



EMBERS
IN THE
SNOW



ANNA CARVEN

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CONTENTS

1. [Finley](#)
2. [Finley](#)
3. [Finley](#)
4. [Corvan](#)
5. [Finley](#)
6. [Finley](#)
7. [Corvan](#)
8. [Finley](#)
9. [Corvan](#)
10. [Corvan](#)
11. [Finley](#)
12. [Corvan](#)
13. [Finley](#)
14. [Finley](#)
15. [Corvan](#)
16. [Finley](#)
17. [Finley](#)
18. [Corvan](#)
19. [Finley](#)
20. [Finley](#)
21. [Corvan](#)
22. [Finley](#)
23. [Corvan](#)
24. [Finley](#)
25. [Finley](#)
26. [Corvan](#)
27. [Finley](#)
28. [Finley](#)
29. [Corvan](#)
30. [Finley](#)

31. [Corvan](#)
32. [Finley](#)
33. [Corvan](#)
34. [Finley](#)
35. [Finley](#)
36. [Corvan](#)
37. [Corvan](#)
38. [Finley](#)
39. [Finley](#)
40. [Finley](#)
41. [Corvan](#)
42. [Finley](#)
43. [Finley](#)
44. [Corvan](#)
45. [Finley](#)
46. [Finley](#)
47. [Corvan](#)
48. [Finley](#)
49. [Finley](#)
50. [Finley](#)
51. [Corvan](#)
52. [Finley](#)
53. [Corvan](#)
54. [Finley](#)
55. [Corvan](#)
56. [Finley](#)
57. [Corvan](#)
58. [Corvan](#)
59. [Corvan](#)
60. [Finley](#)
61. [Corvan](#)
62. [Corvan](#)
63. [Finley](#)
64. [Finley](#)

Epilogue

Also by Anna Carven

FINLEY

Something must be afoot, because I've been summoned.

The dining room of Ruen Castle is a study in contrasts.

The tall, arched windows are filled with colorful stained glass mosaics depicting the ancestors, perpetually frozen in the midst of heroic deeds. Once the deepest shade of peacock blue, the heavy drapes are now faded like the winter sky outside.

Dust gathers in the corners. Cobwebs adorn the ceilings.

Lunch is served in the most elegant ware; the plates and bowls adorned with gilded rims, the cutlery wrought of sterling silver, the glasses made from the finest etched crystal.

It's too bad the food doesn't quite match the grandeur of the setting.

We're served hard rolls of bread and a stew of ham and winter vegetables. The sauce is flavored with dried herbs and stretched with flour; more soup than meaty stew. Beside it is a concoction made from root vegetables and onions fried in lard and spoiled red wine, seasoned with copious amounts of pepper.

I can't blame the cooks. They try their best with what they've been given.

My father, Baron Lucar Eravus Solisar the Third, sits at the head of the table. My stepmother, Lady Dorava Solisar, is at the other end, quietly sipping wine from a long-stemmed glass.

I'm in the middle, uncomfortable in my stiff formal gown.

My brothers are absent; they're probably eating lunch down in the mess-hall with the knights.

I envy them. Compared to me, they have so much freedom.

Dorava wears a fur-trimmed gown of pale, greyish-blue, the hue matching her eyes. Her gaze is trained upon my father; eyes taut at the edges, mouth pressed into a thin line, expectantly waiting for him to speak.

Not once does she acknowledge me.

She's more avoidant than usual.

Something's *definitely* afoot.

I taste a spoonful of my lukewarm stew, which has the consistency of warm glue.

At least it's somewhat tasty. The poor cooks must be sorcerers to be able to conjure this kind of food with the few ingredients they have.

Father lays down his fork with an impatient *clink*. "How are your department lessons progressing, Finley?"

"Fine," I say carefully, not liking where this is going. The truth is, the lessons are terribly boring. I find them ridiculous and unnecessary. But apparently, I must learn to conduct myself like a *lady* so I can attract the attention of a worthy suitor. Someone higher in rank than my father, with all the benefits that entails. That's what he's hoping for. It doesn't matter how old or decrepit my prospective husband might be. "This afternoon, I will be revising the correct etiquette for when one is in the company of the Imperial Family."

"Lady Majurie gives me a somewhat different impression," father says drily, idly running one finger over the edge of his mustache—an annoying habit of his. "That you lack perseverance and are easily distracted by trivial things. As is *always* the case." He lets out a thin sigh, as if I'm somehow the cause of all his woes. "I should have paid more attention to those frivolous activities of yours when you were a child." He smiles thinly; ominously. "But it matters not, because I have

managed to secure an arrangement that will change everything.”

He looks terribly pleased with himself.

I don't *like* that.

Not at all.

I look him in the eye. “Father, what are you talking about?”

This time, even my directness isn't enough to spoil his good mood.

“You are betrothed, Finley.”

“E-excuse me?” I force myself to slow down; to take another spoonful of stew and not give my father the satisfaction of seeing my distress.

His expression is infuriatingly smug. “When I was in the capital, I managed to gain an audience with the Emperor. I *did* mention to him that I have a daughter, comely in looks, healthy of body and mind, and fortunately, still of child-bearing years. A maiden, at that. I mentioned it *specifically* because Emperor Duthriss is a consummate politician, and has been known to influence strategic matches between the children of Rahava's most powerful families. Cunning old wolf. Perchance that he might know of a lord in need of heirs; one that has done him favors, whom he could reward with a suitable noble woman of good breeding and decent looks.”

I'm overcome with the sudden urge to pick up my glass of water and splash it in his face.

I don't, of course.

I don't want to be beaten to within an inch of my life. Inwardly, I can't help but feel bitterly smug.

I'm *not* a bloody maiden, but father doesn't know that.

My stepmother is silent. Of course. She's *always* quiet when father speaks.

Father is looking more and more pleased with himself.

Dread pools in the pit of my stomach.

“He made a suggestion.” My father’s tone is insufferably smug. “No, it was more than a suggestion. It was a proposal. Of course, I deliberated upon it, and after giving it careful thought, I accepted on your behalf.”

No! My heart feels like it’s about to explode out of my ribcage. *I can’t believe this is happening!*

But I always knew this day would come. Father has been waiting for such an opportunity. He’d been planning that trip to the capital for months.

I take a deep, shuddering breath. Close my eyes for a moment. Curse my stepmother for being incapable of saying a single word, but then again, why would she, when she herself was married off in exactly the same fashion?

Poor Lady Dorava.

“Who is he?” I barely recognize the sound of my own voice. It sounds like death warmed up.

My father doesn’t answer straight away. He allows the silence to stretch out, enjoying my fraught anticipation. “Finley Solisar, you must be grateful that I am a good negotiator, because the man you will marry is far above your station. Most would consider him *far* too good for someone of your rank and temperament, but considering his approval of the match, Emperor Duthriss seems to look favorably upon our family.”

“*Who*, father?” My impatience spills through the brittle cracks in my composure.

“After lunch, you will arrange for the maidservants to pack your belongings. Make sure you take your thickest coats, because I hear the winters in Tyron are brutal. Although I’m sure the Archduke will have plenty of resources at his disposal to ensure that you are outfitted with garments befitting of his station, it is best to be prepared.”

My insufferable father pauses, savoring my shocked silence.

Tyron.

I blink.

The silver fork handle digs into my palm as my grip tightens.

Tyron.

That inhospitable, mountainous region to the south.

The biggest of Rahava's territories.

It widely considered untamable... that is, until the Archduke took over the Mountain Fortress.

No. This isn't possible.

I stare at my father, my anger momentarily swept away by sheer disbelief. "I... I am to be betrothed to Corvan Duthriss?"

My future husband is not some old geezer, as I'd feared.

In many ways, this is worse.

I've heard the rumors; the stories. They talk about him in the village square, in the halls of the castle, in the kitchens and the stables. My own family speaks of him at the dinner table.

The Emperor's firstborn, Corvan, was once regarded as the obvious heir to the Rahavan Throne.

But everyone knows the story of the crown prince; the former Imperial Commander who waged a brutal campaign in the north to defeat the barbarian hordes.

Everyone knows he was a changed man when he returned from the war. Once highly respected; a swordsman without peer and the most eligible bachelor in all of Rahava, he refused to present himself to the Court.

Without warning, without giving reason, he relinquished his claim to the throne and became a recluse, accepting the dukedom of Tyron—the territory that nobody wanted.

It's a vast and inhospitable land. Cold and barren. Crawling with monsters and terrifying beasts.

Rumors swirl around the capital. That the ravages of war drove him mad; that he was cursed by some barbarian witch.

What kind of horrors does a man have to endure to make him give up the entire world that once lay in the palm of his hand?

They say he did terrible things during the war.

They say he is even more ruthless than his father.

Some even say that he has succumbed to the temptations of the arcane.

That he drinks the blood of his enemies.

Not that I believe *that*.

Since he returned from battle, Corvan Duthriss hasn't returned to Lukiria once; not even for the Midwinter Ball.

It's as if he just wants the world to forget about him.

"Y-you can't send me to Tyron." The words fly from my lips before I even realize what I'm saying. "Corvan Duthriss is a brutal man... a madman. And Tyron..."

It's as remote and forbidding a place as I've ever heard of. If I set foot in Tyron Castle, I'll never escape.

Baron Solisar sees my distress. I can tell that it satisfies him. My father, I think, always resented the fact that, I, his firstborn, turned out to be a girl.

And he hates the fact that I can do all the things my brothers can.

I can ride a horse. Shoot a bow. Read and write.

As well, if not better than them.

My brothers were the ones that taught me when my father wouldn't allow it; when he was off on one of his many *business trips*.

My dear brothers, Aderick and Kastel.

Now I understand why they weren't summoned here for lunch.

They would be livid.

Father's gaze crystallizes. "No matter what state of mind he is in nowadays, he's still the *crown prince*. Do you understand what it means for our family to marry into *that* family? Do you know what we gain in exchange for *you* gaining such a powerful husband? Emperor Duthriss has agreed to admit Kastel and Aderick to the Imperial Knights' Academy in Lukiria. When each of them graduates as a Knight of the Empire, they are to be granted their own lands and titles. They are to be given the rank of Viscount."

My eyes widen in surprise.

My brothers don't care about Imperial Academies and titles. They've said so themselves. But they are young and naive, and even I can't deny the magnitude of the emperor's offer. In Rahava, it's almost unheard of to cross ranks.

It's a once-in-a-century opportunity.

A life-changing opportunity.

But not for me.

Bitterness rises in the back of my throat. "And what about you, father? What do *you* gain from all of this?" I should bite my tongue right now, but I can't. "Did Duthriss agree to pay off your mountain of debts?"

Baron Solisar is already out of his chair. He crosses the floor, his boots ringing loudly on the cold stone.

His hand connects with my cheek, *hard*.

Stinging pain rips through my face. I cradle my cheek, staring up at him in disbelief.

Bloody bastard. Maybe living with the Cursed Archduke of Tyron will be better than staying with you.

"Lucar, *enough*," my stepmother says softly.

As always, father ignores her. "You do not get to question my authority, child. *Ever*. I will not hear another word of dissent from your impudent little mouth. If you wish to survive in Tyron Castle, then you will do your best to learn to hold your tongue. For your own benefit, Finley, I would strongly suggest that now is the time for you to develop a shred of

common sense and learn to act like a proper fucking *lady*. The Archduke is not kind to those that disobey him.”

Why do I feel like throwing up all of a sudden?

“And do not say a word of protest to your brothers, Finley. Do you want to lay waste to their futures; to burden them with unnecessary guilt? As far as they’re concerned, you have *agreed* to this union.”

My insides twist. Tears prick my eyes. I want to scream, but I can’t.

Hold your tongue.

I *hate* that I have to heed father’s words.

If not for this betrothal, Aderick, the eldest of the two, would inherit a disaster; a barony in ruins, crippling debt that will take a generation to pay off, and the wrath of the Duthriss family.

Kastel would have nothing.

Just a dire future.

All because of my father’s pride and stupidity. The extension to the castle he commissioned lies in half-finished ruins, marble columns cracked and exposed to the elements, water and mud and snow pooling on the crumbling stone floors.

“At least let me stay a little longer,” I plead, my voice cracking. “Just a few weeks... until spring.”

Father stares down at me, his expression cold. “No. The Emperor has made it clear that you must reach Tyron before winter’s end. After you finish eating, you may go down to the stables and say your goodbyes to the boys. Then you will go to your mother’s chambers and allow her to choose attire that is a little more appropriate for your station. I will *not* have you presenting yourself to the Archduke in trousers and a fucking tunic.” He shoots my mother a stern look. “I don’t know how you raised such an unladylike daughter.”

“I don’t know, either,” Dorava says softly. “But I will ensure that she is dressed in a manner that His Imperial

Highness should find pleasing, at the very least.”

I glare at her, but she refuses to meet my gaze. Dorava has never said anything nasty to me. She’s never raised her hand in anger or been blatantly cruel. But she never stands up to father, either.

“Good.” My father returns to his seat. He picks up his silver fork and starts to eat.

Silence hangs over the dinner table like a cold, damp fog.

I force myself to eat. The food sticks in my throat. I can’t taste anything anymore.

I knew this day would come.

I just didn’t think it would come so *soon*.

But I suppose all things must end sooner or later, and people like me, who have no power, will always be at the mercy of the ones that rule.

I can only hope that Archduke Corvan Duthriss isn’t as terrible as the stories make him out to be.

FINLEY

I shift around on the hard, narrow bench, trying to make myself comfortable.

The carriage creaks and groans. There's a vicious jolt, and I'm thrown off-balance as the wheels hit a dip in the road.

I raise my hand, pressing against the window to steady myself, feeling constricted in my *suitable attire*.

This cursed bloody dress. The shoulders are too narrow, and it's too tight at the neck. What did Dorava do to the bloody thing? Although I've loosened several of the cloth-covered buttons at the back, it still suffocates me, thanks to the rigid boning.

The bodice is stiff and ridiculous; too narrow for my waist and too roomy for my chest, even though Dorava has pulled the laces as tight as she possibly could.

Then there's the ridiculous bustle, which takes up most of the bench space, leaving my lower half drowning in a soft-yet-stiff mess of skirts and wire.

Until we reach Tyron, I'm to wear this oversized, uncomfortable mess of a garment. It's very much in Dorava's style—frilly and voluminous and not something I would ever choose for myself—but father has insisted that I dress in the current fashions of the capital, so as not to give the impression that the Solisars are country bumpkins.

I've been trapped in this garment for three days now. Ordinarily, I would have changed into something more

comfortable as soon as Ruen Castle was out of sight, but father has sent an escort of four soldiers to ensure I'm delivered safely—and probably to make sure I don't escape.

He's sent a maid, too; a dour old woman called Janvia. She feeds me and helps me in and out of my dress when it's time to sleep. At other times, she rides outside, sitting alongside the coachman, Hercog, who just so happens to be her husband.

She doesn't talk much. None of them do.

We ride in silence, and they leave me inside my stuffy, glass-windowed box; alone with my thoughts and a view of the endless landscape, which becomes more and more barren as we travel farther into Wolf Country.

Tyron.

So far north, it's barely part of the Rahavan Empire.

Sparsely populated and wild.

The trees here are different. They're bigger than any I've seen before. Huge, barren branches soar up into the grey, cloudy skies. It's as if the trees themselves have a pact with the heavens.

Their trunks are impossibly thick. It would take the linked arm-spans of twenty men to encircle them.

The ancient trees make me feel small and insignificant. There's a certain feeling of *presence* about them; as if they're watching us as we lurch toward the mountains.

It isn't comforting in the slightest.

The change in our surroundings is a stark reminder that I'm in a strange and unfamiliar land.

To stop myself from becoming overwhelmed, I drift into my imagination, trying to conjure up an image of Corvan Duthriss in my mind.

I've never seen the man in the flesh. He wasn't in the capital when I visited shortly after my coming-of-age ceremony.

He was at war.

By my calculations, he would be around five winters older than me.

Perhaps he resembles his father, Emperor Valdon Duthriss. A big, powerful man who possess dark eyes and hair; undeniably handsome features, and a commanding aura.

Well, he *was* once like that, if the portraits of him are anything to go by.

He's old now.

But the men of the Duthriss line—the Emperor and his second son, Ansar—are not *un-handsome*, so they say.

I imagine Corvan would be much the same.

Maybe that will be my consolation—being wed to a man who is pleasing to look at, even if he is an insane, battle-hardened, arcane-dabbling recluse. If the stories are anything to go by, then all those things are true.

I snort with annoyance—at myself. How could I think that I would excuse *any* man for terrible behaviour just because he is pleasing to the eye?

And yet, perhaps I am judging Corvan Duthriss prematurely; based on gossip and rumor, on stories that have passed across a thousand lips before they reached my ears.

He's certainly a notorious figure.

And I know next to nothing about him—the *real* him.

I can only hope.

Why you, Fin?

That's what Kastel asked me as my brothers bid me farewell. They were confused and a little angry at father for not giving them enough forewarning, but I reassured them that this arrangement was fine.

That this was what I wanted.

That I had *agreed*.

Even though I'd done no such thing.

“How did father get the Emperor to agree to this? Duthriss is still the crown prince. Even if he is a madman, he could have had his pick of the ladies in Lukiria... ahem, that’s not to say that you aren’t an absolute bloody catch, dear sister, but you know what I mean. Father’s a baron, not a duke. When we get invited to the Midwinter ball, it’s as an afterthought.”

“I don’t know, but it’s probably better than being married off to some old geezer. You know me. I’ll survive. Wish me luck, Rick and Kas. And come visit in the summer.”

The light outside begins to fade. Soon, it will be dark again. The temperature will drop sharply, and we’ll halt for the night. The soldiers will start a fire, and they’ll sleep outside in their thick bedrolls as one of them stays awake, keeping an eye out for wolves and brigands.

Only I get to sleep in the carriage, piling rough grey blankets on top of myself to try and keep warm, because the heat of the fire never quite reaches the cabin.

We’ve only just entered the borders of Tyron—or so Janvia tells me—and the nights have grown terribly long.

It feels like the winter here is endless.

Perhaps there is no such thing as spring in Tyron.

I shudder at the thought.

We pass by the last of the ancient trees and enter a part of the woods where the vegetation—although still barren—is thicker. Here, the trees are twisted and weeping, their slender branches almost touching the ground. For the very first time, I see a smattering of greenery in the snow; small, rounded bushes that bear small red berries.

I wonder if they’re poisonous.

After a while, the shadows grow so deep I can no longer see between the trees.

The gleaming red berries disappear in the darkness.

“Halt!”

The carriage grinds to a stop.

“Let’s camp here for the night.”

Rough voices fill the clearing; the soldiers make weary banter as they dismount and retrieve kindling and wood-blocks from a pack below the carriage.

The clinking of chains and keys reaches my ears. Moments later, the door to my cabin unlocks.

“Evening, princess.” It’s Brusic, the head guard. A freshly lit torch burns in his hand, creating a cocoon of light in the creeping darkness. “Time for you to step out and enjoy the sunshine.”

His pale blue eyes roam across my face, before traveling down my neck, my chest, my waist...

What can he possibly be imagining when I’m draped in all this bloody silk?

I shudder to think.

Foul bastard. He’s just like all the servants that are loyal to my father.

What’s that saying again?

The fish rots from the head.

“I’m fine,” I say icily. “I’ll just stay here.”

“You sure, sweetheart? Because if you need to shit or piss, it’s your only chance. I’m not getting up in the middle of the night to let you out of your little cage.”

“If it’s necessary, the sentry can let me out.” My glare is filled with venom. Humiliatingly, he’s right.

I *do* need to relieve myself.

“Sentry’s job is to watch the woods, darling. Not to supervise you while you’re pissing in the snow.” His leer makes my skin crawl.

I silently wish that the Seven Furies would flay Brusic alive. “If you want to watch me relieving myself in the woods, then go ahead and do it.” *Pervert.* “I don’t care. But if you touch me or mark me in any way, my betrothed will know of

it. Of course, I haven't met the man yet. I don't know anything about Archduke Duthriss. I don't know how he'd react to being told that some lowly baron's man-at-arms has cast lecherous eyes upon his soon-to-be wife. What do *you* think, Brusic?"

Brusic's stubbled jaw clamps shut. His eyes tighten in anger. Was that a trace of fear in his expression just now? "You're lucky you've been promised to a Duthriss," he growls. "If it were any other man, I would have given you what you deserved, you ungrateful bitch."

Ah. Now you show your true colors. I smile; a thin, poison-tipped smile. "How delightfully enlightening. Too bad he's not *any other man*. Now if you don't mind, servant, I've changed my mind. I think I *will* go for a piss in the woods. Over there, behind that dense, thorny thicket. Oh, don't worry about following me, Brusic. There's barely enough light for me to see by. I'm not going to run off into the snow. Not in these bloody skirts, anyway. Besides, following me really isn't worth the trouble if my future husband's going to find out about your transgressions, don't you think?"

The guard's ruddy face turns pale.

To my surprise, he averts his eyes. "Shut yer bloody mouth, woman. Get going then, before the last of the daylight leaves us."

My smile turns acid-sweet. "And please don't speak so crudely in front of me again, Brusic. I'm a *maiden*. As His Imperial Highness is undoubtedly aware."

In truth, I have no idea whether this Corvan Duthriss would care about my virginity or not. Some nobles make a terribly big deal out of it—as if a woman's purity is somehow a thing to be coveted and seized.

