

Daughter of

**SNEAK
PREVIEW INSIDE:
DAYS OF
BLOOD & STARLIGHT**

**SMOKE
&
BONFIRE**

*"You won't want to put it down."
—Entertainment Weekly*

LAINI TAYLOR

Daughter of
SMOKE
&
BONE

Laini Taylor



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[**Begin Reading**](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[*A Preview of Days of Blood & Starlight*](#)

[Newsletters](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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*For Jane,
for a whole new world of possibilities*

Once upon a time, an angel and a devil fell in love.



It did not end well.

Walking to school over the snow-muffled cobbles, Karou had no sinister premonitions about the day. It seemed like just another Monday, innocent but for its essential Mondayness, not to mention its Januaryness. It was cold, and it was dark—in the dead of winter the sun didn't rise until eight—but it was also lovely. The falling snow and the early hour conspired to paint Prague ghostly, like a tintype photograph, all silver and haze.

On the riverfront thoroughfare, trams and buses roared past, grounding the day in the twenty-first century, but on the quieter lanes, the wintry peace might have hailed from another time. Snow and stone and ghostlight, Karou's own footsteps and the feather of steam from her coffee mug, and she was alone and adrift in mundane thoughts: school, errands. The occasional cheek-chew of bitterness when a pang of heartache intruded, as pangs of heartache will, but she pushed them aside, resolute, ready to be done with all that.

She held her coffee mug in one hand and clutched her coat closed with the other. An artist's portfolio was slung over her shoulder, and her hair—loose, long, and peacock blue—was gathering a lace of snowflakes.

Just another day.

And then.

A snarl, rushing footfall, and she was seized from behind, pulled hard against a man's broad chest as hands yanked her scarf askew and she felt teeth—*teeth*—against her neck.

Nibbling.

Her attacker was *nibbling* her.

Annoyed, she tried to shake him off without spilling her coffee, but some sloshed out of her cup anyway, into the dirty snow.

“Jesus, Kaz, get off,” she snapped, spinning to face her ex-boyfriend. The lamplight was soft on his beautiful face. *Stupid beauty*, she thought, shoving him away. *Stupid face*.

“How did you know it was me?” he asked.

“It's always you. And it never works.”

Kazimir made his living jumping out from behind things, and it frustrated him that he could never get even the slightest rise out of Karou. “You're impossible to scare,” he complained, giving her the pout he thought was irresistible. Until recently, she wouldn't have resisted it. She would have risen on tiptoe and licked his pout-puckered lower lip, licked it languorously and then taken it between her teeth and teased it before losing herself in a kiss that made her melt against him like sun-warmed honey.

Those days were so over.

“Maybe you're just not scary,” she said, and walked on.

Kaz caught up and strolled at her side, hands in pockets. “I *am* scary, though. The snarl? The bite? Anyone normal would have a heart attack. Just not you, ice water for blood.”

When she ignored him, he added, “Josef and I are starting a new tour. Old Town *vampire* tour. The

tourists will eat it up.”

They would, thought Karou. They paid good money for Kaz’s “ghost tours,” which consisted of being herded through the tangled lanes of Prague in the dark, pausing at sites of supposed murders so “ghosts” could leap out of doorways and make them shriek. She’d played a ghost herself on several occasions, had held aloft a bloody head and moaned while the tourists’ screams gave way to laughter. It had been fun.

Kaz had been fun. Not anymore. “Good luck with that,” she said, staring ahead, her voice colorless.

“We could use you,” Kaz said.

“No.”

“You could play a sexy vampire vixen—”

“No.”

“Lure in the men—”

“No.”

“You could wear your cape....”

Karou stiffened.

Softly, Kaz coaxed, “You still have it, don’t you, baby? Most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen, you with that black silk against your white skin—”

“Shut up,” she hissed, coming to a halt in the middle of Maltese Square. *God*, she thought. How stupid had she been to fall for this petty, pretty street actor, dress up for him and give him memories like that? Exquisitely stupid.

Lonely stupid.

Kaz lifted his hand to brush a snowflake from her eyelashes. She said, “Touch me and you’ll get this coffee in your face.”

He lowered his hand. “Roo, Roo, my fierce Karou. When will you stop fighting me? I said I was sorry.”

“Be sorry, then. Just be sorry somewhere else.” They spoke in Czech, and her acquired accent matched his native one perfectly.

He sighed, irritated that Karou was still resisting his apologies. This wasn’t in his script. “Come on,” he coaxed. His voice was rough and soft at the same time, like a blues singer’s mix of gravel and silk. “We’re meant to be together, you and me.”

Meant. Karou sincerely hoped that if she were “meant” for anyone, it wasn’t Kaz. She looked at him, beautiful Kazimir whose smile used to work on her like a summons, compelling her to his side. And that had seemed a glorious place to be, as if colors were brighter there, sensations more profound. It had also, she’d discovered, been a *popular* place, other girls occupying it when she did not.

“Get Svetla to be your vampire vixen,” she said. “She’s got the vixen part down.”

He looked pained. “I don’t want Svetla. I want you.”

“Alas. I am not an option.”

“Don’t say that,” he said, reaching for her hand.

She pulled back, a pang of heartache surging in spite of all her efforts at aloofness. *Not worth it*, she told herself. *Not even close*. “This is the definition of stalking, you realize.”

“Puh. I’m not stalking you. I happen to be going this way.”

“Right,” said Karou. They were just a few doors from her school now. The Art Lyceum of Bohemia was a private high school housed in a pink Baroque palace where famously, during the Nazi occupation, two young Czech nationalists had slit the throat of a Gestapo commander and scrawled *liberty* with his blood. A brief, brave rebellion before they were captured and impaled upon the finial

of the courtyard gate. Now students were milling around that very gate, smoking, waiting for friends. But Kaz wasn't a student—at twenty, he was several years older than Karou—and she had never known him to be out of bed before noon. “Why are you even awake?”

“I have a new job,” he said. “It starts early.”

“What, you're doing *morning* vampire tours?”

