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KIKA HATZOPOULOU

THREADS

THAT

BIND



THREADS THAT BIND

KIKA HATZOPOULOU





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CONTENTS

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Part I: One to Weave](#)

[Prologue: Snap](#)

[Chapter I: Fraying](#)

[Chapter II: A Wraith](#)

[Chapter III: The Right Thing to Do](#)

[Chapter IV: A Throne Gilded with Knocked-Out Teeth](#)

[Chapter V: Half a Lie](#)

[Chapter VI: Creature of Curiosity](#)

[Chapter VII: Occasionally](#)

[Chapter VIII: Red](#)

[Chapter IX: Reckless](#)

[Chapter X: A Cautionary Tale](#)

[Chapter XI: Chimerini](#)

[Chapter XII: Play the Part](#)

[Part II: One to Draw](#)

[Chapter XIII: We Ora Sisters](#)

[Chapter XIV: The House of Nine](#)

[Chapter XV: And the World Ends](#)

[Chapter XVI: Something Sharp and Serrated](#)

[Chapter XVII: A Delight](#)

[Chapter XVIII: You, Mostly](#)

[Chapter XIX: The Neo-Monsoon](#)

[Chapter XX: What You Had To](#)

[Chapter XXI: His Gaze Was a Warning](#)

[Chapter XXII: Wait It Out](#)

[Chapter XXIII: Crepes](#)

[Chapter XXIV: The Shape and Timbre of It](#)

[Chapter XXV: An Acute Sense of Discomfort](#)

[Chapter XXVI: Brass Gleamed](#)

[Chapter XXVII: Yours to Give and Yours to Take](#)

[Chapter XXVIII: Black Wings Were Stitched](#)

[Chapter XXIX: Red Rain](#)

[Chapter XXX: Dying Soldiers](#)

[Part III: One to Cut](#)

[Chapter XXXI: An Exposé](#)

[Chapter XXXII: Your Penance](#)

[Chapter XXXIII: Gods-Damned Reckoning](#)

[Chapter XXXIV: The Whip Is Death](#)

[Chapter XXXV: Endless Shades of Gray](#)

[Chapter XXXVI: Over His Heart](#)

[*Acknowledgments*](#)

[*About the Author*](#)

TO GEORGE AND MY FAMILY,
OURS ARE THE THREADS THAT BIND

~ PART I ~

ONE TO WEAVE

PROLOGUE

SNAP

THE STREETCAR SLICED ahead inches above the tidewater. As it came to a stop before the station, the cables groaned with the weight of the overpacked carriage. Passengers twisted their heads to glower up at them. Just the other day, a cable had snapped over at Sage Street, emptying passengers into the malformed canal. Three had ended up in the hospital; the bay water was cruelly cold, even this close to summer.

The old lady in the back of the streetcar twirled her liver-spotted fingers over her chest, as if tying an invisible knot. She wasn't moira-born, held no true substance between her fingers but air. It was a common gesture, meant to ward off the youngest sister of the Moirae, the goddess of Fate who decides when a life-thread is to be cut.

Knot it once, the saying went, and she will know you're still fighting.

In the Silts, people added a second verse: *Knot it a thousand times, and she will still cut it.*

The old lady wasn't from the Silts. She wore a fur-lined coat, pristine and unpatched, and her gray hair was styled in upper-class fashion, braided and pinned at her nape. But her hairpins were missing the jade stones that should have decorated them, dull bronze shells left in their absence.

The cables squealed in farewell when the streetcar took off. The old lady waited for the passengers to clear the station, then started over the bridge, tugging a shopping cart behind her, its wheels echoing piercingly over every

dent on the bridge. The streets were empty, yet she glanced at every shifting shadow and fleeting sound.

Her husband, who'd been twenty years older and enjoyed frightening his guileless wife, had told her something foul swam the flooded streets of the city of Alante at night. It hid in girls' shadows, he taunted, curled around their ankles, and never, ever let go. The woman had buried him a long time ago. She rarely thought about him nowadays but had begun to think of the foul monster daily. She could swear she felt it. A shackle around her ankle, dragging behind her.

How she wished to be moira-born, to feel the threads of life solid and whole in her fingers. She quickened her step, eager to be safe at home: nestled in blankets on her armchair, spirit-laced tea in hand, the latest episode of her favorite drama playing on the radio.

It must have already started; when she slipped into her apartment, she went straight for the radio, filling the room with the familiar voices of the cast, then began putting away her meager groceries—chamomile tea, a packet of cheese crackers, and a discounted jar of dried figs—when she suddenly sensed the impress of a body moving through air.

