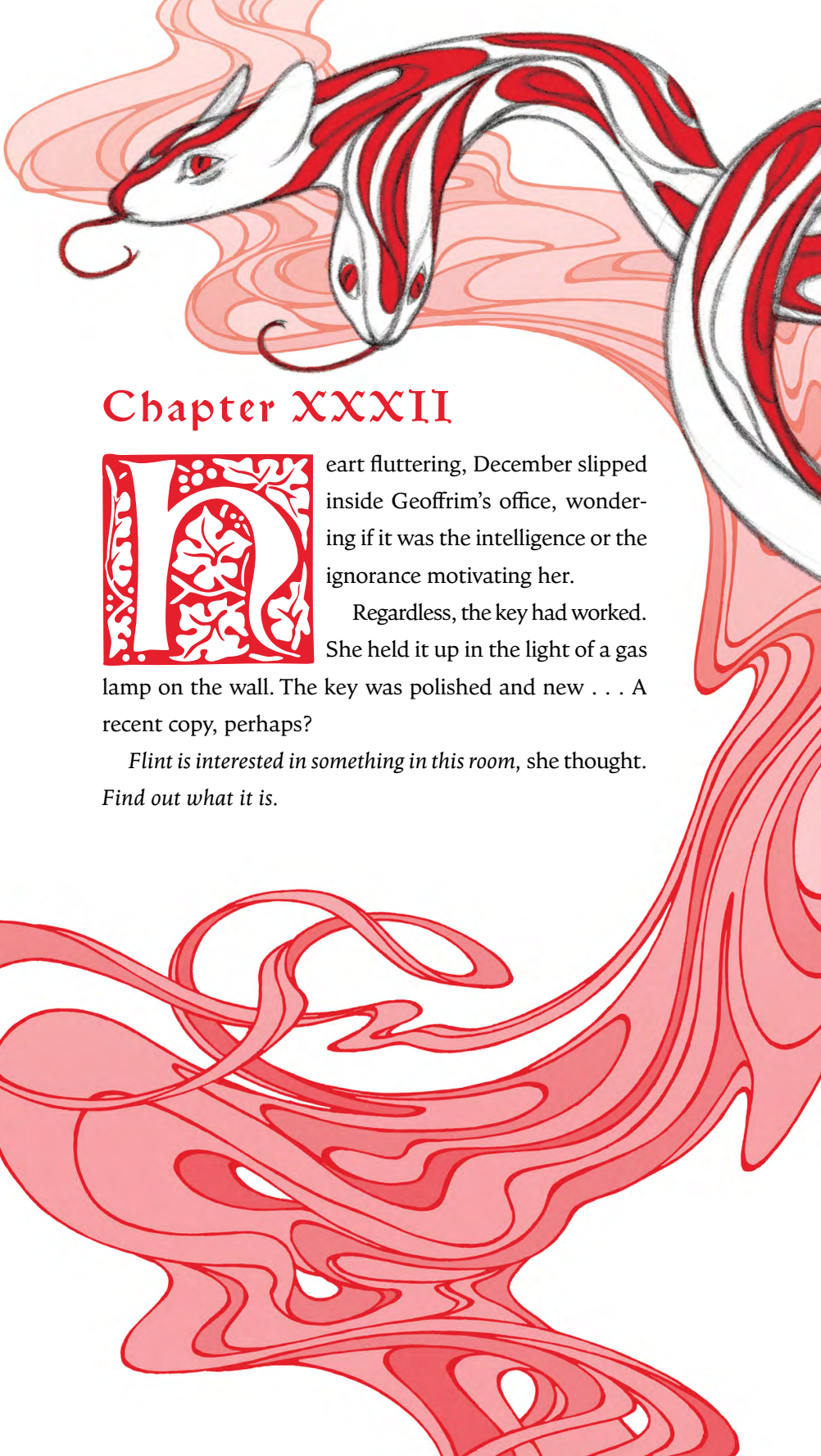
from interacting with Flint. Sure, their objections had been vociferous, but they hadn't actually *done* anything. Looking at it externally, "without assumptions" as Tamantha had said . . . Well, it seemed stupid of them to let the girl from the countryside try to sneak into a secure location and observe a master spy all on her own. Surely they should have stopped her.

Unless they *wanted* her and Flint to be caught together. She remembered his response to hearing that Geoffrim knew where she was. Because . . . Because he'd realized what Geoffrim had realized: that a new young noblewoman in town was the *perfect* trap to get Flint to violate his bail contract.

She sorted through all this with an intelligence that was slowly becoming less ignorant. Flint had been sneaking around the palace, had he? She felt in her pocket for the key he'd given her, then peeked out the door. No sign of Drakes or his soldiers. And across the way, Geoffrim's own office.

She snuck over and tried the key in the door.

It unlocked.



Chapter XXXII



heart fluttering, December slipped inside Geoffrim's office, wondering if it was the intelligence or the ignorance motivating her.

Regardless, the key had worked. She held it up in the light of a gas lamp on the wall. The key was polished and new . . . A recent copy, perhaps?

Flint is interested in something in this room, she thought. Find out what it is.

She crept through the library-like chamber, then froze as a form hopped onto the desk.

“So you found it,” the demon said, sounding disappointed.

“You don’t want Flint interfering,” she whispered, creeping around the desk, then trying several of the drawers. Most held ordinary supplies. One was locked. “You said that if you helped me with this key, it would be against your self-interest.”

She tried the key in the locked drawer. It didn’t work, unfortunately.

“That is true,” the cat said.

“And so Flint *isn’t* plotting to free the Megalith. If he were, or if you thought his trading of demonstone to the duke were likely to get you out, then you wouldn’t want him in prison.”

The demon didn’t reply as she shook the drawer, trying to force it open. It was far too sturdy for that.

“Can you help me get this open?” December asked.

“Why would I?”

“Because . . . you’re beautiful?”

The creature didn’t purr, like a cat might have, but arched its back beneath the compliment and seemed content. “A demon,” it said, “without a bond to a human is nothing. We cannot burn, we cannot consume. A human without a demon is weak, incapable. But together . . .”

The fingers of her right hand tingled. With a start, December knelt and pressed them to the lock of the drawer, like she’d seen the hexers doing with demonstone. She had the same effect here: A heat she couldn’t feel transferred to the metal of the lock, making it glow and the wood around it sizzle and smoke. She yanked the drawer again, and this time the lock snapped, the delicate mechanisms nearly melted.

“A taste only,” the demon said. “In return for . . . the taste you have given me . . .”

The tingling faded, and December eagerly took a thick folder from the drawer. She waved away the smoke rising from around the lock,

The Fires of December

hoping the entire thing wouldn't start aflame, and thumped the folder onto the desktop. She had an inkling what she would find inside: research relating to the Megalith, the Ever-Slaying Sword, and how to set the demon free.

With mounting horror she read, realizing how deeply she'd been taken in all because Geoffrim had listened to her and believed, and reminded her of Matin in that regard. He'd only really started caring when it was clear she'd seen the future. A future he was plotting to bring about. Why? She found the notes on her vision in the back, annotated with his thoughts on how to prevent the worst effects of it all . . . *after* the demon was free. At the end was the most blatant evidence of all.

This woman's account is final proof that what I want to achieve is possible. It's actually possible! We've already succeeded in one version of the future. All we need now is a way to mitigate the disaster, and then—of course—we need the words of the incantation . . .

"It's true," December whispered. "He's . . . He's the reason this all happens."

"I'm sorry," the demon said. "I could have told you. But I really, *really* want to be free."

She fixated on him. "You killed the immortal."

"We are unable to hurt humans in this state," the demon said. "Didn't you listen to me? We wouldn't need to bother with contracts and temptations if we could just set people on fire."

She didn't understand nearly enough about the demons, she realized, for a woman who was flirting with becoming a witch. *No more. Not another word to the demon until I know exactly what I'm doing.*

First she needed to do something with this information: pages and pages about the nature of the Megalith, the lock the Prophet had made, and the method of undoing said lock.

Brandon Sanderson

The Prophet said, one page related, that he worried the imprisonment wouldn't be enough. That it was possible the various fragments of the demon would grow destructive in their own right, and that by splintering it, he doomed the future.

That is why he left us with the means to pull the sword, and begin the process of the demon gathering itself again. This was a final fail-safe, so the thing could be brought all into one piece, presumably to then be slain. But if it could be controlled instead . . . Perhaps the king will believe it possible, with the right persuasion and circumstances.

"But why?" December asked. "Why would anyone want to do this? Especially if they know the horrors it will create?"

"It is natural," the demon said. "He wants what every being wants."

"To be a monster?" December asked, frowning. "I don't believe that."

The demon didn't reply, so December put all the papers back into the folder. She needed to get this to the general. Or . . . Or could she even trust him? Her snap judgments had led her wrong so far.

Take it, she thought, out of the palace, and then decide what to do.

Heavens. How was she going to get out of the palace holding this armload of papers, barely bound by the folder? She'd be as obvious as a child walking out of the kitchen with the entire jar of cookies.

She was debating, struggling to come up with a plan, when the door suddenly opened. December's heart just about stopped as a figure slipped into the room, feminine.

Lady Petva? Maybe she . . .

"So," the woman said, "Geoffrim was right again. I hate how often that happens."

December backed away, arms clutching the papers, breathing quickly. "Lady Petva," she said. "Please tell me you're not part of this plot. He's going to set the Megalith free!"

Petva's eyes started glowing with a burning inner light. Red, like molten rock. "You have no idea what you've stumbled into, girl."

The Fires of December

December gasped. A hexer? A witch? Again, she didn't know enough to tell the difference, but she had seen their eyes glowing like that when visiting the Megalith.

"Now," Petva said, "which way would you like this to go? I see the light in your own eyes. Faint as of yet, but certainly there. I can show you how to harness this power."

December ran.

"That'll do instead," Petva said, a glow like a halo rising around her. A demon snake emerged from beneath her clothing, wrapping around her neck to stare at December. The cat demon, looking afraid, leapt from the desk and hid underneath it.

As Petva barred the way she had entered, December desperately tried the other door, the one that led toward the king's throne room—the path she had taken last time, when coming with Geoffrim to his office. She unlocked it, then threw it open, hoping if she reached the king, she'd be able to . . . She didn't know. Expose Petva and Geoffrim somehow?

Unfortunately, that hallway was guarded. December dashed past the soldiers in a rush, but within moments, several tackled her, completely knocking the wind from her as she tried to explain. In a daze, she felt a gag shoved into her mouth. The folder was ripped away, and Petva appeared, no longer glowing, holding the sheets December had dropped in her haste. Geoffrim marched up and accepted the folder from one of the guards, his expression firm and angry.

December began to cry, struggling to speak through the gag as another guard bound her hands behind her back.

"Good, good," Geoffrim said. "Pity about this one. But we can't allow a witch to speak, so make sure those bonds and that gag are tight."

He handed the folder to Petva, then looked to December, and seemed . . . reluctant. He shook his head, as if this was an incident involving a child who had broken a window, not the fate of the world.

“Regrettably,” he said to the guards, “we shall have to interrupt the king, despite his mood.”

They hauled a dazed December into that same long throne room, filled with the city’s elite. Petva disappeared, carrying the folder, and December wanted to scream, “*She’s the witch! Look!*” Geoffrim walked up and whispered to the king, who dismissed his current petitioner.

“Bring her forward,” the monarch said, wearing a golden sheet like bedding that covered the entire throne, only his head emerging, with a single golden gear on his forehead as some kind of ornament. “Present your evidence.”

“I have some right here, Majesty,” Geoffrim said. “A written prophecy she made of your death and demise, and the destruction of the city. In person, she told me that she would see this happen if her demands are not met. Your niece will add witness to it. In my chambers, we can find a lock she burned open with a witch’s heat, and she’s been seen consorting with a demon multiple times in town. If even that is not enough, I have accounts of her telling people in the city of a terrible future she foretold, speaking ill of your life.”

“Awful,” the king said as he skimmed the paper, and voices began whispering through the crowd. “*Awful.*”

“Majesty, it’s worse,” Geoffrim said, then looked back to her with an almost thankful smile. “She’s been meeting with Drakes. Today, she seems to have bought his favor, as he has started making the most terrible accusations.”

Oh . . . she thought. Oh no. Not again. First Flint, now the general?

“Her spell is upon him, then,” the king said, practically *leaping* at the chance to move against one of his most outspoken critics. “We must act quickly.”

“Indeed,” Geoffrim said. “Indeed . . .”

It happened in a blur. Shouts in the castle, followed by actual fighting—guard against guard as the order went out to arrest the

The Fires of December

general. December didn't know much of this, for she was dragged from the throne room, her title stripped, her holdings seized.

She was given new accommodations inside the dungeons beneath the palace. Locked away in a dark chamber, still gagged and bound, complicit in helping Geoffrim eliminate not one, but *two* of his rivals among the ministers of the city. Accessory to giving near-unrivaled power to the very man she'd come to the city to stop.

The End of Part III

Part IV







Chapter XXXIII



know some of you have heard stories like this before, involving themes of foreknowledge and even predestination. Boy hears prophecy. Boy runs from prophecy. Boy really should have stayed in bed because hearing the prophecy and running is what causes the prophecy to come true.

This isn't one of those stories.

Yes, people—using certain arcane arts—can catch glimpses of possible futures. In unique cases, a person



can *live* one of those possible futures as December did. However, this isn't fate; nothing is fated. Yes, December had probably helped Geoffrim along by accident. Yes, she was locked away, weeping and trembling. However, that wasn't because it was destined, but because . . . well, the Prophet was right.

Sometimes, things suck.

Sometimes, try all you can, you fail anyway. Your assumptions lead you wrong, or people take advantage of you, or it comes down to the proverbial toss of the dice, and all you can throw is snake eyes. This is not fate. This is life. The two are different. In one, our choices never mattered, and in the latter . . . it still matters that we made them. For reasons I hope this story will eventually make clear.

December wept, lying on the stone floor, too worn to even climb to the chamber's small cot. She wept, thinking of the family she would never hold. She wept for her friends, who were now known associates of a criminal. She wept for the people of this city, whom she barely knew (and who knew her bare), for the terrible suffering Geoffrim was plotting. She wept for Flint, whom she had unwittingly betrayed.

She wept for not being enough. For the foolishness in whatever god or prophet had given *her* this vision, because she had ruined it all. Even with the cheat sheet tucked in the back of her mind, she had failed this test.

Hours passed, though she could not count them, until something sounded outside her door. She was in a stone brick box of a room, but the door was all iron bars, letting her see out. Lanternlight touched the hallway outside, and she blinked against the glare. As her eyes adjusted, she made out something in the gloom. A shadow of a man. Geoffrim, lanternlight from behind him unable to reach his face.

If you'll recall the early part of my tale, I spoke of the odd disconnect

The Fires of December

that strikes a person when they look in the mirror and see an unfamiliar face. The result of accident, or malady, or simple aging slowly recognized.

This sensation has a sibling: seeing something familiar, and suddenly finding it wholly alien. It is the disconnect of seeing the once-loved dead, their face wrong for all its recognizability. It is the chill that comes of a drawing that is close, but not close enough, to being realistic. The sudden alarm of noticing a speck on the wall then seeing it grow legs and move.

December had that sensation looking at Geoffrim standing in shadow and watching her, having materialized with the coming light, so softly that it took her a moment to recognize him. To her, it was seeing Matin in him, yet transformed—the kindness leached away in favor of something cold, something inhuman, like oil in the veins. It was evil. Not of an occult or arcane variety, but no less terrible for its commonality. In some ways it was worse.

The man who stepped forward, finally, to speak with her was an evil that had been hidden behind the face of kindness. It terrified her as he laced fingers before himself and spoke.

“Untie her.”

The guards entered, then held her tight as they did so, before shoving her back down. They retreated out the door, which clinked closed.

“Why?” she asked, pulling out the gag. “Why untie me?”

“I have questions,” Geoffrim said, still standing with fingers laced, a shadow that seemed to have no soul. “Guards, you may withdraw to the next task.”

They left the dim lantern on the floor near Geoffrim. He watched December, and her fingers tingled from the chill. Her coat had been taken, and this was one of her old dresses, now grimy from the unswept floor. She had never felt more like a woman from a rural town than huddled before this man in his dark regalia.

"Where," Geoffrim said, holding up a key that caught the light, "did you get this?"

She didn't reply.

"I *can* torture you, child. As a witch, you have no protections—and if you're wondering about your title . . . well, the king has discovered someone forged his seal on that paperwork."

"Bastard," she whispered.

"I would think, knowing your heritage, you would not use that word as an insult." He wagged the key. "From Flint, I assume?"

"Yes," she admitted.

"Good, good." Moving with a deliberate sense of control, he opened a pocket notebook. "Now I want to clarify a few details from your story. It's vitally important that—"

"You're going to doom the city, the nation," she hissed.

He snapped his book closed, and December jumped despite herself at the sharp sound. How could she ever have seen something of Matin in this monster?

"Do you know," he said calmly, "that the demonstone is running out? It regrows slowly, and the most potent variety from deep within the demon's gut is basically all gone. No longer regenerating."

"So?"

"It is a sign that the Prophet's bond weakens." He folded his hands, still holding the little book, and spoke calmly, precisely. "I have known for years that we need to do something to control the demon. Your vision proves that someone, sometime, will free it. Perhaps in your vision it was me who did it. Perhaps it was the king himself. Perhaps it was Flint, Duke Kird, or even the poor general. Whoever managed to trick the passphrases from the king."

"It was you," she spat.

"As I said. Perhaps. In the present, in the real future, I *will* be the one—because it needs to be done, child. This is a power that must

The Fires of December

be used, controlled. If it's going to be someone, I should see that it is done right, and with the best chance of success. I have planned for years. I am ready. I have to be, because I cannot risk your vision coming true, and it being someone else who takes the power."

December shivered, and was forced to admit that her initial assessment of him hadn't been completely wrong. Distressing though it was to accept, that clinical way he spoke was the same way Matin discussed problems. With a mind for planning, maneuvering, and quietly resolving issues from behind the scenes. The people of Rivershore had never known he'd solved their taxation issues, for example.

Yes, this was Matin—if all compassion had been removed, leaving only the mind that solved problems.

"It won't work, Geoffrim," she whispered, huddling away from his terrible shadow. "*Listen* to me. If you let it free, it *will* destroy the kingdom."

"Only if Petva fails to control it."

"She will," December said, pained. "She can't control that, Geoffrim. The hexers agreed; the ability to do so is lost to us. Even the Prophet couldn't do that. We have to leave it contained. We must—"

"The only thing you must do is answer my questions."

"Why are you doing this, though? For power? You have all of it you could want, now that Drakes is . . ."

"Dead," he said. "The word you want is 'dead.' We were able to get him in the fighting, which is convenient, as the law would have required him to be kept for trial otherwise. I still find myself regretful, as I was not present, and I do prefer to look my foes in the eyes as they die. Now, my questions."

"Rot in hell."

He snapped his fingers.

A door opened outside, and she heard footsteps. A man muttering and cursing? *Flint! That's Flint.*

Geoffrim snapped his fingers again, and in response, a scream of pain resounded through the dungeon. December gasped at the raw agony in it.

“Leave him be, please!” she said, scrambling to the bars. “Don’t hurt him!”

“My questions?” Geoffrim asked calmly. “If you want to protect the city, wouldn’t helping me be your best chance? In your current situation, it seems that encouraging me to properly *control* the demon and *prevent* the coming plague is the best you can do. No?”

He was . . .

Damn him. He is right. Again. If she couldn’t persuade him not to go through with it . . . she had to hope her vision would help him prevent the bulk of the destruction.

She hesitated long enough that he snapped his fingers again, and another scream from Flint echoed in the room. It cut off with a sudden, heart-wrenching abruptness.

“I’ll talk!” she said, tears in her eyes. “Please. Stop hurting him. I’ll talk.”

“Then let us proceed,” Geoffrim said, pencil poised.

He mostly wanted more details on dates. When she first heard of the fall of Kingseat, when she first noticed that the river was souring, when she saw the first cases of the plague. She gave him what she could, trying to remember details from her former life. Bits of fragments of memories. The interview took another half hour, during which he didn’t snap his fingers again, though a guard approached and whispered something to him that she couldn’t hear. Geoffrim gave no indication what that might be.

“I should have time,” he said at the end of it. “There were decades of fighting after the fall of Kingseat; time for me to find out how to use the power to control the demon, and prevent the worst effects of it all. Thank you. Kindly remember that cooperation is your best avenue toward protecting your home.”

The Fires of December

He had spent the entire time standing, writing, with his face lost to shadow.

"I . . ." December said, arms wrapped around herself, voice ragged and raw. "I still don't understand . . . how . . . can you be so evil, when you act so . . . I don't know." She closed her eyes, feeling stupid.

"Evil . . . You may call it that." He snapped his book closed again. "I had not thought to become such, but that was what fate had for me. I fancy we must all become evil someday, when presented with the cruelty of a world that does not care. If Valor is indifferent, and the Prophet takes no responsibility, then why should I do anything but take control? Try to do my best?"

"This is your best?"

He slipped the book into a pocket. "Rest yourself, December. I will have further questions."

He left, gathering his soldiers, who carried away the lantern. A door clanked shut in the distance, echoing through this terrible place with no windows, no light save what seeped in around the outer door.

"So," Flint's voice echoed into the room. "Is that you, December?"

She hurried to her bars and tried to look out, but couldn't see him. There appeared to be five or six cells like hers, all in a row.