Brusic's mouth compresses into a thin line. His eyes are taut.

So different to his earlier demeanor.

Is my future husband's name really all that powerful?

I'll admit; I am a little naive regarding the affairs of the Rahavan Court. Being the daughter of a lowly baron, I wouldn't know about half the things that go on in the capital.

But the mere mention of his name appears to be enough to protect me against my father's nasty guardsman. Because of him, nobody's going to touch me or my supposedly precious maidenhood.

So there's that, at least.

Brusic takes a step backwards, keeping well clear as I hike up my skirts and alight from the carriage. The winter chill bites through my woollen leggings, but I don't care.

It's good to be able to stretch my legs after being cooped up in that awful cabin for so long.

My boots crunch the snow. I ignore the stares of the other guards as I walk away from Brusic, putting distance between myself and the camp.

They quickly return to their tasks; pitching tents, setting up a fire, watering the horses.

Janvia ignores me completely. She's peeling shriveled potatoes and dropping them into an iron pot.

The darkness closes around me. For once, I'm grateful for it.

It hides me, cloaking me from these people who despise me.

Now I can just make out the outlines of the thicket. The woods stretch out all around me; it's impossible to ignore my surroundings, because under the cover of night, they come to life.

My boots crunch on the snow.

A bird lets out a mournful cry. Insects chatter in the bushes.

Far off in the distance, a wolf howls.

I drop to my haunches and quickly finish my business, taking care not to dirty my dress.

Then I rise and walk a little further, straying deeper into the woods.

I don't quite know what it is, but something about this place is darkly alluring.

Tyron is truly the wilds of Rahava. Our small barony of Ruen is tame in comparison; surrounded on all sides by picturesque farmland, dotted with small towns and bisected by the Imperial Highway.

I've never been in a place that's so remote... so uncivilized.

It's a completely different world out here.

If only I could keep walking... away from my father's people, away from this stupid marriage.

Where would I go?

Not back to Ruen, surely.

I'd shed my identity; become a commoner, marry a farmer or a villager.

Then I'd have to deal with having nothing to eat in winter. I'd be forced to pay the crippling taxes imposed by greedy lords like my father.

If a troupe of soldiers was passing through the village, my husband would have to sit back and watch while they did whatever they wanted with me.

They could kill us where we stood and get away with it.

The wolf in the distance howls again, savage yet mournful.

I envy the wolf.

Unlike the wolf, there's no way I can escape from here.

If I were left on my own out here, I would surely die. If the winter cold didn't get me, the wolves and monsters surely would.

"Finley." Janvia's flat, emotionless voice cuts through the darkness. "What are you doing? Dinner is prepared. You must

eat and then retire for the night. Get a good night's sleep, girl. Tomorrow, we arrive at Tyron Castle.”

A chill wind races through the trees, dislodging small mounds of snow, echoing the wolf's howl.

I scuff the snow with my thick boots and lift my skirts a fraction, walking across to the radius of light that forms the edge of the camp. The soldiers have a fire going now, but its warmth isn't nearly enough to penetrate the coldness in my heart.

The only thing that keeps me going is the thought of my brothers.

Kastel and Aderick.

They always received warmth and love from my father, and they gave some of that warmth to me.

See, I raised them.

When my father was away on business and Lady Dorava was cloistered in her room, puffing elegantly on her *lautani* pipe because the children were giving her *headaches*, I was there, making sure the nanny didn't beat the boys too badly or keep the best portions of food for herself.

Later, when they were older—eight and six to my twelve—they returned the favor, secretly teaching me the things they learned from their tutors—how to ride, use a sword, read and write.

By the time father returned from his long trip, it was too late.

I already *knew* things.

If this marriage secures their futures and saves them from the destructive grip of my father, then so be it.

I climb the rickety steps and haul myself back into the cramped carriage, pulling my snow-encrusted skirts up behind me. The smell of woodsmoke reaches my nose, but it gives me little comfort.

Night has fallen, and the winter chill is stealing through the air, right into my very bones.

It doesn't matter, though.

Tomorrow, I'll be sleeping in a castle.

I'll become the Lady Duthriss.

I'll endure whatever my husband throws at me.

And maybe...

No. Don't you even dare think of that.

3

FINLEY

T *hud.*

I'm jolted out of sleep by a strange noise.

The horses stir. Several of them let out panicked snorts. Those nearest to me whinny in a high-pitched tone.

Clutching my blankets close to my chest, I sit up and stare out the window.

It's still dark outside.

The campfire has burned down to embers. It casts a faint orange glow across the clearing.

My breath mists. It's *cold*.

A deep growl reverberates through the windows.

The fine hairs on my arms stand on end. What was *that*?

Shadows move through the dim glow. Men grunt. The growls become louder.

Someone shouts; a guttural, unintelligible sound, laced with pure fear.

"At arms, men!"

I catch a glimpse of something passing across the firelight. Something big and hulking and furry; the shape of a wolf, only it's much bigger than any wolf I've ever seen.

There's not one, but *three* of them.

These aren't wolves. They're *monsters*.

The soldiers are up; swords raised. They're wearing no armor at all, because they've been asleep in their bedrolls.

I count three men. Another is down; a dark, lifeless shape beside the fire.

The wolf-creatures become a blur.

One of the horses goes down with a high-pitched whinny, its large body crashing onto the snow with a heavy *thud*.

The others are pulling hard against their restraints, trying to get away.

It's futile. One of the wolf-things attacks a second horse, going straight for its jugular.

Where is the coachman? Where is Janvia?

My thoughts race. I should go out there and help, but what can I do?

I have no weapons.

I'm not a warrior.

Those beasts would tear me to shreds.

Besides, I can't even move. My entire body is paralyzed with fear.

All I can do is cower under the blankets, listening to the sounds of men screaming as they're torn apart by monsters. I hear the terrified cries of the horses, then Janvia's shrill scream, tapering off into nothing but...

The sickening crunch.

Of a gigantic maw clamping down on warm flesh.

The cries of the soldiers grow more desperate. I hear grunts. Hoarse, laboured breathing.

Then, finally, footsteps, crunching in the deep snow.

A man, breathing heavily, staggering, trying to run.

Go, I urge, willing him on, because although father's soldiers treat me with disdain, that alone isn't reason enough for me to want them dead.

But he isn't fast enough.

There's a rush of wind. I catch hints of the beasts' deep, musky, scent. One of the wolf-monsters growls; a raw, primal sound that sounds almost triumphant. I *see* its shadow as it surges forward, running down the poor soldier.

Crunch.

He's gone.

All of a sudden, there's nobody left.

The horses are dead. The soldiers are dead. Janvia is dead. The coachman is dead.

It all happened so *fast*.

Unable to take it any more, I look away, covering my head with the blankets.

The sound of flesh being torn apart; of bones crunching...

It's sickening.

I'm overcome with a sudden urge to throw up, but I swallow it back down, not daring to make a sound.

I don't want to draw their attention.

Sooner or later, they're going to sense that I'm here.

They're going to come for me.

I can't even get out of here, because the door is locked from the outside.

The only thing I can do is to force myself to be very, very still. I can barely breathe.

Please, go away.

I don't want to die. Not here. Not like *this*.

The monsters feast on the carnage for what feels like an eternity.

But all of a sudden, they're finished, and I hear paws padding softly around my carriage.

Encircling me.

The wolf-creatures growl menacingly.

Go away! I want to scream. *Haven't you had your fill? Do you really need to devour me, too?*

Claws scratch against the door.

I poke my head out of the covers and desperately search for something I can use to defend myself, but the cabin is bare.

Maybe I can cover myself in enough layers of blankets that their sharp teeth won't penetrate.

Don't be silly.

There are three of them, and they're huge, each beast about the size of two grown men.

They'll finish me off as quickly as they finished off my entourage.

The guards, Janvia, the coachman...

They're all dead!

I'm all alone, just short of making it to the promised refuge of Corvan Duthriss's castle.

So close.

I was so very close.

I'm sorry, Kastel, Aderick...

There's a loud *thud* as one of the cursed beasts sinks his teeth into the carriage's wooden door.

In the moonlight, I catch sight of a pair of impossibly long and sharp bloodstained fangs as they pierce through the last line of defense.

I scuttle backwards, into the corner, trying to make myself as small as possible.

The fangs are withdrawn.

Crunch.

The damn thing bites through the door again. There's a crack in the wood now. A few more strikes, and it will well and truly splinter.

But then another of the wolves lets out a low, reverberating growl. There's an uptick at the end, as it turns from growl into a sort of inquisitive whine.

Almost as if it's asking the other one a question.

The beast that's currently trying to break down my door stops and gives off a dissatisfied grunt.

The third one snarls.

Far off in the distance, a bird chirps, its sweet, cheerful song completely at odds with the carnage all around me.

Sweet, little bird. A harbinger of the coming daylight.

Have you saved me?

To my astonishment, the monster doesn't attack my carriage again.

I hear footsteps on snow; so soft I could be imagining them.

Then, there's silence, punctuated only by smatterings of birdsong and the faint rush of the wind.

I don't know how long I remain under the blankets, tensed and listening for any trace of the monster-wolves.

A crow caws. The birdsong grows louder.

The cold isn't as bad as before.

The musk-smell of the wolves is gone, replaced with the metallic tang of blood.

At last, I summon the courage to emerge from the blankets.

I look outside, peering through blood-flecked glass.

Through the skeletal branches, dawn is breaking, painting the sky a delicate shade of lavender.

Why it look so beautiful when there are bodies strewn all across the ground?

CORVAN

I n the early hours of the morning, I walk down the corridors in silence, enjoying the peace and quiet of my own castle; this ancient, roughly-hewn stone fortress.

Edinvar, it is called.

In the Old Language, it means *Immovable Heart*.

I enjoy being able to walk freely, without being stared at furtively; without being abjectly feared.

The servants are just beginning to rouse. Today is the day they get to sleep in late, because on this day, I demand nothing of them but that they rest and enjoy the day at their leisure.

It is *Seinmas*, the Seventh Day, when the seventh Fury, Hecoa, The Goddess of the Dead, supposedly created her Underworld and drew all the malevolent spirits into it, curing the world of its ills.

What a load of horseshit that turned out to be.

I'm still here, aren't I?

Ill-fated spirit I may be, but I'm no tyrant.

Let the people rest.

I'm not one to demand that they dress me or prepare me meals. The Furies know... I don't need *those* kinds of meals anymore.

As for the other things...

I can draw my own bath.

Keep my own chambers neat.

Shave my own chin.

Cut and braid my own cursed hair.

Because even though my demands of them are fair and honest and I pay them generously, making sure they are well clothed and fed and have comfortable lodgings, they fear me.

But considering what I've become, I can hardly blame them for that.

I stop at a large window, admiring the new glasswork. The artisans have followed my instructions to the letter. So they should, because they charged me to the point of bloody extortion, but I appreciate good craftsmanship, and Tyron has enough wealth to go around these days.

Set into the thick wall above the inner entrance gates, this window allows a view into the outer courtyard, where all visitors and newcomers must pass.

It's where my soldiers do their drills.

Its frame is forged from iron steel, as is the grille, with each square around two handspans in width and set with thick and clear sapphire crystal glass.

The previous window was smashed and rusted, haphazardly patched over with planks of wood, the miserable contraption allowing the bitter cold to seep in during winter.

Even I prefer warmth to the cold, *still*.

A familiar sound—boots crunching on snow—steals my attention.

Moments later, someone stumbles across the courtyard; a big, hulking figure dressed in furs and leathers.

Someone familiar.

An amused snort escapes me. *You idiot*.

I reach the tower and quickly make my way down the stairs, reaching the bottom before said idiot can take another step.

In the blink of an eye, I'm out the door and standing beside him with my arm around his shoulders.

"You look like you need a shoulder to steady you, Commander," I say amicably, unable to keep the amusement from my voice.

His entire body goes stiff. He slowly turns his head to glare at me. "Goddess-damn-you, you bastard. Your Highness," he says, slurring his words. "You know I hate it when you sneak up on me like that."

"A screaming toddler could have snuck up on you in your current state, Kaithar. Do yourself a favor and get into bed and sleep for at least ten hours. That's an order. I can't have you looking like death warmed up at drills tomorrow." My nose wrinkles. "There are at least three different layers of perfume on you, Kaith. I take it you had a worthwhile evening, then?"

Kaithar shrugs. "*Tch*. That cursed nose of yours. You know what? I think so. Can't remember." His grey eyes narrow as he looks me up and down. "Where are *you* going at this ungodly hour, Van? You're not going to fool anyone in that getup, you know."

"I have no desire to fool anyone," I say quietly, allowing Kaithar to lean on me as he walks across the snow-covered flagstones. He's a heavy bastard, but as I am now, I can shoulder his weight effortlessly. "Just being practical, is all."

I let Kaithar's drunken observation slide, but I know very well what he's going on about.

I'm wearing what might be described as the simple garb of a woodsman. Loose woollen trousers and a simple grey tunic. Sturdy leather boots and a hooded cloak.

In the capital, someone of my station would never dress so humbly. The Rahavan Court would be outraged.

But living in Tyron allows me such freedoms.

Especially with the way I am *now*.

"So, you didn't tell me where you're going," Kaithar growls as we enter the stairwell. "Got a lover's tryst or

something?”

“I do not. Don’t be ridiculous.”

“There’s only so long you can prevent all womankind from entering the castle.”

“You know my reasons,” I growl. “The hunger is... *unpredictable.*”

The few women that I have encountered since my revival... their blood-scent was so tempting that I immediately sent them away. I fear what I might become if I were to ever succumb to such temptation.

The blood of men doesn’t smell so maddeningly sweet. I can control myself around them. As long as I surround myself with male soldiers and servants, my condition is manageable.

Kaithar staggers up the stairs, his footfalls so heavy he could wake the dead.

How can this bastard be so deadly and graceful on the battlefield—a pure menace with his heavy war axe—and yet so clumsy and lumbering when he’s had a few too many drinks?

It isn’t often, but when Kaithar gets on the booze, he goes *hard.*

“Van...” Kaithar’s tone turns serious—well, as serious as he can possibly be when he’s drunk and slurring his words. “You’re *you*. I don’t care what’s happened to your body. You’re as you as I’ve ever known you to be. You’ve already had enough power at your disposal in your lifetime, even *before*. If you wanted to turn into some evil bastard, you would have done so already. I should know. I’ve seen enough of them. You and I both. That’s why I’m loyal to you.”

“I appreciate your vote of confidence, Commander Bareem,” I say dryly as I deliver my old friend to the top of the stairs. “But there’s still so much about this infernal condition of mine that I still don’t understand.”

The books I ordered from the other side of the continent haven’t arrived yet. *Arcanea Magikora* and *An Illustrated*

Guide to Vampyrkind are extremely rare and old texts I've been trying to obtain for some time.

The answers I seek... I am hoping beyond hope I'll find them in those books.

As we walk down the corridor, Kaithar puts his big, heavy arm around my shoulders. "I'm sure you'll figure it out. You always do. It doesn't make me see you any differently, Your Highness. I'm just glad you're still alive."

I take more of Kaithar's weight, refusing to allow him to stagger. "Kaith," I say softly, a thorny vine curling around my heart. "It's not often I say this, but *thank you*."

"*Tch*. What for? You're not going all sentimental on me now, are you? You know, it's good to see you, Van. I haven't seen your face in a while. I get uneasy, you know, with you locking yourself up in your chambers all the bloody time."

"I have a lot of work to do," I growl. "Feyrun Bengar left Tyron's estates and finances in a mess."

"Can't argue with you there. The man was a complete moron. I don't know what your father was thinking, keeping him as steward for so long. Never mind. You'll have this place up to your usual standards in no time. You've already done enough, mind you. Nobody's going to starve this winter."

The castle registry is filled with records of many deaths from winters' past. Babes, children, mothers, fathers. The registrars usually put *sickness* as the cause of death, but when I cross-referenced the granary records from those dates, it was quite obvious that they simply didn't have enough food.

A knot of anger tightens within me.

I despise incompetence.

Especially incompetence that causes suffering.

I don't tell Kaithar that father failed to deal with Duke Bengar because he didn't *know* what was going on in Tyron. Lukiria is the center of everything, and as far as the nobles are concerned, Tyron is the end of the world; a barren, wintry province that is of no value and no consequence.

At last, we reach the simple wooden door that leads to Kaithar's quarters.

"Well, thank *you* for dragging me all the way here, Your Highness." Kaithar uncurls his arm from my shoulders and tries to execute the worst bow I've ever seen. "If you didn't sneak up on me back there, I probably would have crawled into the nearest stairwell and fallen asleep."

"And gotten yourself half-frozen to death in the process. At least now your snoring won't wake half the bloody castle."

"I don't snore," Kaithar says with a deadpan expression as he pushes the door open. A tendril of warm air escapes. One of the servants must've lit the fire before they went to bed.

Familiar scents swirl around me. Leather and blade oil. Clean linen and woodsmoke and salted meat.

Ever since I underwent the changes, my senses have been overly sharp. The faintest sound rings loudly in my ears. I can pick up scents I never knew existed. Too many strong scents all at once can make me feel sick in my stomach.

I can see in the dark now.

The direct midday sun is too harsh for my eyes.

For months after I turned, I secluded myself, unable to cope with the cacophony of noises and the melange of scents that assaulted my senses.

But I'm a little more used to it now. I can filter out unnecessary distractions... *most* of the time.

"Go to bed, Kaith," I growl, gently pushing him inside.

He hesitates at the entrance, turning around and leaning heavily on the door frame. "Do I have to pry answers out of you, you cryptic idiot? I asked you where you're going. *Twice*. Spit it out, Van."

Kaithar never forgets, even when he's drunk.

I shrug. "You probably won't even remember this when you wake up so I'll tell you. I'm going out to check the lycan traps. They were active last night."

“How do you know?”

“Heard them.”

“*Ah*. Of course you did. Sure you don’t want to leave that to the soldiers?”

“It’s Seinmas. I’m not a slave-driver. And I’m faster on my own.”

Much faster.

“True. I’m almost jealous, you know.”

“Don’t be. It isn’t worth it. *Believe* me. I wouldn’t wish this curse on any friend of mine.” I meet my old friend’s eyes, and for a moment I almost feel human again. Kaithar is one of the very few people around here who treats me normally.

Kaithar pushes off the doorframe, and for a moment, his massive body sways back and forth like a gunship in a squall.

We’re of a similar size, he and I, but Kaithar carries more muscle-bulk, thanks to his Vikurian heritage.

There was a time when he could have taken me down in a grappling match—*sometimes*.

His thick black brows draw together. His broad forehead creases in concern. “At least pull up your damn hood then, my lord. Don’t want you getting sunburned like last time.”

I chuckle. “You’re worse than my bloody mother.”

“Someone has to be. Who else is going to knock some sense into you, you gloomy bastard? You know what you need? A woman, that’s what. I wish you’d get over yourself and stop being such a fucking prude. Vampire or not.”

“I’ll let that pass on account of the fact that you’re drunk. Just this *once*. Good night, Kaithar.” My voice is colder than I intended as I gently close the door.

Kaithar lets out a muffled grunt of irritation as he disappears into his lair.

That bastard surely knows how to get under my skin, even when he’s so pissed he can’t walk straight.

What's he talking about?

A woman?

What woman wouldn't despise a wretch that wants to devour her?

FINLEY

The sky has turned from deep lavender to pale pink by the time I summon the courage to kick against the door, trying to splinter the already damaged wood in the hopes that I can make an opening large enough for me to squeeze myself through.

It helps that I've put my boots back on, although I've left the ridiculous dress on the opposite bench, where Janvia had neatly folded it.

I'd rather be cold than trapped.

Thud.

I kick again, and this time, the wood cracks.

A hole appears. Through it, I see snow and blood.

Bile rises in my throat. I fight the urge to throw up and kick harder.

Why did they lock me inside? Did they think I would run away?

In this place, in the middle of winter?

My father has to be a little insane.

All I know is that I need to get out of here before nightfall. The wolf-monsters left at the first hint of the rising sun. I have no doubt they'll be back.

I need to get out of here.

As long as I follow the track through the woods, I should eventually reach some sort of civilization. I shouldn't be too far from Tyron Castle by now. Surely, there would be a small village or homesteader's hut along the way.

Thud.

I kick again.

Thud.

Again; harder this time, tapping into the anger I've stored inside.

Actually, amidst the shock and fear, I'm *really* angry.

But then I freeze mid-kick, because a faint sound reaches my ears.

At first, I think I'm imagining it, but it's growing louder.

Hoofbeats.

The sound of many horses, galloping at speed.

I hear the voices of men; stern, loud, unfamiliar. The horses slow down. They're almost upon us.

I duck under the covers again.

Friend, or foe?

I don't know yet. Better to be cautious. They could be outlaws. Brigands. Men who would hold me for ransom and slit my throat if my father didn't pay.

Please. Be friendly.

"Look at this slaughter." One of the men laughs. "What a bunch of idiots. Who the fuck travels through Tyron in winter at night with such a small and poorly equipped escort? There's not even a crossbow or a war-axe between them."

How callous. My heart sinks. These men aren't friends at all.

"They look like Midlanders. Some minor noble's soldiers, from the looks of it. Don't expect to find much, but there might be a few gold on them. Hefgar, start going through their pockets and purses... what's left of them, anyway."

