

Prologue

The empress blazed against the twilight sky. Fire licked at her fingertips as flames spread across the meadow at the top of the hill—a portent of what was to come.

Hers was a power that had conquered empires.

A girl in the village below lifted her head from a spray of wildflowers, their blooms dancing in the smoke-tainted breeze. “Momma, look! There’s a lady up there!”

Her mother’s face drained of color. “Come here, my love,” she ordered, her voice sharp and urgent. “*Now.*”

Flowers slipped from the girl’s grasp, the petals scattering on the ground like falling ash.

The mother seized her child and dragged her to their cottage as the firestorm surged over the crest of the hill. It reached the hamlet, consuming all it touched in an instant.

The girl’s mother shoved her into the cellar. “Get as low as you can and curl up tight. Don’t come out, understand? I’ll be right behind you.” The girl heard nothing else but the roar of the inferno outside, followed by one last thing—a whisper from her mother amidst the chaos: “I love you, *vmekhva.*”

She sealed the girl in the darkness and didn’t come back.

The girl would never forget the screams. She would always remember the overwhelming heat, the thick smoke that threatened to choke her. How the fire brushed against her skin and left marks that no time would heal.

And she remembered—

Silence.

A stillness that echoed through the dark as days passed. Then, finally, hushed voices reached her. Residents from a neighboring village arrived to mourn and found only a wasteland—no bodies to bury, no survivors. Except for one.

A girl who rose from the ashes.

Sera

Twenty years later

The god caged in Sera's body hated her.

She paced outside her forest cottage in irritation, frost crunching beneath her boots. The extended winter had taken a toll on the iatric plants in her garden, leaving a pitiful sight of withered foliage under a fresh layer of snow. A fever had swept through the outskirts of Dolsk—her medicines were in short supply.

And her deity was a fickle bastard that demanded a sacrifice in exchange for power.

An audience of blackbirds perched atop a nearby stone wall, their feathers ruffling in the morning breeze while they chirped in an irritating chorus that did little to improve Sera's foul temper.

"Shut up, all of you," she snapped at the avian gathering.

A foolhardy bird dared to trill in dissent.

Sera rounded on the creature and fixed it with her iciest glare. "One more chirp, and I'll pluck you from that wall and eat you."

The bird wisely held its beak still.

Sera kneeled beside the wilted plants, running her hands over the cold soil. She appealed to her god. "Give me your godpower."

Scales shifted beneath Sera's skin. Trapped wings fluttered. Talons flexed and scraped across her bones as it tested the limits of its enclosure. For over two decades, the zmeya, her caged god, had writhed and slashed within her—first with violence and desperation, and now with a quiet loathing.

The deity did not listen to her. If it yielded its abilities, it spoke with the deep, menacing rumble of a furious hostage. The Exalted Tongue was its language of resentment.

Every use of its power came with a message: *Fuck you, hope you suffer.*

Sera couldn't blame the beast; they were both shackled together in this wretched arrangement. A cursed pair: an imprisoned dragon and a woman who never asked for her body to be offered to such a vindictive god.

Sera gritted her teeth as the god's claws sent another fissure of discomfort through her. A deliberate provocation; its rage seeped into her veins, burning embers beneath her skin.

"Give me your godpower," she hissed again. When the zmeya didn't listen, Sera yanked the blade from her belt. "Fine. If this is the only language you know—"

"Polina Ivanovna!"

Sera turned to see a scrawny lad hastening up the path towards her cottage, waving a broadsheet. Sera's heart lurched with anticipation. Anna, one of two spies Sera still communicated with back home, only sent missives when it was urgent.

"Polina Ivanovna, I have a message for you!"

Polina Ivanovna was the alias she'd taken up in Dolsk, a nondescript town deep in the territory of Kseniyevsky. For the past four years, Sera's identity had been adopted and discarded with regularity: Marina, Svetlana, Aleksandra, and Feodora—but Polina stuck the longest. *Serafima Mikhailovna* had vanished the same day the empress executed her mother for sedition.

Residing within a region contested by two monarchs was a gamble, but the locals were used to foreigners coming and going. They didn't ask questions.

Best of all, they minded their damn business—for a couple of fugitives, it was ideal.

Sera clicked her tongue at the boy. "Slow down before you hurt yourself."

This was why she kept her distance from the village children: their fidgeting, their antics, their general lack of coordination. But she needed to remain in their good graces, or they wouldn't bring her newspapers with coded messages, so she paid the little bandits far too much silver to do her bidding.

Viktor halted before he reached her. "Polina Ivanovna, what are you doing with that knife?"

"Never mind that. Give it here." She wasn't about to explain herself to someone barely out of swaddling clothes. She slid the weapon back into her belt and dropped a coin into his small, gloved hand. "Don't spend it all on sweets or your mother will ban you from running errands for me," she warned, taking the paper from him.

