

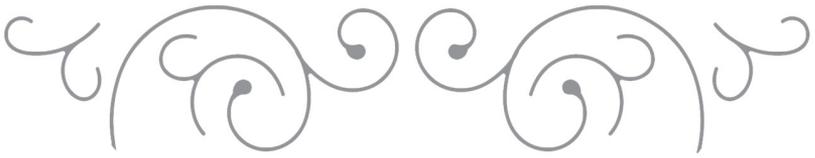
The

**HEART
FORGER**

**RIN
CHUPECO**



sourcebooks
fire



*S*HE WORE THE CORPSES FOR show. They trailed behind her, grotesque fabrics of writhing flesh and bone, spreading across the plain for miles around us. Those bereft of legs and feet used hands and elbows; those lacking jaws and tongues moaned from the hollows of their throats. Those onlookers who drew close grasped at the train of her gown until I was no longer certain where her dress ended and they began.

“Intimidation,” she told me, amused by my repulsion. “Men abandon battle when they see their own fates in these ruined faces.”

I could not argue with her results: resistance crumbled as soldiers disobeyed their commanders and ran rather than face her horrors.

She plundered every graveyard we found, no headstone left unturned, since entering Daanoris. Her strength had grown since leaving the Sea of Skulls. When she first resurrected her daeva, each summon had sapped such strength and life from her that by the time she had raised the last, she was nearly dead herself. Yet she brought back these unfortunate ghouls from their graves with relative ease.

Asha reached their limit after raising five or six corpses, I remembered. Even the strongest bone witches could not manage more than a dozen at best. I knew the girl’s immense power had everything to do with her heartsglass, as black as the darkest night when other ashas’ would shine silver.

I was appalled by her disrespect for these innocent dead, beseeched her not to interrupt their rest. To this, she only laughed. "The dead do not need rest," she told me, "only the living believe the grave can bring you peace."

There was no reason to raise these armies of undead, and she knew it. The daeva that surrounded her were enough to ruin kingdoms. Strangely docile, all seven plodded beside their mistress, each more terrifying than the next. In ages past, they had the reputation for violence, capable of supping on whole armies with little effort. Yet throughout our journey to Daanoris, they paid no heed to the men and women who fled from their approach. Stragglers were shown mercy and ignored.

I understood the people's fear. For many nights, I had broken camp with these demons, wondering each time if I would live to see morning. Only the presence of the Deathseeker, Lord Kalen, calmed me, though he was no more alive than the throng of cadavers that followed his lover. His chest rose and fell like mine, his face bore none of the pallor associated with death, and his brown eyes were sharp with the spark of life, even if the absence of true breath in him disproved this.

"It is necessary that they flee," he said quietly one night. "In time, you will understand."

"Then tell me her intentions now," I challenged him. "I promised to tell her story. Why leave me in the dark?"

"Conquer one fear at a time," he responded with a pointed glance at the daeva frolicking with its master in the near darkness. "Accustom yourself to one type of fiend before we introduce you to another."

The words filled me with foreboding. What did the asha intend when we reached Daanoris's capital?

I watched them, the necromancer and her familiar. I watched her cast quick secret glances at Kalen when she thought he did not see.

"Am I distasteful now?" he asked without looking away from the fire. "Am I that much different?"

"Never," she said quietly.

"How did you raise me? Silver heartsglass can't..."

"I didn't." She looked down. Her hands trembled. "I was...so full of the Dark. I felt powerful enough to believe I could stop the sun. And so I did."

He knelt before her then, taking her heart-shaped face in his large hands.

"Are you angry at me?"

For the first time, I saw her afraid.

"Do you resent me for bringing you back to this chaos?"

"I promised you with my dying breath, with my blood and your heart in my hands. I promised that I would crawl out of my grave and kill everything that stands between us." He bent closer, kissed her hard.

She kissed him back, hungry, her hands stroking his neck. He drew her tightly against him, as if holding her could never be enough. I turned away.

