

## *The Thorn Raid*

Prequel Novelette for The Unchosen Series

by Kristin J. Dawson



My bones ached as I dragged my feet along the cobblestones of the city square. The nights were dreadful. But that's when I was needed — when hope was snuffed out like the last breath in a sandstorm. The Lilac Plague had ravaged the city of Moesia for the last three weeks, but it had felt like a hundred years.

Mama had promised me a protection. I trusted her. I still did, even after she couldn't protect herself.

“You should go home,” instructed a man who was about my father’s age. “Get some rest.”

His face and hands were covered with scabs. A lucky survivor. His worn hands grasped my bucket.

My stiff fingers slowly unhooked from the handle. “I will see you again tonight after dusk.”

“I’ve seen you here every night for the last six. How many nights have you worked since the gates closed?”

I shrugged. I’d worked *every* night, but not everyone appreciated magic. Some even feared it. Not even I understood my protection from the fevered illness, but I knew enough to keep quiet.

“The deaths are slowing.” The man’s gaze drifted to the horizon. “The plague is burning out. So, keep your chin up. Besides, I always feel better with the dawn.”

I lifted my eyes to the pink streaks in the lightening sky. Across the open square, through a gap between homes sitting lower on the hill, the desert stretched beyond. Spirals of black smoke inside the city gate smudged the once glorious view. Not even the dead could escape these walls.

*Mama.*

Bile churned in my empty stomach, and I turned away. The man refilled my bucket with water one last time, and I trudged up the hill toward home. Dirt-streaked, scabbed faces lined the roads through the Commons. Their early slumber was a momentary escape from the cruel consequences of the plague. Soon they would be alert, desperate for a familiar face.

I pulled a crust of bread from my apron, the last of my meal, and laid it next to a waif just beginning to stir. I hurried on, wishing I could help them all. But with only one *me* and hundreds of orphans, my supplies were scarce. If I couldn't replenish soon, I'd be forced to pillage the quiet houses of the dead. But it was laughable, thinking of *me*, a thirteen-year-old girl, fighting over stolen food against desperate, grown men. We needed the Thorns, the city guard, to open the gates.

Outside the gates, we could forage or hunt in the high desert. But more importantly, we needed merchants to come *inside* the gates. Moesia blossomed only because of the nearby gold mines. But, glinting metal nuggets couldn't fill our bellies any more than the stones under my feet.

Halfway home, horses clopped up the street behind me. The smell jolted me, and I hurried to the side of the road without looking at the wagon.

"I'm headed for the Golden Lily," the driver said. "I can drop you off if you're headed in that direction." This woman had greeted me many times in recent weeks. Those of us who served together through this nightmare were now bound together by the invisible tether of shared atrocity and work. She was always kind, but I would rather crawl home than ride in *that* wagon.

"No, thank you." I clutched my bucket tighter.

"Get your rest, child." Her advice was quick, but soft. "How can you help others to walk if you're too weak to stand?" With a snap of a whip, the horses trotted past, the wagon stumbling along behind. I turned away from the wagon bed, not wanting to see the bodies of any I knew or cared for.

The narrow street beyond was lined with canvas flags, a black 'X' marking them. Nearly a hundred thousand people lived in Moesia, and how many had been affected in the Commons?

Three out of five? Nine out of ten? Had anyone helped a single home in this section of the city? I needed to sleep. But I could do one more house. Just one more.

I forced my weary bones to move to the nearest door, hesitating at the threshold. Most homes had someone sitting on a mat outside the door, listening for news or soliciting for help.

Not this home. If nothing else, I could mark it for the reapers.

Inside, I was hit with the stench of rotting flesh, and my eyes instantly watered. I continued to the hearth in the center of the home, with two doors on the left, plus a door and narrow window along the back. The scant light revealed a girl, about seven or eight-years old, laying on a blanket near the ashes. As I neared, the child blinked and sat up.

I'd seen too many faces like hers. Frightened. Alone. Forlorn.

“Who is in the house with you?” I whispered as I evaluated the hearth. Cold.

The girl stared at me for a breath before responding. “Papa got sick. My sister is gone.”

If her sister was dead or simply fled, I didn't know.

“When did you last see your Papa?” I evaluated the girl, but didn't see any signs of the plague. Her family had been good to separate themselves, and the girl had stayed healthy. So far.

The girl shrugged.

“When did you last eat?” It was spring and most households had some stores from their winter personal gardens. Through the window, I evaluated the small bath and tiered household crops. Like most others, the plants were stripped bare. Our city was reliant on outside farmers, and with the gates closed, our food had quickly dwindled.

I restarted the fire, then searched the cupboards. A mouse had eaten a hole in the last bag of flour, but a scant cupful remained. I pulled my bucket off the table, pausing at the burgeoning

flames. I didn't have the strength to return to the well. I gripped the sides of the bucket and glanced at the girl.

