

“The body must be burned,” says the Company priest.

The body. Not my father anymore. Just something cold which holds his shape, which occupies his bed in one damp corner of the dripping, creaking shack, wearing the beard I once braided and the nose I once set and the strong, careful hands I once mended. And of course, the Ink. It makes a horrid maze of him, head to toe, a labyrinth of harsh black lines and nested runes etched into his skin. Proprietary glyphs, mostly. Inelegant Company scratch. It makes me sick to see him wear it.

The priest turns to me, so tall his bald head nearly brushes the thatch roof. His voice comes tinny and grating from behind his half-mask.

“Sooner, rather than later,” he says.

“We have time.”

“Protocol dictates—”

“I understand protocol, priest.” I barely keep my voice level. “We are a long way from the capital.” I let him ponder this fact. I’m bound by oath not to harm anyone, let alone such a stalwart Company asset. He knows this as well as he knows his precious protocol. And yet he takes one tiny step back.

I don’t want to touch Father. Don’t want to ground myself, to make it real, to feel the lack of warmth, the lack of presence. But there is something I need to see. So I raise one hand, and am glad my father can’t see it tremble.

“Don’t,” the priest says. He can’t help it, the poor thing. “You might—”

“This is my father,” I say.

He folds his arms under his robes. “We’ve already waited too long.”

A thousand biting remarks bubble up inside me but all that escapes is one sorry word: “Please.”

A pause. The mask clicks. Something human happens behind the Ink-blackened eyes.