

The Kethran Empire



OBLIVION

AMANZI ISLANDS

DAWNKEEP

SHADOWMERE

STONEBARROW

★ Malgraves

The former Kingdom of Anor

GRAYEDGE

The Kingdom of Melec

BLOODSTONE MOUNTAINS

FOOTHILLS VILLAGE

HERRATH

★ Ciri

FALLENBRIDGE

OBLIVION GATEWAY

VALSHADE FOREST

LOTHERAN RIVER

GREAT SOUTHERN ROAD

EDGEKEEP

The Wild In-Between
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THE GLASHTYN SEA

- City
- ★ Capital
- - - Kingdom Border



GLASHTYN BADLANDS

LIGHTWATER OASIS

MORETH DESERT

The former Kingdom of **Ethswen**

SERINE RIVER

NAMURIAN FOREST

The former Kingdom of **Sadira**

KIRITH FOREST

THE BELARIC SEA

GULF OF NYRES

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- City
- ★ Capital
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The Kethran Empire

GLASHTYN SEA

OBLIVION

The Former Kingdom of Anor

The Former Kingdom of Eihswen

BLOODSTONE MOUNTAINS

The Kingdom of Melech

The Former Kingdom of Sadira

VALSHADE FOREST

KIRITE FOREST

The Wild In-Between

GULF OF NYRES

BAY OF SINKING SOULS

Kingdom of Galasea

Kingdom of Walin

THE BELARIC SEA

SINHARA MOUNTAINS

Kingdom of Tumeria

GREYBANK PENINSULA

VERLORE FOREST

The Sundofian Empire



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THE HIERARCHY OF GODS



ICE



BONE



SERPENT



FIRE



STAR



MOON



SKY



STORM



OAK



MTN.



SAND



OCEAN

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CHAPTER I

CASIA HATED THUNDERSTORMS. THEY REMINDED HER OF THE night she had watched her mother kill her father.

A bone-rattling *BOOM* in the present, and suddenly Cas was unwillingly back in the past, nine years old and crouching behind a claw-footed chair, smelling the dust in the suede fabric, feeling the rough floor beneath her bare feet while her tiny body quivered from a mixture of fear and sickness.

Another clap of thunder. Back in the present, Cas shifted closer to the rocks lining the mountain path as the rain started to fall in earnest. She gave her head a little shake, trying to spill the remnants of memory from it. *Not tonight.*

Too many things were riding on tonight being a success.

Swiping the damp strands of hair from her eyes, Cas settled into a crouch, making herself as small as possible

before creeping forward into the shadows cast by the rock ledges and the sparse bit of vegetation still growing this high up. She gripped the rough, knobby branch of a leafless and crooked tree, and then froze beneath it as she heard a low hissing sound. Her hand cautiously reached for the bow across her back.

The hissing soon grew louder, accompanied by the whisper of scales sliding against stone.

“Rock viper,” she muttered to herself as she reached for an arrow, her eyes wide and scanning the nooks and crannies for its hiding spot...

There.

Yellow-slit eyes locked on her face. The viper flung itself from the ledge in the next instant, lunging toward her with its mouth open, its fangs flashing along with the lightning—

Her arrow released faster. It pierced the creature in mid-air, causing it to break into a violent, twisting dance as it fell. The viper landed belly-up and thrashed against the gritty ground for a few seconds—*thump, thump...thump...thump*—before the stillness of death overtook it.

Cas put a boot on its shovel-shaped head and yanked the arrow out, wiped the blackish blood off on a nearby cluster of weeds, and then continued on her way.

There were likely more of those serpents lingering nearby, so she kept her bow out, making sure to have an arrow nocked and ready every time she rounded a corner or crested a steep rise of the pebbly path—although the

vipers were the least of her concerns, in spite of the venom they carried.

There were far worse creatures that haunted these paths.

Feral dogs, and the malevolent *kui* spirits, and countless other nasty things made of teeth and claws and ire... And most of those things would not be felled by a single arrow.

There were also soldiers allegedly waiting in the pass just ahead, and that was perhaps the most unnerving thing of all.

That skinny passage ahead was known as the Bone God's Pass—so called because of the white, crystalline structures that reached out from its rock walls like skeletal fingers. A half-mile of those clawing fingers awaited, according to the map Laurent had given Cas. After that, the pass would give way to a wider road, one that curved toward a gate made of metal, arched stones, and white trees that twisted together in a way that could only be described as *unnatural*.

That stone and metal gate was the ultimate point she and her team were attempting to reach. Beyond it, the domain that was known as *Oblivion*—at least in the common tongue—awaited anyone brave enough to keep going. This would be the first time Cas had seen it all in person. Her chest tightened a little more with every step she took. She rarely thought of herself as *brave*; she had simply become well-practiced at doing things in spite of her fear.

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Investigate the Oblivion Gateway.

Bring me proof of whatever the King-Emperor is up to.

Those had been her lord patron's instructions. This was the reason she and her team were here in spite of the danger and the fear—because of those specialized soldiers from King-Emperor Varen's army, his so-called *Peace Keepers*, that were allegedly here as well. Her patron wanted to know *why* those Peace Keepers were here. Nobody frequented this dismal place without purpose. Most went out of their way to *avoid* it, believing that the Bloodstone Mountains were cursed.

And perhaps they were.

Or the domain of Oblivion was, at least. Nestled in the northernmost ridges of the Bloodstones, it was covered in silver-black clouds that frequently swallowed people up and never spat them back out.

Explanations for what lay beneath the clouds varied.

Some said the cover was a natural barrier created from the decay of strange flora and fauna underneath it. Others claimed that Kerse, the 'Bone God' who was otherwise known as the middle-god of Death and Destruction, had made a secret home there. That he still visited it whenever he grew tired of the various, far more divine places that he and his fellow deities more often frequented.

Still other stories said there was a monster hiding deep in the heart of that silvery darkness, and it stalked the edges of its territory without rest, breathing sickness

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and famine and disaster out into the empire whenever it grew angry or restless.

The truth was that nobody knew what happened in the shadows of Oblivion. And the not-knowing was enough to convince most that it had to have been something wicked and wild at work—something wicked and wild that the King-Emperor may or may not have been tangling himself up in.