“Why do *I* always have to do the dirty work?”

“Because you’re new around here, bastard. Get to work.”

I feel sick. They’re talking so casually about the dead... about the people that had been all around me only yesterday. The guards and the maid hadn’t been the nicest to me, but they were just following my father’s orders.

They didn’t deserve *this*.

I hear the sounds of several men dismounting. The horses nicker and snort nervously, probably catching the residual scent of the beasts from last night.

“What do you think’s in that carriage over there?”

No...

“I don’t see any nobles amongst those bodies. Maybe they ran away. Wouldn’t surprise me. Most of them are cowards.”

Someone spits on the ground. “Parasites. All they do is leech our coin to build their fuckin’ palaces and hire bastards like us.”

“Well, *he’s* one of them, isn’t he? And *he’s* paying us.”

“Yeah, but he’s different. Proper powerful, he is. The sort that’s beneficial to serve. And he pays in gold. We’ve got the thing he wanted, now all we have to do is get it to him quick smart. Keep him happy. Show we’re reliable and all.”

“Y-you don’t think we’d be better off serving the other one?”

“The eldest? He’s mad, isn’t he? Corrupted by the dark magic. Who would want to... *tch*. Anyway, don’t worry about it. Go look inside, Teven. Might be something valuable in there.”

Footsteps crunch on the snow. The door rattles violently. “It’s locked. What’s this, then? Teeth-marks or something? The lycans were onto something.”

“Here. Use my axe.”

I curl into a ball beneath my mound of blankets, trying to make myself as small as possible; praying that maybe they'll be careless and overlook me.

Thud.

The sound of hard steel hitting wood chills me to the bone.

I don't dare move.

Thud.

“What's this thing made of, fuckin' elven-wood or something?”

Thud.

This time, the wooden door finally shatters.

The glass pane explodes. Shards of glass tinkle as they rain all over the blankets.

I tense, frantically trying to think of how I can escape this. Maybe I can launch myself forward; catch the intruder by surprise, somehow get to the outside...

No. Don't be stupid. He has an axe.

There are at least five men outside. They have horses. No matter where I go, they would run me down.

Maybe I can steal one of their horses.

“What in the Seven Furies is all this? A dress? There a woman in here?” The intruder mutters to himself as he rummages through the ridiculous dress that's folded up on the bench, before opening and slamming the wooden drawers beneath the seats. “Nobody in here?”

He tugs at one of my blankets. I clutch it with all my might, not ready to be uncovered.

He yanks harder. He's too strong. The blanket's torn from my grasp.

Cold air brushes against my face.

I look up... and come face to face with a stranger.

I'm dissected by a hard blue gaze. He has straw-colored hair and a rough beard and dirty teeth. His clothes are brown and rough and dirty. His cracked lips curve into a lascivious smile. "Well, well. What do we have here? Oi, boss. Look what I fou—"

Thud.

He stops mid-sentence. Something is poking out of his left eye. I cover my mouth in horror.

It's an arrow-tip.

Blood seeps from his eye where the tip of the arrow has penetrated through his sclera, just shy of his iris.

He slumps forward, collapsing onto his face. A metal-shafted arrow protrudes from the back of his head.

Outside, there's chaos. Men shouting. Horses whinnying. I brave a look out the window. Another man falls, an arrow protruding from his chest.

The remaining three gallop off in the direction of the shooter, leaving a pile of bodies and two untethered horses behind them.

Bile rises in my throat as the smell of blood hits me.

I'm queasy.

Paralyzed.

Trembling all over.

I force myself to move.

Ignore it. Keep going.

This could be my only chance.

I throw off the blankets and scramble over mounds of fabric and broken glass, desperately pushing the dead man aside as I make for the exit. One of the glass shards embeds itself in my palm, drawing blood and a sharp prick of pain. I pull it out and toss it aside, clenching my fist tightly to stem the flow of blood.

It's nothing to worry about. It'll stop soon.

Thank the Goddess I kept my boots on. I drop down onto the cold, hard snow, ignoring the glass shards that have embedded in my hands.

I barely even feel the pain.

The horse closest to me is a quarter horse. He looks a little underfed, and his deep brown coat is dull and lackluster. Overstuffed saddle bags are strapped down behind his saddle.

“Come,” I say softly, approaching from the side, holding out my hand.

He takes a tentative step forward.

“It’s okay,” I murmur, careful not to look him in the eye. “Come on.”

He edges forward until he’s close enough that I can grab the reins.

In the distance, I hear the sounds of men fighting; of steel clashing against steel, of frenzied shouting and screams of agony as wounds are inflicted.

My fingers curl around the soft leather of his reins. The cut in my hand is not so bad after all; it’s only shallow, and the blood has already started to dry. It might open again, but it’s not worth worrying about.

I’ll deal with it later.

Nearly there. Keep your head.

I focus on the horse; on getting him to trust me. I block out all sound and gently pull on his reins.

I ignore the smell of blood; the stench of death.

I ignore the fact that there are bodies strewn all around us.

We walk. I lead him behind the carriage until I can no longer see the carnage. The sight of pure, untouched snow is but a momentary respite.

Slowly, carefully, trying my best to give off a calm aura, I walk to the horse’s side and lower the stirrup. Holding the reins steady, I slip my foot into the stirrup.

One, two, three...

Up.

The saddle beneath me feels familiar and somehow comforting. I hold the reins steady and a little loose. The horse waits expectantly.

Good boy.

Much to my relief, he's easy to handle, and not too spooked by all the violence.

He must be used to it.

I give him a gentle squeeze with my legs. "Let's go."

He starts to walk.

Fear and excitement course through me. This is *it*. I might actually be able to escape from here.

I apply a bit more pressure with my legs, more briskly this time.

He speeds up. I shorten the reins and ease him into a trot, absorbing his movements with my body.

Almost.

We're almost away.

We're about to break into a canter; to leave this terrible place behind for good.

But then I hear the sound of my own name, shouted by a voice that's all too familiar to me.

"Fin! Don't go!"

I pull on the horse's reins.

Did I really just hear that, or am I hallucinating?

There's no way I can ignore that voice.

I turn in my saddle.

And all of a sudden, I'm staring back at a face that's so very similar to my own.

6

FINLEY

Three lads.

What?

They've followed me all the way here, taking the very best horses from Ruen's stables.

I can't believe my eyes.

I squint.

In the distance, I see my younger brother, Kastel, galloping toward me.

Behind him is another rider. It's Garan. One of the squires, he's the son of Ruen Castle's stable master, and a good friend of my brothers. They've played together since they were toddlers.

Someone is slumped across the front of Aran's horse.

Aderick.

Oh, no. Please don't be...

Cold fear grips my heart.

I've seen enough death already.

Silently, I curse my father and Emperor Duthriss.

Why is it that when old men try to connive and make plans, they so often end in nightmares?

And this son of the Emperor, this Corvan Duthriss... what part did *he* play in all of this? Was he not expecting me? Could

he not even send an escort to the border of his lands to greet us?

Kastel and Garan are gaining ground quickly. Aderick's unmoving form sways, his hands swinging from side to side.

The boys are wearing thick leather armor emblazoned with the serpent insignia of Ruen. Their heads are covered by sturdy leather and metal helmets. Longswords hang from their sides.

Their armor is splattered with blood.

The lads are much better fighters than I'd thought.

"What are you doing here?" I scream. "You should not be here, Kastel! I *told* you not to worry about me."

Anger wells up inside me, combined with a strange feeling of gratitude.

They've followed me *all* this way. For what? To rescue me from the clutches of this supposedly mad, terrible Corvan Duthriss?

Kastel reaches me. He slows his horse and manoeuvres the big gelding until he's alongside me. "Finley! You're safe! Thank the Goddess. If we didn't reach you just now, those brigands would have..."

Realization hits me in the chest like a vicious punch.

He's absolutely right.

I would have been...

Dead. Or worse.

"No time for worrying about what might have been," I snap. "What about Aderick? What's wrong with him?"

Kastel dismounts. Garan does as well. He unrolls a blanket and lays it on the ground. As gently possible, they pull Aderick off the horse and lay him down.

To my relief, my brother is breathing, but his face is a worrying shade of pale; almost blueish. Deep shadows encircle

his eyes, which are closed. A blanket is crudely tied around his belly.

“One of the brigands got him,” Kastel says, a tremor entering his voice. “Stabbed him with a sword. Right in the gut, through his leather armor. He’ll bleed out if we move him any further by horse. We’ll have to put him in the carriage and hitch the horses to it. Find a healer.”

“Tyron Castle shouldn’t be too far from here.”

“We are *not* going to that castle, Fin. We heard the truth from a maid. She listened in on the whole thing. You should have told us what father was planning. I can’t believe he would give you to *that* man against your will. We were going to steal you back and hide you away... I’m sorry, sister.” Kastel’s lower lip is trembling. Beneath the shadow of his helmet, it’s so obvious that he’s still a boy; just on the cusp of manhood.

So *young*.

Young enough to do utterly reckless things.

He shouldn’t be here. None of them should. What in the goddess’s name possessed them?

I turn and look across the woods, following the snow-covered road.

There *is* a road. It’s hard to make out at times because it’s covered in snow, but it’s there; compacted, trodden earth where nothing grows, cutting a swathe through the skeletal trees.

The road we’ve been traveling all this time.

If I follow that road, I’ll reach Tyron Castle.

All of the things we think we know about Corvan Duthriss...

They’re just rumors.

“Kastel.” My voice is hard and quiet. I sound like a stranger. “You and Garan will take the greatest care when moving our brother to the carriage. Be careful of the broken

glass. Keep him warm at all costs. Layer him in blankets and keep strong pressure on the wound. One of you will hitch your horse to the carriage. The other will keep guard, in case any other brigands appear. I'll go ahead—to Tyron Castle. Mark my words, the Archduke *will* render assistance.”

This time, it's Garan that protests, holding up a gloved hand. “Better that I go. You aren't—”

I glare at him. “Aren't *what*? I am Corvan Duthriss's betrothed. If not for me, you wouldn't be here. The least I can do is try and do everything in my power to save someone that saved me. Besides, I can ride faster.”

For whatever reason, the horses have always chosen me above all others. The stablehands say I have an *affinity*. I'm a naturally excellent rider, and it drives my father mad.

Time to put this ability of mine to good use.

“Stay the course,” I order. “Maintain a slow pace. Aderick's in no state to be subjected to rough travel until we have the right kind of bindings on his wound. I *will* return.”

I stare down the road, which is lined with the skeletal forms of hibernating trees. A mist hangs across the forest, ghostly and ephemeral.

The horse snorts uneasily. I give him a gentle squeeze with my calves, easing him into a walk.

“Wait for me,” I call, glancing over my shoulder. The boys' faces are ashen and grim.

I'll just have to ride as fast as this horse will take me and pray that no monsters cross my path.

CORVAN

I walk to the edge of the trap and stare down at the pure, undisturbed snow.

Nothing.

The tripwire hasn't been triggered, even though I've placed a shaman's potion in the center of the circle as bait. It contains a scent that's supposed to be irresistible to lycans—something called a *pheromone*. I know it works, because I've had some luck with this method before.

But this time, nothing. Maybe the shaman sold me a dud.

Or maybe the lycans are growing wise to my tricks.

Above me, the winter-stripped woods are silent. Wan sunlight filters through the branches, but I'm shielded from it by the edge of my hood and the silken scarf wrapped around my lower face.

It's a weakness of mine now. I can't stay in direct sunlight for very long before it scalds me. My body is different in so many ways—faster, stronger, quickly-healing—but these powers of mine come at a price.

I'm no longer fit to inherit the Empire.

It doesn't matter, though. I don't mind it out here; in the cold, in the silence.

After the horrors of war, the silence puts the mind at ease.

But silence can be quickly broken.

Just like now.

Across the clearing; across the woods, I detect a familiar sound.

A sound I'm intimately familiar with.

It's the sound of a horse's hooves on snow and hard ground.

Galloping; pounding the earth.

A lone rider, approaching *fast*. Whoever they are, they must be in serious trouble, because that horse is being ridden to death.

They're heading in the direction of my castle.

Friend, or foe?

Best if I intercept them before they reach the gates. If they're in genuine distress, I'll help them.

If they're an enemy, I'll decide whether I need to interrogate them or kill them.

I move with unearthly speed; silent across the snow, my footfalls barely making an indent.

I'm at the road in an instant, standing in the middle, staring down the lone rider.

They're not in view yet.

Soon.

I inhale the scent of fresh snow and earth and woodiness; of approaching horse and...

What is *that*?

It coils around me like a vine's tendril; a little at first, invading my senses, growing quickly until it engulfs me completely.

My thirst intensifies a hundredfold.

The pounding of my own blood becomes a roar in my ears.

I'm already starting to move, even though I don't completely comprehend it. I look down at the snow. The

sunlight reflects back at me, momentarily blinding me with its dazzling intensity.

I can't see.

I don't care.

I don't *need* to see.

The scent grows ever stronger, drawing me toward it like a beacon in a storm. I can't get enough of it. It consumes every last part of me. The sounds meld into a symphony; of trees swaying in the wind and hoofbeats and the delicate rasp of a human's breathing.

Her breathing.

The horse bears down upon me... then stops.

My vision clears, but the thirst does not.

The horse is panicking, rearing up onto its hind legs as it lets out a shrill whinny, throwing its rider out of the saddle.

I move.

I'm there.

She's in my arms—*caught*.

The horse bolts—*gone*.

I look down.

At a face that's so lovely I have no right to be staring at her like that, but her scent has driven me mad.

I'm no longer in control.

My body is moving of its own volition.

I can't stop.

Can't. Stop.

FINLEY

There's a man standing in the road.
A lone figure.

Am I seeing correctly?

I'm gaining on him quickly, riding at full speed, but he's not making any effort to move.

The closer I get, the more details I can make out.

He's big. Broad-shouldered and tall, he possesses the lean and muscular physique of a man who does hard and purposeful physical work on a regular basis.

A warrior or a hunter, perhaps.

He wears simple grey clothing. A tunic and trousers. Black leather boots. His face is hidden in shadow, covered by the hood of a long black cloak. A scarf conceals his lower face.

His hair emerges from one side. Long and braided, it's almost as white as the snow itself.

A rare shade. A *strange* shade, considering that he is certainly not elderly. Who is this man? His clothing tells me he isn't from the nobility. He doesn't wear the insignia of any lord.

Is he a brigand, like the men from before?

But he carries no weapon.

He's just standing there, still as a boulder, staring me down.

I catch a flash of something from beneath the shadow of his hood.

His eyes.

They glow *red*.

For a heartbeat, my entire body freezes.

Time slows.

A feeling of terrible un-reality ripples through me, coursing across my skin and down my spine.

As much as I want to, I can't look away, even though an overwhelming feeling of danger permeates every fiber of my being.

There's something unnatural about this man. He's like a wraith; a specter, appearing out of nowhere, staring at me with those demonic eyes.

I urge my horse to run faster.

Faster. Don't stop.

I'll mow him down if I have to. There's no way I'm stopping for this man—*whatever* he is.

For a moment, I think about galloping off into the woods, but the snow is thick on either side, and it would just slow us down. Besides, it would be so easy to get lost and disorientated in there, and I might not find my way back to safety before nightfall.

That would mean certain death, for both me and the boys.

I kick my horse's sides, urging him to go faster, *faster. Go!* I won't stop until we reach the safety of Tyron Castle's stone walls.

But as he nears the strange man, my horse betrays me.

A great shudder courses through the creature. He lets out a whinny of pure panic and rears, throwing me off-balance.

I try to hold on, but the force and the shock is too great, and I'm thrown backwards out of the saddle.

I cry out in despair as I tumble, anticipating terrible pain as I hit the cold ground below.

But I never land.

Because *he's* there, right beside me, catching me in powerful arms, and it happens so fast—he *moves* so unnaturally fast—that I can't do a thing as he sets me on my feet and runs his trembling fingers across my cheek, inhaling deeply.

As if he's *savoring* me.

And his eyes are crimson embers, contrasting with his pale cheekbones and brow, giving off a faint glow that's definitely unnatural.

He's a monster, just like the wolves that devoured my escort.

Even though I know it's futile, I try to squirm; to wrench myself out of his grasp, but he's demonically strong, and he pulls my arms behind my back, encircling both of my wrists with a single hand.

I kick his shins, but I only end up hurting my foot in the process. His body feels like it's made of steel. I try and bring my knee up—to kick him where it hurts the most—but his other hand clamps across my thigh, and I'm perfectly powerless against his inhuman strength.

Paralyzed with fear, I stare up into his eyes.

His irises are pure red; the color of fresh blood. I wasn't mistaken. They really *do* emit an unearthly kind of glow, as if his soul has been consumed by arcane magic.

His skin is smooth and perfect, like an alabaster statue. His brows are the same shade of white as his hair.

“Please,” I whisper, hoping that this creature possesses even a sliver of mercy. “*Don't.*”

He lowers his face, pressing his lips against my neck. Through the soft material of his scarf, his lips are warm. He inhales deeply.

He's trembling.

A low rumble emanates from deep inside his chest.

A *growl*.

Suddenly, the thin strip of cloth separating his lips from my bare skin is gone.

I feel them pressing against my neck, and I can't move.

His *lips!*

I can't do a thing.

I'm a rabbit, caught in a wolf's thrall.

I am prey.

Something hard and sharp pierces my skin.

It takes a moment for the realization to sink in.

He's *biting* me!

I feel the warm gush of my very own blood.

He's *drinking* it.

His lips are a tender clamp, moving ever so slightly, sucking gently.

Why doesn't it hurt? This savage, insistent pressure; this monstrous act... why does it somehow feel tender?

In fact, the feeling of his entirety; his large body engulfing mine, his immovable fingers around my wrists—bare skin against bare skin—his tongue and mouth caressing my neck...

All of this is...

It's strangely *pleasant*.

No. I try to quash that traitorous thought.

He's *draining* me. This monster is probably going to kill me.

Stop, is what I desperately want to say, but my lips won't move.

My mind is frozen, caught in a viscous mixture of warmth and terror; of shock and blissful sensation.

Is this what death feels like?

He takes from me again and again. Time moves fast and slow.

It could have been an eternity.

It could have been the span of a single heartbeat.

I don't know how long we've been like this, me held in thrall to this devastating creature. My resistance has melted. My thoughts are a panicked, heated mess.

I keep waiting...

For what?

Pain.

Death.

My *end*.

But it never comes.

And then, at long last, he stops.

My breath catches as he runs his tongue over the tiny punctures he's made in my skin. All of a sudden, his mouth becomes shockingly gentle.

It doesn't hurt.

It doesn't hurt at *all*.

He breaks away, and for a single inexplicable moment, I find myself lamenting the loss of his mouth's warm caress.

Are you mad, Finley Solisar?

He lifts his head, and his lips are stained crimson with my blood.

For the very first time, I see his face.

Of course.

Does it even surprise me that he's excruciatingly handsome?

His dark brows are drawn together, crimson eyes fixed upon me, his gaze so intense I feel like he can reach into my soul and take whatever he wants.

He has high cheekbones and a strong nose with a slight bend in the bridge—as if it's been broken and set at some point in his unholy life. He has a chiseled jawline and a cleft chin. His cheeks are ever so slightly hollowed.

His lips are sensual softness; the only thing about him that's remotely soft, even though they're painted with my blood.

His tongue darts out and he licks his lips clean. I catch a glimpse of sharp fangs.

He is most definitely *not* human.

My heart remembers to beat again, hammering so hard and fast it's almost painful.

The red glow in his eyes has faded. Now, they're a deep, dark crimson—one could almost mistake them for reddish-brown. If not for the unnatural hue of his irises and the marble-like quality of his skin, I might almost think he looked human.

He blinks, shaking his head ever so slightly. He whispers something under his breath.

It sounds like suspiciously like a curse.

His gaze is wide. Filled with heat and surprise. *Not* cold. For a moment, he seems almost as shocked as I am.

This isn't the look of a man that wants to kill me.

I draw upon all my willpower to try and shake off the madness of what I just experienced. I force myself to resist the magnetic force of his aura. I don't care if he's a demon or a spirit or a powerful mage.

I won't give in to his depraved desires.

And yet...

He didn't kill me.

And *everything* depends on what I do right now.

Don't panic. Whatever you do...

Do. Not. Panic.

Part of me wants to scream. I want to let my fear loose; to twist and writhe and fight, to *show* him how distraught I am.

How dare you devour me like that?

How dare you enjoy it?

The last one goes for him and me, both.

But instead of fighting him, I remain very, very still.

I look up, searching his elegant features, catching the last of the softness in his expression before his face becomes an inscrutable mask.

Who are you?

I don't dare ask that question.

There are more pressing matters to deal with.

"Please." My voice comes out as a cracked whisper. "*Help* me. I'll give you..."

Anything.

If you still thirst for my blood, you can have it again. Just save my brother.

His brows draw together. His eyes narrow.

My heart catches.

Have I offended him?

"What do you need?" When he finally speaks, his voice is deep and smooth and resonant, the timbre a perfect complement to his decadent looks.

I have never encountered anyone so dangerous and yet so damn beautiful in my entire life.

"There are three young lads. One of them is badly wounded. Stabbed with a sword. He needs a healer. I was on my way to Tyron Castle, to request assistance from..." The words catch in my throat. Do I tell him that I'm Corvan

Duthriss's betrothed? Would that information help me, or put me in danger?

