



THE  
RAVEN  
SCHOLAR

‘Vast and  
intricate’

ALIX E. HARROW

‘Immersive and  
enthralling’

TASHA SURI

ANTONIA  
HODGSON



# THE RAVEN SCHOLAR

PROPERTY OF HACHETTE AOTEAROA NZ

# THE RAVEN SCHOLAR

BOOK ONE OF THE  
ETERNAL PATH TRILOGY

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ANTONIA HODGSON



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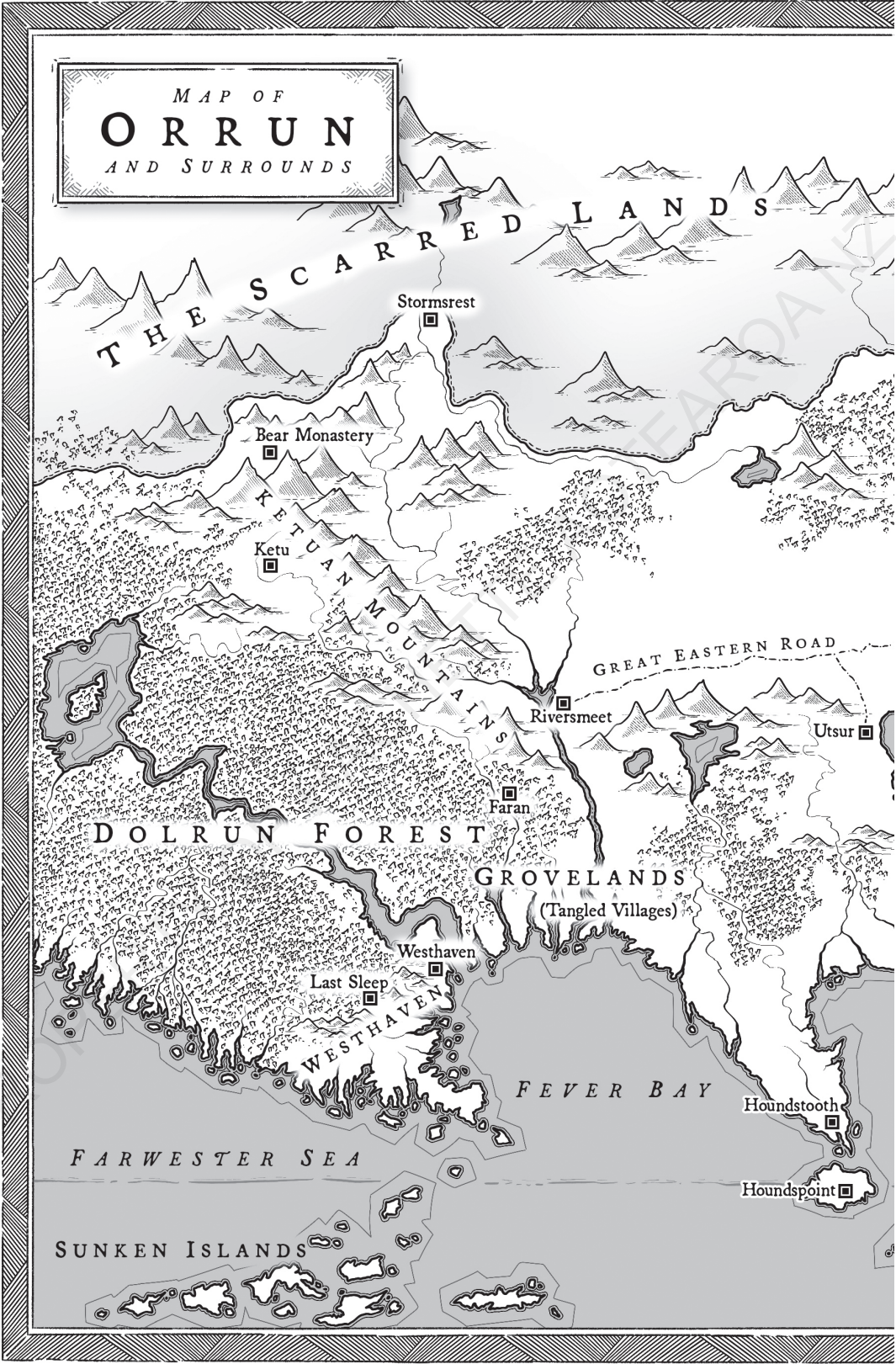
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Brother, Sister – listen to me,  
The Eight will Return in blood and fire.  
You will taste them in the water,  
You will hear them in the wind,  
You will glimpse them in the lightning storm.  
They will come to you in dreams.  
They will call to you.  
Do not let them in, do not let them in.  
They are coming.