A hand clasped her mouth. The jar slipped from her fingers, clattering to the floor. She struggled to get free, kicking, elbowing, scratching blindly at her assailant. Her bun came undone, white wisps of hair floating across her vision, the heels of her boots became sticky with crushed figs. On the other side of the wall, a neighbor called her name in concern.

“Don't worry,” they whispered in her ear—she couldn't tell if it was a person or a shadow-shrouded monster—“this is not the end.”

If the woman had gotten her wish, if she had been moira-born, she would have felt them plucking her life-thread from the tangle of her other threads. She'd have watched them trace her life-thread up, where it stretched toward the ceiling, disappearing into the sky above. She'd have seen them take one of their own threads, stretching it between two fingers, silver and sharp as steel.

But the woman only heard:

SNAP!

And the thread was cut.

CHAPTER I

FRAYING

IO STOOD AT the edge of the roof, trying to convince herself to take the first step.

She had explained it a thousand times: it wasn't heights she was afraid of, but rather . . . edges. She had no problem riding the trolley, she could tap-dance across terraces, but she would have to halt, take a few deep breaths, and mentally coax herself in order to cross a hanging bridge.

"Little idiot," her sister Thais would say when Io was younger. "You're moira-born. You can see the threads of Fate. Do you see your life-thread fraying anytime soon?"

Sharing a knowing look, Thais and their other sister, Ava, would then tackle Io to the ground. All three of them wrestled, limbs tangled and grins feral, until Io admitted defeat. Ava would draw Io's life-thread out and give it a couple of tugs. It stretched like a chain of silver, and shone just as bright.

"Look at that," Thais would chide. "Strong as ever."

"She likes being afraid," Ava would chuckle. "So that she has a reason to do nothing."

And young Io would whine every time, "I do *not*!"

How she hated to whine. It was their fault: they treated her like a child, so like a child she behaved. The girls' parents, before their deaths, had worked at the Neraida Plains out of the city, leaving their daughters to care for themselves from a young age. Thais, the oldest, took on the role of warden, cleaning and cooking and managing their money, while Ava, two years

younger, busied herself with fun, inventing games to occupy their time and reading people's fortunes for a little extra cash. And so Io, the youngest, born six years after Ava, became the baby, looked after and teased. *One soul split in three bodies*, they whispered conspiratorially, heads huddled together in their shared bed.

Of course, that was years ago. Before Thais left town, before everything changed.

Io stepped carefully onto the bridge. It bounced under her weight, groaning with every step. Not really designed for humans, this bridge. It was a long, thin strip of metal built specifically for cats, to allow them a way to roam the city during the flooded high tides—the city's master plan to curb the growing population of rodents that carried diseases through the streets.

The problem with these cat bridges was that they had no railings. *Cats don't lose their balance*, the city officials declared. But that wasn't true; cats could slip and fall like any other creature—they just tended to land on their feet. Io thought the whole thing was counterintuitive; there was nothing to land on under the bridges, only murky tidewater, which, as already established, cats hate.

There should have been railings. There weren't. A statement that pretty much summed up the Sunken City of Alante, in Io's opinion. Needs were never met. People demanded, were denied, and learned to make do with what they had.

Io had no railings, but she had fear, lots of it. She wrapped it around her, clutched tight like a shield. Here's what her sisters never grasped: fear didn't numb you. It made you cautious, alert. Io was always, *always* alert. That was why she excelled at this job. She walked, with small, methodical steps, across the bridge, puffing her cheeks out in relief when she stood on solid ground again.

The roof hatch of the abandoned theater had been boarded up haphazardly; Io slipped through with ease. Mold and rot hit her nostrils as she followed the stairs down, a hand on the wall to guide her through the heavy darkness. Moonlight silvered the grand hall. The planks of the stage

were bloated with humidity, and the rest of the theater, all two thousand seats, was completely submerged in water, leaving only dark impressions. She pulled her scarf over her nose and made her way around the gallery to the theater balconies, veering toward the middle one, which had collapsed years ago, bringing the wall down with it.

It was an ugly sight: wood and wires and cement hanging like the entrails of a gutted beast. But the view beyond it was nice. The ripped-out balcony of the Beak Street Theater was one of the few places in the Silts where you had an unobstructed view of all three moons. Pandia, the biggest and brightest; Nemea, traveling the bottom of the horizon; and Ersa, which rose and set in a matter of hours. Only Ersa was up now, bathing the world in her milky pink light. The dew-covered wallpaper glazed rosy, the water on the streets a soft cherry. It made the city, flooded to the brim with the night tide, almost beautiful. One day, Io would save enough for a camera and immortalize the otherworldly sight.

