

of metal and wishes

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For Asher, who would build.

of metal and wishes

—❧ Chapter ❧— One

IF I BELIEVED in the devil, I'd give him credit for the shift whistle at the Gochan One factory. Its shriek rips me from a dream of the wind whispering through flowering dogwood trees.

I fold my pillow over my ears, crush it down, and think of my mother singing me to sleep. She always used to, until her voice faded to a raspy croak and it hurt her to speak. Now there's no music in my life except in my memories, but that's okay, because I live there as much as I can.

The shrill of the whistle goes on and on, calling to the workers. It's as much a welcome as a warning; if any of them are still in their bunks, it's going to come out of their pay. But I don't have to worry about that. My father runs the factory's medical clinic, and it's always open. We

live above it, and when people need the doctor, they ring a little bell outside the clinic door. When it's an emergency, they crash right in.

The awful sound ends as abruptly as it began, and I let the pillow fall away from my face. My father is standing a few feet from my sleeping pallet. He raises the window curtain and looks toward the front gate of the factory compound, then lifts his pocket watch to the light. It's a heavy old thing, too fancy to be clipped to his sagging trousers with patched knees, but my mother gave it to him when he graduated from medical school, and he's worn it every day since. He flips it shut with a soft click. "Five minutes earlier than yesterday. That's a rather dirty trick."

I pull my blanket over my head.

A month ago my life changed forever. Now, instead of living in a warm cottage with a lovely garden, I live on the factory compound. Instead of sitting in a kitchen and inhaling the earthy scent of stewing vegetables, I sit in a cafeteria and pick at starchy rice or thin soup shoveled from enormous vats. Instead of reading the classics, I read medical texts. Instead of the feather lightness of my mother's touch, I feel the dry, antiseptic rasp of my father's.

Instead of embroidering silk, I embroider skin.

I actually don't mind that part.

My father is looking down at me when I finally peek out from under the blanket. The lines of his round face are deeper in the shadows of almost dawn, and his brown eyes look as inky black as his hair. "You're going to have to get used to it, Wen."

"Don't remind me, please," I whisper.

He winces. "I'll make tea." He walks from the room.

I sit up and swing my feet to the floor. There's a chill in the air and I shiver. I pull my braid from the neck of my nightgown. It's a thick black rope, long enough to wrap around my throat in my sleep.

I get ready quickly, pulling on my forest green dress with the intricate embroidered vines coiling at the neckline and down the sleeves, which are thinning at the elbows. I need to patch them up before they become holey. I should go to the company store and buy myself some practical clothes, like the slacks and button-ups worn by the girls who work at the textile mill in Gochan Three. Here in Gochan One, the slaughterhouse, it's all men in overalls and rubber aprons. The only women in this factory are the secretaries and office girls, and they wear simple brown dresses, not ones that are embroidered and colorful like mine. I know I look pretentious and stupid and out of place, but my mother made this dress. She made all my clothes, actually. Her hands touched every stitch of this skirt, this bodice. She lined it with delicate pink buds and emerald leaves, gilded each of them with golden thread, made them too beautiful to be real. She pulled it tight at my waist and said I was getting a nice figure. She chose the color because it looked good on my toasted-almond skin. When I touch this dress, I touch her. When I wear this dress, she is with me.

I pull my thick apron on over it because I don't want to stain it with whatever's going to land on me today. Yesterday one of the slaughterhouse workers threw up in my lap.

My father and I eat a breakfast of bread and hard

cheese. We split the last apple from our small stash, the final gifts of the tree in our abandoned backyard behind the cottage on the Hill. We haven't been back since we locked the doors the day after my mother's funeral. It was her home, every inch of it, and it doesn't seem right to be there when she's not.

"The new workers are starting today," my father says.

"I heard people grumbling about it in the cafeteria yesterday. They wanted the extra hours during feasting season. Why didn't the bosses let them work more, if they wanted to?"

