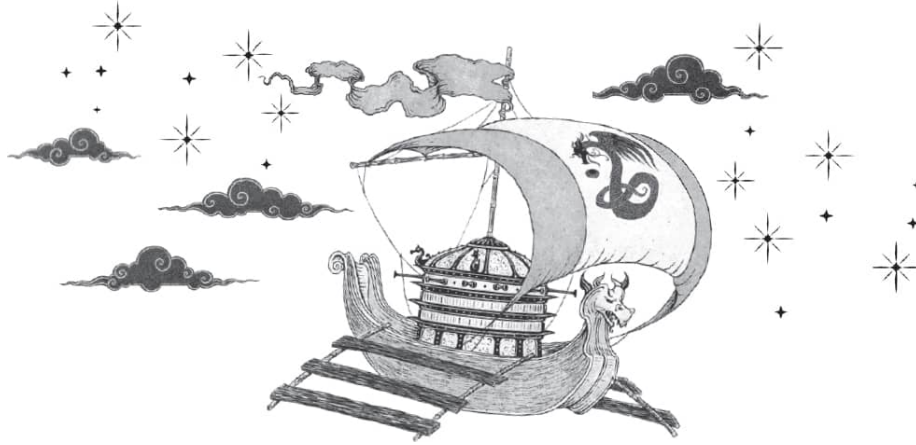




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Thea Guanzon


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Dedication

To everyone who, honk-honk, loves the library

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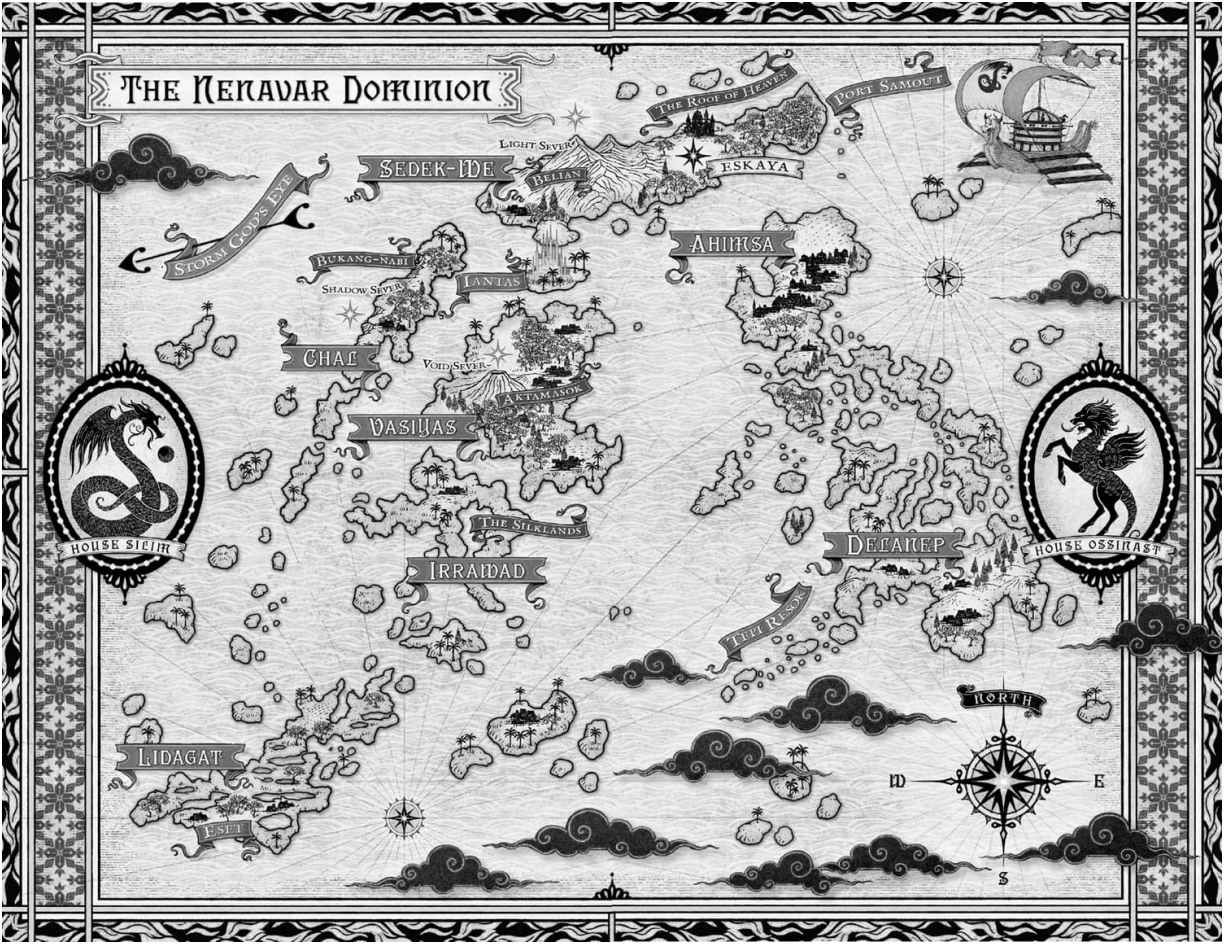
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Maps





