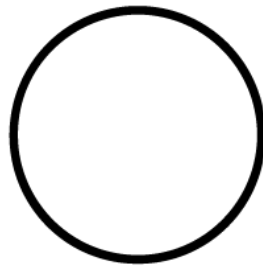


I've made some small changes to this opening that can be read here:
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-9sy8-24uYzaACmcuQ8-zrEK3ZyN5gtc/edit?usp=sharing&oid=107950934718105266587&rtpof=true&sd=true>

If you've read this before they're just changes in the first 3 scenes.

Beneath the Irithni Eye



Chapter One

#

“I must admit, I was quite displeased when you killed me.”

Misen Delaur found this complaint irritating for two reasons. Firstly, she hadn’t actually killed King Varsim of Qustavin. Secondly, she felt that breaking into someone’s private bedchamber to inform them they were *theoretically* dead was entirely justified by one crucial piece of information.

“That’s what you hired me to do.”

Misen hoped this objective statement of fact might make a difference. She had enough experience of Siourean royalty that she wasn’t surprised when it didn’t.

“Technically, yes,” King Varsim admitted. “But I really did not expect you to succeed.”

In an extraordinary triumph of self-control, Misen managed not to laugh. She had been the most gifted assassin of a generation and now she used her talents to help prevent the mysterious, incredibly frequent ‘*accidents*’ that so often befell Siourean royalty. This was why King Varsim had hired her and his surprise that she was actually *good* was equal parts hilarious and offensive. Or at least it would have been a few weeks earlier, her recent jobs shifting the balance more towards deep, personal insult. Still, Misen was a professional. She swallowed her irritation.

“Well, I did,” said Misen, her voice flat. “And now something has to be done about it.”

She reached into her leather satchel and retrieved her report. It hadn’t taken her long to compile a list of the problems she’d found in Qustavin castle. The real challenge had been devising solutions that wouldn’t be immediately dismissed. The problem with hereditary monarchy, assuming you could narrow it down to one, was that it was difficult to convince divinely chosen rulers that sometimes they actually had to make an effort to achieve their goals.

In recognition of this, Misen had ensured all her suggestions were both simple and easily delegated. Unfortunately, King Varsim wasn't interested in hearing them.

"Indeed, something *must* be done," said King Varsim imperiously. "I'm afraid your actions leave me no choice; you shall be imprisoned in the dungeon."

Misen frowned. This was a surprise, not because Siouean Kings were known for their logical decision making but because the threat didn't make sense. Misen double checked her report before replying.

"You don't have a dungeon," she said, reading a page title aloud.

King Varsim directed a questioning look at his Royal Architect. The woman gave him an apologetic shrug.

"No matter," said King Varsim airily. "I'll have you locked up in one of the supply rooms."

Misen turned to the next page of her report.

"None of the doors in Qustavin castle have locks."

King Varsim seemed dubious but, after a brief aside with his Royal Doormaster, he moved on.

"Then I shall order my soldiers to tie you up."

"You only have four soldiers," said Misen, summing up two entire pages of notes.

"Currently one of them is patrolling the Qustavi border and the other three are in Jakusta being measured for new uniforms."

This was the first thing Misen had said that genuinely irritated King Varsim. However, after several assurances from the Royal Stylist that the border guard would also be receiving a new uniform, he returned his attention to Misen.

“Very well, very well,” King Varsim sighed as he drummed his fingers upon his throne.
“In that case, how about...”

King Varsim turned to his assembled advisors; hopeful one might offer a suggestion. Both the Royal Financier and Royal Quartermaster were silent. As was the Royal Chef, Royal Spymaster, Royal Erithna, Royal Arborist, Royal Harbourist, even the Royal Generalist seemed at a loss. Then, just when the collective brainpower of Qustavin seemed exhausted, someone spoke up.

“You will ensnare her with mysterious, potent magics...?”

Misen frowned, following the voice to what she’d believed was a coat stand. The man’s heavy robes were wholly unsuited for the Sioulean climate, yet a single glance of the Royal Sorcerer, and his menacing finger wagging, suggested his clothing was the least objectionable thing about him. The sorcerer’s offer intrigued King Varsim but before he said anything he looked to Misen to see if she had any objections. She did.

“That won’t work,” Misen scoffed as she lowered her report. “Magic isn’t *real*.”

As far as Misen was concerned, “*magic*” was little more than superstition and trickery. It was a tool of charlatans, an utterly ridiculous concept that only the truly witless believed in. Then, after a series of elaborate gestures from the Royal Sorcerer, Misen’s feet sunk into the stone floor. Understandably, this changed her position. Inexplicably, this was only true in the literal sense.