‘The Bear Warrior’s Lament’, anon

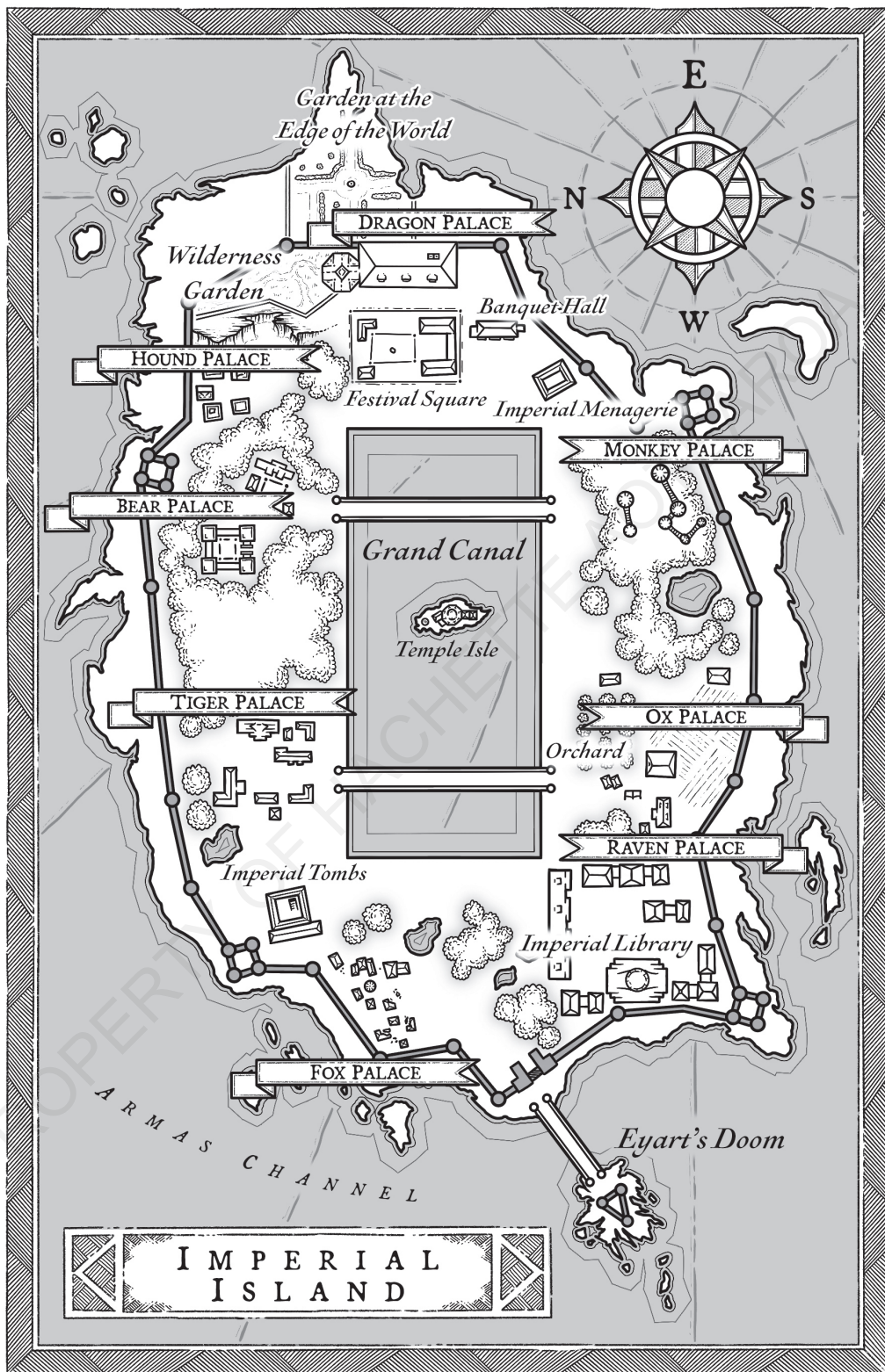
... and the skies wept poison on to the ruined  
earth ...

