



POISON FOREST

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PART ONE: WALKING THE DEAD

Who can tell where the dead walk?

Whether they meet on dark paths or distant shores?

Only one who has met Death themselves.

-Sazulian Book of the Dead

CHAPTER XV, VERSES 12-14.



CHAPTER ONE

PRAYERS in the Temple of the Dead are twice as long today. The chanting usually lulls me into tranquility. Boredom, even, if I'm honest. But today is different.

I made my sacrifices and underwent the sacraments before the sun rose in preparation for my death ceremony tonight. The priestesses bathed me the way corpses are bathed in the mortuary, anointed me with blood, ash, and scented oil.

Here in my country, Lazul, death ceremonies are held in the ancient burial ground a few miles from the capitol. Tonight, I'll walk there to wake the shade of Zori, our goddess of death.

A young acolyte crosses the nave and touches a set of hanging spirit chimes with fingertips light as moth antennae. A crystalline note hangs in the air for a moment, clear and sharp as an icicle. This is the signal to end morning prayers, and I scramble to my feet as my knees crack in protest from kneeling so long on the stone floor.

The temple keeper, Garneta, pads over as I begin

extinguishing the numerous tapers arranged on the marble altar.

She pulls a dagger from the folds of her white robes, used for scraping dried wax from the altar. “Never mind the rest of these. Won’t the Empress be arriving soon?”

The candle snuffer trembles in my hand, and I take a shuddering breath. “Yes, any time now.”

Queen Akina, High Empress of the Triumvir, is bringing her daughter Dette for my death ceremony. We’ve known one another since we were eleven, and when we fell in love one summer, our parents stole the opportunity to betroth us to one another. But it all fell apart after my mother died.

Once I thought not being with Dette would destroy me. I cried like I was dying the night our betrothal was dissolved, and eighteen months later I still can’t stop thinking about her. Her home is in Thistle, the capitol of Zelen, and it’s nearly a week’s ride from here on horseback. I haven’t seen her since the night her mother broke our engagement. *They’re only coming for political reasons, Thedra.*

Garneta gives my arm a comforting squeeze and takes the snuffer. “Don’t be anxious,” she says. “You know the rituals.”

I nod. She thinks I’m only nervous about my death ceremony, and I’ve no reason to inform her of my inner turmoil. I may be a princess, but inside the temple, she has always treated me like any other acolyte, and I prefer it that way.



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As I leave, I hear the clamor of a crowd gathering in the understreets, and the breeze in the open courtyard brings the scent of roasting mutton. The city is up and about early—peddlers will be selling meat pies and cups of mead for flin’pennies. My father’s guard has assembled in the courtyard below the palace. Sunlight glints off the gold details on their uniforms, dazzling my eyes as I stride across the balustrade.

Father is sprawled beneath a covered awning with his lover, Onyx. They’re sharing a chaise and breakfasting on summer fruit and bread with broiled goat cheese. “Good morning, Thedra.”

“Morning.”

“You look surly.” He licks a drip of melted cheese off his thumb. “Aren’t you pleased you’ll soon see, Dette?”

“I’m pleased.”

I turn and grip the balustrade’s marble banister until my knuckles turn white. Father looks thoroughly relaxed, like he’s on holiday in the Glittering Caves, but a flush is building beneath his translucent skin. Sun and wind burn him, and his complexion betrays emotion like a bog, giving up hidden detritus in the heat. He’s nervous, too.

I brush my palm across the diamond vial hanging from my belt. My touch awakens the lightning inside, and it skitters across the surface like an anxious spider as the courtiers and servants gathered behind me chatter. Even the guards’ steeds on either side of the gate seem edgy.



High Empress Akina has this effect on everyone.

She is a stone elemental, which means she has the power to move earth and rock, and to petrify flesh. Although she hasn't turned anyone to stone in decades, one doesn't tend to forget her history. At age fourteen, she inadvertently petrified a young nobleman for being too handsy with her in the palace gardens. Dette says his condition proved irreversible despite the efforts of Zelen's court physicians and mages, but the statue was bronzed and served as both a fine garden ornament and a reminder of Akina's power.

