

Hi! TESSONJA HERE. I AM SO EXCITED TO BE ANNOTATING A SPECIAL CHAPTER FOR YOU!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

♥ INANA ♥



It's one of my FAVORITE chapters in the whole book!

BUT I ALWAYS NEED TO PICTURE MY SETTINGS SUPER CLEARLY WHEN I'M WRITING OR IT STRESSES ME OUT.

Thornfal feels so much like my hometown it makes my heart ache. Not that my life in Dunway was enviable, and after everything that happened there, even my happy memories are tainted. Still, an inadequate home is still a home if you've never found a place to call your own elsewhere.

Under the light of day, Thornfal is almost identical to Dunway. Same stone houses, same thatched or tiled roofs, same unobtrusive storefronts with the same bland wares. There are no trees or shrubs, offering as few places as possible for Shades to linger. There's even a dress shop that looks just like mine did: a simple brick building with militant-looking dress forms cluttering the window, boasting the most austere skirts and bodices made from the same patterns I traced and sewed day in and day out for the five years I was a seamstress.

I note all of this from the window of our loft room at the inn. We haven't left the loft since we retired here yesterday at dawn, our every need attended to by the servants who bring our food and drink. We even received gifts from the mayor: new cloaks and boots lined with fur to get us through the approaching winter, an assortment of wool clothing, clean vials for Dominic and Calvin.

The room itself is a gift, a grand suite compared to the barracks where I slept in Nalheim, and probably the finest accommodations

I SPENT HOURS LOOKING UP PICS OF OLD TIMEY VILLAGES TO WRITE THAT ONE LINE

IF YOU WANT TO KNOW THE EXACT TYPE OF SQUIRREL I'M PICTURING, LOOK UP "JAPANESE DWARF FLYING SQUIRREL."

this town has to offer. It's a large space with a sloped ceiling, wood-paneled walls, four beds, and an abundance of oil lamps, candles, and reflective disks hanging from the rafters to protect us come nightfall. After the makeshift barricade of flame we saw the night of the attack, I'm surprised the town has anything left to burn.

I shudder.

That night feels like a dream. A nightmare, more like, but one where I awoke not from terror but from victory. A strange, unearthly victory tinged with the sorrow that comes from knowing we were too late to prevent casualties. Yet that happens in every unprotected town; fatalities come with the territory of being plagued by monsters. That doesn't stop the conflict in my heart. The dragon Shade was terrifying. Deadly. It left enough destruction in its wake that the villagers are still cleaning up outside, from what little I can see of the market square from my window.

And yet . . .

What we did with our art, mesmerizing the Shade and convincing it to divide into flying squirrels . . .

I can't pretend that wasn't enchanting, for it was. But what kind of person finds any interaction with a Shade enchanting?

The kind that whispered stories to them when she thought no one was looking, I suppose. Or the kind that stroked Sloth's shadowy fur instead of pushing him away in the wagon the other night.

Speaking of Sloth . . .

"Where the hell has the Shadowbane been?" I ask, turning from the window.

"Sleeping, probably," Calvin says as he sorts through the new clothing we've received, placing them in different piles on his bed. I've already selected my chosen articles: a wool skirt in green plaid, a thick chemise, a brown leather bodice, and a fur-lined cloak.

YUM "Is he too good for our company?" Harlow says in between bites of cream-dolloped scones. Every meal we've received, she's scarfed it down like it's the last food she'll ever have. Good for her. Might as well fill our bellies before we're forced to sustain ourselves on Calvin's cooking again.

"His room is next door," Calvin says. "He always sleeps alone."

THIS TIME I GAVE YOU ALL THE DETAILS IN MY HEAD

I WOULD LITERALLY WEAR THIS

BUT HE'S PRECIOUS SO PETTING HIM IS THE OBVIOUS CHOICE.



“Always?” Harlow smirks. “How ordinary. What about all that talk about blindfolds—” *I love her.*



I choke on my own breath as I realize what she’s getting at. My eyes whip to Calvin, though I’m not sure if I’m more desperate for him to answer or not to.

“Oh, that,” he says. “Can’t say I’ve seen him take a lover for a night, but if we’re visiting a place that offers that kind of frivolity, I’m the first in bed with . . .” He snaps his mouth shut, eyes flicking to Harlow.