My father examines his apple. "It's been a hard year, and Underboss Mugo was looking for a new way to cut costs. The Noor are the cheapest labor available."

The Noor. They're not like us, the Itanyai. My mother taught me never to trust them. I've never seen one around here because most of them live in the Yilat Province, over the Western Hills, but Mother had warned me that if I ever did have the misfortune to encounter a Noor, I should run in the other direction. She said they were more like animals than men.

Now some of them are coming to work at Gochan One.

The apple is mealy and dry, and I choke it down. "Have you ever met one?"

"Not until last night." My father sips his tea.

"Isn't the company afraid they'll cause trouble?"

Father chuckles, but there's little humor in it. "I think the only thing they want to do is work and earn money to send to their families. When their train arrived, all they looked was . . . defeated."

And they'd had to stay on the train too, because they had lice. This morning they're being processed. My father is in charge of their decontamination and medical examinations. I don't get to assist because some of the processing involves their being naked, and he doesn't want me to see that.

I help him prep, counting the cartons of noxious delousing powder and germ-killing soap, making sure we have enough. The Noor are being issued company clothes, too, and their old ones are being burned. Father tells me all of this is coming out of their pay, even though they haven't started working yet.

A few workers come with handcarts to help Father with the supplies. As always, they give me funny, quizzical looks, like I'm some stray cat that wandered in off the streets of the Ring, the shops and neighborhoods that surround the three factory compounds of the Gochan complex. The Ring is almost a city, but not quite. It is as much a product of the Gochan industrial compounds as the meat of Gochan One, the war machines of Gochan Two, or the clothing of Gochan Three. It sprang up like a patch of clover around a pile of dung, fed by the money and jobs that trickle outward from the factories.

After my father leaves for his appointment with the lice-covered Noor, I focus on neatening already-neat things—lining up the gleaming plungers of the metal syringes, setting out clampers, and pulling the bowls and basins from our steam-powered cleaning machine. It makes a terrible racket but is much better than having to wash each of them by hand. Next I sweep the floor. I have to do this every day because there always seems

to be metal shavings at the base of the walls, and sometimes in little piles under chairs and tables. It must come through the vents from Gochan Two, which churns out monsters of steel to defend our country from enemies outside our borders . . . and within them. We probably all have metal shavings embedded in our lungs. If you cut us open, we'll sparkle in the light.

When I finish my chores, I go into my father's office. It's too far to walk to the school I've attended all my life, and too expensive anyway now that my mother's income is gone, so I am finishing my education here, under my father's instruction. He seems pleased that I have taken to his lessons. Today on his desk I find the cold, pink foreleg of a pig resting on a tray. Arranged beside it is a set of claspers, a curved stitching needle, some suturing thread, and a scalpel. Father left no note, but I know what he expects me to do.

I settle myself on his chair and catch my reflection in the scalpel's blade before I slice it along the leg, cutting to the bone, rending flesh from hoof to joint. Enough to keep me occupied with precise angles and tidy knots, to allow me to forget everything beyond the boundaries of the steel tray for a little while. Years of living up to my mother's rigid standards, of pulling and repeating delicate embroidery stitches until I got them just right, until my fingers blistered and then bled, are paying off now. Not really in the way I planned, but that's all right. I thread the suturing needle and grip it with the claspers. Eyeing the gash, I position the tip and poke it straight down into the flaccid tissue, then rotate my wrist, driving the point upward on the opposite edge of the wound. I will make

these stitches perfect and do both my parents proud.

I am rewarding myself with a long stretch after completing the final knot when I notice the cloth pouch on the table next to the door. My father has forgotten his stethoscope. He needs it to listen to the Noor's lungs and make sure they are not bringing illness into our compound. And if I take it to him, I could perhaps catch a glimpse of a Noor. Despite my mother's warnings, or perhaps because of them, I cannot help but be curious about what these barbarian men look like.