Dolrun tomb inscription,  
trans. Neema Kraa









PART ONE

# An Invitation

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PROPERTY OF HACHETTE AOTEAROA NZ

## CHAPTER One

ONCE THEY MADE sacrifices here, to appease the Eight. This was many thousands of years ago, but the rock remembers. There was a modest temple on the hill, with views across the island, and worn stone steps leading up to a plain stone slab. Now there is a palace with golden halls and floors of white marble. Lustrous silk tapestries hang from the walls, telling intricate stories of love and war, and the death of tyrants. The air is lacquered with incense, rich and heady.

*This is where my father died.*

Yana Valit walked beside her twin brother Ruko, willing herself to stay calm. The emperor had no reason to hurt her; she had done nothing wrong.

Nothing he could know about.

Yasila followed close behind them, her footsteps muffled by the fine antique rugs that lined the way. Without turning, Yana could picture her mother's expression precisely – composed, dignified. Yasila wore her fabled beauty like a mask, her light brown skin unmarked by years of loss and misfortune. A flick of kohl, a dab of perfume. Three paces away, and as distant as the moon.

Had she known the emperor would summon them here, this morning? No point in asking. Yasila had grown up a hostage on the Dragon island of Helia, where secrets were hoarded like precious jewels. She had learned young how to hold her tongue, and bind her heart.

They headed down another hushed corridor, deep within the inner sanctum. A solitary guard watched them approach, hand upon the hilt of his sword. He was dressed in the uniform of the Imperial

Bodyguard – black trousers and a red tunic slashed with five black claw marks. The Bear sigil, worn to honour the emperor. The man carried himself more like a Hound warrior, Yana thought, his weight balanced slightly towards his toes, giving him a poised, dynamic stance. Yasila had trained her children to notice these things. As they passed beneath the guard's piercing gaze, Yana spotted the square silver ring on his middle finger. The sigil of the Hound. She smothered a smile, imagining her mother's admonishment. *This is not a game, Yanara. This is how we survive.*

Another turn, another incense-laden corridor, almost identical to the last. There were no windows, no way for Yana to orientate herself. This, she knew, was a trick of the sanctum. Even experienced courtiers arrived at the throne room with a queasy sensation that they had both reached their destination, and lost their way.

There is a world, Yana reminded herself, beyond these walls. Out there, out across the imperial island and its lesser palaces, courtiers strolled through pleasure gardens and woodland trails, trading scandals or starting new ones behind the deafening roar of frothing fountains. Servants sweated in the laundries, burned their fingers in the kitchens, talked of leaving as they shared a roll-up behind the service huts.

Yana felt a familiar tension in her chest – a desire to run out into the bright morning sunshine and disappear. Dodge the guards and take a boat back to the mainland, melt away into the busy streets of central Armas. Hitch a ride out of the capital and head north to Scartown, or some other rundown place on the borders. Start a new life, with a new name . . .