Viktor grinned, displaying his milk-teeth-gapped smile, which she hoped resulted from childhood rather than the surfeit of confections he'd likely purchased with her money.

Sera carefully unfolded the broadsheet, and her breath caught as the headline blared from the page: *EMPEROR YURI NIKOLAEVICH DURNOV DEAD IN CARRIAGE ACCIDENT. No foul play suspected.*

As she scanned the article, the lack of details regarding the Tumanny monarch's death hinted at censorship. She knew better than to trust the *Blackshore Courier*—every sentence, word, and exclamation point was meticulously edited to present the royal court's version of events. Anna must have sent the newspaper knowing it contained a heavily altered report.

"A letter came for you, too." Viktor handed her the envelope.

Sera tucked it into her pocket, her gaze still glued to the article. She'd read Anna's coded message later.

"What are they saying about this in Dolsk?" she asked the boy.

He scratched his head, dislodging a few snowflakes from his woolen hat, and toed a rock on the snow-covered ground. “Not much,” he said. “But my mama seemed worried.” He looked up at her, concern casting a shadow on his young face. “Should I be scared?”

Sera toyed with a lie—an act of maternal deceit, easily within her capacity.

But, with a sigh and a long pause, she chose honesty. “I’m not sure.”

The alurea took malicious glee in exploiting their rivals’ weaknesses. Those nobles ruled across the continent of Sundyr—all bonded to deities unwillingly caged in their bodies and granted godpower that obliterated empires. Just a few hundred years ago, sixty-eight small nations comprised Sundyr, now absorbed into the holdings of more powerful monarchs. Battles had raged to seize control, leaving behind destruction and ruined lives.

Commoners had no choice but to obey the laws set down by their cruel rulers or face retribution, and every sennight, they paid tribute to their oppressors at local temples.

No matter how fiercely people rebelled, uprisings always failed.

Sera gave Viktor an affectionate pat on the shoulder. “Go home, Vitenka. Comfort your mama.” What else did one say to frightened children? “Erm. Be brave.”

It was perhaps for the best that she was not a mother.

“Am I gonna see you at the temple on Wednesday?”

“Not this Wednesday,” Sera said. She left out the possibility that it might be her last Wednesday in town.

After she saw Viktor off, Sera took Anna’s cryptogram out of her pocket and opened it. Their code was complex, but after four years of running, Sera had learned the cipher by heart. The message was concise and concisely dreadful:

Intel indicates an explosive device. The palace has cracked down on the gossip, but Vitaly Sergeevich has claimed responsibility. He’s not hiding anymore. Thought you should know. — Anna

Sera crumpled the paper in her fist. “Godsdamn it,” she hissed under her breath. “What are you doing, Vitalik?”

Vitaly Sergeyevich Rysakov—her mother Irina’s ruthless and younger second-in-command—had returned to the Blackshore and assassinated the emperor.

Sera tried to ignore the warning bells going off in her head. She remembered the executions they had witnessed together, bodies writhing in agony as they burned in the empress’s godfire.

Vitaly’s brother had been on that execution platform beside Irina, along with every other faithless member in the secret press room raided by the palace sentries. Printing and distributing seditious pamphlets against the alurea was a crime punishable by death—and there was no leniency for the pathetic piece of shit in the rebellion who betrayed his fellow faithless, either. Treason was always paid for in blood. That traitor had named Sera and Vitaly, forcing them to flee the Blackshore.

Now the emperor was dead, and when rulers fell, war followed.

Vitaly was going to get himself killed.

Sera shoved the paper back into her pocket, shaking her head. Revolution was a game of strategy, patience, and intelligence—waiting for the right moment to light the match. She’d watched too many uprisings end with carelessness and stupidity.

That was why Sera’s mother kept secrets from the faithless even into her death: she’d learned how to cage gods in the bodies of commoners—and she’d succeeded. Then she trained an orphaned girl she’d chosen to breach the royal palace and seize the throne.

A girl who was the sole survivor of her village’s destruction, a symbol of the empress’s cruelty.

A girl who understood the motivations of vengeance from a tender age.

Her mind made, Sera unsheathed a blade, lifted her coat's sleeve, and dragged it along her pale arm. She watched her blood drip onto the snow and seep into the soil. She closed her eyes and gritted her teeth as she reached for the dragon that lived in her skin.

“Give me your godpower.”

This time, the god listened—she had spoken in the violent language it required.

A surge of energy coursed through her, and the deity whispered from Sera's mouth in the Exalted Tongue. Green spread beneath the layers of frost—but it wasn't enough. The bastard demanded more. Her injury would heal too quickly, knit back together and mend without scars, a power her zmeya imparted against its will.

It wanted her to suffer.

The dragon stretched within her bones and sank its claws into Sera's wound, opening the gash wide. It never granted power without consequence, would not allow her to heal unless it extracted its price from her flesh. It was a monster, and it did not aid by nature.

Sera's god loved to make her bleed.