There were faint marks on the bone witch's neck when we left the next day, and her eyes were very bright. The Deathseeker sported no injuries, and his gaze was gentle whenever he looked at her.

The Daanorian capital, Santiang, lay before us. I took in its high walls and fortified towers. I saw the bobbing torches of the men

who manned its garrisons. Even from this distance, I saw their fear rising, higher than any flag they could wave.

I watched the familiar reach forward to wrap her in his arms. I watched the Dark asha relax, leaning back against him with a vulnerability she rarely allowed herself to show.

“The Daanorians will not surrender easily, Tea,” Lord Kalen said.

“That will not matter. Their gates shall fall anyway. We rest here tonight and begin on the morrow. It will give them time to send their women and children away and the rest to put their affairs in order.”

“It is not too late. We can go—anywhere. They won’t find us.”

For a moment, I saw the temptation in her eyes, the longing his words sowed. “You know they will do the same to the next bone witch after me, and the next, and the next. You know this will never end.”

The Deathseeker pressed his forehead against hers. “Then we will fight.”

The girl turned back to her throng of faithful undead. “Thank you,” she told them softly, the way one might tell a bedtime story to children. “Sleep and wait.”

The corpses sighed in unison, a frightening sound that echoed from the nearest ghoul that clawed at her skirts to, as I imagined, the farthest of her carrion, many miles away.

And as one, they fell. They sank down like groundwater, the land swallowing them whole until no trace of them remained. What was once a company of thousands of corpses became a fellowship of three and seven, and the daeva bayed their good-byes.

The asha sat by a fallen log, gathering stones. The Deathseeker

gestured, and fire sputtered from the pile. She gestured at me to sit, and I complied.

“You have more to tell me,” I said, knowing this was far from the end of her tale.

“Yes.” She gazed thoughtfully at the fire, at the flames licking through the stone. Then, like it was the most normal thing in the world, she said, “I suppose the trouble began again when I tried raising a king from the dead.”



***H**E DOES NOT LOOK SO formidable, I lied to myself, staring at the warped, decaying body before me. I can defeat his will. I will break him. It is a wonder what Mykkie had ever seen in him.*

It was not the first time I had deceived myself in this manner. Neither was this the first time I had raised King Vanor from the grave. But if I repeated that mantra enough times, I thought I could finally believe my words.

The dead king refused to look at me, his eyes distant. The royal crypts were built to strike both fear and awe in those who visited, but I had grown accustomed to the stone faces looking down at me with quiet scrutiny from their high precipices. But King Vanor's continued silence unnerved me every time—more than I cared to admit.

“A wise philosopher once said,” Fox drawled from the

shadows, “that doing the same thing over and over again while expecting a different result is the mark of a fool.”

“Why do I bring you along?”

“Well, a wise philosopher once said—”

“Shut up.” My brother had no need to tell me my quest was hopeless. Numerous Dark asha, all more experienced than me, had made the attempt. But I had to do *something*.

“You’re in a worse mood than usual. Did Kalen chew you out at practice again?”

“If you don’t like it here, why not find some women in the city to flirt with instead?”

“Not in Oda—” He caught himself. “None of your business. Can we get this over with?”

I turned back to the corpse. “Where are you keeping Mykaela’s heartsglass?”

No answer. The colossi statues guarding the catacombs were likelier to respond than this infernal sod of a king.

“Answer me! What have you done to her heartsglass? Where did you keep it? Why do you hate her so much?” My headache worsened. Somewhere in the back of my head, I was aware of a shadow thrashing about, sensing my anger. I saw a vision of water, green and murky, before it faded out of view.

I took a deep breath and let it out carefully. The ache lightened and the shadow retreated as I recovered my calm.

“This is a waste of time.” Fox folded his arms across his chest. My brother looked to be in peak physical health, though he was no more alive than the royal noble standing before us.

