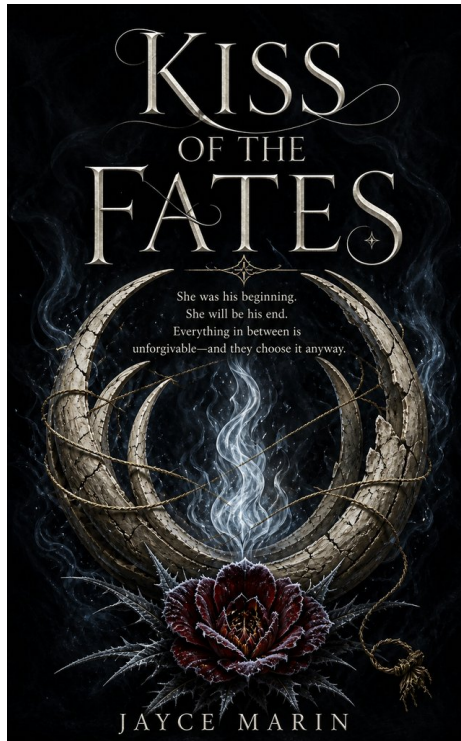




Kiss of the Fates

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FREE SAMPLE · CHAPTER ONE

Chapter One: The Brand-Breaker

The Hollow did not remember its name, but it remembered how to beg.

It crouched by the frozen well with both hands lifted. The fingers had split at every joint and were leaking silver-white crust from under the nails. Its coat had frozen to the shape of the body inside it. The face still had the make of a man who had eaten and slept and been spoken to by somebody, and there was nothing behind it at all.

Edric had been two days behind it.

You did not track a Hollow the ordinary way. They did not always leave prints, and they had no blood in them to spill. What you did was walk until the country went quiet.

The White Lament was never loud, but it had a floor of small sounds under it. Birds shifting in the thorn. Hares breaking the crust. Water working somewhere below the ice at the stream crossings. Where one of these things had been, the floor was gone.

At the second dusk the quiet had a village in the middle of it.

The place had a name. He had read it off a bounty notice nailed to a post nine miles back, in a hand that had gone shaky by the third word, and by the time he reached the first of the cattle sheds he had forgotten it. That happened to him with names. It had happened all his life, and he had stopped taking it as a sign of anything.

Sixty people, maybe. Six houses and a longhouse and a smithy with a cold forge. Every shutter closed. Every door

barred. They had left one thing standing in the square for him.

"Please," it said.

Edric stopped six paces away.

Wind scraped snow over the square and took the tracks of everyone who had run inside. Nobody watched from a window. They never did. What a village wanted from a man like him was the quiet afterward, and they wanted it without having to see how it was got.

Vira paced at his left, low to the ground. Her tawny wings were folded tight against her scarred body. One gold eye stayed on the Hollow. The other side of her face was marked by a pale seam where an old blade had taken the eye years ago.

The Hollow swallowed. Its throat clicked.

"I had a daughter."

Edric's fingers closed around the hilt of his bone-sword.

"You do not," he said.

The thing smiled. Its lips had gone blue. "I did."

It moved without warning. Vira roared.

The Hollow crossed the distance too fast for a dead man. Its shoulder struck Edric's chest. Cold hit him through fur and leather. He went down hard, his back slamming into packed snow. Teeth snapped near his throat.

Edric drove his knee into its stomach. He rolled clear as its claws cut through the place where his face had been. Vira lunged. Her jaws closed around the Hollow's forearm with a wet crack.

The Hollow did not scream. It twisted its broken arm free and came for Edric again. Good. His heel burned inside his boot.

Pain crawled up through the bone, relentless. He'd torn at that scar for years, desperate to rip it out, but it always stayed. He told himself it was old damage, just a mark, but the lie never held. It never let him go.

The burn cut him awake. It made him real.

Edric grabbed the Hollow by its ruined collar and slammed it into the stone rim. Skull on rock, a dull crack. It snapped at his face, breath flooding the air with rot, frozen meat, and that sharp, metallic stink that meant Unmaking. He tasted it in the back of his throat.

"Please," it whispered again.

His blade entered beneath its jaw.

The bone-sword passed through flesh, tongue, and the base of the skull. The Hollow shuddered once. Its hands clawed at his wrists. Then the strength went out of it.

Edric yanked the blade out. The body dropped, heavy and useless, into the snow. Silence pressed in, thick and waiting.

Silver-white sludge oozed from its mouth and nose, slow and obscene. It crawled over the ground, turning snow to glassy crust wherever it touched.

Vira sneezed and shook her mane.

"You are welcome," Edric told the empty square.

A door opened somewhere behind him. He did not turn until he had wiped his blade on the dead man's coat.

The village elder stood on the threshold of the longhouse. She was small and wrapped in too many layers of grey wool.

Her hands trembled inside mittens patched with leather. Three other villagers waited behind her. None of them came closer.

"Is it done?" she asked.

Edric glanced at the spreading silver stain. "Does it look done?"

Her mouth tightened. "The old one had a name."

