

## Firebird

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Hours before, Alok Thule hunted a myth; now a nightmare threatened to engulf him. The irony, of course, did not escape him, for he was a *visionair*, a dreamer, an interpreter for his people, always looking to the skies for signs. Recent events had driven his gaze to the clouds and the stars in search of a clue to understanding the unrest in the world around them, and just on the night when he thought he had found a beacon for his suffering people, an angry mob forced his vision back to a scarred and blackened earth.

With a loud crack, wood cinders shifted on themselves in the darkness before him, and a fleet of bright orange sparks leapt into the air, branching out when the wind caught them. As they floated down a street lit only by a mosaic of dying embers, each fleeing spark in turn flickered and went out. The town's central thoroughfare, now an incinerated corpse, remained empty except for the crowd gathered around Alok.

"What shall we do with him?" yelled one gruff voice. Alok could not locate the speaker in the dark. He did not know these people, and the cover of night only magnified the hostility he felt radiating from them.

"He started the fire! I saw him," accused another.

"Burn him!" A male voice screeched above the others, an owl after its prey.

Other voices picked up the chant. "Burn him! Burn him!"

Alok tried to speak above their roar, "It wasn't me. The fire came from the sky." He dared not reveal all he knew, though. He must have been the only one to see the flaming streak in the sky, the only one to recognize it for what it was—the firebird must be an omen of hope for his people alone.

One of the men behind Alok shouted, "Hold your tongue!"

Another voice, a woman's, sang out, "No, there must be proof. We cannot place an innocent man on the pyre."

Alok watched as a slender, young woman stepped into the torchlight in front of him, turning her back to him to face the sneering throng, her braided black hair swung along the middle of her back like a dark pendulum against a field of royal blue. Though he did not know her name, he recognized her as one of the few townspeople who had visited his people. She had overseen the distribution of water that had been so crucial for the survival of his friends and family.

Voices from the crowd shot back. "None of his kind are innocent."

"We don't want them here."

"Of course, he's guilty."

“This is none of your concern, Ria!”

The last comment stirred the woman in the blue dress. “Of course, it’s my concern, just as it is for any of you who live in this town. We did not ask for these Patharian refugees to descend on us. We all know of the tensions between our peoples. But they did not ask for this either. This one town fled from an erupting volcano in the mountains; they only came our way because all other directions were cut off to them. Many more Patharians live to the south, and we must be careful. If we do not handle this crisis wisely, then we could start a war. It only takes the littlest spark—”

Someone else finished her sentence, “To start a fire.” A tall man stepped forward, his white shirt marked by streaks of black soot marks, a section on his shoulder burned off, exposing the muscular arm beneath. Alok felt the sweat running down the back of his neck, the throbbing in his head.

The tall man continued. “I’ve fought the fire for hours. I’ve seen our homes and shops go up in flames. Our friends and loved ones have been hurt. We are still sorting out whether the fire has claimed anyone’s life. There are some who are not accounted for. Someone must pay for what has happened, and several witnesses say they saw the fire start near this man. He must have fired flaming arrows at the first buildings.”

“Did anyone find a bow on him? Did anyone see him lighting or shooting any arrows?”

“He ran when they found him.”

“Wouldn’t you run too?” Ria defended.

“He could have hidden the bow or even thrown it into the fire.”

“Do you think that likely?”

Alok admired her energy. Why was this woman speaking up for him?

Yet her opponent pulled up his height to tower over her, his voice deeper and louder. “It’s easy for you to defend him. You didn’t lose anything in the fire. My wife and I lost our home—and so have many here.” He swung his left arm widely toward the crowd, evoking several grunts and murmurs of support. “We’ve already heard from three witnesses who say they saw this man lurking around the buildings where the fire started. They said there could have been others involved, but they were only able to catch him.”

“He deserves a trial. We need to investigate the cause of the fire, to uncover evidence before we condemn a man to die.”