Then, I poured half my water into her kettle.

While waiting for it to boil, I took a deep breath and entered the first room; I found two mats and two trunks on the floor. Interestingly, there was a Luminary on the wall. The magical half-dome was filled with liquid, and the motes floating inside created light. Someone likely paid a silver for such a luxury. Between the Luminary and the quality of the blankets, I figured someone in the household likely worked, or had worked, at the gold mines.

In the second room, I found a man lying on the bed. Dread sunk like a cold rock to the bottom of my belly. To confirm he was dead, I checked for a pulse, as I'd been taught. I gasped, feeling a faint heartbeat. I checked his sores; some had scabbed.

He could still be saved. Possibly.

I darted back to the hearth and grabbed a cup off the shelf. The little girl pushed to her feet and padded next to me.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Making medicine for your papa.” I scooped the cup into the hot water and then yanked a packet of herbs from my satchel. I dumped the contents inside, nearly choking over my next words. “I have Healer training. A little.”

I'd once hoped to become a properly-apprenticed Healer. I bit my lip, reminding myself to be grateful for what training I had been given.

“Will he. . .” the girl quieted, too shy or frightened to finish. But I knew her question too well. It was the one I'd asked myself every day when Mama was sick.

*Will she survive?*

While the medicine steeped, I made a careful plan. I didn't have magic in my veins, but I had two pouches of medicinals mixed by the best Healer in the city. One was now soaking for this man I didn't know. Like my food, Healer supplies were scant. It didn't take a brilliant scholar to realize I didn't have enough for everyone. I had to save them for the people with the best chance of survival.

Did this man have the *best* chance? I wrestled inside, knowing he didn't. But, I couldn't leave this child an orphan. If this girl's papa was to have any chance at recovering, I had to help. And I had to act quickly.

I darted back to the room and removed the soiled blankets off the man's bed and marched them out to the road for the reapers to burn. Then I fed the girl a paltry meal of boiled barley flour. If I timed everything favorably with the medicine and removal of the diseased bedding and bandages, perhaps he would live. Perhaps.

I worked until my head grew too light to think. I gave the girl my last instructions and promised to return.

Back out on the street, the canvas flags snapped, and I clutched my bucket tighter. I stared at the long line of ragged banners, sentinels of death dusted by morning light. So many. My shoulders slumped, and I dragged myself home.

Emperor Caracalla was a fair ruler. We learned in school about his brilliance in maintaining our kingdom's prosperity and his wisdom in keeping invaders at bay. Surely he would send aid to the city who mined the kingdom's gold. But how much longer would it be until they came to our rescue?

I arrived home to the smell of lilacs. I touched the necklace through my dress, drawing reassurance from the orb. Papa's study door was closed, but I knew he was inside, staring into nothingness.

The kitchen hearth had dwindled to warm coals. Mama had always been the one to rekindle the fire and start the kettle in the morning. I turned and took a shaky step through her bedroom door. On the floor was an empty feather bed. All the emotion I'd shoved down through the night threatened to surface. Tears welled in my eyes, and my chin quivered. Yesterday, Rubia, a Healer and Mama's closest friend, had come by and tucked in fresh blankets and left a bouquet of lilacs wrapped in ribbon.

It had seemed that Rubia's remedies might work when some of Mama's sores started to scab. But Rubia had warned that it might only be a momentary reprieve. She'd suggested I say my good-byes during one of Mama's rare lucid moments. Thank the stars I'd complied, even if I was just humoring my elder.

"I wish I could be there to watch you grow," Mama had said. "To have a family of your own, someday. I always wanted to be a grandmother."

Mama had winced, her breathing shallow. The downside of her clarity was that she felt the sting of every blister across her body, inside her mouth and down her throat, deep in her ears, and under her nails. I couldn't hold her hand, couldn't comb her hair; it only increased the already excruciating pain. I was helpless, useless. In the end, Zalmoxis took her away. Rubia said that she'd never seen anyone fight so hard to live, but the Lilac Plague doesn't reward effort.

I sunk to my knees next to where Mama had laid for the last ten days. The place where I'd bid her my anguished farewell. The place where she'd made promises, wailed, bargained, then hallucinated and cast all sorts of accusations in her visionary-state.

Hot tears ran down my cheeks as I dug my fingers into her soft blankets.

*Don't leave me.*

I longed for anything that smelled of Mama, but under the cloying lilac, only the scent of the plague lingered. I crawled over to Mama's trunk. I heaved aside the lid and felt around until my fingers brushed against one of her winter dresses. I pulled it out and buried my face in its folds, taking a deep breath. My shoulders shook, and my cries were muffled in the heavy fabric.

I cradled the dress, the only place where Mama's true scent remained. I needed to preserve this small part of her. I shoved it back into the trunk, slamming down the lid, away from the taint of the plague still hanging in the air.