I strip off my apron and hang the sign that says the clinic is closed for the lunch hour. The overhead lights buzz like bees as I tread the main hallway that leads to the cargo bays and pens in the southeast corner of the compound, where the factory connects to the rail line. This is how the cows arrive at Gochan to meet their fate, and it is how the Noor arrived too.

As I go through the heavy door that leads to the yard, a huge partitioned outdoor area with a corrugated metal overhang, I am greeted by the anxious lowing of cattle and the clatter of hooves. A train must have arrived, and the cows are being herded into the narrow, fenced lane that guides them to the killing floor. The air is thick with the stench of manure and urine-soaked hay, and I wrinkle my nose as I listen for my father's voice beyond the stained, rusted metal of the partitions.

A thickset young man in gray pants and a neatly pressed shirt strides out from an opening between the flimsy steel walls. He raises his head from his clipboard and pauses when he sees me. "You're not supposed to be here," he says, but not in a harsh way. He looks over

his shoulder and frowns before turning back to me. Shuffling footsteps and mutterings I do not understand come from the makeshift chamber he just exited, as does the faintly astringent odor of delousing powder.

I hold up the pouch. “I need to give this stethoscope to my father.”

“You’re Dr. Guiren’s daughter. Wen, right?” The young man smiles and stands a bit straighter, pushing out his chest. “I’m Lati. I’m in charge of making sure all the Noor are where they’re supposed to be.”

Lati looks only a few years older than I am, and the fact that he gets to wear slacks and carry a clipboard—instead of wearing a rubber apron and wielding a butcher’s knife—means he is from a middle-class family like mine. He seems proud of himself, though it sounds like his job is to take roll and little more. Still, I return his smile, which feels stiff and unfamiliar after a month of stifled tears. “And where are they supposed to be?”

He tips his head toward the main hallway, allowing me to see the comb lines through his slightly oiled hair. “On their way to the cafeteria.”

No sooner has he said it than two men trudge through the gap in the partitions. The smell of delousing powder makes my throat burn, and these men are covered in it, white patches and smears on their hands and faces, a dusting of it on their eyelashes. I squint at them with stinging eyes and know immediately that they are Noor. They’re dressed like the rest of the workers, in brown overalls and white undershirts, but they don’t look like *us*. They are bigger, for one. Not by much, but most of these men stand a few inches taller than the average Itanyai. Their

skin is tanned, but there's a pinkish undertone that I've never seen in anyone around here. And their hair is so light, mostly muddy brown, not black and shiny like ours. Their eyes are also the color of street puddles, and they are red-rimmed and bloodshot and darting. I shrink back against the wall but continue to stare.

The Noor file out of the yard two by two and slowly walk toward the factory proper. Each of them has a paper tacked onto the shoulder of his shirt. Most of the papers are too high for me to read what's written there, but I see a few—Altan, Erdem, Savas, Zeki—and realize what they are, foreign names for strange, foreign men. Some of the yard workers accompany them, carrying electric prods, as if the Noor were cattle instead of factory employees. It hardly seems necessary, because what my father said this morning appears to be true. The Noor do not look rebellious or dangerous now; they look tired.

The ones at the front have deeply lined faces and hunched shoulders, but most of the Noor appear no older than twenty. Lati reaches my side as they begin to pass me. One, a boy with a mole on his cheek, sneezes loudly, then wipes his dripping nose on his work shirt, leaving a cloudy trail of mucus and delousing powder along his sleeve. Another, an impish-looking boy with sharp cheekbones and a scar that cuts through his left eyebrow, scratches his crotch. Then his muddy eyes find me, and he *winks*. I gasp, clutching my father's stethoscope to my chest, as if that will protect me.

"You must be very careful of them, Wen," says Lati, stepping in front of me to block their view. His gaze slides to the embroidery on my cuffs, and he follows a

twisting vine of flowers until it entwines with others on my bodice. “It’s likely they’ve never seen a girl who looks as fine as you do.”