“We don’t have time for that.” He looked out at the crowd. “Those refugees are dangerous, and we need to send a swift message to them or they could come back and finish the job. We’ve already lost a third of our town. We can’t afford to lose any more.”

At the moment Ria opened her mouth to speak again, something struck the side of her face and burst, sending wet pulp cascading down her neck. Alok watched in despair as she winced and pulled back in pain.

Shaking his head, the tall man stepped around her to grab Alok by the arm. Suddenly, they were pulling him along, and he lost sight of the woman who had defended him. How badly was Ria hurt? He did not have time to think, for his captors relentlessly pushed him forward. He stumbled several times, and once, he even felt the tip of a boot ram into the back of his right thigh. The attack caught him at the wrong point in his stride, and he fell hard onto the ground, jolting his neck, releasing a splitting pain in his head, to join the pulsing burning running down his leg.

Large hands grabbed under his arms and pulled him to his feet. Marching forward again, Alok wondered if he could make a sudden dash to the side and outrun them. He held no hope any of his people would rescue him, for he had not told anyone, not even his younger sister, when he had left their camp and the misery there, wandering off on his own, looking for relief in the stars. Alone gazing at the constellations, hypnotized by the soothing sounds of crickets, he first spotted the streaking flame in the sky—he did not believe his eyes as they distinguished wings, a body, a head. Was it the omen? Was the myth true?

Pursuing the firebird, he stumbled in the dark and came to the edge of the settlement before he knew it. Then, unexpectedly, the fire swooped toward him in a great ball. Alok ducked reflexively, closing his eyes, feeling the heat along his arms and back as the powerful creature passed over him. When he stood and opened his eyes, the buildings nearby were ablaze. He heard shouting and saw people running at him. This was not his town; these were not his people, so he ran. On his way out of town, someone tackled him from the side and pinned him to the ground, pushing his face into the acrid soil. Others caught up to him and pulled him into town, where they tied him to a post in the dusty ground and made him watch as the townspeople struggled against the spreading inferno.

Their fight was desperate, and several were injured trying to save items from the rapid, destructive blaze. The uncontrolled appetite of the dancing flames finally faltered, though, at a generous gap between homes. Alok heard a man nearby offer a curse against someone in the town who had stubbornly refused to sell the property—a prayer seemed more appropriate. Once the flames receded, Alok witnessed several townspeople hanging their heads, shoulders slumped in exhaustion. When one vigilant youth reminded them of their captive, though, a renewed energy rose in them, and the crowd quickly descended on him, the perfect scapegoat.

Now that the angry mob had passed sentence on him, they forced him east, farther from his people's camp to the southwest. After they escorted him out of town and into a spacious clearing, Alok's attention quickly locked onto a massive circular structure ahead, a ring of

carefully placed stones surrounding a grey pit littered with coal rocks. As his captors pushed him down the gravel-strewn incline toward that amphitheater, he observed several townspeople building a bed of wood at its center, their shuffling feet raising clouds of ash. Smelling the stale, smoky odor, Alok wondered what this place was and what other fires had risen there. His curiosity however died as reality struck—he was approaching swiftly the time of his own burning.



When her guide told her they were nearing the town of Toluca, Solange Bukavu breathed a sigh of relief. This journey had been more difficult than she had originally thought. Ignacio Molina, despite his youth and occasional charm, was distant and distracted. Traveling through long stretches of open fields in the oppressive heat of summer was something she had not done since her youth—no wonder none of the other ambassadors had shown any interest in her assignment—and he had not made the task any easier. She had hoped for conversation; she could at least learn a little bit about the mysterious Order of the Eternal Flame. As they reached their destination, she was unsure she knew any more than when they had started—that monks like Ignacio dressed in black, except for the vibrant red lining the interior of their cloaks and the golden flame embroidered in the center of their chests.