I decide to keep silent on that matter, for now.

"Archduke Duthriss?" The stranger's lips curve ever so slightly. There is a hint of irony in his voice.

Does he find this amusing?

Irritation courses through me. "He is the lord of this land, is he not? He is honor-bound to provide assistance to travelers in distress."

"That is true." His expression is strange. I don't entirely like it. "Where are they?"

I open my mouth, then close it again. Doubt swirls in my chest. Is it right that I reveal to this stranger—this powerful, dangerous being—the location of my brothers and their friend?

What if he devours them, too?

But I'm desperate, and without the horse, I can't possibly reach the castle in time.

This savage stranger is my only hope.

"I won't harm him," he says, as if reading my mind. "You have my word."

Gently, the pale man releases me from his arms. I sway on my feet and immediately stumble backwards, recoiling from him.

He waits; silently, patiently, giving me time to gather my composure.

"What does *your* word count for in this place?" I demand.

"I'd like to think it counts for something." He puts his hand to his chest and offers me a look of perfect sincerity. "I can *assure* you it counts for something. I will not hurt your man, my lady. If he is severely wounded, as you say, then time is of the essence, especially in this weather."

My lady? I frown. How does he know to address me so? From the way he speaks—with his educated accent and natural authority—he could easily be nobility from the capital, but I don't know any nobles with pure white hair and crimson eyes and a thirst for human blood.

Can I trust him?

Definitely not, but what choice do I have?

“How do I know you won't drink from them... the way you did with me?”

“I have no need for that.” His gaze drops to my neck, where he bit me, making me feel terribly exposed. “I'm satiated now.”

“I don't recall giving you permission to bite me,” I blurt, indignation erasing any semblance of caution.

“Did I kill you?” His voice is soft, alluring, dangerous; laced with a hint of amusement.

“No,” I exhale. *Although you nearly made my heart stop, you damn bastard.*

“I'm the only one that can help you right now. Tell me where the lads are, my lady.” Somehow, he's become terrifyingly persuasive. There's an earnestness in his crimson gaze that makes me want to throw caution to the wind and trust him completely.

Silently, imperceptibly, I shudder.

This creature is *dangerous*.

But what choice do I have? With all the time that has passed, if I keep quiet and do nothing, Aderick will die.

I take a deep, shuddering breath and try to forget that I'm in the company of a monster.

“It's about five leagues that way,” I say softly, “if you follow the road. But you'll need a horse, otherwise it will be too late.” Already, I've wasted far too much time. I don't know how much longer Aderick can survive. “Surely the castle is not far from here. Please, if you would just help me get to—”

The pale stranger holds up a hand. “No need. *I* am faster. If you will permit me, my lady.”

Permit? I shake my head in confusion. *What is he talking about?*

The monster adjusts his hood until shadows fall across his inhuman eyes. He fixes his scarf, wrapping it around his neck and the lower half of his face.

Hiding himself from plain view.

From a distance, and to the ordinary observer, there would be nothing unusual about him except for the braided tail of long white hair that emerges from beneath his cloak.

He’s calm. *Too* calm.

His entire demeanor is relaxed; still, he radiates that strange energy—half-amusement, half something else that I can’t quite put my finger on.

It occurs to me that I’m wearing nothing but my boots and my grey woolen undergarments. Although the long-sleeved tunic and long-johns cover almost every part of me—from neck to bloody ankle—they are rather tight and clingy, leaving little to the imagination.

I am indecent right now, but who cares?

The man—*monster*—disappears before my very eyes, the space around him turning into a blur of darkness and light.

A great force lifts me up.

Suddenly, I’m in his arms again, but this time, he’s carrying me, and we’re moving so fast that the snow and the trees blur.

I gasp.

He’s running. Fast. Faster than even a horse would run.

No mortal is capable of moving this fast.

No mortal is this strong, to be able to carry me so effortlessly. Against him, I have no hope of fighting; no hope of escape.

I entered the lands of Tyron destined to marry an archduke.
Instead, I've ended up in the arms of a demon.

A strange, white-haired, red-eyed, blood-drinking demon.

I can only pray that he stays true to his word.

CORVAN

Just my bloody luck.

It's as if Kaithar, snoring in his warm bed high in my castle, is playing some infernal trick on me in his sleep.

His drunken words ring in my head.

You know what you need? A woman, that's what. I wish you'd get over yourself and stop being such a fucking prude. Vampire or not.

I do *not* need a woman. Look what just happened. The one I'm carrying in my arms? She's the first woman I've encountered in over three years. And in an instant, she demolished every last sliver of self-control that I possess.

I don't know what came over me. Her scent was so strong; so overpowering. I've never experienced anything like that in my life, and I've been *this* way for over three years now. As soon as her essence reached my nose, I was gone. Nothing was going to stop me from tasting her. *Nothing*.

So I did.

And it was glorious.

And for the very first time since the infernal death-curse dragged me back into the world of the living, my terrible thirst is completely sated.

I drank from her and I would do it again, because nothing I've ever known compares to the taste of her blood.

Now she's in my arms, trying to pretend that she isn't afraid, even though she's so obviously terrified.

It's in the stiffness of her body; in her shallow, flighty breathing. It's in the way she looks at me, her eyes wild and wide.

My footsteps are light upon the ground. The snow and mud and the gravity of the earth do little to restrain me. I'm simply stronger and faster, capable of moving great distances in the blink of an eye.

I follow the road—*my* road, although she doesn't know that yet.

What is a nobleborn woman doing, traveling through Tyron in the middle of winter?

What was she *thinking*?

I cannot even fathom.

The nobles in Lukiria all know to leave me well alone, and even if they didn't, not a single one of them would be foolhardy enough to travel to Tyron in winter.

Why would *anyone* come all the way out here?

The scent of blood reaches my nose again—someone else's blood. It's dull and lackluster; nothing at all like the pure, heady sweetness flowing through this woman's veins.

I slow down. I can hear voices. Male. Two of them. Arguing in the background. I detect the slow clop of hooves and the creaking of carriage wheels.

"Told you I should've gone," one of the men says. He sounds young; probably barely out of adolescence. *"What if Finley's gotten lost? Or been caught by brigands?"*

Finley.

Is that her name? I store it in the back of my mind for later.

At the mention of brigands, cold anger flickers inside me.

How dare they enter *my* lands?

I will deal with them later. *Personally.*

“You underestimate her, Garan. She’s not going to get lost,” another male says adamantly. “She’s got an uncanny sense of direction, and she’s a damn good rider. Besides, she’s the one who’s betrothed to Duthriss. She’ll probably have a lot more sway over the Archduke than you or I. Fin can be pretty persuasive when she wants.”

Wait... what?

Not much can take me by surprise these days, but this time, I almost choke.

Betrothed? To this sweet little thing?

It’s the first I’ve heard of it. My anger rises. I’ve made my intentions *very* clear. Which meddling idiot in the court would be stupid enough to defy me?

Even father knows to leave me alone.

Was *he* behind this?

Whoever it was, they must be incompetent or stupid or malicious or truly desperate. Sending her to the Northlands in the middle of winter with an inadequate escort?

To the point where lives are put at risk? Where *her* life is endangered?

Quietly, I seethe.

Someone will pay for this.

I slow down as I catch sight of the carriage. It’s a basic model; sturdy and functional, although lacking in the ornamentation and without the more sophisticated engineering that would make the ride smoother and faster.

It’s the sort of carriage that would be used by a low-ranking noble. No different from the thousands I’ve seen in Lukiria.

The side door is badly damaged. The stench of lycan clings to it, cutting through the distinctive coppery tang of human blood. With such a strong smell of blood hanging in the air, I would usually be tested to the very limits of my self-control.

But this time, I’m not even remotely tempted.

Compared to *her* blood, there is nothing tempting about this wounded mortal's blood, which is just as well for him.

I stare at the wooden panel of the door, which is torn and splintered.

Lycan were here last night. Did they attack? Was Finley in that carriage?

All the more reason for me to be furious.

I reach the middle of the road and set Finley down. She stifles a gasp and instinctively steps away from me, her entire body stiffening as she shoots me a look that's equal parts fear and astonishment.

I tend to have that effect on people.

I generally don't care.

But seeing *her* reaction to me...

Somehow, it's a thousand times worse.

We're almost upon the carriage now. The smell of blood is overpowering. The poor kid must've lost a lot.

Finley's sense of urgency is justified. If he doesn't get treated by a healer soon, he'll be greeting Hecoa in the Underworld.

The driver, a young lad with dark hair and eyes and the typical clean-shorn hair of a knight, catches sight of us.

He wears simple leather armor. A sword hangs from his side. I recognize the coiled serpent insignia on his chest. It's from Ruen, a small barony in the Midlands. I know of it, but only vaguely. Faint memories flicker through my mind—I believe I visited the castle there when I was a child, with father.

From what I can remember, it was quite basic, but there was a nice, homely garden. I vaguely recall playing in the woods just outside the castle.

Why are these lads here? Why *her*?

The lord of Ruen holds no special power or influence within the Rahavan Court. In fact, my father despises most of the minor lords, with their shameless ambition and posturing and sycophantic behavior. I'm sure Baron Solisar is no exception.

The carriage driver slows. A man jumps out of the cabin; yet another lad who's barely into manhood. I wouldn't even accept recruits this green into my army.

As soon as he catches sight of me, he draws his sword.

His stance isn't bad, although it needs slight correction; with proper training, he has potential.

"Finley!" he shouts as they roll to a stop. His eyes hold a healthy level of distrust and fear as he looks me up and down, trying to gauge whether I'm friend or foe. "Who the bloody hell is this? Where are Duthriss's people?"

I'm already moving, easily evading his blade, ignoring him as I reach the steps of the carriage. He's no threat. He can't even touch me.

I enter. Shards of broken glass are everywhere. Thick woolen blankets are strewn across the seats. In one corner, a ludicrous quantity of green-and-gold silk has been deposited, deformed by a mass of wires that's supposed to form a skirt-like structure.

Beneath my scarf, my lips curve in wry amusement. This must be the dress that Finley cast aside. I don't blame her. It's a monstrosity.

My attention turns to the poor wretch lying on the floor. His torso is wrapped with blankets which are tightly secured by a belt. His eyes are closed, his breathing shallow.

His face is deathly pale. Shadows encircle his eyes.

Years of experience on the battlefield tell me he's hovering close to death. If he is to be saved, he needs a healer, *now*.

I lift the injured man into my arms, blankets and all. To me, he's as light as a leaf, even though he's big and strong and

would probably feel like he weighed a ton if my old self was carrying him.

I bring him outside, where I'm promptly met with the point of a sword.

The lad's arm trembles as he places the tip of his sword close to my neck.

"Kastel, put the sword down." Finley's voice is calm. Her scent surrounds me; warm, sweet, and utterly intoxicating. I don't dare glance behind me.

"Fin, who the fuck *is* this guy?" The lad is having none of it. I don't blame him. *I* wouldn't trust me, either. "What is he doing? What can he even do when Aderick's in this state?" His voice cracks. Desperation and fury fill his words.

A dangerous combination.

"If you want your brother to live, then lower your sword and listen to me," I say softly. "I'm taking him to the best healer in Tyron. I can get him there faster than anyone else. The three of you will continue toward Tyron Castle. An escort will meet you along the way."

"You'd better do as you say, because we are guests of the Archduke, and he *will* hear of this," Kastel threatens.

Given the circumstances, it's a reasonable thing to do.

"I'm sure he will," I say mildly.

"If my brother dies..."

"If I get him to the healer on time, he *won't* die." I have that much faith in my physician's abilities.

Unable to help myself, I steal a glance at the strange woman; this *Finley*, who is apparently my betrothed.

She's standing in the middle of the road, staring at me with wide eyes. The wind whips at her unbound hair, scattering the rich brown tendrils. Her complexion is pale. I must've taken a little too much from her. I see the faint evidence of my momentary madness at the base of her neck—two tiny puncture marks, surrounded by the faintest of bruising.

I'm not going to lie to myself. I would gladly drink from her again.

What am I going to do with this unexpectedly alluring creature?

She crosses her arms and glares at me, chin thrust forward, jaw set in a stubborn line. I get the feeling she's going to curse me to all eternity if anything happens to this poor lad in my arms.

Very well.

I'll do everything in my power to make sure he lives.

I tip my head in acknowledgment.

Then I move, faster than the human eye can follow, leaving her sharp intake of breath in my wake.

CORVAN

I t doesn't take me long to reach the gates of my castle.

Edinvar—immovable heart. Mountain Fortress. Tyron Castle. They're all names for the imposing stone structure that rises up out of the vast forest, crowning an impressive stone hill that gives it spectacular views out across the city of Sanzar and the vast lands of southern Tyron.

Built by my ancestors when the Rahavan Empire was newly formed, it's the last bastion of civilization before the hills rise into the unforgiving mountain ranges of *Khatur*.

Many would consider *Edinvar* crude and unrefined, but I like it. It's highly defensible. I find it incredibly reassuring. In some places, the stone walls are as thick as my entire armspan.

Most importantly, it's quiet.

I return the way I came—through the rear gates, which are normally reserved for soldiers and supply carts and the like.

The sentry atop the wall is a solemn figure. He stands with his halberd in one hand, crossbow at the ready, silently watching the forest from above the parapet.

Not everyone rests on *Seinmas*.

There's always someone on guard.

I glance up, and we lock eyes. He greets me with a respectful salute, eyebrows lifting at the sight of the wounded lad in my arms. "Do you need assistance, Your Highness?"

“I’ll sort the lad out. Go and find Captain Kinnivar,” I order. “There’s a party of three headed this way on the Central Road. He’s to send an escort to meet them. I want them to be given meals and rooms in the East Wing. They are to be treated as honored guests—but also closely watched.”

Fearing the kid’s life is about to slip away, I increase my speed again. To the guard, I’d appear as nothing but a blur, but he barely reacts as I leave him.

My men are used to this kind of thing by now.

I cross the courtyard, following the path along the walls until I reach the entrance to a tall circular tower.

The heavy wooden doors creak faintly as I push them open and go inside. Holding the boy as steady as possible, I make my way up the stone staircase. He’s light in my arms, like a child’s toy. The uneven steps are nothing beneath my feet; I feel weightless, almost as if I could levitate.

Everything is easier.

More detailed.

More excruciating.

In a heartbeat, I’m in the large, circular chambers at the top, poring over a detailed scientific text alongside Vinci Sacrosan, my brilliant healer, and formerly medic-in-chief of the armies under my command.

“Ciel,” I say quietly, from over his shoulder. Ciel is what he prefers to be called.

He jumps out of his seat, the wooden chair hitting the floor with a clatter. “Hecoa be damned,” he blurts. “Could you at least *knock* or something? You disrupted my flow-state. *Iacovo’s Compendium of Quaternian Physics* is not a text that one simply—” Vinci’s mouth clamps shut as he realizes what’s in my arms. His attention shifts like lightning. One look at the lad’s face, and he’s immediately grasped the gravity of the situation. “It was quicker to bring him straight to me, wasn’t it? Well, if you want me to save his life, then you’ll do exactly what I say.”

I tip my head obligingly. “What do you need?”

“What’s the damage?”

“I haven’t dared check the wound. Impaling from a blade is what I’ve been told. He’s obviously lost a lot of blood. *Too* much.” I’ve seen many such injuries on the battlefield. I’ve held men in my arms as they died, watching the life fade from their eyes. There’s a feeling when you see death take hold; a certain kind of dread. And the thought comes—or at least, it used to: *tomorrow, that could be me.*

Suddenly, *her* face blazes bright in my mind. I can’t forget that fierce look of hers. If this boy dies, then surely she will curse me for all eternity.

But death does as she pleases.

“Just save his life, won’t you, Ciel?”

“Lay him on the table.” Vinciél removes his gold-rimmed glasses, folding them and slipping them into his pocket. He rolls up his shirtsleeves and ties his long golden hair at the nape of his neck. He goes over to the basin and fills it, dipping his hands and forearms into the water. Then he starts to scrub, raising a soapy lather. “Do not unwrap his bindings until I say. That green chest of drawers over there. Third drawer from the top. Get me *all* of the gauze. And in the top drawer, there’s a blue bottle of ether. I need the wooden instrument-case from that desk over there. Open it, lay it beside the patient, where I can easily reach.”

I lay the young man on the table and gather the equipment, exactly as Vinciél has instructed. I think nothing of the fact that he’s issuing me commands as if I’m some young apprentice.

In Vinciél’s lair, even the Archduke of Tyron defers to his knowledge and expertise.

After my transformation, he was the very first one that understood what I was. He’s saved my life more than once—along with my sanity.

I expect him to do the very same for this lad, who bears more than a slight resemblance to Finley, my betrothed-

apparent.

Her brother, would be my guess. Even though their coloring is completely different, there's a similarity in his face; his bone-structure.

"You can unwrap him now. Use that blade to cut the belt."

I make quick work of the makeshift belt-tourniquet and the wadded blankets. Pulling them away, I uncover a mess of blood and organs.

The smell of blood hits me right in the nose, but I'm not even tempted, because Finley's sweet aftertaste lingers on my tongue.

"Looks like someone ran him through with a sword," I growl. "He's too young to be fighting like that."

"Correct. Liver's damaged, but the rest of his organs are intact. He'll live. Remove the rest of the cloth from the edges of his wound. I'm going to push the organs back in and stitch him up." A needle and catgut thread and forceps have appeared in Vinciel's hands. "Go and get scrubbed," Vinciel snaps as he reaches my side. "I might need your precious royal hands for more than just carrying things."

I oblige, rolling up my sleeves. The water's still running; a warm trickle coming from copper pipes that are heated by coals in the basement. I quickly work up a lather and clean my hands and arms up to the elbows, copying his routine.

Vinciel is very particular about clean hands. Even on the battlefield, where blood and dirt and gore and filth are inescapable, he somehow manages to drill *clean hands* into every single one of his healers and apprentices.

He's obsessive about certain things, even though his working environment is a cluttered mess in every other way, driving me mad at the worst of times.

"Corvan, come here." Vinciel beckons with a flick of his chin. "Give me your hand."

"What do you need me to do?" I return to the healer's side.

"Hand. Palm facing upwards."

It's strange, but I cooperate. I trust Vinciel implicitly, no matter how infuriating he is at times.

He takes his blade and makes a neat cut right through the middle of my palm. The pain is sharp and sudden, but it's nothing compared to the countless war wounds I've suffered.

"What was *that* for?" I growl. Even as my blood trickles down, dripping into the lad's wounds, the cut in my palm is already starting to heal.

"Your blood is useful."

"I do not want to create another... like me."

"Won't happen. All the texts I've read say that it's pretty much impossible. You're either Chosen, or you aren't. But there's a temporary healing effect that can be transferred to others. It's a gift, Corvan. A *gift*."

Vinciel lets out a low, appreciative whistle as he makes quick work of the surgery, his long, nimble fingers dancing across and in-between flesh and organs until he reaches the outermost layer—the skin.

"Give me that red lacquered box over there."

I retrieve a small box from amidst the clutter on one of Vinciel's many desks.

"Open it."

He takes the contents; a small spool of black silken thread, and quickly threads a fresh needle.

His bare hands are soaked in blood.

"Let's close. Cut my sutures as I go."

When Vinciel's done, all that's left of the terrible sword-wound is a neat incision about the length of my hand. The healer takes a large wad of gauze and douses it in astringent-smelling brown liquid from a glass bottle. Then he proceeds to clean the area, removing dried blood and leaving a thin film of the brown stuff on and around the sutured wound.

"Bandages," Vinciel orders. "Fourth drawer."

I find the neatly-rolled spool of cloth and hand it to him.

“Lift him for me, Corvan.”

I gently lift the lad’s body at an angle, allowing Vinciel to loop bandages around his torso.

When he’s done, he liberally douses a wad of gauze in ether and lets the lad breathe it in. “Thanks to your magnificent blood, he’ll awaken soon if I don’t do this. Best to keep him sedated until he’s healed enough to tolerate a bit of pain. He’ll live.” Appearing satisfied with his work, Vinciel raises his bloodstained hands and walks toward the basin. “This kid isn’t a local, is he?”

“No.” I close my hand and open it again, staring at my palm. The cut has completely healed. There’s only my bare skin and the sword calluses I earned before I became a vampire.

A necessary reminder that I was once human.

Vinciel looks over his shoulder as he immerses his hands in the water, giving me a calculating look. “Who travels here in the middle of winter? What kind of idiot travels here at *all*?”

I return his look with a shrug. Although I’ve withdrawn from the politics of the Rahavan Court, I’m still sought out by the occasional visitor. From minor nobles to grifters to cunning merchants; and even spies disguised as the latter, there are those that will brave the wilds of Tyron to pay their respects to the crown prince of Rahava.

But this is the first time a woman has come into my domain.

The very thing I feared might happen...

It happened.

I lost control.

And if it happened again—if I had the opportunity to *taste* her again—there is a part of me that would not mind at all.

“We shall see,” I say quietly, carefully concealing the sudden heat that flares inside me. “I will have the servants prepare lodgings and bring him down. I trust you will be monitoring the patient during the early stages of his recovery.”

“Of course. It is my duty as a physician.”

“Another thing, Ciel. This man’s companions will soon arrive. One of them is a woman. I want you to give her a full check-up. Make sure she is not displaying any signs of ill-health.”