She stares at him through slitted lids.

Calvin dons an unconvincingly innocent expression. “I’m . . . in bed with perfectly angelic behavior.” *and I love him too.*

Harlow scoffs, and even I chuckle at that. I’m sure wherever Calvin goes, he has no shortage of lovers. He isn’t my type and is six years younger than I am, but I can see the appeal of his lovely face, his messy blond hair, and even his slender figure. Not to mention his flirtatious manner. He looks like a boy who can be easily broken yet knows his way around a lover’s body. There’s probably great satisfaction in being sexually obliterated by such a fragile thing. Or sexually obliterated at all . . .

WONDER  
|  
339  
↑

Not that I’m contemplating sex. At least not with Calvin.

That, of course, begs the question: Who am I contemplating sex with? Dominic’s face floods my mind at once. I recall the weight of his gaze after I finished my story for the flying squirrels. When our eyes locked, he didn’t look away. Didn’t try to hide his fascination, or the open vulnerability on his face. Our gazes snagged and tangled for what felt like an endless moment. I was still wrapped up in the awe of what we’d accomplished, in the awareness of our power as artists, and Dominic’s expression compounded that tenfold. I felt powerful. Beautiful. In control. And the memory of that now sends a pool of heat to my core, a sizzling fire between my legs—

FUN FACT:  
MY HUSBAND  
IS SIX  
YEARS  
YOUNGER  
THAN ME

I shake the thoughts from my head. “How long will we be here?” I ask, changing the subject.



Harlow’s expression turns eager. Even Bard, who has spent much of the last two days either sleeping or silent, lifts his gaze. Though neither has complained about their chance to rest in comfort, I imag-

ine the idle time is getting to them as badly as it's gotten to me. For two years my days have been filled with manual labor, first at the textile mill, then working for Rockefeller. The sudden inertia is unsettling. Yet there's nothing for us to do here. There's no such thing as leisure time in small towns. Days are dedicated to work, whether at home, for an employer, or for a certain trade. There are no specialty shops, no books to read save for the holy texts, no gardens to stroll. I didn't even know such things existed until I lived in Nalheim, and even then I never engaged in such pastimes, for those were reserved for the elite, not servants.

"Two weeks is the minimum for a Shadowbane's post," Calvin says. "Whether we'll only be here for the minimum duration depends on the next couple of nights. If the dragon re-forms or nightly Shade activity is higher than average, we'll work to draw the threat away until it settles down. Dominic said last night was quiet, so if tonight and tomorrow prove the same, we'll move on to our next post at the end of next week."

"He's been keeping watch at night?" I ask. "Doesn't he need us with him in case there's an attack?"

"He'll wake us if there is," Calvin says.

I turn back to the window, my lips tugging down. I don't know why I'm annoyed to hear Dominic has been keeping watch without us, but I am. I may have felt powerful the other night, but I'm reminded we're only tools. What else could we be to him? He calls us his crew, yet he keeps a separate room and hasn't said a damn word to us in two days. I'm starting to understand why no one ever mentions Summoners, only Shadowbanes. We're just their dirty little secret—artists who get to use their forbidden craft, unbeknownst to the public—to take out when needed and put away when done. We do all the fucking work in drawing the Shades away, yet the Shadowbanes take the glory.

It's a wonder no one has revealed this secret.

Then I remember. We're outlaws. What fucking reason would we have to out the truth? We'd only be outing ourselves. Our crimes. Losing our slim chance to gain safe passage off this continent.

My lips curl in a cold, humorless grin. What a flawless system.

I WAS 100% THE KID IN SCHOOL WHO CONSTANTLY DOODLED IN THE MARGINS OF HER HOMEWORK + CLASS NOTES.

BUILDING THIS WORLD MADE ME THINK OF JUST HOW BORING A WORLD WITHOUT ART WOULD BE.

AT THIS POINT INANA STILL KNOWS VERY LITTLE ABOUT DOMINIC. SO MANY SECRETS WAITING FOR HER...

After nightfall, sleep eludes me. Perhaps my body has had all it can take of resting, for I can't stop tossing and turning, the light from the many lamps and candles blazing against the backs of my eyelids. I'm all for keeping rooms bright enough to prevent Shades from entering, but it's a godsdamned nuisance when I'm already struggling to sleep.