Despite her expectations, the retinue of six soldiers had proved more entertaining, particularly Tafar Wolde, the imposing captain of the guard. During each day of the journey, he rode closely behind her, not offering any conversation unless she initiated it. Rules of respect governed their interaction, and the rhythmic slap of his sword against his saddle troubled her. Yet at the end of that first day, and during every evening after, she discovered Tafar had another side; he turned unexpectedly jovial whenever they sat together for supper.

And that first evening, Tafar had defended her.

“Why did you bring a dog on this mission?” Ignacio asked while setting up the campfire to cook their supper. “And such a small one as that?”

“She’s not small,” Solange returned, running her hand along the back of her brindled Basenji, who had kept pace with her horse’s trot most of the day. Luciku leaned into her hand, enjoying the attention.

“She doesn’t stand higher than my knees.” Ignacio raised his eyebrows.

Solange balked at Ignacio’s insult. She did not go anywhere without Luciku, for her canine companion was more devoted to her than any human being had ever been. How could anyone not warm up to her dog?

“Size seldom proves merit,” Tafar entered the fray, sitting to Solange’s right.

Ignacio frowned. “The dog complicates matters.”

“No one will be able to sneak up on us,” Tafar answered with a large smile.

When Ignacio silently turned away to care for his horse, Solange relaxed and enjoyed the conversation with Tafar, learning more about how he had entered the national guard and risen to the elite troop in the service of the Council of Seven.

Now as their company finally approached Toluca, Tafar was in his proper place as usual, the slap of his sword strangely comforting. Solange glanced down and checked on Luciku, who had proven many times along the journey she had more endurance than Ignacio and some of the other soldiers thought she had. Luciku's ears perked up and her tail wagged when she saw Solange watching her.

"Something's not right," Ignacio said softly.

Immediately looking ahead to where Ignacio led the group—the monk a dark shadow in the failing light—Solange smelled the smoke and felt its presence in the night air. When Ignacio spurred his horse forward, she nodded to Tafar and followed in turn, keeping an ear out for Luciku's howling *barroo*, proof her dog was on the heels of her horse. In a matter of heartbeats, they came into the village from the southeast, spotting the edge of the fire's destruction. Solange watched Ignacio leap off his horse and race to the closest embers. When he reached the blackened shell of a building, its rafters having collapsed onto the remaining stone wall, Ignacio studied the remains, jumping from one corner to the next, following an invisible line into the village. Solange slowly followed, refusing to leave the privileged position of horseback.

She observed that the few—were there not supposed to be more of them?—people in town watched them carefully from a distance. Only those with a special courage would approach them since the soldiers had gathered now in formation around her. Across the way two young ladies showed special attention to Ignacio's investigation, though he appeared oblivious of their attention. After several moments they dashed down the street and disappeared from view, lost on a mission of their own. Ignacio paused at a building on the edge of town, his arm slipping inside his cloak, an expression on his face she could not read. His look betrayed something she could not afford to let him keep secret. She nudged her horse forward.

"What is it? What'd you find?" she asked in an official tone, which came off harsher than she had intended, but didn't he ask for it?

His eyes, shadowed in the dim light, met hers for a brief instant; he offered no explanation. When she saw his gaze shift and focus on something behind her, she twisted in her saddle to locate what captured his attention. She saw the road leading out of town to the east—that was where the people had gathered. Ignacio returned to his horse, grabbed something out of his satchel, and then dashed toward the crowd, his cloak billowing out behind him.

"He's an odd one," Tafar said behind her.

"It's not for you to say, but I'm not going to disagree with you either," she said, pushing her horse into a quick trot as another guard snickered and Tafar grunted his displeasure.

When she reached Ignacio, he was engaged in a conversation with a thin, elderly man, whose relaxed posture suggested he knew the monk. She could not hear what was spoken, but she saw the elderly man point in the direction the crowd was milling. Ignacio immediately disappeared into that throng. With a sigh of exasperation, Solange dismounted.

“Where did you tell Ignacio to go?” she asked the elderly man.

“Are you a friend?” he asked.

Feeling the man expected one answer, she lied, “Yes.” But then softened the lie with something true, “We traveled here together from the capital.”