In the apartment building across from the theater, the light in the far-left window of the third floor flickered on. Io tore her gaze away from the moon and put her spectacles on. Sure enough, it was the very apartment she had been hired to watch. A figure moved inside—maybe two? She slid down and grounded her palms on the splintered wood of the balcony. *Before you slip into the Quilt, make sure you're safe*, Thais used to instruct. *We don't want you walking off a rooftop, do we?*

Io blinked and the Quilt appeared, a jumble of threads laid over the physical world. Only moira-born, descendants of the goddesses of Fate, could see the lines of silver that sprouted from every person, connecting them to the things they loved most in the world. Io focused on the apartment on the third floor. In the Quilt, she saw beyond brick and wood, straight to the two people in the apartment. Dozens of threads emerged from their bodies, linking them to the many different places, things, and people they loved. One of the brightest threads connected the two figures together, pulsing vividly, the kind of luster that consumed everything. *The singular brilliance of a love-thread*, in Ava's moonstruck words.

The singular tedium of a pain in the neck, more likely. A sigh escaped Io's lips. Why was it always cheating? Why couldn't it be a weird hobby or a late-night class for once, something that wouldn't crush her clients' souls? Io could picture it clearly: tomorrow, her client, Isidora Magnussen, would sit at the table farthest back in the café on Sage Street, her coat wrung like a dish towel in her hands, and Io would have to tell her, *Yes, your husband did go to the apartment he supposedly sold three weeks ago. Yes, he had company.* Then the hardest part would come: *Does he love her?* Any other private detective could shrug and say, *How would I know?*

But Io was different. Io was moira-born. It was why clients chose her; they didn't just want to know if their loved ones were cheating or gambling or drinking. They wanted to know the secrets that only the Quilt could reveal: if their spouses loved cheating and gambling and drinking more than they loved *them*.

And Io would have to tell her. *I'm sorry, Mrs. Magnussen. Their thread is so bright I couldn't stand to look at it for more than two seconds. It means your husband's in love with his mistress. It means I want to slip through a hole in the café floor and never come out.* That was what put a roof over Io's head and food on the plate: breaking people's hearts.

She watched the two figures a while longer, just to be sure. She made out no bodies in the Quilt, only the threads, but there was no mistaking it: the couple came together, silver interweaving in a slow embrace. Io's cheeks heated—she glanced away.

Something caught her attention. Close to the couple, on the third floor of the apartment building. It was a person, but also . . . not.

The un-person had only one thread. People loved in multitudes; they got attached to others, to places, to objects, to ideas. The average person's thread count was fifteen. Newborn infants had the fewest: their life-thread, a thread to their mother, and a thread to food—the last two usually one and the same. This person, however, standing in what must be the apartment building hallway, had a single thread. On its own, that was improbable, but not impossible.

What was impossible was that the thread was severed. It came out of the person's chest on one end, and the other just flopped limp to the floor, where it frayed into nothing. Threads *connected*—there was no such thing as a one-ended thread.

And worst of all, the severed thread was tilted at an unnatural angle, like the person was gripping it in both fists. Stretched tight and sharp, as though meant to cut someone else's threads. This single-threaded person, this impossibility, was a cutter. Io knew, because Io was a cutter, too.

The cutter was edging toward the lovers' apartment, their lone thread a raised weapon. Io's shoulders tensed. Her breath caught in her lungs.

Little idiot, her sister berated in Io's mind.

She breathed out and ran.



The apartment door had been left ajar.

Her heart pounded against her chest as she stepped inside. There was a long corridor with three open doors, all sheltering darkness. Io had dropped the Quilt to focus on getting to the building, but now she pulled it back up. In the second room down the corridor: the cutter and their single thread, gripped between their hands. A separate bundle of threads cowering in the corner.

Io could taste her terror in her mouth, sharp and sour. Her steps felt slow and lagging, as though she were underwater. Her fingers snatched up one of her own threads—it didn't matter which right now—and wrapped it around her index finger and thumb. Only a thread could cut another thread. If this person was armed, Io would be, too.

The apartment was carpeted, muffling the sounds of her footfalls. A mirror hung in the hallway with a narrow table beneath, full of little bottles of cosmetics. In the reflection, a woman stood in the middle of the living room, gray hair coming undone from a braided bun at her nape, waist jutting

forward unnaturally. Her single thread tumbled from her fingers to the floor, its frayed end curling around her ankle like a pet snake.

Io couldn't comprehend what she was seeing. Up close, this thread had the brilliant luster of a life-thread, the most important of a person's threads, a connection to life itself. Normally, life-threads shot up into the sky, disappearing among the clouds. But this one flopped on the floor, unconnected, monstrous in its wrongness.

This woman should be dead.