I roll onto my back and assess my companions. All three are snug in their beds, their steady breaths filling the room, their chests rising and falling in a gentle rhythm.

A thud sounds overhead. I lift my gaze to the ceiling, and it sounds again. Then again. It's soft and steady, moving from one end of the ceiling to the other. No one else stirs, for it isn't loud enough to interrupt anyone's slumber. It's only because I'm awake that I take notice. Still, the cadence is very much like footsteps, not the skittering of an animal.

The sound stops at the far end of the room.

Someone's on the roof.

And there's one person I expect to be awake at this hour.

My curiosity piqued, I rise from my bed, don my boots, and wrap my new cloak around my chemise. Then, on silent feet, I cross the loft to the window and pry it open. Chill air bites at my cheeks and I hear Harlow mutter a complaint in her sleep. I glance back at the room to ensure I still haven't woken anyone, then hoist myself onto the window's ledge. It's a dormer window, set midway through the pitched roof. I scoot from the ledge to the roof, securing my feet firmly on the tiles before closing the window behind me. Then, clinging to the ledge above the window, I stand as quietly as I can.

The night is beautifully dark, the sky clear and speckled with stars. I spot Dominic's silhouette farther down, limned by moonlight. He's half turned away from me, but I notice the open vial in his hand, extended like an offering. Then I smell it. The sickly-sweet tang of blood.

Something about the scent sets me on edge. It's not like I haven't smelled blood before, and I should be used to it from how often Calvin drinks from his vials, but the rotten scent hits the back of my throat, making me gag. A sudden spike of rage funnels through me, and I curl my hands into fists—

Dominic whirls around and caps his vial.

IT'S FUNNY READING BACK ON THIS PART BECAUSE THIS IS LITERALLY ME WITH EVERY SOUND. I HAVE TO PINPOINT WHERE

IT'S COMING FROM/WHAT IT IS BEFORE I CAN RELAX.

I SUFFER FROM SLEEP ISSUES SOMETIMES + I'M SUPER SENSITIVE TO LIGHT + NOISE.



The scent disappears, and my muscles relax. My anger cools to a simmer, but what lingers serves as a reminder of what Dominic is. A half Sinless with secrets he refuses to share. Well, I won't make it easy for him to treat me like a tool, discarding me when he's done.

"What are you doing here?" Dominic's voice is sharp. Cold.

I climb the roof toward him, each step careful despite my ire. "I could ask you the same." My eyes drop to the hand that holds the vial. "What were you doing with that?"

"It's dangerous out here."

"Were you trying to catch another Shade?"

"I'm keeping watch," he says through his teeth. "Go back to your room."

I scoff. "Why? Hiding something?"

He strides toward me, his balance effortless despite the precarious terrain. "What I'm doing is none of your concern. You can't be out here."

"Looks like I'm out here just fine."

He reaches for my arm, but I lift it before he can make contact. He grabs for it again, and this time his fingers close around my wrist. He tugs me a step closer, expression dark. "Go back on your own or I'll haul you inside myself."

I hold his gaze with a glower and lean into his threatening pull. "I'd like to see you try."

"Ab, so would I, love," comes Lust's deep and sultry voice. His dark shape coalesces beside the Shadowbane, his visage an impersonation of Dominic's. "So would I."

Dominic closes his eyes, teeth bared in irritation. His hand opens at once, and I lower my arm. In taking a step away, my foot slips on one of the tiles. Dominic reaches for me, but at the same time, a heavy weight presses against my thigh. I regain my footing, thanks to Sloth, who now stands between me and the roof's decline. Dominic stopped himself before he could touch me and now closes his fingers into a fist. "You see? This is why I didn't want you out here. It's fucking dangerous."

"I was perfectly fine until you got handsy."

"Handsy," he echoes.

"I like getting handsy," Lust says.

Sloth is the best boy.

I love scenes that take place on rooftops. Especially at night.

"We fucking know, you prick," says Pride. His form wavers on the Shadowbane's other side. He too wears Dominic's face, but his expression is haughty where Lust's is flippant. "The more you brag about your lecherous proclivities, the more pathetic it makes you look."

Lust scoffs. "Stop trying to stir up my shame, Pride. You know I don't have any."

"Clearly."