“Not that. Something else. An... *unveiling* of sorts.” He was grinning now. Gloating. He wanted her to ask what his new job was.

She wouldn't ask. With perfect disinterest she said, “Well, have fun with that,” and walked away.

Kaz called after her, “Don't you want to know what it is?” The grin was still there. She could hear it in his voice.

“Don't care,” she called back, and went through the gate.

• • •

She really should have asked.

Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, Karou's first class was life drawing. When she walked into the studio, her friend Zuzana was already there and had staked out easels for them in front of the model's platform. Karou shrugged off her portfolio and coat, unwound her scarf, and announced, "I'm being stalked."

Zuzana arched an eyebrow. She was a master of the eyebrow arch, and Karou envied her for it. Her own eyebrows did not function independently of each other, which handicapped her expressions of suspicion and disdain.

Zuzana could do both perfectly, but this was milder eyebrow action, mere cool curiosity. "Don't tell me Jackass tried to scare you again."

"He's going through a vampire phase. He bit my neck."

"Actors," muttered Zuzana. "I'm telling you, you need to tase the loser. Teach him to go jumping out at people."

"I don't have a Taser." Karou didn't add that she didn't need a Taser; she was more than capable of defending herself without electricity. She'd had an unusual education.

"Well, get one. Seriously. Bad behavior should be punished. Plus, it would be fun. Don't you think I've always wanted to tase someone. *Zap!*" Zuzana mimicked convulsions.

Karou shook her head. "No, tiny violent one, I don't think it would be fun. You're terrible."

"I am not terrible. Kaz is terrible. Tell me I don't have to remind you." She gave Karou a sharp look. "Tell me you're not even considering forgiving him."

"No," declared Karou. "But try getting *him* to believe that." Kaz just couldn't fathom any girl willfully depriving herself of his charms. And what had she done but strengthen his vanity those months they'd been together, gazing at him starry-eyed, giving him... everything? His wooing her now, she thought, was a point of pride, to prove to himself that he could have who he wanted. That it was up to him.

Maybe Zuzana was right. Maybe she *should* tase him.

"Sketchbook," commanded Zuzana, holding out her hand like a surgeon for a scalpel.

Karou's best friend was bossy in obverse proportion to her size. She only passed five feet in her platform boots, whereas Karou was five foot six but seemed taller in the same way that ballerinas do, with their long necks and willowy limbs. She wasn't a ballerina, but she had the look, in figure if not in fashion. Not many ballerinas have bright blue hair or a constellation of tattoos on their limbs, and Karou had both.

The only tattoos visible as she dug out her sketchbook and handed it over were the ones on her wrists like bracelets—a single word on each: *true* and *story*.

As Zuzana took the book, a couple of other students, Pavel and Dina, crowded in to look over her shoulder. Karou's sketchbooks had a cult following around school and were handed around and marveled at on a daily basis. This one—number ninety-two in a lifelong series—was bound with rubber bands, and as soon as Zuzana took them off it burst open, each page so coated in gesso and

paint that the binding could scarcely contain them. As it fanned open, Karou's trademark characters wavered on the pages, gorgeously rendered and deeply strange.

There was Issa, serpent from the waist down and woman from the waist up, with the bare, globe breasts of Kama Sutra carvings, the hood and fangs of a cobra, and the face of an angel.

Giraffe-necked Twiga, hunched over with his jeweler's glass stuck in one squinting eye.

Yasri, parrot-beaked and human-eyed, a frill of orange curls escaping her kerchief. She was carrying a platter of fruit and a pitcher of wine.

And Brimstone, of course—he was the star of the sketchbooks. Here he was shown with Kishmish perched on the curl of one of his great ram's horns. In the fantastical stories Karou told in her sketchbooks, Brimstone dealt in wishes. Sometimes she called him the Wishmonger; other times, simply “the grump.”

She'd been drawing these creatures since she was a little girl, and her friends tended to talk about them as if they were real. “What was Brimstone up to this weekend?” asked Zuzana.

“The usual,” said Karou. “Buying teeth from murderers. He got some Nile crocodile teeth yesterday from this awful Somali poacher, but the idiot tried to steal from him and got half strangled by his snake collar. He's lucky to be alive.”

Zuzana found the story illustrated on the book's last drawn pages: the Somali, his eyes rolling back in his head as the whip-thin snake around his neck cinched itself as tight as a garrote. Humans, Karou had explained before, had to submit to wearing one of Issa's serpents around their necks before they could enter Brimstone's shop. That way if they tried anything fishy they were easy to subdue—by strangulation, which wasn't always fatal, or, if necessary, by a bite to the throat, which was.

“How do you make this stuff up, maniac?” Zuzana asked, all jealous wonderment.

“Who says I do? I keep telling you, it's all real.”

“Uh-huh. And your hair grows out of your head that color, too.”

“What? It totally does,” said Karou, passing a long blue strand through her fingers.

“Right.”

Karou shrugged and gathered her hair back in a messy coil, stabbing a paintbrush through it to secure it at the nape of her neck. In fact, her hair did grow out of her head that color, pure as ultramarine straight from the paint tube, but that was a truth she told with a certain wry smile, as if she were being absurd. Over the years she'd found that that was all it took, that lazy smile, and she could tell the truth without risk of being believed. It was easier than keeping track of lies, and so it became part of who she was: Karou with her wry smile and crazy imagination.

In fact, it was not her imagination that was crazy. It was her life—blue hair and Brimstone and all

Zuzana handed the book to Pavel and started flipping pages in her own oversize drawing pad, searching for a fresh page. “I wonder who's posing today.”

“Probably Wiktor,” said Karou. “We haven't had him in a while.”

“I know. I'm hoping he's dead.”

“Zuzana!”

“What? He's eight million years old. We might as well draw the anatomical skeleton as that creepy bonesack.”

There were some dozen models, male and female, all shapes and ages, who rotated through the class. They ranged from enormous Madame Svobodnik, whose flesh was more landscape than figure, to pixie Eliska with her wasp waist, the favorite of the male students. Ancient Wiktor was Zuzana's least favorite. She claimed to have nightmares whenever she had to draw him.