Cas wasn't sure what she believed about this place. Not yet. But she tried not to think of the more terrifying stories she'd heard about it as she continued to wind her way through the uneven paths.

As she came closer to the Bone God's Pass, she returned her bow to the sheath slung across her back, and she reached instead for the small dart gun tucked inside her coat. The darts she carried tonight were tipped with a toxin derived from killsweed. Despite the plant's name, this particular toxin would do little more than put her target to sleep. She wasn't here to kill.

Not this time, at least.

Between the last king-emperor's rule and the Fading Sickness that had been ravaging the Kethran Empire for the past few decades, she couldn't help but feel there was enough death in the world without her gratuitously adding to it.

The path forked, and she took the route to the left. If she recalled that map she'd studied correctly, the Bone God's Pass was just around the corner ahead. She crept along until she reached the edge and paused for a

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moment to steady herself, pressing her back against the smooth bit of rock. Then, shielding her face from the driving rain with one hand, her dart gun raised in the other, she took a deep breath and rounded that corner—

Only to find the entrance to the pass unguarded.

Strange.

She had expected at least a few guards here, as the narrow way would have been an easy place to head off potential spies and intruders, such as herself, to keep them from creeping too close to the Oblivion Gate.

She might have thought it a stroke of good luck...*if* she actually believed in that sort of thing. But Asra, the woman who'd raised her, had taught her long ago that Luck was a lesser-spirit that only the lazy and the foolish prayed to.

Cas kept her guard up as she made her way down the hill. It was even darker here—almost like descending into a pit. She had a Fire-kind crystal in the small pouch on her belt, but she preferred not to use it; such crystals did not come cheap, for one thing, and she was also wary of attracting more attention to herself.

She carefully picked her way through the near darkness, sprinting short distances whenever a flash of lightning helped illuminate the way.

She made it to the pass, hesitated only a moment to study the cluster of elongated white stones glinting like fangs around its opening, and then stepped into that narrow mouth. The rain funneled down and the wind howled hauntingly loud in the more-enclosed space. She

had only taken a few steps when she nearly tripped over... something. *A bit of fallen rock? A wayward root?*

She narrowed her eyes, let them adjust to the dark, and saw...

It was an *arm*.

Cas stumbled back, gripping her dart gun harder. Two men clad almost entirely in black lay on the ground before her. Silver brooches fastened their cloaks, engraved with the emblem of the King-Emperor's house—a tiger rearing on its hind legs with its jaws opened wide.

The men almost looked as if they were sleeping, so much so that Cas gathered a few shreds of courage and crouched beside them for a closer inspection.

Neither had a pulse. Their skin was rain-slicked and cold. One's eyes were still partially open, his hooded gaze staring up at the dark sky, unseeing. It was hard to tell in the blackness, but his irises looked grey...*unnaturally* grey, as if all of their true color had been leached out of them by the Fading Sickness.

They looked terribly similar to Cas's own eyes—albeit considerably more *dead*.

Heart pounding, she removed one of their brooches and dropped it into her pouch. She briefly wondered what had killed these men—had it been that Fading Sickness?—but then she pushed it all from her mind just as quickly; it wasn't her job to make sense of things. She was getting paid to collect proof, that was all, and here it was—hard evidence that some of the King-Emperor's men were at least in this area.

It was a start.

Hopefully her colleagues had found other things. They had split up to better search for these things—and to find the path of least resistance to the Oblivion Gate. A path that Cas seemed to have discovered; if two dead bodies and the occasional rock viper were the only things she had to face on this route...

She kept going.

Deeper and further through the pass of the Bone God she went. The stone walls squeezed more tightly around her. The air began to feel strange, to burn her lungs—almost as if it was woven through with invisible threads of poison. She grabbed for the mask that hung against her throat, buried under the cowl neck of her damp coat. It had allegedly been blessed by one of the Sky-kind—who were wielders of barrier magic—and Laurent had insisted they all wear them.

Cas wasn't convinced the mask would do much to protect against the evil airs of this place—or that she personally *needed* that protection, given her history—but she wasn't in the mood to hear another smug lecture from Laurent when he caught her not wearing it.

At the very least, the mask might help hide her identity from any of the King-Emperor's men waiting up ahead, so she pulled it up, secured its bands around the curves of her ears, and then picked up her pace once more.

The sound of boots thumping and chainmail rattling made her pause.

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She twisted around, raising the dart gun to her lips, but cursed when she realized her mask was in the way and instead reached once more for her bow. She nocked and aimed an arrow into the darkness behind her.

Two men emerged from that darkness. They were dressed almost identically, save for their cloaks; the man in front no longer *had* a cloak—because Cas had stolen the brooch that once held it in place.

Impossible.

Despite their dead, vacant stares, now they moved as if they were alive. Alive and *fast*. The one in front rushed her before she could give so much as a startled yelp, whipping his short sword from its sheath with a fluidity that was otherworldly. The creaks and groans that tumbled from his mouth were equally unnatural.

A slew of terrified curses fell from Cas's own mouth as she loosed an arrow and then swiftly followed it with another. Both arrows hit their mark, and the first not-quite-dead man staggered back a few steps, the arrows jostling but not falling from his pale forehead.

The man regained his balance, and his hooded eyes darted upward, just briefly, as if the arrows were only a minor nuisance.

The second man drew closer, groans twisting into words, unfamiliar and terrifying. He seemed equally unconcerned about the arrows bouncing around in his companion's head—even as thick rivers of blood streamed from the puncture wounds.

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The bleeding man responded to the second man in a tone that sounded almost...*amused*.

With a sick feeling wringing her gut, Cas realized what she was going to have to do to stop these two.

And she was going to need a sword for it.

The arrow-impaled man sliced at her arm. Cas ducked and darted around both men—a difficult maneuver in the tight space and treacherous mud—and then she planted a foot in the lower back of the second man, pushing him into the other. As the two became a briefly incapacitated, tangled-up heap, Cas aimed an arrow at the sword-wielding man's wrist.

It struck and pierced straight through. He didn't cry out—his dead body didn't seem to register any pain—but the strike jostled his grip enough that the sword fell from his hand. It clanged against the rocky ground and then skittered a short way down the path.