Ciel dries his hands on a towel and turns to face me. He pulls his spectacles from his bloodstained pocket and puts them on, his eyes narrowed behind the crystalline lenses. “A woman,” he says flatly.

“Yes.”

“You have already encountered her?”

“Yes.”

“Then you have...?”

I regard him with a cool stare. “Yes, I *have*.”

Ciel’s left eyebrow curves upwards. He knows a lot more about my condition than most. He knows I do not permit women to reside in Edinvar because their bloodscent tempts me to the point of near-madness.

He even has his theories as to *why*.

“I will examine her for signs of anaemia, then.” My physician lets out a wry chuckle. “It isn’t the end of the world, Corvan.”

I frown. I can’t afford such weaknesses, even when I crave them so badly.

“So tell me. Have you become a depraved monster yet?”

I shrug. “No idea.”

A look of disapproval crosses Ciel’s elegant features. “You can’t keep avoiding the issue, you know. There’s only so long that you can continue to depend on offerings from the tribes to

quell your thirst. Sooner or later, you're going to have to learn to control it."

I turn to leave. "I did not request your counsel on the matter, Vinciel." My tone is cold. "Although I appreciate your efforts in saving this lad's life."

"Yes, Your Highness." Realizing that he has overstepped, Ciel's tone becomes formal.

"I will receive your report tomorrow, in my office. Enjoy the rest of your Seinmas. Ciel."

"I don't think I quite have the appetite for Iacovan Quaternian Physics anymore," he mutters. "Maybe some good old fashioned smut will cheer me up."

I leave him amidst his books and medicines and equipment, glancing at the patient as I head for the door.

The young man looks a little better, at least. The pallor in his cheeks isn't quite as bad anymore. The shadows around his eyes are a little lighter.

What the fuck were you doing, nameless lad, coming to my lands in the middle of winter, so poorly equipped, and with her in your company?

I still haven't figured out who I need to be furious with.

Or who I need to kill.

FINLEY

The guest dining room of Tyron Castle feels so different from the cold, cavernous hall in Ruen where we used to take our meals.

The three of us are seated at a round table. The chairs are comfortable; cushioned and deep, with polished wooden armrests. A fire burns in the hearth, suffusing the room with warmth.

Although the walls and floors are bare stone; raw and unrefined and brutal, the furnishings are luxurious. The silken rug on the floor is large and impossibly fine, deep red and woven with an intricate floral tapestry.

Its color reminds me of blood; of the crimson that was all over that pale demon's lips.

My blood.

A sliver of heat unfurls in my chest and shoots downwards, slipping into my core, dancing between my thighs. I go perfectly still as the memory of his touch invades my mind.

He bit me. Not only that, he did it without my permission, *restraining* me while he took what he damn well pleased.

I should be repulsed, but the torrent of emotion coursing through me is more complicated than that. I can't forget the way he released me; the momentary look of confusion on his face, as if he himself was shocked at what he'd done.

I can't forget the way he immediately agreed to render assistance to Aderick, with no questions asked.

At least, I *hope* that's what he's done.

It's out of our hands now.

"You okay, Fin?" Kastel leans forward, his hazel eyes filled with worry.

"I, uh..." Heat rises in my cheeks. "Why do you ask, Kastel?"

"You look a little flustered, that's all. But it's understandable." He leans back in his seat and lets out a long sigh, running his fingers through his tawny hair. "That thing *wasn't* human. I shouldn't have let him take Aderick."

"What choice did we have?" Garan is seated across from me. Dark-haired, stubble-faced, and powerfully built, he's completely transformed from the skinny, lanky youth I used to scold when he and my brothers played pranks on me.

He's shed his leather armor. His grey undertunic is flecked with blood. "There's no way Kastel or I could have fought that guy. You saw the way he moved. Inhumanly fast. But I didn't sense ill intentions from him. He would've just killed us all if that was the case. Anyhow, the Archduke sent out an escort, just like the demon said he would. I wouldn't be surprised if that bastard and Archduke Duthriss are connected."

"What makes you say that?" Unease turns my thoughts cold.

"Well, they say the war changed him. The arcane magic the barbarians used against our soldiers... that he embraced it. There's speculation he's even made alliances with some of them. That he turns a blind eye to the dark magic they practice, in exchange for power.

"But it's forbidden," I murmur. In Rahava, the use of arcane magic is highly illegal and punishable by death. Arcane magic is connected to death, and death should stay in Hecoa's domain.

Is *drinking blood*... a form of arcane magic, then?

That strange man I encountered... was he a warlock?

“Why do you think we came after you?” Kastel leans forward, his voice dropping to a whisper. “I cannot *believe* father did this to you, Finley. This grand building project of his has driven him mad.”

I resist the urge to shake my head. *No, Kastel. He’s always been this way with me. You were just too young to see it.* “You shouldn’t have come here,” I say instead, my anger rising. “What were you *thinking*? For the three of you to come to Tyron alone? You could have been killed!”

“*You* would have been killed, Fin,” Kastel shoots back, his expression darkening. “Or worse. Look what happened to our people back there. Your escorts. Men that have served under father for years and years. All dead. If he knew you were coming, that fucking archduke should have sent an escort to meet you at the border. We just don’t have those kinds of resources.”

Guilt and sorrow hit me like a crossbow bolt through the chest.

They’re all dead.

I should be amongst them.

Behind us, a man clears his throat.

My gaze snaps toward the other side of the room, where the heavy wooden doors are open.

A figure stands in the doorway, hands folded behind his back, a cryptic almost-smile on his lips. He’s tall and slender, with golden hair and blue eyes and elegant features that stop just short of being effeminate.

What is with these Tyronese men and their long hair?

“Pardon my intrusion,” the man says calmly. “My name is Vinciel Sacrosan. I am Edinvar’s head physician. The *fucking archduke* has ordered me to update you on your brother’s condition. He has been treated for his injuries and is currently stable. The hepatic trauma was severe and certainly life-threatening. Fortunately, I was able to initiate a treatment that induces rapid healing.”

“In plain language, please, Sir.” My brother’s forehead furrows with worry.

“He’ll live.”

Kastel’s expression is ridiculous; caught somewhere between astonishment and relief.

He’ll live.

I close my eyes and let out a deep, shuddering sigh. All the anger and tension flow out of me.

Aderick will live. My foolhardy, reckless kid brother, who is yet to learn how the world truly works...

He’ll live.

A pang of guilt creeps into my heart. “Will there be any permanent damage?”

“Unlikely. He’s young. He’ll heal well. As long as he spends the next several weeks recuperating—with proper bedrest—he should make a full recovery. But he is not to exert himself in any way until I give the all-clear.”

“I understand. I’ll make sure he follows your instructions to the letter.”

“I’m sure you will.” Vinciel Sacrosan gives me a strange look. I can’t decipher his expression in the slightest.

I blink.

Did I hear correctly before?

Just before... did he say... *fucking archduke?*

I must be dreaming, because the physician looks like butter wouldn’t even melt in his mouth. His gaze is cool and analytical. He’s urbane and polished. “My lady, I am informed that there may have been a certain incident during your travels. His Highness has asked that I check you over.”

I stiffen. *Incident?* Does the physician know about the blood-drinking? “I-I’m fine.”

Vinciel won’t be swayed. “Nevertheless, I have my orders, and it’s never a good idea to disregard Archduke Duthriss’s

will. It will not take long. I can examine you here, or in a private room. Whichever is your preference.”

I share a look with Kastel. “Here is fine.”

“As you wish.” He crosses the room, his movements graceful and elegant, reminding me of a cat. His clothing is simple but well tailored; the dark blue coat and white shirt look like they’ve been cut from the highest quality cloth.

The fit and styling are impeccable, effortlessly so.

The castle might look deceptively simple and unadorned, but everything here reeks of wealth.

Suddenly, Kastel and Garan are giving off a hostile aura, like big guard-dogs, ready to pounce at the slightest hint of anything inappropriate. But Vinciel pays them no mind as he reaches my side. It’s as if they don’t even exist. “You can remain seated.” He takes my hand and turns it over, placing his fingers over my pulse. “You have no pain?”

“No, I’m completely fine.”

He places his thumb beneath my left eye and pulls, briefly checking the inside of my lower eyelid. For the briefest of moments, his gaze flicks toward the point on my neck where the demon sank his fangs into me.

My heart is hammering. I want to ask a hundred questions, but I don’t *dare*.

Does he know the man that did this to me?

Does he *know*?

I’m feeling warm again. Restless. Like I have an itch that can’t be scratched.

What is *wrong* with me?

“Mildly anaemic and a little dehydrated,” he says at last. “Nothing that can’t be fixed. Lunch will be served shortly. Then you will be shown to your quarters and given time to rest.” He gives me a strange look. “I would recommend that you drink a lot of water and eat to your heart’s content. The servants will provide everything you ask for. And I’m certain

His Highness will make arrangements to replace your damaged garments with something more suitable.”

A flush rises into my cheeks. I’m acutely reminded of the fact that I’m wearing nothing but my woolen underclothes beneath the warm winter cloak that was hastily offered to me by one of the Archduke’s men.

I have it wrapped around me right now, the well-woven deep blue cloth smelling of pine and fresh soap.

This isn’t at all the arrival I’d planned, but for some reason, I feel more comfortable sitting here in my underclothes and a borrowed cloak than I would in that cursed dress.

Vinciell steps back and tips his head. “I’ve seen all that I need to see. Please, make yourselves at ease. You are our honored guests, and you’ve been through quite the ordeal. Besides, it’s Seinmas.”

“When will I meet the Archduke?” I blurt. I feel a sudden need to regain some semblance of control, even though I’ve *never* been in control. “I must have an audience with him as soon as possible.”

I need to make a deal with him. I need to negotiate for Garan and Kastel’s safe passage back to Ruen. I need to see Aderick with my own eyes, so I can be assured of his wellbeing, *especially* after that strange man took him away.

I need to know that Aderick will be cared for, and allowed to recuperate in this place for as long as he needs.

And I need to see for myself... what kind of man this Corvan Duthriss really is.

The rumors are too much. I don’t know what’s hearsay and what’s real.

The mad prince. The ruthless commander. The bitter recluse. Afflicted with an unmentionable condition. Cursed by arcane magic.

Which is the truth?

The physician raises a finger; a stern and not-so-subtle warning. “He will summon you *when he is ready*. In the

meantime, please. *Make yourselves at ease.*”

CORVAN

“Come in, Kyron,” I say absently as I scan the dense paragraphs of *The Known Vulnerabilities of Arcane Beasts*. I’ve reached the chapter entitled: *The Rare and Deadly Vampyr*.

Deadly? Well, I beg to differ. I haven’t killed anyone since I was turned—well, not anyone innocent, anyway.

Rare? This isn’t news to me.

I’ve never met another of my kind. Thanks to my father’s suppression of all things magical, vampire lore isn’t well known in Rahava. The most valuable information I’ve received has come from the people of the mountain tribes.

Astoundingly, after their surrender, the Khaturians—the ones Rahavans call *barbarians*, even though they’re anything but—decided that they would worship me as some kind of a god.

I’m not entirely comfortable with it, but it’s necessary for peace. We have a pact. In exchange, they provide me with blood-offerings on a regular basis.

“Please. Sit.” I beckon toward the simple upholstered chair in front of my desk.

“Y-your Highness, my thanks.” Looking decidedly uncomfortable, Captain Kyron Kinnivar takes a seat.

I close the book and set it aside. “Report, Captain.” There’s nothing different about the way I address him. Nothing untoward about my attire.

Really, there isn't much that's different about me. It's just that my skin is pale and my hair has turned from black to white; my eyes from brown to red. I drink blood rather than consume animal flesh. That's all. I'm no threat to any of my people.

So why is Kyron still looking at me as if he's seen a ghost? He *is* trying to hide it behind a veneer of professionalism, though.

I appreciate that.

"The survivors arrived safely, Your Highness." Kyron avoids my gaze. "It appears they're from Ruen. The injured one is the eldest son of Baron Solisar. The brother is here too, along with a young squire called Garan. The woman is Lady Finley Solisar, his daughter. Er, you might already be aware, but she claims that they were traveling to Tyron because she's your *betrothed*."

"I see." I rise to my feet and walk across to a small cabinet and select an aged Druthingan port. I pour some into a crystal glass and offer it to Kyron, placing it on the desk in front of him.

"Y-your Highness, I can't possibly..."

A soft sigh escapes me. "Kyron, we've shared a drink on many occasions in the past. What's changed now? Besides, it's bloody Seinmas."

For the first time, Kyron meets my eyes. Along with the unease, there's a trace of guilt. "Thanks." He takes a sip. Then he sets down the glass and reaches into his jacket. "We found the rest of their party further down the road. All dead. Devoured by lycan. Not too far away, there was a band of brigands, *also* dead. Looks like the lads from Ruen put up a good fight. I've sent out a scouting team to track down any outlaws that might have gotten away."

I lean against the desk and cross my arms, frowning. "A mess." *They shouldn't have come here.* "Make sure you clean it up without leaving a trace. Summon a priest. The dead are to

be given their last rites and cremated. I don't want news of this to leave the castle."

What a mess, indeed.

And yet, for a moment, I tasted pure ecstasy in the form of a woman called Finley.

Who is now residing in my castle.

Who has been sent here by a minor lord called *Baron Solisar*.

To marry me, apparently.

What kind of idiocy is this?

"Kinnivar, send a message to our people in the capital. I want to know who is responsible for this ridiculous situation."

Kyron clears his throat. "Um, about that..."

"What is it?"

"We found a message scroll on one of the brigands." He reaches into his coat and produces a small leather-bound cylinder. "I apologize. I had to cast my eyes upon it, to determine whether it was important or not. I haven't looked at the innermost contents, but I'm guessing it's probably connected to all this. I'll make contact with one of our city informants; see if there's anything major brewing in the capital."

I take the cylinder. It's carved from light wood and finished in a thin layer of grained blue leather. At each end is a severed leather tie. It would have been attached to a messenger hawk at some point.

I glance at Kyron. "You think they could have shot down the messenger bird? By chance, or intention?"

"The dead men bear no insignia, but they look like seasoned operators. I wouldn't be surprised if they came into Tyron under the orders of someone influential."

"Then the Ruen lads did very well to take them out."

"Desperation is a powerful thing, Your Highness."

“Indeed.” A shard of cold anger enters my heart. There were intruders on my land. If her brothers had been just a moment too late, those brigands could have intercepted Finley.

Someone orchestrated her journey here.

Someone *else* wanted to intercept it.

This could have all turned out a lot worse.

“Thank you for your endeavors, Kyron. Let’s hope this is the last of the unexpected disturbances for today. Try and enjoy the rest of your Seinmas.”

The captain downs the remainder of his drink in a single gulp, before rising to his feet. He bows. “Appreciate it, Your Highness. I’ll take my leave, then.”

“There’s a banquet in the mess hall. Small thanks for those who went out today.”

A quick smile appears, giving me a glimpse of the old Kyron. “You always fucking spoil us, Your Highness.”

“Not nearly enough.”

Suddenly, I’m alone again, the echoes of Kyron’s footsteps ringing in my ears along with a thousand other sounds.

It’s taken me a long time to learn to shut out all the noise.

I open the cylinder. There’s a rolled-up parchment inside, bound by a simple wax seal. My name is written on the outside.

Corvan.

Only a handful of souls in the empire can address me by my first name.

I slip my fingernail under the seal, breaking it. The wax falls away easily thanks to the sharp edge of my nail, which has become hard and crystalline.

I unroll the parchment to reveal my father’s elegant script. But my father’s writing is perhaps a little smaller; a little less assured than I remember.

This is a personal letter, devoid of any official imperial insignia.

Father and I haven't spoken in two years.

Something must be happening, because the emperor doesn't do anything without reason.

My dearest Corvan.

Not a day goes past when I am not filled with regret. Rahava is at peace and the empire is prosperous once again. And yet, you, my eldest son, are not by my side.

This rift is of my own making, so let me be the one to extend the first overture. I trust you are well, my son. I continue to receive heartening news about the fortunes of Tyron. The fact that you have managed to turn a once-barren province into one of the most prosperous regions of the empire is nothing short of remarkable, but then again, you are my son, so it doesn't surprise me at all.

Now more than ever, I am convinced that your condition, whilst perturbing, does not justify such reticence.

So allow me to come straight to the point.

In the coming days, you will receive a guest. Her name is Finley Araluen Solisar. She is the daughter of Baron Lucar Solisar.

I have accepted her father's proposal for a betrothal.

She, Finley Araluen Solisar, and you, Corvan Ithar Taelinor Duthriss, will be married.

I know that you will find this arrangement to be an imposition and an inconvenience. Knowing you, you will more than likely try to resist. This long-suffering fool has tolerated you rejecting suitor after suitor, even before you became one of Hecoa's Chosen.

Therefore, it is important for you to know that this union is now enshrined in Imperial Law, by my decree. It has been recorded in the Imperial Chronicles as an Official Engagement.

Any attempt by you to annul this union will result in the invalidation of all of your Lands and Titles.

Yours with the utmost love,

Father

P.S. You may be interested to read this passage I came across in my readings. It is from Arcanea Magikora; Chapter Seven, Page 305:

For a newly fledged Vampyr, there is nothing more invigorating than the blood of a young man or woman in their prime, for the essence of a Son or Daughter of Eresus is the embodiment of the antithesis.

Thus, he or she becomes the symbiosis.

In particular, blood from a woman in her oestrus will be most potent when consumed by a male Vampyr, for she carries Eresus's grace. Thus the cycle of death and rebirth continues. Hecoa's Chosen will become immeasurably stronger.

A puff of disbelief escapes my lips as I set the cursed parchment down on the table. I'm half-tempted to tear the damn thing to shreds and throw it in the bin.

That's my old man through and through. He sends a letter professing regret and conveniently binds me up in an arrangement not of my own choosing, then offers vague hints of some esoteric nonsense, leaving me to figure out the rest for myself.

The threat is clear.

Marry this woman, or lose all of my lands and titles.

I would gladly choose the latter, but there are too many here that depend on me. My soldiers. My loyal servants. The people of Tyron, who were living in abject poverty until I corrected the previous duke's mismanagement.

This duchy was in shambles when I arrived. Nobody else can manage it. If father ever tried to come for my lands; for my people... I'd fight him.

Tyron is mine now, and I will defend it at all costs.

So I'll go ahead with this marriage, because I'm sick and tired of bloodshed, and I have no appetite for civil war.

I curse my father for his cunning. He knows me all too well. And maybe that was part of his stratagem. He sent her here without warning because he knows something I don't. He *knew* that when I first encountered her, I would...

I sigh, closing my eyes and cursing the infernal magic that's left me like *this*.

Lying in the snow, pain racking my body, I stare up at the perfect winter sky. The sky is achingly blue. The sun's so bright it burns my eyes, almost blinding me. How it burns.

An eagle circles above, drifting on the currents.

I fought. My sword-hilt is still clenched tightly in one hand, sticky with drying blood—the blood of a dragon.

Why am I like this, all of a sudden?

Why am I like this, and not dead?

And if I saw her again... could I even control myself?

FINLEY

I wake in a four-poster bed, wrapped in a cocoon of soft, clean blankets and sumptuous furs. The fire in the hearth has burned down to glowing embers.

The sun isn't yet up, but I know it's morning, because I can hear the birds.

This castle... somehow, it's peaceful.

Maybe it's the walls. The sheer amount of stone that must have been used to construct this place just boggles my mind. The walls are at least an entire arm-span thick, and they feel like they've been here for an eternity.

I feel like I'm ensconced in the depths of the Earth itself.

Roughly hewn blue-grey stone surrounds me from ceiling to floor. It doesn't quite feel homely—the walls could easily be softened with a few tapestries or a painting here or there—but the room is certainly comfortable.

The bed is the best I've ever slept in. The blankets and furs are of the highest quality. Throughout the night, I was perfectly warm.

I close my eyes and stretch, wondering if I'm stuck in a dream.

At least Aderick has woken, much to my relief. The physician allowed us to see him on the second day of his recovery, when he was sitting up in bed with a tray in front of him, loaded with a bowl of steaming beef rib stew and fresh crusty bread.

But it's been three days since we arrived here, and still, there's no sign of that damnable archduke. I haven't seen that white-haired demon, either.

That *bastard*. He drank from me like he was some sort of wild beast. The more I think about it, the more restless I become.

What kind of depraved pervert feasts on a woman's blood like that? In *that* manner? And enjoys it? And then has the gall to act like nothing untoward happened at all?

When I see him again, I'll...

What?

What can I do against a creature like that; a demon who possesses the speed and strength of a god?

What would you do if you saw him again?

Aside from the part where he forcibly restrained me, he was actually quite gentle with me.

A tiny knot of heat tightens in my chest.

In frustration, I kick off the covers and slide out of bed, my bare feet crushing the silken pile of the rug. I pull the folds of my nightgown tighter, re-tying the fabric belt around my waist.

Faint voices reach my ears.

I walk across to the window and peer through the frosted glass.

There's movement below. I see men, cloaked and hooded against the winter cold.

I see horses.

Some are being ridden. One, riderless, is being led by the reins. I recognize that horse; that deep brown coat and undernourished frame. It's the quarter horse... the one I escaped on. Poor thing, he was spooked.

I don't blame him. I would have run away too.

The horse's hooves clop loudly on the frosted grey cobblestones. He's trembling all over. He weaves from side to side, much to the annoyance of the man holding the reins.