“He looks like an unwrapped mummy.” She shuddered. “I ask you, is staring at a naked old man

any way to start the day?"

"Better than getting attacked by a vampire," said Karou.

In fact, she didn't mind drawing Wiktor. For one thing, he was so nearsighted he never made eye contact with the students, which was a bonus. No matter that she had been drawing nudes for years; she still found it unsettling, sketching one of the younger male models, to look up from a study of his penis—a necessary study; you couldn't exactly leave the area blank—and find him staring back at her. Karou had felt her cheeks flame on plenty of occasions and ducked behind her easel.

Those occasions, as it turned out, were about to fade into insignificance next to the mortification of today.

She was sharpening a pencil with a razor blade when Zuzana blurted in a weird, choked voice, "Oh my god, Karou!"

And before she even looked up, she knew.

An *unveiling*, he had said. Oh, how clever. She lifted her gaze from her pencil and took in the sight of Kaz standing beside Profesorka Fiala. He was barefoot and wearing a robe, and his shoulder-length golden hair, which had minutes before been wind-teased and sparkling with snowflakes, was pulled back in a ponytail. His face was a perfect blend of Slavic angles and soft sensuality: cheekbones that might have been turned on a diamond cutter's lathe, lips you wanted to touch with your fingertips to see if they felt like velvet. Which, Karou knew, they did. Stupid lips.

Murmurs went around the room. *A new model, oh my god, gorgeous...*

One murmur cut through the others: "Isn't that Karou's boyfriend?"

Ex, she wanted to snap. So very, very *ex*.

"I think it is. *Look* at him...."

Karou *was* looking at him, her face frozen in what she hoped was a mask of impervious calm. *Don't blush*, she commanded herself. *Do not blush*. Kaz looked right back at her, a smile dimpling one cheek, eyes lazy and amused. And when he was sure he held her gaze, he had the nerve to wink.

A flurry of giggles erupted around Karou.

"Oh, the evil bastard..." Zuzana breathed.

Kaz stepped up onto the model's platform. He looked straight at Karou as he untied his sash; he looked at her as he shrugged off the robe. And then Karou's ex-boyfriend was standing before her entire class, beautiful as heartbreak, naked as the *David*. And on his chest, right over his heart, was a new tattoo.

It was an elaborate cursive *K*.

More giggles burst forth. Students didn't know who to look at, Karou or Kazimir, and glanced from one to the other, waiting for a drama to unfold. "Quiet!" commanded Profesorka Fiala, appalled, clapping her hands together until the laughter was stifled. Karou's blush came on then. She couldn't stop it. First her chest and neck went hot, then her face. Kaz's eyes were on her the whole time, and his dimple deepened with satisfaction when he saw her flustered.

"One-minute poses, please, Kazimir," said Fiala.

Kaz stepped into his first pose. It was dynamic, as the one-minute poses were meant to be—twisted torso, taut muscles, limbs stretched in simulation of action. These warm-up sketches were all about movement and loose line, and Kaz was taking the opportunity to flaunt himself. Karou thought she didn't hear a lot of pencils scratching. Were the other girls in the class just staring stupidly, as she was?

She dipped her head, took up her sharp pencil—thinking of other uses she would happily put it to—and started to sketch. Quick, fluid lines, and all the sketches on one page; she overlapped them so the

looked like an illustration of dance.

Kaz was graceful. He spent enough time looking in the mirror that he knew how to use his body for effect. It was his instrument, he'd have said. Along with the voice, the body was an actor's tool. Well, Kaz was a lousy actor—which was why he got by on ghost tours and the occasional low-budget production of *Faust*—but he made a fine artist's model, as Karou knew, having drawn him many times before.

His body had reminded Karou, from the first time she saw it... unveiled... of a Michelangelo. Unlike some Renaissance artists, who'd favored slim, effete models, Michelangelo had gone for power, drawing broad-shouldered quarry workers and somehow managing to render them both carnal and elegant at the same time. That was Kaz: carnal and elegant.

And deceitful. And narcissistic. And, honestly, kind of dumb.

"Karou!" The British girl Helen was whispering harshly, trying to get her attention. "Is that him?"

Karou didn't acknowledge her. She drew, pretending everything was normal. Just another day in class. And if the model had an insolent dimple and wouldn't take his eyes off her? She ignored it as best she could.

When the timer rang, Kaz calmly gathered up his robe and put it on. Karou hoped it wouldn't occur to him that he was free to walk around the studio. *Stay where you are*, she willed him. But he didn't. He sauntered toward her.

"Hi, Jackass," said Zuzana. "Modest much?"

Ignoring her, he asked Karou, "Like my new tattoo?"

Students were standing up to stretch, but rather than dispersing for smoke or bathroom breaks, they hovered casually within earshot.

"Sure," Karou said, keeping her voice light. "*K* for *Kazimir*, right?"

"Funny girl. You know what it's for."

"Well," she mused in Thinker pose, "I know there's only one person you really love, and his name does start with a *K*. But I can think of a better place for it than your heart." She took up her pencil and on her last drawing of Kaz, inscribed a *K* right over his classically sculpted buttock.

Zuzana laughed, and Kaz's jaw tightened. Like most vain people, he hated to be mocked. "I'm not the only one with a tattoo, am I, Karou?" he asked. He looked to Zuzana. "Has she shown it to you?"

Zuzana gave Karou the suspicious rendition of the eyebrow arch.

"I don't know which you mean," Karou lied calmly. "I have lots of tattoos." To demonstrate, she didn't flash *true* or *story*, or the serpent coiled around her ankle, or any of her other concealed works of art. Rather, she held up her hands in front of her face, palms out. In the center of each was an eye inked in deepest indigo, in effect turning her hands into hamsas, those ancient symbols of warding against the evil eye. Palm tattoos are notorious for fading, but Karou's never did. She'd had these eyes as long as she could remember; for all she knew of their origin, she could have been born with them.

"Not those," said Kaz. "I mean the one that says *Kazimir*, right over your heart."