We wait and wait, as the sun rises and glitters off armor and horse livery. Just when I think I can't wait another minute, the roar of the crowd greeting the Empress reaches us.

When the royal litter alights on the cobblestones in the courtyard below, I push away from the marble banister eagerly.

"Wait, Thedramora." Father's voice is indolent as always, but he uses my full name, so I know he's serious. "Don't run to them like an eager pawn."

I glare at him over my shoulder, annoyed that he would call me a pawn in front of his lover. "It's rude to stay up here when they journeyed all this way to meet us."

He twines a finger in one of Onyx's chestnut ringlets. "This is our stronghold. Make them come to us. If you're so concerned about etiquette, you should've made yourself presentable for their arrival." He glances at the worn breeches and loose, belted linen tunic I always wear to the temple. "You



look like a stable hand.”

He’s been like this since my engagement to Dette was rescinded. It was my fault, after all.

I turn away, refusing to rise to his bait. I watch Empress Akina make her way toward the steps leading up to the balustrade. Dette runs ahead of the gaggle of courtiers and attendants and skips past her mother to climb the stairs. Zelen is a warmer country than Lazul, and she has on a light summer dress embroidered with pink buds and green vines. Her white, feathery wings are folded, trailing on the ground behind her.

Dette is half-sylph, the long-lived, winged race of people who share our world. They’re something of a mystery to us humans. Some of them can fly, and their mythology and anatomy are different from ours, but occasionally we join our races for the benefit of each. Dette’s father is King Cygnus, the leader of the sylphan realm.

Dette mounts the stairway to the upper tier in a flash, taking the steps two and three at a time. Court etiquette requires that she let her mother come first, but she has either forgotten or doesn’t care. Two of her ladies-in-waiting are on the cobblestones halfway between the stairway and the litter. They look confused, but they lift their skirts and follow her.

When she sees me frozen on the balustrade, she calls, “Don’t just stand there, silly.”

She sounds unbothered and slightly teasing, like she’s daring me to jump into the freezing lake back at Alder Tower,



the summer home where we first met. I don't understand how she does it, how she acts completely normal when every time I see her, I feel like I'm slowly dying of longing for her like an unprepared traveler dies of thirst in the desert.

I meet her halfway with open arms and she hits me square in the chest. We're the same height, and anyone else her size would've knocked the breath out of me, but Dette's sylphan heritage makes her bones lighter than a full human's.

Dette's gaze doesn't leave my face. "I missed you." She pecks me on the lips with a quick dart of her head and her feathers tickle my cheek. It feels like a careless, impulsive kiss, but my mouth tingles. I thought we'd never kiss again.

"Dette," barks Empress Akina, "control yourself." I was so focused on Dette that I didn't notice her enter the upper tier. From the corner of my eye, I see Onyx flinch and I have to bite back a snort of laughter. Empress Akina is a short, broad woman with a gravitas that would brook no nonsense even if she didn't have the power to bring the stones of the castle down on our heads.

Dette shrugs and flips her curls, completely uncowed. "You look wonderful, Thedra."

"And you. I've been informed that I'm dressed like a stable hand." I cast my eyes at Father, and Dette laughs.

"I meant your face," she says.

She's the one who looks wonderful. The sunlight brings out the pale green undertones from the verdant blood in her



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veins, and her rosy cheeks and light brown skin glow like a ripe summer apple. As another gust of wind billows the flags and banners, she opens her wings to their full width, letting the breeze ruffle her downy feathers. Dette's wings have never been strong enough for flight, but they're beautiful, like the rest of her.

"How was your journey?"

"Pleasant enough, but Momma grumbled over the state of the roads for half the journey."

"Some of us are not so young that bouncing in a litter for days upon end is a treat."

Father deigns to leave his lounge so he can kiss Dette's cheek and go down on one knee before Akina, who extends her right hand where she wears a massive ruby signet ring. He places his lips on the gem with indifference. The whole procedure reeks of boredom and habit. And he accuses me of behaving like a pawn.