“Is that your dog?” The man reached to pet Luciku.

“I wouldn’t. There’s too much noise, and she’s nervous.”

He pulled his hand back. “Oh. Well, I’m afraid you’ve caught us at a bad time. They’re about to execute the man who started this fire.”

She felt time was short and said a “thank you” over her shoulder as she jumped into the crowd, ignoring the shouts of caution from Tafar. No one had ever accused her of being slow, but she had never visited this town, and the formation of the crowd was obnoxiously chaotic. By the time she caught sight of Ignacio’s black cloak, he was running toward the center of an amphitheater, maneuvering around men, women, and children. One man tried to grab him, but when the monk turned and glared, the detainer released him.

Solange looked ahead anticipating Ignacio’s trajectory. At the center of the crowd, a tall, muscular man touched a blazing torch to the base of a wooden bench on top of which a man lay on his back, tied down. The scene looked like a funeral pyre, but from the man’s attempts to pull free, it was obvious he was alive. Instantly, the flame circled the bench and began to climb up toward the man. Solange wondered what Ignacio’s plan was. Did he intend to interrupt the town’s justice? What could he do anyway? The fire was about to claim another victim.

When Ignacio reached the pyre, the man who had started the fire stepped forward, yelling at him, but Ignacio nimbly cleared the flames and perched on top of the wooden structure, his feet on either side of the man tied down. Fire ran up the back of his cloak, and wherever it lit, the material glowed like the embers of an old fire. In disbelief Solange watched as Ignacio stood his ground, reaching down at the pouches at his belt, crossing his arms and twisting down into a crouch. As he stood and twisted back into standing position, he pulled his arms free and extended them to release a cloud of white dust, and as that cloud settled, the roaring fire below and the flames on his back stuttered, flickered, and died.

A hush settled over the crowd, and Ignacio took advantage of the moment. “This man is innocent. You know me. You know the Order I represent.” He looked at the man with the torch. “This is my judgement.”

Solange then realized Luciku was licking her hand, yet could not recall when she had started.

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Nursing a headache, she touched the side of her face where the peach had struck her—it still throbbed. She was trying to decide if she was more irate with Brom, the unknown person who had pelted her, or the crowd of people she thought were her friends who had pushed past her. Although she recognized what it was to express an opinion no one shared, Ria Valera found herself struggling to find what she could do to stop this insanity, to prevent a war, to make sure justice was done. Something inside her told her the Patharian man was innocent; she believed him, despite how far-fetched the claim seemed, when he said something else started the fire.

The world was restless; something inexplicable stirred beneath and around them. The earthquakes and the distant volcano eruption which had brought these refugees down on them may have only been the start of something greater. Though Ria could not voice the origin of this feeling, neither could she ignore it.

“Ria!” A young girl’s voice called. “Ria! You’ll never guess who rode into town.”

Two girls ran toward her, and Ria recognized them—she used to care for them for their mother when they were much younger.

“What?” she asked, pushing back the haze of her headache. A wind blew by, a dry, warm wind, offering no relief from the heat of the evening.

“Guess!” the younger one said, a gleam in her eye, holding gleefully to her secret.

Any other time Ria would have engaged in the play, but now was not the time. “I can’t. Please just tell me.”

The girls burst in unison, “Nachito!”

Ria frowned. Had she heard correctly? Why was he here?

“Are you sure?” she asked, but the look in the girls’ eyes already answered her question.

“Ria, we know Nachito. We saw the two of you together enough.”

“We’re not together any more,” Ria quickly corrected.

“So you’re not interested in knowing where he is?” the elder girl teased.

“As a member of the Town Council, I should welcome any guests,” Ria countered, again unable to determine what she felt. One part wanted to avoid him, to leave the past in the past, but a curiosity also grew in her, much to her chagrin. Ignacio always had impeccably irritating timing.

“Is that all?”

“Just leave that to me,” Ria answered.