"I don't have a tattoo like that." She made herself sound puzzled and unfastened the top few buttons of her sweater. Beneath was a camisole, and she lowered it by a few revealing inches to demonstrate that indeed there was no tattoo above her breast. The skin there was white as milk.

Kaz blinked. "What? How did you—?"

"Come with me." Zuzana grabbed Karou's hand and pulled her away. As they wove among the easels, all eyes were on Karou, lit with curiosity.

"Karou, did you break up?" Helen whispered in English, but Zuzana put up her hand in an imperious gesture that silenced her, and she dragged Karou out of the studio and into the girls'

bathroom. There, eyebrow still arched, she asked, "What the hell was that?"

"What?"

"What? You practically flashed the boy."

"Please. I did not flash him."

"Whatever. What's this about a tattoo over your heart?"

"I just showed you. There's nothing there." She saw no reason to add that there *had* been something; she preferred to pretend she had never been so stupid. Plus, explaining how she'd gotten rid of it was not exactly an option.

"Well, good. The last thing you need is that idiot's name on your body. Can you believe him? Does he think if he just dangles his boy bits at you like a cat toy you'll go scampering after him?"

"Of course he thinks that," said Karou. "This is his idea of a romantic gesture."

"All you have to do is tell Fiala he's a stalker, and she'll throw his ass out."

Karou had thought of that, but she shook her head. Surely she could come up with a better way to get Kaz out of her class and out of her life. She had means at her disposal that most people didn't. She'd think of something.

"The boy is not terrible to draw, though." Zuzana went to the mirror and flipped wisps of dark hair across her forehead. "Got to give him that."

"Yeah. Too bad he's such a gargantuan asshole."

"A giant, stupid orifice," Zuzana agreed.

"A walking, talking cranny."

"Cranny." Zuzana laughed. "I like."

An idea came to Karou, and a faintly villainous smirk crossed her face.

"What?" asked Zuzana, seeing it.

"Nothing. We'd better get back in there."

"You're sure? You don't have to."

Karou nodded. "Nothing to it."

Kaz had gotten all the satisfaction he was going to get from this cute little ploy of his. It was her turn now. Walking back into the studio, she reached up and touched the necklace she was wearing, a multistrand loop of African trade beads in every color. At least they looked like African trade beads. They were more than that. Not much more, but enough for what Karou had planned.

Profesorka Fiala asked Kaz for a reclining pose for the rest of the period, and he draped himself back across the daybed in a way that, if not quite lewd, was certainly suggestive, knees just a bit too skewed, smile bordering on bedroom. There were no titters this time, but Karou imagined a surge of heat in the atmosphere, as if the girls in the class—and at least one of the boys—needed to fan themselves. She herself was not affected. This time when Kaz peered at her from under lazy eyelids, she met his gaze straight on.

She started sketching and did her best, thinking it fitting that, since their relationship had begun with a drawing, it should end with one, too.

He'd been sitting two tables away at Mustache Bar the first time she saw him. He wore a villain's twirled mustache, which seemed like foreshadowing now, but it was Mustache Bar after all. Everyone was wearing mustaches—Karou was sporting a Fu Manchu she'd gotten from the vending machine. She'd pasted both mustaches into her sketchbook later that night—sketchbook number ninety—and the resulting lump made it easy to locate the exact page where her story with Kaz began.

He'd been drinking beer with friends, and Karou, unable to take her eyes off him, had drawn him. She was always drawing, not just Brimstone and the other creatures from her secret life, but scenes and people from the common world. Falconers and street musicians, Orthodox priests with beards to their bellies, the occasional beautiful boy.

Usually she got away with it, her subjects none the wiser, but this time the beautiful boy caught her looking, and the next thing she knew he was smiling under his fake mustache and coming over. How flattered he'd been by her sketch! He'd shown it to his friends, taken her hand to urge her to join them and kept hold of it, fingers laced with hers, even after she'd settled at his table. That was the beginning: her worshipping his beauty, him reveling in it. And that was more or less how it had continued.

Of course, he'd told her she was beautiful, too, all the time. If she hadn't been, surely he'd never have come over to talk to her in the first place. Kaz wasn't exactly one to look for *inner* beauty. Karou was, simply, lovely. Creamy and leggy, with long azure hair and the eyes of a silent-movie star, she moved like a poem and smiled like a sphinx. Beyond merely pretty, her face was vibrantly alive, her gaze always sparking and luminous, and she had a birdlike way of cocking her head, her lips pressed together while her dark eyes danced, that hinted at secrets and mysteries.

Karou was mysterious. She had no apparent family, she never talked about herself, and she was expert at evading questions—for all that her friends knew of her background, she might have sprung whole from the head of Zeus. And she was endlessly surprising. Her pockets were always spilling out curious things: ancient bronze coins, teeth, tiny jade tigers no bigger than her thumbnail. She might reveal, while haggling for sunglasses with an African street vendor, that she spoke fluent Yoruba. Once, Kaz had undressed her to discover a knife hidden in her boot. There was the matter of her being impossible to scare and, of course, there were the scars on her abdomen: three shiny divots that could only have been made by bullets.

“Who *are* you?” Kaz had sometimes asked, enchanted, to which Karou would wistfully reply, “I really don’t know.”

Because she really didn’t.

She drew quickly now, and didn’t shy away from meeting Kaz’s eyes as she glanced up and down between model and drawing. She wanted to see his face.

She wanted to see the moment his expression changed.

Only when she had captured his pose did she lift her left hand—continuing to draw with her right—to the beads of her necklace. She took one between her thumb and forefinger and held it there.

And then she made a wish.

It was a very small wish. These beads were just scuppies, after all. Like money, wishes came in denominations, and scuppies were mere pennies. Weaker even than pennies, because unlike coins, wishes couldn’t be compounded. Pennies you could add up to make dollars, but scuppies were only ever just scuppies, and whole strands of them, like this necklace, would never add up to a more potent wish, just plenty of very small, nearly useless wishes.

Wishes, for example, for things like *itches*.