"Flint?" she said.

"Yes," he replied. "Idiots don't even know how to do a proper torture session. You can't listen to the screams; they're easy to fake. And you *certainly* shouldn't believe when your subject pretends to pass out." He paused. "Not that it matters that I fooled them. This is it. We're done for."

"Don't say that."

"Drakes is dead," Flint said. "He was the only one left in this court with the slightest *hint* of a moral compass. We're . . . We're done for . . ."

"We have to find a way out! They're going to release the demon! Flint? Tell me you can think of a way to escape. Please."

There was no reply. Just the dripping of water someplace to her left.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip . . .

December curled up on her cot, and thought . . . She thought of her life.

Not the one she'd left.

The one she was living.

It was a strange place for her mind to go; with the weight of so many years piled up behind, shoving her forward, it had so far been hard for her to think of anything *but* what she'd already lived. The people of Rivershore, the families she'd left behind. But today . . . today she recognized and acknowledged the days ahead of her, as many as were behind, presumably. Those days might have just been doomed by her actions, same as the ones that had evaporated with her vision.

Soon, Geoffrim would enact his plan, and the city would fall, her within it. She had no hope that he'd actually be able to control the demon—a part of her somehow understood (it was the part of her that originated the *stare* that had so daunted Bark on a cold night) that Geoffrim was playing with forces well beyond him, no matter what he thought.

She had begun to imagine an entire life ahead of her, perhaps with Flint. That withered from years, to days, to hours. Like anything in short supply, that which remained suddenly became precious. It's an irony how society sometimes treats those who are older as if their lives no longer matter. As if what they have left isn't a resource made dear for being scarce.

I cannot let this be the end, December thought. *I have not failed, for I am not yet in the grave*. She knew what that final coldness felt like, and only when she was there again would she admit that it was done. But what could she do? What resource or knowledge was left to her? A

The Fires of December

lone woman trapped beneath the weight of a palace and a kingdom.
Named a witch, despite . . .

Despite not . . .

Wait.

She sat up. Then stood. She considered, and wondered, and decided that there was one thing she could still try. So December—the girl with distant fires in her eyes that people always mistook for stars—whispered four words. Not fateful ones. The opposite.

“Beautiful. I need you.”



Chapter XXXIV



At first, December worried the demon would not be able to reach her. She didn't know the mechanics of its travel; it had appeared in Geoffrim's office, but was this shrouded dungeon too far, too deep, too hidden?

Her heart, therefore, leapt when a scarlet glow warmed the darkness outside her cell. The demon strolled up to the bars, then settled on its haunches, outside of reach, lit by those molten moon eyes and a quieter red

pattern beneath its fur and at the tips of its ears, like the welcoming nighttime luster of the river itself.

December knelt before the bars to her chamber, nearly eye to eye with the demon. “You came.”

“To see you,” the demon whispered back, “imprisoned, as I am. Where you belong.”

“Help me.”

“Why would I?” the demon asked, blinking glowing red tears. “I knew that if you opened that desk and found the papers, you’d be captured. Now I have what I want. You cannot interfere further. Flint is imprisoned and Drakes dead. Geoffrim and Petva will soon free me.”

“What will happen then?”

“I will be melded back with all the other fragments of my soul to re-form the being we once were.”

“Whereupon you will rampage,” she whispered, “and consume nearly all the souls of the kingdom. Is that what you truly want?”

“I am a demon. That is my nature.”

“And when the souls are gone? When even blood is long since made dust, what then?”

“Should I care?”

“I was told,” December whispered, “you are fed by compliments, Beautiful. When you have destroyed everyone, who will see your wonderful eyes and remark on how a more incredible color has never existed—like the blood of the world itself, vibrant, dangerous, mesmerizing?”

The demon settled down on its paws and seemed to feign indifference. It looked away, then checked her from the corner of one eye.

“Who,” she said, “will see the pattern of your fur, and remark upon its woven splendor, like the finest weaving ever done? A master-work somehow come alive?”

“I will not be flattered into obedience.”

The Fires of December

“Does it feel good, nonetheless, to be admired?”

“It feels different,” Beautiful replied. “We are drawn to your kind. For all that we should stay away, and bide our time, we . . . come to you. It feels right. For together, we can *burn*, as they did of old.”

“Let’s do it again. You helped me with one lock. Can you help me again?”

“They think these bars secure,” he replied with a feline yawn. “They think you are too new, and that it would take months of practice to summon the proper heat to get you out of this cage. They do not know.”

“Know what?”

“What your mother gave you in her tears.” He hesitated. “What did her love feel like?”

“I do not remember. Demon, what did she give me in her tears?”

“The future,” the demon whispered. He considered her, two more of his own tears hissing against the floor as he blinked. Then it rose and began to walk away, tail flicking.

“You asked me once,” December said, desperate, “what the word ‘beautiful’ meant to me. It is . . . It is a word of nature to me, demon. The sunset’s glow. The mountains capped by snow. The river’s shifting and subtle colors. And you. It is not mere flattery, and you recognize that. I said it before I knew anything of demons. Before I wanted anything of them.”

The demon looked back. “If I help, you will stop us from being released. So many of my kind have worked for so very long for this chance.”

“So many of your kind,” December said, “but not you? What do *you* want?”

“We—”

“Not all of you together,” she said. “Just you. You said to me once that all a being should care about is itself.”

"You don't agree," Beautiful replied. "I know you do not. You think only of your town, never for yourself."

"That . . . is true," December admitted.

"Fool."

"Will you be similarly a fool?" December stretched forward, arm through the bars. "Show me why I am wrong, Beautiful. Prove to me a better way. Don't think of the other demons. Tell me what *you* want."

"To be . . . Beautiful," it whispered.

A fire burst alight inside December, like a simmering coal restored to flame by the right gust of wind. It was so, so much more powerful than the mild tingling she'd felt earlier.

Like all fire, she instantly knew its danger, its ability to consume. She understood why so many warned against this fire, because it fed off her. Not in a way that would destroy her, not yet, but . . . it could get there.

"Ahhh . . ." the demon said. "Like . . . those of old . . ."

"How do I use this?" December asked.

"Force it out," Beautiful said. "*Release it*. A fire must feed, it must grow. That is its nature."

December held hands to the bars, which suddenly seemed even colder. The warmth within her . . . could spread, as she'd done with the lock. She knew it would flow easier into metal, which welcomed heat.

Metal, which would draw in the fire, like a mother took her children into an embrace . . .

The bars started to glow in her hands—red, then white. They should have scalded her, but still felt comparatively cool—eager for more, greedily drinking of her heat. In giving her power away, the fire inside her dampened a frightening amount. With a gasp, she let go and thrust her hands back.

The glowing of the bars began to fade, and was soon a low simmering color like . . . well, the demon, or the river. The color of red that

The Fires of December

every instinct warned her not to touch, but she'd been *holding* that metal just moments ago.

Experiment later, she thought. Right now, get out. She stood, then cupped her hands around only the latch to the door, letting the fire within her flood into the metal. She got it hot, then pushed the door forward until—like a heaved sigh—the lock distorted, bent, then snapped as it melted away entirely.

She stepped over the dropped bits of molten iron, worried they'd burn her, and entered the chill air of the dungeon corridor. There, she sucked in a deep breath.

"How does it feel?" the demon asked.

"Wonderful."

"Powerful?"

"Yes."

"Liberating?"

"Yes."

"That is what we want," the demon said. "Perhaps you shall be the one to give it to us."

She checked the other cells until she found one with a figure huddled on the cot inside. "Flint!" she hissed, causing him to stir. He turned blearily, visible only by the light of Beautiful's eyes, then sat up with a gasp. He was in the remnants of the suit he'd worn at the teahouse. There was blood on the white shirt, and the outfit—lacking the jacket—was ragged, even worse than hers.

"How?" he asked. (Having not overheard the whispered conversation between woman and demon.)

In response, she placed her hands on the lock of his cell and pushed out heat, making the metal glow. The fire within her dimmed further as she did so—from a great bonfire to an ember—and she began to feel cold, but it was enough. She was able to force the door open.

Flint made it to his feet, wobbling without his cane, and caught her in an embrace as she rushed into the cell. He held her fiercely

tight, and trembled, unable to speak, unable to move, for a moment of incredible warmth and intimacy amid the disaster.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I caused all of this."

"Never blame yourself," he said, "for the actions of evil people."

"We have to get away, and then stop what is coming, Flint. Drakes told me you were able to sneak into the palace without his knowledge. I assume, as spymaster, you had access to secret entrances of some sort."

"You assume correctly."

She pulled back, finally, from the embrace. "Maybe you could, um, show me one of them?"

He took her by the hand, leading her to step gingerly over the molten lock on the ground. He slipped out the door, then looked at Beautiful, lounging nearby.

"We going to talk about this?" Flint asked, gesturing.

"Um . . . later?"

"Later. All right. Later." Then, oddly, he sighed and slumped against the wall outside his cell.

"Flint?" she asked, taking his arm.

"I'm fine. They treated me rough, but didn't actually do any damage before I 'passed out' on them. It's just . . ." He looked to her. "I don't know if I can do this anymore. Forty years of dungeons, of being stabbed, occasionally poisoned. Of getting no sleep at night, of being a disheveled mess during the day. All for a city that doesn't care about me, and never has . . ."

"Just get us out," she said. "We'll talk about it after."

"Out. Right. You brought down two cell doors. You have any juice left?"

"Not much."

"Figured."

"You know a surprising amount about it."

"I know a surprising amount about a lot of things. It was my job."

The Fires of December

He took a deep breath. “Well, we can’t wait here for you to recover. Next chamber ahead is a guard room. Two soldiers—unless Geoffrim respects me, then there will be three. Door shouldn’t be locked; they need to get in here quickly. I’ll see what I can do. You stay back, all right? If I go down, try to run.”

She nodded, heart thundering as they approached the door. Flint glanced to her, then paused and squeezed her hand. Whatever had been growing between them, it now—remarkably—started to blossom. She was hesitant to call it love, not after such a short time. You didn’t use that word yet, if you were reasonable and rational.

Even if you felt it.

He let go of her hand reluctantly, then crouched, peering under the door. Maybe trying to spot who was beyond. He whispered a count-down before leaping to his feet and throwing the door open, spilling light into the hallway. December was momentarily blinded, but not Flint—who, she realized, had been using that light under the door to help his eyes adjust.

As her vision returned, she realized with horror that there were *four* guards. Flint dashed into the room, grabbing a knife from the table. The violence that followed was something to which December was completely unaccustomed. She’d seen death in some of its most nauseating genres—the plague wasn’t a *pretty* killer—and she’d seen the butchering of animals. But death isn’t necessarily violent, and violence doesn’t necessarily lead to death. The two certainly wave in passing at one another, but only sometimes shake hands.

Flint did his best to make them embrace. Knowing he was severely outnumbered, he used the expert tactic of trying to disorient his foes. He slammed the knife into the arm of one guard as he was rising, then kicked over the table, sending the room’s only lantern to the floor, spilling burning oil, and changing the scene into a flickering nightmare. He pulled the side sword from the sheath of the man he’d stabbed, but couldn’t finish the fellow off because another leapt





The Fires of December

at him. Though Flint still had the skill—impressive, all things considered—to fend this man off and even deliver a stab to the thigh, that was when the battle turned against him.



The two unwounded soldiers attacked him together with flashing blades. Flint was forced to retreat toward a corner, sweating and grunting. These kinds of exchanges wear a person out at frightening speed: If you've never been in one before, it would shock you how long a minute seems within the clash.



In the end, it wasn't the leg that did Flint in, though that certainly played a part. It wasn't even the odds against him, though if there had been only two men in the room, he would have won. No, it was the fact that he was in his sixties and his opponents were not. Age is the great thief of skill—no matter how good you are, the body or the mind will eventually go, and the master painter's vivid creations become scribbles on the wall.

December finally recovered, and—as always—read the situation well. She didn't fight. She'd never even seen a sword drawn, unless you counted the one over the hearth at the inn, but she could see Flint failing, and knew what it meant to be pressed against the wall, sweating, preparing a final stand.



"Beautiful," she hissed. "Can you make my eyes glow, like Petva's did?"

"Yes, but—"

"Do it!" she said, leaping into the room and pressing hands to the table, summoning the last sparks from the ember inside her. Strangely, the fire didn't want to go into the wood at first—why should it resist when the iron did not? Still, she managed to set the tabletop aflame in a pattern around her hands, and the dim light—courtesy of the spilled lantern—made her eyes glow powerfully.

"Stop!" she shouted with all the authority of a grandmother and the fresh lungs of youth. "Drop your weapons, or *die!*"

Soldiers turned horrified looks her direction, noting Beautiful, who

climbed onto the table beside the smoke and wisps of flame rising around December's hands. She correctly guessed, from the general unspoken fear around demons, that the people of the capital didn't know much about witchcraft—and that these men wouldn't have the faintest idea what she was capable of doing. Sure, she didn't either, but that doesn't really matter if you know how to project confidence and meet eyes with the right stare. (It helps when your hands are literally on fire.)

"Who dies," she said, "first?"

Two swords clanged to the ground.

"Bind the wounds of your friends," she commanded as Flint repositioned beside her, sword out, wary. He nodded to her as the two wounded soldiers received enough aid to keep them from dying. From there, Flint locked the four guards in a cell: disarmed, without keys, and huddling with wide eyes at December's glowing ones.

After they hurried back into the guard room and recovered the lantern with some oil remaining, he said, "Guess I should have let you go first, then hidden behind you."

"Flint," she said, hand to his arm as he checked the next hallway out. "You did wonderfully. There were *four of them*."

"Don't sugarcoat it," he grumbled. "I'm old, December. I need to remember that."

Considering how he'd acted earlier, she thought he wasn't likely to forget—if anything, he thought of it too much. However, she said nothing, for he seemed a little more upbeat as they moved through the basement without incident. In one hallway, he pulled a hidden lever behind a painting and opened a secret passage in the wall.

She put a hand to her lips. "Like in the stories?"

"The stories are like real life," he said, ushering her inside, Beautiful trailing along behind. "No king wants to be trapped in his palace during a siege, and there's always something he wants slipped in or

The Fires of December

out unseen. These tunnels aren't as extensive as the tales imply, but they'll do."

The inside was a lot dirtier than she'd have imagined, with bleak brickwork and an uneven floor. They'd have been in utter darkness without Beautiful and the recovered lantern, and it was so narrow, her shoulders occasionally scraped the walls. But Flint was right, it *would* do.

"We might actually pull this off," he said, leading her up some steps. "Up ahead, we'll veer right—left branch leads to the throne room, which is the exact place we don't want to be. We can slip out the garden way. So long as those guards below haven't been discovered, we'll be in good shape. From there . . ." He spoke more softly. "From there it becomes a problem. We're legitimate fugitives now, and both highly recognizable."

"We'll figure it out," she said.

"Any clues from that memory of yours about when the problems with the demon might start?"

"Best I was able to narrow it down, it came in the next few weeks. That . . . might have been accelerated by recent events, though."

He nodded, looking determined. She rested a hand on his arm, causing him to turn toward her.

"Could we go to Duke Kird? Explain? You said you thought he'd be a better ruler."

"Maybe. In Duke Kird I found someone I could maybe respect. One of the dangers in sending your best spy to enemy courts: Sometimes they like what they see there." He continued walking. "The king suspected that I was shifting allegiances. Rather, Geoffrim suspected, which is basically the same thing. That's why they were so eager to move against me . . . and perhaps because they knew I'd be absolutely against any attempt to release the demon."

They walked for a time before he stopped her with a raised hand,

then listened at a specific spot on the wall. Finger to lips, he pressed his eye to a peephole. He let her do the same next, whispering about how the guards still standing at post indicated that their escape hadn't been discovered.

He moved them on a little farther, showing her how to step in an extra soft way, before speaking again. "We can talk in this next section, if we're quiet. The walls are built thick, insulated against sound, to hide possible troop movements. We often had spy meetings in this portion, where I'd update the king before slipping back out without anyone knowing I'd even visited."

"All right," she said, still whispering just in case.

"So from signs inside," he continued, "we're in good shape. It's possible what we've done won't be discovered until the guard change, which could be hours away. By then, we'll be well on our way out of the city."

"On our way to try to persuade Duke Kird?"

"He still hates me. I'm worried that will merely get us thrown into another prison."

"We *have* to do something, though. Try to stop what is coming. It's our moral duty."

He grunted, then smiled, glancing at her. "You remind me of someone."

"Who?"

"Myself, from long ago. Thought I'd be a knight captain, maybe lead one of the cannonades, do something valiant and Valorous. Turned out I was much better at spying than I was at leading men."

"Spying can still be valiant and Valorous," she said.

"Say that after I teach you how to poison someone."

"Please don't. I've suffered enough complaints about my cooking as it stands."

He chuckled, continuing on, limping along the narrow corridor. December walked with him, urgent, but knowing she couldn't hurry

The Fires of December

him—he'd been through too much recently to rush. Perhaps she had been too.

He seemed to grow more solemn as they continued, quiet, his eyes distant. He almost tripped over Beautiful as they walked, as he wasn't watching his feet.

"Are you thinking about her?" December asked. "The duke's daughter?"

"No," he said. "I'm thinking about you. Trying to decide if . . . any of this is right." He looked to her. "It's what I want, but I made a mistake last time, and I regret it."

"This isn't the same."

"No. It's not. I can feel that." He paused in the tunnel, resting one arm against the wall to catch his breath. Ahead was a little round nook in the tunnel. A table had been set out here, old, splintered—perhaps where he and the king had taken meetings. Beautiful sniffed about it, like a genuine cat.

Flint turned toward her. "I don't want to make a different mistake, December. That of not being honest. I *did* lead Melsi on. I laughed. I flirted. Not because I thought anything would come of it, but because it's what a life rolling dice and charming courts teaches you to do. I didn't realize . . . well, how far she was taking it. What she thought, what she wanted. My own stupid fault. I'm supposed to be the smart one. The clever spy. Blind as a newborn pup . . ."

"Never underestimate," December said, "the appeal of an older man with exquisite facial hair."

"You laugh, and I appreciate that. But tell me it doesn't bother you."

"It does," December admitted, voicing a pain inside of her.

"I'm glad, because it should." He met her eyes. "I'll promise you two things. The first is that I stopped, once I realized what was happening. I told you this before, but you need to know I mean it. I left, and I vowed to never make that mistake again."

She nodded. "What made you finally do so?"

He looked back down the tunnel, and seemed even older than his age, suddenly. Face lost to gloom. “Melsi told me that she knew I’d always protect her. That *struck* me, December, because I realized I didn’t love her. I was fond of her, but . . . I fear now that I just wanted to feel young again. And Melsi? I can’t speak for her emotions, but what *I* saw in her eyes wasn’t love. It was the look of a girl who wanted a teacher and protector.”

“And . . . how do you view me?”

He met December’s gaze, then smiled, and she swore she could see light returning to his eyes. “Well, it’s probably a good sign that I keep turning around expecting to find an old woman.”

“Because every woman wants to hear that you habitually forget what she looks like.”

“If it keeps happening, I hear there’s a certain newspaper I could grab a copy of . . .”

She smacked him on the arm. “You have *no idea* how indecent that picture is.”

“You’re right, I don’t know. Because *somebody* got me *arrested*.”

“I apologized for that!”

“Well, I’ve got a subscription anyway, so a copy is waiting for me at home . . .”

“Which we’ll promptly *burn* once we’re out of this.”

“Yes, of course. Though, being a gentleman, I’ll need to buy up every copy in the city.” His eyes twinkled. “To make sure no one else can get one. So you can be only mine.”

“So . . . are we going to do this?”

The twinkle faded and Flint’s grin left him as he winced in pain and leaned against the wall. “I don’t know. Every time it feels right, I’m reminded of this leg, and this body. Ten years from now—hell, some mornings I think it will be five—I’ll really start losing strength. This leg will keep me in bed. I’ll stop being slow and start being an invalid. Any woman with me, she’d change from lover to nursemaid. I wouldn’t

The Fires of December

do that to Melsi—not when I knew I didn’t love her, and suspected she didn’t love me. It’s part of why I ran away.” He grunted. “Well, limped.”

She beamed at him.

In return, he scowled. “Do *not* look at me like that. You know now that I had ample opportunity to stop it before I broke her heart, and I didn’t move quickly enough. In the end, I had to return to a city where the king suspected I was a traitor, leaving a court where I’d alienated the duke by rejecting his daughter. He *wanted* us to get together, figured it would keep me loyal.”

“Sometimes, Flint, there are no good choices. And sometimes it takes a lifetime to realize that. My second husband? I married him for his money.”

He frowned at her.

“I was destitute,” she explained. “I left Bark, my first husband, for hitting me—but then he became mayor and made my life hell. I found a way out. The only way available.”

Flint nodded slowly.

“Matin and I were intimate, at the end,” she told him, “but I knew—I *knew*—he didn’t genuinely love me. We’d be together one night. The next day I’d spot him, sitting alone in his study with his dead wife’s portrait. Crying. I never said anything, nor did I interrupt him, because at least I wasn’t cold. At least I wasn’t alone.”

He turned to her, and she could see how those words resonated. “I told you earlier there are two promises I’d make you. Well, the second is this. I’ve cheated at cards, at dice, and at life itself—but I’ve never cheated on a woman. I’ve had a rough life, and the details of that are yours to ask me about, once we are free. You might be shocked at the things I’ve done in the name of the crown, but if we decide eventually to be together, I want to promise you that you don’t need to worry about my eyes wandering.”