He's afraid.

They disappear around the corner.

My heart clenches. I feel bad for the horse. Have they only just found him now? After three days? He's probably starving.

He would have been terrified out there in the cold and darkness, in unfamiliar territory, with the scent of blood and predators in his nostrils.

I want to go to him. I *know* my presence would do him good.

I cross the room. There's a large polished wood console against the far wall. It's laden with various items for my comfort; a carafe of water and a pair of etched crystal glasses, a delicate glass bottle containing some sort of fragranced pink oil, a bowl filled with summer fruits—grapes, apricots, and cherries.

How is it possible that they have fresh summer fruit in Tyron?

At the end of the table, resting on a delicately embroidered blue velvet square, is a silver call-bell.

I haven't used it yet. I never had a call-bell in Ruen Castle. Only Lady Dorava and father ever used bells to summon the servants.

Gingerly, I take the damn thing between my fingers and ring it.

Ding. Ding.

I hear footsteps on stone, echoing through the thick wooden door. Moments later, it opens.

A man appears, wearing the Archduke's livery—a fine black coat embroidered with red and gold; well-tailored trousers tucked into a pair of supple black boots.

The servants here dress like nobility.

I haven't seen this man before. The servants that have attended to me have all been young men; discreet, efficient, and with impeccable manners.

Tight-lipped, too, despite my attempts to make conversation.

This one... he's a bit different. Older. Slender, with a full head of silver hair, his face etched with fine lines. There's a commanding air about him.

"My lady, my name is Gerent." He executes a perfectly smooth bow. His accent is pure cultured Rahavan. "How may I be of service?"

Part of me feels like I should be the one asking *him* for guidance.

"I'd like to take a walk around the castle grounds," I declare, trying to sound like I'm used to ordering people around. "Please arrange some suitable attire for me. I'd rather *not* be dragging skirts around in the muddy snow. I'll need trousers, a shirt, and enough layers to keep me warm. A warm overcoat would be preferable. A pair of good boots would be even better."

Gerent's expression is as calm and cool as a deep lake on a summer day. "You may explore the internal grounds with an escort, but you can't go outside the castle walls."

"Would my escort happen to be the archduke, by any chance?"

"I'm afraid not, my lady. One of his men will take you around the grounds."

"Still indisposed, is he?" I offer him an acid-saccharine smile. "I'm almost starting to think that he's going out of his way to avoid me."

"His Highness will see you as soon as he is able." Now there's just a hint of irritation in Gerent's voice.

"I'd tell you that I understand," I say sweetly, "but I'd be lying. In any case, I can see that you're loyal to your master, and I don't intend to torture you with incessant questions."

Gerent gives me a *very* pointed look. “You’re not wrong in your assessment of my loyalties.”

It’s almost a rebuke.

From a servant.

Ha.

“Well, it’s reassuring to know that Archduke Duthriss can inspire such sentiment in his people.”

The servant tips his head in acknowledgement. The sharpness melts from his expression. Whatever it was, the moment has passed. “I shall fetch you some attire that is suitable for this weather. Trousers, shirt, coat, woolen layers. It won’t be easy to source something in your size, but I’ll do my best.” He frowns. “The dressmaker will need to pay you a visit as soon as possible.”

“Tailor,” I correct.

“*Both,*” Gerent insists.

“I don’t need custom made clothing just for going outside. Isn’t there any woman in this castle with similar proportions to mine? I would gladly borrow and return. I’m really not that fussy, Gerent.”

Come to think of it, I haven’t seen a single woman since I entered this castle. The servants, cooks, housekeepers... they’re all men.

The servant gives me a strange look. “A moment if you please, my lady.”

Then he disappears, leaving me wondering about the strangeness of it all; about what *really* lies between the silent walls of this cold, vast, immovable castle.

Corvan Duthriss, what is wrong with you? Why are you avoiding me?

Father, you miserable, conniving bastard. What did you get me into?

Really, this is all starting to get a little bit tiresome.

FINLEY

The cobblestone courtyard is dusted with a delicate layer of undisturbed snow; pale, icy powder that crunches beneath my ill-fitting boots. They're a size too big for me, as are the soft woolen trousers and the knitted tunic and the fur-lined overcoat, but they're warm and functional, and that's all I need.

For borrowed clothes, they aren't bad at all, especially the men's shirt I'm wearing as an under-layer. It's made of fine silk, and it's softer and more luxurious than any garment I've worn in my life.

It smells of pine and fresh, woody herbs and a hint of something else... that I can't quite put my finger on. The only part of my outfit that's slightly feminine is the soft woolen scarf wrapped around my neck.

It's the purest shade of delicate sky-blue, and it's wonderfully warm.

I'd almost feel comfortable right now, if not for the intimidating figure walking by my side.

My escort, as Gerent promised.

To my disappointment, he isn't the elusive Archduke Duthriss. But he's probably the next best thing; a big, hulking weapon of a man who simply calls himself *Kaithar*.

That was how he introduced himself. There was no mention of rank or station.

There's just a very obvious sense that this man is a warrior.

With *that* physique, he can't be anything but.

He isn't wearing any sort of armor or official garb—just a simple black shirt that's rolled up at the sleeves, a grey fur vest, and a pair of leather trousers tucked into worn black boots.

His legs are like tree trunks; thighs thick and muscular, his tight-fitting trousers leaving little to the imagination.

Isn't he *cold*?

Evidently not.

His hair is black and tightly coiled, shaved on both sides of his head and arranged in long, neat dreadlocks that are loosely braided together and tied back. His distinctive hairstyle and dark complexion clearly mark him as a Vikurian.

“Did you want to see the inner gardens?” Kaithar's voice is deep and gravelly, like the rumble of thunder. “There's a pond with a statue. It's frozen over now, but it's still pleasant to look at. I like it better in winter, actually.”

I glance over my shoulder.

Kaithar is the kind of man that most Rahavan women would swoon over. The sort that the noble court ladies would dream about while they act content with their arranged marriages.

But when I look at him, I feel nothing but a mild sense of trepidation.

The Vikurian seems affable on the surface, but there's a watchfulness about him; a thinly veiled hardness that sets me on edge.

And just now, when I look at him, trying to get a sense of him, I don't feel even an inkling of a *swoon* coming on, even though I might have lusted after him once upon a time.

That's because another man has completely invaded my thoughts.

I remember...

The feeling of his warm lips against my neck. They were unexpectedly soft. Tender, almost. Even though he was restraining my wrists with cold, savage force.

The memory is seared into my mind.

It was so *wrong*.

Yet it felt good.

A shudder courses down my spine. Kaithar's dark gaze bores into me.

I try to compose myself. "The frozen pond sounds pleasant enough, but I would much prefer to see the stables. Can you show me the horses, Kaithar?"

"You sure, my lady? The stables are hardly the most interesting place in the citadel. Full of bad-tempered war horses, and the smell isn't exactly—"

"I know what horseshit smells like. I *like* horses. Especially the ill-tempered ones. Some of them can be absolute sweethearts if you treat them right. So yes, I would very much like to tour the stables." I shoot Kaithar a pointed look. "It isn't something the archduke would be particularly opposed to, is it?"

Kaithar chuckles softly. "Nah. It isn't." He stops and turns. "As you wish." He raises his arm in a sweeping gesture, indicating toward a huge stone wall that runs the length of the courtyard. "Follow me, my lady."

He starts to walk, heading toward a pair of massive wooden doors. Inset with heavy iron fixtures, they're punched right through the center of the big stone wall.

This place radiates brutal power. It's more fortress than palace. The walls are bleak and defensive—as if designed solely for the purpose of war.

Kaithar stops and glances to his left. He cocks his head to one side, as if listening for something.

A frisson of tension courses through me. My senses are stretched taut as my body anticipates danger.

But it's just a man, appearing at the far gates, dressed in a soldier's garb and the livery of the Archduke of Tyron. He crosses the courtyard with swift, measured steps, his boots ringing loudly on the stone.

"Sir!" He performs a crisp salute.

"Sergeant Luvan." Kaithar turns to acknowledge him, sounding a little amused. "For you to be interrupting us on our little stroll... something must be urgent, hmm?"

Luvan doesn't look the slightest bit impressed. "We have visitors at the main gates."

Kaithar frowns. "In this kind of weather? Is it those fucking traveling merchants again? Send them away. His Highness doesn't want to be disturbed."

Luvan's brows draw together in irritation. He gives me a half-curious look. "Not merchants. A petty noble and his traveling party. Apparently, he's Baron Lucar Eravus Solisar the Third. He reckons he has some sort of divine right to demand an urgent audience with the archduke. Something about taking his sons back and overseeing his daughter's marriage rites." He shrugs. "Don't give me that look, Sir. I'm only the messenger."

"Solisar, hm?"

My heart sinks.

Father has travelled all the way *here*?

And to make it worse, he has the gall to retrieve the boys and abandon me to my fate?

Kaithar glances at me and raises a single eyebrow.

I smile through gritted teeth. "It seems father has traveled here out of concern for my poor brother. He's probably at his wits' end right now. Perhaps he'll calm down if I talk to him first."

I need to take control of this situation. The last thing I need is for father to mess everything up.

Knowing him, he'll be anxious to bring Aderick back to Ruen Castle as soon as possible. After all, my brother is the heir; the one that ensures the survival of the Solisar line.

But in order for Aderick to make a full recovery, Vinciel warned that he must avoid any strenuous activity for at least one month. That includes traveling.

Would the Archduke of Tyron even care enough to enforce Vinciel's orders, or would he just release my brother back into the care of my father and wash his hands of it all?

The Vikurian gives me a strange look. "You're father's the one that orchestrated your arrival here, isn't he?"

My smile is fixed in place like a death-grin. "Rahavan tradition dictates that the patriarch of the family is responsible for arranging a suitor for his daughters." The words come out cold and stiff, as if there's broken glass in my mouth. "Now, will you *please* allow me to speak with my father? I might just be able to spare your reclusive master the inconvenience of dealing with an irate and extremely stressed baron who doesn't understand a single thing about the current situation."

"Hmm." Kaithar's lips curve a fraction. "Family matters can be a pain in the arse. I know that well enough. Very well, my lady. You have my permission to go and deal with your father. For *his* sake, it would help if you could get him to understand that he isn't in a position to demand anything. Whatever privilege he thinks he's entitled to... it doesn't exist here, and His Highness has little tolerance for belligerent fools."

A chill runs through me. I have little affection for my father, but I don't want anything terrible to happen to him. "Surely, the Archduke of Tyron respects the Code of the Noblesse?" In Rahava, the nobility are forbidden from using violence against one another. Fed up with nobles killing each other over minor disputes, Emperor Duthriss enshrined the Code of the Noblesse into Rahavan Imperial Law.

Kaithar's shrug is slow; almost menacing. "He does. *Sometimes.*"

I sigh. All the more reason for me to handle father and his vicious temper. “I’ll speak with him.”

Kaithar turns to Sergeant Luvan. “The guards can escort the arriving party into the forecourt. I’ll be at Lady Solisar’s side.”

They exchange a look; a silent communication. The atmosphere has changed. The air is charged with icy tension.

“Come, my lady.” Kaithar gestures toward the gates. “Let’s go and greet your father, Baron Solisar.”

I reach his side, walking briskly to match his big strides. “About the archduke,” I say quietly; insistently. This is starting to get ridiculous. I’m like a dog with a bone now. The more Duthriss avoids me, the more I want to meet him. I’ll give him a piece of my bloody mind, too. “I trust that he will introduce himself to me before he meets with my father. It’s only decent. I *am* his betrothed, after all.”

“He isn’t going to do wrong by you, if that’s what you’re worried about. Corvan has his reasons for the way he goes about things.”

Did he just call him... Corvan?

I shake my head. Kaithar’s casual use of the Rahavan Crown Prince’s first name is jarring.

Nobody does that.

The big Vikurian lowers his voice conspiratorially. “I shouldn’t be telling you this, but... I like you. You’re direct. It’s refreshing. I haven’t met anyone from the minor nobility like you before. I think you’ll be good for him.” Kaithar’s dark eyes are piercing, but his shrug is laced with good humor. “So anyway, let me tell you this. About Corvan...”

I hold my breath.

“Lady Solisar, I think you have enough common sense about you to understand that things... *people*... aren’t always what they seem. No matter what Corvan looks like; no matter the way he goes about things, or that you might not understand him... the way he is now...” Kaithar sighs; a tired, almost

exasperated sound. “I’ve known him for a long time. Even though you might think he’s always had all the trappings of power and wealth at his fingertips, none of that’s come easy for him. Underneath everything... he’s got a good heart, and that’s why he’s got a little fear of what he’s become.”

“What he’s become...?”

Kaithar doesn’t answer. He turns away, leaving me no choice but to follow as we pass the looming stone walls, our footsteps ringing in the cold, still morning air.

A lone crow caws, splitting the cold morning air with a harsh, jarring note.

And then I hear a familiar voice in the background; belligerent, demanding, laced with entitlement.

My heart shrivels.

This castle feels like a den of wolves. For all his arrogance and cunning, my father has no power here.

Does he even understand that?

Can he?

CORVAN

I rub my forehead and frown, trying to make sense of the numbers and graphs and diagrams on my desk. I've arranged them in meticulous order as is my habit, by geographical location rather than name.

Over the past year, my surveyors have collected an impressive amount of data. Even in the midst of winter, they hunker down in their underground base beneath the mountains, slowly making sense of the hidden depths.

Preliminary signs point to the presence of large mineral deposits at the exploration site.

High-grade Ruvenium. Extremely rare and valuable Luthenia.

And *serpenstone*. Coveted by sorcerers and witches alike.

I scan the documents, my attention briefly caught by a paragraph detailing the presence of thick Luthenia veins in igneous rock.

It's the kind of information that would make my father's eyes glitter with avarice.

Few things can excite my old man these days.

The promise of riches is one of them.

But my concentration shatters as a pair of familiar voices reaches my ears.

It's Kaithar and the girl. My most trusted war-commander and Finley Solisar, my apparent bride-to-be. They're down in

the square, walking.

I've been told she's sharp-eyed and restless; curious, quick-witted, and not afraid to speak her mind.

And she isn't the type to sequester herself in her room, despite the fact that I ordered the servants to make it warm and luxurious.

No. She wanted to *walk*. In the biting cold of morning.

Accustomed to the comforts of their opulent palaces in the sunny midlands, most ladies of the nobility would show little interest in the frozen surroundings.

Even from here, I can smell her. Her blood-scent is the sweetest, purest, most tempting thing I have ever smelled in my entire cursed life.

The hunger hits me like a punch between the eyes.

The world swirls around me. My vision blurs.

Need. Her.

I grip the edge of the desk, steadying myself.

Three days.

That's as long as I can go, apparently, after drinking her blood.

Three days without the terrible thirst.

And then it all falls apart.

It was presumptuous of me to hope that her glorious blood might be some sort of cure-all for my condition. That the feeling of satiety might be a permanent one.

No; life is never that simple.

I'm craving her blood again, *terribly*, and she's down there in the square, walking around with bloody Kaithar.

And even though I've been preoccupied with my work, I can't help but listen, can I?

As they speak.

As Kaithar tells her things about me. That I'm a good person, despite my failings. And he *knows* I can hear him.

My commander... my old friend. He's doing this on purpose, because he doesn't agree with me on certain things, which he's made very clear. An exasperated puff escapes my lips as I try and put a leash on my temper before it turns foul.

We've had this conversation before, more than once.

Kaithar's one of those rare souls who's never afraid to speak his mind around me.

"This avoidance business is pointless, Corvan. She's here now. Doesn't seem like she wants to be, either. You might as well just talk to her."

"I have my reasons."

"Well, you need to snap out of them, Your Highness. Because the way I see things, the Rahavan Empire is turning to shit in a handbasket, and recluse or not, you're one of the few people that can keep it from going to the dogs."

"Hell."

"What?"

"It's hell. Hell in a handbasket, Kaith."

"Shit, hell, same difference. You and your insistence on detail. You see? That's why they need you. Not bloody Ansar the Rake."

"My brother is competent enough. He trained at the Knights' Academy. He's received the highest level of military and diplomatic education."

"So what? Education doesn't equal intelligence or decency. He's not you."

"You're deviating from the point, Kaithar."

"No I'm not. See, who sent her here in the first place? Why now, of all times? Don't you want to know what Daddy Duthriss is scheming?"

“Not really. And he’d flay you alive if you called him that to his face.”

“Yeah, well your old man never could take a joke. And you know he doesn’t do anything without an agenda.”

I didn’t want to tell Kaithar that father and I are more alike than I care to admit. I know him better than anyone else in the empire, and if there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that Valdon Duthriss is *always* plotting the endgame.

Whatever it is, I will *not* be used in his machinations.

Never again.

If the North and its people are to survive and prosper, I need to consolidate my power here.

Father is getting old, and sooner or later, my brother will inherit the throne. Ansar must learn to fear me more than he already does, because one day, he will be emperor.

By the time he realizes how prosperous Tyron truly is, he will also understand that these lands are well and truly out of his clutches.

I need to play this game as cunningly as my father would.

There’s only one problem.

Oh, Hecoa damn-it.

“Finley.” Another man speaks. The newcomer. His voice drops to a whisper, but with my enhanced hearing, I can still make out the words clearly. *“Why aren’t you inside the castle? What are you doing out here with a Vikurian? And dressed like that. Stupid girl. Didn’t you listen to a single thing I told you?”*

“Father...”

My left eyebrow twitches in annoyance. It appears Finley’s father has arrived. This Baron Solisar. I heard him as he arrived at the gates; pompous, arrogant, demanding to see me at once.

How did this man manage to gain an audience with my father? The Emperor of Rahava doesn’t pay much heed to

minor nobles.

Surely Kaithar can handle this situation.

Finley's voice wraps around my awareness, threading through my hunger like finely woven silk. She's trying to convince Kaithar to allow her to speak with the baron first.

After all, she's his daughter.

She can be quite the persuasive one, it seems. Even with a hardened soldier like Kaithar.

"Father, listen to me, please."

But now she's pleading, and I don't like the desperation in her voice.

"Quiet." He's still whispering. *"Go back to your chambers and dress in something more appropriate. Quickly, before I lose patience. It's because of you that I had to come all the way out here. Because you manipulated my sons into coming after you. From now on, you will shut the hell up and do whatever Archduke Duthriss demands of you."*

My brows draw together in irritation. This idiot dares to presume what I want? He dares to speak to her in that manner?

Arranged or not, she's *my* betrothed.

"Watch your tone," Kaithar growls menacingly.

"Kaithar, please. Don't. Let me handle this. Father, just listen." Now there's steel in her voice. *"It's about Rick."*

"What is it, Finley?" The baron's tone changes, becoming cold and dangerous. *"What about Aderick?"*

I hear footsteps; Kaithar stealing across the cold ground. My commander is perceptive. He'll want to be closer to her, in case the baron tries anything stupid.

Before I realize it, I'm moving, too.

I surprise myself.

I don't really know what I'm planning to do, but I just don't *like* this.

“Father, I beg of you. You mustn’t do anything in haste. Aderick... it isn’t good news. He’s been badly hurt.”

“What?” The baron makes a strange sound; a strangled cry of rage. *“This is all because of you...”*

Slap.

The sound of an open hand hitting flesh resounds loudly in my ears.

“That’s enough.” Kaithar steps in. There’s a scuffle.

Finley’s father roars as Kaith restrains him. *“Get your hands off me, you fucking filthy Vikurian.”*

Kaithar just chuckles. He’s got the patience of a saint, really, and he’s well able to handle himself, but still.

Nobody talks to my commander like that.

Nobody gets to treat Finley Solisar like that.

Anger surges through me, so intense it burns white-hot. My head swims. A faint red haze descends across my vision, and I’m overcome with a sudden urge to kill that man.

It’s that old battle-lust feeling, because the shadows of war have never left me.

But there’s something else, too.

A certain madness.

This is the part of me I’ve tried so hard to keep suppressed.

It’s been there since the change; barely understood, always lurking beneath the surface, threatening to strip me of everything that makes me civilized.

He *hit* her.

More than that... he’s drawn blood.

Her blood.

The scent slices through the air like a finely honed blade, obliterating every single thought in my consciousness. It wraps around my soul and pulls me away from this mundane existence, transcending life and death.

I feel impossibly light on my feet. Power surges through me. I could kill that man with a single hand, wrapping my fingers around his feeble neck, crushing his throat, extinguishing his life in an instant.

The world around me becomes a blur as I move faster than even I thought possible. I fly through the doors; down the corridors, passing a couple of servants who don't even see me.

All they would feel is a rush of wind; a disturbance in the atmosphere.

I couldn't care less.

I can't think straight anymore.

Her blood draws me to her. I just want to devour her, and destroy anything that dares to touch what is mine.

FINLEY

Pain shoots through my lower face as my hand flies to my mouth. My fingers come away stained with fresh blood—*my* blood.

He's split my lip.

I can't believe you!

Father's always been stern and demanding; prone to violence when he's angry, unpredictable at times. He's lost his temper with me many times... but he's never hit me in public.

And now a big Vikurian warrior has him pinned to the ground, his knee pressing into his back, and I can't stop staring at them, because nobody has ever dared challenge my father like this.

"Get off me, filth," my father snarls. "You dare treat me this way? Your master's going to have your head for this."