Karou wished Kaz an itch, and the bead vanished between her fingers. Spent and gone. She’d never wished an itch before, so, to make sure it would work, she started with a spot he wouldn’t be shy to scratch: his elbow. Sure enough, he nudged it casually against a cushion, scarcely shifting his pose. Karou smiled to herself and kept drawing.

A few seconds later, she took another bead between her fingers and wished another itch, this time to Kaz’s nose. Another bead disappeared, the necklace shortened imperceptibly, and his face twitched. For a few seconds he resisted moving, but then gave in and rubbed his nose quickly with the back of his hand before resuming his position. His bedroom expression was gone, Karou couldn’t help noticing. She had to bite her lip to keep her smile from broadening.

Oh, Kazimir, she thought, you shouldn’t have come here today. You really should have slept in.

The next itch she wished to the hidden place of her evil plan, and she met Kaz’s eyes at the moment it hit. His brow creased with sudden strain. She cocked her head slightly, as if to inquire, *Something wrong, dear?*

Here was an itch that could not be scratched in public. Kaz went pale. His hips shifted; he couldn’t quite manage to hold still. Karou gave him a short respite and kept drawing. As soon as he started to relax and... unclench... she struck again and had to stifle a laugh when his face went rigid.

Another bead vanished between her fingers.

Then another.

This, she thought, isn’t just for today. It’s for everything. For the heartache that still felt like a punch in the gut each time it struck, fresh as new, at unpredictable moments; for the smiling lies and the mental images she couldn’t shake; for the shame of having been so naive.

For the way loneliness is worse when you return to it after a reprieve—like the soul’s version of putting on a wet bathing suit, clammy and miserable.

And this, Karou thought, no longer smiling, is for the irretrievable.

For her virginity.

That first time, the black cape and nothing under it, she’d felt so grown up—like the Czech girls Kaz and Josef hung out with, cool Slavic beauties with names like Svetla and Frantiska, who looked like nothing could ever shock them or make them laugh. Had she really wanted to be like them? She’d pretended to be, played the part of a girl—a *woman*—who didn’t care. She’d treated her virginity like a trapping of childhood, and then it was gone.

She hadn't expected to be sorry, and at first she wasn't. The act itself was neither disappointing nor magical; it was what it was: a new closeness. A shared secret.

Or so she'd thought.

"You look different, Karou," Kaz's friend Josef had said the next time she saw him. "Are you... glowing?"

Kaz had punched him on the shoulder to silence him, looking at once sheepish and smug, and Karou knew he'd told. The girls, even. Their ruby lips had curled knowingly. Svetla—the one she later caught him with—even made a straight-faced comment about capes coming back in fashion, and Kaz had colored slightly and looked away, the only indication that he knew he'd done wrong.

Karou had never even told Zuzana about it, at first because it belonged to her and Kaz alone, and later because she was ashamed. She hadn't told anyone, but Brimstone, in the inscrutable way he had of *knowing things*, had guessed, and had taken the opportunity to give her a rare lecture.

That had been interesting.

The Wishmonger's voice was so deep it seemed almost the shadow of sound: a dark sonance that lurked in the lowest register of hearing. "I don't know many rules to live by," he'd said. "But here's one. It's simple. Don't put anything unnecessary into yourself. No poisons or chemicals, no fumes or smoke or alcohol, no sharp objects, no inessential needles—drug *or* tattoo—and... no inessential penises, either."

"*Inessential penises?*" Karou had repeated, delighted with the phrase in spite of her grief. "Is there any such thing as an *essential* one?"

"When an essential one comes along, you'll know," he'd replied. "Stop squandering yourself, child. Wait for love."

"Love." Her delight evaporated. She'd thought that *was* love.

"It will come, and you will know it," Brimstone had promised, and she so wanted to believe him. He'd been alive for hundreds of years, hadn't he? Karou had never before thought about Brimstone and love—to look at him, he didn't seem such a candidate for it—but she hoped that in his centuries of life he'd accrued some wisdom, and that he was right about her.

Because, of all things in the world, that was her orphan's craving: *love*. And she certainly hadn't gotten it from Kaz.

Her pencil point snapped, so hard was she bearing down on her drawing, and at the same moment burst of anger converted itself to a rapid-fire volley of itches that shortened her necklace to a choker and sent Kaz scrambling off the model stand. Karou released her necklace and watched him. He was already to the door, robe in hand, and he opened it and darted out, still naked in his haste to get away and find a place where he could attend to his humiliating misery.

The door swung shut and the class was left blinking at the empty daybed. Profesorka Fiala was peering over the rim of her glasses at the door, and Karou was ashamed of herself.

Maybe that was too much.

"What's with Jackass?" Zuzana asked.

"No idea," said Karou, looking down at her drawing. There on the paper was Kaz in all his carnality and elegance, looking like he was waiting for a lover to come to him. It could have been a good drawing, but she'd ruined it. Her line work had darkened and lost all subtlety, finally ending in a chaotic scribble that blotted out his... *inessential penis*. She wondered what Brimstone would think of her now. He was always reprimanding her for injudicious use of wishes—most recently the one that had made Svetla's eyebrows thicken overnight until they looked like caterpillars and grew right back the moment they were tweezed.

“Women have been burned at the stake for less, Karou,” he’d said.

Lucky for me, she thought, this isn’t the Middle Ages.

The rest of the school day was uneventful. A double period of chemistry and color lab, followed by master drawing and lunch, after which Zuzana went to puppetry and Karou to painting, both three-hour studio classes that released them into the same full winter dark by which they'd arrived that morning.

"Poison?" inquired Zuzana as they stepped out the door.

"You have to ask?" said Karou. "I'm starved."

They bent their heads against the icy wind and headed toward the river.