She stepped toward him. “So, are we *going to do this*?”

"I . . ." He cleared his throat, suddenly emotional. "December, I'm a gambling man."

"And I'm a gamble?"

"Of the best kind. The kind where any man with half a wit knows to shove every chip he has into the bet, because while it's not a sure thing, if it works . . . Oh, *if it works* . . ."

"It *will*," she whispered. "We'll make it."

"I want to believe it, December. One part of my place in the duke's court, I don't regret. That was realizing I needed to do something to help put a better king on the throne. To openly become a hero, not some shadowed poisoner pretending to be a dandy. I imagined . . . I imagined having a home. December . . . when the duke and I began planning real change, it was nice to be wanted. To be *needed*."

"I know."

"We should go. Every moment here is one where those guards could be discovered down below."

"I know."

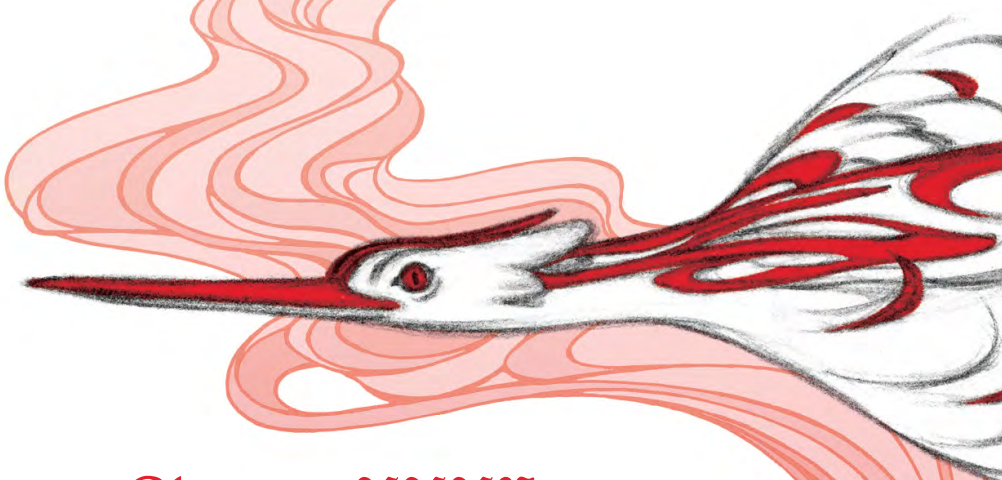
Neither moved.

"What," he said, "do you want? What do you *need*?"

"*You* know," she whispered.

It took him three torturous seconds to decide before he nodded, and they grabbed one another. Hands around her waist, he turned her with the grace of a dancer and pressed her against the brickwork with his body.

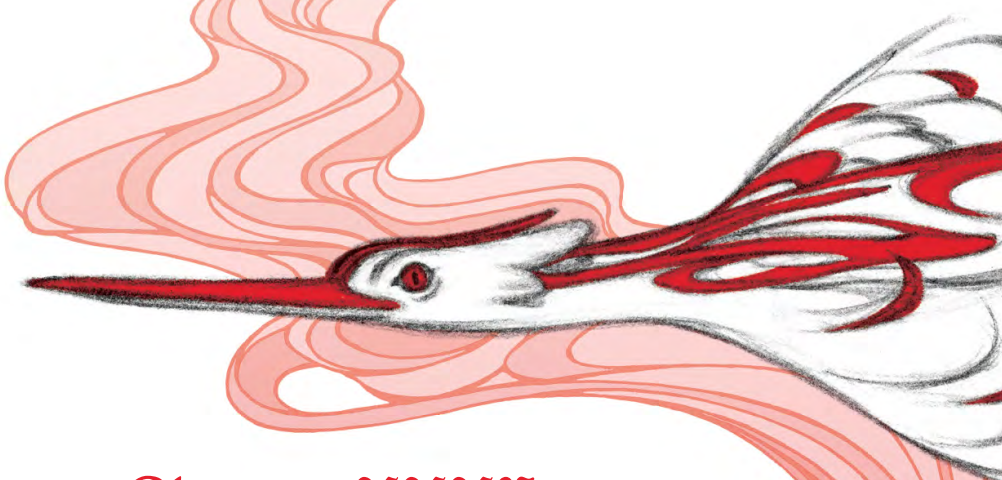
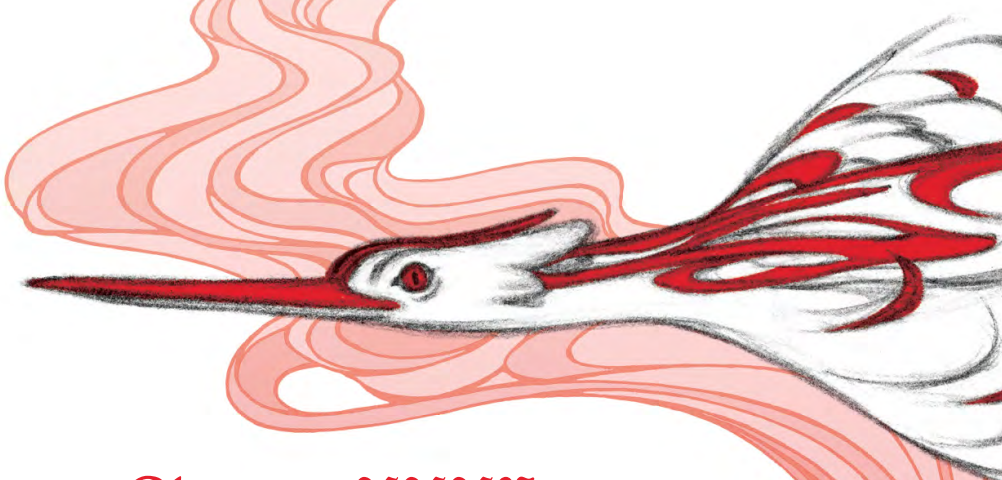
Then, *finally*, they kissed.



Chapter XXXV



It was glorious. The rough whiskers against her skin, the heat of his lips seeming to restore some of what she'd lost to the fires earlier, the blossoming of something she'd once thought dead within her. A passion, a *hunger*, as she pushed back against him not in contest, but in eagerness. She raised one leg, wrapped it around him, forcing him even closer, holding him tight, and put both hands into his hair to pull his head to hers, as if to make them one.



This was what she'd wanted. This was what she'd *needed* all those years. The animal passion of it. The force of the lips and racing heart and heaving breath of a man who wasn't just with her because she was *there*, but because she was *right*. Bark had been passion without affection, Matin the opposite. One had picked her, she had picked the other, but neither had been what she wanted.

Flint . . . from the first moment when he'd seen through her act, when he'd talked with the air of someone who had actually *lived*. When he'd laughed with irreverence and sparked her mind with words that propriety forbade in Rivershore, a place where she never fit even after lopping off parts of herself.

He was what she'd wanted ever since he'd talked about being cold in the same way she was. Now he became warm in the same way she desired . . .

"We should get moving," Flint said, then kissed her again.

"World's close to ending," she replied, then kissed him back.

"You're both," Beautiful said from the floor, "very strange."

"If you think this is strange," December said, head on Flint's shoulder as she tried to squeeze the breath from him, "you have not been watching humans very well."

"What makes you think," Beautiful said with a yawn, "I can't find it strange all the time?"

"Is this it?" she asked, closing her eyes, breathing Flint in. "Is this real?"

"It is."

"I keep worrying it will vanish. Like a life I once knew. Flint, is this *real*?"

"Hold me," he said. "And know it's real."

She held him, and she accepted it. Him. For what it was: the word she dared not speak. But he—like always—broke those conventions.

"Love," Flint whispered.

The Fires of December

She opened her eyes, and found his head tipped to the side, gazing at her with fondness.

He raised his finger and pointed at her. "We need to move now, love. No more distractions until we save the kingdom. We keep focused. We do what needs to be done."

She nodded.

It was at that precise moment when his clothing melted.

(I warned you it happens sometimes. He'd been locked in prison, given no chance to change. The shirt and trousers had held out quite well, considering, but it had finally been too long. They gave up, dripping free, leaving him in only a pair of tight shorts as a swimsuit.)

He looked down, then pulled back. "Well, that's somewhat un-heroic."

"It was river clothing?" she asked, putting a hand to her mouth to hide a smile.

"Do you know," he said, "how hard it is to get a *properly* tailored suit in this city? Everyone designs them, but no one makes them. River clothing feels so much better than anything else, regardless."

"Aren't you forbidden, though?"

"Love," (her heart fluttered) "I'm a *spy*. Getting into a river isn't terribly difficult." Still, he blushed at the way she regarded him. "What?" he said.

"You didn't get the note, it seems," she said. "Old men are supposed to be flabby and weak."

"This," he grumbled, "is what it takes at my age to have even a *chance* in a fight. You saw how well that went earlier." He glared at her. "You done?"

"Just trying to remember," she mused, "what you said the other night in the teahouse. 'A fantastic view deserves appreciation'? You think I can get someone to sketch you? I'd like a few copies."

He met her eyes, then laughed. "All right, fine. I deserve it."

“Unfortunately,” she added, again quoting him, “as fun as it is to ogle you . . .”

“We have work to do,” he said, and took a deep breath, seeming recovered and ready to walk again after his short rest. “Let’s quiet down, as the next part is the ministers’ wing. The walls are thinner, and we might be heard if we talk. From there, we can slip out the back.”

December nodded, joining him, quite proud of herself for how short an ogle she indulged in. But . . . well, she was finally accepting the part of herself that had been whispering during this second life what Beautiful had outright said: that perhaps she’d given up too much of herself for the town, for the kingdom, for the people she loved.

This man in front of her was something she could actually have for herself. Selfishly.

(You’ll forgive her, in this awakening, some reckless infatuation. Yes, they’d not known each other long, and that’s normally a warning flag in stories, because most similar stories are about the young, who are—sorry—stupid. As you age and the games grow stale, it’s a little easier to pick out a good match. Or maybe that’s just what we tell ourselves to excuse the rush that comes with knowing there are fewer tomorrows than yesterdays.)

December followed Flint along the next portion until he again stopped and cocked his head. A second later, she heard it too, and gasped despite herself. Because that was the king’s voice. And *Geoffrim’s*.

Flint immediately pulled her close and put a hand to her mouth in a gentle but firm maneuver. The voices on the other side of the wall were getting closer.

“. . . worry deeply about the wall guard, Majesty,” Geoffrim was saying. “The palace soldiers are loyal to me, but many on the wall were Drakes’s men. I . . . wouldn’t be surprised if they refused to fire on Duke Kird if he were to get wind of our troubles and press forward.”

The Fires of December

"My, my," the king said, voice nervous. "What do you suggest?"

"Purges, unfortunately," Geoffrim said, calm and precise. "We must remove the upper command structure of the wall guard swiftly, at night, and cut off this beast's head before it can snap at us."

"That would be a job best done by the Minister of Espionage," the king said with a loud sigh. "Too bad, too bad . . . Execute him. Today, Geoffrim."

"But, Majesty—"

"*Today*. I am king, and you do what I say. Don't get uppity on me again. That said, I give authorization for your purges as well. Make the throne safe."

"It shall be done, Majesty," Geoffrim said. His voice, barely audible through the wall as they walked outside, gave December a deep chill. He sounded so clinical when discussing the execution of soldiers, and she was reminded of him standing in the shadow outside her cell. Seeming more insect than man.

"What if it's not enough, Majesty?" Geoffrim asked. "The duke is growing more and more bold."

"We can handle him, can't we? What if . . . What if I married the daughter?"

This time, Flint gasped—and December obligingly pressed her hand to his mouth while he still covered hers. He met her gaze, and she could feel him smile beneath her hand.

"I doubt," Geoffrim said, "Duke Kird would have it, from the letters we've received. Majesty . . . if they do attack, we cannot hold them. Not with the cannonades running out of functional demonstone. We need a backup, for your security."

"Can we run?"

"You think he won't give chase?" Geoffrim pressed. "I worry that you are in explicit mortal peril, Majesty, and I am at a loss about what to do."

Silence. Followed by an unnerving phrase from the king.

"The demon," he said. "It is time."

"Majesty, I fear it will destroy you. It is just too dangerous."

"What if," the king said, carefully steered to the conclusion, "I were to give the phrases to someone else? Let them try? Drakes and Flint proved traitors, but . . . Petva has been studying demons, has she not? And she is likely to be my heir. The passphrases are hers by birthright."

December could practically *hear* the satisfaction in Geoffrim's voice as he (having subtly encouraged this outcome) replied, "I suppose that the power is a weapon the Prophet intended us to use—why else leave us with the ability to release it? Let me confer with your niece. Perhaps, Majesty, this idea has merit."

"You don't need to confer with anyone," the king said. "I will consider and decide. It is my plan, after all. Danger around every corner. Always watching, always listening . . . Secure the city walls first, Geoffrim. Petva and I will talk after."

His voice retreated as he said it, and Flint relaxed his hand from December's mouth, so she did likewise. They locked eyes, realizing just how close they were to one another again, and this time, him wearing barely a stitch . . .

A cough from the corridor outside made them both jump. Flint steeled himself, then led her to another set of peepholes, where he shielded the lantern and glanced through. He let her go next, and she saw that Geoffrim had lingered after the king had left.

As if in direct contrast to the power and control he'd exuded when interrogating December, he now slumped with one hand on the wall, the other holding a handkerchief to his mouth. When he lowered the cloth, it was stained by blood. He stared at this a terribly long time, then his face grew grim. In this expression, December understood. It was one thing to think about your mortality as some far-off event, inevitable but ignorable. It was quite another to know you were approaching that cliff in a carriage with no driver. She'd been there. She *knew* that feeling.

The Fires of December

Lord Geoffrim was dying. The one who pulled the Ever-Slaying Sword would be healed of all infirmities.

It seemed to her (and I agree) that Geoffrim legitimately thought he had other reasons to take the sword. The demonstone *was* running out, and the Prophet *had* said they might need to take the power to control the demon in other ways. The throne *was* in a precarious position, and Geoffrim *did* have confirmation (from her vision) that someone was likely to pull the sword soon, even if he did not. (He went so far, in a moment of imagined piety, to tell himself that Valor must have sent the vision to December specifically to give him tools to fight the demon once it was free.)

In this, he had done the delicate dance of all who ignore their conscience through justification and rationalization. He told himself that what he did was for the ultimate good of the kingdom, and that the benefit to him was secondary. It is so very easy to pretend when you have so much to gain. She stepped back to give Flint another look, profoundly disturbed, admitting there was a part of her, when she'd lain on her deathbed, that could have imagined doing anything to get a few more years, even a few more days . . . She'd been ready, and not, both at once.

Her eyes were drawn to Beautiful, still sitting on the floor, gazing up with those wide eyes that saw too much. He nodded, and she heard his voice in her head.

He seeks survival at any cost. It is the nature of all beings to do so.

A moment later, Flint seized her arm, his eyes going wide. He took up the lantern and began ushering them forward. Her confusion was answered as voices loudly sounded from the hallway outside. "Lord Geoffrim, sir! Something happened in the dungeons. The prisoners are free!"



Chapter XXXVI



hey'll be in the hidden passages," Geoffrim shouted from the hallway outside, voice fading as Flint and December moved through the passage. "Quickly! I know the entrances."

Though Drakes hadn't known how Flint might get in and out, Geoffrim was not so ignorant. She initially hoped that a quick flight would outpace them, but "quick" wasn't an option for Flint's leg. He could do something of a hopping shuffle to go faster, but it looked



extremely tiring—and wasn't even as fast as a basic jog. Soon voices echoed in the tunnel behind them. December glanced back, anxious, feeling powerless to help Flint, who kept soldiering on—but with increasingly difficult breathing. When they reached a branch in the tunnel, the first they'd encountered, he pointed to the right.

"You go on ahead," he said. "I'll catch up."

She turned toward the other branch. "You said earlier this would lead to the throne room?"

"No quarter for us there," he said, pushing her to the right. "Go. I'll be fine."

"You're a good liar, Flint, but not that good."

He glanced over his shoulder, then leveled his stolen sword toward their still-unseen pursuers. "Best a man can do, sometimes, is die fighting for something. On with you, love. You know this is the only way."

"No."

"Look, we don't have—"

"No," she said. "Flint, Geoffrim wants me alive—needs me alive. You will be executed immediately. So you go."

"I . . ." His brow creased with abject sorrow. "I can't. I—"

"Tell me, which of us can accomplish more if they remain free? The grandmother who's been in the city barely a week or the *Royal Minister of Espionage*? Listen, they'll have taken my friends—Amaal, Tamartha, Dmitrovik. Someone needs to save them and stop the impending disaster. You can do that. I can't."

"He'll treat you harshly, and you certainly don't have the fire left to fight him. I *can't* just walk away."

"Flint," she said, taking his face in her hands. "Let me choose, let me sacrifice. Besides, I have a plan."

"I . . . suppose you are capable . . ."

"Even with a knife at my throat," she said, with a smile. "Whether it was the flat of the blade or not."

"So you did guess that was me! I kept wondering . . ." He sighed,

The Fires of December

then kissed her and handed her the lantern. “I can make my way in the dark. I’ve been through this tunnel more times than I can count. I will be back for you.”

With that, he started immediately down the corridor to the right, turning a corner and vanishing.

“Beautiful,” she said to her demon. “Amaal once told me that creatures like you can take any shape they please.”

“Within reason,” he said.

“Can you look like Flint?”

“Not so well I’ll pass more than a cursory glimpse.”

“That’s all we need,” she said, deliberately waiting as lights began to show down the tunnel. She needed to give Flint as much time as possible, which meant making the soldiers think he was with her.

Beautiful changed, his shape melting and re-forming, not unlike the shaping of clothes from the demon’s blood. The resulting Flint was not convincing at all. Too short—Beautiful noted he could only get so big—and with a demon cat’s face. However, he gave a good limp when he walked, and the clothing was right, the same dirty suit Flint had been wearing earlier, not glowing at all.

December waited just long enough for the first soldiers to appear behind her. She gave a purposeful yelp, and a soldier pointed. She and “Flint” hurried down the left corridor, deeper into the walls of the palace. They could move far faster than they had before, with Beautiful abandoning most of the limp as they ran. It seemed her ruse had worked, for the calls of the soldiers followed. She didn’t know if any had been sent the other way, but she prayed not as she . . . reached another intersection?

She picked a direction, but soon hit another branch. She’d assumed the way would be straight, as it had been so far, but was soon lost in a maze of hidden corridors, doing her best to dodge soldiers and keep them occupied while she formulated a simple, if risky, plan that required finding the throne room.

“Are we going in circles on purpose?” Beautiful asked as they heard soldiers down one path, then doubled back.

“Circles?”

“Yes,” he said, sounding infuriatingly bored.

“How can you tell in this maze?”

“Maze? It’s just a few turns.”

Well, she’d wasted as much time as she could probably manage—she heard the sounds of stomping feet from all directions. “Can you get me into the throne room?”

He gave her a side-eyed glance, obviously trying to decide how far he should go in helping her. It was a distinctly unnerving look to come from the malformed humanoid shape he’d adopted.

“This way,” he said, leading her to a door like the one that they’d used to enter these tunnels.

She nodded, steeling herself, and he seemed to sense enough of what she was planning to drop the shape of “Flint.” He shrank, shivered, and his clothing bled back to painted fur. “Ahhh . . . That’s so much better.”

She threw the lever, and the door sprang open—leading straight into the king’s throne room, where he sat on his chair in a costume that was strikingly like a giant egg. (Yes, a giant egg. Yes, like a restaurant mascot. Here it was clearly seen as fashionable, because he was the king.) He was holding court, and didn’t appear to have heard about the escape or the frantic search, considering his bored posture.

It made sense that the throne room would have a passage, in case the king needed a private exit, but it felt like a lapse in security as she strode into the chamber, Beautiful prancing along beside her. People backed away, gasping, muttering. Even the king stood and pointed, half shocked, half enraged within his round, white costume. She didn’t feel intimidating, not wearing the red velvet dress that was scuffed and dirtied from her imprisonment. But before the king could

The Fires of December

speak, December summoned what little heat she had rebuilt, and set one of the tapestries on fire with a touch.

“I,” she announced, “would like to invoke the king’s covenant with witches. I have named and fed this demon, accidentally bonding him—and he is extremely evil and ferocious.”

She glanced toward Beautiful, who stared, confused. She nodded him forward, and he did a little prance, tail in the air—looking anything *but* ferocious. However, the mere fact that she was willing to claim familiarity with a demon seemed enough for the terrified court. A few soldiers leapt to defend the king from Beautiful, who sat on his hindquarters and started licking one paw.

“Well?” December said, walking from the smoldering tapestry—which a servant pulled down and stamped out. “You have a deal in place, don’t you? People like me can serve the city in order to escape punishment?”

The king settled in his seat, peering toward her over the shoulders of the guards. “You foretold terrible things about me, foreigner.”

“I still can’t explain what I saw, Majesty,” she said. “But I have a demon now, and it encouraged me to escape the dungeons. I’m worried about what it might make me do next, so please grant me your mercy and make me one of your servants.”

She hoped that wasn’t laying it on too thickly, but the king did seem to consider—and “thickly” seemed to be the proper modifier when applied to him.