I can tell Akina is waiting for me to genuflect too, and the fact that everyone is watching me, wondering if I will, only makes me more averse to the idea. She might be High Empress in title, but constitutionally, she and my father are equals, and I'm first in line for the throne of Lazul.

She fixes me with her stony gaze, and I hold back a tremble at making prolonged eye contact with her, still refusing to bow. I wonder if it hurts, being turned to stone, or if it happens so fast you don't even have time to flinch.



“It’s a great honor that you’ve come,” I say finally, lowering my chin a bit.

Father’s mouth and eyes look tight. “Our children seem to forget their court manners as soon as they’re together.”

“Agreed,” says Akina smoothly. “Although it’s a mystery which of them is worse, and who has influenced the other more.”

Dette links her arm through mine. “It’s been an equal exchange. Will you show me inside, Thedra? I’m starving and need a good soak.”

As she steers us toward the palace, I see the two ladies-in-waiting who followed her scamper behind us like obedient puppies.

Fruit, wine, bread, and water are set out in the spacious dining hall, where the windows have been opened to admit the breeze. The gusts blow the heavy draperies away from the casings in billowing arches, like the sails in a fleet of ships. Autumn will come early this year. Late summer gales never lie.

We sit at the long table and the ladies-in-waiting hang back until I beckon for them to join us. Dette reaches for a ripe plum. “Oh, I almost forgot. Thedra, meet Henbane and Neev.”

Henbane looks like a Zelener, her complexion the same shade as the dark velvet center of the flower she’s named for, her long locks dyed brilliant green and decorated with beads. Neev is more than likely from Dendronia, the snowy country

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to our north. She's pale-skinned with large gray eyes and short, chin-length hair dyed deep purple. She is wearing a pair of silk gloves, which I find odd. Lazul is a colder country than Zelen because we're farther from the warm sea breezes and closer to snowy Dendronia. But it's not that cold here in summer.

Both women bow deeply to me before taking a seat.

As usual, all this bowing and scraping makes me uncomfortable, but Dette is too busy eating to notice. She finishes the plum in several bites, then spreads a slice of dark, thick bread with yak butter. My stomach rumbles, but I shake my head when she offers me the platter of fruit.

"I'm fasting until tonight."

The corner of her mouth turns down. "Ascetic Lazul."

"Self-indulgent Zelen," I return. "It's tradition. And for my benefit, I've been told."

Servants scurry in and out in a flurry of preparation for tonight's festivities. There is a ball planned for after my death ceremony tonight. Father takes any excuse to throw a ball, but I do find it odd, given that some acolytes don't return from Zori's tomb alive. My mother was the only other royal to become a Priestess of Death, and she suggested the food from her ball be given to the poor in the event of her untimely demise. My mother had a strange sense of humor.

Dette opens her hands. "I can ease your hunger if you want."

I stare at her hands—the long, capable fingers, the soft



palms, the neat nails. I bite my lip involuntarily as I imagine the warmth of them on my belly, soothing the gnawing discomfort of my hunger the way she used to soothe my menstrual cramps or the headaches I got when my mother wrote to me of Lazul's suffering and political unrest. But the weight of being Priestess of Death is mine to bear, not hers, so I shake my head.

When she's finished eating and her ladies have been sent to prepare her rooms, I lead Dette down the corridor to the palace baths. I remove my boots at the entrance and turn them over, spilling sand onto the tile.

"Do you keep half of Lazul's sand in your boots, Thedra?" asks Dette teasingly.

"I rode across the Fallow Dunes before I went to the temple this morning," I say, referring to the strip of desert between here and the Dendronian mountains.

Dette selects a bottle of scented oil from the menagerie of skin treatments arranged on a marble table and pours some into her palm, infusing the heavy air in the room with the scents of vanilla and chamomile. "You'll have to take me with you tomorrow."

Two servants, a man and woman clad in loose, sleeveless robes, come forward to attend to us.

"Welcome, Your Highnesses. What pleases you today, Princess Thedramora? A bath? Steam?"

"No, thank you. They... they bathed me in the mortuary this morning."



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“Oh good goddess,” exclaims Dette, annoyed once more by Lazul’s morbid rituals.