Kaithar says nothing; he just chuckles softly, as if this sort of thing is nothing to him.

I should be begging for leniency on behalf of my father, but I can't bring myself to do it.

For the first time in my life, it feels like someone's on *my* side.

Father's eyes dart back and forth as he searches for his men. "Dobson, Negus, *do* something about this."

The Ruen knights stand several feet away, their eyes wide, uncertainty flickering across their grizzled features. The older

one, Negus, hesitantly starts to draw his sword.

Kaithar pins the man with a dark stare and raises his eyebrows, as if to say: *are you really going to try?*

Because even though he's unarmed, the Vikurian stands a head taller than them, and he radiates raw power from every inch of his body. The speed with which he put father down was astonishing.

The ease with which he *keeps* him down is terrifying.

And the warrior has the nerve to throw me a good-natured glance.

And then he *winks*.

Honestly, now.

“You don't have to worry about a thing, Finley. I suspect *he'll* be here any moment now. I can only apologize that I wasn't fast enough to stop this idiot from striking you. Took me by surprise, to be honest. You see, I never could have imagined that anyone who calls himself a father could do that to his own child.”

I blink furiously as sudden tears come to my eyes.

What's this?

I rarely cry. He protected me. This wasn't what I'd expected... at *all*.

“How *dare* you...” Baron Solisar struggles under Kaithar's knee, but it's futile.

“Release His Lordship at once.” Negus has his sword out. He's approaching slowly; tentatively, his expression telling me he really doesn't want to do this.

Because he's noticed the Tyronese soldiers that have materialized from the shadows; they're standing against the walls, quietly watching the scene unfold.

And they're all lean and hard-faced and dangerous looking; there's an edge to them that our fighting men don't have.

They're all focused on Kaithar, as if waiting for him to just say the word.

But he doesn't need to.

Because right then and there, a storm blows through the gates.

Icy wind swirls through the air, tugging and snapping at my hair, penetrating even my thickly lined coat. Specks of frost and snow fly into the air. For a fleeting moment, they shimmer like tiny diamond shards, before scattering into nothingness.

There's a blur in front of me; a shadow, all black and crimson and pale, slowing and coalescing into solid form.

The wind dies away, leaving nothing but stillness.

And the shadow isn't a shadow at all.

It's a man.

"*You!*" I gasp, meeting familiar crimson eyes. The very same eyes have haunted my dreams these past few nights. They glow dangerously, just like they did when I first encountered him on that frozen road.

My breath hitches.

There isn't a single shred of doubt left in my mind that I'm in the presence of magic.

The sun is behind him, casting a gentle shadow across his face, encircling his pale hair with a soft, ethereal halo.

His hair is loose and tousled, as if he's just gotten out of bed. It's gloriously long and lush, longer than even mine, reaching down past his shoulders.

It's the color of pearls. Not quite pure white. Not quite as cold as the snow, or as luminous grey-white as the moon.

There's a hint of golden in it.

Its softness contrasts with his alabaster visage; his chiseled, inhuman perfection, tempered only by the fullness of his lips, which are imbued with the faintest hint of dusky pink.

His expression...

No human is capable of looking at me with that kind of intensity.

I really don't know whether he wants to devour me or kill me.

And I can't move. Just like before, I'm unable to move even the tip of my finger as those terrible lips part to reveal the very same fangs that forcibly pierced my skin.

"Hello, Finley."

My eyes go wide in disbelief.

He's addressing me and only me.

He knows my *name*.

And his voice has the consistency of deep liquid silk, and the ability to momentarily trap me in its resonance, and I'm fighting against him; swimming against the tide of his overwhelming presence.

Gather yourself, Finley Solisar. This is not the time nor place to become smitten. Especially by one that you have no business being smitten with.

Ever.

I take a deep breath and try to summon some semblance of sanity.

I remind myself that we have an audience.

My father's still on the ground, pinned by Kaithar, head pointed in the opposite direction. He can't see us; can't see the demon. There are soldiers all around us.

The big Vikurian wears a wicked grin, as if he's been waiting for this.

What is going *on*?

My awareness of my surroundings shatters as my attention snaps back toward *him*.

Despite all my misgivings, I can't help but stare.

He's so still... and yet it feels like he could explode into violence at any moment.

He's absolutely beautiful and utterly terrifying.

"Why are you here?" I ask, and even though I'm all fear and turmoil inside, my voice comes out sounding perfectly calm and even.

The pale demon reaches out.

The callused pads of his fingers gently graze my lower lip. They come away stained with a tiny smear of my blood.

He brings his fingers to his mouth and tastes it. *My blood.*

He closes his eyes. A visible shudder courses through him. He takes a deep breath.

Nobody dares move. Nobody says a word. Even Kaithar is quiet.

The demon turns away, glancing down at my father. "Restrain him and take him to the dungeons," he says quietly, his voice colder than the winter snow outside. "I will deal with him personally."

"Y-you can't do this," my father protests, his voice hoarse; filled with outrage and disbelief. "I am a member of the Rahavan *nobility*. Where is the Archduke Duthriss? I demand to speak with him at once."

The demon makes a small gesture with his hand.

Kaithar leans in and whispers something soft and menacing in my father's ear.

Father goes perfectly still. His men hang back, wisely reading the mood.

They're outnumbered five to one. There's nothing they can do here.

And the one commanding the situation with ridiculous ease is the man standing right before me.

He wields authority like a second skin.

Like he was born to it.

And his face...

Even though I have no idea who he is, now that I think about it, there's a certain familiarity to his features. It's jarring; as if some huge and obvious realization is about to hit me between the eyes, and yet my mind will *not* accept that answer.

It cannot be.

"Please, don't kill him," I say softly, sounding detached and emotionless. Because although my father is a cruel, petty fool, I don't want him dead...

Do I?

The pale demon ignores my request. "Come with me, Finley Solisar." His tone is stern and commanding; a whipcrack through the cold air.

Behind it, I sense fury, about to spill over.

My feet are frozen to the ground.

Why would I go with him? I don't even know who he is.

Or *what* he is.

What if he's...?

No. *Impossible.*

"And if I refuse?" My lips move before my brain has a chance to apply logic.

I hear Kaithar's soft snort in the background. Irritation prickles through me. Is there anything the big guy doesn't find amusing?

The pale demon glowers at me. "You *can't*."

It's both a command and a desperate plea.

My head swims.

What would he do if I refused? Threaten to lock me in the dungeon with my father?

My feet, hitherto frozen, begin to move, even though my thoughts are still encased in ice. Something painfully obvious

is staring me right in the face, and I don't want to even begin to comprehend it.

I follow him.

Across the frost-burnished stone, past the soldiers, away from Kaithar and my father, who looks so pathetic and small.

I've never seen father like this before.

In Ruen, he's the lord of his domain, the ultimate authority. His word is law, and he rules over us with an iron fist.

Here, he's nothing.

These men of Tyron... they're wild and hard and they care nothing for the laws of the empire.

And the one that wields authority over them is this inhuman stranger. Whether agent or servant or commander of the seemingly nonexistent Archduke Duthriss, I know not.

All I know is that he walks bloody fast, and I have to quicken my pace to catch up with him, and I can't help but stare at his back; at his broad shoulders and lean, powerful physique.

In spite of the chill, he's wearing only a thin white shirt, tucked into a pair of finely tailored deep grey trousers that accentuate the taut perfection of his ass and his long, muscular legs.

His long hair swirls around his shoulders, and the effect on me is mesmerizing.

Seven Furies help me, but I can't stop staring.

We pass through an arched gateway and take a sharp left turn, disappearing from the view of the men back there.

Suddenly, I feel terribly alone. Vulnerable.

He could do anything to me right now.

And he does.

He turns around, moving so fast I see only a blur of white and shadow and piercing red. He doesn't care that he moves like a spirit; like the winter wind and the fury of a silent

blizzard. He cuts through time itself, and I, a mere mortal,
can't do a thing against him.

It's so fucking unfair.

I'm in his arms again.

And we fly.

FINLEY

Does he do this because he knows it will shock me, or is he truly unaware of how destabilizing it is to be swept up into a monster's arms and carried away into a vast and unfamiliar stone castle?

How can I even fathom the thoughts and logic of someone who isn't human?

He shoots up flights of stairs as if they were nothing. We navigate a maze of stone corridors at terrifying speed, passing a shocked onlooker—a soldier or servant, I can't quite be sure, because as soon as I catch sight of the hapless soul, we're gone.

We pass frosted windows and heavy wooden doors. I catch glimpses of opulence amidst the stark walls and cavernous ceilings. A stunning tapestry of a forest in autumn, threaded with gilt. A series of menacing monster-heads, taxidermied and turned into trophies on the wall. Fine rugs on the floors, intricately woven; shades of cream and grey laced with vibrant flourishes of red, green, and blue.

I've never seen anything like it before.

And yet, none of it matters.

I'm completely helpless in this powerful creature's arms, and we're entering another doorway now, passing through an antechamber into yet another room, and it's warm in here, and it smells of wood and smoke and leather.

All of a sudden, I'm being set down on my feet, and he takes a sharp step back from me, recoiling as if I'm covered in

a noxious substance.

Or as if I'm the poison itself.

Instinctively, I wrap my arms around myself, thankful for the thick, dependable coat that keeps me warm. I wish I had a suit of impenetrable armor, to keep me safe from this man.

But there's nothing that can come between us right now.

All I have left are my wits and my tongue... and the fact that I'm not dead yet.

Calm down. If he wanted to harm you, he would have done so already. It's obvious that he wants only one thing from you.

I remember what he did to me.

His sharp fangs, sinking into my skin. The exquisite pain. And the rush of warmth that came afterwards...

Oh, my Goddess.

I glance away, unable to meet his eyes as my body betrays me; as my heart flutters wildly and heat seeps through me.

"Who are you?" I demand. "Why do you keep hauling me into your arms and stealing me away against my will?"

"Finley Solisar..." His voice is strained. Dangerously so. It draws my attention back to his face. He rubs his hand over his handsome features and lets out a shuddering sigh.

The way he looks right now... it isn't cruel or cold or savage, as I'd expected.

I don't really understand it, but he almost appears...

Vulnerable.

"I... need... to drink from you. I can't explain. It's beyond my control. But I swear on my mother's grave that I will not harm you. So, I beg of you, allow me to take from you again... like before." He implores me with his eyes, which are the color of rubies.

And ever so slightly, they glow.

"Why are you even asking?" My voice comes out colder than I intended. "I'm no match for you. You could easily

overpower me, just like you did before, so why bother seeking my consent?"

His eyes widen a fraction. "I'm trying *not to* turn into a complete monster here."

"So you expect me to say yes because your need is so great, and because you *asked*? Is that going to make you feel better about all of this?"

"I was hoping you would understand, because the alternative is *not* so pleasant." He takes a step forward, the unholy glow in his eyes intensifying. "And I have reached my breaking point."

His nostrils flare. He inhales deeply.

His thirst is palpable. The air around him almost crackles with tension.

"At least you asked this time," I say stiffly, as my eyes drop to the collar of his shirt, which is unbuttoned... enough to reveal a glimpse of sculpted perfection underneath. "And because you did a good deed for me back then, I'll take your words and intentions as earnest."

After all, he did help Aderick.

And I really don't think he wants to harm me. I'd much rather cooperate than have him take me by force.

I shrug off my coat, letting it fall to the floor. I pull down the woolen neck of my sweater and tilt my head to one side. "Consider this a token of my gratitude," I say stiffly, "for saving my brother's life."

"That will have to suffice, for now." His voice cracks. He takes another step forward, his movements like water; impossibly fluid and graceful. There's no *way* anyone could mistake him for human.

"Wait!" I snap, holding up my hand.

His glare could melt iron. "*What?*" I catch a glimmer of sharp fangs. Fingers trembling, he reaches out and brushes my hair away from my neck.

Danger radiates from him.

I push on in spite of the cold-but-hot knot forming in my chest. "I have one condition."

He looks down at me, eyes narrowing, his expression regal and terrible.

I can almost imagine what he's thinking.

What audacity. You aren't in any position to be setting conditions.

"Tell me," he rasps.

"When you're done with... *me*, you're going to explain everything."

What kind of creature are you, that you need my blood to survive?

The demon doesn't say a word. All of a sudden, he's by my side, his fingers shockingly gentle as he tucks my hair behind my ear. "I won't harm you," he whispers. "Just be still."

I close my eyes, tensing in anticipation. His fingers slide across my jaw. He tilts my head. His other arm goes around my waist.

He pulls me closer, until I can feel his hard, powerful body through my thick woolen tunic, and to my surprise, he's warm.

And he smells warm, too; faintly of smoke and spice and leather and parchment and *male*.

Suddenly, his mouth is on my neck, gently clamping down on the area above my collarbone. I feel a sharp, twin-pinpoint sensation as his fangs pierce my skin, but it isn't as painful as last time.

The pain quickly gives way to heat and the molten sensation of his lips against my skin.

As he drinks, he holds me tighter, one arm curled around my waist, his other hand caressing the back of my neck, fingers sliding through the loose strands of my hair.

I close my eyes.

I can't believe I'm doing this again.

And I don't *mind* it.

The tension flows out of him. His terrible urgency relents. His touch becomes gentle; almost tender.

Then, at last, he stops.

His warm tongue glides across the place where he bit me. His lips linger for a moment, exerting slight pressure.

My legs turn weak.

What was *that*?

He lets me go, withdrawing his big, warm body and his gentle hands, taking a step back so that I'm looking up at him as he wipes the blood from his lips with the back of his hand.

Slowly, intentionally, he licks the blood from his skin and stares back at me.

He wears a slightly glazed expression. The unearthly glow in his eyes has faded.

"Thank you, Finley," he says quietly. "For *not* falling apart in the face of what must seem incomprehensible." He gestures toward a nearby sofa; studded and made of richly patinaed brown leather. It looks worn and comfortable. "Please, sit. Oh, don't look like that. I'm not going to bite you again."

Warily, I glance around the room. We seem to be in a study or an office of sorts. Books line the walls from floor to ceiling. My eyes widen as I scan the spines. Some are beautifully bound and embossed with gilt lettering. Some are so ancient they're falling apart.

Vast windows, crossed with black steel frames, look out onto yet another snow-blanketed courtyard. A grove of stately blue cedars stands in the center, drooping branches thickly laden with pure white snow. In front of the window is a huge, leather-topped wooden desk. Books and papers are neatly arranged on top, alongside ink-pots, pens, and a wooden box containing a brass wax seal.

It's an office. A big, sumptuous one, filled with meticulously crafted furniture that's been built for purpose, not show. It's warm and comfortable and undeniably masculine.

My legs like jelly, I tip my head and walk across the floor, stepping on a woven rug of cerulean blue decorated with intricate cream-colored patterns of leaves and vines. I take a seat, sinking into leather cushions that are neither too soft nor too firm; just ridiculously comfortable.

He crosses the room, turning his back to me. I'm starting to feel a little giddy and lightheaded. I can't help it if I take a moment to stare at his broad back; at the way he moves, his toned ass perfectly encased in those fitted trousers, his body sinuous, exuding raw power.

What is wrong with you, Finley Solisar?

Maybe the blood loss has me in a delirium.

He retrieves a guest chair from in front of his desk and returns with it, turning it so that the back is towards me.

Then he sits, legs wide, arms draped over the back of the chair.

His sleeves are rolled up, revealing broad, sinewy forearms. He has a few old scars—some tiny, some long and nasty. All as marble-pale as his skin.

Battle-scars, perhaps?

He regards me with an unfathomable expression, head cocked, one eyebrow slightly raised, eyes narrowed, his lips curving ever so slightly.

And they're still faintly stained pink with my blood.

There's no denying that he's a spectacularly handsome man. But for all his chiseled alabaster beauty, there's a certain rough edge to him; a hardness that reminds me of Kaithar and the soldiers I encountered down there in the courtyard.

The ones that detained my father.

On *his* orders.

That effortless authority.

That face of his... it's not exactly the same, but the resemblance is there, on every damn coin in Rahava.

He looks like...

Oh, Eresus.

My mind pieces together all the evidence that my heart doesn't want to believe.

He's...

My thoughts become like treacle. My head is fuzzy. His unearthly face swims in my vision.

"Finley?" I hear his voice, quiet and oh-so-serious. Why does he sound so far away?

Why are you so serious, Your Highness?

His brow furrows in concern. His eyes are deep and dark, like wine.

It's so warm in here.

I lean back into the luxurious sofa and catch sight of the logs glowing in the hearth. Golden orange and red, glowing brightly against the blackened fireplace.

"*Finley...*" He says my name again, and I like the way it sounds coming from his lips, shaped by his deep, rich baritone.

I close my eyes. My limbs are heavy, but my body feels like it's floating.

The darkness engulfs me, both unsettling and comforting.

Unsettling, because I'm helpless against it.

Comforting, because it feels good and natural, and it makes me want to surrender.

Crimson and white swirl in my vision, like embers in the snow.

So... warm... in here.

I can't fight it anymore.

CORVAN

She closes her eyes, sways a little, and promptly faints.

And although I'm quite satisfied, a small demon in my head taunts me.

She smells so good. And she's helpless now. You could, you know... just take a little more. Nobody would know.

"Shit," I growl.

Her face, smooth and golden-tan, has taken on a greyish pallor. Dark circles surround her eyes, cradling lashes that are long and dark brown, the same rich shade as her lush wavy hair.

Her jawline is strong yet delicate, and the elegant column of her neck tempts me even now, making me want to press my lips against her dewy skin.

I see the place where I bit her... twin pinpricks of crimson, so faint one could easily miss them.

You did this to her. Take some more...

Sooner or later, you'll kill her.

A vision flashes through my mind, of her lying in my arms, languorous and intoxicating, her essence so sweet and vibrant as I drink my fill; as the life drains from her.

It's like a drug.

This blood of hers... I've never known anything so divine. Taking from her is like transcending heaven and hell.

And considering all that's happened, she's handled it very well. I was just about to offer her an explanation of sorts. I owe her that, I suppose.

So much for our little chat.

I rise from my chair and sweep her into my arms—yet *again*.

This is becoming a habit, it seems.

She's so light. So fragile. She smells delicious—and it isn't only her blood. She carries a delicate fragrance that mingles with her skin-scent to cloud my senses with a sweetly intoxicating aroma.

She carries the scent of warm weather—of summer and spring, spiked with a hint of fresh citrus.

I look down at her features, so peaceful and exquisite. She has a perfectly oval-shaped face, with arched brows and a strong, elegant nose. Full cheeks, sharp cheekbones, lush dusky-rose lips.

I shake my head in disbelief as I carry her out of my office, heading for the tower. I will *not* succumb to temptation and drain her of every last drop of her heady essence.

As tempting as she is, it's like grazing for delicious morsels of food on a full stomach. Now that my hunger is quenched, she's a delight to the senses, nothing more.

I won't *ever* lose control to that extent.

I've got brutal decades of military training beneath me. Unlike my brother, I've waged the grinding campaigns. I've bled and fought alongside my men. I've dug trenches and waded through the mud and the sludge and the corpses.

I've done it before—used my ability to kill men by tearing out their throats and draining their blood. I can be fast and savage and remorseless in the heat of battle. I've known what it's like to overpower a *mortal* with my monstrous strength and hold him down; to feel his fear and desperation, quickly giving way to helplessness as I lull him into a thrall, until he understands that all he can do is submit.

At least they die gently, willingly; not in agony.

But *this*... with her...

I have enough self-discipline to overcome this, surely.

I don't completely understand what I am, but I know what I'm capable of.

What makes me so certain I won't do it to her?

No. I won't.

Not *her*.

I shoot down the hallways, reaching the entrance to Vinciel's tower in the span of several heartbeats, and *her* heartbeat is loud in my ears; slow and steady in spite of her condition.

It reassures me.

In the time it takes to blink, I've climbed the stairs.

There are many days that I despise the curse for what it has turned me into, but one thing I never lament is my newfound speed.

And I find myself using it more and more, and sometimes I don't realize I'm doing it until I catch the startled reactions of people around me.

It just starts to become more and more natural, to the point where it's like breathing.

"Ciel," I bellow, having learned from past mistakes. The medic doesn't like surprises like me.

I hear a commotion; hasty movements, the rustle of cloth, bare feet on the floor. They're coming not from the main room, but from Ciel's quarters off to the side.

I enter the large chamber, where Ciel does most of his work when he isn't out in the field or in the castle clinic. The stone floors and the steel operating table are spotless; there isn't a single trace of the lad's blood from the day before.

The entire place has been scrubbed clean and doused with an astringent herbal concoction that strips my sensitive nose

from the inside out, dulling even *her* overpowering scent.

Ciel emerges from his quarters, hastily pulling his quilted velvet robes around him. The deep emerald color is luxurious, but the fabric is worn and almost threadbare in places. Like me, Ciel has a habit of using things over and over until they're no longer fit for purpose.

Military habit, I suppose.

His long blonde hair is damp and unbound. He hastily retrieves his glasses from his breast-pocket and puts them on.

Blue eyes narrow as he takes us in. "You're in the shit now, Corvan."

I detect a hint of amusement in his voice.

I cross the room and gently deposit Finley into a big mustard-gold velvet armchair. "Shut up and take a look at her, Ciel. I'm very low on patience right now, so don't test it."