<<>>

When I awoke, I wiped away my salty tears the best I could. Unable to properly wash without the full bucket of water, I had to make concessions. I re-applied ash to my face, per the Getaens mourning tradition, and figured the extra sweat made the ash stick all the better. I shrugged off the inconvenience and cooked flatbread over the hot coals. It needed to last us five days. Papa calculated that our food must stretch through two moons. Moesia was by far the largest city in the south, so he and Rubia worried the plague would rage longer than the few weeks it had lasted in the surrounding settlements.

I knocked on Papa's study. "I have fresh bread for you. I'll be back tomorrow."

"You're leaving early today?" he called through the thick door.

"There's a little girl I need to help."

"Just stay above the Fissure," Papa reminded me.

"I'll be fine." I sat the food tray on a table.



“You're all I have left,” Papa's voice was faint; I wondered if he'd intended me to hear his words.

I fiddled with the orb on my necklace. Moments after the gates closed, Mama requested me to repeat words in an ancient language before gently placing the sphere around my neck. Then she made me swear never to remove it until she or Rubia told me otherwise.

I dropped the pendant against my chest and grabbed the empty bucket before hurrying down the quiet streets. If she had any more medicine, I needed it. Without Rubia's magic and my help, the man would die.

Lower on the hill, I strode past a long structure partially carved into the hillside. Several brightly colored doors and baskets of flowers lined the street. The sun beat down and sweat ran down my back as I neared Rubia's home. Rubia had taught me about medicine and had cared for me when my parents traveled, which was often. She'd asked me to only come if my needs were urgent, but she would never turn me away, even if I just wanted to see her face.

I knocked on Rubia's door. She peered out her window, and her eyes widened. In a flash, she unlocked the door and pulled me inside.

“What's wrong? Is Calvus ill?” Rubia asked, her ash-covered face scrunched with concern. Rubia was a decade older than Mama, but they'd been friends since before I was born.

“Papa is fine,” I said. “Though, I haven't actually seen him since . . . since Mama.” That was all the explanation I could muster. “But I do need more medicine.”

Rubia's shoulders relaxed, and she turned to the jars on her glass shelves. “I have nothing left to numb pain. But, fortunately, someone came to trade for dried lilac this morning. It was the last of my lilac stores, but they had supplies I needed for vitality packets. Will you assist me?”

I nodded, grabbing the last of the dried summer savory off the shelf, then seeing roots next to it. “Is this geum?”

“Good eye, Nikka. I haven't had a chance to label it yet.”

I handed Rubia each ingredient in the proper order. She minced, crushed, and mixed, all while whispering incantations. The thrum of her voice uncoiled the tension I carried, and I welcomed it. It would be a lie to say her refusal to make me her apprentice didn't sting. But at the same time, I knew her time would be better invested in a Getaen; someone born with Healer magic.

Mama had said there would be something even better in my future, but surely her words were the empty promises of a dying woman. What more could be greater than Healing?

An hour later, Rubia wiped beads of sweat from her brow and handed me three sealed packets. “It's all I have. Use them wisely.”

“I will. I promise.”

The man I'd met would need at least two more treatments. When I saw him, if the medicine didn't appear to be working, I'd have to make a hard decision.

“Nikka,” Rubia said as I tucked the medicine into my satchel. “Keep your pendant hidden.”

I grasped the gold orb. It was round, except it looked like someone had slammed it down causing one side to completely flatten. The entire pendant was covered in strange symbol markings etched into the surface. In the Moesian Commons, gold wasn't terribly hard to come by. But Mama never displayed her necklace, which seemed odd, now that I thought about it.

“There are rumors of things getting worse before they get better,” Rubia said, her face serious. “If the city devolves into chaos, don't risk coming here. Protecting the orb is more important than saving me.”

“A piece of jewelry is nothing compared to your life.”

“Nikka, there's nothing you can do against an angry mob.” Rubia put a heavy hand on my shoulder. “Promise you'll keep yourself hidden.”

Rubia's request wasn't all that different from the woman in the wagon. They both wanted me to survive. “I'll do my best.”

<<>>

Inside the little girl's house, I found her playing with a straw doll on her blanket. She had been smart enough to let the fire die down to coals and opened the back door to let in a cross-breeze.

“Put your blanket in the water basin in the back.” I instructed the girl on how to wash. Once we got started, she knew exactly what to do. Apparently, she merely needed a soft nudge to spur her mind out of its frozen state of inaction.

“I'm Nicoleta,” I said, once the girl seemed to relax. “But my friends call me Nikka.”

The girl gave me a shy grin. “I'm Vita.”

“I'm going to check on your papa.” I gave her what I hoped was a reassuring smile.

My heart thumped as I entered her papa's room, bracing myself for the worst. His skin was wet with sweat, but his fever was gone. I shifted his arm, checking his sores. He stirred, and relief washed over me. Not only did I see more signs of scabbing, but he was semi-conscious.