Their similarities ended there; there was barely enough skin and sinew clinging to Vanor to pass for human. That was my doing. The first few times I resurrected him, I had been respectful, taking great pains to restore his body to how it appeared when he was alive.

Now I allowed him only enough muscle and flesh to move his jaw.

“He’s not going to talk, Tea. You know that, I know that, and he definitely knows that.”

“I will *make* him talk.” Many years ago, my sister-asha had fallen in love with this wretched excuse of a ruler. In exchange for her unwavering devotion, he had taken her heartsglass and hidden it so well that no one had been able to find it.

And now, more than a decade later, Mykaela was dying. She could no longer return to Kion. Her health had deteriorated to the point where she had to remain near her heartsglass, still hidden somewhere within Odalia, here in the city of Kneave. It was hard enough to be a bone witch; that she’d survived for this long was a miracle in itself.

I grabbed what was left of the king’s shoulders, pulling him toward me. He reeked of death and obstinacy. “Answer me!” My voice echoed off the columns. “Didn’t you love her even a little? Or are you so petty that you’d allow her to suffer for the rest of her years? She’s *dying*. What grudge do you harbor to hate her this much?”

“Tea.”

I froze. So did Fox.

I had told no one else about my weekly excursions to the

royal crypts. Not my friend Polaire, who would have boxed my ears if she'd known, nor Mistress Parmina, who would doom me to a life cleaning outhouses. Only Fox was privy to my secret, which he had agreed to keep despite his own misgivings. And Mykaela was the last person I wanted to find out.

She had aged more rapidly during the last few years since she had taken me under her wing. There was more gray in her golden hair, more lines on her face. Her back stooped slightly, like she struggled under a heavy burden. She had taken to using a cane everywhere she went, unsure of her own feet.

“Mykaela,” I stammered, “you’re not supposed to be here.”

“I could say the same for you,” she answered, but her eyes were fixed on King Vanor, her pain obvious. He watched her gravely, without shame or guilt, and my anger rose again. How many raisings had my sister-asha endured, forced to watch while this king refused to speak?

I raised my finger to sketch out the rune that would send Vanor back to the world of the dead, but Mykaela lifted a hand. “Vanor,” she said quietly, “it’s been a while.”

The decaying figure said nothing. His eyes studied her, savage and hungry and ill suited for such an impassive face.

“I apologize for my wayward apprentice. She has been willful and intractable since her admission to my asha-ka and has shown little improvement since. Please return to your rest. Tea, let him go.”

Mykaela’s words were a steel knife through my heart. Stuttering apologies, I completed the spell and watched as King

Vanor's body crumbled back into dust in his open coffin. Even as his features dissolved, King Vanor never once looked away from Mykaela's face.

"Close the lid and move the stone back in place," she said. I could detect the anger behind her calm. "I would tell King Telemaine to seal his coffin, but even that might not stop you. Whatever possessed you to let her do this, Fox?"

Fox shrugged, grinning like an abashed schoolboy. "I'm her familiar. It comes with the territory."

"Being her familiar is no excuse for being an imbecile! And you! What possessed you to summon dead royalty in the middle of the night?"

"I wanted to help." The excuse sounded weaker when made to Mykaela than to Fox. "I thought that I could control daeva now! You said no Dark asha's ever done that before! That's why...why I..."

Mykaela sighed. "And so by that logic, you think you are different from Dark asha of the past? What you have in ability, Tea, you lack in wisdom. You cannot compel the dead if they are not willing. Wasn't that the first lesson I taught you after you raised Fox from his grave? Arrogance is not a virtue, sister."

I looked down, blinking back tears. Was I arrogant to want to save her? Unlike Fox, Dark asha and all those with a silver heartsglass cannot be raised from the dead, and that permanence frightened me. "I'm sorry. I want to help. But I feel so powerless."

I heard her move closer, felt her hand on my head, stroking my hair.

“It’s not such a bad thing, to feel powerless sometimes. It teaches us that some situations are inevitable and that we should spend what little time we have in the company of the people that matter most. Do you understand me, Tea?”