Still smiling, the girls pointed back into town. “He was investigating the buildings that burned down. And there was a woman and soldiers with him.”

Woman? Who traveled with him? Now, curiosity outweighed the desire to hide. She wanted to see what was going on. If soldiers were with them, then maybe the Council of Seven sent them. For a second she wondered if Ignacio could help.

Grabbing the front of her dress to free her legs, she rushed forward, leaving the girls giggling behind her. By the time she reached the spot the girls mentioned, no one was there, but turning, Ria soon identified the soldiers pushing past the town's residents, heading toward the Fire Circle. Ria tracked a strange woman, skin as dark as the night, dressed in the official green and brown of the capital city, just as she and a strange dog vanished into the crowd.

Her head still thumping, her pulse in her ears, Ria ran as swiftly as she could, ignoring those who called after her, telling her not to bother, for the execution was already under way. She dodged past friends and acquaintances until she finally could see what was going on. She reached the Circle just as Brom lighted the pyre.

When Ignacio vaulted over the fire onto the wooden structure, Ria stopped to witness the flames dancing on his back, his rapid twisting crouch, and the explosive release of the fire-quenching cloud. At the end she breathed again; the rush of air making her light-headed. His speech and subtle challenge of Brom confirmed Ignacio had changed. Ria doubted whether she should speak with him. Would he acknowledge her, or was he so alienated from that former life? They had not parted well.

For a second Ria also watched Brom. Would he challenge Ignacio as he had opposed her? She could see it in Brom's face, but a second later his expression shifted, and he retreated into the crowd, pulling several other men with him. Obviously, the group did not condone the stay of execution, but as the unknown woman and the soldiers approached, they evidently decided resisting would be too costly. Ria wondered what trouble they would stir up next.

In spite of herself she walked steadily forward into the amphitheater, where a few people stood and started to make their way back into town. The majority remained seated, though, as if they expected an encore. Official strangers had not been to Toluca in years, and here with the ambassador and soldiers was one who used to live with them, one who was radically transformed into a "fire monk," as the people called them out of official company. Though they would scarcely admit it, the town feared the monastic order, for Tolucans offered little charity to those they could not understand—Ria knew that hostility firsthand.

No one detained her. Most of the town knew of her past with him. Ignoring the feeling those still present were watching her, Ria studied the group of outsiders. One of the soldiers spotted her first; he watched her warily, but made no other motion. Would Ignacio remember her? Even as he finally looked her way, surveying the crowd, his face displayed no sign of recognition, not until his head twisted back and his eyes locked on her.

No smile. No frown. What did that mean? He was so infuriatingly impossible to read.



After a brief word to the woman in green, Ignacio stepped forward. Ria paused and let him walk the rest of the way toward her. He pulled back his hood to reveal dark, curly hair, the reddish tones of his skin, the face she once had known so well, but now the hints of creases in his forehead and the touch of melancholy in his eyes, despite the gentle smile on his lips, betrayed the years and the experiences that now separated them.

He spoke first. “Ria?”

“Nachito—Sorry, Ignacio.”

He raised an eyebrow. Confound his condescension. She invoked a mocking tone. “So you had to make a scene your first time back?”

“How else would I come home? Isn’t this what everyone expects of a fire monk? I didn’t want to disappoint the crowd.”

“Since when do you care what others think? And I think you did disappoint—they had gathered to see this man burned to death.”

“Oh, that was an oversight on my part. I can’t imagine what they’ll be saying about my show. I can’t let too many bad reviews out; it could wreck my reputation and any future displays in other towns.” His eyes darted around the crowd in a feigned worried look.

Tiring of the sarcasm, Ria turned serious. “I assume you are here to check on the refugees? Did the Seven send you?”

“They sent Solange. I was added as an afterthought when my teacher grew ill.”

“Thank you for saving him.” She nodded toward the Patharian man, who was engaged in conversation with the woman named Solange. “I—” she caught herself. She was not proud of her failure to stop the crowd; she would not tell him.