I explained who I was and assured him that Vita was well, and he relaxed. As I prepared Rubia's Healer tea, my hands shook. I wasn't sure if it was excitement, hope, nerves, or relief.

When the remedy was ready, I helped him sit up and drink. His breathing deepened as I dabbed his skin with cool water. After giving him an hour to rest, I changed his bandages.

I winced when the material pulled away dead flesh. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be." The man could barely speak, his voice soft yet gravelly. "It's not pleasant, but at least I'm more . . . alert." His airy laugh quickly turned into a raspy cough.

The man had an odd sense of humor, but I grinned nonetheless as I helped him sip more water.

"I must pay you for your kindness," he said.

"Repay me by resting and recovering. Vita needs her papa."

I dumped his soiled bandages to the street for burning. The man's things wouldn't survive, but there was a chance that he would.

For the next week, I returned to care for Vita and her papa. When their barley flour ran out, I brought flatbread from my home. Despite my best efforts, Vita became gaunt. I quelled my worry every night as I worked, drawing water at the city well. If the gates didn't open soon, we'd both starve.

As Vita and I grew weaker, her papa grew stronger. He was able to get up from his bed and walk across the room, but little else. He longed to see Vita, but he only dared to speak to her through the closed door.

"My older daughter works at the mines," he told me. "She left the day before the plague descended."

"She was fortunate to escape," I said. It wasn't unusual for miners to stay at their worksites for a week or more as the mines were nearly a day's walk.

"I'm sure she's worried sick about Vita. We're fortunate you found us."

Despite his words, guilt twisted inside me. I'd helped his household but not others. I'd given him the Healer packets and none remained. He'd laid in feverish unconsciousness while thousands of the dead burned. He had little understanding of what destruction existed outside his door. I'd already gambled on his life, leaving no medicine left for others . . . my thoughts consumed me like the flames of the summer sun, so I shoved them away.

“The gates should open soon.” I helped ease him back into bed. “You'll see your daughter again.”

“You must let me pay you,” he said, inspecting my face. “I hate to see you disappear into the Fissure after what you've done for us.”

A blush worked up my neck. “The ash on my face isn't because I'm destitute; it's a Getaen tradition. We wear ash for two years after a loved one dies to symbolize our mourning.”

“Oh, I didn't . . . realize. I didn't mean to—”

“Not to worry. I'm sure you'll learn more about Getaen traditions in the upcoming moons.” I forced a smile.

Calvus Aurelian, my papa, was a respected scholar and a higher class than most people of the city. He came from a long line of proud Dacians with their thick brows and raven hair. My mama's Getaen blood, unfortunately, didn't come with magic, but it left its mark through my light brown hair and freckled skin.

“I'm sorry for your loss, Nicoleta.” The man closed his eyes, the pitying look on his face turning to exhaustion. He didn't ask who I'd lost, and I was grateful for it.

I tucked Vita into her proper bed and handed her the small straw doll before slipping outside. My work for the night was just beginning.



Several new volunteers had appeared over the last two nights—more survivors. According to reports, the deaths were slowing. Rubia said this plague swooped down like a pack of vultures, violently picking a carcass clean, then disappeared in a blink. Perhaps the darkest days were behind us.

Yet, as the plague waned, the city grew restless—a steady thrum of palpable tension. People were no longer anxious about the closed gates. They were angry. Starving people did dangerous things. Rumors circulated; Poppies from the Fissure were coordinating an attack on the Thorns who guarded the gate and the wall.

When dawn broke, I dragged myself up the hill. Vita was expecting me to come by later, before dinner. Her papa had recovered enough to fetch his own water, but I planned to visit until her sister returned.

I didn't regret saving Vita or her papa, but now hunger was my constant companion. I ached to curl up in Mama's bed. I ignored the people in their whispered discussions until one spoke so loudly I couldn't miss the conversation.

“The gates, yes,” a woman said, flitting her hands in excitement.

“I'll gather my satchel. I never thought my mouth would water just thinking about a plain speckled lizard for dinner.” A girl not much older than me dashed down the street.

A few steps further, my neighbor was smiling and wiping away tears. “Nicoleta, have you heard the happy news? Emperor Caracalla has sent his guards to help us! The gates are open!”

*Finally.*

A surge of energy thrummed through me, and I rushed inside my house.

“Papa! The gates are open!” I plopped down the bucket near the hearth, then threw open the door to Papa's study. “Merchants could be here as soon as tomorrow. I'd pay a bronze bit for a single apple!”

Papa rubbed his eyes, then blinked up at me from his desk. A red spot marred his forehead where he'd laid it to sleep on top of his desk. “What?”