Cas tossed her bow aside, snatched up the fallen sword, and spun back around to face her enemies.

They finally untangled themselves and rose, swaying a bit as they did.

She managed to hook her boot around the ankle of the one closest to her, throwing him off balance, and kicked him away.

Quick as a shadow, the one she'd fired arrows into swept around behind her. A deathly cold washed over her as he neared, and suddenly the falling rain felt like needles of ice stabbing into her.

She spun around, gripping her new sword in both

hands. She hoisted the blade high, as if she planned on delivering a crushing overhead blow, and her target lifted his crossed arms so that his bracers would take the brunt of the attack, leaving his mid-section completely unguarded.

Cas shifted, pulling her blade down, and aimed a powerful kick into his stomach. As he doubled over and curled inward, exposing his neck, she swung her stolen sword in the arc she'd truly planned all along.

It lodged deeply into his neck. Cas twisted her torso, drawing strength from her core as she'd been taught to do, and swung again. The blade proved sharp enough to manage the rest of the job. The thunder and howls of rain and wind drowned out the gruesome noise of the man's head being severed from his neck.

The body crumpled, but then kept moving for a moment, writhing about, its hands beating along the ground and searching.

It might have been comical...if it hadn't been so horrifying.

Cas kept moving as well, afraid she might end up frozen in place if she didn't—either from fear, or from that strange cold that the undead men were still giving off. She found the severed head before its body could, and cringing, she drew back and kicked it as hard as possible, sending it hurtling back up the path she'd already traveled.

The headless body ceased its searching and went still.

The second undead man had stopped in his tracks,

watching her. His head lolled about on his shoulders, still attached but suddenly appearing too heavy for his neck—as if whatever puppet strings were controlling him had suddenly gone slack. His hooded grey eyes drifted over her, briefly locking on her face. On her eyes. Then his body slumped, dropping to his knees and falling forward onto the ground.

Cas heaved for breath as she stared at him.

What the hell?

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CHAPTER 2

TREMBLING SLIGHTLY, CAS RETRIEVED HER BOW, RETURNING IT to its place on her back, and then stumbled away from the still bodies. She just wanted to keep going, to finish the job and get as far away from these strange mountains as she possibly could.

Still carrying her commandeered sword, she broke into a jog, slowing down only once she'd caught sight of what appeared to be an open trail on the other side of the Bone God's Pass.

She paused and took a diamond-shaped crystal from her coat pocket.

This particular crystal was embedded with Air-kind magic. The lesser-spirit of Air had once been a messenger to the upper and middle-gods, and for her services, she had been granted magic that made her capable of moving both herself and her messages more easily through space.

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Now a tiny trace of that spirit's magic resided in the translucent green stone resting against Cas's palm.

A whisper of *I'm almost to the gate* against that crystal, a bit of concentration, and the spell activated and absorbed her words, her thoughts, her vision. Cas made sure to focus intently on all that she had seen and was seeing, so that the others might see it, too. She reluctantly pictured those undead monsters once more, so that her friends would be sufficiently warned about what they were walking into—though she also made a point to show them that the path to where she stood was more or less clear.

Even after her battle, she had managed to be the first of her team to arrive here, so she remained convinced she had chosen the right path—the one of least resistance—and that meant she'd won the bet she'd made with Zev. He owed her a drink, and she made sure to include *that* in the message she was sending, as well.

The thought of sharing a drink with her friends after this warmed her as she finished activating the Air-kind spell, even as the rain continued to soak her, chilling her to the bone.

The Air crystal crumbled to dust in her hand, and a spark of celadon-colored energy flickered before disappearing and carrying her message off to the others.

Then she waited, keeping watch. Five minutes passed. Ten minutes. Twenty minutes—

Where were they?

As the storm picked up its intensity, the adrenaline

surge from her fight continued to fade, allowing her memories to resurface. Memories of all she had lost on that stormy night just like this one, over thirteen years ago...

Suddenly restless, she decided to move through the remainder of the Bone God's Pass on her own, ducking and weaving through those strange, protruding white formations. In the darkness lit only by flares of lightning, it was even easier to believe that the crystal formations were skeletal hands grabbing at her hair, her coat, her weapons. Each flicker of light and peal of thunder made her heart slam a little harder against her chest.

Finally, after one last turn, she was back on a more open path, moving away from the skeleton fingers and away from the *actual* undead beings that she'd escaped in that pass. She was safe. She was okay. Her friends would be here soon, and she would be safe and okay—

She'd nearly convinced herself of this. But then...thunder, thunder, more thunder boomed through the sky, bouncing off the tall cliffs surrounding her, carving a vibrating, twisting path into her gut...

Cas leaned against the rock face on her right and slumped halfway down it. She could feel the anxiety clawing through her. Digging in. Threatening to become a full-blown attack.

Not here. Not now.

She tried to tell herself how ridiculous she was being. She had just fought off two undead monsters, and now she was letting a storm trigger her? Letting it steal her

breath? Letting it tie its weights to her hands and feet and hold her in place this way?

But her anxiety was like that, unfortunately. It didn't always make sense, even to her, but that didn't make it any less real.

"Get it together, you fool," she chastised herself. And at least for a moment, both her body and the storm around her seemed to obey. The wind briefly calmed. The rain slowly transitioned to a mere misting, and Cas managed to anchor herself further by tapping her fingers against the stone behind her.

One, two, three...all the way to ten and then back down again. Her breathing settled. Her panic receded, somewhat, and the world momentarily turned oddly silent and still.

Footsteps echoed in the silence. She whipped toward the noise, lifting her new sword and pointing it at a target she couldn't see.

Something small and quick startled her as it brushed against her leg. She looked down, glimpsed a black-tipped fox tail bouncing away, and she realized what had just weaved its way past her. She lifted her eyes expectantly back to the path behind her. Lightning flashed a moment later, illuminating a dark face framed by darker curls and half-hidden by a mask just like Cas's.

Rhea.

Cas let out a small sigh of relief as she lowered her weapon. She peered around Rhea's shoulder, searching for Laurent and Zev. "Just you?"