“I’m slipping. I didn’t make it in time to save him from burning. His right hand will hurt for some time.”

“You saved him from an unjust death.”

“So you know?” His eyes, sharp and intense, studied her.

Suddenly, he was touching her face, the spot where she had been hit earlier; she pulled back instinctively, but the impression of his touch lingered.

“Are you okay?” His voice softened slightly.

Was that concern? It was so difficult to tell. She fought the impulse to confide in him. “We had a fire. Several people got hurt putting it out.”

“That was no ordinary fire.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“The pattern of destruction is unusual, radiating out from a line, almost as if the fire swooped from above over that edge of the village.”

She nodded again to the Patharian. “He said the fire came from the sky.” Was Ignacio thinking about the ancient myth? He had often spoken of it with her when they were younger. But how could it be true?

Ignacio continued, though, in another direction. “Why did the others blame this man?”

“They found him near the fire.”

“How has the refugee situation been?”

Though she felt he was interrogating her, Ria played along. “Many in the town are scared because the Patharians are draining our limited water supply. I modified our rationing plan—”

“You’ve had to shoulder that job?”

“No one else seemed to want it. And I didn’t know it also meant I would become the central advocate for the refugees.”

“So the town pinned their frustration on this man.” His tone was a declaration, not a question.

“I tried to tell them they had no evidence, that they needed to place him in the jail until he could have a proper trial.”

“So you stood up against the mob?” His eyes gleamed, a slight smile lurked at the edges of his mouth.

“Yes, that’s how I got this.” She saw her hand rise to her face, and she secretly cursed herself—why did she tell him?

“You’ve changed, Ria.” The smile had vanished, shrouded by a sadness she could not identify.

“So have—”

At that moment a commotion in the crowd caught her attention, and she turned to see Anna, who served on the Town Council with her, running wildly, shouting, “Come quickly. They’ve attacked the refugee camp!”

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As Ria turned, Ignacio admired the shape of her neck and the wisps of dark hair that had escaped her braid and clung damply against her temples. The blue dress accented the red-tan tones of her complexion. Though he knew such sensations were dangerous, he felt drawn to her. He had tried to prepare for seeing her again, but all plans melted in the immediacy of her presence. He could only hide behind his sarcasm and official role.

As Anna’s words began to sink in, he cursed. “Brom! We should have held him.”

“He wasn’t the only one,” Ria responded. “Brom didn’t throw the peach at me.”

He heard Solange’s voice behind him. “We need to find them now!” He watched as the soldiers gathered in formation, pausing for direction.

“Ria, can you lead them there?”

Ria's eyes darted from him to the soldiers, and then she stepped close to him, whispering, "Do you think it was a firebird?"

"How could that be?" he asked reflexively. Ria always put the pieces together faster than anyone else in this town; that was one of the things he had loved about her, but he was not ready yet to tell her what he had found in the embers at the edge of town.

"You know something you're not telling me." Frowning, she stepped back and called to the soldiers, "This way. Follow me!"

After glancing toward Solange, who nodded, the soldiers fell in behind Ria, marching back to the charred village.

Now it was obvious. Ignacio had been too confident, thinking that stopping the fire was enough. He had let her distract him. His master had given him one task, to assist with the refugee situation, to cushion the powder keg, to avert a war. If the villagers had turned on the refugees in a state of frenzy, such action could spark a flame—and eventually a wildfire.

Solange suddenly was at his side with the Patharian. Recognizing the question in her eyes, Ignacio nodded he would take charge of the man. As soon as she received his answer, she dashed off after her soldiers.

Ignacio saw the Patharian grimace. The wounded man needed rest, but they needed him to help bring order to this chaos.

"Are you up for this?" Ignacio asked.

The man nodded. "My name is Alok. I am in your debt."

"Ignacio. And don't thank me yet. We need to locate your people now."