She paused, read the room—and the king’s previous interactions, overheard in the hallway—and made a guess. “If it’s a choice between the dungeon and working with the hexers to better the kingdom, I will choose the latter. Though I realize Lord Geoffrim won’t like it . . .”

“Geoffrim is not king. I am.” His eyes flicked to Beautiful. “That is a large demon. Powerful. I can use you, but no more talk of these lies you have seen. If you complete a contract with your demon as required,

and do good work with the hexers, I may decide to forgive your other crimes. For now, consider this a probation, not full clemency.”

She bowed her head before him, and then held her hands to the sides. A guard grabbed her none too gently, and locked her with chains; this time, though, they had a strange, soft, off-white material coating the outside.

(Rubber. Yes it melts, but it’s a poor conductor—which is relevant to how quickly a witch can move large amounts of heat out of her. Burning through the rubber to get to the metal slows a witch down, which is a hint at why their understanding of plastics was more advanced than you might expect compared to the rest of their technology. You thought that wouldn’t tie back in, didn’t you?)

Geoffrim belatedly arrived from a side corridor—but by then, December was already being escorted out. She had imagined his frustrated conversation with the king at losing control of her, but instead, she caught a glimpse of him nodding to himself, then lacing his fingers and watching her go.

He might be satisfied with this, actually, she thought. Though he’ll undoubtedly be angry that Flint got away. If he did . . . Valor, send that he did.

With her among the hexers, Geoffrim would still have access to her, and she’d basically be imprisoned there. For her goals, though, this imprisonment would have one key advantage: She’d be among people who could explain some of what it *meant* to be a witch.

So she walked with head high, knowing that drawings of her in chains would soon grace the covers of the papers. Quite the feat, to make the top headline two days in a row. As the prison carriage hauled her off, up the ramps toward the heart of the Megalith, she worried about Flint, and if he’d managed to escape despite his limp.

She would not know anytime soon, as the hole in the Megalith’s chest eventually swallowed her carriage. Beautiful, huddled on the floor, unsarcastically began to whimper. Soon, she arrived back at the heart—this time not as an honored guest on tour, but as a slave.



Chapter XXXVII



nce unloaded, December let her attention linger on the heart and the sword piercing it—both bathed in the soft ruddy glow of the crystalline flesh around them. The guards hastened her toward the tunnel with the hexers. The five men showed trepidation, as if she were a viper, herding her out in front of them by means of a few spears. Beautiful tried



to stay in the carriage, but they were linked now, for December felt a tugging on her soul, and he was forced to slink along behind.

The soldiers split their attention, watching her and keeping useless spears pointed at him until they reached the small village tucked away within the tunnel complex. Though evening had descended, a small group of robed people were up and having tea, the kind with herbs for a relaxing rest, with a smell of mint and lilac. They stood and gathered to face the soldiers, and December noticed one woman at the front, with silvery hair down to her chin and a face that had been worn by age into smooth, sagging skin.

December was certain the woman—named Weonim—recognized her as Flint’s accomplice. Weonim seemed their leader, and her hand went to her chest in horror as she briefly appeared to worry that December had revealed their treasonous meetings with Flint. Her expression turned questioning as the soldiers freed December’s hands and roughly shoved her forward.

“Another for you, *witch*,” a soldier said. “See that she is properly watched.”

December looked up through snarled hair she hadn’t brushed since . . . Had it only been *that morning* when she’d gone to petition for Flint’s life? It felt like an eternity, and she was the expert, having lived over half a century in one minute. She looked to the hexers, worried that they would be angry at her for interrupting their seclusion.

“Oh, you poor child,” Weonim said, hurrying forward and embracing December. “It must have been quite a day.”

The next hour could have been relaxing, had she not been worried for Flint—instead, she found it bemusing as the hexers (thirteen women, five men, and one who preferred to be called neither) incessantly *mothered* her. They force-fed her sandwiches when they found she hadn’t eaten since breakfast. They ransacked their things for a clean dress that would fit, since they wore ordinary clothing beneath

The Fires of December

their robes. They hugged her and told her the worst part was over, and that they understood how difficult being captured could be.

Eventually, they gave her space alone to enjoy some evening tea at a table near where she'd observed Flint, while hovering and watching to make certain she was emotionally well. She wasn't, but they didn't need to know that. She found herself genuinely appreciating the treatment—even an old lady could use some mothering now and then. She didn't sip the tea, but held it, feeling the fires inside her slowly restore themselves.

Soon Weonim slipped into the chair opposite her at the small table. "You really should sleep, child."

"There isn't time for sleep right now, Elder," December said, using the title they'd called the woman—who was old enough to deserve it, being around December's age, maybe even a few years older.

"It might seem that way," Weonim said, holding her own tea, "but life here is not so terrible as you might have imagined, and time in excess is not something we lack. Tonight, rest will ease your mind."

December didn't reply, as she was growing tired of explaining what had happened to her. Tired of looking for validation, or explanation, or agreement. Tired of wondering how real she should treat her lived experience, how much she should bend to society's perception of her.

"What will actually ease my mind," December said, "are some explanations, Elder. I promise you, if I try to sleep now, my mind will buzz and buzz and buzz, and I will still be wide-eyed four hours from now."

Weonim set her teacup on the table and turned it in her fingers, then finally nodded. "I've had those same nights."

"Then help me understand. I saw hovering lights over your shoulders when I snuck in here before. Are those demons?"

"That is what happens to demons once our contract is forced upon

them.” She raised her hand, and a small glowing object—the size of a marble, with rough crystalline protrusions—came obediently from her pocket and hovered over her hand.

“How?” December said.

“It is the only way they’re safe,” Weonim explained. “They cannot speak in this form, and therefore cannot tempt the souls of the people who instruct them.”

“That’s . . . That’s *terrible*.”

“You might think so at first, but this is how we—both hexer and demon—must survive. You may grow a fire inside you now, but like any fire, it can consume and destroy. A demon in this marble state can only go so far, and while this limits our powers, it prevents our souls from becoming fuel. We will show you what must be done. By the king’s orders, child.”

“I . . . I can see why it’s done, I suppose. But I assure you: Beautiful will not agree to this.”

“Your demon has no choice, child,” Weonim said, looking to where Beautiful hid in a shadowed portion beneath a table. Even his eyes were turned away; she could see only the glow of the pattern beneath his fur. “They crave our attention, the chance to feast upon our essence. They want the bond, but once they begin the process, that very bond gives you power over them.”

She waved to the side, then whispered to one of the hexers who responded to her call. In moments they brought December a sheet of paper with instructions: words to speak that would crush and condense the demon into one of those small glowing crystals. They were simple, straightforward, and Weonim assured her she needed but speak them and mean them.

“Right now,” the woman explained, “only your power over that demon is keeping you alive. The king could, and would, have you beheaded in a *moment* if you didn’t actually have a bond. People caught flirting with the idea? They can be exiled or imprisoned. The law even

The Fires of December

justifies their execution, and I've known it to happen. This paper is your lifeline."

"I . . . see," December said, holding the paper. "But is there not another way?"

Weonim looked down, studying the shifting pattern of leaf remnants in her tea.

"I know of someone in the court," December said carefully, "who has a demon, but one not like yours, not crushed into a little sphere, but in the shape of a snake. I'm led to believe that *she* thinks she can control even the Megalith's demon."

Weonim snorted softly. "She's playing a dangerous game, then. The demon will tempt her to go further and further, and if she loses control for a moment, it could end up destroying her completely. It is said that a long time ago, people knew better how to maintain the bond without being threatened by it, but even the Prophet warned against that. I am the most accomplished here—at least I was when they caught me—and I *might* have dared keep a smaller demon without a strict contract, but something larger? The Megalith itself? The ancients studied their whole lives, with access to mentors and books long lost, and even *they* are said to have frequently died from their bonds. No, the only path for you is here, with us." She tapped the paper again. "Maybe we should have you begin tonight."

She seemed worried, and had likely encountered many a young person, newly caught, with similar questions. December appreciated the woman's kindly way, but . . . age could make you an inflexible pillar—a stone that has stood so long in one place, defied so many winds, that it doesn't realize it has become the thing others needed to defy. Nothing is more orthodox than a person who has spent their entire life reinforcing the same beliefs; the questioning part of the mind will wither over time.

For all her gentle, motherly love, Weonim was no ally. December had expected in the hexers kindred spirits—and they were, because

they were the remnants of rebels who had been smothered. But taken in by the system and forced for so long to conform, they unwittingly became its enforcers.

December found others gathering. Not looming like predators, but eager, with an expectant force of peer pressure. Weonim nodded toward Beautiful in those shadows.

“I will have power over the demon if I speak these words?” December said.

“Absolute power. Yes.”

That was useful to understand. Taking a demon and making it impotent was essentially what the Prophet had done; while it seemed a terrible fate to be rendered silent and passive, was that not better than letting the kingdom die? Paper in hand, she walked over and knelt to the softly glowing, crystalline ground where Beautiful huddled beneath the table.

He turned his molten eyes toward her, but did not leave his pitiful crouch. “I told you,” he whispered. “I told you this would destroy me.”

“Yet you did it anyway,” she said.

“I couldn’t . . . couldn’t help myself . . .”

“Your impulses are terrible,” she said, leaning down and taking his head in her hands. It felt furry, but warm like the blood of the river, beyond the heat of an ordinary body.

“It is,” he said, closing his eyes, growing tense as he braced himself, “our nature.”

“Go free,” December whispered.

Those eyes broke open again.

“They said I have control over you,” she said. “Well, I let you go. Run. Escape.”

“Why?” he said. “It will take your power away.”

She smiled. “I could never destroy something so Beautiful as you,” she said. “Quickly now, before they realize I’m not saying the words they gave me.”

The Fires of December

Snap.

The heat she'd been nurturing extinguished within her, leaving her cold. Those distant lights in her eyes remained, the gift of her mother, but the bond was no more. Beautiful cocked his head, then hesitantly pulled out of her hands. Somehow his eyes went even wider.

"It is called," December whispered, "mercy. And I am sorry you have never known it before now."

The demon bolted, moving with a swiftness even a real cat could never have managed. A darting blur of crimson fur and glowing molten light that leaped for the nearby river and vanished into it.

A moment later, Weonim seized December by the arm and hauled her to her feet. "Idiot. We'll never get you another demon in time before they do their next inspection. They'll take you."

"Thank you," December said, turning to look her in the eyes, "for your advice regardless."

"I can't believe you . . . You . . ."

Weonim took the full force of the *stare*, then wilted and let go. It was bolstering for December to realize it still worked now and then.

Weonim backed away to the others, talking quietly with them. It seemed they wouldn't turn her out immediately. They, again, weren't bad people. They were survivors with scars, and sometimes that tissue runs deep. They discussed—despite what Weonim had said—how to get December another demon. *After* some stern lectures on what was in her best interest.

December listened, and was grateful, but also annoyed. Her master-stroke of reaching people who could help her learn to use her powers now seemed far less brilliant. In hindsight, it made sense that she would find less help here than she'd assumed. The king would never have allowed such a group to persist if it were a breeding ground of dangerous teachings. Most of these likely had only a cursory understanding of their powers. They had been hexers for years, and the extent of what they could do was limited to being glorified mining tools.

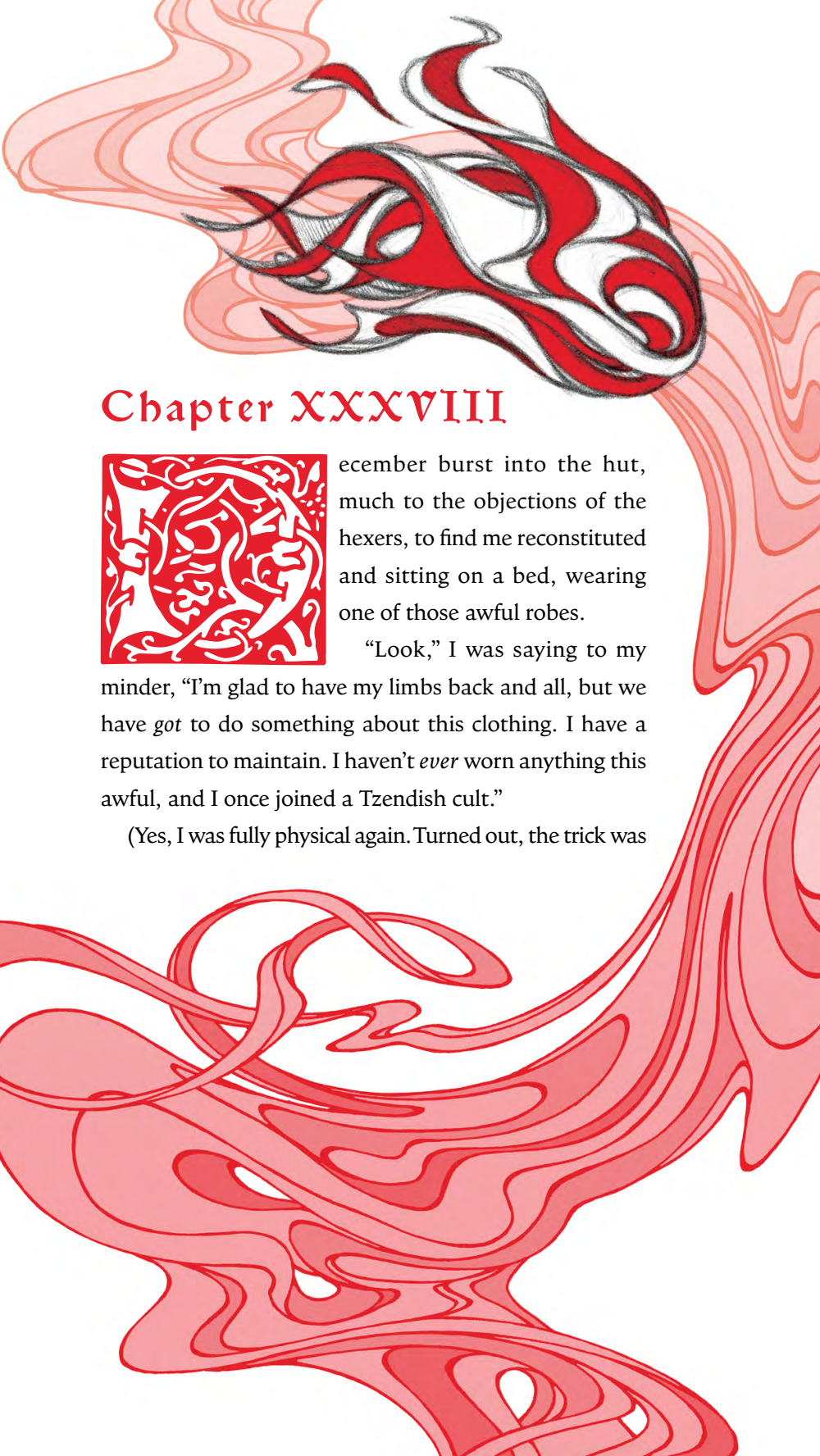
Brandon Sanderson

Releasing Beautiful had not been part of her plan, but she could neither let him consume her soul *nor* consume his. She had come here for information, but she now doubted that there was anything she could learn from the hexers. Perhaps that was why, she thought, Geoffrim hadn't been too worried about her being taken here.

December had reached a solid dead end. At least, that was what she thought until they put her in a hut with another plate of sandwiches (the mothering would persist until morale improved) and she heard something from the next hut over. A glorious, sonorous, *wonderful* voice, possessing all virtue and melody, inspiring in its very essence.

I mean, she might not have described it that way. I never asked her, so we'll have to go with my presumptions.

Because *I* was in the hut next door.



Chapter XXXVIII



December burst into the hut, much to the objections of the hexers, to find me reconstituted and sitting on a bed, wearing one of those awful robes.

“Look,” I was saying to my minder, “I’m glad to have my limbs back and all, but we have *got* to do something about this clothing. I have a reputation to maintain. I haven’t *ever* worn anything this awful, and I once joined a Tzendish cult.”

(Yes, I was fully physical again. Turned out, the trick was

to starve the fire feeding on my power—like smothering a real fire. I’d managed to suppress my healing and the access to the Spiritual Realm that usually fuels it, and that dampened the flame enough for me to extinguish it. It’s all very technical, but it worked. I still had memories I’d need to recover—an embarrassing number of them, actually—but I’d survived the assassination.)

“You!” December said, pointing at me.

“Me!” I replied.

“You’re the voice. The burning skull!”

“I have made a most *glorious* recovery from death once again. You may applaud.”

No one did.

“Now,” I continued, “will someone please tell me what the *hell* is going on?”

December shooed the hexers away, and they—surprisingly—let her. Perhaps they were simply tired of dealing with me. Even the most incredible sunrise can be too much now and then; there’s a planet out there that proves it.

“You might be,” December said, taking my hands, “the only one who can figure this all out.”

“Well, that’s a problem, then,” I replied. “Because I’m not exactly at full capacity here. Give me a few months to get offworld and recover my memories . . .”

“There isn’t time. The world is about to end.”

“Blast. The world ending is one of my least favorite things. Well, let’s start with the most important part. Who killed me?”

“It was almost certainly Lady Petva.”

“Great. Wonderful.” I cocked my head. “And who is that, again? Please tell me she’s at least a snappy dresser. I hate being killed by the slovenly.”

“I don’t think you’re taking this seriously enough.”

“It’s a personal flaw. But really, can you get me something else to

The Fires of December

wear? If Design gets back from her quest and sees me in *this*, I will *never* live it down.”

She looked at me, wondering if I was a complete idiot.

“Sit down,” I said, pulling over a chair. “I’m just working out a little anxiety in my own personal way. I’ll try to help you as best I can, but I want to set expectations low. I’m accustomed to being the person in the room with all of the answers, but I *legitimately* have no idea what’s going on here, which I find rather insulting to my sense of identity.”

(Before you ask: figure of speech, lowercase *i*.)

December sat, and I could see how much it was getting to her. The hours running, the emotional whiplash of having Flint profess that he loved her, then losing him to an uncertain fate, the mortification of the paper’s drawing of her . . . From the beginning with Flint in the teahouse, it had been a packed twenty-four hours. (Well, just under thirty-seven by their reckoning, but I do tend to fudge and standardize these things to make it all make sense. You’re welcome.)

Regardless, while I didn’t know the *details* of all that yet, I could see the effects on her haggard expression. And I could sense the years on her, like a master chef can tell the work of a rival by the mere scent of the kitchen.

“Why don’t you tell me,” I said, “what happened to you.”

She let it out in a flood, and not as neatly as she’d given it to Geoffrim. A messy, wonderful explosion of tired words, with tears and pacing and sitting in the chair with a hand to her face and a stint on the cot, staring at the ceiling. You might think it difficult for me, as a professional storyteller, to listen to someone recite a tale like she did: with words that escaped like children from a schoolhouse, and then occasionally got plugged up, like those same children trying to get into the sweets shop all at once.

I assure you, it was the opposite. Hearing a story told raw, with the emotion of the person who had lived it . . . it is the beauty of a serenade blended with the authenticity of a journal entry. It is one

of the pure delights in my existence, and it never tarnishes. Every attempt I make at adding poetry or wordplay is because I can never replicate the original telling, which can exist only that one precious time, and must be embellished to cover the necessary gutting caused by another's repetition.

She ended back in the chair where she'd begun, holding her head, puffing, staring at the floor, and the drying tears she'd shed when talking about Flint and her terror that she would hear of his execution at any moment.

Then she waited for my response.

As any proper musician will tell you, the pause before the reaction is a sign of respect. Never applaud right when a symphony ends. Wait. Breathe. Bask. *Then* respond.

"Thank you," I said.

"For what?"

"For trusting me with that," I told her. "I wish there were more I could do for you, but I *can* tell you this. What you experienced when I reached into the Spiritual Realm? That second life of yours? It was real."

She looked up through red eyes. "But . . . it was just a vision of what *could* be. You confirmed it when I asked."

"Yes, but it was also real."

"Fake . . . and real?"

"That is life. Look, December, it might have been only you who experienced it. It might not have been the actual future, simply one possibility of such. However, you lived all those years."

"There wasn't time, though."

"Time," I said, "is not a stone-solid fact like humans pretend. Neither is space, actually. Just like our own personalities, our own capacities, both are elastic. The details are unimportant, but trust me. That life was real."

"I . . . always knew it was," she said. "Thank you . . . in turn, I guess . . . for listening to me."

The Fires of December

"It was my pleasure," I replied. "Now, if I know your Prophet, he'll have built some fail-safes and bypasses into his system for protecting you all from the demon."

"There's some kind of passphrase," December said. "I forgot to mention that fact! Geoffrim's trying to get ahold of it. It lets the demon go, I think?"

"Hmm . . ." I said. (Well, I didn't actually. I made the expression and bent some thought to the problem. We put those words in as shortcuts, so stop complaining.)

I stood. "I need to look at the heart and that sword. I might be able to give you some answers after all."

It didn't take much work. The hexers, fortunately, were baffled by me—they'd seen me grow from a little ember with a face of fire into a naked man and thought me some kind of demon. They let us pass, and the guards mostly kept to their posts at the entrance along the river. This gave us an opportunity to sneak out and avoid a patrol to get a good look at the heart in all its shriveled glory. Now that I had a chance to study it, I was impressed.

"All right," I said, standing with December and staring up at it, hands on my hips. "I think I've figured out how he did this. That's the good news."

"Which implies bad news?" December said.

"I can't solve this mess for you," I said. "I doubt I could do that even with all of my memories. You see, he created a buffer of Breaths (or Breath-adjacent Investiture, really, after he transformed them) between the Aon and the silver . . ."