I bow my head, nearly as embarrassed by his overly familiar tone as I am about the rudeness of the Noor. I know he is trying to be kind, but it is too presumptuous, too intimate, and I have only just met him. “I’ll be careful,” I say, glancing at him and then at the horde of Noor. The line seems endless. “How many of them are there?”

“Just short of two hundred,” he replies, checking his clipboard. “All from one village. They must breed like pigs. They look like them too.” He says it loud, and when he sees my shocked expression, he laughs. “Don’t worry—they can’t understand us.”

As he reassures me, two more Noor emerge from the yard, and I am completely distracted by them. Both are young—one looks Lati’s age, maybe eighteen or nineteen, and the other can’t be older than fourteen, which means he must have lied to get his work permit. Both boys are taller than the others, though the younger one looks like a weed, while the older one looks more like a birch, lean but solid. But what astounds me is that their hair is the color of the rust spots on the metal walls. I had no idea hair could actually be that color. They don’t have much of it, though. Like the rest of the Noor, they look like sheared sheep. I wonder if they had to pay for these haircuts, or if the company gave them those for free.

“I have to escort these pigs to their troughs,” says Lati, “but perhaps you should take the side hallway? So you don’t have to be near them.”

The older rust-head glances at me over Lati’s

shoulder. He has eerie, jade-colored eyes, and before he turns away, I note a spark of cleverness and comprehension in their pale depths that makes my stomach tighten. Lati clears his throat, catching my attention again. "Give me the stethoscope," he says. "Your father is still examining the final few, and I'm sure he'll be happy to use something other than a tube of greased paper to listen to their lungs."

I hand him the pouch just as one of the passing Noor spits on the floor at my feet. I step back quickly as Lati grabs the Noor by the shoulder. "That's worthy of a fine," snaps Lati, checking the paper on the young man's shoulder, then conspicuously placing a check on one of the rows on his clipboard. He shoves the stunned-looking fellow, who bounces off one of his friends. The other Noor in line give us wary looks while the yard workers brandish their cattle prods. Suddenly feeling nauseated, I decide to follow Lati's instructions to take the side hallway. Before I reach the door, Lati calls out in a cheerful voice, "It was nice to meet you, Wen!"

I give him a tight smile and a small curtsy, then slip through the door and find myself in a dark corridor. My hand slides along the wall, seeking a light switch and finding none. For a moment I consider going back into the yard, but the memory of the rude Noor and of Lati's eager familiarity keep me where I am. A murky hallway cannot harm me, but being seen as too friendly certainly could. "I'm not afraid," I say, though I don't know why.

There's no one here to listen.

At least, I thought so. Somewhere, deep in the inky

darkness, there is a scuttling, clicking noise that makes my toes curl. Rats, maybe, though the sounds are a bit more rhythmic than rodents usually manage. “Hello?”

My voice is still echoing when the bulbs snap to life, first the ones above me, then the ones ahead, lighting my path. Though I should be relieved, my heart thumps like a rabbit in a snare. “Is someone here?” I call out.

The only answer is the low buzz of electricity, and again, perhaps I should find that soothing, but all I want to do is get out of this hallway. I hurry along, holding my skirt above my ankles so I don’t trip myself up, jogging past little piles of metal shavings and closed doors leading to unknown rooms. As the administrative hallway comes into view ahead, one of the doors opens and out steps old Hazzi, who scrubs the floors and fixes the leaky toilets of Gochan One. His gnarled fingers curl over the handle of his mop, which is resting in a wheeled bucket he pushes along the floor. Blinking, he peers up at the lights, and then his eyes widen as he sees me coming.

“Thank you for turning them on,” I say as I approach. Hazzi has been to see my father a few times for the pain in his joints, and though he cannot pay, my father does whatever he can to make the old man more comfortable—and able to keep his job here at the factory.