"Gods, it must be exhausting for you, always looking down on everyone. I, on the other hand, prefer going down. You should try it sometime."

"I don't need to try," Pride says. "I either do something, and do it right the first time, or I don't."

Lust rolls his eyes. "Just say it, Pride. You don't know where the clitoris is, do you?"

"Just say it, Lust. You've never lasted longer than three seconds, have you?"

"Was that a premature-ejaculation joke? Am I supposed to take offense? Sounds lovely to me."

♥ Sloth's eyes volley between the bantering Shades. "Can everyone just sit down where it's safe?" **THE VOICE OF REASON** ♥

Dominic puts his hands on his hips and heaves a long-suffering sigh. Meanwhile, I'm left baffled. I never could have imagined I'd one day witness two Shades verbally sparring in a figurative dick-measuring contest. Do Shades even have dicks? Lust and Pride may wear Dominic's face, but below their necks, their bodies undulate in wisps of black and only a hint of clothing. An open shirt and loosened cravat for Lust. A crisp jacket and starched collar for Pride.

Dominic shakes his head, drawing my attention back to him. He seems annoyed by his Shades, but how much more annoyed would he be if he knew I'd heard every word? I'm almost of a mind to confess, just to see how he'd react. But I dismiss the notion when I recall the argument we were in the middle of when his Shades decided to have their own. As he stalks a few steps up the roof, I wonder if he'll tell me to go back inside again. Then, without meeting my eyes, he pauses and extends a hand back toward me. "Come on," he says, tone begrudging. "If you're going to linger like a thorn in my side, at least do it where you won't break your fucking neck."

laughing at that because you know

I love banter. It is the air I breathe.

→ Ah, the banter begins. Can you believe that when I first planned this book I was convinced it would be fully serious?

→ It you know me from my previous books, you are probably

I purse my lips but take his proffered hand, letting him aid my climb while Sloth stays close behind me. I settle onto the wide ridge at the roof's peak, Sloth lying at my feet while Dominic sits not too far away. Pride and Lust are now giving each other the silent treatment, hovering just behind the Shadowbane.

Tipping my head back, I take a moment to admire the quiet night, the canopy of stars, the silver glow of the moon, before I assess our surroundings. The streets are quiet, empty, the windows aglow with lamplight. There's not a single Shade to be seen. Reluctantly, I return my attention to my prickly companion. "Why are you so determined to keep us at a distance? You never answer questions plainly. You always put up a fight."

"I could say the latter about you," he says tonelessly.

"And there he goes," I whisper to Sloth, reaching to pat his head, "dodging another question."

Dominic rolls his eyes. "We can't have this conversation at night. The Shades—"

"Are only attracted to lies," I say.

"Except one of us seems to attract Shades even when she isn't lying."

"Is this about what happened in the clearing— Damn the gods. You're doing it again. You are so frustrating I could . . ."

"You could what?" Lust appears between us, his imitation of Dominic's features clearer than before. I imagine even his voice is like Dominic's, if the Shadowbane would speak in anything but his dry tone. "Tell me what you want to do to me, and make it dirty."

"Leave her alone, Lust," Dominic says under his breath.

Lust pouts but retreats into the Shadowbane, leaving Pride to smirk, chin lifted in triumph.

"You want to know why I'm reluctant to answer certain questions?" he says. "Then let me ask you this. How did it feel to learn the truth of the Holy Braziers?"

I frown, considering his question. "I felt . . . betrayed. By my fiancé and by all Sinless."

"And why don't you spout the truth to everyone you meet?"

"Some wouldn't believe me," I say. "Others would arrest me for

AND DOMINIC TESTS THE WATERS OF TRUST + HONEST CONVERSATION WITH HER.

I LOVE IT WHEN MY DOGS STAY

CLOSE

WE TRY'VE PROTECTING ME. DOGS: I have 2 Korean Jindos. An elderly boy named GHST and a dainty lady named RIVER.

THIS MOMENT MARKS A BIG SHIFT IN TRUST FOR THEM BOTH. INANIA CALLS HIM OUT FOR BEING DISTANT WHILE ALSO OPENING A LINE OF COMMUNICATION.