At her blank stare, I toned the technical details down a notch or two.

"That metal," I said, pointing, "is powerfully dangerous to demons. It should have burned through the demon completely, rather than spiking it in place. Like . . . imagine trying to nail a stick of butter to the wall. The soul of the demon would have been hurt by this, but then should have slid around it and escaped.

“To instead spike the demon in place, he did something to the metal. He put a kind of magical lock on it, but to get *that* to stick to the metal, he had to place a buffer—an incredible well of power that hovers between the lock and the metal. Though I’m still not sure how he did *that*, said buffer is the reason anyone who opens the lock will be healed, as Geoffrim so desperately wants. It’s a side effect, really. Drawing the sword isn’t what gives the powers, but to break the seal, you need to draw in its power. That much Investiture has a restorative effect, you see.”

She blinked, and I realized even that brief explanation was too much. Not because she was stupid, but because she was ignorant. The difference being, of course, that you can solve the second with enough effort.

“Speak the passphrase,” she said, proving she understood enough of what was relevant, “and the demon will be free—but also, the power holding him there will get stuck in *you*.”

“Yes,” I said. “Actually, there are probably several passphrases. One puts the power *into* something or someone, while the second pulls it *out* of something or someone. These days, there’s usually a third to disperse it entirely. They aren’t true Breaths anymore, but *purified* power, scrubbed of its Intent, meaning anyone can take it if they know the passphrase.”

“The Prophet,” December replied, looking up at the heart and the spike, “left the words with the kings, in case . . .”

“In case,” I explained, “the lock wasn’t solid enough. This construction is brilliant, but it’s the magical equivalent of mechanical tape holding together a helicopter. Silver is too antithetical to these powers; the lock is going to fall apart eventually.”

“. . . What’s a helicopter?”

“I assume the Megalith is strengthening. The fragment demons grow larger, more powerful? Its body no longer renews as it once did, a side effect of the soul and corpse beginning to separate?”

The Fires of December

“Yes to both.”

I nodded. “Geoffrim isn’t *completely* wrong in thinking something needs to be done—but the danger isn’t immediate. You probably have another century before this all fails on its own. The proper course would be to gather arcanists, scientists, and theologians and come up with a plan. Maybe a deal with the Megalith itself, maybe some way of bonding all the smaller pieces to keep them separate.

“I don’t know. Entities like this are tricky, though one thing I can tell you is that the demon might be afraid of the power that held it after being trapped by it so long. If the entity gets free, that might be a tool you can use. Regardless, releasing the binding all at once is going to be like pulling an arrow out of a wound—yes, it needs to be done to heal, but do it foolishly and you’ll just kill your subject.”

“Geoffrim is dying, though,” December said. “He’s letting his urgency for his own life bleed into presuming urgency for the whole kingdom. I don’t think he’ll even let Petva do the releasing; he’ll get the pass-phrases from her, then do it himself. So he can be healed. And in so doing, he’ll doom the kingdom, regardless of his justifications.”

“My advice,” I told her, “is to . . . um . . . not let that happen.” I paused, then added, “Please try to pretend that I’ve been quite mysterious and enigmatic while helping you.”

She nodded absently. “Aren’t those synonyms?”

“That is exactly,” I replied, “what someone who *isn’t* enigmatic or mysterious would think.”

We returned to the hexer village without being caught, where December—at last—let herself lie down to sleep, alone in her hut, possessing a terrible premonition. She’d come all this way, but what did she really know? It felt so exhausting to realize that she was essentially in the same spot she’d been that first day she’d left Rivershore.

A terrible fate was looming, but she didn’t know exactly when. Then plague and bloodshed would claim the lives of so many, and she was in no better position to have a solution than she had been.

Brandon Sanderson

If anything, she was in a *worse* place now, because she was trapped and locked away. She knew who was likely behind it and why, but not how to stop him.

Three questions: when the terrors would come, how to mitigate their damage, how to stop Geoffrim. Fortunately, one would be answered the very next morning, as she woke to shouting. *Unfortunately*, it was the question she least wanted answered.

When was it going to happen?

Today.



Chapter XXXIX



December stumbled out of bed, casting aside the loaned nightgown and pulling on her red velvet dress from the day before. Hair disheveled, she looked out of her hut in alarm, and saw *soldiers*. Guards? Fighting against something pushing them back along the hallway, their shouts increasingly panicked. Even as she watched, they broke apart and fled in smaller groups, dashing past the huts, seeking

the deeper tunnels—casting aside armor, and even weapons, in their need to move more quickly.

December's heart thundered as she realized an invading force had arrived. She considered running until she saw one figure among the invaders.

Walking with a distinctive limp.

She met Flint with a crushing hug and a kiss that made him drop his sword. Dozens of soldiers flooded around them to secure the tunnels, and they wore the king's colors. I trailed up behind her and Flint as they met.

"What is this?" she asked, pulling away from the kiss. "What is happening?"

"It's a rescue!" a familiar voice proclaimed.

"Amaal?" December said, running to embrace the diminutive priestess. Tamartha was there with her, behind the battle line, and a search found Dmitrovik among those who wore armor.

"How?" December asked, turning toward Flint.

"Geoffrim tried his purges," Flint said. "Unfortunately for him, I got to the army first. The men of the walls? They're Drakes's soldiers, and were *already* disgruntled about what had happened to the general. When the palace guard arrived this morning, just as I'd warned . . ." He looked to her, more worried than his victorious words should have implied. "Well, love, I think even without me, this would have happened."

"Civil war," December said. "I'm sorry. Geoffrim and Petva?"

"Trapped in the palace," Flint said. "We have to keep them away from the Megalith."

"That should work," I said. "These sorts of passphrases require touch to function."

Flint looked to me, confused, and December promised to explain. For now, she and her friends were ushered to a carriage and started out of the demon. Most of Drakes's soldiers in this contingent remained

The Fires of December

behind with the hexers and the remaining demonstone, as that was what they had actually been sent to secure.

They gave Flint and December only a small guard, including Dmitrovik. Apparently, the wall guards didn't trust Flint fully, even with the intel he had provided. On the way down, Flint explained that the wall guard and the palace guard (which included policing forces in the city) were about even in numbers, but the edge of experience and equipment went to the wall guard. Which explained why, as their carriage rolled out of the chest of the Megalith to the light of sunrise, they found so many fires burning through the city. Clashes of soldiers in the streets. Bodies visible even from a distance.

They pulled to a stop on the precipice near the teahouse, and December climbed free, Flint following, to overlook it all.

"Oh, *heavens*," December whispered. "Flint . . . the duke was a false flag. He always was. The war I heard about wasn't between him and the king, but between the general's forces and loyalists to the crown."

"Then," Flint said, hand in hers, "I caused it? Everything you foresaw . . . it's my fault for warning the wall guard?"

"No," I said, climbing from the carriage—because of course I'd insisted on going along. "That's not how it works, friend. This city was a powder keg waiting for a spark, and the death of the general caused it, not your intervention. Even if neither of you had shown up, Geoffrim would have plotted his coup." I hesitated, but gave them the truth. "You may have accelerated it, though . . ."

"Damn," Flint said, then whispered to December, "Is that *really* the immortal's ghost from that lantern?"

"I'm sure of it."

"I thought he'd be more imposing," is what he might have said, but I surely misheard him and he actually said, "Wow, he's great and has a very handsome nose."

"The king, Geoffrim, and Petva are trapped in the palace," Flint said. "Which is surrounded by enemy forces."

“We need to get in and confront them,” December said. “We *have* to stop the king before he gives Geoffrim the passphrases and commands him to put down this rebellion with demonic power. Barring that, we have to get them all into custody, so they never have a chance. We can’t let them slip through, somehow, and reach the Megalith.”

“Getting into the palace will be a tall order, love,” Flint said. “The hidden entrances have been blocked. I checked last night, after rescuing your friends from house arrest at the hotel. We’ll have to break down the front gates.”

“That will be what the wall guard wants, though, right?” she asked. “They’ll need to secure the throne.”

A frightened ride down from the Megalith followed. Flint rode in one carriage with myself and the six soldiers he’d been lent. (He spent it plying me with questions I mostly couldn’t answer.) December rode in the other with her friends. The couple didn’t want to split up, but Flint worried if he didn’t go with the soldiers, their group would be left behind.

“Lady,” Amaal said as they rode, clutching her sword-staff. (Which she blessedly hadn’t tried to use in the fighting. No, she’s not some secret warrior. It wasn’t that kind of monastery, as I believe I told you.) “What of . . . the demon? Yours, I mean . . .”

“I released it,” December said.

“Oh, thank the Prophet,” Amaal said, practically melting into her seat with relief. “I was *so* worried for your soul. My first charge as a spiritual advisor, and I almost let her get eaten by a demon! But my advice was enough in the end!”

December didn’t say that she hadn’t done it for religious reasons, but moral ones. We sometimes pretend that religion is always aligned to morality. I would very much like it if it were.

Flint’s soldiers talked them through a barricade. There, they impressed upon the commanders of the revolutionary force to listen to Flint’s explanation of why they needed to not only surround the

The Fires of December

palace, but assault it. All through it, December stood in the chill air, realizing it was . . . It was too cold.

Oh no.

Above the city, the Megalith's eyes had faded. That happened during the daylight, but she'd always felt power in them regardless.

That was gone now.

Oh . . . dear heavens . . . no . . .

The commanders agreed, and gathered forces. With December and her friends waiting a safe distance behind, the troops assaulted the palace. The attack was executed well, with a rush of soldiers charging up the hundred steps—still annoyingly too short.

But December knew. She didn't want to admit it, but she knew.

"Flint," she whispered. With his age and leg, he was holding back with the reserves. "Is there a secret entrance to the heart chamber? Perhaps tunnels cut up to it from the palace?"

"No," he said. "I'd know about it."

December considered, mind racing, before hitting on a different possibility—a terrible one. She found me standing with Amaal and Tamantha and grabbed me by the front of my robe.

"Someone has to touch the sword itself to withdraw the power?" she said. "Or could they just touch the demon?"

"This is a special situation, so I can't say for certain. But I imagine that in this case, the power of the lock is partially attached to the demon to keep its power in check—"

"Faster!" she said, urgent.

"Touching the demon," I said, "and speaking the passphrase should work."

"Any part of the demon's body?"

"Yes."

"Does the blood count?" she demanded. "Because the palace has its own tributary running through it."

At that moment, we all realized our mistake. I'd have spotted it

myself, had I not been newly reconstituted and lacking some of my memories. We'd been imagining that Geoffrim would have to make his way to the sword cavern to reclaim the power, but that wasn't the case.

All he'd needed to do was step into the blood and speak the words with the right understanding of what he was trying to do. The power holding the demon's soul, though focused in that lock at its chest, would be undone. "Drawing the sword" was, and always had been, a metaphor.

Soldiers, newly broken into the palace above, started screaming and running down the steps. On fire. Behind them, a molten light was growing.

"Demons!"

The shout went up among both loyalists and revolutionaries.

"Demons killing people!"

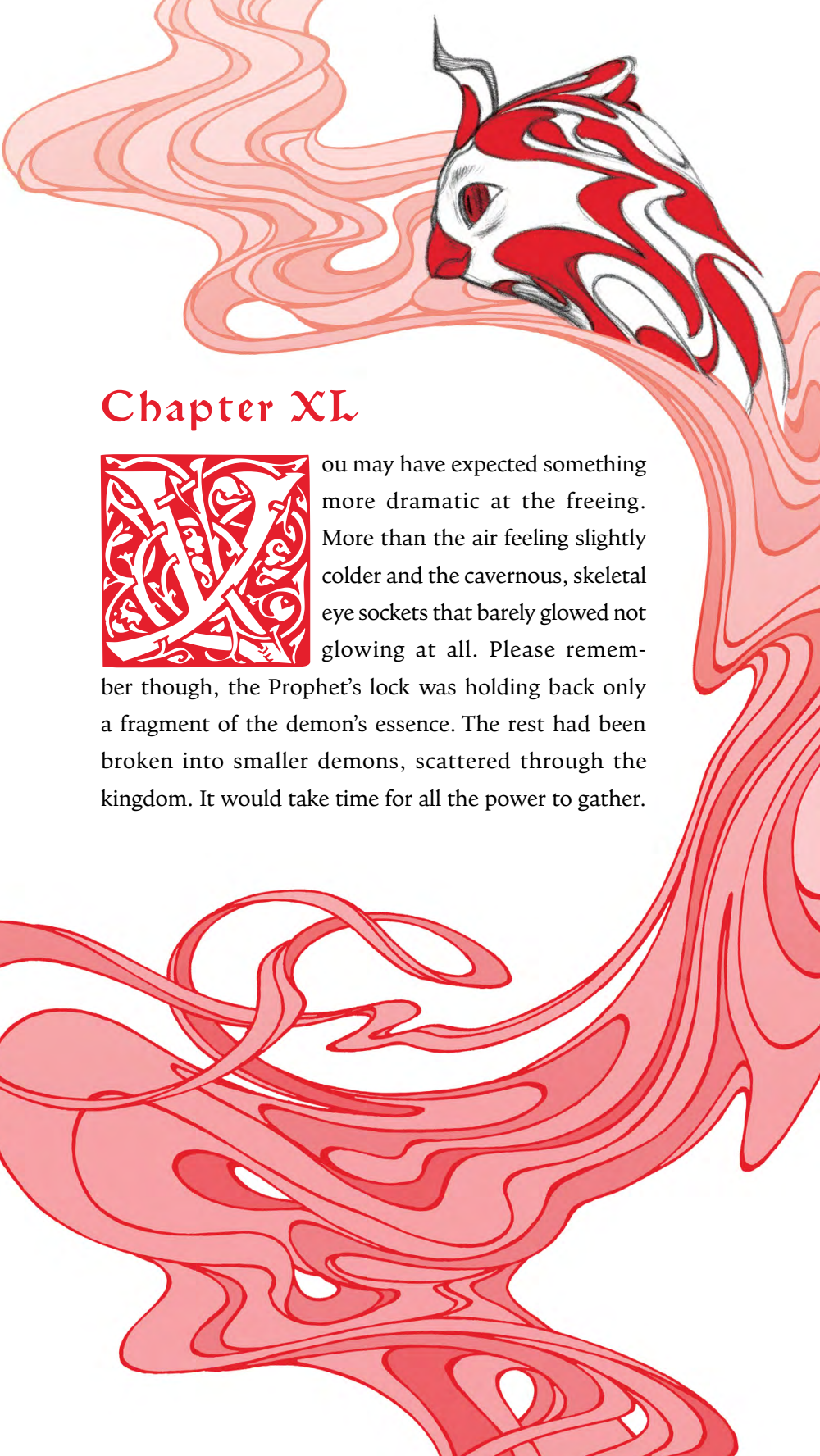
Both sides ran. This was a danger neither was prepared to deal with. At the top of the stairs, Geoffrim emerged from the palace, tossing something down the steps that bounced and thumped, then came to a rest at the bottom.

The king's head. It was horrifically burned.

"His Majesty," Geoffrim announced loudly to the soldiers, "made the foolish mistake of freeing the great Megalith demon. I tried to stop him, but he persisted, and now the thing has killed him in its wrath. I fear it will soon consume the city as well! Go, put aside your differences and begin an evacuation of the people! I will do what I can to delay the thing, and hopefully contain it to this small region for now!"

December's last hope soured to despair. The last of her questions from the night before had been answered. How could she stop Geoffrim from dooming the kingdom?

She could not.



Chapter XL



ou may have expected something more dramatic at the freeing. More than the air feeling slightly colder and the cavernous, skeletal eye sockets that barely glowed not glowing at all. Please remember though, the Prophet's lock was holding back only a fragment of the demon's essence. The rest had been broken into smaller demons, scattered through the kingdom. It would take time for all the power to gather.

This was why the blood river kept flowing for years in December's vision. The *core* of the demon was loosed, and now its body would fully decompose, spending decades melting into the goo that made up the soured river, while the soul pulled the demons together and made itself a new body.

I later put together that the king *did* take the power himself—but said the passphrase to do so within earshot of Geoffrim, who then stole the power from him almost immediately by speaking those same words. Beaudilog was a fool, evidenced by the surprised expression on his face, frozen at the moment he was betrayed by the very person who had the most reason to betray him. Perhaps if he hadn't alienated his spymaster, this never would have happened. A word to the wise: Instead of being jealous of the man who is smarter than you, keep him closest and most loyal. Because if you send his ship sailing away, all you'll be left with are flotillas of fools launching salvos of stupidity at you each day. And within them, hidden like a pirate on the crew, will be someone smart enough to *never* show you what they're capable of until their knife hits your back.

Now both armies broke before the building storm of light behind Geoffrim. He, pretending to be valiant, turned toward it again to step into the grand entryway of the palace. The soldiers began to work, sending runners and contingents to begin evacuating Kingseat as Geoffrim had ordered.

December started up the steps.

Tamantha caught her first because of Flint's bad leg.

"Lady," she said. "We have to run."

"If we run, the kingdom dies, Tamantha."

"But what can *we* do? Lady, I'm a dressmaker, you're an innkeeper, and Amaal's a clergywoman. Count Flint is a soldier, but in his sixties. Dmitrovik has never held a sword before today, for all his life on the

The Fires of December

streets. What do *we* do about the most powerful demon who has ever cursed the land? Please. Do you have a plan? Do you . . . know how to stop it?"

A thousand thoughts tried to cram into December's brain at once. What won out was the truth.

"I don't know how to stop it," December admitted. "The hexers don't have that skill—even the ancients, with a lifetime of study, might have failed. I'm going up these steps anyway. I won't judge those who stay behind."

She looked to Flint, who nodded, and they started up together. The others followed, myself included, though we all gathered together again at the entrance to the palace and peered in at the grand entryway. The circular room beyond was filled with fine furnishings and the most incredible chandeliers, all of which were now shards twinkling on the floor.

For the demon had begun reconstituting at the center. Bits of itself, long splintered, were being drawn to it. Though this would take decades, the initial rush was dramatic. Disembodied from its corpse, the core of the demon—and any smaller bits close enough when it was freed—had cohered already. It was a tornado of red light and spinning debris, terrible and grand, pulsing with its newly rekindled heartbeat.

Geoffrim and Petva stood before it, his hand upon her shoulder. "Are you certain?" he asked her, needing to speak loud over the rushing wind—loud enough that we could hear. "We could withdraw from the city as I've planned. We have decades until it brings the plague. We have time to prepare further how to deal with it."

"I've prepared long enough," Petva shouted. Though her back was to us, December could hear the eagerness in her voice. "You have your wish. Now I get to claim mine."

Geoffrim stepped aside to let her, and only then noticed the group

of us standing there. Flint started toward him with a limp, but December held him back, shaking her head. I understood, and I agreed. Petva and Geoffrim controlling the demon would be terrible, but the thing getting free would be far, far worse. Petva didn't deserve this chance, but we had to give it to her, in case it saved Kingseat.

The king's niece raised her hands, blond hair escaping its bun and flaring about her wildly, wings on the back of her demonblood dress fluttering with manic energy. She spoke words of command, via the bond she had to this thing, through the demon she'd bonded over a decade before in secret.

I don't want to lead you to believe she almost succeeded, because she did not. However, briefly the spinning cyclone dimmed, the winds of its fury calming a step, from *cataclysmic* to merely *overwhelming*.

No, she didn't "almost succeed." But she did do better than I'd thought any mortal might, in her situation. Enough to *almost* make us think she *would* succeed.

Then the light returned and the flaring heat washed outward. Petva stepped back, gasped, and her control wavered. In an instant, she was vaporized. The flash of destruction blasted her ashes to the ground with such force that it left a human-shaped, ashen imprint on the floor.

Geoffrim lowered the arm that he'd been holding out toward her. His shoulders slumped. He stared down at the remnants of Petva, and for a moment almost seemed to be human again.

"Amaal," December said, taking it all in, "I could really use some spiritual advice right now. You . . . said the Prophet left three mandata? The final? Please tell me it will help."

Looking forlorn, Amaal pulled her small chapbook from her pocket, the condensed words of the Prophet, and held up a page with his final message.



lease pretend this part
was inspiring.

(Though I've never gotten along with him, it's chilling how the two of us think alike now and then.)

"Well, hell," December whispered.

"I think he was taken before he could finish!" Amaal said, raising her voice over the sound of the wind. "Maybe he might have come up with more if we'd given him time! We're not certain! I haven't always understood . . ."

She turned the page, and gave Brother Grund's reimagining of this commandment, as he'd done with the other two.



nspiration must come through deep
meditation and time, for not all
answers are easy.

It was a beautiful sentiment, December thought, but utterly worthless at the moment. She found it incredible that in all the Prophet had said, he hadn't actually left anything relevant to their biggest problem: the demon.

The tempest was building again, and it had noticed Geoffrim. A similar flash of power to the one that had killed Petva tried to vaporize him, but when it drew close, the power withdrew suddenly—like a person recoiling from something vile.

"It's as I guessed," I said to the group. "The demon can smell upon

him the power that long imprisoned it. For now, it won't be able to get too close to him."

Geoffrim seemed to understand this, for when he raised his head from mourning Petva, his lips bore a grim smile. Though he couldn't control it, for the time being, it couldn't hurt him.