The streets of Prague were a fantasia scarcely touched by the twenty-first century—or the twentieth or nineteenth, for that matter. It was a city of alchemists and dreamers, its medieval cobbles once trodden by golems, mystics, invading armies. Tall houses glowed goldenrod and carmine and eggshell blue, embellished with Rococo plasterwork and capped in roofs of uniform red. Baroque cupolas were the soft green of antique copper, and Gothic steeples stood ready to impale fallen angels. The wind carried the memory of magic, revolution, violins, and the cobbled lanes meandered like creeks. Thugs wore Mozart wigs and pushed chamber music on street corners, and marionettes hung in windows, making the whole city seem like a theater with unseen puppeteers crouched behind velvet.

Above it all loomed the castle on the hill, its silhouette as sharp as thorns. By night it was floodlit and bathed in eerie light, and this evening the sky hung low, full-bellied with snow, making gauzy halos around the street lamps.

Down by the Devil's Stream, Poison Kitchen was a place rarely stumbled upon by chance; you had to know it was there, and duck under an unmarked stone arch into a walled graveyard, beyond which glowed the lamp-lit windowpanes of the cafe.

Unfortunately, tourists no longer had to rely on chance to discover the place; the latest edition of the Lonely Planet guide had outed it to the world—

The church once attached to this medieval priory burned down some three hundred years ago, but the monks' quarters remain, and have been converted to the strangest cafe you'll find anywhere, crowded with classical statues all sporting the owner's collection of WWI gas masks. Legend has it that back in the Middle Ages, the cook lost his mind and murdered the whole priory with a poisoned vat of goulash, hence the cafe's ghoulish name and signature dish: goulash, of course. Sit on a velvet sofa and prop your feet up on a coffin. The skulls behind the bar may or may not belong to the murdered monks....

—and for the past half year backpackers had been poking their heads through the arch, looking for some morbid Prague to write postcards about.

This evening, though, the girls found it quiet. In the corner a foreign couple was taking pictures of their children wearing gas masks, and a few men hunched at the bar, but most of the tables—coffins, flanked by low velvet settees—were unoccupied. Roman statues were everywhere, life-size gods and nymphs with missing arms and wings, and in the middle of the room stood a copy of the huge equestrian Marcus Aurelius from Capitoline Hill.

"Oh, good, Pestilence is free," said Karou, heading toward the sculpture. Massive emperor and

horse both wore gas masks, like every other statue in the place, and it had always put Karou in mind of the first horseman of the Apocalypse, Pestilence, sowing plague with one outstretched arm. The girls preferred table was in its shadow, having the benefit of both privacy and a view of the bar—through the horse’s legs—so they could see if anyone interesting came in.

They dropped their portfolios and hung their coats from Marcus Aurelius’s stone fingertips. The one-eyed owner raised his hand from behind the bar, and they waved back.

They’d been coming here for two and a half years, since they were fifteen and in their first year at the Lyceum. Karou had been new to Prague and had known no one. Her Czech was freshly acquired (by *wish*, not study; Karou collected languages, and that’s what Brimstone always gave her for her birthday) and it had still tasted strange on her tongue, like a new spice.

She’d been at a boarding school in England before that, and though she was capable of a flawless British accent, she had stuck with the American one she’d developed as a child, so that was what her classmates had thought she was. In truth, she had claim to no nationality. Her papers were all forgeries, and her accents—all except one, in her first language, which was not of human origin—were all fakes.

Zuzana was Czech, from a long line of marionette artisans in Český Krumlov, the little jewel box of a city in southern Bohemia. Her older brother had shocked the family by going into the army, but Zuzana had puppets in the blood and was carrying on the family tradition. Like Karou, she’d known no one else at school and, as fortune would have it, early in the first term they’d been paired up to paint a mural for a local primary school. That had entailed a week of evenings spent up ladders, and they’d taken to going to Poison Kitchen afterward. This was where their friendship had taken root, and when the mural was finished, the owner had hired them to paint a scene of skeletons on toilets in the cafe’s bathroom. He’d paid them a month of suppers for their labor, ensuring they would keep coming back, and a couple of years later, they still were.

They ordered bowls of goulash, which they ate while discussing Kaz’s stunt, their chemistry teacher’s nose hair—which Zuzana asserted was braidable—and ideas for their semester projects. Soon, talk shifted to the handsome new violinist in the orchestra of the Marionette Theatre of Prague.

“He has a girlfriend,” lamented Zuzana.

“What? How do you know?”

“He’s always texting on his breaks.”

“That’s your evidence? Flimsy. Maybe he secretly fights crime, and he’s texting infuriating riddles to his nemesis,” suggested Karou.

“Yes, I’m sure that’s it. *Thank you.*”

“I’m just saying, there could be other explanations than a girlfriend. Anyway, since when are you shy? Just talk to him already!”

“And say what? *Nice fiddling, handsome man?*”

“Absolutely.”

Zuzana snorted. She worked as an assistant to the theater’s puppeteers on the weekends and had developed a crush on the violinist some weeks before Christmas. Though not usually bashful, she had yet to even speak to him. “He probably thinks I’m a kid,” she said. “You don’t know what it’s like, being child-size.”

“Marionette-size,” said Karou, who felt no pity whatsoever. She thought Zuzana’s tininess was perfect, like a fairy you found in the woods and wanted to put in your pocket. Though in Zuzana’s case the fairy was likely to be rabid, and *bite*.

“Yeah, Zuzana the marvelous human marionette. Watch her dance.” Zuzana did a jerky, puppetlike

version of ballet arms.

Inspired, Karou said, “Hey! That’s what you should do for your project. Make a giant puppeteer, and you be the marionette. You know? You could make it so that when you move, it’s like, I don’t know, reverse puppetry. Has anyone done that before? You’re the puppet, dancing from strings, but really it’s your movements that are making the puppeteer’s hands move?”

Zuzana had been lifting a piece of bread to her mouth, and she paused. Karou knew by the way her friend’s eyes went dreamy that she was envisioning it. She said, “That would be a really big puppet.”

“I could do your makeup, like a little marionette ballerina.”

“Are you sure you want to give it to me? It’s your idea.”

“What, like I’m going to make a giant marionette? It’s all yours.”

“Well, thanks. Do you have any ideas for yours yet?”