“The guys are coming,” Rhea assured her. “They were investigating something first—some more friends like the one you, um, relieved of his head back there.”

“More dead bodies, you mean?”

“Mm-hm.”

“Were they...”

“Alive? Yes. In a manner of speaking.”

“I suspect there must be a Bone-kind around here somewhere, pulling the strings.”

“Did you spot anyone of the sort?”

Unease prickled the hairs on the back of Cas’s neck. “No. Which is what frightens me; how powerful would such a magic user have to be, to be able to control the dead so fully from a distance?”

Rhea frowned, but still managed to offer some reassurance after a moment of thought: “Maybe they’re being helped by the odd energy of these mountains, and the collective residue of the strange magic that has gone on here for so long?”

“Maybe,” mumbled Cas, unconvinced.

“All I know for certain is that this is an exceptionally neat place, and I’m really enjoying myself and all, but Casia?”

“Yes?”

“Next time I’m choosing the mission.”

Cas huffed out a breath, too tense to manage the laugh she usually did at Rhea’s dry and occasionally morbid sense of humor.

“...You okay, by the way?”

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“Fine,” Cas replied in a calm tone that likely would have convinced anyone but Rhea.

Rhea was almost completely blind—had been, for over a decade now—and she always said the loss of her sight had made her ears more attuned to bullshit.

Another crack of thunder and lightning made Cas shiver. She turned and started down the path before Rhea could question her further. Spying a shallow cave up ahead—an opportunity to get out of the rain for a moment—she hurried toward it with plans to wait there for the rest of their party.

Moments later, she heard Rhea catching up to her, feeling her way up the path with the use of a weathered grey staff. That unassuming staff, like the crystals Cas carried, was embedded with Marr magic—magic derived from the middle-god of Fire and Forging, specifically—and it doubled as a weapon as well as a guiding stick.

“Terrible storm tonight,” Rhea commented innocently.

“This empire has seen worse,” Cas said, squinting into the cave, studying it briefly before shuffling her way inside.

The storms that had roared through the former kingdom of Alnor thirteen years ago were unrivaled—they remained the stuff of legends to this day. The destruction had been catastrophic, with dozens of casualties and hundreds of homes flooded and otherwise destroyed.

The passing of the Lord and Lady of House Tessur, the

last members of the powerful house that had once ruled the largest of the Alnorian realms, had gone largely unnoticed in the aftermath—as had the disappearance of their adopted daughter, Silenna.

Silenna Tessur was dead, as far as anyone needed to know.

She had become dozens of other people since that death, but she was Casia Greythorne now, and she had worked hard to leave her other identities in the past where they belonged.

“Silverfoot’s spotted some interesting things in this storm,” Rhea said, climbing into the cave. She was slow, but surprisingly sure-footed, and Cas knew that she hated having people wait on her—so Cas hadn’t waited.

“What kind of interesting things?” Cas asked as she subtly kicked aside a treacherously loose bit of shale in Rhea’s path.

Rhea was quiet for a moment, concentrating. “I see metal stamped with the Bone god’s symbol, and those twisted white trees that people talk about. The entrance to Oblivion...it’s really as big and ominous as they say. And there are so many clouds beyond it. Looks like an ocean of grey waves and starlight; it’s all got a weird glow to it.”

Cas didn’t doubt this vision, as Rhea’s source—Silverfoot—was more sharp-eyed than either of them. This was the small fox that had brushed against Cas earlier, and he was one of the peculiar sort from the Twisted Wood of the Wild In-Between. Like most things that hailed from those

wilds between their empire and the Sundolian Empire to the south, he carried a trace of divine magic—Air-kind, in this case. The creature’s eyes were the same odd green shade as the crystal that Cas had used earlier.

His magic worked in a similar manner, too; he had bonded himself to Rhea after she’d found him, abandoned and hungry and hurt, as a kit. She had nursed him back to health, and now, perhaps as a way to thank her, he used his magic to pass messages—mostly images of whatever he was seeing—into Rhea’s mind. He was the only way she clearly saw anything these days.

“The gate is less than a half mile ahead,” Rhea continued. “Silver’s spotted a small group of the King-Emperor’s Peace Keepers hanging around it.” She said *Peace Keepers* like it was a curse.

That wasn’t too far from the truth.

“So Varen is certainly meddling in something up here,” Cas said. “But *why*?”

“Doesn’t matter, does it? We just need proof that it’s happening,” Rhea reminded her. “Let Lord Merric and his political allies confront Varen about it if they want to. That’s nothing we need to get tangled up with.” She wrinkled her nose, and muttered, “Least not beyond what we already are.”

The King-Emperor needs to be investigated and held accountable, for the good of the empire, Lord Merric had claimed.

Cas was not a fool—Merric’s motives were not entirely altruistic. The Stonefall Realm he oversaw was

simply closer to these mountains than any other, and that meant his people would bear the brunt of whatever horrors the King-Emperor's meddling might awaken.

The Fading Sickness that had plagued their empire was already flaring in Stonewall as of late, and there were rumblings that Merric might soon be supplanted in favor of a new lord or lady who could better protect his people.

It seemed like almost *all* of the once-powerful houses of the Kethran Empire stood on unstable foundations now.

But if Lord Merric could blame at least some of his realm's troubles on the King-Emperor, he might be able to save face with some of his followers and shore up his house's rule once more.

He couldn't do that without *proof*, however.

Cas pulled the brooch she'd collected from her bag and twisted it around in her hands, thinking.

She knew Rhea had a point; they didn't need to get mixed up in the politics of this. And truthfully, she didn't *want* to get mixed up with anyone or anything beyond herself and the few people she cared about in this world. But still...

"You're sure it was actually Peace Keepers that Silver saw?" she asked, and then frowned as Rhea nodded.

The fox returned from his scouting of the gate a moment later, moving so silently that Cas didn't even notice him until he'd slinked up to his customary perch on Rhea's shoulder, wrapped his black-tipped tail around her neck, and settled there with a yawn.