Ignacio let Alok take the lead back into town. Some in the crowd realized the spectacle had shifted to the other side of the village and were pushing to make their way to the refugee camp. Rushing along the congested street, Ignacio noticed several looks of recognition, people he knew from his youth, ones he had not seen in seven years. Some smiled, but most frowned, unable or unwilling to hide their suspicion. Ignacio did not expect otherwise from this isolated town. He had left this life for the capital city and a cosmopolitan world many here had never seen and never wanted to see. Now, most of those who watched him pass would no longer claim him as one of them, but that did not bother Ignacio in the least.

His attention was focused on a larger matter. In that last conversation before Ignacio had joined Solange's entourage, Master Estrada—his teacher and the one the Council of Seven had chosen for this trip, but who had fallen ill the night before—had given him a singular task, to prevent a war. During the entire trek there, Ignacio had wondered how his little hometown could be the source of such trouble? The wider world was now watching it, to see how its people would respond in a time of crisis. As he ran with Alok, he noticed again the man was shorter, his legs

and arms more sinewy, his skin paler and yellower than those in the town, just enough difference for him and the other Patharians to stand out.

As they passed the burned houses and shops, Ignacio felt the pain again. He knew the heartbreak such destruction would cause many in the town. Most would not have the resources to bounce back, particularly with the current drought squeezing the life out of this region. When the farmers hurt, the market would too.

Ignacio noticed the smoke about the time Alok suddenly picked up speed. There were noises ahead, yelling and the thumps of various metal and wooden objects hitting each other. As they drew closer to the chaos ahead, Ignacio also smelled burnt flesh.

He caught sight of Solange, her sword drawn; she paced back and forth at the edge, the captain of the guard close at her side. Two of the other soldiers, swords also drawn, were nearby pushing back a group of men with torches and pitchforks. Ignacio looked to Alok, who was already circling around this group; he jumped to follow.

As they moved out into the wider field, Ignacio saw the bodies lying on the scorched ground. He heard Alok yell something he could not understand and saw him run over to a spot where a woman was crouched over a smaller form lying on her side. The woman was Ria, and she pulled back as Alok pushed in.

“Gerel? I’m here,” Alok cried as he held the smaller form, a girl badly burned on her arms and torso, the charred marks up her neck kissing her cheek. Her eyes were closed, her face tight in pain.

When Ignacio looked to Ria, she shook her head, tears in her eyes.

Alok glanced up. “Can you do anything for my sister?”

What did Alok know? The Patharian had studied the charred buildings too. Ignacio struggled. He had to keep the secret. He did not know if it would even work—those were old myths that spoke about healing powers. The girl was so badly burned, though; she was in pain, and the desperation in Alok’s eyes pulled at Ignacio. He had to risk it.

He reached inside an inner fold in his cloak, felt the heat in his hand, and pulled it out, carefully palming it so that only those nearby could see. It stretched from his hand halfway up his arm, a glowing ember in feather form. Ria’s eyes opened in wonder, and Alok watched in expectation. Ignacio knelt, reached out, and placed his hand on her shoulder, the feather coming in direct contact with her skin. The girl, who had been completely still, suddenly twisted and groaned as a whisper of a flame flicked out from the feather, up her neck, across her chest, and down her arms. As suddenly as it appeared, the flame vanished. Ignacio gasped, then pulled his hand back and quickly thrust it into his cloak. Though he knew fire, he had never seen a flame like this one.

Alok held the girl close as the skin, twisted and charred, fell off like scales, revealing a raw pink new skin beneath. Her breathing grew stronger, and she turned her face into Alok's chest.

"Thank you," the Patharian said, looking Ignacio directly in the eyes.

He felt Ria studying him. He smiled at her, raising his eyebrows, shrugging his shoulders. "I found it in the ashes at the end of town. That's how I knew he was innocent."

"Why didn't you explain to the crowd?"

"I think you know."

"Why didn't you tell me?" she asked.

Before he answered Ria's question, Ignacio realized someone was calling his name; he turned and saw Solange rushing toward him. He saw the nervous energy in her face.