THE STAKES OF THE SECRETS HE

HE'S BEING GENUINE HERE.  
REALLY TRYING TO CONVEY

KEEPS  
WITHOUT  
GIVING THEM AWAY YET.

treason. The rest might fall into hysterics." I imagine what would happen if everyone suddenly knew that the Sinless feast on human hearts to light the braziers. It's one thing to know the Sinless feed from people. As far as the average citizen believes, a Sinless's blood source is kept alive. And if they die, what does it matter? They're only criminals. Or, in cases like Calvin's, the family of the chosen blood source has been fairly compensated in exchange for what appears to be a position of honor.

It's another thing to know the Sinless kill, claiming sacrifices without warning, without trial.

"Then imagine how much more I know than you," Dominic says. His voice adopts a gentle, almost pleading quality. "How many more secrets I carry. You only hypothesize what might happen if you share what you know. I, on the other hand, have firsthand experience. A Shadowbane's work brings us close to royal secrets that are kept from the public, and many don't pass these truths on to their Summoners. I do intend to share valuable intel, but I will do so only after we've established trust. In the meantime, know that I meant it when I said I've sent many of my retired crew across the sea, alive and well. I genuinely want that for you. Hate me and my kind all you want, but I am not your enemy."

I'm not fully convinced by the last part, but I'm most concerned about a pointed omission. "What about the Summoners you didn't send across the sea? You said before some have died, but how? You promised to protect us. Did your previous Summoners die under that promised protection? Or by a deliberate lack of it?"

He holds my gaze without falter. "My burdens are heavy, Seamstress."

I let him leave it at that, for I doubt he'd elaborate if I prodded more. It's obvious he's been betrayed by his crew—something I considered doing when he first gave me his ultimatum—and he's made it clear he won't hesitate to kill us if we take that path. Aside from being what he is, a Shadowbane hell-bent on becoming full Sinless plus an all-around asshole, he hasn't done anything to make me seriously ponder that option again. Especially if his promise proves true. If we can survive these next six months and he can get us off this continent,

LOL

I can put up with everything I hate about him. The promise of freedom, of not having to hide who I am or what I do, of not being labeled a sinner or an outlaw . . . it's enough to keep me at his side.

Of course, no one knows if the lands across the sea are any better than here.

I lower my eyes to the dark horizon and the hulking shapes of the nearby mountains.

"Do you know what's out there?" I whisper. "Across the sea? Are the other civilizations as damned as we're told?"

The history books say the Holy Continent was the only land blessed by Bastien. No other continent's king was turned Sinless or taught the Absolution ritual. The other lands live and die at the mercy of Shades, and the survivors are warmongering devils, continuing the same vile acts that angered the gods five centuries ago and plunged the world into One Hundred Days of Darkness. We have so little interaction with other continents, we can only believe it's true. Otherwise, wouldn't we have more than one open port? More trade? Perhaps limiting trade is a safety measure, to keep outsiders away from this pretend paradise.

Maybe it's to make it harder for us to leave.

Dominic shakes his head. "No one really knows what it's like, only that there are no Sinless. No Shadowbanes."

No protection from Shades, is what he means. All they have are natural means. Silver and light. It could be a thousand times worse than it is here, but that doesn't dissuade me from holding on to my goal. The alternative is running until the day I die, and outlaws don't tend to live long on the Holy Continent.

Sloth rolls onto his side, his head resting on my foot. I pet him again, this time stroking his soft ears. "What do you use them for?" I ask. "The Shades you catch. Sloth, Pride, and Lust didn't help us with the dragon. And where is the new one?"

"The new one is staying in the vial," Dominic says. "And I don't use my shadows to fight other Shades. The most they do against their own kind is darken my shadow or move it, allowing me to tempt the Shades I hunt close enough to catch. They do help me with other people, though."

(SPDILISE WARNING)  
 At was a challenge at times trying to remember separate histories. What Inanna knows, what Dominic knows, what only I know.

→ At was a lot to layer all at once!

My stomach sours as I revisit the few times his shadows have touched me. I may have warmed up to Sloth, but I'll never forget how invasive it felt when he licked my face when I was pressed to the ground, or the terror I felt when one of them had his hand at the base of my throat.

The reminder makes me reconsider petting the shadow dog, but I can't bring myself to pull away. Not with how real his fur feels, how warm and heavy his belly is beneath my hand. In this moment, he's just so doglike. I scratch him under the ears.