I shrug. “It’s tradition. A bath,” I say to the attendant, “for Dette.”

Dette unpins the tower of hair atop her head and it springs loose in a cloud of black curls. “I’d like my hair washed, please, for the ball.”

As Dette soaks in a vat of soapy hot water, the woman washes her hair and takes time untangling and oiling it. The other attendant pares my cuticles and rubs rose-scented balm into my hands and arms while I wait.

“A massage, perhaps?” he asks. “Your shoulders are up by your ears.”

He has dimples and blond hair, and Dette arches a querying brow at me. I shake my head at her, not wanting to be teased in front of the servants. She only likes women, but you could say I like everyone. Potentially, anyway. “I’m fine.”

As we leave the baths, I pause to look at the statue of Zori tucked into an alcove. Her flowing hair is painted dark brown, and she is covering her eyes with one hand. She is always depicted in one of two forms in reliefs and statues: the Slayer, who carries an executioner’s axe, or the Blind, like this one. Her covered eyes represent her indifference to human mortality as a death goddess.

But what if she looks nothing like these portrayals? In my worst nightmares, she’s a monster with teeth that craves



human souls. The Devourer was what they called my mother when she was Lazul's High Priestess and executioner. It was said she could take off a man's head in one terrible bite, and although I loved her, I also feared her. In my early childhood nightmares, she and Zori were one and the same.

Dette takes my hand and squeezes it, sensing my mood. "You've been learning the rituals for your death ceremony since we were children, Thedra. You'll be fine."



I go to the ancient burial ground in the Fallow Dunes at sunset and wait among the gravestones for the priestesses from the Temple of the Dead to join me. I like to think it takes a lot to scare me, but my heart is beating erratically against my ribs, a wild bird fighting the bars of its cage.

The sun sinks quickly, taking the heat of the day with it. The cool of night falls, leaching the warmth from the sand beneath my feet. I lean against the stone of an ancient grave, its inscription long worn away by centuries of wind, sand, and snow. The limestone digs into my back, and I wish the priestesses would hurry, but I know they're chanting rites and walking slowly. It's bad luck to trip on the way to a meeting with Death.

Finally, I hear their footsteps on the path, and the crystalline ringing from the spirit chimes they wear around their necks.

I stand and meet them at the entrance to the burial ground. Garneta is at the front, and she pads over and pulls a dagger

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from the folds of her white robes. I extend my hand to her from habit.

She pricks my palm with the point of the dagger and I tilt my hand, letting the blood run in a thin rivulet to the sand—an offering to Zori. My palm is mottled with thin, interwoven scars from my years as a temple acolyte. A scarlet droplet runs along one of the raised lines, reminding me of the tiny red sand beetles that hide in the rocks of the palace gardens.

Two priestesses catch some of the blood from my hand and mix it with temple ash to draw runes on my face. Then they drape a sheer black veil over my head that reaches my elbows—a death shroud—and take each of my hands to lead me to a large sarcophagus in the center of the graveyard: Zori’s tomb.

Zori was mortal, once. But legend says she grappled with Death until he fell in love with her, and when they were married, she stole his power for herself by learning his secrets—the power to move between worlds, to raise the dead and steal the living, to come back to life. It’s her power that we take for ourselves.

Garneta presents me with the necessary items for the ceremony: an unlit lamp, a stick carved with ancient death rites, and a dagger. I take them silently, willing my arms not to tremble and betray my fear. The ritual to awaken Zori is a secret kept from acolytes, and I don’t know what will happen. I only know what I’m supposed to do.



The caged bird in my chest has frozen nearly to death. I take a deep breath, bursting the icy bubble of fear.

“You’ll be all right,” says Garneta. “I know you will. You’re Mora’s daughter.”

As I cross the threshold of the crypt, my palm brushes the diamond vial hanging from my belt and the lightning inside glitters, awakened by my touch. It skitters inside the confines of the vial like an anxious spider, illuminating the walls of Zori’s tomb so it looks like a subterranean cavern. I clasp one hand around my vial, letting its buzzing energy fill me.