PART I





CHAPTER ONE

A breeze that spoke of snowmelt in the Highlands tumbled across the barren plains and came whistling in through the lone window of the Regent's private hall. It crashed against the swirling plumes of shadow magic that drifted from stone to stone and was swallowed up by them, vanishing along with the daylight—everywhere save for one bright corner, where the sariman lay in a pool of sunbeams, pinned to the table by leather-gloved hands.

The bird struggled fitfully in the grip of its three captors, issuing a plaintive warble from its twisted golden beak. Its eyes went as round as copper pieces when a fourth Enchanter approached with a glass-barreled syringe, the cold glint of the hollow steel needle emerging from the darkness as its wielder walked into the nullification field.

Gaheris's Enchanters looked even more distressed than the sariman. It was no easy thing to feel one's magic drain away, to suddenly have a gap in the soul where the aether used to be. Even from where he stood at a safe distance, before his father's throne, Alaric's veins crawled with a memory so visceral that his gauntleted fingers twitched against the urge to open the Shadowgate, just to check if he still could.

"Cursed beast spends its every waking moment singing." The growl from the dagger-shaped throne threaded through the sariman's melodious wails. "Even if your time in Nenavar provided no clues as to how its traits can be utilized, did you at least learn how to make it shut up?"

Alaric thought of the amplifying configuration, the circle of wires and metalglass jars laid out on the Roof of Heaven's marble tiles. The molten cores of ruby blood suspended in sapphire rain magic.

He shook his head.

"Why did I even bother to ask?" The bitter disappointment on Gaheris's face, riddled with lines and scars and fissures, was much too clear. "You

sailed southeast and discovered nothing. What is the *point* of you, Emperor?”

The sariman’s song took on a higher pitch as the needle plunged into its jugular. It was a sound like a fistful of iron nails raked along porcelain, magnified seven times over, clawing at the pit of Alaric’s stomach. But he couldn’t let on that it affected him. Not in front of Gaheris.

The Regent looked like he’d aged a decade in the ten days since Kesath’s imperial delegation returned from Nenavar and the bird was brought to him by Commodore Mathire. He was thinner and more haggard, deep circles carved into the weathered skin under the gray eyes that were so much like Alaric’s own.

“Father, if the bird’s singing keeps you up,” Alaric ventured, aware that Gaheris took the sariman everywhere he went, “perhaps it can stay in this hall when you retire for the night.”

“So that every loose-lipped scullery maid and dim-witted stable boy in the Citadel can blather on about this priceless advantage that we now possess?” Gaheris struck the armrest of his throne, and the tendrils of shadow surrounding him flared ever higher, fueled by his wrath. His paranoia. “You spout nonsense about my health when we should be discussing *your wife*.”

Spooked by the Regent’s outburst, the Enchanters hurried through the rest of their task, transferring the syringeful of sariman blood into a corked vial, applying herbal disinfectant to the extraction site, and ushering the beast back into its ornamental brass cage. They bowed to Gaheris, and then to Alaric, before fleeing the hall, the Shadowgate nipping at their heels.

“Attend to me, my son,” Gaheris rumbled once he and Alaric were alone. “After the Moonless Dark, the Lightweaver’s magic will have served its purpose. There will likewise be no further need for this pretense at peace with Nenavar. We must strike quickly to bring those islands into the Night Empire’s fold. Therefore, once you and your wife have stopped the Void Sever, you will bring her here—under the guise of the provision in your marriage treaty stating that she must hold court at the Citadel from time to time.”

“What if you haven’t found a way to remove her magic by then?”

“There’s still the sariman to keep her in check.”

“You wish to hold her hostage,” Alaric said dully.