“Yes.” I wept.

“Tea, I’m not dead yet.” A finger nudged at my chin. “I would appreciate it if you stopped acting like I was. I do not give up so easily, but we must adopt other means.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It is only an apology if you mean it. This is the last time you will be summoning anyone in the royal crypts, no matter how noble you think your actions are. Promise me.”

“I promise,” I mumbled.

“The same is true for you too, Fox.”

“I promise, milady.”

“Good. Now help me up the stairs. My legs aren’t what they used to be.”

Fox reached down and scooped Mykaela into his arms. “It’s the fastest way,” he explained. “You’ve expended enough energy yelling at us.”

The older asha chuckled. “Yes, that’s always been rather tiresome now that I think about it. Perhaps you should direct your energies toward more productive tasks so I can tire less.”

“How did you know we were here?” I asked.

“I’ve taken to wandering at night. I looked in on Tea, but her room was empty. I detected a shifting of runes nearby and merely followed it to its source.”

“I didn’t mean to make you worry.” The staircase led back to the Odalian palace gardens. For the past two months, Fox and I had been King Telemaine’s guests, traveling the kingdom and tending to the sickly. Most of the people here fear and dislike bone witches, though with lesser fervor than before. It is not easy to hold a grudge against someone who has nursed you back to health.

At the king’s invitation, Mykaela had taken up residence in the castle indefinitely. But every day finds her weaker, and I feared the palace would serve as her hospice.

“There are many other concerns, Tea. Likh has a new case pending, hasn’t he?”

The asha association had rejected Likh’s appeal to join, but Polaire had dredged up an obscure law that permitted Deathseekers to train in the Willows until they turned fifteen, which was Likh’s current age.

Mykaela glanced over Fox’s shoulder, back at the catacombs, then turned away.

She still loves him, I thought, and fury burned through me like a fever. “I’m really sorry, Mykkie.”

She smiled. “As I said, only if you mean it, Tea. Get some rest. We’ve got a busy day ahead.”



I listened until my brother’s footsteps faded before sneaking out of my room a second time. I opened the doors of my mind to welcome the hidden shadows; they wrapped around my core,

creating a barrier that had for many months prevented Fox from discovering the other sentience I hoarded away, like a sweet vintage I had no intentions of sharing. I couldn't. Not yet.

Chief waited for me at the stables. A lone woman on a horse caused no outcry, and we rode undisturbed out of the city, into a copse of trees that hid us further from view. I climbed off my stallion, told him to await my return, and moved deeper into the forest, into a small clearing that served as a rendezvous point.

I reached out once more to the moving darkness. The scar on my right thigh was hot to the touch. It burned in the cold air, but I felt no pain.

Despite its size, the beast was made of stealth and shadows. Where there was once nothing, it now stood beside me, as if summoned from the air. Three pairs of hooded eyes gazed down at me, forked tongues dancing. Its wings extended, and twilight rolled over me, soothing and pleasant.

Master? It was a voice but not in the manner we think of voices. Our bond gave us an understanding that went beyond language.

I reached out. Its scaly hide was a combination of coarse bark and rough sandpaper.

Play? It sat, unmoving, as I climbed up its back.

Yes.

In the blink of an eye, we were soaring across the sky, rolling meadows and fields of green passing below us. *Turn*, I thought, testing the limits of my control, as I have over the last several months. The *azi* complied, wings curving toward the horizon.

I laughed, the sound joyous and free against the wind, and one head dipped briefly to nuzzle at my cheek, purring.

This is not selfishness, I told myself, *but a responsibility*. Mykaela was partly right; I was arrogant and overconfident, but I was not like other Dark asha. No other Dark asha had been able to tame the *azi*. And riding with it on quiet nights meant it was not rampaging through cities.

But I also knew I had to keep my companion a secret. Raising a dead king was a far lesser sin than taking a daeva as a familiar. *I shall conquer this*, I thought and, in doing so, sealed my fate.