“He took a high path to the gateway.” Rhea was quiet for a moment, head bowed as she tried to see the full picture from Silverfoot’s mental images. The fox’s intelligent eyes shimmered with the glow of his magic. “The three of you should be able to take that same path. It looks narrow and steep as hell, but it appears as if it will take you to a good vantage point that overlooks that gate. Meanwhile, we’ll stay here and keep an eye out for things.” She gave the fox a little scratch under his chin and added, “And we’ll keep *dry*, won’t we, Silvie?”

“I’m jealous about that last part,” Cas said, attempting a cheerful tone. She knew Rhea hated being relegated to the role of a mere scout.

Before she had come to live with Asra and the others—before she had lost her sight to a head injury she didn’t like to talk about—Rhea had been a decorated soldier in one of the armies of the southern empire. She had lived and died by the sword. And she rarely complained about being forced to trade her sword in for a guiding staff, but Cas knew her well enough now to know that she would have been the first to rush that Oblivion Gate if she could have.

They sat in alert silence for a few more minutes, waiting for the others to catch up. Even though she was expecting footsteps, when they finally came, all Cas could think about were those undead monsters she’d left in the pass.

Every nerve in her body tingled to life, and her fingers wrapped more tightly around the stolen sword in her lap.

Silverfoot leapt from Rhea's shoulder and crept out of the cave.

"Zev and Laurent are almost here," Rhea said.

Cas crawled outside, stood, and wiped the gritty, damp dirt from her knees.

Zev came into sight first, wearing his usual grin. He was Rhea's younger brother, and he looked the part; he was just as absurdly tall as his sister, his skin the same warm-brown, his closely-cropped hair the same raven-wing black, and his eyes the same big, beautiful hazel-green that Cas imagined Rhea's had been before blindness had clouded them.

But unlike his sister, he had been born with the mark of one of the Marr on his palm—the middle-god of Fire and Forging. He'd fashioned the staff that Rhea carried himself, sacrificing his own blood in a ritual to enhance it with Fire-kind magic. But otherwise, he tended to keep his mark covered and rarely made use of the divine magic that coursed through his veins. He preferred his bow—it was the safer option in this empire, certainly. He was the one who had taught Cas to shoot well enough that she could spear a rock viper mid-strike.

"Were you napping on the job in there?" Zev asked, peering into the cave behind her.

"Hardly," she replied. "I was just waiting on your slow ass to finally catch up with me."

"Shall we get on with it?" The terse suggestion came from Laurent, who came up behind Zev. The half-elf walked past them both without waiting for their reply,

his lithe body moving as silently as Silverfoot's. After bidding goodbye to Rhea, Cas and Zev fell into step behind him, making rude faces at his back—faces that Laurent likely wouldn't have cared about, even if he *had* bothered to turn around to see them.

Cas spotted the path that Silverfoot had found, and she took the lead, guiding the other two up the steep trail.

After a strenuous climb, the trio came to a section of stone that jutted out, overlooking the pass below. Loose rocks were piled along the edge, resembling the enclosing battlements of a castle. Cas made her way to one of the openings in this natural parapet and leaned forward. From there, she could see that the more-established path below came to its terminus some twenty feet in the distance.

She saw the Oblivion Gate that Rhea had described. Saw the emblem of the Death God glinting wickedly in its center. A strange rush of cold energy threatened to overtake her for the second time that night, but she gripped the stone beneath her more tightly and made herself focus and continue to observe.

She counted three soldiers in black. They walked a steady path back and forth in front of the wide gate, occasionally glancing into the mists on the other side.

They seemed...*expectant*.

But why?

Those mists were as Rhea and so many others had described them; like a rolling sea of darkness that occasionally pulsed with a silvery-blue light.

The rain had stopped, Cas realized suddenly; the wind had pushed the storm clouds away, revealing a nearly-full moon, allowing more and more light to pour down into those dark mists. But no matter how bright that light became, she couldn't clearly see the ground beneath the sea of fog. It was as if the energy of Oblivion was simply drinking up the moonlight as she watched. Or scattering it, perhaps...maybe *that* was where the pulses of silvery light were coming from?

Cas was starting to grow restless when she noticed something moving beneath that dark, moonlight-drinking sea—a shadow that looked vaguely human.

And then she saw another.

And another.

The figures swayed in a way that reminded her of the undead she had fought. She leaned forward, trying to get a closer look, but her hand slipped against the stone. She gasped as she tumbled forward, only to stop abruptly as Laurent grabbed the hood of her coat and jerked her back. He was always pulling her back before she went too far, it seemed like—usually after Zev had goaded her into going there in the first place.

“Did you see something?” Laurent asked, crouching beside her as she shrugged off his grip.

Zev joined them a moment later. The three of them stared together until Cas was certain enough of what she saw to whisper, “Is that...are there...*people* under those clouds?”

No sooner had she uttered the word *people* when

something decidedly inhuman-looking moved beneath the ominous canopy. Cas thought she caught a glimpse of a slender snout and two wickedly sharp, curved horns—or were they curved ears? It was hard to make out much more than a blurry outline.

“People or monsters,” Zev said, voicing her own concerns.

“An army’s worth of people or monsters,” added Laurent, his usually placid voice betraying a rare bit of concern. “Look at the way the mist is moving in the distance there—I’m betting there are even more...*bodies* of some sort hiding further beyond the gate.”

They studied it all in an awed, disturbed silence for several more minutes, until Zev said, “Well, it looks like proof that something weird is going on to me.”

“Do one of you have another Air-kind crystal to capture that proof?” Laurent asked, his concerned tone giving way to his normal business-like one.

“We aren’t going to be able to capture a particularly clear image unless one of us gets closer,” Cas pointed out.

“Lord Merric seems like the type who would refuse to pay based on what he deems *blurry* proof, doesn’t he?” muttered Zev. “So whoever is going to do it needs to get a clear look at things *and* they’ll need to press these things into the crystal very quickly.”

The older an image or memory was, the less clear it would be when pressed into a message. It was a limitation of the Air-kind crystals—most of these crystals had

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such limits; their abilities were generally weak compared to the powers possessed by innate users of divine magic.

There was a murmur of agreement after Zev's words, and then Laurent readjusted his mask and drew the hood of his coat more securely around the damp brown waves of his hair. "I'll go," he volunteered. "So long as one of you has a crystal we can use."