“I could just take my boots off,” said Misen, refusing to give ground to the giving of the ground.

After another series of vigorous hand motions, Misen found herself up to her knees in solid rock. Of course, she was confident she could just wiggle out of her trousers, but she

decided not to announce this.

“*Fine*,” she grumbled. “What now?”

“Well, it is within my power to keep you here forever...” said Varsim gravely.

Misen didn’t react. Even ignoring the logistical issues posed by having a woman half embedded in the floor of your throne room, detaining her would cause far more problems than it would solve. There were hundreds of Kingdoms in the lands of Sioure and though the large ones could do as they pleased, Qustavin was a minor kingdom. Technically, it was a large minor kingdom, there were many that measured in inches, but its possession of a castle, a road, and half a lake wouldn’t protect it from the consequences of imprisoning Misen Delaur. Misen knew this and even a dramatic, prolonged silence couldn’t convince her otherwise. Eventually, King Varsim realised this.

“Unless” the King continued. “You state, for the record, that you *couldn’t* kill me.”

The request was stupid, petty, and its only possible purpose seemed to be to protect the King’s ego. However, as King’s often valued their ego more than their life, Misen decided it would be easiest to do as he requested.

“Okay then,” Misen shrugged. “I couldn’t kill you.”

The assembled crowd cheered. Misen watched in bemusement as several of the King’s advisors sought the Royal Protector to congratulate him on a job well done. She waited a moment for the noise to die down. When it didn’t, she raised her voice.

“Now, could we please get this over with?!”

The throne room hushed. The King and his advisors exchanged baffled looks.

“But it is over...?” said Varsim slowly.

“No, we still need to go through the report,” upon noting the King’s blank expression,

Misen added. “You know, the entire reason I’m here...?”

“That’s unnecessary,” said Varsim, his expression smug. “Once it’s known the assassin who killed the unkillable King of Sullenbridge couldn’t harm me, I doubt anyone else will bother to try.”

Sometimes the mere mention of Sullenbridge was enough to make Misen want to sink into the earth. This time the opposite happened. With great difficulty, and a lot of full body gyration, the Royal Sorcerer began the arduous process of freeing Misen from the stone. As she rose, she stared at the King in disbelief.

“Wait,” she said, as everything finally fell into place. “You hired me to fail and you won’t fix any of the problems I found...?”

“Yes,” said Varsim.

There was a certain logic to the plan, but it was the same kind of logic that would suggest that flapping your arms would allow you to fly. Admittedly, reputations were important in Sioure but Misen doubted even her personal endorsement could deflect a knife. Once the Royal Sorcerer had fully extracted her from the floor, Misen felt compelled to offer her professional opinion of the King’s plan.

“That’s dumb as shit.”

Varsim was taken aback. Clearly, it’d been some time since anyone had given him an honest opinion, a fact proved almost immediately when a dozen advisors swarmed the King. They insulated the King from Misen’s poisonous gaze and, after several seconds of hushed conversation, they also insulated the King from reality itself.

“I have been assured that it is actually a very clever and cunning plan,” Varsim replied archly. “Our business has concluded. You may leave.”

One of the King's countless officials ushered away Misen. She could have argued, tried to convince Varsim to listen, but even if she'd had the patience she lacked the will. Instead, she allowed herself to be steered through the mass of Royal Advisors clogging the hallways. By the time she finally made it outside the castle, she'd been threatened, flattered, insulted, bribed, and forced to accept a small potted tree.

Really, all things considered, it was a good outcome. She had expected to spend the rest of the day explaining her report to King Varsim. Instead, she was already on the road back to Jakusta. Certainly, the entire thing had been a tremendous waste of her time and skills but, between gold, gems and shrubbery, the job was profitable enough that she didn't care. Or at least that is what Misen tried to convince herself as she trudged towards Jakusta.

Regrettably, she was not nearly as gullible as King Varsim.

#

"My, *my*. Aren't you *large*."

Abren had noticed the woman approach, Sioulean fashion ensured only the blind and deaf could have missed it. He'd hoped she would content herself with staring. Instead, she lay her hand upon his broad chest and made an appreciative humming noise. He reacted in the only appropriate manner.

"I could turn this desert into lush pasture," he said, his voice resonant. "I could banish all hunger and sickness. I could make children of you and give you peace. I could make this world a paradise for you. I give you this choice. This was what the third prophet heard, deep in the desert, far from his home and kin. Alone and dying, alone and-"

Abren fell silent once the woman had retreated far enough that she could no longer benefit from the teachings of the third prophet. He had lived in the Sioulean capital of Jakusta for

years now and though there were countless Sioureans who'd like to take him to bed, he had yet to meet one capable of enduring the hours of rigorous, theological debate necessary for him to even consider it. He resumed his silent vigil.