Io noticed the body on the floor. She recognized him instantly—Mrs. Magnussen had shown her their wedding photos. He wore nothing but a pair of striped boxers, his neck bent unnaturally. Ersa painted his naked flesh in a lively pink, but it was a lie. No threads in the Quilt. The body was a corpse. Rattling breaths drew her attention farther into the room, where a woman in lingerie was hiding behind an armchair, sobbing quietly into her knees. It took Io a moment to place that white-blond hair: Mr. Magnussen's assistant. She had spotted them together this morning, having a smoke in the street outside their office. At the time, it had looked like innocent chitchat. Now it was evident she was his secret paramour.

The old woman with the abnormal thread stood still as a statue, surveying the room over her nose. In Ersa's moonlight, her silver hair seemed dipped in rosebuds. Io should go. She should backtrack to the front door, scream the whole building awake, find some way to get the old woman away from the assistant.

Move, she begged herself. She drew in a deep breath.

In the silence, her sharp inhale was a gunshot. The woman slanted her neck; their eyes locked in the mirror.

"There are crimes," the old woman said, removed as if in a trance, "that cannot go unpunished. I will rise from the ashes a daughter of flame."

And before Io could react, the old woman rushed at her, a whirlwind of white hair and sharp bones. Their bodies collided; Io fell on her back. The woman was on her, thrashing with no thought or reason, scratching at Io's

face and chest. Io put her arms up and tried to kick the woman off her, striking the wall instead.

At the loud sound, the old woman stopped altogether and gazed down at Io. Or rather, at the thread between Io's thumb and index finger. "What a pretty thread. Little moira-born," she rasped. "I see you. I see your crimes, too."

Io had a second to think—*What crimes?*

To shudder—*Which crimes?*

To panic—*I have committed so many.*

Then the old woman was hammering her again with jagged fingernails. Pain stung Io's cheek and neck, jolting her out of her shock. She grabbed the first thing she saw, the woman's hair, and pulled. With a fiendish scream, the woman dropped away. In seconds, Io was up, running toward the open door. The woman launched after Io, bumping into the walls.

"Hide!" Io screamed over her shoulder at the crying assistant, hoping she would obey.

The moment she crossed the door, Io started shouting for help, glancing back at the maniacal creature coming after her. It *moved* like a creature, scurrying on all fours and lashing out with crooked fingers. And the thread, that terrible limp life-thread, was still in her hand, a weapon ready to strike.

"Help me, dammit," Io screamed, battering both fists on a door.

The knock cost her; in a flash, the woman had caught up. Her fingers latched on to Io's trouser leg. Io went down with a thud, landing hard on her palms and knees. She twisted and saw, in terror, that one of her threads was in the woman's right hand.

And then a door burst open, spilling light into the hall. A tall, dark-skinned man screamed at them in a foreign language—Kurkz?

The old woman over Io paused.

That was all Io needed. A pause. A moment. A breath.

She pulled her knee in and kicked the woman's jaw, hard. The creature flew back in an arc. Io scrambled away, putting distance between her and those insidious fingers. She straightened when her back hit the wall at the

end of the corridor, cool air coming through the tall open window behind her.

Other residents emerged from their apartments. The Kurkz man was marching toward them. Io wanted to motion him to stay away, to call for help, but why wasn't her voice working—

Suddenly, the woman filled Io's sight, lunging for her, the severed life-thread a rope of silver in her left fist. Close, so close that Io felt wisps of hair on her face just before she stepped aside from the open window. The woman noticed it too late; she tried to stop, but momentum shoved her forward. Her legs smacked on the window ledge, her waist pitched forward, and she tipped, head over heels, out the window.

There was a distant splash as she hit the tidewater flooding the streets. Io's breath became shallow, as though her lungs were constricted to half their size. Her hands were numb, one holding the window frame, the other closed around the random thread of her own that she had grabbed to protect herself.

She didn't move when the Kurkz man shook her shoulders, when he leaned out the window and announced the woman was gone. She stood there, wheezing, and slowly, very slowly, the world came back into focus: the people emerging from their apartments, their robes and socks, their tousled hair, their languages.

She was still in the same spot, back to the wall, fists clenched, when she felt a vibration in her chest. One of her threads was pulsating; had the old woman harmed it? Io's body tensed, bubbling with panic—she had no energy left for another fight.

The thread stretched taut, leading straight down the corridor, into the chest of the young man who had just come running up the stairs. Broad shouldered and brown skinned, with brass knuckles on his right fist. He glanced the other way, then this way, and saw her. Io got the sense he recognized her, his eyebrows dipping low over his dark eyes.

“Where'd she go?” he asked.

Io jerked her chin out the window. He turned and left, taking her thread with him. Io had never seen him before, but she knew who he was all the same.

Her fate-thread.

The boy she was destined to love.