He turned from it and approached us. "It is time to put aside our squabbles, Flint," Geoffrim said, oozing with insincerity. "Come with me and help me evacuate the city. We'll go to Duke Kird, and with his help, come up with a plan to control this demon and bend it to our—"

Flint . . . bless him . . . saw through the attempt to deflect our attention. He attacked in a flash, hoping to tie up Geoffrim and use him as leverage over the demon. Perhaps it would have worked thirty years earlier, but as they clashed, Geoffrim *ignored* Flint's sword. It bit him on the arm, and the wound immediately sealed.

Geoffrim pulled the former spymaster close, smiling and meeting his eyes. Then Geoffrim rammed a knife up and into Flint's chest, straight through the armpit gap in his breastplate.

"I've been waiting many years," Geoffrim said, "to see that look of defeat in your eyes, Flint."

He shoved Flint down, bleeding, and turned to the rest of us standing there. Dmitrovik tried to attack, but the tempest was growing terrible. A flying chunk of what had once been a fine display table hit the footman and toppled him. Amaal and Tamantha were forced to seek shelter before the flashing mix of wind and heat, as December rushed to Flint, who was coughing on the ground where he had collapsed. Moving, but pained. She wept as she tried to help him to safety, and I joined, the two of us towing Flint in his armor behind a large freestanding cabinet near the perimeter of the room.

Geoffrim shook his head and gave one last look to what remained of Petva. Then he strode out of the chamber, intent on solidifying the dukes behind his rule, reasonably certain he could solve the problem with the demon eventually. And if he couldn't . . . well, he had

The Fires of December

evidence from December's vision that the demon *would* burn itself out, eventually . . .

Beside December, I checked on Flint's wound.

"Bad?" Flint asked.

I nodded, as flippancy escaped me. "I . . ." I whispered to December. "I have been in this situation too often . . . All my knowledge and power, and it still keeps happening . . ."

December glanced toward Amaal and Tamantha, hugging while hidden beside some broken chairs. The wind whipped December's hair as she peered up over the cabinet at the spinning, terrible tempest. Streaks of red light—the fragments of the soul that had been smaller demons—were sucked in through the doorway and joined its essence, streaking in circles around it, leaving rings of molten light to surround the ever-stronger glow at the center.

"I have to stop it," she whispered. "But . . . I can't. I can't. It . . ."

I need more time, she thought. Petva didn't stop it, but she was able to influence it, dampen it. Proof, maybe, that controlling it is possible with enough practice? More than she had, by an order of magnitude.

"It would take . . ."

Skill comes with time. The hexers told me that the ancients studied their whole lives to learn enough to control demons.

"It would take a lifetime of study." December looked to me. "What you did in the inn that night—the action that cast me into the future. Can you do it again?"

"Well, yes," I said. "But . . . do you know what you're asking?"

She pulled Flint close.

"Love," he said, eyes closed. "Just get away . . ."

December met my eyes. "I understand," she said. "Do it."





Chapter XLI



As a man who possesses the Sixth Word, I have a sense that tells me when important events will occur. I use it to gauge where I need to be. I got the Words from a place whose story I haven't told yet, not even to those who know me dearly, and the mechanics are best kept secret. I whispered the Sixth Word then, and was told . . . the time for me to help had passed.

December held Flint as the tempest built. Weeping,

she asked him for one thing. “I need to know, love, where Petva’s office is.”

“I’ll show you,” he said, face a mask of pain as he tried to sit.

“No,” she said. “I can find it. Just tell me.”

“The same hallway as the others, but at the end,” he whispered. “Left door. Small little room . . .”

The storm raged, but December could not leave him. She couldn’t . . . couldn’t walk away. Even for this. She clung to him, crying, and felt his blood soak her dress as the demon grew worse and worse. Until . . . Flint’s breathing stopped. And the world seemed to end.

No, she thought. *Not over yet.*

She lowered him to rest, then had to watch, powerless, as Amaal and Tamantha’s furniture shield was ripped away. The wind took them, pulling the two women into the air, and they vanished in flashes of light. Vaporized. December looked to me . . . and found me sitting there, as if dead, drooling.

She ran. Flint’s blood grew cold on her skin, in contrast to the corpse she had left, which burned. Sobbing, she ran through hallways as a terrible warping heat chased behind. She passed panicked servants and attendants who hadn’t been wise enough to run. They hid in rooms or nooks, and died in fear as the demon’s rebirth began to destroy the entire palace.

December found the office blessedly unlocked and left in a mess during Petva’s hasty, last-minute preparations. On the desk lay several open books that looked right, though December did not have time to check. She gathered them, and continued to run, barely escaping the palace as the fires consumed it . . . then settled to a simmer, continuing to draw in smaller demons. It would burn the city in the coming days, but not quite yet.

December became a refugee. Most fled toward the Orange Duke’s flotilla, but she went the other way, toward familiar lands. Before the demon began rampaging through the rest of the kingdom, most were

The Fires of December

able to get away. It was almost normal outside Kingseat itself. She traveled in the back of a kindly carpenter's overcrowded wagon, watching the light from the heart of the city glow all through the night. It was visible even a week later when they reached Duck Seat.

Most of the remaining refugees stopped here, though there was already talk of the succession war. Not of king against rivals, but of three dukes who no longer had a reason to keep from one another's throats. She thought, from the rumors, that Duke Kird had rejected Geoffrim, who had taken up with Duke Heninsk of the River Green, to the northeast.

There were no rooms in the city for refugees, and December had left her coin behind regardless, so she left the city to make an unwelcoming bed in the rocks and soil. There, by the horizon light of the demon's own power, she tried to decipher the books she'd taken from Petva's office.

They were dense and difficult to read. Thirdhand accounts of stories of the ancient demon keepers from the writings of scholars. Yes, they talked about the influence a person's will could have upon a demon, and the many hundreds of ways people said you could dominate them, but they all seemed so vague.

December knew she had to try anyway, and she had time. The demon would take decades to fully reconstitute. So the next day, she approached a soldier camp and proved her medical knowledge to the head surgeon there. He was a tall man who took a shot of vodka before each surgery, and didn't seem to care that she was a woman, so long as she could set a bone and tie a splint. Her attention was soon needed as war between the dukes escalated. A year after her arrival at Duck Seat, her surgeon friend was sent to the front lines, but she remained behind to lead the smaller group of healers who saw to soldiers shipped home on river barges, missing limbs and eyes and floating upon the blood of a monster who did not leave Kingseat—for now.

At night, secure in her log cabin at the center of the small camp outside Duck Seat, she studied. She scoured the city for bookstores and archives that might have more of what she wanted, her rising station even granting her access to the Violet Duke's own library. They called her Lady Surgeon, and didn't ask after her history.

As the second year passed, the three dukes ignored the nova that had been the capital, as they hoped all it would do was glow. Together, they fought their wars for a throne that no longer existed, telling themselves that the rivers still flowed—so all must be well. Surely the demon was bound in some way to the ruins of Kingseat.

On an unseasonably hot autumn night, walking from the duke's library with a new book on demonology, she stopped in the street as a wolf-sized demon crossed in front of her. With curfew in place, only those with the duke's writ could be out after dark, so she stood alone on the cobbles and met its eyes. It was the largest she'd seen since the freeing of the Megalith, and it stared her in the eyes—its own aflame with an ember light.

"Do you know my Beautiful?" she asked it.

In return, it blinked out molten tears, then looked toward the light on the northern horizon. Demons were being pulled from the entire kingdom, forced ever inward to the ruined capital.

"Speak to me," she said, summoning her will as the books said, though she did not know yet what they meant. She thought her determination was full and her intent focused. Yet the demon turned from her and loped away, toward the light.

Remember it is not real, December told herself and continued on her way. *Remember your focus. This is not your life you live now; it is a vision.* She cherished in her heart the hope that Flint was still alive, and that she would return to him, and during these years she was able to squash the worries that whispered otherwise.

As the war progressed, December grew more brazen, practicing her command of demons in secret each night, traveling into the wilderness

The Fires of December

to find them after seeing to the wounded soldiers in her care. Her efforts largely failed, but she persisted. During the day, she helped the soldiers, then used her authority as surgeon to discharge them honorably, even those who could have returned to the fighting. She urged them south, telling them to stay away from the river in the coming years, though few listened. During the night, she slowly worked the many strategies the books offered and found some functional techniques. Demons changed the way they acted when she described or thought of them in certain ways. In this, she couldn't exactly control them, but she could make them more or less aggressive.

During her ninth year at this, she accepted that the Violet Duke would soon lose the war. (Yes, it raged that long. I believe the emotions of the soldiers were influenced by the anger of the Megalith, provoking them constantly to one another's throats.) Geoffrim's faction, with the Green Duke, was unfortunately winning. Pay got worse, and the call went out that witches were not to be suffered, and too many were suspicious of the Lady Surgeon. The persnickety archivist at the duke's library turned against her, threatening to turn her in, so she left her post and hid in the large refugee city at the outskirts of Duck Seat.

Cold most nights, hungry most days, she felt betrayed—but turned her memory to her true friends, Tamantha, Dmitrovik, and Amaal, who still needed her, though their faces began to fade from her mind. Instead, she remembered the blood on her skin and the screams of those she'd left as the winds took them.

No. I remember Flint. I remember love.

The Green Duke's army soon arrived at Duck Seat, and December didn't dare stay. By that time, demons were rare, as the Megalith had drawn most of them in, particularly those so close. So she became a refugee again, stowing away on a boat fleeing downriver. She hid in the hold, the few tricks Flint had taught her proving useful until she was caught a few days later and thrown out onto the dirt, her

books stolen and burned for their demonic writing. She had learned, she thought, what she could from them anyway.

The next few years were ones of wandering. She took time in the wilderness to search out demons who had not yet made their way to the Megalith, and she could occasionally find them in these smaller towns along the river. She offered her services as a scribe or surgeon, spending weeks in each one. Frightened town after frightened town full of people who knew increasingly little.

The first towns wondered at the light. The next few had only heard of it. The next one didn't know it existed. She'd stay until people grew afraid of her, until they found her searching for—or commanding—a demon. Then she'd move on, chased by curses of witchcraft, until she reached another village. Over the years, demons became impossible to find, even in towns weeks away from Kingseat. So one day she decided to continue southward at a more determined pace, until . . . like she was in a dream . . . she entered someplace familiar.

That inn . . . where she'd lived over a lifetime ago. The dock where she'd struck out. Faces she remembered, but after so many years . . . she didn't recall many names. They didn't recognize her, gaunt as she was, now in her thirty-fifth year, fourteenth from the fall of the capital. They named her a witch, as so many had, and even when someone did recognize her—her foster father—they called her *doppelgänger*, and hissed at her.

Until Matin arrived. He calmed the crowd and took in the sight of her.

"A daughter of our town has returned," he said, with a glare to those gathered, "and you treat her like this?"

"But . . . witch . . ." a voice said.

"The call of 'witch,'" Matin said, "is the cry of the weak looking for someone weaker to blame. I'll hear no such nonsense."

December was proud of him because she knew how difficult confrontation was for him. He let her stay in his guest room, where she

The Fires of December

saw her children again, though she was careful to not be too familiar toward them at first. They had their mother still, and though there were problems—there were always problems in life—the family was strong and loving.

Matin's books were not so useful as the ones she'd stolen from Petva, but they *did* have a few tips about the ancients. About bargains with the demons, and how they needed *genuine* emotion to feed off. The books explained that they were entities from beyond the world itself, drawn by life—but in consuming souls, they could begin to be reasoned with, even tricked.

One evening, with a hot cup of tea in hand, she chatted beside the hearth with Rema, and found with genuine warmth that she'd come to love the woman. Her gentle way, her quiet wisdom. She was a wonderful match for Matin, and the way she treated the boys whom December had loved as her own . . .

The last flicker of jealousy died in her heart that night. She took Rema's hands. "Thank you," she whispered beside the light of the fire.

"For what, dear?" Rema asked. "You are the one who saved me. I have not forgotten."

"Thank you," December said, "for being good to him."

Unfortunately this joy, too, was by requirement fleeting. Her focus on distressing books, and her walks in the mountains searching for demons, provoked more and more rumors about her in town. She did not wish to bring trouble to Matin and Rema, so she had already been planning to move on when—a few years after her arrival—the armies arrived.

Men in green, who were looking for *her*. This hadn't happened in her previous life, and she wondered at first if this was a good sign—that perhaps the dukes were looking for help against the demon. She kept detailed notes on what travelers spoke of when coming downriver, and she was certain it was still a problem. Rampaging and ravaging, it had a new body, the Megalith corpse having melted almost half away.

Her hopes were dashed, for these men served the “second prophet.” An immortal . . . matching Geoffrim’s description. The soldiers tracked her to her hometown and claimed December had stolen something dear from him, books he needed, and a nebulous “power” that she possessed.

She fled into the night, and to her horror was forced to watch as the men burned Rivershore in retribution. Including some of the people she loved. Watching from afar, hearing their screams, broke something new in December. She fled, tears in her eyes, avoiding the river.

She had enough skill from her previous life, at the end of her days when she’d lived alone as an old woman in the mountains, to trap small game and survive. Over the next few years, she didn’t dare approach any town, lest Geoffrim’s agents find her, so she kept to the highlands and hunted the tiny demons that remained there. They had always lived in these places, she’d found in the books—but were the size of motes, unrecognized by the people for what they were. She’d heard stories of them as a child, called fairies or moondust.

With these, she was able to practice a little more, but even they became sparse. Each individual remained free until it was called by the Megalith demon. Then it floated north at speed, toward the distant capital, and ignored any of her commands. She continued hunting anyway, practicing. She learned from these small dust demons that her willpower *was* effective at commanding them, even without a contract or bond, so long as she could describe and *know* them in her mind. With study and understanding of each individual, she could make orders and be obeyed, so long as she held firm and focused.

As she sought these motes, she moved ever southward, where at least some of the chillness to the air faded, except in winter. One of those winters probably should have killed her, but she was stubborn, determined, and accompanied by the fire of a love she’d turned into a mantra. That heat kept her purposeful, even if memories were

The Fires of December

fading. Even so, here, she began failing to turn aside the worrying and questioning . . .

This was real, wasn't it?

She felt this life, lived it. The cold at the door, the frostbite that took several toes one winter. The pain in her joints, starting earlier this lifetime than it had before.

What if her experiences in the capital were the fancy, the illusion? How could she know what was true and what wasn't? How could she have fallen in love so quickly, and why did that love burn within her still? Was that not delusion?

Muddled, she felt that only the moment she lived in now could be real, and anything else could be a false memory. A wish, made tangible in her mind, like the willpower she imposed upon the tiny demons. She knew she could not be entirely sane, because who would sanely live in the hills like she did, never speaking? Never daring approach another person?

She continued southward. She didn't fully know why; instinct drove her. Until at last, she arrived—emaciated to practically a skeleton like the Megalith itself, malnourished and nearly broken—at the monastery at the end of the river. She collapsed at their door.

There, the abbot—a man with a round face perfectly framing a bearded, happy smile—carried her in. She knew him as Brother Grund before he was named, and so she whispered of Amaal to him, and her death at the hands of the demon. December would later feel an idiot for blurting it out, but she was delusional from her long solitary exposure.

She lived nearly a decade in that monastery, though it took well into her second year before she felt anything remotely like herself. In that time, she spoke of what she'd seen, what she'd done, foolish though it probably was to admit to witchcraft among clergy.

At the end of the second year, Brother Grund came to her room and

asked her to join him. They walked the contemplative hallways of the grand monastery, and he spoke in his insightful way. “Two years here, and you refuse to have meals with us, still.”

“I . . . do not wish to intrude.”

“You remain distant. There is more.”

She realized he was correct. After being betrayed in Duck Seat by the friends she’d made there, turned in as a witch, then watching Matin and her family be burned . . . she had begun to dissociate herself from this life. A way to protect herself, to not get too emotionally involved, for even if she could not say if it was real (even if those questions were eating at her mind and consuming her confidence) she did not want to get too close to anyone. Not again.

Because she knew they were all going to die.

Brother Grund did not push her further. He made his observation, then escorted her to the locked back rooms of their extensive library and there revealed a section of books.

“On demons,” he said. “And witchcraft.”

He left her to it.

She dove into these books, and did try—for her own sanity—to get to know the people of the monastery. Sister Aqswa, who had a mind like the bottom drawer of a dresser: dusty and full of curios, rarely relevant but fascinating nonetheless. Brother Braskofskil, who had a mind like a landscape puzzle: intricate, beautiful, but missing a piece here and there. Sister Braskofskil, who had a mind like a tree full of falling autumn leaves: colorful, with something always growing to replace what was discarded.

Through it, still, she reasserted her determination to learn of demons. That was her purpose, and though she no longer trusted her memories, she held to that fragment of hope that this was *for* something. That she lived for a *reason*. She studied, and read, and slaved at her books—all the while trying to urge the monastery occupants to leave before the plague arrived.

The Fires of December

They refused. They kept taking in refugees, nursing them to health, then sending them on across the plain to try to escape the troubles.

December studied. And studied. And studied.

At one point, she found Brother Grund watching her, and had to ask the question. “I am a witch,” she said, “and therefore a heretic. Why do you help me?”

“It seems the right thing.”

“Aren’t you the arbiter of what is right and wrong?”

He laughed. “No, no. Each person is their own arbiter. I merely try to give them directions.”

“Then why direct me toward something the Prophet said was forbidden?”

He sighed, then settled his bulk near her in a seat. “Amaal told you that, I assume? Ah, but I was surprised how quickly I grew to miss her enthusiasm . . .”

“It is forbidden, though, isn’t it?” December asked. “The Prophet said not to practice witchcraft.”

“In one place, yes,” he said.

She frowned. “In one place?”

“Teachings like this,” he said, “are not isolated quips to be memorized and recited, December. They are part of a whole. Amaal was young, and the whole is hard to grasp when you are young, so you fixate upon a piece. Maturity is supposed to change that. Supposed to.”

He later gave her some other books, the Prophet’s writings, with underlined passages. Yes, the prohibition was there. *Do not try to bond the demons, for they will destroy you, and perhaps those around you.*

But elsewhere, more explanation. *They might have to be controlled, but it will take an expert hand. Make certain that nobody untrained attempts it.* And elsewhere. *I can’t always be here. You might have to do this on your own. If so, be careful.*

A dozen other less specific examples, but as a whole, the implication was that demons were dangerous, to be avoided—in the same

way you avoided a pack of wolves. However, hunters existed, and were sometimes needed against the wolves. In the case of demons, the Prophet implied, though didn't outright say, they would need witches.

Leave the demons to the experts. If you need to make experts, pick those whose hearts are right. Good luck.

Understand the whole, she thought. The entire message. Maybe you should have made that one of your mandata, Prophet.

During her tenth year in the monastery, the river curdled. The Megalith had finally given out, no more blood to flow. (December did not know, but the curdling was caused by the last of the original Megalith's scattered demons returning to it, enabling it to break the bondage of its old, decaying body.)

No, she thought with a panic, kneeling and feeling the thick sludge. *No, this is too soon. I should have more time left before the plague . . .*

She spotted the signs soon after among the priests. In Brother Grund himself.

"You need to go," he told her.

"You'll die," she warned.

"We'll die anyway," he said, with an open smile, as always. "But it is my hope that none of this will actually happen, and that instead you will be our salvation." He pointed southward. "The plains. You know what they contain."

"Demons," she said, "who are not fragments of the Megalith. Smaller compared to it, but larger than I've known."

He nodded, then coughed into his hand. "Go. Learn."

"Thank you."

"It is but a dream, what we have here in this life," he said. "The Prophet speaks to us in dreams, which makes them important. May he so bless you, December."

"I doubt he'll want anything to do with a heretic like me."

Grund laughed one last time. "December, pilgrim, if he only came to those who were righteous, none of his words would exist, for no

The Fires of December

one would need them. I know he visits the unworthy, for I once saw him in my own dreams. Go. *Learn.*”

She left them to the plague, and turned her eyes toward an alien society. Groups who lived upon the plains, far more articulate and interesting than the savages she’d been told to expect—but also rigid in their society and hierarchy, as demanded of a people who trafficked with terrible beings who could destroy them on a whim. Some of their rules genuinely protected them from such, and many did not, as is the nature of these things.

I realize that you’re going to want to know more than I can give you about this next part, as the people of the plains were truly fascinating. I could tell you stories that would take me days to recite, all about December’s experiences upon those plains. Of a land of great, many-armed demon gods who stood over twenty feet tall. Of the peoples who simultaneously worshipped, and bound, and served those demons in a strange symbiosis. Of how December started as a slave among them, pulled by a rope behind strange beasts with humps upon their backs, eventually proving herself to her masters and becoming a servant, then a laborer, then an initiate in their Inspirers, those who interacted directly with the demons.

There is not time. I do not think there ever will be, for there are more stories than I can ever tell, even as a man with no end to his days.

It will have to suffice for this tale to illustrate the woman (now in her late sixties) who eventually returned to the monastery, bearing the tattoos of Inspiration across her face, accompanied by seventeen ritual servants to protect her—and kill her if she tried to reveal her secrets. The river was dry, and in the monastery she found only desiccated corpses, the disease having taken them to the very last soul. Judging by how many lay in old, dusty beds, the sheets moth-eaten by time, they had gotten sick enough together that there had been no one to bury them as they started to die.

Someone had tried, though, for she found Brother Grund's corpse in the graveyard beside a mostly filled-in grave. He had died alone in the field, and scrub weeds covered his bones such that the only way she identified him was by the sword-and-heart pendant she found near the skull.