Abren knew if he didn't intercept Misen at the gate, it'd take another day before she reached home. He hoped things had improved, hoped that this last job had broken her recent run of bad luck, but Abren was too much a son of Kiahen to rely on hope. He'd come to the Liar's Gate at midday and though hours had passed he was determined to remain until either Misen returned or the vast armies of the Kiahenese Empire arrived to obliterate the perverse blasphemy of Jakusta. Currently, he favoured the former but, as the sun set upon the horizon, he was certain that would change. Soon the revelry would begin and though Abren had Seven Prophets with which to protect himself he'd have to ration their teachings if he was to survive the night. And so, with the wisdom of the prophets reserved for those who could never understand it, all that was left to Abren was the question that often plagued him at times like this; how had his life gone so terribly, powerfully wrong? As always, he was interrupted before he could come to a conclusion.

“What are you doing here?”

“Alone and dying, alone and forsaken,” Abren began, picking up from where he'd left off. “He was offered salvation but the sand in his blood told him none was needed. The only thing left for him to seek was the final silence of Il Aria.”

Abren stopped, hoping he'd said enough to re-establish his solitude. He hadn't.

“You're on the *third* prophet? “How long have you been out here...?”

There were few people in Jakusta that Abren didn't look down upon and, coincidentally, this was also true in the physical sense. Even among the Kiahenese he was exceptionally large and he towered over even tall Sioureans. Suffice to say, Misen Delaur was not a tall Siourean. He

craned his neck and found her staring up at him at an equally uncomfortable angle.

“Several hours,” he replied.

Abren could tell from Misen's scowl and the small potted plant wedged under her arm that her job had not gone to plan. He tried to cheer her up.

“You are not dead,” he added.

On a personal level, Abren was unsure if being alive in Sioure was preferable to oblivion, but he recognised others didn't find it to be quite the torture that he did. Unfortunately, despite this being the most positive thing he could come up with, Misen seemed to take it as a challenge.

“Not *yet* I'm not,” she muttered as she took his arm. “Come on, we're going drinking.”

Misen was deceptively strong for her size, but even overt strength would have struggled to move Abren.

“I do not drink.”

“Fine!” she snapped as she released him. “Then *I'm* going drinking and *you are* going to sit and listen to me complain. Do you *do* that?”

Abren considered this. His answer was both accurate and regrettable.

“Frequently.”

“Great!” said Misen as she spun on her heel and strode off.

Undoubtedly, meditation would have been a better way for Misen to deal with her unhappiness, but she didn't have the patience for such things. She didn't like to think, she needed to do something, and so she followed in the steps of the Third Prophet.

Although, the prophet's path to oblivion was significantly dryer than the one Misen had chosen.

#

“I was quite displeased when you killed me,” Misen repeated for the fourth time in an ever-increasing pitch. *“That's what she said to me!”*

It was quiet in the Croffit. Occasionally, the tavern attracted nobility intent on living the *“common life”* but tonight there were only the regulars. There weren't many taverns like the Croffit in Jakusta, really there weren't many taverns in general. Most drinking establishments in the capital were far grander, Jakusta's wine gardens widely recognised as being the finest place in all Sioure to get drunk under a tree. The Croffit on the other hand, was the kind of place you'd expect to find in some miserable eastern backwater. At first, Misen had hated the place, but over the years she'd come to find the unchanging nature of the strange little tavern to be reassuring. Tonight, it wasn't reassuring enough.

“But how is that my problem?” she continued. *“That's literally my job. That's what I'm there to do. It'd be like if... if... you sold someone... bread and then they complained that you'd... sold them bread.”*

Sometimes Misen wished Abren had a profession that better lent itself to analogies. These times happened almost exclusively after breakfast. Of course, it didn't matter. Misen didn't need a good example to convince Abren that something in Sioure was fundamentally terrible. Even if she did, she wasn't talking for his benefit. Though her trip back to the city had been relatively short, it had given her time to be alone with her thoughts. It'd been awful. Thoughts were treacherous things, impossible to pin down and capable of spiralling off in a dozen different directions, and knowing the danger of engaging with them Misen had come to the Croffit to drown them. She felt she was doing a good job of it. Then disaster struck.

“It seems your life was better when you were an assassin.”

Misen blinked, surprised to hear a voice that wasn't her own. Technically, she and Abren

were having a conversation, but this was the first thing he'd spoken since they'd sat down. This wasn't all that uncommon, it was the primary reason she enjoyed talking to him, but now he'd said something Misen was forced to think about it.