I hold the stick before my eyes and run my fingertips over the runes carved into its surface before using it to draw a circle in the thick dust around the tomb.

I light the lamp with a spark from my vial and speak the ancient rites. “I summon the one who lies buried here—Zori, Bride of Death, Goddess of the Dead, protector and executioner of the living. Awaken and speak.”

There’s a rushing in my ears, maddeningly loud in the dark, silent crypt, and I’m grateful the rituals for the ceremony include fasting. If I had anything in my stomach, I’m certain it would come up from terror.

I stand still, blinking at the shadows cast by the lamp as my pulse pounds in my ears. I hear a rustling like old, dry fabric brushing against stone, and I picture a shroud being dragged along the floor. I give a start as the flickering flame in the lamp snuffs out. One second, I’m alone, and the next I can

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sense something beside me in the darkness. My heart lodges in my throat. I thought a shade was unable to leave the circle. And no one said anything about the lamp going out.

A voice cuts through the silence, stirring the air next to my ear. “What do you want?”

I close my eyes, recalling the proper words for this part of the ritual. “Zori, G-Goddess of Death, bless me, make me your consort. Imbue me with justice and mercy. Help me raise the dead and put the living to rest.”

Her voice is a death rattle, a droplet of water on a searing hot stone. “What’s your name?”

“Thedramora. Daughter of Queen Mora, who was Shapeshifter, High Priestess of the Dead, and of King Thede, son of—”

“Enough,” she interrupts.

“But...I’m asking to be high priestess. Don’t you want to hear my—”

“Entire genealogy? I’ve been dead a millennium and heard enough bloodlines yammered by trembling proselytes to last me two.”

I can’t see anything in this suffocating tomb, but I sense that she’s standing in front of me now—I can feel her breath through my thin veil, cold and stale.

“Why do you want to be my consort?” she asks.

“I...”

No one has ever asked if I want to be Zori’s consort, let

alone why. I was just expected to do it, as I was expected to eat a wholesome breakfast every morning, or learn combat, diplomacy, and foreign languages.

“It’s in my lineage,” I say finally. “My mother was High Priestess.”

“Lineage means nothing. Why should I make you the arbiter of who lives and dies in Lazul?”

“Because it scares me,” I blurt. “I saw what it did to my mother. She used to lock herself away after an execution. There was plague and then famine when I was a child and people started murdering one another, eating one another... It was up to her to decide who deserved justice and mercy.”

“I didn’t ask for your kingdom’s entire tragic tale,” she interrupts. “Lazulians stink of grief. We’ll be here all night.”

I bite my lip savagely beneath my veil. I’ve worshipped Zori my entire life, but only because I had to. It’s wise to honor the Goddess of Death in a country like Lazul, and when I was a young child, my mother made me.

The commoners bring Zori monthly offerings of first fruits and small game in hopes of appeasing her through hard winters and drought. But despite being the daughter of the king and the Priestess of Death, I never trusted Zori. A goddess who craves so much blood always seemed suspect to me. And now that I’ve summoned her, I hate her.

“I won’t take the responsibility lightly,” I say, and I can hear the bitterness in my voice, cutting through the air like a

sharp blade.

“You despise me.” She sounds amused. “I hear it in your voice. Do you fear me, too?”

My eyes have finally started adjusting to the dark and I can see her outline, but it shifts and changes, unbound by the laws of the living. She smells of decay and grave mold, and I close my eyes so I can’t see her wavering shadow. “Both.”

“Well, at least you’re honest. I never bless liars.”

“Then you’ll bless me?”

“If you’re brave enough.”

I stretch out my hand. “Let it be done.”

Her hand clasps mine. It’s so cold and dry that I suppress a shudder. “Kneel and give me the knife.”

A deal-making. I sigh with relief, but it quickly turns into a gasp as she throws back my veil, revealing my face like a groom about to kiss his bride.

“Oh. They painted you for me.”

I kneel on the hard floor of the tomb, flipping the dagger around and shoving the handle at her. “Fuck off.”

As she takes the dagger, I extend my palm for the blood pact. But instead of cutting my offered palm, she plunges the long blade into my chest.