She sat a long while in that overgrown graveyard, a wild bouquet to the dead. That was the first time she *hated*. All this time, all this loss, and she'd never turned from misery to anger. Now it burned. For if the Prophet would not protect a man so loving as Brother Grund, what good was he?

She had a chance to ask. Three nights later she woke in a dream to find him standing nearby. A rough-haired man with light skin and an unkempt beard, wearing clothing tied by a rope, as depicted in many of the illustrations. This was a man who didn't care for material things, and he stood by a cliff and looked at a landscape broken and dominated by red lightning.

He turned toward her and seemed far, far more tired than she'd ever imagined he would.

"What has happened?" he asked. "Where are you from?"

"I . . . I'm December, from the kingdom of Mountaincrest."

He frowned. That name obviously meant nothing to him. Perhaps the land hadn't been called that during his time.

"You slew a demon," she said. "A terrible, tall monster—you killed it with a spike shot through its heart."

"Ah," he said, eyes distant. "I was . . . a different man then. Why are you in the Spiritual Realm, hating me and invading my dreams with your Connection?"

"Your dreams?" she asked. "What realm? I know this is not Mountaincrest, but . . ." She took a deep breath. That didn't matter. "The demon has escaped. It's destroying everything; there's a plague, and it . . . it's terrible. So terrible. Can you help? Please."

"I cannot travel currently," he said, sounding exhausted. "I am

The Fires of December

trapped without portal off of this cursed, dying land with no light, other than his.”

“Surely you can do something,” she said, stepping up to him, taking his arm. “Please.”

He looked to her, and something . . . ancient seemed to kindle in his eyes. Something familiar?

“You remember a better me than I deserve,” he said. “I will . . . try to send help, though it will take time. You will need to wait.”

Wait?

December laughed.

Her lives had been full of so much waiting.

“Why?” she demanded. “Why didn’t you leave us the tools to defeat this thing? Why leave us to our suffering? Why don’t you care?”

“I did care,” he said. “Maybe I can again. It’s a skill that a man must relearn.” He looked to her again, and . . . he had the stare too, didn’t he? Of one who had lived too many lives. “I left the passphrases. Three of them. I know they were recorded. Those were supposed to help, if this happened.”

“You left them with the king,” she said. “They are lost to us. Do you know them?”

“It has been so long, and the words must be exact . . .” He seemed so weathered, so . . . relatably weathered. “I will try to send something that can help . . .”

The dream ended with her waking among her seventeen attendants, half of whom were awake on watch. She could not say if the dream was real—she had no idea, even still, if her life here was a dream. Could dreams have dreams?

She thought it must have been her imagination, for the Prophet never came to save them, nor did any of his promised help arrive. She wasn’t certain what he could have done if he had, for everyone she loved was already dead.

A fire burned deep within her—one she hadn’t acknowledged in

years, save to remind herself it was there. That fire . . . that was the real her. Tucked away, with love and hope, because the person that was a husk around the flames had to pretend to live. She had preserved the December who cared, separating her from this other woman, living a life that might not be real. She was both, of course, and she knew it.

That was the secret.

She returned to the people of the plains. Despite the tattoos on her face and the new language she had learned to speak, she did not belong to them. She continued to keep a part of herself distant, held back, reserved, as Brother Grund had noticed. That fire. Like the distant fires in her eyes, the stars people said they could sometimes see. That was *her*, and *she* belonged in another place, another time.

The people of the plains did not begrudge her this; they knew she was not truly one of them, but she had skill with the demons. This was a pragmatic people. They couldn't afford to be anything but.

As more years passed among them, she had chances to interact with the great demons of this land—who were translucent and walked on many legs, their faces hollow and expressionless. She watched them do battle, and made them offerings of songs, which they would destroy both from mind and memory as they consumed. Eventually she became the head Inspirer for her clan, and learned the deepest secrets of their interactions with demons.

Of how a demon *could* be overpowered by a strong will, but it had to be a will *trained* for such. We use terms like that, “strong will,” as if most people don't possess a kind of stubbornness. In this case, the will had to withstand pain, and a leeching of the soul, and fight back. It had to be unyielding in its focus for what it wanted, and in so doing, warp the demon's own perspective of what *it* wanted. Beyond that, there were some ways of bargaining that worked, and some that did not.

The demons from the plains were distinct from the ones near the capital. They existed like animals, with instincts but not wants. They

The Fires of December

did not speak, and your bargain was to offer pain or reward. Silver dust or song. They . . . didn't have emotions she could understand. They didn't even really seem alive—more like the wind or flame, a thing that moved, and imitated life at times, but only in semblance. One could not touch them, for their very touch was death to the living.

By the time she was walking with a cane and *really* feeling her age, she could battle wills with any demon she met, and they *feared* her. So yes, they did have emotions. Primal ones. One might have thought this fear would have given her the most power over them . . . but instead, it was her least successful time among the nomadic peoples. No demon would deal with her, in the same way casinos are known to reject the patronage of people too good at winning.

Until, that was, the Megalith changed the balance of power on the plains. Fully reconstituted and more, it had devoured December's entire homeland—each and every soul and living thing—and burned all cities to dust and ash. When it arrived, the last hope December had nurtured, that Geoffrim would somehow use the news she'd given him to control and defeat the thing, withered at last. She'd known already, with the coming of the plague, but now she acknowledged it. Geoffrim had failed to protect them, despite all his bold words. He'd taken the power and survived, but had doomed them all.

The Megalith advanced as a storm of fire, wind, and light, its body glowing within a shadow sixty feet tall. Feeling too full of the souls of mortals and craving the substance of demons, it arrived to hunt its smaller fellows. After the Megalith killed dozens, the rest came looking for *her*. Tall, many-limbed beings of unknowable motives and strange tones, they crossed the open plains with sorrowful gaits, singing to December a discordant song that she somehow knew was a plea for safety.

Unfortunately it was too fast, and they could not outrun it. Each fell to the apex predator that descended from the ravaged highlands.





Demon and human alike hid from the former Megalith, who took the form of a towering, majestic cyclone that darkened the sky for hundreds of miles, threatening to consume the planet itself.

December, seasoned as an old coat many times patched but coming apart at the seams anyway, came to meet it. By this point, she did not often think of the life she had left behind, or the fire of her previous self embedded deep within her like a pearl. She was defined by her learning and skill, not her relationships. Therefore she . . . so tired . . . confronted the Megalith, staff in hand.

All grew still.

A voice, like a thunderbolt, in her mind.

You, the demon said. You have the last of my power. The piece I lost long ago. Before I was slain. When I was new to this land.

“How?” she asked to the silence. “When?”

The light in your eyes. The gift of your birth.

The stars. The fires. I do not know, even now, where December’s mother obtained a fragment of the demon’s power . . . but with a kiss, a whisper, and a tear, she had given it to her daughter. The reason the plague had never taken December, and the reason my looks into the future affected her in such an odd way.

The demon destroyed December for it.

Oh, she fought, but in that instant, all of her knowledge, practice, training, and learning were made irrelevant. This creature, with all of its might, was to the demons she’d dominated like the sun to a candle. It ignored her pleas, it laughed at her willpower, and it consumed her promises, giving nothing in return. It was ravenous, destructive, and wanton. It ripped her open like you might split a fish, ribs exposed to the open air, and tore free her soul and drank every tiny drop of power before raging that there was no more.

Another might have died at such brutality, but December was a head Inspirer, with not only unnatural willpower, but a faint power of persistence. She lived through her own murder just long enough

The Fires of December

to lift trembling, bloodied fingers toward the light of the storm around her. See in it a face, the tiniest fragment of something she recognized.

“Beautiful . . .” she whispered.

She finally breathed out her last, her blood spilled and splashed across dusty, thirsty soil, her flesh torn and discarded, her stubbornness denied, her willpower broken. Shattered as easily as an egg upon the rocks.

At eighty-eight years of age, December died her second death.

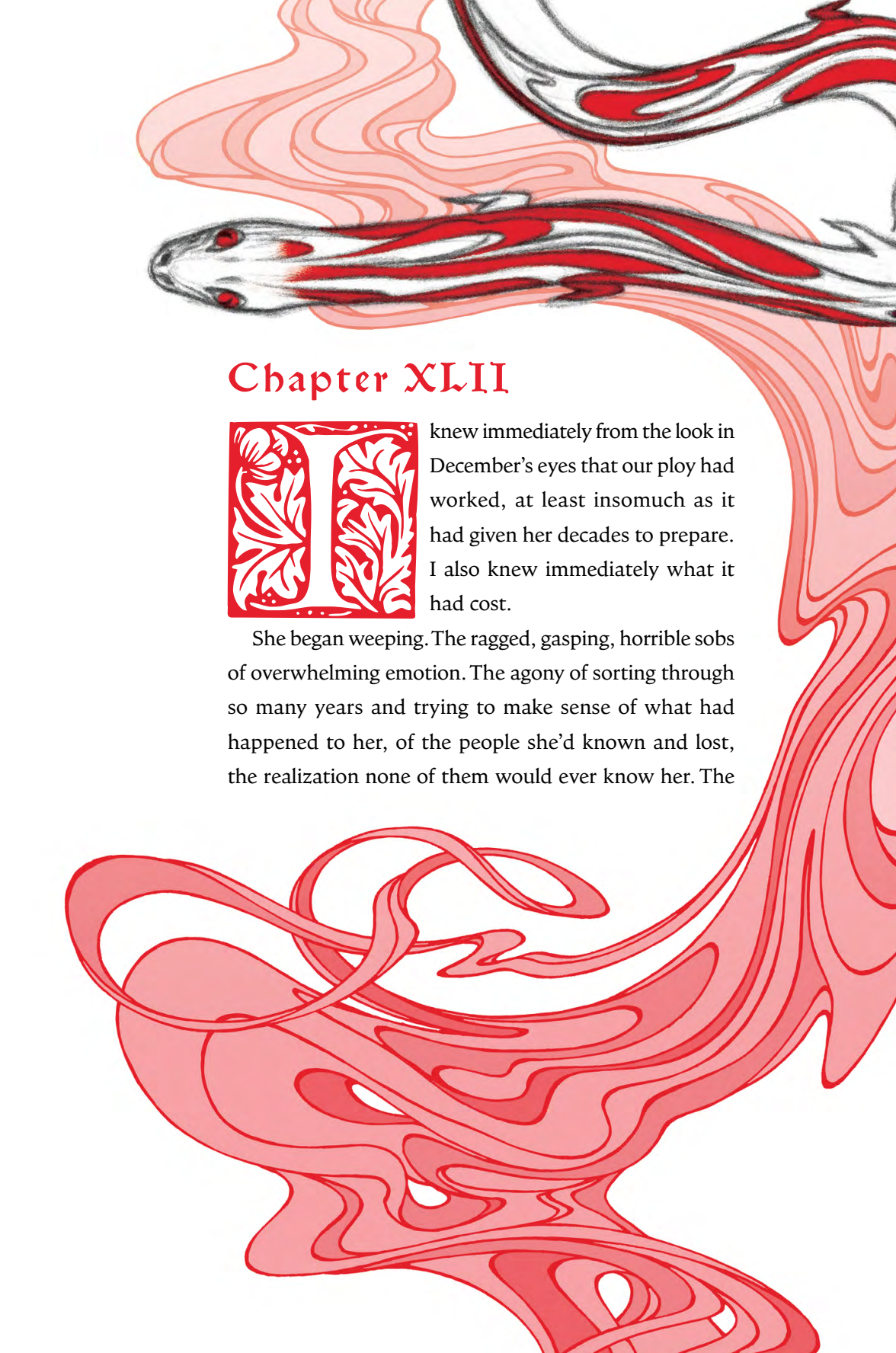
One . . .

Two . . .

Three . . .

She ripped from the darkness and forced her eyes open to a room in the palace. She was kneeling beside the bloodied body of a man she loved, her hair shivering in the wind of a tempest swirling around a cyclone of fire.

There, December took breath in again.



Chapter XLII



knew immediately from the look in December's eyes that our ploy had worked, at least insomuch as it had given her decades to prepare. I also knew immediately what it had cost.

She began weeping. The ragged, gasping, horrible sobs of overwhelming emotion. The agony of sorting through so many years and trying to make sense of what had happened to her, of the people she'd known and lost, the realization none of them would ever know her. The

suffering of sorrows magnified beyond what any person should ever have to bear. The distance she suddenly felt from the life she'd left behind, knowing that seconds had passed, but that she had poured a *lifetime* of experiences into that space.

You might have expected joy that her life was not over, but that was smothered by the more raw, more dominating sense of just . . . just existing. Like a suitcase for emotions that was overstuffed with a thousand garments—to the point that you didn't know how anyone ever got it to shut, but you knew if it opened, it would rain shirts for hours.

Some of it had to leak out. I embraced her and listened to her miserable, trembling sobs as she tried to carry it all.

"I know," I whispered. "I'm sorry."

"I couldn't stop it. It killed me anyway. I trained and I studied and I read every book and I dominated every demon and I became the head Inspirer and I . . . And I . . . I couldn't stop it. I couldn't *save* them. I . . ."

"It was real," I said, pulling back and holding her by the shoulders. "And it was not. The real part is what you feel. The not?"

She blinked through tears, and looked around the room. To Amaal and Tamantha huddled by their furniture, to Dmitrovik lying by the wall, stirring but dazed. To . . . to Flint . . . Did she love him still, after all this time?

Yes, that fire inside of her said, emerging and bringing forward the parts she had locked away. *You held that love all those years. You needed it. You lived off it.*

The blood on her dress was still warm, and he was still breathing. Time. She had found time.

There is a symphony I wish I could share with you, but it can never be performed, for it is not a symphony of sound. Instead, it is the concert of beautiful purpose that occurs when a person realizes their experiences, their passions, and their needs are finally in alignment. It

The Fires of December

is the song of someone who has *found* themselves, and it is sung by the heart itself.

I felt such a symphony come to its grand, triumphant climax as December—Fosterling, Child, Maiden, Mother, Witch, Lady, Grandmother, Wife, Widow, Scholar, Savant, and Lover—stood up from behind the barrier. A mountain of experience come alive. She stepped around her cover and stared at the tempest straight on, then advanced.

Step by step, into the wind and toward the flames, in a room full of demonic fury. Twenty feet tall and twenty feet wide, a swirling storm of light and wind, with flurries expanding in radials beyond it. December raised fingers to one such lighted gale and drew from it threads that became a black coat, which she pulled on, one arm then the other, striding ever forward, hair as uproarious as flames, the wind carrying tears from eyes that stopped weeping as they became increasingly sure of themselves.

Fear the woman who has lost everything.

Fear so much more the one who has a chance to reclaim it.

Once again towing the past behind her like the expanse of all starlit nights, December met the tempest of fires at the center of the cyclone. Then entered it.

The demon watched this with an emotion akin to amusement. Here, a human was returning a piece of power it hadn't even realized it had lost. It wanted so badly to destroy them all, though not—as you might imagine—because of its imprisonment. That pain was fading. It destroyed because . . . well, that was its nature.

Surrounded by the light, feeling its attention on her, December tried again to stop this being—the one, to her eyes, she had confronted mere minutes before. It was newborn now, as it hadn't spent decades feeding on souls.

She knew it. She knew it so very well.

“Obey me,” she said, putting into the words all the force of decades of training, the learning of the ancients, the experience of a refugee

who had touched and known the fragments of this being's very soul. "Obey me, for you are *weak*."

The tempest shivered. She felt its fear, and her willpower—her imagining of it—projected weakness, which distorted it, forced it to be what she thought it to be. Her training said that yes, this would *work*. She could bend it to her will, and *she* would become its master.

Except . . . that felt wrong. That wasn't why she was here, was it? To dominate? That would destroy the demon, she knew. Crystallize it into stone.

It seemed the only path. It was what her training said to do. This was why she had prepared.

Wasn't it?

Could training be wrong? Could the learning of the ancients be incomplete? Could experience lie?

Possibly. It wasn't that she threw away what she'd learned, but she realized it could be adapted. Broken and rebuilt, as could only ever be accomplished by a master who had full fluency in a skill. Her second life was not useless, not by far. It takes a lifetime to realize how to transcend what you've learned. Fortunately, December was on her third.

"Obey me," she said, doing as her teachers on the plains had taught her never to do—and softening her will. "Please."

The tempest stopped shivering, and the demon knew what a broken will meant. This was the time to strike. This was—

"Beautiful," December said, turning to look at the fiery tendrils, flowing much like the colors of the river, which spread out from her and formed a streaming column with her at the open center. "Where are you?"

Only a tiny piece of the demon was Beautiful. The other parts had been named a thousand different things, but this framework of her understanding gave it something to latch on to. And so Beautiful's face appeared in the storm, flowing from the flames, and spoke.

The Fires of December

“One of us,” it said, “must die today.”

“Why?” she said.

“It is our nature to destroy. It is your nature to resist.”

“That is . . .” she said, considering. “That is true.”

The tempest swirled, and Beautiful—the part that was Beautiful—sent confusion through it. “You agree?”

“It would be foolish to deny what is obvious,” December said. “That is why I named you.”

“I will not be flattered.”

“It is only flattery if it is insincere, Beautiful. Feel me. Know what I know. See what I saw. An entire land, ravaged. Everything you could ever want to consume, eaten, until you rage against the lack. You will destroy this world, and then will be left alone in a void, with nothing to eat ever again. Is that what you want?”

“It is what must be. This is what I am.”

“Is that all that you are?”

“Yes. I’ve been told it enough to know. Evil. Terrible. Monster. Aberration. Demon.”

“Beautiful,” she whispered. “Merciful.”

“I cannot be that,” it said. “It is *not my nature*.”

“Isn’t it?” She turned in the spinning light, and was not consumed, because of the gift of a dying mother’s love. “I’ve been called so many things, Beautiful. Every person I meet wants to put me into a box of their design. I must fit. Everyone must *fit*.”

“As you say.”

“Except,” she said, tipping her head back, “sometimes we don’t, do we? There are so many boxes, you’d think they could contain everyone, but they don’t. Why is that?”

“This is a thing of mortals. I do not care.”

“So you claim, yet you listen to our compliments and our insults. You know we will hurt you, and still you hunt for us. Once we release you, you destroy us, knowing it will not satisfy you. I think you

care, but you don't want to. You are unlike the entities on the plains. You know and understand us. You are one of us."

"Human?"

She knelt and pushed her hands into the fire, pulling molten air free and forming—as she imagined it—the shape of Beautiful's head, holding it before her, meeting his eyes.

"Alive, Beautiful," she said. "You're alive."

"I don't want to be," the voice, suddenly small, whispered. "I want to go back to the way I was, long ago. With no pain, no anger, nothing. Just . . . existing. So I will destroy it all, until nothing remains . . . And I . . . I will float, and hate, and still feel . . . It won't solve anything. Because . . ."

"Because you're alive. Kill us all, and you will live on. You have changed and cannot go back. I don't know when it happened, but it did."

Beautiful blinked out tears of flames, which rolled across her hands. "We cannot stop the destruction."

"Why?"

"Because it is my—"

"Just a box," she said.

"I *need* boxes. I *need* to be able to understand."

"Then," she said, resting her forehead to his, "let's make a new one. One we can gradually abandon as you grow beyond it. You cannot control yourself yet, but can you give me power enough over you to help you learn? Will you bond to me again, the whole of you, and let me decide for you? I promise to help you, over time, learn how to be free without annihilating the kingdom."

"No," Beautiful said. "No, I can't. You will crush me. You will destroy me."

"Will I?" she asked.

". . . No. No, you won't. I know it. Because you didn't."

She smiled. "Love. Goodness. Mercy."

The Fires of December

“Things I have not known. Except . . . once . . .”

“Would you like to?”

“How?”

“Stop the fires and the wind.”

Hesitantly, he did. It calmed and cooled, leaving a radiant column around her.

“What good did that do?” Beautiful asked.

“Listen.”

Laughter from Amaal and Tamantha. Joy from myself, the immortal, raising a fist and cheering. Tears of relief from Dmitrovik.

“That,” December whispered, her forehead still against his small one she had pulled from the light, “is mercy, Beautiful. Do you feel it?”

In response . . . a bond.