“Yeah, probably,” she shrugged.

“Then why do you not return to your work as an assassin?”

Even though this question was a clear, logical progression, it caught Misen entirely off guard. She should have known Abren would have a point. Abren always had a point. He was a man of many points. The Kiahenese had an entire word for people like him; “*cactus*”.

“It's not that simple,” said Misen dismissively.

“Why?”

When Abren was presented with a problem, he considered solutions. Admittedly, this pragmatic approach was good when the roof was leaking or something was on fire, but it was very unwelcome when applied to Misen's life. Unwilling to engage, Misen scanned the room for a distraction. Unfortunately, most things in the damp, dingy tavern seemed at least as uncomfortable as the conversation.

“Because of reasons...” said Misen as she continued to look around.

“Every time one of your jobs goes poorly, it is because you have to deal with the people you didn't kill. If you were an assassin this would not be an issue,” Abren continued. “It is clear your culture does not see assassination as a shameful practice. Even if it did, your culture does not ascribe any importance to shame.”

Misen mumbled a wordless response. She didn't want to listen, but Abren's was difficult to ignore. She tried to focus her attention elsewhere, but so far the most acceptable distraction she found was a grease patch upon the wood dust covered floor. With no other choice, she

decided to stare intently at it. Abren continued.

“Your work would not take as much time.”

That was true. It was much easier to deal with people when you only had to deal with them once.

“You would not have to talk to people.”

That would also be an advantage. Misen didn't like talking to people, it gave them the opportunity to talk back.

“The Guild Accountant would manage all the billing and collection of payments, removing the burden from your fine shoulders.”

That'd be good too. Misen had never had an especially firm grasp on the concept of money and she suspected this might one day become a problem.

“You'd also have a position of authority in the guild. You could just order people to do the things you don't want to do.”

Another positive. If Misen could order people to leave her alone, then she wouldn't have to spend so much time coming up with convincing threats. Honestly, taken together, it was a compelling argument. Compelling enough that several seconds passed before she realised Abren wasn't the one making it. She looked up from the grease stain, only to be confronted by another.

“Go away, Dark Shadow,” Misen scowled. “This is a private conversation.”

Dark Shadow grinned down at her, moustache oily and eye patch sparkling. She didn't mind that he'd been eavesdropping, she couldn't blame people for being interested in what she had to say, but joining in was a step too far. She glared. Instead of backing away, he threw his head back and laughed.

“Dark Shadow? The great assassin of legend? My girl, I am truly honoured to be

mistaken for such a man! Regretfully, I must inform you I am merely the humble merchant, Wodahs Krad,” said Wodahs Krad, a man clearly unused to saying his name aloud.

“I’m not joining your dumb, stupid guild,” said Misen, cutting right to the point. “Quit asking.”

“Once again, I must stress I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Wodahs clarified before Shadow chimed in. “However, if I did, I would suggest you reconsider your position. There are a lot of opportunities for advancement right now.”

If Misen was being honest with herself, Dark Shadow’s new guild was a good fit for her, still small enough that her work would matter but prominent enough to keep her busy. Luckily, Misen Delaur was rarely honest with herself.

“I’m not talking about this again,” she said bluntly.

Dark Shadow sighed dramatically.

“Well, you can’t fault a man for trying-”

“Yes, I can,” Misen interjected.

“-but just to show there are no hard feelings,” Dark Shadow continued without missing a beat. “Allow me to buy you a drink.”

Misen hesitated. She knew she should decline, knew that the offer of a drink in the Croffit was more threat than reward, but she still considered it. As irritating as Dark Shadow was, he wanted something from her and that meant it was in his interest to agree with anything she said. She still had a lot to say, there were still several more octaves before her repeated “*I was quite displeased when you killed me*” was only audible to dogs. The thought of having a receptive audience was enough to convince her to make a terrible decision.

“Fine, but it’s going to take a lot more than one drink to convince me to join your guild,”

said Misen.

“Well then, I'd best ensure it's more than one then,” said Dark Shadow, the skin around his eye patch wrinkling in a manner that suggested he was winking.

With a flourish of an imagined cape, Dark Shadow stalked off to the bar.

“We should leave.”

Misen was used to Abren falling silent when conversation became “*too Siourean*” but he was so good at fading into the background she was almost surprised to realise he was still sitting opposite her.

“I don't want to be rude,” said Misen, continuing before Abren could point out that she was rarely anything else. “I'll just have one more and then we'll go.”