Hazzi shakes his head. “I didn’t turn them on, Miss Wen.” He smiles, showing a gap where his bottom front teeth used to be. “The Ghost must have thought you needed a little light.”

I laugh. “I told you last week that I don’t believe in ghosts.” Which makes me different from nearly

everyone else in this factory. They give up their hard-earned money and food to make offerings to the Ghost of Gochan One. They write their silly prayers and leave them at his altar at the front of the factory. They truly believe that he responds. I think he is nothing more than the bundling together of the useless wishes of people who must spend their days in a terrible place like this. “But it was a fine trick all the same, Hazzi.” Fine enough to make my heart speed.

“No trick,” he says with a raspy chuckle. “And you must be respectful of our Ghost. He is not all about the light. He brings darkness, too.”

“That’s certainly a useful myth to scare the workers into behaving.” I nod at his cart and bucket. “Can I help you carry something to the front?”

“We can’t splash wastewater on your fine dress,” he says kindly as he rolls his bucket away from my skirts. “And it’s not a myth, you know. A few years ago there was a young worker who proclaimed he was going to find out who takes the offerings from the Ghost’s altar every night. His many prayers had not been answered, see, and he had decided the Ghost didn’t exist. He was determined to prove it too. Right up until the day he disappeared. Atanyo was his name. I remember him well.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Are you sure Atanyo didn’t simply run away?”

Hazzi purses his lips. “Suppose he might’ve, though I’m not sure why he would, since he had a good enough life here and a family out in the Ring. If you ask me, he challenged the wrong specter and it devoured him. You shouldn’t anger our Ghost, Miss Wen. He hears

everything and can do anything. You should be grateful he favors you.”

“Please, Hazzi. Forgive me, but I’m not superstitious.” I try not to laugh again as I gesture at a set of light switches on the wall not two feet from his broom cupboard. “And I think you’re playing with me.”

The corner of his mouth twitches as he shuffles over to the switches and flips all of them down at once. The lights stay on. He flicks one switch up and down repeatedly, the sharp clicks echoing in the empty corridor. “These haven’t worked for months, and this hallway has been dark that whole time.” He grins at me. “Until you decided to walk this way.”

—❧ Chapter Two ❧—

THE CEMENT FLOOR suddenly feels cold and hard beneath the soft soles of my woolen shoes. I thank Hazzi for his wisdom and leave him in the side hallway to wheel his rickety bucket to whatever place needs a good scrub. My skirt swishes with my steps as I enter the administrative corridor, hoping I've arrived in time to walk to the cafeteria with Vie, my best friend from school who came to work here a year ago. But when I reach the bookkeeping office, I see that she's already left for her lunch. I tiptoe past the office of the factory underboss, Mugo, whom my father warned me about as soon as I arrived at the factory compound. The whispered rumor is that Mugo has a thing for underage girls. Having just turned sixteen, I apparently fit the bill perfectly. I've kept a low profile since I've been here, but I can feel his eyes on me sometimes, prying and weaselly.

I enter the front section of the factory and pass the entrance to the killing floor. On the other side of the wall are hundreds of men, armed with their long knives, hacking away with merciless precision. The noise is deafening: the zing of the hooks, the wet slap and slash of blade against bone and muscle, the crash of metal on metal as the belts churn in their forever circles. Engines roar as the spinner machines rotate-twist-jerk-tear-dump the wheezing, lowing cattle onto the stained concrete. Their hooves clack and scrape, splashing their own blood on their dirty faces as they try to get up and run. This is how they spend the last few moments of their lives. If I turned my head, I could see it all through the tiny, round window set into the metal door.

I keep my eyes straight ahead and hold my breath until I get to the cafeteria. Even though I don't consider myself squeamish, I still can't understand how the men wolf down stew and soup and casserole after cutting out beef tongues and carving out hearts for hours on end.