“The Nenavarene will be more obliging with their Lachis’ka at our mercy, don’t you think?” Gaheris smiled, a humorless stretch of parchment-thin lips. “If not, well, then we’ll remind them how their dragons fared against our void cannons.”

The ghastly images roiled through Alaric’s mind. Talasyn stripped of the Lightweave, dragons dropping from the sky, their rot-covered corpses sinking beneath the Eversea. The Shadow falling over the Dominion, Kesathese stormships turning a proud, millennia-old civilization into rubble, as they had all the Sardovian states.

“We wounded one dragon, and there are hundreds more.” Alaric forced the words out through the taste of bile. “I’m not sure our Voidfell supply can —”

“You leave that to me and my Enchanters,” Gaheris snapped. “Should we use it all up in the assault, there is more for the taking, alongside fresh aether crystals and Nenavar’s other riches. Your only job, *Emperor*, is to bring your wife here.” Then he paused, his mouth curling into a sneer. “Do not worry. She is of more use to us alive than dead, especially once I can better stomach her presence when she’s not a Lightweaver anymore. I won’t kill her.” His next statement dripped with scorn. “I wouldn’t do that to you.”

“You were the one who insisted upon the marriage,” Alaric replied, careful to show no emotion. No sign of faltering. “She means nothing to me.”

“I should hope so,” Gaheris said wryly. “She grew up on the Continent. She fought for Sardovia. There are deep ties there, and you *cannot* trust her.”

Alaric had always known that. But to hear his father say it ... It tore at something in his chest. He kept silent, enduring the ache.

“When she arrives for her coronation in a few days,” Gaheris continued, “keep her under lock and key. We can’t have her running around and finding out about the recent unrest. Inform the generals not to breathe a word, or their tongues will be nailed to the city gates.”

The “recent unrest,” as Gaheris called it, was a string of uprisings that had taken place in several towns across former Allfold territory. The Regent had been busy putting out those fires while Alaric was in Nenavar, his son’s absence no doubt contributing to the Regent’s annoyance. They’d been local revolts, though—too small in scale, too scattered, to amount to much.

“The Lightweaver won’t risk breaking the peace on account of a few resistance fighters,” Alaric protested. “She understands what’s at stake.”

The Void Sever was to be unleashed in a little under four months’ time, spreading death, amethyst and roaring, all over this corner of Lir. A merging of light and shadow was the only way to stop it. Talasyn had promised to cooperate. She wouldn’t ...

“You told me once,” said Gaheris, “that it was inadvisable to wager the future on a woman’s heart. Neither will I hinge the safety of our people on such a capricious thing.”

Alaric drew a breath and Gaheris slumped, infinitesimally, as though the weight of his own declaration was settling over him. As though a string stretched between them in that moment, pulled taut by years past. Father and son entangled.

“Remember your mother,” Gaheris murmured. “Remember how she left us when the work got hard. When what she wanted didn’t align with what Kesath needed in order to survive.”

I will still work with you, Talasyn had said on the rooftop, her eyes blazing. *But you won’t ever convince me that the Night Empire saved Sardovia from itself ... Whatever better world you think you’ll build, it will always be built on blood.*

“Yes,” Alaric said hoarsely. “I remember.”

“Good. Don’t let your wife out of the Legion’s sight during this upcoming visit,” Gaheris warned. “She will help the resistance fighters the first chance she gets. Of that I am certain.”

The eternal mountains of the Nenavar Dominion’s Belian range carried the start of wet season on their craggy shoulders, iron-gray clouds heavy with

the promise of rain looming over the viridian jungles that carpeted the lofty peaks. From the tallest summit, though, a colossal pillar of golden light shot up, breaking through the ashen skies, filling the misty air for miles around with a thunderous hymn like glass bells.

At the heart of that radiant column, amidst all the golden light and pulsing power, stood a woman. The brilliant glow distorted her features, but two things were sharply etched: the beads of fired clay adorning her smooth brow, and the sobbing infant in her arms, swaddled in embroidered cloths.

The magic flashed and then focused, revealing impressions of buildings, ladders, bridges—all of it carved out of cracked ochre dirt. All of it gathered close to form an arid city packed upon itself until it soared over the Great Steppe's sea of tallgrass and rabbitbrush.

The woman walked down a mudbrick path, slipping unnoticed through the apathetic crowds, holding the child tightly against her chest. She stopped in front of a building as drab and rust-hued as all the others and set her squirming burden down on its front steps.

“Everything will be all right,” she whispered, stroking the back of the child's head. “You have to be strong, Alunsina.”