"The villagers had already hurt several of the refugees by the time we got here, driving them back with fire. A few Patharians stood their ground and were locked in combat with the villagers. My soldiers engaged before I could rein them back. The villagers resisted, and this is the mess we have. I'm not certain what will come of it. I don't know what the Seven will say."

"It's just what the Seven wanted," Tafar, the captain of the guard, interrupted in a deep voice over her shoulder. "They wanted us to start a war. Sorry, Ambassador."

Before Ignacio comprehended the words, he heard Solange cry out, crumpling to the ground. He moved to grab her, but saw Tafar stepping forward, holding up a dagger, red with blood. Instinctively reaching for the pouches at his waist, Ignacio already had his hands full of fire powder before he realized Tafar had stopped. Alok was standing next to him, a staff in his hand.

"If it had been my choice, then you would be dead too, monk." Tafar sneered. "But someone else has plans for you. Maybe one day you'll wish I had ignored orders." Tafar bit down on something, and a black liquid spilled over his bottom lip. "But who will believe your word when news of this chaos reaches the capital—when the ambassador and the soldiers sent with her all died?" Tafar winced. "But you will not take me." Tafar tossed a glittery powder in the air above him and a blue fire flashed violently, rapidly consuming the captain of the guard.

As Tafar fell to the ground, eerily silent, Ignacio jumped to Solange. She was still breathing, but her blood stained her clothes and the ground below. After rolling Solange onto her side, pulling her blouse free from her belt, exposing the terrible slit in her back, Ignacio reached again for the firebird feather and carefully placed it on the wound. Small red and yellow flames lit the area around his hand; the heat burned his palm, but Ignacio held it in place until the fire ceased. It took longer this time than with Gerel. Was the feather's power draining? When he finally pulled it back, flecks of black, dried blood dropped to the sides, revealing cauterized flesh.

“The wound’s gone!” Ria gasped, leaning in beside him.

Ignacio checked the ambassador’s pulse and breathing. Her face still twisted in pain gradually relaxed as Luciku, who had pushed in, started licking her cheek. Ignacio prayed Solange would make it. He was in new territory. The firebird was a myth, but here twice this evening, he had seen power he had never seen before.

Ignacio nodded to Ria. “Would you watch her?”

“Yes.” She smiled. He was glad she was there; he had one person he could trust.

Then, he turned to Tafari’s corpse. It was so badly burned. Would the feather bring life to this charred skeleton? Was its healing power weakening? Were there not others out on the battlefield that deserved healing more? Recognizing death when he saw it, Ignacio chose not to reach for the feather. What had possessed this captain of the guard? Ignacio had identified the poison Tafari had taken to ease any pain and the blue flame that had killed him—and the dark magic behind both. Tafari had spoken of the Council of Seven’s intentions, but fire magic suggested someone from Ignacio’s order. Who really was behind this betrayal?

Ignacio felt Alok standing next to him and turned to speak with him. “He was right. Dead soldiers magnify this horror. The politicians of my country will be able to twist the reports of this event to their benefit.”

“But you and I can give witness to the soldier’s declaration,” Alok offered.

“I doubt our voices will matter. There is too much death here.”

“The flame burns before it gives life. Is that not so?” Alok intoned.

Ignacio doubted his ears again. This man, a stranger, a Patharian, was quoting one of the central teachings of the Order of the Eternal Flame. Ignacio looked around them—while Ria cared for Solange, and Gerel rested, others still fought in the distance. And Alok, the one who most deserved to be angry at the chaos around them, seemed to have a vision of where to go next. Ignacio pulled the feather again from his cloak, holding it up between them.

Perhaps, there was hope for their peoples. If war were to break out, it would bring much suffering, much destruction, much death, yet Ignacio somehow dared to hope they could shoulder the nightmare, because in this evening when fire had reduced much of the town to ember, when misunderstandings and racial tensions had led to senseless violence, myth had become fact—firebirds existed, and their feathers brought healing. The omen brought him hope even as the world threatened to burn around them.