The secretaries and office girls are already seated at their regular table in the far corner of the room, and among them I see Vie. The men are coming off the killing floor, through the antiseptic spray and the plastic sheeting. They strip off their rubber hoods, gloves, boots, and aprons and leave them lying in piles in the cavernous chamber that separates the killing floor from the cafeteria. They stride in, wearing matching imprints around their eyes from the goggles. And also matching tired, glazed expressions. It always takes a few minutes for that to wear off, for them to start talking and laughing again. But there's a strange intensity to them today,

a layer of anger smeared over their usual fatigue as they notice that most of the tables are already occupied.

The Noor are here. All two hundred of them, by the looks of it. And I have to squeeze past them if I want to sit with my friends. The barbarian men lean forward as they eagerly shovel rice and beans into their mouths, moving their hands over their almost-bald heads, laughing and talking in their strange language. It's straight from the back of their throat, like something got caught there and they're trying to get it out. Now that no one's threatening them with cattle prods, their gestures are sharp and quick. Untrustworthy. I imagine them trying to pick my pockets, or worse, and press myself to the wall to edge by them.

A few of them turn their head to watch me, their darting eyes sparking with recognition, and suddenly the swishing of my skirt and petticoat sounds like an avalanche, a bulky crashing noise that I can't leave behind no matter how fast I move. As I pass the table closest to the wall, the impish Noor boy with the scar on his eyebrow says something to me, but I put my head down and ignore him. My heartbeat thuds against my temples. I wish I were invisible.

When the foot shoots out in front of me, I don't stand a chance. The toe of my shoe snags on his boot, and I fall forward like a sack of grain. As I push up to my hands and knees, I feel air on the back of my legs.

The impish boy has lifted my skirt.

My cheeks burning, I twist my hips in an effort to yank myself away, but he's got a thick handful of embroidered cotton in his grimy fist. If I pull any harder, my skirt will

rip. If I don't, the Noor will have the chance to see parts of me no boy ever has. Somewhere in the cafeteria I hear an angry shout from one of the Itanyai workers, but it doesn't seem to register with this horrible imp with muddy hair and muddy eyes. He grins at me and makes a show of licking his lips as I try to scramble to my feet while preserving my modesty. Tears sting my eyes and all of them laugh.

Well, not all of them.

A wide, long-fingered hand cuffs my tormentor hard on the side of the head. The older rust-haired Noor is standing up and leaning over the table. He hisses at the impish skirt-lifter in that throaty language of theirs. The imp blanches at whatever he's said and drops my skirt like it's burned him.

I jump to my feet. In the moment before I turn away, the rust-haired boy turns his pale eyes to me. I should say "thank you," but I am so humiliated right now that I hate him as much as the rest of them. I whirl around and try to find my escape, and nearly burst into tears when Vie appears at my side, her round cheeks flushed with fury.

She makes a gesture of contempt at the Noor, sliding her hand over her shoulder in a way that tells them she thinks they're scum. She puts her arm around my waist and leads me to our table. Behind me I hear some of the Itanyai workers in strident argument, and I flick my gaze over to see the rust-haired boy speaking to them—in *our language*. Lati was wrong; perhaps most of the Noor don't understand us, but this one does. He's got his hands up and is making conciliatory movements, like he just wants everyone to calm down. Maybe to make a point,

he smacks the imp on the back of the head, and the guy doesn't object as he stumbles forward with the force of the blow. I guess the rust-haired boy scared him a little. Against my will I feel a twinge of gratitude toward this strange-looking Noor.

I turn away as his head swivels around, like he knew I was looking at him. I put my back to all of them and sit down at the table with Vie. Jima, Underboss Mugo's personal secretary, sweeps her shining curtain of black hair over one shoulder and gives me a sympathetic look. She slides me her untouched tray of rice and beans. "So you don't have to walk past them again."