Karou didn’t. Last semester when she’d taken costuming she had constructed angel wings that she could wear on a harness, rigged to operate by a pulley system so she could lift and lower them. Fully unfolded, they gave her a wingspan of twelve magnificent feet. She’d worn them to show Brimstone, but had never even made it in to see him. Issa had stopped her in the vestibule and—gentle Issa!—had actually *hissed* at her, cobra hood flaring open in a way Karou had seen only a couple of times in her whole life. “An *angel*, of all abominations! Get them off! Oh, sweet girl, I can’t stand the sight of you like that.” It was all very odd. The wings hung above the bed now in Karou’s tiny flat, taking up one entire wall.

This semester she needed to come up with a theme for a series of paintings, but so far nothing had set her mind on fire. As she was pondering ideas, she heard the tinkle of bells on the door. A few moments later, three men came in, and a darting shadow behind them caught Karou’s eye. It was the size and shape of a crow, but it was nothing so mundane.

It was Kishmish.

She straightened up and cast a quick glance at her friend. Zuzana was sketching puppet ideas in her notebook and barely responded when Karou excused herself. She went into the bathroom and the shadow followed, low and unseen.

Brimstone’s messenger had the body and beak of a crow but the membranous wings of a bat, and his tongue, when it flicked out, was forked. He looked like an escapee from a Hieronymus Bosch painting, and he was clutching a note with his feet. When Karou took it, she saw that his little knifelike talons had pierced the paper through.

She unfolded it and read the message, which took all of two seconds, as it said only, *Errand requiring immediate attention. Come.*

“He never says please,” she remarked to Kishmish.

The creature cocked his head to one side, crow-style, as if to inquire, *Are you coming?*

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” said Karou. “Don’t I always?”

To Zuzana, a moment later, she said, “I have to go.”

“What?” Zuzana looked up from her sketchbook. “But, dessert.” It was there on the coffin: two plates of apple strudel, along with tea.

“Oh, damn,” said Karou. “I can’t. I have an errand.”

“You and your errands. What do you have to do, so all of a sudden?” She glanced at Karou’s phone sitting on the coffin, and knew she had gotten no phone call.

“Just things,” said Karou, and Zuzana let it drop, knowing from experience that she’d get no specifics.

Karou had things to do. Sometimes they took a few hours; other times, she was gone for days and

returned weary and disheveled, maybe pale, maybe sunburned, or with a limp, or possibly a bite mark and once with an unshakable fever that had turned out to be malaria.

“Just where did you happen to pick up a tropical disease?” Zuzana had demanded, to which Karou had replied, “Oh, I don’t know. On the tram, maybe? This old woman did sneeze right in my face the other day.”

“That is *not* how you get malaria.”

“I know. It was gross, though. I’m thinking of getting a moped so I don’t have to take the tram anymore.”

And that was the end of that discussion. Part of being friends with Karou was resignation to never really knowing her. Now Zuzana sighed and said, “Fine. Two strudels for me. Any resulting fat is your fault,” and Karou left Poison Kitchen, the shadow of an almost-crow darting out the door before her.

Kishmish took to the sky and was gone in a flutter. Karou watched, wishing she could follow. What magnitude of wish, she wondered, would it take to endow her with flight?

One far more powerful than she'd ever have access to.

Brimstone wasn't stingy with scuppies. He let her refresh her necklace as often as she liked from his chipped teacups full of beads, and he paid her in bronze shings for the errands she ran for him. A shing was the next denomination of wish, and it could do more than a scuppy—Svetla's caterpillar eyebrows were a case in point, as were Karou's tattoo removal and her blue hair—but she had never gotten her hands on a wish that could work any real magic. She never would, either, unless she earned it, and she knew too well how humans earned wishes. Chiefly: hunting, graverobbing, and murder.

Oh, and there was one other way: a particular form of self-mutilation involving pliers and a deep commitment.

It wasn't like in the storybooks. No witches lurked at crossroads disguised as crones, waiting to reward travelers who shared their bread. Genies didn't burst from lamps, and talking fish didn't bargain for their lives. In all the world, there was only one place humans could get wishes: Brimstone's shop. And there was only one currency he accepted. It wasn't gold, or riddles, or kindness, or any other fairy-tale nonsense, and no, it wasn't souls, either. It was weirder than any of that.

It was teeth.

Karou crossed the Charles Bridge and took the tram north to the Jewish Quarter, a medieval ghetto that had given way to a dense concentration of Art Nouveau apartment buildings as pretty as cakes. Her destination was the service entrance in the rear of one of them. The plain metal door didn't look like anything special, and in and of itself, it wasn't. If you opened it from without, it revealed only a mildewed laundry room. But Karou didn't open it. She knocked and waited, because when the door was opened from *within*, it had the potential to lead someplace quite different.

It swung open and there was Issa, looking just as she did in Karou's sketchbooks, like a snake goddess in some ancient temple. Her serpent coils were withdrawn into the shadows of a small vestibule. "Blessings, darling."

"Blessings," Karou returned fondly, kissing her cheek. "Did Kishmish make it back?"

"He did," said Issa, "and he felt like an icicle on my shoulder. Come in now. It's freezing in your city." She was guardian of the threshold, and she ushered Karou inside, closing the door behind her so the two of them were alone in a space no bigger than a closet. The outer door of the vestibule had to seal completely before the inner one could be opened, in the manner of safety doors at aviaries that prevent birds from escaping. Only, in this case, it wasn't for birds.

"How was your day, sweet girl?" Issa had some half dozen snakes on her person—wound around her arms, roaming through her hair, and one encircling her slim waist like a belly dancer's chain. Anyone seeking entry would have to submit to wearing one around the neck before the inner door would unseal—anyone but Karou, that is. She was the only human who entered the shop uncollared.

She was trusted. After all, she'd grown up in this place.

"It's been a day," Karou sighed. ~~"You won't believe what Kaz did. He showed up to be the model in my drawing class."~~

Issa had not met Kaz, of course, but she knew him the same way Kaz knew her: from Karou's sketchbooks. The difference was that while Kaz thought Issa and her perfect breasts were an erotic figment of Karou's imagination, Issa knew Kaz was real.