Talasyne leaned forward for a closer look at the woman's face, but this scene was woven only from aether and memory. It vanished when the Lightweave did, and Talasyne stumbled backward, out of the sandstone fountain, no longer buffeted by the waves of her magic's nexus point. When she hit the rocky ground ass-first, she shouted a crude expletive at the pain that jolted through her hips and spine—an expletive that was quickly followed by a splinter of lightning that silhouetted the gnarled tops of the grandfather trees, a peal of thunder from the heavens, and then rain.

She got to her feet with a groan. The drizzle sluiced down her braided hair and into her eyes as she tried to make sense of what she'd seen. Of what aetherspace had shown her.

That had been the day she was abandoned at the orphanage in the rammed-earth city of Hornbill's Head. That woman—those beads had marked her as a servant of the Nenavarene court. The words she'd spoken

had been carried to Talasyn in a dream before, in the hollow of a grandfather tree.

Indusa, Talasyn remembered, was the name of the nursemaid tasked with accompanying her to the Dawn Isles, where they were supposed to wait out the Nenavarene civil war, safe with Talasyn's mother's people.

Yet Indusa had taken Talasyn in the completely opposite direction. Northwest, to the Continent, to the Sardovian Allfold's most impoverished state.

Why? Had they gotten lost? Talasyn had been told that two royal guards also boarded the airship that ferried them away from the Dominion capital while civil war raged below—where had they been in that memory? And why had Indusa left the heir to the Dragon Throne in such a desolate place?

Talasyn glared at the empty fountain in the middle of the Belian shrine's overgrown courtyard, willing the Light Sever to flow from its dragon-shaped spouts once again. She was desperate to chase this new lead, this thread in the enigmatic tapestry that was her past. But the fountain was still, save for the patter of rain darkening its stone.

After Alaric's fleet had faded out of sight in the Dominion skies, Talasyn had waited only a few days before scampering off to the Lightweaver shrine, reveling in the newfound freedom she'd gained from standing up to Urduja. She'd been encamped here for almost a sennight, aethermancing and exploring and fielding concerned messenger eagles from her father back in Eskaya. This was the first time that the nexus point had discharged since she'd arrived. It did not look likely to do so again before she had to leave, and it was frustrating.

At least the Light Sever had shown her something *useful*, instead of all the memories that she'd spent her waking hours trying to banish to no avail. Hazy images and phantom sensations from her wedding night, hungry lips on her bare skin, clothing shoved out of the way, a flush to the column of a pale throat, a hoarse voice in the dark of her bedroom, strong hands urging her higher, holding her closer—

A twig snapped behind her.

She whirled around. Months ago, something like this had happened, someone sneaking up on her as she stared at the fountain, under cover of late evening, and she'd flown at Alaric in a blinding rage. They'd fought, light against shadow, his silver eyes gleaming in the aether sparks.

But the Night Emperor was in Kesath. The man looking at her now, from across a respectful distance, was Yanme Rapat, the border patrol officer who had apprehended her and Alaric the first time she'd stepped foot in these ruins. What felt like a lifetime had passed since then.

Rapat saluted. The gilded lotus blossoms embedded in his brass-plate cuirass caught rivulets of rain. "Your Grace." He hesitated, then corrected himself. "Your Majesty."

Talasyn's skin crawled, but she waved off his unspoken apology. "I was the Lachis'ka before I was the Night Empress." Was she even already the Night Empress? Technically, her husband had to crown her first, didn't he?

Her husband. Gods. Of all the ways to think of Alaric Ossinast.

"Before you were either of those things, you were my prisoner." The kaptan's tone was rueful. "I'm truly—"

"You were doing your duty," Talasyn hastened to assure him. It was because of this man that she'd been reunited with her remaining family, after all. "But what are you doing *here*?" Suspicion crept in, along with the same old anger at Urduja for never leaving her well enough alone. "Did my grandmother send you?"

"Not today." Rapat gestured vaguely in the direction of the sandstone fountain. "Your mother, the Lady Hanan, visited this place frequently, Lachis'ka. I sometimes come here to remember, and to mourn."

While Talasyn felt *some* chagrin for jumping to unflattering conclusions about his motives, this was swiftly replaced by the nervous excitement bubbling through her veins. "Did you know my mother well? Were you friends?"

"Her late highness was very lonely in Eskaya," said Rapat. "She detested politics and had no patience for ... all the formalities and maneuvering. I was one of her few confidants."