She could tell Abren wasn't convinced. She could also tell he was even less convinced the second, third and fourth time she said it. Luckily, by the fifth time, he was blurry enough that his scepticism was impossible to make out.

#

Misen needed a new bed.

For most Sioureans a “*single bed*” was a kind of mythological construct, akin to ancient hydras or honest Endenese. Unfortunately, Misen's bedroom was so cramped that she'd been forced to choose between a narrow bed or a bed that prevented her door from opening. As a true-blooded Siourean, the choice was obvious: remove the door. Unfortunately, Abren hadn't agreed, and she'd needed him to carry her new bed up the stairs. So Misen had settled for the narrow bed and though she still resented it, she had learned to tolerate it.

Or at least she had until this morning when, for no reason, it began groaning. Misen was quite good at ignoring morning sounds like the fluting dawn chorus of the Owarl birds or the

drunken shouts revellers staggering home, but there was something about this sound that made it difficult to block out. Eventually she realised why. It was because the sound was coming from her.

“Ugh... I'm never... drinking again,” she groaned.

“That would be wise.”

Misen eyes snapped open, the prospect of someone being in her room alarming enough to overcome her misery. Her eyes struggled to adjust to the glare of the morning sun but the enormous, looming shape over her bed was remarkably easy to identify.

“Abren...?” said Misen, blinking blearily. “What... why... when did ...you...?”

“I have been talking to you for five minutes,” said Abren.

Misen scrunched up her face as she processed this information.

“What about...?”

“There's someone downstairs asking for you,”

This probably meant that someone was looking to hire her for a new job. Memories of her last ten jobs informed her reply.

“Tell them I'm dead.”

“No.”

Misen attempted to sigh but the sound she ended up making was significantly damper.

“I thought you people always told the truth...” she grumbled.

“I will tell them you will be down shortly,” said Abren. “Get dressed.”

Misen winced at the sound of the door slamming, certain that Abren had closed it gently but equally certain it'd have been silent had he simply removed the door as she'd requested. She sat up in bed and took a moment to allow her stomach to settle. When she realised that would

never happen, she grabbed the pile of fresh clothing Abren had laid out and began the complicated process of getting dressed. Inexplicably, she succeeded.

Misen stumbled to her mirror and found a stranger staring back. In her opinion, she had quite a remarkable face and though that remained true, the nature of the remarks it currently inspired skewed towards “*gods, what happened to you?*” and “*I think you better lie down*”. Her brown skin was normally the Siourean ideal, rich and balanced, but this morning it was more like the Siourean reality, inconsistent and highly stratified. Some parts of her face were so pallid and glossy she could have passed for an eastern swamp-dweller. Other parts, such as the bags beneath her eyes, were dark enough that she may have been mistaken for Sandsworn Kiahenese were it not for her stance, clothing, and possession of a personality. Her amber eyes remained striking, but they were so bloodshot that it looked like someone had finally struck them back. In addition to this, her long, black hair seemed to have undergone a serious schism resulting in five unique factions all holding wildly different views regarding which direction they should point. All this taken together meant that Misen looked as if she were on the cusp of either death or Jakustain high fashion. Unsure what else to do, she ran a brush through her hair. This didn't improve much, but it did dislodge a small silver fork that had been hidden amidst the tangles. Accepting this was the best she could do, Misen staggered out of her room and headed down the stairs.

Despite her own unsteadiness and the inexplicable potted plant someone had thoughtlessly discarded upon the stairs, Misen made it to the kitchen in one piece. She could make out muffled voices coming from the bakery but what she heard confused her. Abren's part of the conversation was easy to identify, it rarely being more than one syllable, but the other voice was familiar and yet not deeply irritating. Misen didn't have many friends in the city,

arguably she had none, and so normally when she recognised a voice it was a bad thing. This didn't feel like a bad thing. This was enough to propel her onwards. She staggered out into the bakery. When she saw who it was, she stopped dead in her tracks.

“Broukas...?” Misen muttered in disbelief.

Broukas Mal paused mid-sentence. She grinned.

“Misen!” she said as she threw her arms wide. “You look like shit!”

In response, Misen threw up.

#

Misen hadn't seen Broukas Mal in years. Technically, she still hadn't.

Though Misen had been looking directly at her, a combination of a raging headache and watering eyes meant she hadn't so much recognised Broukas as she'd recognised the woman's general dimensions. Normally, this method couldn't identify anyone other than Abren, but though Broukas wasn't a towering, obsidian monolith, she was still quite distinct.