She and Twiga and Yasri were as hooked on Karou's sketchbooks as her human friends were, but for the opposite reason. They liked to see the normal things: tourists huddled under umbrellas, chickens on balconies, children playing in the park. And Issa especially was fascinated by the nudes. To her, the human form—plain as it was, and not spliced together with other species—was a missed opportunity. She was always scrutinizing Karou and making such pronouncements as, "I think antlers would suit you, sweet girl," or "You'd make a lovely serpent," in just the way a human might suggest a new hairstyle or shade of lipstick.

Now, Issa's eyes lit up with ferocity. "You mean he came to your school? The scandalous rodent-loaf! Did you draw him? Show me." Outraged or not, she wouldn't miss an opportunity to see Kaz naked.

Karou pulled out her pad and flipped it open.

"You scribbled out the best part," Issa accused.

"Trust me, it's not that great."

Issa giggled into her hand as the shop door creaked open to admit them, and Karou stepped across the threshold. As always, she felt the slightest wave of nausea at the transition.

She was no longer in Prague.

Even though she had lived in Brimstone's shop, she still didn't understand where it was, only that you could enter through doorways all over the world and end up right here. As a child she used to ask Brimstone where exactly "here" was, only to be told brusquely, "*Elsewhere.*"

Brimstone was not a fan of questions.

Wherever it was, the shop was a windowless clutter of shelves that looked like some kind of tooth fairy's dumping ground—if, that is, the tooth fairy trafficked in all species. Viper fangs, canines, grooved elephant molars, overgrown orange incisors from exotic jungle rodents—they were all collected in bins and apothecary chests, strung in garlands that draped from hooks, and sealed in hundreds of jars you could shake like maracas.

The ceiling was vaulted like a crypt's, and small things scurried in the shadows, their tiny claws scritch-scratching on stone. Like Kishmish, these were creatures of disparate parts: scorpion-mice, gecko-crabs, beetle-rats. In the damp around the drains were snails with the heads of bullfrogs, and overhead, the ubiquitous moth-winged hummingbirds hurled themselves at lanterns, setting them swaying with the creak of copper chains.

In the corner, Twiga was bent over his work, his ungainly long neck bowed like a horseshoe as he cleaned teeth and banded them with gold to be strung onto catgut. A clatter came from the kitchen nook that was Yasri's domain.

And off to the left, behind a huge oak desk, was Brimstone himself. Kishmish was perched in his usual place on his master's right horn, and spread out on the desk were trays of teeth and small chests of gems. Brimstone was stringing them into a necklace and did not look up. "Karou," he said. "I believe I wrote 'errand requiring *immediate* attention.' "

"Which is exactly why I came immediately."

"It's been"—he consulted his pocket watch—"forty minutes."

“I was across town. If you want me to travel faster, give me wings, and I’ll race Kishmish back. C
just give me a gaviel, and I’ll wish for flight myself.”

A gaviel was the second most powerful wish, certainly sufficient to grant the power of flight. Sti
bent over his work, Brimstone replied, “I think a flying girl would not go unnoticed in your city.”

“Easily solved,” said Karou. “Give me two gaviels, and I’ll wish for invisibility, too.”

Brimstone looked up. His eyes were those of a crocodile, luteous gold with vertical slit pupils, and
they were not amused. He would not, Karou knew, give her any gaviels. She didn’t ask out of hope,
but because his complaint was so unfair. Hadn’t she come running as soon as he’d called?

“I could trust you with gaviels, could I?” he asked.

“Of course you could. What kind of question is that?”

She felt his appraisal, as if he were mentally reviewing every wish she’d ever made.

Blue hair: frivolous.

Erasing pimples: vain.

Wishing off the light switch so she didn’t have to get out of bed: lazy.

He said, “Your necklace is looking quite short. Have you had a busy day?”

Her hand flew to cover it. Too late. “Why do you have to notice everything?” No doubt the old
devil somehow knew exactly what she’d used these scuppies for and was adding it to his mental list:

Making ex-boyfriend’s cranny itch: vindictive.

“Such pettiness is beneath you, Karou.”

“He deserved it,” she replied, forgetting her earlier shame. Like Zuzana had said, bad behavior
should be punished. She added, “Besides, it’s not like you ask your traders what they’re going to use
their wishes for, and I’m sure they do a hell of a lot worse than make people *itch*.”

“I expect you to be better than them,” Brimstone said simply.

“Are you suggesting that I’m *not*?”

The tooth-traders who came to the shop were, with few exceptions, about the worst specimens
humanity had to offer. Though Brimstone did have a small coterie of longtime associates who did no
turn Karou’s stomach—such as the retired diamond dealer who had on a number of occasions posed a
her grandmother to enroll her in schools—mostly they were a stinking, soul-dead lot with crescents o
gore under their fingernails. They killed and maimed. They carried pliers in their pockets for
extracting the teeth of the dead—and sometimes the living. Karou loathed them, and she was certainl
better than them.

Brimstone said, “Prove that you are, by using wishes for good.”

Nettled, she asked, “Who are you to talk about *good*, anyway?” She gestured to the necklace
clutched in his huge clawed hands. Crocodile teeth—those would be from the Somali. Also wolf fang
horse molars, and hematite beads. “I wonder how many animals died in the world today because of
you. Not to mention people.”

She heard Issa suck in a surprised breath, and she knew she should shut up, but her mouth kept
moving. “No, really. You do business with killers, and you don’t even have to see the corpses they
leave behind. You lurk in here like a troll—”

“Karou,” Brimstone said.

“But I’ve seen them, piles of dead creatures with bloody mouths. Those *girls* with their bloody
mouths; I’ll never forget as long as I live. What’s it all for? What do you do with these teeth? If you
would just tell me, maybe I could understand. There must be a *reason*—”

“*Karou*,” Brimstone said again. He did not say “shut up.” He didn’t have to. His voice conveyed i
clearly enough, on top of which he rose suddenly from his chair.

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