“Papa,” I gasped as I took in the state of his room. Scrolls were strewn across his desk and the tiled floor. I hadn't noticed the gradually-mounting hodgepodge. Papa never left this many scrolls out at the same time. Likely, he'd miscalculated the number borrowed from the university. Or perhaps without Mama's direction, Papa was struggling to manage. Either way, it was unseemly to have so many scrolls in a private residence. Now that the plague was officially done, we could leave. But not like this. His study looked like a haven for nesting mice. And if his superiors realized his mistake . . . I cringed.

“I'll help you clean up.” My stomach rumbled. “We're going to market as soon as merchants enter the city, and I'm buying everything we need for a pie.”

*And you're getting these excess scrolls returned to the university.*

Papa directed me, and I put the scrolls in the appropriate baskets. Ash and sweat mixed into a paste on his skin and settled into the wrinkles across his face. An hour later, we had made progress; but my excitement waned, and my eyelids drooped.

“Go rest,” Papa gently suggested.

I collapsed onto Mama's bed. But, I only closed my eyes for what seemed like a moment before I awoke to a loud noise.

In a heartbeat, Papa was at my side, gripping my shoulder. “I need your help, Nicoleta. Be quick, or all is lost.”

I blinked, half-dazed. Outside, horses neighed, and a demanding shout issued a command down the street. I sat up taller. A voice that loud could only be from a magical Sonus.

“The guards will be here soon,” he pulled me to my feet. “The royal announcement was made. Everyone in the Commons must prepare for inspection.”

“Inspection?” I hurried behind him to his study.

Most of the scrolls were ordered, but not all. Papa rolled up his loose linen sleeves and grabbed a metal bar from behind the amphora. He slammed the bar in between the perfectly laid terracotta floor tiles.

Under the pressure of the lever, a tile tilted upward.

“Move the tile to the side,” Papa urged through gritted teeth.

“Papa?” my voice squeaked. “Papa, what are you—”

“Hurry.” He grunted under the strain.

I dove down onto my knees and slid back the tile he’d freed. The shouts from the soldiers outside grew louder, closer, sharper. Blood rushed to my head, pounding in my ears. The heavy floor pieces dug into my palms, but I did as Papa asked, moving them one by one.

Stale air breathed up from the growing hole at my feet. Under the tiles was a mesh of metal bars. Papa dropped the lever and lifted away criss-crossing bars that had held the floor in place, laying bare the space below. Narrow shelves lined the hard-packed clay wall from top to bottom on one side. They were laden with books and scrolls, sketches and journals.

My stomach dropped at the sight of the hidden contents. “Zalmoxis, Papa, what is this?”

Papa flinched at the name of our vengeful god. *As if my words are more offensive than this shocking hole in the floor!*



I tried to be respectful of my elders, but my confusion mounted. “I apologize, Papa. But, what is going on? Why—”

A woman screamed and a child cried. They didn’t sound far. I jumped to my feet, yearning to rush to their aid. Papa grabbed my arm, his eyebrows knit with pain and regret.

“You can’t help them against the Thorns.”

I wrested my arm away from him. Why would he think the guards were causing the trouble? Then again, perhaps other people had secrets that the Thorns had discovered. Secrets like hidden caverns under floors with records clearly meant to keep hidden.

“Climb down. Quickly.” Papa gestured to the side of the cavern wall. He was rarely curt with anyone, least of all me.

The last thing either of us wanted was for a Thorn to discover illicit records in our home. I grabbed my skirt and descended, my arms shaking as I gripped the handholds. The screams outside spurred me faster, down, down into the dim space.

The cavern barely had enough room for me to turn around. I reached my hands up, my fingertips curling over the lip of the cavern. Papa handed me a bin. It had handles for quick transport and fit perfectly on a shelf. A few scrolls spilled out down by my feet. I had to press my body against the dirt wall so I had room for my knees to bend enough that I could pick the scrolls up.

“First your mama and now a levy.” He dropped down another armload of scrolls. His tunic was open at the neck, wisps of gray hair on his upper chest showing. “You have the orb?”

I tugged on the golden chain around my neck and pulled up Mama’s pendant. Papa gave me a satisfied nod.

“There’s not enough room in here for both of us.” My stomach churned, knowing what it meant.

There was a loud crash outside, and the house shook. I gripped the nearest handhold, my mind racing.

“You’ll be safe. Even if they burn the thatch inside the roof and it crumbles, you can dig your way out when it cools.” He slammed the bars across the opening.

My jaw dropped. I would be stuck down here, alone. Why was Papa hiding all these scrolls? He was a scholar, so why the secrecy? Furthermore, I thought the Emperor had sent guards to help us. Why all the terrified cries? My mind scrambled to put everything together, but I was missing too many pieces.

Papa slid the first tile over, dropping it into place, the sound echoing through my bones. I gripped the orb under my clothing. If something happened to Papa, could I push the tiles up? Did I have the strength? As Papa continued replacing each tile, more and more of the study above was blocked from view.