Broukas had a broad, stocky build that suggested she worked for a living, something that put her in stark contrast to most of the citizenry of Jakusta. This taken in conjunction with her lamentable decision to be born with skin pale enough to be scorched by the Siourean summer meant that when Misen saw a chalky, bulky, blocky blur in the bakery it was either Broukas Mal or a large pile of flour sacks. As Abren had been talking to the blur, Misen suspected it was the former. It was only when her brain caught fire that she could confirm it.

“*Agaghauhlug!*” Misen gurgled.

Broukas quickly withdrew the cup from Misen's lips before her frantic flailing knocked it to the ground.

“Stop complaining, you gigantic baby,” Broukas chided.

Even though Misen was in the middle of being consumed from within by liquid fire, she still found time to be offended by Broukas's casual dismissal. Unfortunately, before she could protest, she realised she wasn't actually dying. This did little to improve her mood.

“What *was* that?!” Misen demanded.

The painful clarity left in the wake of the molten liquid meant that when Misen glared accusingly at Broukas she actually saw her. Despite the years, Broukas hadn't really changed. She was still muscular, still plagued by freckles, and still gave off the impression she could tear your arm off and beat you to death with it. The only real difference was the single streak of blonde in the middle of her red hair. It seemed Broukas had weathered her exile to the isles of Enden with little ill effect and though that should have been a relief to Misen, she found it difficult to concentrate on anything other than the orange vapour rising from the chipped mug in Broukas's hand.

“Just some Sojast,” Broukas shrugged. “It's an Endenese hangover cure.”

This was preposterous, not simply because the existence of a viable hangover cure would be all the justification the Kingdoms of Sioure needed to declare all-out war on Enden but also because it hadn't cured Misen's hangover. Instead, it had stripped away the insulating fog, meaning that she not only still felt terrible, but she was also now acutely aware of exactly how terrible she felt. This was bad enough. Knowing that Sojast had been involved only made it worse.

“Sojast?!” Misen exclaimed. “That kills people!”

Drugs were commonplace in Jakusta, but even the most well-stocked supplier would've struggled to provide Sojast. Unlike other substances which offered a break from reality, Sojast made it easier to concentrate, stripping away illusions and leaving only the true reality of life.

This alone would have made it a niche product, but the fact that overindulgence, the Jakustain pastime, could cause paralysis and death ensured the drug was deeply unpopular. Despite all this, Broukas didn't seem all that concerned.

“Only if you take too much,” said Broukas. “And that's true of everything. Even too much *air* can kill you.”

Before Misen could argue, her mind began processing the backlog of memories that had led to this moment. Now she not only remembered vomiting, but she also remembered vomiting a second time. Luckily, by then, Broukas had manoeuvred her to the kitchen table and placed a bucket upon her lap. After the inevitable had taken place, Broukas claimed she had something that might help. Now Misen realised that everything she knew about Sojast, from its effects to its scarcity, had come from the explanation Broukas had given while searching the kitchen for a mug. It was clear Misen had nothing to complain about. She was undeterred.

“Air can't *kill* you,” Misen retorted.

Broukas shrugged as she took the chair opposite Misen.

“Sure, it can,” she said, a smile quirking her lips. “You just need to fall through enough of it.”

Immediately, the memory of the last time Misen had seen Broukas surfaced in her mind. The howling wind, the chilling cold, the long plummet to the ground. Misen stiffened. Broukas quickly realised her mistake.

“I wasn't talking about that,” she blurted. “I was just... saying shit.”

That was probably true, but it didn't make the reminder of Sullenbridge any more pleasant. That was the last time they'd seen each other, and they hadn't parted on the best of terms. There was a lot that Misen had wanted to say to Broukas, but when the Aleal sea between

them she'd had the excuse not to even try. Now that Broukas was here, Misen didn't even know where to begin. Luckily, Broukas did.

“Why do you have a cupboard full of jewels?”

Misen blinked before slowly turning to stare at the multitude of gems scattered across the kitchen floor. During Broukas's search for a cup, she'd opened a cupboard only to have its precious contents tumble to the floor. Chances were Broukas didn't really care, that this was just small talk, but that only made it easier to answer.

“Birds give them to Abren.”

Broukas nodded. Then frowned.

“Birds give them to Abren,” she repeated, making it clear there was no aspect of this answer she didn't find deeply confusing.

“Yeah,” said Misen. “Abren feeds Owarl birds old bread and they give him jewels.”

Inexplicably, Broukas still had questions.

“Why do they give him jewels?”

“I don't know,” Misen shrugged. “Why do birds do anything?”

“Okay. Fair,” Broukas conceded. “But why doesn't Abren just sell the bread to people for actual money?”

“Because, *apparently*, it's too stale to eat,” said Misen bitterly, all too familiar with this questionable rationale.