A dream, a fantasy. There was no escape for the daughter of Andren Valit, the Great Traitor. There was no disappearing into the crowd. For the last eight years – half her life – Yana and her family had been watched, ceaselessly. When neighbours in their grid complained about the rubbish piling up, the rising cost of food, the street crime, the Valits kept their mouths clamped shut. They could not afford the luxury of speaking their minds. They must assume – always – that someone was listening, eager to re-



port them to the Hounds. Theirs was a tightrope of a life, sharks circling below.

Ruko was gnawing his lip. Yana wanted to tell him not to worry, everything would be fine. But when she tried to speak, there was a knot in her throat. She never could lie to her brother.



The Palace Hounds had arrived in the middle of the night. Boots on the stairs, a sharp rap at the door. Instantly awake, Yana threw back her bedsheet and swung her legs over her bunk. She'd trained herself to shift like this, from deep sleep to high alert. Her family might live under the emperor's written protection, but that only extended so far. There were plenty who still believed the Valits had been dealt with too kindly, after the rebellion. A piece of paper would not deflect an assassin's blade.

'Open up, please,' a voice called through the door.

Dropping down to the floor, Yana reached into the bottom bunk and punched Ruko in the arm. He groaned and burrowed deeper under the blanket. 'Ruko,' she hissed, irritated. She loved her brother, but for Eight's sake. *'Move.'*

In the living room, her mother stood in front of a mirror, clipping back her long black hair. 'Open the door to our guests, Yanara.'

The Valits lived in a cramped, three-roomed apartment above a tailor's workshop. To reach it, visitors must take a rotting wooden staircase, flimsily attached to the external wall. Yasila had dismissed the tailor's offer to have it replaced. Let the way to her door be treacherous. The young Hound sergeant, having assessed the risk, had come up alone. His squad waited for him below, yawning in the velvet dark, batons fixed to their belts.

He introduced himself in neutral tones, giving nothing away. 'Madam Valit? Sergeant Shal Worthy. His Majesty summons you to the island. No, not your youngest, just you and the twins. One of my officers will watch over ...' He groped for a name. *Eight*, what was she called again, the little one?

‘Nisthala,’ Ruko offered, earning a sharp look from his mother.

The sergeant gave Ruko a nod. ‘Nisthala. Thank you, sir.’

*Sir.* The title sounded strange to Yana, but it was formally correct. She and her brother had turned sixteen yesterday. According to the law, Ruko was a man now.

And how old was the sergeant? Yana wondered, studying him in the candlelight. Only a few years ahead of them. He looked like a hero from a dance-tragedy, all soulful and athletic, with striking hazel eyes and smooth, warm-brown skin. He’d done his best to rough up his edges, in a bid to blend in with his more experienced squad. His full moustache merged with a thick stubble and his dark brown curls were chopped short. But his hands were a young man’s hands, his frame and his jawline still boyish. Twenty-one, Yana decided. Fresh out of Houndspoint and straight to squad sergeant, which meant he was being groomed for a high imperial position—

*Shit.*

She was studying him, he was studying her, his eyes blazing with internal fire. Houndsight. A rare, innate ability to read a person’s thoughts and feelings with uncanny accuracy. Yana’s heart flared a warning. What had he seen? What had she given away?

The sergeant’s eyes dimmed back to normal. ‘Twenty-two, as a matter of fact.’ He rubbed his jaw, rueful. ‘Maybe a beard would help, what do you reckon?’

Yana liked the way he’d made a joke, to counter the effect of his unsettling gift. But it didn’t alter the fact that the emperor – who could have sent anyone to escort them to the island – had chosen a man who could read them right down to the bone. Well – not her mother, perhaps. Not a child raised by Dragons.

A brief hug for Nisthala, sleepy and fretful and annoyed at being left behind – why was she always left behind, it wasn’t fair – and it was time to go. As they followed Sergeant Worthy down the stairs, Yana murmured a warning in Ruko’s ear, about the Houndsight. He nodded. He’d seen.