“Wait!” I shouted before Papa dropped the last one.

Papa’s eyes softened, and he reached down into the pit and gripped my hand. “Your mama would say, ‘Remember to look for the light.’”

I sucked in a breath. Someone pounded on our front door. Papa jerked away and dropped the last tile into place.

A narrow crack between two tiles allowed me to see a sliver of the room. Papa walked past me, but before his footsteps left the study, the door opened and crashed against the wall. Someone pushed Papa back toward his desk.

“Calvus Aurelian, we are here on an errand from the Emperor. Due to the plague, the kingdom is increasing its levy. By our records, you must pay three days of ten in service to the kingdom,” a baritone voice bellowed in the rough accent of the north. The soldier didn’t sound very old. Maybe a man in his thirtieth decade. I could see the tops of boots and legs of soldiers, but not much else.

“What?” Papa asked. “The levy is tripled?”

“Emperor Cassus VII has provided a new way to fulfill your levy if you are unable to work three days out of ten. Of course, as a scholar, you are lucky to have the opportunity to serve the emperor without leaving your city.” A boot moved over the crack, blocking my view.

“I am a scholar. My service to the kingdom is through my research on behalf of the emperor. I already work one day out of ten—.”

A sharp slap cut Papa's sentence short. I gasped. Did a Thorn just hit Papa?

“There are rumors you keep too many scrolls,” the baritone voice continued. I heard a shuffling of feet and the rustling of parchments. A scholar being discovered with no scrolls would be highly suspicious. Papa must have left some up in his office as a decoy. Relief swelled before it crashed at the realization of what Papa had done. This cavern, the box with the handles, the plan to leave a few scrolls out; Papa had prepared for this kind of situation. But why would anyone prepare for a visit like this?

Papa explained, “Of course I have many research documents. I travel through this kingdom and beyond, researching on behalf of the university. I can certainly borrow any scrolls from the university. I helped collect many of them.”

There was a snap of fingers and boots marching.

“Where are you taking the scrolls? Those are property of the university,” Papa said, fighting to keep his voice calm.

“We have interpreters here with us. We will review the documents and decide whose property they are,” the soldier said.

Several footfalls reverberated against the tiles and then faded from the room, but the same set of soldier’s boots remained.

“Where is your family? The extra days of tax are based on the number of people in your household,” the baritone voice said.

“What about large families? What if a family has more children than days in the week?” Papa’s voice was incredulous.

“The emperor has provisions for that.” The soldier’s tone sent a chill down my spine. “Bring your family forward for an accounting.”

“My wife is deceased,” Papa’s voice faltered. “And my daughter is not home. She often helps the sick.”

The soldier snapped his fingers.

“Records,” The baritone voice commanded.

Parchment shuffled, then a female voice responded. “One wife, Getaen. One daughter, half-Getaen.”

There was more shuffling above me and Thorns talking, one laughing. At least the boot moved so I could see a bit more, again.

“If your wife is dead, she won't be needing her things anymore. We'll take them off your hands to make up for the fact that your daughter is conveniently missing. An Azure like yourself does tend to have a few nice things laying around.”

A horrendous crash of ceramic sounded, breaking on the terracotta floors above.

“You’re lucky the emperor doesn’t charge an extra levy for Getaens.” The soldier sneered. “Otherwise, you’d be begging us to take your half-Get daughter off your hands.”

My scholarly, timid papa leapt at the soldier, knocking him down. My hands flew to my mouth. Papa had never hit anyone before. Shadows and shouts clashed. Papa was forced to his knees. The light was to his back, throwing his face into shadows, but I could see his anger.

“We are here on official business from Emperor Cassus VII. Impeding us is a crime. Make it easier on yourself, scholar.”

Papa shot back, “You’re a pack of thie—”

A hand flew, slapping my father’s face.

“Your daughter, she can work to pay the levy for you and herself.” The soldier tapped the hilt of his sword.

“And for how long would she need to be a slave to the Emperor to pay the levy on the two of us?” Papa growled. “No, I will pay it myself. Leave my daughter alone.”

The ground beneath me seemed to shift. Papa normally had his nose in his scrolls, philosophically rambling with Mama or colleagues at the university. Always soft-spoken and perhaps a little scattered.

Someone pushed him forward, his body against the crack, blocking most of the view. But I heard a groan escape his lips.

The baritone soldier continued, his voice muffled. “We know who you are, Calvus Aurelian. Don’t think your studies haven’t already raised suspicions. Eventually, you’ll slip up, Azure. Let my little parting gift be a reminder to be careful of who you cross.”

Papa screamed out. I covered my face and curled up on the dirt floor. There was a thump above me, and I was shrouded in complete darkness. I buried my face in my apron. Heavy boots slammed against the tiles above. There was hard laughter, and things snapping and breaking. My breathing was hard and ragged, but the more I tried to quiet, the louder it grew. How could they not hear me? Finally, the Thorns marched away.