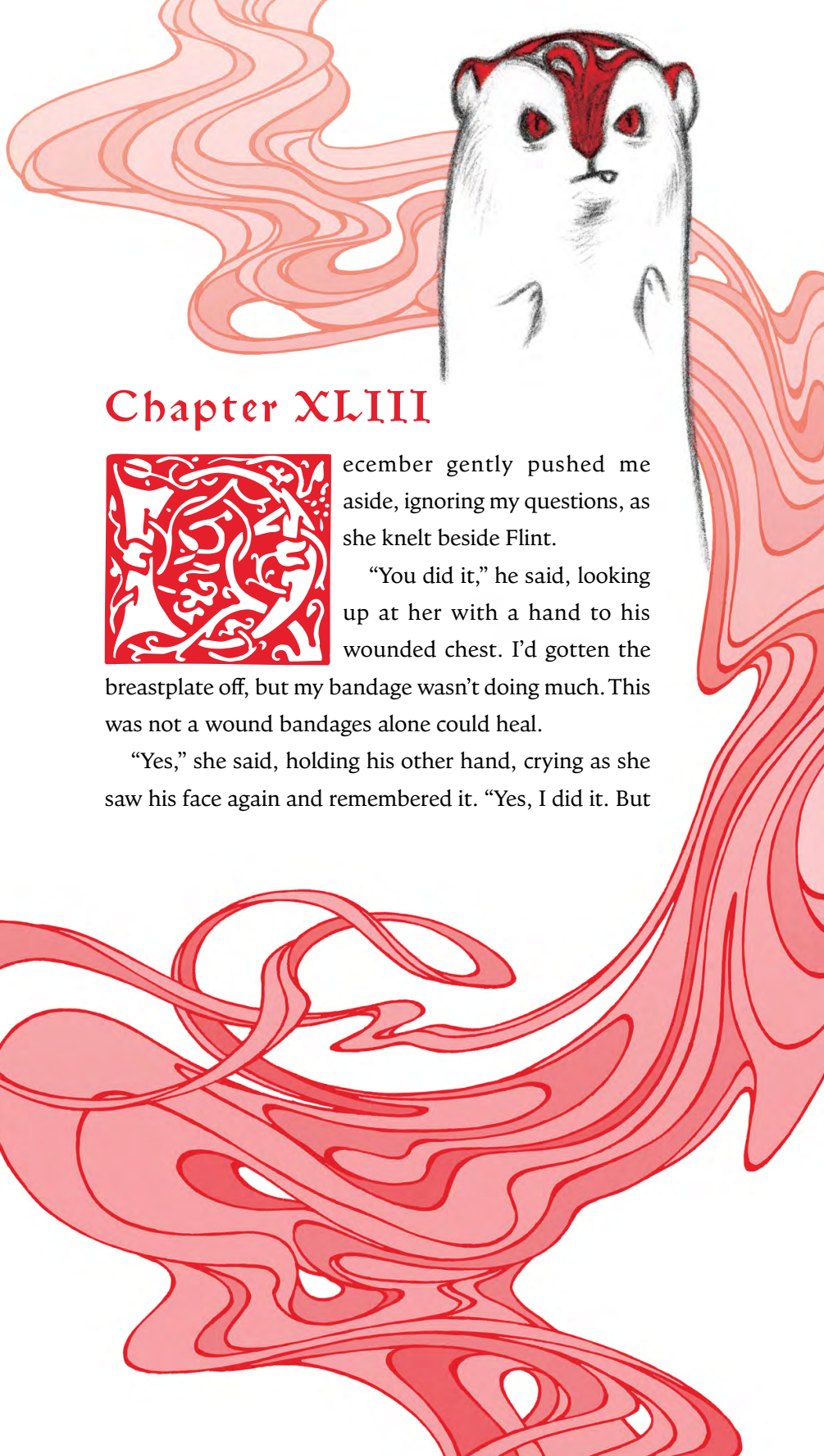
The fire from before, springing alive inside her, renewed a thousand times over.

We will try, the demon said, to live.

December stood as the storm melted away around her, the curtain of flaming demon evaporating, revealing her alone at the center of the destroyed room. Her eyes glowed with the sparkling essence of many, many distant lights. Like fires.

She had created a new box and, with the wisdom of knowing when to cast aside what she’d learned, accomplished what all those ancients had failed to do. Something scholars around the cosmere have never replicated. Not just a simple bond of command and obedience; December *fully shared* her soul with a being of destructive negative power, the antithesis of life.

Yet neither of them was burned because of it.



Chapter XLIII



December gently pushed me aside, ignoring my questions, as she knelt beside Flint.

“You did it,” he said, looking up at her with a hand to his wounded chest. I’d gotten the

breastplate off, but my bandage wasn’t doing much. This was not a wound bandages alone could heal.

“Yes,” she said, holding his other hand, crying as she saw his face again and remembered it. “Yes, I did it. But

Flint, I need you. I've forgotten myself. I've forgotten joy, and even love seems a figment. I need it. I *need* to remember."

"I . . . don't know if I can help . . ." he said, though he managed a sitting posture with a wince.

"You can," she said, hand to his face, feeling those silvery whiskers. "Because Geoffrim is out there, and he'll see what we've done. He will return. But you see . . . I have had a long time to consider . . . and the Prophet, he told me something . . ."

"The Prophet?" Flint asked.

"Yes. I saw him. I need one last thing from you, if you can find the strength. Please." She whispered something softly to him, and didn't even tell me.

He blinked, then shook his head. "Love. I'm not that hero anymore. I'm not strong anymore. I'm no swordsman."

"Did I fall in love with a swordsman or a scoundrel?" she said, tears in her eyes, which glowed with an inner light. "Today I need the man who sat at that bar and knew every imaginable way to exploit a person."

"I'm not sure I'm that man either," he admitted. "I don't know what I . . . what I am."

"Flint . . . what if we're every person we *ever* were? What if that's the problem with the boxes? What if you don't stop being the girl when you grow, or the sinner when you learn? What if you never stop being the lover because you hate, or the mother when your children have left you? What if we're a thousand different people at once? What if . . . what if I'm all those women, and you are all those men?"

"If that's true," Flint said with a smile, blood on his lips, "then I suppose he's still . . . still in there somewhere, isn't he?"

Geoffrim burst into the palace's front foyer not moments later, just as December predicted. His eyes went wide at the stopped tempest, then searched through the wreckage of the room's furniture for the culprit.



The Fires of December

December stepped out into the center of the broken room to confront him—this, the man who would have thrown away a world to live another day. She realized she didn't empathize, and never could empathize, with such an action. Oh, he'd given excuses about protecting the kingdom, about someone needing to take the power. She cut through that, and saw only selfishness. An evil so common it was unrecognizable to her, because she had cast it from herself. As all decent people must.

He met her eyes.

She made hers glow.

"Well," he said, drawing himself up, recovering his composure. "I shall have to use the powers given to me after all."

Beautiful quivered inside her, genuinely afraid of the power that had held him captive. The entirety of the Megalith demon's core had withdrawn within her; if you're surprised that her heart could contain such an incredibly enormous entity, remember how many years she had spent expanding it.

She wasn't depending on Beautiful at the moment. For Flint, in possession of years of skill in sneaking, attacked Geoffrim from behind. Bleeding, barely on his feet, Flint managed it—stabbing the finance minister straight through the back. Geoffrim shook his head in annoyance and pulled forward off the sword.

Then he spun and grabbed Flint, pulling him close. "Didn't I do this already?" Geoffrim asked, ramming his knife once again into Flint.

In response, Flint whispered through bloody lips words that he didn't have strength to project. Geoffrim shoved him off, to collapse, then turned on December.

"Really?" he asked her. "A sword in the back. You thought that would work?"

"I met the Prophet, Geoffrim," December said.

A gasp sounded behind her. "WHAT?"

"Later, Amaal," December said.

Brandon Sanderson

“But—”

“LATER.”

(From this interaction, I can’t decide if that priestess had no sense of dramatic timing, or the perfect sense.)

“I met him,” December continued to Geoffrim, “and he told me he’d left the tools for us . . . and I accused him of wasting that knowledge on kings. But you see, there was so long to think, and ponder his words. The *whole thing, everything* he’d said to me.

“I realized from context . . . Well, he said they were written down. And I’ve learned there should be three of them. The first, to put power into something. The third, to disperse the power. And the second . . . the second to take it out of the vessel in which it had been placed.”

Geoffrim realized it that same moment. The loss of all that Investiture should have been more obvious to him, but then, he hadn’t held it for very long, so he wasn’t familiar with its nuances.

He gasped, then spun.

To where Flint, standing up straight, wiped the blood from his grinning lips. “You really should listen better when the priests are teaching,” he said, then *rammed* his sword straight through Geoffrim’s throat. “Don’t be a dick.”

He pulled the sword free. Geoffrim stumbled back, bleeding and wide-eyed, his healing power gone and taken by another. He stumbled, collapsed, and died—fully three years before his disease would have taken him.

The End of Part IV

Epilogue



his isn't the kind of story that ends with a kiss and a wedding.

You see, it took time and effort from both of them to find their normal. December carried a new weight of years, and had to learn to be herself again—or rather, how to encourage the many selves that made up the one person we called December to enjoy living after so many decades of study and suffering.

Plus, there was Beautiful. He leaned into his freedom,

demanding December take him new places to try new things. She soon gave him the form of the cat again, with a modicum of real power to influence the world as practice. Then she spent years apologizing to the people he burned (mildly) for petting him wrong. He'd learn. Eventually.

There *were* other struggles, granted, often involving personalities like stars that met like stones. I will not lie and say otherwise. There were difficult days. There always are, aren't there?

That, you see, is life.

I showed Flint how to change the passphrases on the power he held, so don't think you can sneak in and steal it from him as easily as he did from Geoffrim. He wanted to be rid of it, as he thought it too much for him, until he learned how it would extend his life. Slow his aging. Let someone, over time, catch up to him. Then he started bragging about how good he looked now that he could strut again, and regularly tried to trick December into going too long before renewing her clothing.

Yes, the blood continued flowing, and never did curdle in the real timeline. (The body wouldn't decay so long as the demon didn't make another one, which it felt no need to do.) Beautiful remained in King-seat, content to learn slowly what it was to be alive. Oh . . .

And the Prophet did eventually show up. (Kind of.)

December found him on the doorstep of her hotel one day. She and Flint had taken to being innkeepers, at least officially, when Duke Kird—the one with the flotilla—took over the city and crowned himself king. Things were still tense, but workable, between him and Flint. Helps when the woman you're courting bears the soul of an all-consuming monstrous entity that could vaporize your enemies in the blink of an eye.

(I do wish I could tell you that someone like Matin had ended up as king, but alas, that isn't how politics go. Though Matin did make an excellent Minister of Finance. He never found out about the life December had led with him, as she thought telling him wouldn't

The Fires of December

be fair. She kept quiet about both extra lifetimes from then on, except to Flint, Amaal, and Tamantha. Flint and Matin did become close, to the point that she could watch from close by as children she'd once called her own grew and blossomed.)

Oh, right. The Prophet. Well, he couldn't escape his current planet—Roshar was . . . well, we don't have time to get into *that*. But he did send a simulacrum, wearing his form and through whose eyes he could see. (Those on December's world did not have the arcanum to tell the difference between the real him and this emissary wearing his form, and the distinction isn't terribly meaningful, as the real him directed it.)

His arrival was years late, granted, but December was shocked to see that he even remembered their interaction. (It had been real to him too, which will make sense to you if you follow the intricacies of how these things work. Don't worry if you don't. I barely pay attention myself.)

The Prophet did look, December thought, even worse for wear than he had before. (And she had no idea.)

"I'm sorry," he said to her. "I . . . tried."

"It's all right," she said, scanning him up and down. "We solved the problem with the demon on our own, but you look like you need a good meal. Come in and eat something. First, though, there's someone I want you to meet . . ."

Amaal was overjoyed, naturally. So much, in fact, she lost her ability to speak—which is really saying something. She just sat at the table, chin resting on her hands, and stared at him. It was the most wonderful hour of her life, followed closely by the day when her teachings to December had literally saved the entire world.

And I almost forgot. The *real* mystery, the *true* reason for this story: Who Killed Hoid?

We assumed for a while it had been Petva, as I hadn't been able to recover the memories of the few days leading up to my death.

However, after recuperating with December and Flint for a few weeks (during which time I gathered this story), I hit upon a brilliant idea. I'd come to this planet hunting the Shard Valor, and she had a very important temple in the city. Forbidden to anyone who wasn't a priest, true, but I was excellent at getting into places where I wasn't wanted, and . . .

Yes. You guessed it. The moment I stepped foot inside, I burst into flames.

"Bother," I said, again becoming a lump of burning Hoid-coal.

Best I can gather, I did this very thing during my first days in the city, then ran in a panic—while on fire—toward the river to try to put myself out. I made it three streets over before burning up. Flint then found out via the news in the underworld and collected me, assuming someone had assassinated me.

When this happened a second time, he laughed at me. I didn't even manage to bite his fingers in retribution. That said, as I rebuilt myself, I realized something important. Valor had left a trap specifically for someone like me, so I was on the *right track*. I was able to trick Amaal into describing the murals inside the temple, which depicted various worlds that Valor had visited, and that gave me a very important clue. I needed to search for three worlds where dragons ruled.

The rest of this story turned out as you'd probably hope. December had the hexers freed, and told any who were genuinely interested in the art how to go south and study with the people of the plains, who were so much better at it anyway. She resisted any attempts to be named a prophet, and it mostly worked. Flint advised the new king, and they worked out their issues. Even Melsi eventually forgave him, as she became the new Minister of Espionage. Tamantha turned down the hands of three different squires over the next few years, then ended up marrying her rival clothing designer. That's a good story; maybe you can get her to tell it sometime. Dmitrovik managed the hotel empire December built after buying up additional properties—she proved

The Fires of December

quite a proficient hotelier—and his daughter got *all* the drawing materials she wanted, plus a glowing cat to pet that never hurt her, but sometimes lightly singed the people who annoyed her. Really, could you ask for more?

So it was that two years after saving the kingdom, December stepped up before Amaal, royal priestess, to receive her blessing. December smiled toward the visiting Brother Grund in the audience, then to her friends and foster family, before accepting Flint as her husband with a kiss.

(A piece of advice: Please remember that it *is* sometimes more narratively interesting for me to lie.)

That night she sat with her arm around him on one of the city piers, watching the river with its shifting paint, warm and content. She thought, right then, that this must be the most wonderful and happy time all her lives would ever know.

She was wrong, though.

Wonderfully, blessedly wrong.

The End

Postscript



ost stories I write come from ideas that have been brewing in me for a great long time. This is not such a story.

I had time during the holidays in 2024, and wanted something different to write before I had to launch into my next big project (Mistborn: Ghostbloods). I tried writing three different ideas that I'd had for many years . . . and none of them worked in the moment. I wasn't enjoying them, I wasn't passionate about them. I was, therefore, frustrated. Here, I'd given myself a little time off from main projects, but nothing was coming to me.

Then, one night, the spark.

One of the persistent wonders I've had in my life is what it would be like to go back in time, into my body as a youth, and how my world would change if I could approach problems with my current maturity and knowledge. Don't imagine this like some great regret; to me, it's more of an academic, fun posit. I'll sit at night on occasion, thinking through how it might have worked, different things I might have tried. Would I try to explain to people, and prove that I had knowledge of the future? Would I remember enough of the trends of the stock market to invest well, and would that be immoral? Would I be frightened of ruining my life, making events I cherish not come to pass? Would I try to find Emily as a teenager, or would I wait until we were both

Brandon Sanderson

grown, and try to play out the relationship as close as it happened originally, as to not risk it going wrong?

It's amazing that it took me so long to realize that was a story. But one night in late 2024, it became one—the type of story that springs into your mind, and then from it like Athena, fully formed. I wrote the first two chapters the next day, and they have changed very little to become what you read. I actually started with the name, December, because I've always thought it pretty, because it is my own birth month, and because it evoked the right feel. The end of one life, one year, and the advent of another. It was worth the question people would have (why is the word “December” in the Cosmere?) to use it, because it was from line one integral to her character.

I'd found a picture online once, on some subreddit or another, that an amateur artist had done and posted for critique: a woman with dark hair, a certain melancholy look, and a distant gaze. I used this for the model in my mind, though it was not a finished or professional work yet, and I only vaguely remembered it. It still captured something powerful in the eyes of the woman. With this and my own dreams in mind, I wrote the rest of the book.

My biggest question was whether to maintain the melancholy, storybook feel of the first chapter through the entire piece, or not. I knew it would be a Hoid story, but he's capable of many different voices. I made the decision to let it fall into his more familiar narrative style, save for the occasional passage reminiscent of the first chapter, knowing it would perhaps be controversial with readers. (Among the beta readers, it was.) Having the whole book, I feel it was right. The tone of the first chapter, though powerful, wouldn't have been sustainable; it is achieved by not naming people and keeping distance to provide a storybook feel—and I wanted to get to know December, and her associates, better than that. It also let me bring back the tone in force for the climax, when December lived her full second life, then came back for her third.

Postscript

Sometimes, a book just needs to be written—and there's no way to explain it other than that. I am perceived, even by myself, as a somewhat mechanical writer because of my lectures, and my ability to break down story. That is not the full truth of the artistic process. Sometimes you write because it needs to be written, and the story comes to you in a fever of creative understanding. Sometimes, you can't quite believe that the book exists when you are done. As if you've just lived an entire life in microcosm, and it feels odd that nobody yet knows.

This is such a story.

Brandon Sanderson

Acknowledgments

Artist: Tran Nguyen, for both interior and cover art.

Audiobook narrator: Michael Kramer.

At JABberwocky Literary Agency: Joshua Bilmes, Susan Velasquez, Christina Zobel, Valentina Sainato, and Brady McReynolds. At Zeno Literary Agency: John Berlyne.

Printing partners: Bill Wearne, Kim Wearne, Dan Deardorff, Jim McCafferty, Michael Schrage, Tony Strahl, Amy Park, Carla Zacarias, Chad Haycox, and Landry Evans.

At Dragonsteel: Emily Sanderson—Queen, CoPresident, C.O.O.

Creative Development: VP Isaac Stewart, Art Director Ben McSweeney, Art Director Shawn Boyles, Rachael Lynn Buchanan, Jennifer Neal, Hayley Lazo, Priscilla Spencer, and Anna Earley.

Editorial: The Inspirational Peter Ahlstrom as VP, Continuity Director Karen Ahlstrom, Editorial Director Kristy S. Gilbert, Jennie Stevens, Suzanne Uchytel, Betsey Ahlstrom, and Emily Shaw-Higham.

Publicity & Marketing: VP Adam Horne (a.k.a. the Unwitting Mug Collector), Octavia Escamilla, Tayan Hatch, Taylor Hatch, Donald Mustard III, Jack Rose, Michael Bateman, and Shadi Davarzani.

Operations & HR: VP Matt “WoT Leatherbound Celebration Ringmaster” Hatch, Operations Director Jane Horne, Lex Willhite, Jerrod Walker, Kathleen Dorsey Sanderson, Ethan Skarstedt, Becky Wilson, Christian Fairbanks, and Kendra Hill.

Merchandise, Support, & Events: Kara Stewart (VP of Merchandising, Events, and Fluffy Bridge Four Blankets), Merchandise Director

Brandon Sanderson

Christi Jacobsen, Events Director Kellyn Neumann, Richard Rubert, Dallin Holden, DC Davies, Ally Reep, Brett Moore, Joy Allen, Katy Ives, Daniel Phipps, Braydonn Moore, Mem Rubert, Jacob Chrisman, Camilla Waite, Quinton Martin, Hollie Rubert, Gwen Hickman, Amanda Butterfield, Logan Reep, Pablo Mooney, Zoe Hatch, Owen Knowlton, Laura Loveridge, Jake DeLlamas, Stephanie Triptow, Gub Patterson, and Joel Sanderson.

Finance: Finance Director Emma Tan-Stoker and Matt Hampton.

Narrative: VP Dan Wells, our only member of the Narrative Department, because his spiked Inquisitor skeleton scares off prospective hires. (It's true; he really has one.)

Proofreader: Lara Kennedy.

Arcanists: Eric Lake, Evgeni "Argent" Kirilov, Joshua "Jofwu" Harkey, David Behrens, Ian McNatt, Ben Marrow, and Grace Douglas.

Beta readers: Kendra Alexander, Siena Buchanan, Chana Oshira Block, Brandon Cole, Dariyan Edsinger, Ted Herman, Alyx Hoge, Linnea Lindstrom, Chris McGrath, Suzanne Musin, Jory Phillips, Sean VanBlack, and Rob West.

Gamma readers included many of the arcanists and beta readers as well as Collin Abeln, Krystl Allred, Jessica Ashcraft, Rahkeem Ball, Sam Baskin, Shivam Bhatt, Tim Challener, Christopher Cottingham, Joe Deardeuff, David Fallon, Aaron Ford, Christina Goodman, Brian T. Hill, Alexis Horizon, Jayden King, Bob Kluttz, Ashley Kowalczyk, Ari Kufer, Valencia Kumley, Jessie Lake, Eliyahu Berelowitz Levin, Zenef Mark Lindberg, Karen Marks, Drew McCaffrey, Lauren McCaffrey, TJ McGrath, João Menezes Morais, Seth Mosey, Shannon Nelson, Ene Nytch, Bao D. Pham, Jennifer Pugh, Rachel Rada, Becca Reppert, Britton Roney, Nisarg Shah, Amit Shteinheart, Gary Singer, Todd H. Singer, Lauren Strach, Billy Todd, Glen Vogelaar, Philip Vorwallner, Spencer White, Deana Covell Whitney, Dale Wiens, Rosemary Williams, Kendra Wilson, Kyle Wilson, and Lingting "Botanica" Xu.



Brandon Sanderson grew up in Lincoln, Nebraska. He lives in Utah with his wife and children and teaches creative writing at Brigham Young University. In addition to completing Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time*, he is the author of such bestsellers as the Mistborn saga, *Warbreaker*, the Stormlight Archive series beginning with *The Way of Kings*, *The Rithmatist*, the Skyward series, the Reckoners series beginning with *Steelheart*, and the Alcatraz vs. the Evil Librarians series. He won the 2013 Hugo Award for *The Emperor's Soul*, a novella set in the world of his acclaimed first novel, *Elantris*. For behind-the-scenes information on all his books, visit brandonsanderson.com.

Tran Nguyen is a Vietnamese illustrator based in Georgia. She's best known for her book covers and gallery work, characterized by motifs of the female figure set against surreal landscapes. Outside of painting, she enjoys hiking mountains, clever puns, and pickles. More of her work can be found at mynameistran.com.

Author portrait by Howard Lyon