Armas City was built on a grid system, once revolutionary, now familiar. Yana’s grid – G4 NW – was comprised of the usual eight connecting squares, each one arranged around a shared

courtyard. In more glamorous parts of the capital, these common spaces were transformed into whatever stood for paradise among the fashionable that year. (Lush scent gardens, in 1531 – everyone had gone wild for lush scent gardens.) Yana's square was not glamorous by any definition, but it was well looked after, with a communal vegetable plot and mature fruit trees, and a tiled prayer octagon for the faithful. Rundown but respectable. When the residents of Square 3 had first learned that the Valits were moving in, they had organised a petition in protest. We are loyal citizens of Orrun, it said. We do not want our home tainted by these people. Some of them had softened their opinion over the years. Some had not.

The squad's arrival had woken them all. Neighbours leaned from windows, fascinated. They'd seen the mother taken away for interrogation plenty of times, but always on her own. This was new. What now, for the Valits? Some fresh disgrace?

'What's happening?' someone shouted down. 'Where are you taking them?'

'My apologies for the disturbance, citizens,' Sergeant Worthy replied. Houndspeak for none of your business. He tapped one of his officers on the shoulder – an older woman. 'Stay and watch the little one.' As she set off he pulled her back, added in a quieter voice, 'She's frightened, trying to hide it. Be patient with her.'

People were still calling down, demanding answers. 'What have they done?' 'Are they under arrest?' 'We've been saying for years, you can't trust them—'

'Good night, citizens.' The sergeant's tone had shifted. They heard the warning laced through it, and fell silent. After a tense moment, he added, friendly again, 'May the Eight protect you ...'

'... and remain Hidden,' people called back, with varying degrees of conviction.

The nearest docks were a couple of miles to the east. As they walked, they moved from the residential sector through squares dedicated to millwork and forges, and cavernous storehouses where people worked through the night, loading and unloading



by lantern light. Some of the workers nodded at the sergeant as he passed. One woman dropped her load and put her fist to her chest in a Hound salute. This was something more than respect for his position. Ruko nudged Yana, and mouthed: *Worthy*. A not uncommon family name, but given the sergeant's Houndsight, and his swift elevation . . .

'I'm his nephew,' he said, eventually.

Yana's skin prickled. High Commander Gatt Worthy had died in her father's attempted coup eight years ago. When Andren rushed the throne steps, it was Gatt Worthy who saw the threat, and placed himself between the emperor and Andren's blade. It had been the pivotal moment of the rebellion. Gatt Worthy's sacrifice. Andren Valit's treachery.

'I'm sorry,' Ruko said.

'I can see that,' Worthy replied. Of course he could. *Those eyes*. After a short pause, he added, 'Thanks.'

The north-east docks were quiet, the sea lapping gently against the quay. In this bridging hour before dawn, the world was cloaked a sullen grey – the colour of loss, the colour of mourning. A couple of fishing boats were preparing to set sail, their crews moving in a silent harmony born of daily repetition. On rooftops, seagulls stretched out their throats, calling sharply to one another across the water. We are here, we are here. Another day begins.

Sergeant Worthy set off alone down the quay to inspect their boat, leaving his squad to conduct the mandatory strip and search. As if, perhaps, he wanted no part of it. Yana fumbled to remove her clothes under the withering gaze of her guard. The search was not gentle. The woman wrenched apart Yana's short plait, poked and prodded her body with mean fingers. 'What do you expect?' she hissed, when Yana protested. 'Traitor's daughter.'

Fighting back the tears, Yana tidied herself up as best she could without a comb. Her hair – like her mother's, and her brother's – was straight and black, with subtle strands of iridescent purple and blue that only showed in certain lights. An inheritance from their ancestor Yasthala the Great, the last Raven empress.