"Cas?" Zev glanced at her, one eyebrow raised expectantly.

She sighed.

Another expensive crystal, turned to dust.

It broke her heart a bit to hand it over to Laurent—at least until she reminded herself of how much money they would make if they successfully pulled this off. The Lord of Stonefall's pockets were deep indeed. And he was not a generous man, but he *was* a desperate one—and Cas had found that both sorts of people were equally as capable of filling her purse with silver.

"Try to do a decent job of covering me this time," Laurent drawled. "I don't need a new set of stab wounds to go with the ones I got the *last* time I relied on you two for cover fire."

Zev rolled his eyes. "Okay, firstly, it's not like you died from those wounds."

"Secondly," Cas put in, "the incident at Castle Grove was a one-time thing, and you know it."

"Let's hope so," Laurent said.

"It also wasn't really our fault," she added—but he

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was already heading off, once again without looking back at them.

“Is it just me, or does it seem like he still thinks we’re grossly incompetent?” Zev whispered.

Cas watched Laurent as he walked away, silently feeling his way along the rocks to find a section he could use to climb down. She shrugged. “Well, *one* of us is kind of grossly incompetent, in all fairness.”

“Don’t talk about yourself that way, Greythorne.”

She cut him a sidelong glance as she pulled her bow out. “We both know you’re the incompetent one.”

“Well, that’s bad news for you then,” he chuckled, pulling out his own bow, “considering I taught you everything you know.”

“*Everything?*”

“More than you could ever pay me back for, at least.” He smirked at her as the two of them settled into a more covert position amongst the rocks.

Cas readied an arrow, though she hoped she wouldn’t have to use it.

And there was a decent chance she wouldn’t; Laurent had already made his way to within throwing distance of the gate, and *she* had barely noticed him doing it. Of the three of them, he was easily the most adept at stealth. He never talked much about the life he’d lived before joining up with her and her makeshift family, which had led to Zev concocting wild stories about the grumpy half-elf being a disgraced spymaster from some distant realm.

Ridiculous as those stories usually were, there was

certainly a clandestine sort of grace to the way Laurent moved; Cas kept losing him in the shadows as he weaved closer to the Oblivion mists.

The guards have no hope of noticing him, she told herself, trying to stave off the anxiety attempting to unfurl inside of her. She tucked her head to her chest for a moment and breathed in deeply.

“Look,” Zev whispered, pointing.

Cas lifted her gaze...and saw something that made her stomach clench.

The mists were suddenly billowing more violently along the edges—building like a wave that pulled away from the shore, only to crash back against the gate.

And then parts of the wave spilled *over* that gate.

The soldiers started to yell to one another. Cas’s gaze was momentarily drawn toward the noise, and when she glanced back to where she’d last seen Laurent, it was just in time to see one of those tendrils of mist swallowing him up. When the mist receded once more, he was nowhere in sight.

Her heartbeat pounded in her ears as she watched and waited for him to reappear.

He didn’t.

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CHAPTER 3

“WHERE IS HE?” CAS BREATHED. “*WHERE IS HE?*”

Zev was silent as he drew his bow, studying the wall. Fingers of mist were reaching out over it once again, as if feeling around for any other intruders that had gotten too close.

“I’m going down there,” Cas said, pushing away from the rocks. Her breaths came rapidly, her anxiety building again, but she had to do *something*. “You stay here and get ready to provide that cover fire.”

“Cas, wait—”

“You’re a quicker shot than me,” she said, “you could end all three of those soldiers on your own before I had properly aimed at *one*.”

The flattery quieted him long enough for her to get away, just as she’d hoped.

She ran as fast as she could in the near-darkness, feeling her way around until she found the section

Laurent had used to climb down to the path below. She started down without hesitating, moving so quickly that she tripped towards the bottom, scraping her boot against a loose clutch of rocks. The soldier closest to her jerked his head toward the sound, so Cas leapt the remaining distance to the path below. She landed lightly, rebalanced the stolen sword in her grip, and lifted her gaze toward the soldier.

Their eyes met.

He drew his own weapon—a long spear with several wickedly sharp points.

“Who are you?” he demanded.

Cas straightened to her full height and took a step back into the shadows, hoping the man wouldn’t follow her.

A fool’s hope.

He stalked after her, jabbing his weapon as he came. “Either you start talking or I’ll—” his threat was cut off as an arrow pierced his throat, courtesy of Zev

The other two rushed over to check on their fallen brother-in-arms, forgetting about Cas—if they’d seen her at all. She spotted a relatively low section of wall to the left of the gate, and she sprinted for it, vaulting over before the soldiers had a chance to stop her.

It was like jumping into deep, dark water. She seemed to fall forever before her feet finally hit ground made of smooth rock. Her eyes instantly teared up as the fog of Oblivion washed over her. She looked up and found that she could no longer see the moon—or even the sky that

held it. Pressure pushed against her from all sides. Tendrils of pale fog and dark energy swirled about, making it impossible to see what lurked beyond a few feet. She was briefly paralyzed by the thought of running into whatever people or monsters had made the shadows they'd seen from above.

But standing still would not keep her safe, so she curled an arm over her masked mouth, squinted her eyes against the burning, and trudged forward.

She might not have believed in the lesser-spirit of *Luck*, but he was apparently on her side anyway—because she quickly found Laurent on his hands and knees just inside the miasma. The half-elf's hand was clutching his coat, pulling it over the mask that covered his face. The mists were obviously affecting him much faster than they were affecting her.

She reached him and dropped to her knees, but he only shook his head and pointed. It took her watering eyes a moment to focus on what he was pointing at—the Air-kind crystal. He must have dropped it when the mist pulled him in. It rested in a shallow depression in the ground, some ten feet away from them.

She tried to help him up first, but he shoved her off and waved her toward the crystal once more.

All business, as usual.

Gritting her teeth, she crawled toward the crystal. She snatched it up and turned back to help Laurent—only to smack into a hard body, sending her flailing backwards.

Her right shoulder slammed into the ground. Pain

fired down her back, but she kept her senses about her and managed not to drop the crystal or her sword as she rolled forward and fought her way up into a kneeling position.