“Then he should sell it as a weapon,” said Broukas.

Misen frowned. “What could you do with a bread roll...?”

“Lots of things!” said Broukas. “I bet you could knock someone out with a stale bread roll.”

“You can’t knock someone out with a bread roll,” said Misen dismissively.

“I could,” Broukas insisted, before adding. “You probably couldn’t. Cause, you know, your tiny arms.”

“I do not have tiny arms!” said Misen, folding her perfectly normal arms across her chest.

“Okay, sure they’re long,” Broukas conceded. “But there’s nothing to them.”

“Yeah, well,” said Misen defensively. “Maybe we don’t all want big, weird leg arms like you have.”

“*Leg arms?*” Broukas repeated.

“Yeah, cause they’re big! Like legs!”

“*Leg arms,*” Broukas said once more.

Misen scowled but Broukas merely grinned. A few moments later, Misen was grinning too. Now she realised there was only one thing she wanted to say to Broukas Mal.

“I really missed you.”

Broukas laughed.

“I missed you too.”

And after that, everything was easy.

#

They talked for hours and though it was often more an argument than a conversation, they occasionally stumbled across something that mattered. Broukas had volunteered little information but there’d been enough to assure Misen that life on the Endenese island of Qion was much less miserable than she’d imagined. Broukas had gained a similar level of understanding into Misen’s life, or at least she had once Misen admitted that “*backwards assassin*” was a semi-plausible description of her current career. Admittedly, they could have

learned significantly more by asking direct questions, but even after hours of frequently pointless back and forth, Misen had no regrets. Then the pastries ran out.

“Well, this has been fun,” Broukas announced as she brushed crumbs from her tunic.

“But I really need to get going.”

“But you haven't even told me about your weird hair thing yet!” Misen protested.

Broukas quickly tucked the single lock of blonde hair back behind her ear, just as she had done every other time Misen mentioned it.

“And *you* never told me why you live in a bakery with a Kiahenese giant,” Broukas countered as she rose to her feet. “So we're both suffering.”

“Okay, fine,” Misen sighed as she pushed back from the table. “I guess we'll get to it next time.”

It was impossible not to notice the awkward pause that followed.

“Yeah,” said Broukas finally. “Sure.”

Broukas couldn't have sounded less convincing if she tried. Misen didn't blame her. It was easier to agree than admit it'd probably be several years before they met again. Misen didn't want to let this bother her. She wanted to be grateful that she'd gotten her friend back for a couple of hours, but when she tried to smile it felt hollow. Broukas didn't notice. Something else was on her mind.

“Actuuuuuaaally...” said Broukas, drawing out the word to an uncomfortable degree. “I forgot to mention something...”

It was clear Broukas wasn't sure if she should continue. She drummed her fingers on the table, her brow furrowed as she wrestled with some mysterious dilemma. Eventually, as was often the case, Broukas came out on top.

“I got a new job,” said Broukas, all doubts forgotten. “I’m going to be the guard captain for the King of Mamsevi.”

Misen frowned. There were no Kings in Enden.

“Wait, does that mean...” she began hesitantly. “You’re... coming back to Sioure?”

“Sure does,” Broukas grinned. “Not sure exactly *where* in Sioure though. I think Mamsevi is somewhere between Vedahl and Torce? Gotta check the big map in the Shulyari library to find out.”

Misen had never heard of Mamsevi but there were so many Kingdoms scattered around Sioure that this was to be expected. She did know Torce and Vedahl. They were two of the old southern Kingdoms, but as their combined territory stretched from the Uncha mountains to the Aleal sea, it didn’t make Mamsevi any easier to pin down. However, this didn’t really matter as even the most remote corners of either kingdom were closer to Jakusta than Enden. This was good news, this *very* good news, but before Misen could say so, Broukas continued.

“Anyway, I want you to come with me.”

Misen hadn’t expected this. She was flattered, but it didn’t change her answer.

“Sorry, I can’t,” Misen shook her head. “I’m not allowed in the Shulyari because of the incident.”

Though Broukas had been poised to dismiss whatever excuse Misen offered, she hesitated.

“Okay, at some point I do want to circle back to *'the incident'*,” said Broukas. “But I didn’t mean the library, you dolt. Come with me to Mamsevi! You can do your *thing*! With the *stuff*!”

Misen didn’t reply immediately, too mesmerised by the illustrative hand gestures that

suggested her “*thing*” involved “*cranking a tiny lever*” while her “*stuff*” included “*riding a tiny horse*”.

“I don't know...” said Misen. “I have a lot going on.”

“No, you don't,” said Broukas. “And even if you did, it'd be stupid and you'd hate it.”