Dominic makes a strange sound, almost like a moan, and my eyes dart to him. He shifts it into a cough that he hides behind his fist.

I eye him beneath a furrowed brow and resume petting the Shade. "Why doesn't Sloth wear your face like the others?"

He glances down at the monster with a wry grin. "He may not wear my face, but he's still a reflection of me."

"How so?"

"I think we all have a primal, animal aspect to us. Don't you?"

I'm taken aback. I've heard such an analogy stated a time or two, but normally it's in reference to a wolf or a lion. Something proud and strong. "Your inner animal . . . is a dog."

His lips pull into a grin so wide and unexpected it makes my heart stutter. His posture is easier now, one hand planted on the ridge between us as he slumps slightly to the side. He holds my gaze with that smile, and I'm struck by how young he looks. How delicately the corners of his eyes crinkle. "A lazy, useless dog," he says, "who just wants to eat and sleep and be petted by a pair of skilled hands. Call me a good boy, and I'll be happy forever."

My mouth falls open. That was probably the most carefree thing he's ever said to me, and . . . I'm shocked by how much I liked it. By how warm it makes my stomach feel, how my heartbeat quickens in response. And maybe that's what emboldens me to do what I do next.

Lifting my hand, I reach for him, letting it fall on his hair. His dark strands are softer than I imagined they would be, despite being mussed by the breeze. "Good boy," I say, patting his head in what's supposed to be a taunting gesture.

Yet . . . it doesn't feel taunting. Nor does my voice hold an ounce of

FORESHADOWING TO UNWINDING TO WHAT SHE DISCOVERS ABOUT HIS SHADOWS IN CHAPTER 16.

IT'S TIME  
HE WAS JUST A FRIENDLY CANINE GREETING!  
READER ORG HIM 2N1 + 2N3S 2L1R0AF - 22DA3  
REINCARNATED AS A DOG. MY DOG IN PARTICULAR BECAUSE HE KNOWS I KNOW I WOULD PET HIM AND

THIS PART IS 100% BASED ON MY HUSBAND. HE HAS OFTEN SAID HE WOULD BE REINCARNATED AS A DOG.

REINCARNATED AS A DOG. MY DOG IN PARTICULAR BECAUSE HE KNOWS I KNOW I WOULD PET HIM AND

the ridicule I intended. Instead, my words are soft, almost breathless. And the way his pupils blow wide, the way his chest lifts with a hitch of breath, tells me he doesn't feel patronized at all. ♡♡

THE ALMOST KISS !!  
SHOWTA 3HL ←

We freeze like that, eyes locked, my hand still splayed over his hair. My cheeks heat, and before I can recall my inhibitions, my mind takes another path. I imagine what it would be like if we weren't master and crew. If he wasn't someone I hate. If we weren't on this rooftop keeping watch for monsters, but just a man and a woman enjoying a late autumn night. If we were just that, I'd find him . . . tolerable. More than tolerable. Handsome. Desirable, even.

THIS WAS SO BITTER-SWEET TO HAVE IN ANOVA  
IMAGINE HOW THEY WOULD HAVE  
DIFFERENT WORLD  
LIVED IN A

Dominic leans closer, an almost imperceptible distance. In the same moment, his eyes dip to my mouth. In answer, my lips part, and I too find myself leaning closer—

Dominic's expression shutters, and he pulls back. With stiff motions, he rises to his feet. "You should go," he says, all traces of his lighthearted mood gone. The hand that had been planted between us opens and closes at his side.

THIS MR. DARCY EFFECT, I WILL NEVER GET TIRED OF THAT HAND FLUX IN P&P ♡

"I . . . should go, yes," I say, too startled by what almost happened to argue. Yet I can't ignore the way my heart races. It's a traitorous rhythm, one it has no right to drum. Not for Dominic. A Shadowbane. A man who will someday be fully Sinless. Maybe even become a duke who will proceed to consume hearts.

I don't look back as I descend the roof and enter the window once more. And as I settle into my blankets, I try to ignore the way my lips tingle, pulsing in the wake of a kiss that never happened. Or the sound of Dominic's steps crossing the roof, stopping just over my bed.

JUST A DASH OF HEALTH DENIAL LOL

Thank You FOR READING THE LIES THAT SUMMON THE NIGHT! I hope you enjoyed my scribbblings!  
~ TESSONIA