A man loomed over her.

He was definitely not one of the soldiers from the other side of the gate; he was dressed differently than those soldiers, in black leather armor reinforced by metal bands across his broad chest. A black cloak fluttered like raven feathers around him. His head was wrapped in a thick scarf, and every other inch of his body was covered in some way, save for a strip that revealed a pair of blue eyes and beige skin. Those eyes were oddly bright—arresting, inhuman, and harsh, and yet...*beautiful*. If Oblivion was an ocean of nightmares, here was a reminder that morning still existed, even here, and that there was still a sky above it all. A cold, steely blue sky that she couldn't stop staring at—

At least until he attacked her.

He dove forward, drawing a broad sword from the sheath at his hip. And as Cas jumped up, barely tripping out of his reach, all she wanted to do was introduce her *fist* to those beautiful blue eyes.

She nearly managed it, too; one quick step and she was back in front of him, hurling a punch that missed his eyes but managed to catch his jaw as he twisted away.

“*You—!*”

She followed her punch with a kick into his side while he was busy trying to curse at her. He staggered away. She

spun back out of his weapon's reach and fell into a more proper sword-fighting stance, setting her feet and lifting her blade as her gaze narrowed on him.

"Who *are* you?" His voice was too muffled by his face-covering to make out much of an accent, but her guess was one of the northernmost realms that had once made up the kingdom of Alnor. "And what the hell are you doing here?"

She didn't answer. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Zev burst through the mists and hurry to Laurent's side. Laurent didn't seem to be moving; the airs of this place were clearly more poisonous—more potent—than they'd realized. Zev quickly lifted Laurent's lifeless body into his arms, and Cas forgot about trying to get back to Laurent herself; she just needed to distract the man in front of her so her friends could get away.

She charged, sword sweeping through the air.

Her target whipped his own blade up and parried hers at the last instant, knocking her away, and then he drew the sword up and sliced for her side. She was faster, bouncing away and then twirling back to swing—

Only for him to parry again.

Again and again, they danced away and then back together, while the sound of steel striking steel and the fluttering of his cloak echoed strangely in the foggy air. Soon, sweat dripped from Cas's forehead and down into her already-burning eyes, blinding her further. The man became little more than a blur of shadow and speed that she nearly lost track of several times.

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She saw the silver streak of his sword breaking through the fog, hurtling toward her. She raised her sword into a guard position just in time, but the force of his blow threatened to buckle her knees. And he didn't stop once their weapons had locked onto each other; he kept shoving, kept trying to break her stance and push her to the ground.

Gods, he was strong.

He wasn't going to put her on the ground—she wouldn't allow it—but he *was* backing her deeper and deeper into the poisonous mists. And though she'd proven to be more resistant than her friends, she was still beginning to feel the effects; her arms shivered at the deep cold that coursed through her veins. It was traveling through her body and numbing her, slowly but surely, making her feel as though she'd sunk into the darkest, most frigid depths of the Glashtyn Sea.

Her wrists ached, threatening to cramp up on her. Her resistance was weakening, her knees slowly bending under the force of him. He had driven her onto a patch of slick mud—far away from the smooth stone she'd first touched down on. She tried to brace her boot against what looked like a more solid bit of ground, but it soon gave way. As she slipped, her enemy's sword slid a bit closer, giving her a glimpse of the hilt and something...odd.

A symbol of one of the Marr—of the wild middle-goddess of Ice and Winter—was engraved on the pommel.

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No wonder she felt so desperately cold. This sword was a contraband weapon, infused with Ice-kind magic.

A strange weapon for him to be carrying, if he's in the service of the King-Emperor....

He yanked his blade away, scraping it over hers and causing a cringe-inducing metallic shriek. The cold swirling through her evaporated almost instantly.

“How are you still standing in the mist?” he demanded.

Seeing another opportunity to distract him, she grabbed the hood of her coat and yanked it down, letting the waves of her grey hair tumble free. Her hair had once been a beautiful shade of dark copper—like autumn leaves aglow in the late afternoon sun—but now just the sight of it, along with her equally colorless eyes, made the man before her stumble back in surprise.

“Fade-marked,” he breathed. “You...*stay where you are!*”

She arched a brow. And then she grinned, even though she knew he couldn't see it beneath her mask. “Sorry, but I'm afraid I've got other places to be.”

He lunged.

She sidestepped the attack and then swept a kick at his ankles, ripping him off his feet.

He landed in a crouch with catlike grace, but before he could spring back up, she pinned that fluttering cloak of his, driving her sword through it and deep into the muddy ground. The blade wasn't a particularly decent

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one; she didn't care about leaving it behind. And she could run faster without it.

She chuckled at the incredulity in the man's tone as he yelled after her to *stop*.

But as the silhouette of the Oblivion Gate materialized in the mists ahead, she realized...

She no longer held the crystal.

At some point during her battle, she had dropped it. She had no idea where it had ended up, and she wasn't hanging around to search for it. And her team...there was no sign of them anywhere. Were they okay? Had Zev managed to haul Laurent out of this hell and hoist him up over its walls by himself?

She prepared to vault herself over the low point in that stone wall once more.

As her hands pressed against the stone, she chanced one last glance behind her. As she leapt over the wall, she would have sworn she saw shadowy figures closing in, watching her go. Preparing to chase her out if need be...

She landed on the other side, and channeling Laurent's business-like demeanor, didn't look back.

Lord Merric had asked for proof of the King-Emperor's meddling, and all she had was the brooch in her bag, and enough mental images to haunt her for months—which might not have been enough for him.

But it was enough for *her*.

Enough for her to believe that something very disturbing was happening in these mountains, and she never wanted to set foot in them again.

CHAPTER 4

“CHEER UP, CAS.” ZEV TIPPED HIS TANKARD OF ALE BACK WITH gusto, finishing it off in a single, long gulp before clanking it back down on the rough wooden table between them. “It could have gone worse.”

“Laurent almost died.”

“He would disagree with that assessment,” Rhea said.