As this was exactly how Misen herself had repeatedly described her work, she couldn't really argue against it. However, she could glare at Broukas for bringing it up. It didn't dampen Broukas's enthusiasm.

“It'll be great!” Broukas insisted. “Jusp Corathian is going to be crowned the King of Mamsevi and once that happens, Fifth Sister and Celn are coming for him. He's dead. He's so dead that he's only given me a six-week contract because anything longer would be a waste of money!”

Though Misen continued to glare, she considered this.

“That is pretty dead,” she admitted reluctantly.

“It's *wild* dead!” Broukas continued. “Celn and Fifth Sister have the best assassins in Sioure. If they're competing then it'll take a miracle for Jusp to last a week.”

“A miracle?” Misen snorted. “Sure, Fifth Sister are *good* and Celn are *weird* but there's plenty of stuff you could- *no*, stop *smiling*.”

Misen's request went unheeded, Broukas practically vibrating with glee.

“Come on, it'll be like old times!”

“It would *not* be like old times!”

“Okay, it would be the literal opposite of old times,” Broukas conceded. “But it'd be fun!”

Misen wasn't convinced. It'd been nice to see Broukas, but she didn't know if it was a good idea to commit herself to a mysterious job in an unknown kingdom based on an afternoon

of chat and pastries. The truth was that Celn and Fifth Sister were two of the most powerful assassin guilds in all Sioure and though Misen's expertise could help delay them, she couldn't stop them. The Guilds would win, King Corathian would die, and it didn't seem like Misen could gain much from the experience. Then Broukas proved her wrong.

“Misen, if this goes well, they'll all want me,” said Broukas, her voice low. “I'll be able to get a job *anywhere*.”

Now Misen understood. King Corathian was going to die but the longer it took the better Broukas Mal looked. Everyone would want the guard captain who'd defied two of the most lethal guilds in Sioure. If Broukas lasted the entire six weeks even the old Kingdoms would take notice. This could fix everything. It'd be as if Sullenbridge had never happened. Misen's choice was obvious.

“Okay, fi-“

Before she could finish, Broukas grabbed her in a bear hug and lifted her into the air.

“We're going to Mamsevi!” Broukas hollered.

Though not thrilled by this development, Broukas's iron grip meant Misen hadn't much say in the matter. Broukas reeled around the kitchen, spinning as she went, and either by accident or design, she crashed out to the bakery. Abren said nothing, but his single glance contained enough silent judgement to dampen the mood.

“Okay, so I really have to go now,” said Broukas as she released Misen. “But you won't regret this!”

“Well, I'm not staying for the full six weeks!” said Misen, desperate to put some terms on the agreement. “I'm not spending more than a month in *Mamsevi*.”

“Oh, obviously, never expected you to. How about you just stay until...” Broukas paused,

her expression thoughtful. “The Irithni Eye?”

Misen wanted to insist this was far too long, but she lacked a crucial piece of information.

“What the fuck is an Irithni Eye?”

Broukas stopped by the bakery door and made a series of noises that suggested she was either shocked or deflating.

“The eclipse...?” said Broukas slowly. “Umirr and Ghurya? Little moon passing in front of the sun? Day of new beginnings? Misen, it's the biggest Irithni festival. It's like the only one they all agree on. How do you not know this...?”

Misen grimaced. Though the worship and ceremonies of the various Irithni gods had played a large part in her childhood, years of concentrated effort had allowed her to forget almost all of it. Misen had no time for religion, no interest in gods, and she considered anything even remotely related to the Irithni to be an unwelcome reminder of her mother. She was surprised Broukas had forgotten that, but she wasn't in the mood to remind her.

“Fine, *whatever*...” Misen grumbled. “I'll stay until the dumb, stupid eye thing.”

Broukas's grin almost doubled in size.

“Great!” she beamed as stepped out into the street. “See you at the Queen's Gate tomorrow at dawn!”

“Tomorrow?!” Misen shrieked. “Dawn!?”

But by then it was already too late. Broukas was gone. Misen grumbled darkly to herself, but though she hadn't expected such a swift departure, it didn't really change anything. She was going to do this, he was going to set it all right, and if that meant getting up early then that was a price she would pay, albeit reluctantly. Now she had to plan, she had to pack, but before she could there was something she needed to know.

“Abren, when is the Irithni Eye?”

Abren always took time to answer a question, but this silence dragged out so long that Misen was convinced he was composing a long monologue about how the "*Irithni eye*" and all the practices associated with the Siourean gods were an abomination. When his actual response came it turned out to be something much, much worse.

“It is in six weeks.”

Misen screamed.