To her left, Ruko was joking with the men searching him. That's how he'd learned to survive with the cursed Valit name hanging round his neck. Yana used her wits, Ruko his good humour.

And their mother?

Dignity.

As the Hounds approached, Yasila stretched out her arms and inclined her head – a goddess, bestowing upon her handmaidens the privilege of disrobing her. There was a brief debate over the jewelled hairclip – might it be used as a weapon? 'It might,' Yasila decided for them, and handed it over. 'Keep it, for your trouble,' she murmured. A gift that robbed them of their power to take. As the women made their respectful bows, Yasila angled her gaze towards her daughter. *This is how it is done, Yanara.* And Yana thought, not for the first time – if I live to be a hundred, I will never perfect my mother's exquisite cunning, her regal defiance.

Yasila had been summoned to the imperial island dozens of times since the rebellion. There was no discernible pattern to her visits. Emperor Bersun might request her presence three nights in a row. He might let a season pass without mentioning her name. Either way, Yasila was fixed to him by an invisible chain. It was his majesty's right to pull upon it as and when he pleased.

As to *why* he summoned her – one obvious, sordid possibility. Yasila – a clever, bewitchingly beautiful woman of thirty-five – met with the emperor alone in his private chambers: no servants, no bodyguards. How the court loved the idea, how they laughed behind their sleeves. The craggy old soldier, the enigmatic widow.

Yana would not think of that. Her mother and the emperor.

A guard handed her a pair of brown cotton trousers and a matching long-sleeved tunic. If they were asked, the Hounds would say they were keeping the emperor safe. The outfits had no pockets, the material was too thin to conceal a weapon. But this was also a deliberate slight: the once rich and powerful Valits presented at court in outfits more suited to farm work.

Yana didn't care – she hated dressing up – but the clothes were too big for her short, narrow frame. She wondered if they had given her Ruko's outfit by mistake. No, she realised, as she turned

to study her brother. He was already dressed, and looked as he always did these days: like a golden god. Bastard.

He threw a pose to amuse them both. Yana laughed, their mother frowned. Yasila could never understand this about her twins, the secret messages and in-jokes passing between them. Yana laughed because she knew that beneath the clowning her brother was worried. She laughed to reassure him, just as he had posed to distract her. And it worked, on the surface.

But underneath, the thrumming fear.

Why had the emperor called for them today, of all days? What did he want?

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Seven and a half years had passed since they last stood before the great Bear warrior. Bersun the Brusque, the reluctant emperor, who wore the crown out of duty, not desire.

After the rebellion, after the riots, the purges and the public executions, Bersun had sailed in procession down Dragon's Mouth Bay to Samra City – ancestral home of the Valit dynasty. No one missed the significance. Entire neighbourhoods streamed from their homes to welcome him, packing the streets, waving and cheering with hectic fervour. The weather was bad. The weather was terrible. No matter. This was a day for the city that raised the Great Traitor to affirm its loyalty to the crown.

On the cracked marble steps of the Assembly Hall, Bersun stood beneath a golden canopy, shielded from the pounding rain – a hulking giant with a long, battered face. The sort of man you prayed to the Eight was on your side on a battlefield.

The canopy was not for him. Bear warriors preferred to stand as they were trained – out in the open, exposed to the elements. This was how you stayed tough, and strong, and focused. The canopy was for his ceremonial clothes, which he hated. Golden robes, densely woven with eight-sided patterns. A heavy, sumptuous red velvet cloak, trimmed with fur. Worst of all, a pair of soft, embroidered satin shoes, which could only look ridiculous on his enor-

mous feet. He had roared when they were first presented to him – literally roared, like an actual bear. A man who had patrolled the Scarred Lands for twenty years, defeated by a slipper.

The emperor did not like his clothes, but duty said he must wear them, and they must not be spoiled. The dignity of the office. So he stood beneath the canopy, glowering as he always did on these occasions.