"Not at the end."

The woman stared at the corpse, eyes shining but dry. Out here, crying just froze on your skin, leaving your hands useless. By thirty, every woman learned to keep it inside.

She reached into her sleeve and produced a leather purse.

Edric held out his hand. The purse hit his palm, weightless. Not enough to matter. He opened it. Seven silver bits. Two clipped coppers. A bent brass button. He looked up.

"The notice said twenty."

"Twenty was before the winter took our herd." The elder lifted her chin. "That is what we have."

Vira made a rough sound in her throat. It was not hunger. It was judgment. Edric looked past the elder into the longhouse.

He saw three children huddled near a low fire. One stared at Vira with wide eyes. Another held a crust of bread in both hands and did not eat it. She was holding it the way you hold a thing you have been told to make last, with both hands, close to the body.

There were four sleeping rolls laid out behind them, and one of them was empty and made up. He looked at the empty one for a moment longer than he meant to.

Edric closed the purse and put it away without counting it again.

"How many have you had?"

The elder did not pretend to misunderstand him. "That is the fourth."

"Since when?"

"Since the thaw that did not come." She pulled the wool tighter at her throat. "The first was old Sarrow at the mill, and we thought it was his years. The second was his wife. The third was a boy who had walked in from Ossen with nothing on his feet and could not tell us his own name, and we fed him for two days before he went over."

"Ossen is sixty miles south."

"Yes."

Edric looked at her.

He had been hunting these things for eleven years, and there had been a shape to it. They came up out of the deep west where the frost was oldest, and they came singly, and they came slowly, and you could draw a line on a map and stand behind it.

A boy walking in from the south with no shoes did not fit the line.

"Has anyone come out from Shadeweave?" he asked. "A count-taker. A healer."

"Nobody has come out from anywhere," the elder said. "That is rather the point of the notice."

"Fine."

The elder blinked. "Fine?"

"Your Hollow is dead. Your village is still standing. Fine."

He turned before she could thank him. He hated the word. Thanks always sounded like a hook, like someone wanted to drag something out of him he did not have left.

Vira followed him down the narrow street. Her claws clicked against buried stone. The village ended after six houses, a shed, and the well. Beyond it, the tundra opened under the ribs of the dead titan.

The Rib-Bones rose from the earth in enormous white arches. Their surfaces were smooth in places and splintered in others. Wind had packed snow into every crack. They crossed the dark sky from horizon to horizon, holding the world beneath them in permanent twilight.

He had seen the Rib-Bones every day of his life, but they still squeezed his chest until he could barely breathe.

"Do not start," he said when Vira bumped her shoulder against his hip.

She bumped him again.

"I took the money."

Vira showed him her teeth.

"Most of it."

Her one good eye narrowed.

"All right. I took their button too."

That earned him a sharp huff. He did the arithmetic on the road, because he always did.

Seven silver bits and two clipped coppers. Grain at Kell was eleven a sack and had been nine in the spring. A shoulder of dried elk was six if you did not care what part of the elk. The powder for the blade was four, and he was out of powder.

So: no powder.

That was the way of it. He stopped resenting it years ago. Resentment burned warmth he couldn't spare. Nine times in eleven years, he'd been paid right. Twice the notice was honest, and both times he expected a trap. Both times he was wrong. That stung worse.

Vira walked into his hip.

"I am not thinking about it."

She did it again, harder.

"It was four days' tracking and a fight in a square, and it came to a button."

She stopped and looked up at him with the gold eye, and Edric stopped too, because when she stopped in the open like that it usually meant she had heard something.

She had not heard anything. She was looking at him.

"Do not," he said.

They walked until the village smoke disappeared behind a rise of frozen salt. Edric found the old trader's cart where he had left it, tilted against a rib fragment. The trader was gone. He had left a broken wheel, an empty grain sack, and a hanging pot black with soot.

Edric crouched beside the pot and dug through his pack. Half a turnip. A strip of dried hare. Salt. A fistful of bitter root.

Vira sat down in the snow. Her wings stayed folded. Her ribs showed beneath her fur.

"Do not look at me like that," he muttered.

He made the meal anyway.

The fire took too long to catch. His fingers went numb while he coaxed it from flint and scrap tinder. When the

water finally simmered, he dropped in the turnip and root, then cut the hare into thin pieces.

The smell crawled inside him, twisting his gut.

Vira's ears lifted. Edric waited until the meat softened. He poured half the stew into a shallow wooden bowl and set it before her. She did not touch it.

"Eat."

Vira looked at his smaller bowl.

"I said eat."

She lowered her head and drank. Slow at first. Then faster.

He took a mouthful. The turnip collapsed on his tongue. The hare tasted like smoke, salt, and old hunger. The heat burned his cracked lips, but he kept eating.

He forced down every bite. After, he slumped against the cart, eyes shut, letting the ache crawl through his bones.

Vira pressed against his shoulder, heat bleeding through fur and cracked leather. Her breath slowed. He let himself go still, just for a moment.