The half-elf in question had stayed at their hideaway to nurse his wounds—and also his pride, Cas suspected. Before they’d left him there, he’d insisted that he needed to do *neither* of those things and claimed that the alarming rattling of his breaths and the pallor of his skin were nothing that a bit of rest—and perhaps a touch of magic—couldn’t fix.

Cas had her doubts, but she hadn’t argued.

“Of course he would disagree,” she said. “But it’s the truth. And it shouldn’t have happened; *I* should have

gone over that wall instead of him in the first place. I don't know why I didn't."

"Maybe because nobody in their right mind readily volunteers to run into a terrifying abyss of darkness and death?" Zev suggested.

Cas shook her head. "I've already been touched by the Fading Sickness, and I survived it. And I've survived every ailment that I've come in contact with since. Remember the poisons they used on us at Castle Grove? And the monsters we exterminated at Westlore with their terrible breath?"

"I try not to remember either of those things in great detail," Rhea said with an exaggerated shudder.

"Neither of them gave *me* so much as a headache," Cas reminded them.

"No, but we still don't know the extent of your, ah..." Zev searched for a word, and with a slightly drunken grin he decided on: "*Weirdness*."

"I never get sick," she insisted. She also rarely got hungry or tired like a normal person did. But she had suffered in other, stranger ways since the Fading Sickness had taken hold of her as a child, and she was still waiting for the day that it fully woke up and consumed her as it had so many others.

But for whatever reason...it still hadn't happened.

Yet.

"Why else would that be," she asked, "if not because of my being Fade-marked?"

Rhea patted Cas's hand but shushed her, simultane-

ously offering comfort and a warning. The warning was fair; Cas's voice had been loud, and Madam Rosa's tavern was more crowded than usual tonight. There were more than a few people close enough to overhear their conversation.

Of course, most of those people were likely too drunk to make sense of her words, and too far gone to suspect what she really was—especially since Cas had her hood drawn up, and she had disguised herself by way of a Mimic-kind crystal. Her normally grey hair was now a dark shade of brown, her disturbingly pale eyes, a much more pleasant shade of soft green. Another expensive crystal gone to dust—gods, she was really burning through them today, wasn't she?—but she was already in such a terrible humor after their failed mission...

She was certainly not in the mood to be gawked at while she sulked and drank away her frustrations. And that was precisely what would have happened had she walked into this tavern with her greyed-out hair and eyes on full display.

It had been years since Cas had seen another Fade-marked, aside from herself and Asra, so the rare sighting of either of them generally caused at least a minor uproar in most places. No one who caught the more recent form the Fading Sickness survived, and the ones who had made it through the earlier, weaker waves of the sickness had all been ruthlessly hunted down by the father of the current King-Emperor—allegedly because he'd hoped they might provide answers for a cure. The theory itself

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was not troublesome. What *was* troublesome was the fact that all of the Fade-marked he'd managed to collect had soon after simply...*disappeared*.

His hunting had been in vain, anyhow; three years ago, the tyrant King-Emperor Anric de Solasen had died a violent death of the very sickness he'd claimed to be trying to cure.

His wife had already died eighteen years before, which meant that his passing left his one and only child as the keeper of the high throne that ruled precariously over the twelve broken realms of the Kethran Empire—realms that had once been a part of four separate, proper kingdoms.

The current King-Emperor hadn't kept up his father's hunting practices as far as Cas knew, but that was likely only because Varen de Solasen believed that no more of the Fade-marked remained. And Cas had employed various tricks and disguises over the years—both magical and otherwise—to make sure that he and most of the empire *kept* believing this. It was a delicate balance, trying to build a reputation that could land her lucrative jobs, while also keeping any whispers of her true appearance and identity to a minimum.

And oh, how *stupid* she'd been to reveal her true appearance to that man in Oblivion. To just let him live after seeing her so clearly...

The mission was a failure in every sense of the word, she thought miserably, as she flagged down one of the servers and ordered a third drink.

“Marked or not, you aren’t immortal, love,” Rhea said, after the sound of the server’s footsteps faded away. “And even with all the prepping we did, I *still* don’t think we had a true understanding of what we were walking into. And no, we don’t know everything there is to know about your *weirdness*, as Zev said. It could still catch up with you. Especially if you keep tempting fate by volunteering for the most reckless part of every mission we take on. Laurent would say the same thing. That’s likely why he stepped up before you had a chance to.”

Cas chewed on her bottom lip, thinking.

It could still catch up with you.

The mood turned noticeably more solemn at those words—because all of them knew the unspoken line that followed.

It could still catch up with you...just as it's catching up with Asra.

Cas tried to push away thoughts of the woman she had once seen as invincible. Asra had been asleep when they’d stopped by their hideaway before venturing out for a drink.

She was always asleep lately, it seemed like.

“Besides, we’re a team, right?” Rhea continued, keeping her voice low. “If one of us is going to volunteer to run into a terrifying abyss of darkness and death, then it goes without saying that we *all* will do it, so it shouldn’t matter which of us goes first.”

Zev nodded and lifted his drink in a toast to the sentiment.

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Cas felt marginally better as she clinked her glass against his. She drank in contemplative silence after that, letting their surroundings wash over her—feeling the vibrations of footsteps and laughter, inhaling the smoke and salty scent of roasting meat and wrinkling her nose at the occasional whiff of sweat that she caught instead...

It truly *was* more crowded in here than she'd ever seen it. She likely could have saved her Mimic-kind crystal; a hood would have sufficed. She simply wasn't worth gawking at compared to the abundance of rowdy singalongs and heated games of dice and cards that were taking place all around her.

Which was why, when somebody *did* begin to stare at her, she felt it.

She tilted her head casually to the left and she spotted him quickly—a man seated by himself at a table in front of the largest of the tavern's multiple roaring fires.

His legs were too long to be easily contained beneath the small table; one was casually stretched out beside him, the other curled under that table. The shape he carved against the firelight made her think of a shadow cat resting in its claimed tree, looking perfectly nonchalant and yet equally ready to pounce. He was observing her—and everything around her—with that same oddly powerful-looking passivity. None of the rude or rowdy patrons hovering around his table seemed to bother him.

His coat appeared cleaner and more finely made than most of the clothing worn by the tavern's regulars, with an equally expensive-looking silver cuff bracelet and set