I envisioned the guards preparing to light the house on fire. Or rummaging through Mama's things. When the room finally fell silent, I dared look up. The sliver of light was still extinguished; I couldn't even see my hand in front of my face.

What was on the ground, blocking the view? A pit formed in my stomach. Papa was laying there. Not moving. What if he was dead, and I was left all alone? No. He couldn't be. He needed me. But could I escape the cavern with his body on top of the heavy tiles? My breathing was shallow, and my head was faint. Hope faded from my heart and panic arose in its place.

I couldn't call up to Papa, not knowing where the soldiers were. Did they know I was there? Were they just waiting for me to emerge? I'd be humiliated, probably tortured, and then arrested. I clutched the orb at my neck and rocked back and forth against the wall. I'd promised them both that I'd survive. But Papa needed me. My body felt like lead, but I pulled myself up the wall. I dug my fingertips into an earthy handhold, and with the other hand I pressed up against the tiles. Part of me knew it was futile, but I pushed until my bone threatened to break in two.

"Papa," I called up, caring less and less if someone overheard me. "Papa!"

I held my breath, hoping for a whisper. A groan. Anything. The silence pressed down on me, swallowing up any hope that was left in my heart for the future. I dropped down to the

ground in a heap. The ground seemed to swallow me whole, pulling me deeper and deeper into the cold, dark earth.



When my tears had dried and I could barely hold my bladder any longer, I knew several hours had passed, perhaps an entire day. How long until Papa stirred? Would he ever?

Perhaps one day someone would happen upon this cavern and find my bones and clothing turned to dust, only my gold necklace marking my grave. Hopefully, at least the scrolls would survive. Whatever they contained, Papa was determined that their information be protected. I'd die here, but the papyrus would remain; the only hint to future discoverers of my slow demise.

No, eventually, someone would move Papa's body. I swallowed, steeling myself to wait in stone silence until Rubia came. I trusted no one other than her. Not my neighbors who believed the emperor's guards had come to help us. Not the university who hadn't protected Papa. And I would never trust anyone who represented the kingdom ever again, especially not a Thorn.

Whether my eyes were open or closed, it didn't matter. Darkness smothered me either way. The longer I waited, the more vivid my imaginings. Whether I was half-asleep with exhaustion, or grief, or hunger, I didn't know. But I couldn't escape the nightmares I conjured.

Breathing became a burden. I began to wish that Zalmoxis would just take me. No one should die like this.

Finally, vibrations came from overhead. Was someone in the house? Desperation to escape clawed through me.

I reminded myself to stay still. If the wrong person discovered me, Papa's reputation would be ruined. Was Papa dead? Would he care about his legacy now?

“Calvus!” Rubia's voice sounded.

Could I trust my senses? Was it truly Rubia?

“He's alive. Bring me water from the well!” Rubia said.

*I want to help. I'm stuck*, I thought.

“Right away,” a familiar voice responded, but I couldn't quite place it.

Papa's body was dragged across the floor. I winced when the sliver of light pierced my eyes. Overhead, a tile lifted, and the light flooded down.

“My dear girl,” Rubia cried.

I was numb, unable to move. Rubia's slender frame seemed to wrench the tiles away with ease. The cross-bars clattered as she tossed them aside.

“Can you stand, Nikka?”

Worry lined her face as she got on her belly and reached down. Her nostrils flared, her voice demanding. “Come on, Nikka, stand!”

I reached up, and our fingertips grazed. There wasn't room for her to come down into the hole and carry me. I had to get myself out.

I forced myself up, my cramped muscles screaming, and grabbed her hand. She clung to my forearms, urging me to climb. I fumbled for the grips, pulling myself up. I wanted to cry, but my eyes were as dry as the Moesian desert.

Rubia grabbed under my arms and yanked me over the lip of the cavern. When my knees found purchase, I crawled over to Papa. Dried blood covered the side of his face, but he was breathing. My fingers tangled in his ruined camasa, and I buried my face in the folds.

I realized that Rubia was talking to me, but my mind felt like fuzz. As Rubia dragged the last tile into place, I began to take in the room. Ink had spilled down the side of Papa's desk, and formed a dried pool of black on the floor. On the far wall, Mama's massive potted plants had



been hacked down to wretched stubs. The gold inlaid amphora behind Papa's desk lay in shattered pieces, strewn across the floor. Only the least valuable pieces remained, any bits of gold had been carried off.

“You're lucky the soldiers took the scrolls.” Rubia pried up a piece of melted wax from the desk. “Otherwise these candles could've started a blaze. Others weren't so lucky.”

I nodded absently, turning back to Papa when someone came through the door. Vita entered the office, carrying a bucket of water, with her papa at her side.