I bite my lip. My skin is hot with shame and I can't quite catch my breath. "Did they do that to all of you?"

Onya, who has been at Gochan for at least fifteen seasons, shakes her head. She is the oldest of us and tries to act like a mother. I don't mind. I know she wishes she had babies of her own, but her husband was badly injured in an accident on the killing floor a few years ago and died soon after. She gives me a pitying look. "Only you."

I look at them, and I look down at myself, and I know why. All of the other women are wearing simple brown dresses with straight skirts and plain sleeves. I look like a peacock in this embroidered dress of mine. I bury my face in my hands.

Vie rubs my shoulders, her plump fingers sliding over flowers and vines lovingly stitched onto the fabric. "Ignore the Noor. They're good for nothing. They'll be gone at the end of the feasting season, and good riddance."

"I wish they'd never come here at all. They don't belong here," I say in a choked voice. The men are still

arguing with the Noor a few tables away, and I think I hear Lati's voice, though I am too ashamed to turn my head and look. I hope he fines them harshly. I hope he teaches those barbarians a lesson.

Jima pats my arm. "Until feasting season is over, Gochan One will run twenty-four hours a day nearly every day, and Underboss Mugo is under pressure to increase profits. He's been very . . . stressed."

I peek through my fingers to see her somber brown eyes, too widely set in what is otherwise a pretty face. She looks a bit like a hunted animal.

"I'll tell you why the Noor are here," says Onya, clucking her tongue. "Look how hollow their cheeks are. They're too incompetent to feed themselves, so they've come here looking for handouts. I suppose it's better than an all-out rebellion."

"I think rebellion *would* be better," says Vie, leaning forward. "Iyzu's father commanded one of the units that put them down the last time they tried to carve out a piece of Yilat for themselves. Iyzu told me that the Noor are so primitive that it wasn't much of a fight once our war machines arrived. Maybe they could be driven from the country for good this time."

Onya rolls her eyes. "You're a silly girl, Vie, and Iyzu is exaggerating to impress you. Good men died trying to keep the Noor from cracking the Yilat Province like an egg. No, much better to keep them in their place so they don't try to fight at all."

Vie gives Onya a pinched, petulant look. "If they know their place so well, why did one of them just expose Wen's delicates to the entire cafeteria?"

My stomach turns, and I push Jima's tray away. "I'm going to go back to the clinic," I mumble as tears burn my eyes.

Jima slides her arm through mine. "I'll go with you," she says.

I keep my head down as she leads me out of the cafeteria, and grip her hand tightly as we pass by the Noor. I mark each step, waiting for one of them to bar my way, but they are quiet and still until we reach the exit. It does nothing to cool my anger toward them, though. It's sitting in my chest like a burning coal, fueled by hot humiliation. In this moment I share Vie's desire to see them crushed and broken. No matter that the rust-haired one intervened to stop his imp friend from ruining my reputation—it was probably to save his own skin, not to help me.

When I turn to enter the administrative hall, Jima tugs me in the opposite direction. "Come," she says. "I promise you won't regret it."

I groan as she pulls me into the alcove where the Ghost's altar is set up. I've never ventured back here before, but I've seen many a worker and office girl duck in, carrying their gifts for the Ghost. Someone has lovingly carved a low table out of elm, and the wood alone must have cost a week's wages. Atop it sits a row of tall candles, thirteen in all. Their tiny flames flicker and weigh down the air with a faint, greasy haze. Around the candles are prayers, scratched carefully onto scraps of paper or fabric, and on top of each prayer is an offering. A bronze coin from the Ring, a few plum cakes, a braided-thread bracelet.

Jima pulls an ink stick from her pocket, along with a piece of paper. “I was going to ask him for something. I could write your wish below mine—if you have an offering?”

“Jima, I appreciate this, but I don’t believe in the Ghost. Or any ghosts, for that matter.” If they were real, surely I’d feel my mother’s presence. She wouldn’t have abandoned me completely.