Then the dream came, the way it did about twice a month and always when he was too tired to keep the door shut on it.

There was no picture in it. That was what made it unbearable. Other men dreamed of things they had done and could name afterward, and he dreamed of a sound, and the sound was a woman singing.

He did not know the song. He had listened for it awake in eleven villages and two cities, and it was not a song anybody sang. It had five or six notes in it, and it went down at the end, and it was being sung close, close enough that he could

hear the breath under it, and there was something wrong with the singer's voice.

She was crying while she did it.

That was the part. Somebody had held him close enough to sing into his face, and she had been crying, and he had been small enough not to know what crying was.

Edric came up out of it with a sound in his throat and his hand already on the sword.

The fire had burned down to a red seam. The ribs stood over him. Nothing had moved for a hundred yards in any direction, and he knew it before his eyes finished opening, because Vira had not stirred.

She had her head up. She was looking at him.

"Do not," he said.

She went on looking.

"It is nothing. It is a noise. I have had it since before I had words and I did not have words until I was ten, so there is no bottom to it and nothing to dig up."

The cougar put her chin back down on her paws without taking her eye off him.

Edric sat with his back against the cart and did not sleep again, and the cold came in under his coat, and somewhere at the very back of his head a woman went on singing six notes down. Then wings beat overhead.

Vira woke with a snarl. Edric's hand went to his sword.

A raven landed on the cart's crossbar. It was larger than any normal bird. Frost silvered its black feathers. A strip of red thread circled one claw. Strix.

"No," Edric said at once.

The raven stared at him.

"Whatever he wants, no."

Strix clicked his beak. A narrow scroll tube dropped from his claws and struck the snow between Edric's boots. Vira rose. Her hackles lifted down the length of her spine.

The raven did not move. Edric stared at the tube.

Tiresian only sent Strix when he wanted something. Usually it was a warning. Sometimes it was a demand dressed up as a warning. The old prophet lived among bones and dead names. That gave him bad manners.

"You open it," Edric told Vira.

She stared back.

"Fine. Useless beast."

Her tail struck the snow. He picked up the tube.

The seal was not Tiresian's. Silver wax marked with a weeping moon held the scroll closed. The sight of it made the brand on his heel flare.

Edric sucked in a breath. His hand crushed the tube hard enough to dent it. Vira growled. Not at him. At the seal.

The smell of the parchment reached him when he broke the wax. Silver. Frost. Something clean and sharp beneath it. Something familiar. His pulse hit once, hard. He read.

> To Edric Kairos Verr, called the Brand-Breaker:

> You are commanded to present yourself at Shadeweave without delay. The court requires a hunter capable of finding the man who murdered Laius Solari, former Sun-King. Payment will be made in full upon your arrival. Refusal will be noted.

> By order of Jocasta Vexen, Frost-Queen of Shadeweave.

Edric read the last name twice. His heel burned, sweat crawling down his spine even with the cold biting at him. He stood.

"A queen," he said.

Strix spread his wings.

"A dead king. A command. A threat. Very polite."

The raven gave one harsh call, then lifted into the dark beneath the ribs.

Edric watched him go. Vira pressed her nose against the letter. A low sound rolled through her chest. She turned toward the western horizon, where the ribs tightened together over Shadeweave.

"No," Edric said.

Vira looked at him.

"I am not going to a queen's nest because a bird dropped paper at my feet."

The brand pulsed. Pain tore up his leg, biting deep into bone. He doubled over, one hand clawing at the cart for balance. The letter slid from his grip.

Vira came to him at once. Her warm breath hit his cheek.

The pain bled out slowly. He stayed crouched, jaw aching from the clamp of his teeth. Every muscle screamed to run.

He had not felt the brand wake like that in years. Not since the Crossroads, not since blood soaked his hands and a woman stood in the storm and watched him and did not call out.

He did not remember her face. He remembered silver hair. He remembered a voice he could not hear over the wind. He remembered the need to run.

"Shadeweave," he said.

Vira's ears tipped forward. Edric picked up the letter. He folded it once and shoved it into his coat.

"We go. We take their money. We find their killer. Then we leave."

Vira made a sound that was not agreement.

"Do not look at me like that." He grabbed the cart's reins. "Something is wrong with that woman."

He got about a mile before he stopped and stood in the open with the letter inside his coat and the ribs going over him from one edge of the world to the other.

There was nothing behind him. Six houses, a longhouse, a cold forge, three children round a fire and one bedroll made up for somebody who was not coming back to it.

There was nothing ahead of him either, except a city he had never entered, in the one direction he had spent his whole life not walking.

He had been in the White Lament for twenty-seven years and had never once gone west.

He had told himself it was the work. The bounties were north, and the money was east, and the western ribs were a labyrinth that swallowed people, and no sensible man walked into a labyrinth for wages.

Standing in the snow, the queen's seal burning against his chest, he realized the reasons were nothing now—just empty words.

"It is a job," he said.

Vira moved past him, not waiting. The western wind cut through his coat, scraping his bones raw. His heel burned,

every step a punishment.

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