As for the crowds crammed into White Tiger Square, they were drenched, hair plastered to their skulls. Their one consolation in such miserable, inauspicious weather – Emperor Bersun hated speech-making even more than he hated his elaborate robes. This would not take long.

Raising his arms, the emperor displayed his ruined right hand for all to see. He had lost three fingers in his desperate, bloody fight with Andren Valit. Almost lost his life too, by all accounts. This was his first public appearance since that day. His giant frame and bulky robes could not disguise the truth: the Bear warrior was diminished, both in body and spirit.

‘There’s been enough blood spilled,’ he declared, shouting over the rain. His voice was gruff, with the short vowels and hard consonants of a far Norwesterner. ‘My body’s broken: it will mend. The empire’s broken, it will mend. We shall heal together. We shall grow stronger, together. This I swear, on the Eight.’

Cheers and applause washed through the square, as those at the front passed the message back. Had his rebellion succeeded, Andren would have restored his beloved city to its former glory. The ancient capital would have become the seat of power once more. The fear was, the emperor had come to destroy Samra in revenge. It wouldn’t take much. The once invincible Marble City had been in decline for fifteen centuries. Rubble City, people called it now, part mocking, part wistful.

Bersun waited for his people to settle. Then, on his signal, the Hounds brought Yana and Ruko up to join him. Eight years old they were then, clutching each other’s hand for courage. As Yana stepped under the golden canopy, she saw tears of sympathy in the Old Bear’s eyes. He beckoned to them, encouraging, and she

hated him for it. How dare he be kind? This man who had killed her father.

The twins had been told to give the emperor a Bear salute. They did so in unison, right hand raised smartly to right temple, palm out.

Bersun looked touched. He wrapped an arm around Yana's shoulder, gathering her in to him. The same to Ruko, on his left side. A great Bear hug from the great Bear emperor. Yana felt sick.

He turned them to face the crowds. 'You've stood here before,' he said, softly. 'You know these people.'

It was true. As Governor of Samra, their father was always proclaiming something or other on the Assembly steps. People had loved to see the twins beside him. And Yasila in her flowing silks, long black hair netted with gold latticework.

'What do you see?' the emperor asked them.

Yana had gazed down at the crowds, still cheering and clapping wildly. 'Fear,' she answered, at the same moment Ruko said, 'Relief.'

'Fear and relief,' the emperor repeated, to himself. 'Yes. That's it. Very good.' He gave them both a final squeeze and let them go.

A few weeks later Gatt Worthy's successor, High Commander Hol Vabras, had issued an edict stating that Yasila Valit was guilty of 'indirect support' of the rebellion. In other words – her husband had used her money to fund it. For this crime she was stripped of all titles and estates, and given a six-month sentence. As she had already languished in the imperial dungeons for almost eight months, she was released the same day, cradling her baby daughter in her arms. Nisthala Valit – born in darkness, brought into the light. The edict continued:

Citizen Yasila Valit and her children shall be permitted to live freely in the Armas grids, with the following caveats:

On pain of death: they shall not leave the capital.

On pain of death: they shall not consort with sympathisers of the Traitor Andren Valit, nor seek to restore his reputation.



*Also:* the Valits must surrender themselves and their property to any inspections deemed necessary by His Majesty's servant, High Commander Hol Vabras.

Under these terms, it pleases His Majesty that the Valit children should grow to maturity without harm or prejudice.

May the Eight protect His Majesty and remain Hidden.

*Signed by  
High Commander Hol Vabras  
this fourth day of the month of Am, 1523*

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Bersun had kept his promise. Nothing stronger in this world, my friend, than the word of a Bear warrior. But yesterday, the twins had turned sixteen. No longer children. No longer protected by the edict.

'Yana,' Ruko said quietly, as they boarded the boat to the imperial island. 'The emperor spared us all these years. He won't destroy us now.'

Her brother, the optimist.