Jima’s eyes shine with hope. “This one is real. Minny told me he cured her son of sickness after she left a prayer—”

“My father treated her little boy, and that’s why he got better.”

“Not everyone your father treats gets better, Wen.”

My throat tightens as I remember how hard my father worked to cure my mother. “I know that. But still—”

“That’s not the only thing the Ghost has done!” Jimma says, clutching her ink stick. “He can bring feast or famine, frost or rain. He’s powerful! He could avenge you. He could make the Noor pay.”

“Lati can do that too.”

She shakes her head. “Lati might fine them, but the Ghost can do more than that.”

I put my hands on my hips. “Has anyone ever seen this terrifying apparition for themselves?”

“No one’s lived to tell about it.”

“Hazzi told me about that worker who disappeared—Atanyo. He could have run away, or someone else might have killed him. Seems like a good way to cover up a murder, if you ask me.”

“I hadn’t heard about that one, but I’ve heard of

others. Onya told me that the last few men who ventured down into the basement levels never returned. It's why no one goes down there anymore." She says it with such reverence, as if these rumors are proven fact. "But the Ghost protects the faithful. I know he does."

She scribbles something on her paper, cupping her hand around it so I don't see what she's writing. I glance over the wishes people have left on the altar today. Some of them are for good fortune and health. Some of them are very specific, like for the slurry machine on the killing floor to stop shorting out midshift. The Ghost is going to be very busy if he intends to reward all these true believers. I shove my fists into my pockets, willing myself to keep quiet. Something warm and metal brushes against my knuckles, and my fingers close around it. A tin factory coin, square with a hole in the middle, the currency of Gochan.

Jima finishes writing and looks up at me, her delicate face full of expectation. "He'll listen," she says. "He'll help. Tell him what you want."

I don't know what I'm supposed to say. I'm not religious. I've never been to the temple. I'm not used to asking anyone but my parents for what I need. And I know the Ghost isn't real. But as I think of that impish, muddy-haired boy, the way he licked his lips as he looked at my bare legs, the way he laughed at my shame, something inside me breaks.

I pull the coin from my pocket and toss it onto the table. People pray to the Ghost just to make themselves feel better about having to be here, but I shouldn't be here at all. I should be on the Hill, living with my mother,

far from the stink of blood and cow, far from the imp boy and all the Noor. If I were there, if my mother were alive, I wouldn't have any reason to pray to a nonexistent ghost. But Gochan One is my home now, so: "Ghost, show me what you can do. Prove yourself to me. I want to be impressed."

Jima sits back on her knees and stares at my little coin lying among the lovingly placed offerings. "Be careful, Wen."

I scoff, too angry to do anything else. "Careful of whom, exactly?" I gesture at the bolt of purple cloth, the bottle of rice wine, the package of salted fish, the carved letter opener—all offerings left in exchange for wishes. "Who is this Ghost, that people think he is worthy of their best things?"

Jima folds her prayer. "He was once a worker here."

"Did you know him?"

She shakes her head. "I've only been here for two years. But Onya said he died on the factory floor. It was an ugly death."

"Any death on the killing floor is bound to be ugly, Jimma, and my father told me there are at least three of them each year. Why would this one worker have the power to become a ghost?"

"I couldn't say," says Jimma, "but he cares for us and has granted many wishes. He does not deserve your contempt." Jimma touches her prayer and then sets her own offering—yet another molded tallow candle—between a small jar of curing salt and a thick roll of fine wire that was probably stolen from a maintenance closet. "He might even punish it."

“We’ll see.” And maybe I would deserve it. From the look on Jima’s face, her wish means a lot to her, and she has been nothing but kind to me. It’s not her fault that I can’t bring myself to believe. “Thank you for trying to help,” I offer, touching her sleeve. “I hope your prayer is answered.”

She wraps her arm over her middle. “Me too,” she whispers.