“Here you are, Rubia,” Vita’s papa said. “Would you like me to start a fire?”

“Yes, please.” Rubia took the bucket from Vita and started tending to Papa's wounds.

I wandered numbly around the house. I barely noticed the upturned bowls on the shelves, nor how my bed had been tilted askew. Inside my parent's room, I stared inside Mama's empty trunk.

Mama's dresses were gone.

And I felt nothing.

<<>>

I refused to go back into Papa's study. Perhaps I never would. It had only been a few days since Rubia had rescued me, but Papa claimed he had recovered from his head injury. He and Rubia were talking to Vita's papa near our hearth. I hadn't realized he was even there until Vita started stroking my hair as our parents spoke. My attention faded away from their conversation until I heard my name.

“Nicoleta was trapped for nearly two days?” Vita's dad asked.

“Left tied up and locked in her room,” Rubia lied.

“And she hasn't spoken?” Vita's dad asked.

“The mind does strange things under stress,” Rubia said. “I’m grateful you recognized the symbol on my herb packets and came to find me when Nicoleta disappeared after the raid.”

“It was the least I could do. If Nicoleta hadn’t saved my life, I can’t imagine what the Thorns would have done with Vita.”

The room fell into a somber silence. Even Vita paused in playing with my hair, curious at the dour change in the room. They started talking, in lower tones. My attention went to Vita’s little fingers combing through my hair until I heard my name again.

“Nicoleta was the only person who dared come into our home,” Vita’s papa said. “I worry about the growing fascination with the survivors, especially any who might have regularly come into contact with the sick. When gratitude for the volunteer’s wanes, the people’s superstitions will grow, especially if the city’s recovery is difficult.”

“Nikka is only at the beginning of her two-year mourning,” Papa said. “I can keep her close to home.”

“Suspicion is on you, too, Calvus.” Rubia gave him a hard look. “The scrolls they found were dull histories, but people are already gossiping about your possible involvement in illicit affairs. They will delight in casting you, a respected Dacian, into doubt because you dared marry a lowborn Getaen.”

“Like I said, be careful,” Vita’s dad reiterated. “Gossip is foolishness, but I’ve seen it cause real damage. I’ve probably already said more than I should. I will go. Anyway, my eldest daughter is only home for a few more nights, and I am keen to see her before she leaves for the mining caves again.” He knelt to look at me, but I struggled to focus on his face. “A life for a life, Nicoleta Aurelian. I hope you have a good one. I plan to do the same.”

He held out his hand, and Vita grasped it. They left together, holding hands. I tilted my head, watching the door long after they'd gone. Something stirred within me—warmth.

I turned back to see Rubia nod at Papa and then rub her temples.

“My darling, golden-eyed girl,” Papa said. “Rubia and I . . . I think it would be best if . . . your necklace . . .”

I clutched the orb at my chest.

Rubia sighed and sat next to me. “Did you know that orb once belonged to me? I gifted it to your Mama. And she gifted it to you. But you're not quite ready for it. Not yet. May I hold on to it for you?”

A part of me knew that I was staring at her for an uncomfortable stretch of time. But the other part of me was confused at her request. Still, if Rubia wanted the orb, I would give it to her. I pulled the chain over my head, about to hand it over. Something about the orb tugged at me, calling me.

I clutched the orb tight in my fist. Rubia gently pried away my fingers with a sad, knowing look.

“One day, I'll give this orb back to you.” Rubia put the necklace on. She closed her eyes and ran a finger over the runes. Then she straightened and leveled me with a gaze. “Next time I place this on you, more responsibility will come with it. And understanding.”

Papa shifted uncomfortably. “But only if you accept it; It'll be your choice.”

There was something magical about that necklace; I hadn't noticed until it was gone. The pendant was obviously important to Mama; she'd worn it every day. And I wanted to have that piece of her back. Furthermore, my family had secrets; secrets kept from me. If I wanted them to

share those confidences I had to prove I deserved that trust. Right now, I was teetering on the edge of sanity.

I needed to regain my strength, mentally and physically. I took a deep breath and pushed myself to my feet.

“I-I,” I struggled to speak. “I’m hungry. B-barley rolls?”

Papa’s shoulders relaxed and he smiled. “How about a pie?”

“Welcome back.” Rubia pulled me into a fierce hug. I wrapped my arms around her, daring to let determination and hope start to grow deep inside me. I started formulating a new plan; I would find out the truth of my family’s secrets and what treachery the scrolls contained.



*The Thorn Raid* is a prequel to the [The Unchosen Trilogy](#), an epic adventure full of magic, a curse, and a thread of romance. *The Lilac Plague* unfolds two years later, when Nicoleta Aurelian comes out of mourning. Discover the truth of the golden pendant, the Guardians meant to protect it, and how the lies keeping the emperor on the throne are also pushing the kingdom to the edge of destruction!