"Always at your service, Your Highness." Ciel offers me a sardonic bow. He crosses the room and presses his slender fingers against Finley's neck, feeling her pulse. "Even if I *was* in the midst of enjoying the rare luxury of a warm bath with a glass of wine and a copy of *Belladonna's* latest novel. You could have gone to the clinic, you know. Kagan's just as experienced as I am when it comes to the common presentations, if not more so."

"You can go back to your bath and your erotic fiction in your spare time, Vinciel." My left eyebrow twitches in irritation. The curse didn't fix that habit, it seems. "As good as Kagan is, he isn't going to appreciate the nuance here. You, on the other hand, have been obsessively researching my condition."

"So you know of *Belladonna's* books, hmm?" Ciel retrieves a stethoscope from a nearby table. He eyes Finley's bulky woolen tunic, which is far too big for her.

It's military-issue. Gerent must've gotten it from the surplus room.

As soon as she is recovered, I will make sure she is dressed by the finest tailors and seamstresses in Sanzar.

No expense will be spared.

“I’ve often seen a dog-eared copy of her latest publication or other lying around the palace, but I don’t partake,” I say dryly.

“That’s what they all say,” Ciel mutters as he lifts the edge of Finley’s tunic.

I’m beside him in a flash, my fingers clamping around his wrist. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Ciel hisses in pain. “Corvan, calm the fuck down. *Before* you crush my bones, because if you do that, these hands will never fix another body again. I’m just trying to listen to her heart. You know, the thing that’s *under* all this bloody wool. Hecoa’s curses, has the taste of her made you this irrational already? Because I’d hate to see what you’d be like if you ever chose to—”

“I will lift her garment,” I growl. “You just listen. Don’t touch her.”

So *what* if I’m feeling irrationally possessive right now?

I reach out and lift up her tunic. Underneath is a white shirt made of the finest silk.

It looks like one of *mine*.

Bloody Gerent. My majordomo earns points for creativity, at least. While waiting for the tailors in Sanzar to make her clothes, he’s gone and pilfered one of my fine shirts for her to wear.

It’s far too big for her, of course, the silk creased in places, draping across her slender body but stretched taut over the swell of her breasts.

Her chest rises and falls.

I can see the faint outline of her nipples through the thin cloth.

My cock stirs.

Through the haze of possessiveness, amusement tugs at the corner of my mouth. At least that part of me isn't dead.

"You don't have to lift her shirt," I say quietly, watching Ciel like a hawk. "The material's thin enough. Listen *through* it."

Ciel is a consummate professional, but the presence of another male in such close proximity is making me irrational.

My medic places his stethoscope on her chest. His movements are quick and precise. He listens to her heart, then her lungs, both in front, and at her sides. The dark part of me wants to rip his slender fingers away from her body, but it's just a fleeting thought.

Would any *other* woman cause me to react like this, or is there something about her that puts her above all others?

The honorable thing to do would be to send her away right now; to marry her on paper as my father demands and install her in a comfortable estate in the bucolic countryside, far away from me and my insatiable hunger.

But I'm not going to do that.

Who ever said I was so honorable?

"She's certainly anaemic, but it isn't dire," Ciel declares, promptly pocketing his stethoscope and stepping away from her. "I suspect she's simply fainted from the mild blood loss and shock of having the likes of *you* gnawing on her neck. Be a good sport and carry her over to the divan, won't you? We'll elevate her legs and give her something to drink when she comes to."

I take a deep breath, inhaling herbal antiseptic in an effort to clear my head. Then I take her into my arms and gently lay her on Ciel's brocade-upholstered divan. Right away, he's there with a plump cushion, placing it under legs, grabbing her ankles to lift her legs one by one.

How *dare* he touch her?

With great effort, I remind myself that he's only doing his job.

If this is how I feel right now, then she's going to be trouble.

Father, what have you done? You conniving old bastard.

Surely, my reaction to her is no coincidence. What does the old wolf know that I don't?

“Will you give her treatment? Iron supplements or medicine? Pig's liver?”

Ciel looks at me as if I'm daft. “Supplements are an option. So is liver. But Van, it'll take several weeks for any of that to work. Unless...” He gives me an appraising look.

“Don't keep me in suspense,” I say dryly. I think I know what he's going to suggest, anyway.

“Give her a little of your magical healing elixir. A few drops mixed in with a glass of wine. She'll be fully recovered within a day.”

“Are you sure it won't have any adverse effects?”

“I told you before, it isn't possible. Even if one were to ingest copious amounts of your blood, they won't turn. There isn't a single report in the literature of a human being turned into a vampire by another vampire. Transformation only occurs by divine magic, and even then, one has to have reached a state of clinical death.”

“If you turn out to be wrong...” I glower at Ciel.

“I'm never wrong,” he says haughtily, pushing his glasses up on the bridge of his nose. The light of the winter sun streams through the windows, reflecting the blue sky outside in his glasses, obscuring his eyes.

Wan winter light...

It occurs to me that Ciel's space gets a lot of natural light during the day.

And said natural light isn't affecting me the way it usually does.

I raise my hand, feeling the skin of my cheek.

It isn't peeling, or blistering. It isn't painful.

I'm walking around in daylight like it's nothing at all.

Is this *her* doing?

It would be a shame. For her to turn into a creature like me... that would be a tragedy. But years and years of seeing Ciel's work on the battlefields and beyond reassures me that I can trust his judgement.

He doesn't order any kind of treatment without giving it the most careful consideration. In the time it takes to blink, he's considered a hundred probabilities and narrowed them down to one.

"Fine," I growl, stalking across to the treatment table. "Give me a knife and a glass."

"Just a few drops will do. I'll dilute it with wine. She could probably do with a drink after all this."

Ciel offers me a scalpel. I make a small longitudinal incision along my wrist, close to my radial artery.

My blood gushes down, as red as hers, but nowhere near as sacred.

To my own senses, it smells bitter.

It flows into the glass, thick crimson pooling in crystal, and there isn't a single thing about it that makes it seem special. My blood isn't overflowing with arcane magic or shimmering with a mystical glow.

It's just blood.

As quickly as I make the cut, it disappears, the raw edges sealing together to form perfectly intact skin. Of course, my scars are still there; a handful of nicks and cuts that have long since healed, marks I've earned during training and battle.

A reminder that I once was human.

I glance at Ciel. "You got anything of a decent vintage in that wine rack of yours? I want her to taste something pleasant, at least."

Ciel looks down his nose at me. “It will have to be a red, of course. Perhaps a merlot from the Tusganes Valley.” He walks across to a heavy wooden cabinet and retrieves a bottle. “I cellared this when we first arrived. Was saving it for a celebration, but I haven’t had anything to celebrate, so this will have to do. A friend of mine owns the vineyard where this was made. This was one of their best vintages. A dry year, producing exceptional grapes.” He retrieves another two long-stemmed glasses. “Will you drink with us, Corvan?”

I shake my head. Although I can still appreciate the taste and aroma of food and wine, the sensory pleasure I get from blood is far, far greater. Anything else pales in comparison, and even then, all blood pales in comparison to hers.

It’s like being offered candlelight when you’ve just discovered the sun.

Ciel pops the cork. The rich, pleasant smell of wine permeates the air, overcoming the sharp antiseptic.

I hand him the scalpel. “You wouldn’t happen to have some *myrnim* on you, by any chance?”

Ciel regards me as if I’m one of his hard-headed patients; the type to ignore pains and concerns and good medical advice for far too long.

Most soldiers are like that.

“If I could ban that stupid leaf from the ranks, I would. You know how it damages the lungs. In the interests of public health, I wish you’d see where I’m coming from, Your Highness.”

More than once, Ciel has attempted to convince me to ban *myrnim* smoking amongst the ranks. But the only time I strictly forbid it is when the distinctive smell might give away our position.

I shrug. “Soldiers need an outlet. What’s the point of telling them something might kill them many years from now when they stare death in the face every single day? So, you got some, or no?”

“I do. For medicinal purposes only. You’re just lucky you’re not susceptible to its effects anymore.”

“Papers?”

“You’ll just have to use blotting paper.” He points toward a pair of steel-framed glass doors, which lead out onto a narrow balcony overlooking the inner courtyard. “If you’re going to smoke, do it outside. I won’t have your filthy habit harming my patient.”

He retrieves a case of blotting papers from a high shelf and throws them to me. I snatch them out of the air, my reflexes lightning-swift. This is followed by a small jar of dried *myrnim*.

I quickly roll myself a cigarette, my movements swift and practised. After all, I’ve done the same action hundreds, if not thousands of times.

Ciel’s right. It’s a filthy habit, and I’ve always tried to keep my smoking to a minimum, only reaching for the *myrnim* when I was particularly stressed.

Making decisions that could send hundreds of men to their deaths, for example.

A soldier needs an outlet.

And *I* need a distraction.

Because underneath the antiseptic and the wine and the faint smell of smoke from the hearth, her scent is there, and I dare not look at her right now, because my arousal is still there, and I didn’t expect this at all.

My betrothed.

What am I going to do with this bright, lovely creature?

I walk across to the hearth and bend down, putting my cigarette close to the embers.

It catches alight and starts to smolder, filling the room with a familiar aroma that comforts me. Thanks to my enhanced senses, it’s a hundred times more potent. There are layers to this herb that I hadn’t appreciated before.

It's the smell of childhood; of sitting in my father's private study, and I'm perched on his knee as he sits in his big winged leather armchair, reading to me.

From an early age, he would educate me, reading maps and atlases and books about exotic lands across the Istrivan Sea. He taught me to speak Vikurian and Rhodenic.

At the time, my father was everything; a gilded hero, larger than life.

But Valdon Duthriss doesn't do anything without a reason, and it was only much later that I realized everything was part of his plan.

To create me in his image.

"Fine," I grumble, glancing over my shoulder, shooting Ciel a dark look. "I'll go outside. And when I come back, you can explain why the sunlight doesn't seem to bother me anymore."

Ciel glares. "I can't explain *everything*, you know."

I open the creaking door and step out onto the cold stone balcony. The winter wind whips at my hair. I cup my cigarette and put it to my lips, taking a long, slow drag.

I exhale.

The wind catches the white plume, swirling it into the air, ephemeral strands disappearing into the pale blue sky.

It starts to snow.

The cold does nothing to douse the heat in my body or the hardness in my cock. I might as well jump down there and bury myself in the damned snow.

From inside, I catch her faint murmur as she begins to stir.

It occurs to me that perhaps my sudden immunity to sunlight is no coincidence.

Who is this woman, really? Or *what*?

At first, I considered the possibility that she might be complicit in this betrothal madness, but now I'm almost

certain she isn't.

Still, father sent her here for a very specific reason, and I need to find out *why*.

It's convenient, then, that Baron Solisar is currently imprisoned in my dungeons. And he doesn't seem like the kind of man that would hold out long under torture.

FINLEY

I wake to the aroma of woodsmoke and sharp-smelling herbs; to the faint scent of *myrnim*. The base of my neck, where he bit me, feels warm and tingly. There's no pain. Just a warm, pleasant sensation, and the memory of his lips against my skin.

I'm in a strange room. It's warm and filled with light. Logs smolder in a hearth. There are big tables to one side, strewn with books and herbs and bottles of different colored powders and liquids.

I catch sight of various metal instruments, a mortar and pestle, and glass measuring jars.

And books.

Shelves upon shelves of books. Not arranged in an orderly manner like the ones in *his* office. This library consists of uneven stacks and rows; of loose papers and books everywhere, some lying open, some propped up half-read, some closed but bookmarked with various items; a piece of string, a feather, a scrap of cloth.

My fingers itch to go and tidy it all.

What is this place?

I remember sitting in his office on his comfortable leather sofa. I remember my eyes closing, his deceptively handsome face blurring in my vision as I succumbed to the spell of his overwhelming presence, despite all my better instincts.

My eyes go wide.

All of a sudden, I'm fully alert.

Because just before I passed out, the pieces came together in my head.

It's him, isn't it? It wasn't just a dream...

I'm covered in a warm checkered blanket. I push it aside and rise to my feet, my heart thudding loudly in my ears.

My vision dims. I sway on my feet. My head feels light, as if my entire being is floating above the clouds.

I'm floating on a haze of aromatic smoke and warmth, and all of my worries—Aderick's injury, my uncertain fate, father locked away—are submerged and distant.

"Easy, now." A pair of big, steady hands drops onto my shoulders. "You don't need to get up so quickly. There's no urgency. You're safe and taken care of. And I'm not going to do that to you again."

His voice is unmistakable. A pleasant sensation frissons over my scalp, down my neck and across my shoulders. I close my eyes and sway gently on my feet, allowing myself to be anchored by his warm hands.

I can't believe this.

"Sit down, Finley. Take your time."

I blink. My heart is beating too fast. He's right, though. I do need to sit down.

I shrug out of his grasp and move backwards, finding a spot at the very end of the couch, as far away from him as possible. I place my hand on the wooden armrest and take a moment to steady myself.

He takes several steps back and leans against the thick stone wall.

The *myrnim* scent... it's coming from him.

It reminds me of growing up; of being a teenager, hanging around father's soldiers and horses, fascinated by their training and their weapons and their easy camaraderie.

Where there's fighting men, there's *myrnim*.

Does he smoke it too?

The Crown Prince of Rahava?

It's really him, isn't it?

He gives me an appraising look, his expression unreadable.

The physician, Vinciél, stands against a desk with his arms folded, regarding the demon warily—the way a small, cautious predator might look at a much larger one.

The demon gives the physician a tiny nod, as if granting him permission to speak. Even when he's like this—casually dressed and reserved in demeanor—he gives off an air of effortless authority.

“You've awakened, Finley.” Vinciél keeps his distance. On the table beside him is an empty glass of wine, tinted red with the remnants of his drink. “You're probably wondering why you're here in my chambers, of all places. Well, *I* don't intend to keep you in the dark.” He shoots the demon a pointed look. “I'm sure you would have come to understand that *he* has some rather ah, *unique* needs.”

“I've realized that, but I don't understand anything.”

“You're anaemic. That's why you fainted. It isn't anything serious, but you're going to have to take it easy over the next few weeks, and you'll have to take the medication I prescribe. Starting with this.” A glass of wine appears in his hand.

“I've never heard of wine being used to treat anaemia. I don't drink wine,” I say stiffly. “I've never understood the appeal.”

Vinciél manages to look aghast. “It's *medicinal* wine.”

His insistence feels suspicious to me. Something's off. And I can't string a single coherent thought together while *that* man is staring at me like that.

As I perch on the sofa, feeling slightly dazed, my attention shifting from one strange man to the other, a sudden rush of anger hits me.

My brother is terribly injured.

My father is detained in the dungeons.

I almost died myself, under the claws of a lycan.

And the man I'm supposed to marry? Well, if my suspicions are correct and this pale stranger truly is the dreaded Archduke Corvan Duthriss, then it appears my husband-to-be is a monster, and he has an uncontrollable fetish for my blood.

I steel myself. "I'm not taking *anything* until I get an explanation."

The physician looks askance at his master.

The demon makes a dismissive gesture with his hand. "Leave us, Vinciel."

I'm almost hoping Vinciel will defy him; that he'll put the wellbeing of his patient above his master's whims, but Vinciel simply offers me a curt nod and departs, leaving the glass of wine on the table and disappearing through a side-door.

It closes behind him with a resounding *thud*.

Suddenly, we're alone again.

He and I.

This man's authority is absolute.

Even his learned physician doesn't dare question his commands.

Why is my heart pounding like this? Why do I feel a thrill of excitement at the possibility that *he* might be the one?

"Finley." The sound of his voice stirs a flutter inside my chest. "Let's pick up where we left off."

He doesn't move from his spot against the wall. There's a stillness about him that's unnerving; he doesn't shift and fidget like an ordinary human would.

I'm intimidated, but I can't afford to show it. "You aren't going to force me to drink that wine, are you?"

“I’m not going to force you to drink the wine,” he says calmly.

“Then might I ask that you at least introduce yourself? It’s hardly fair that you know my name when I’m completely ignorant as to yours.”

He stares at me for a moment, brows drawing together. I force myself to be still under his scrutiny, even though it feels like he’s sifting through my innermost thoughts.

If I’m right about his identity, then he’s probably used to people fawning over him and not questioning his orders.

The corner of his mouth quirks. “Finley, I’m Corvan. I apologize for not introducing myself earlier, but on both occasions, there were far more pressing matters to deal with.”

Corvan.

I stare at him, shaken to the very core. Hearing him say it aloud is another thing altogether.

It’s really him.

The very mention of this man’s name evokes fear and fascination throughout the empire, and he’s right here in front of me, crimson-eyed and dangerous, and the bastard *drank* from me, not once, but *twice*...

I take in his elegant features. The resemblance is certainly there. Once you’ve seen it, it’s impossible to *unsee* it. There’s no doubt he’s related to the man whose portrait hangs in every castle, shop, and institution in the empire.

But he isn’t a carbon copy of his father.

He’s a more refined version of the original, with different colored hair and eyes, and unearthly speed and strength, and *fangs*.

“Your *Highness*.” I draw on every last shred of my self-control to keep from shaking. I don’t want him to see how angry I am. “Is that the kind of man you are? That you would allow us to pass through your treacherous lands with not even an escort to meet us at the border, and then you have the indecency to take advantage of me like that?”

He shakes his head, a puff of exasperation escaping his lips. “If I had *known* you were coming, I would have met you at the border myself. I suspect you had little choice in the matter, but whoever told you to make this trip in the middle of winter is a complete and utter fool. Your sudden appearance caught me completely unaware. A bad idea, with my current state.” Corvan Duthriss’s voice turns dangerously quiet. “Was your father behind this, Finley?”

I bite my tongue, knowing very well that he has father locked up in his dungeon. “I-I don’t understand. You mean to tell me that you didn’t *know* I was coming?”

“I did not.”

“How is that possible? It was all arranged. The *emperor* himself approved it.”

“Apparently, he did. But I had no inkling of it whatsoever until you turned up in the middle of the road, flogging that poor horse like you were trying to outrun the Seven Furies themselves.”

“I was desperate.”

“I know. You did the right thing, Finley. You’re just fortunate I was the first person you came across.” His expression softens. “Who knows? Maybe fate had a hand in it.”

Fate? I want to scream, but I hold myself still. *You bloody bastard, you bit me!*

Instead, I lean forward, turning my body so I’m facing him, clasping my hands together and squeezing hard so I don’t do anything reckless. I have to admit, despite his fearsome reputation, the archduke’s handling of the situation has been quite... measured.

He isn’t what I’d expected at *all*.

“If I may dare to ask, what happened to you, Your Highness?” I’m taking a big risk, but I *need* to know. Otherwise, the situation will become untenable.

He’s already driving me crazy as it is.

He looks away; through the windows, toward the winter sky, his eyes turning hard and crystalline, like rubies. I can't believe this is the same man that led a formidable army against the barbarian hordes; against arcane monsters and undead creatures.

If not for him...

What would have happened to Rahava and its citizens?

"After a terrible battle, I was lying in the snow, mortally wounded. That day, I died and went to Hecoa's underworld," he says quietly, turning to look me in the eye. My heart goes still. A strange feeling overtakes me; I want to both succumb to his magnetic pull, and flee. "But she refused to let me in. Instead, she gave me a drop of her being and sent me back. That's what I saw in my death-dream, anyway. *If* it was a dream. When I woke up, I was like this. Perfectly healed and no longer quite mortal. Strange-looking and somewhat cursed. It took a long time for me to understand what had happened." He pauses. When he looks up again, his eyes are filled with shadows. "Have you ever heard of *vampires*, Finley?"

Vampires...

"No, I haven't."

"Well, that is what I am. It isn't common knowledge, but magical transformations do happen from time to time. Rahavans are intentionally kept in the dark about magic and such things. There's scant literature on my kind, and I've never met another like me in the flesh. Goddess forbid that I might. I thirst for human blood and I no longer enjoy the warmth of the sun. I'm far stronger and faster than any human. My hearing and sight are impossibly sharp. As you can see, my eyes and hair have changed, and my complexion has become insufferably pale."

I think you're beautiful, I almost blurt. He's wrapped up in bitterness and anger, and he's beautiful.

I remember Kaithar's words. *Underneath everything... he's got a good heart, and that's why he's got a healthy little fear of what he's become.*

It's little wonder he's become a recluse.

How would the Rahavan Court react to Prince Corvan Duthriss as he is now?

"Your Highness." I tip my head respectfully. "There are many things that exist beyond the borders of the empire that we don't understand. I know that magic exists. There are monsters and mythical creatures in the mountains and across the Valbergian Sea. And sometimes I feel that our world here in Rahava... is so very, very small. I can't even begin to comprehend what could have happened to you, but I know what you did for my brother..."

And you stopped father, when nobody else has ever dared.

And men like Kaithar and Vinciel remain loyal to you.

So I think... that Kaithar might be right, after all.

As quickly as it appeared, his openness disappears, hidden behind a many-layered mask. "It's Corvan. Just Corvan. There's no need for such formality, Finley. We're betrothed, after all."

"You aren't going to dispute the arrangement?"

He gives me a strange look, his eyes filled with sudden intensity. "No."

"My father's only a baron. A recently made one, at that. Surely you would want to seek a bride more fitting of your station."

Corvan peels himself from the wall and approaches, his movements fluid, his feet perfectly silent on the stone floor, even though he's wearing leather boots. "Is that what you'd prefer? It almost sounds like you're trying to dissuade me."

"N-no, that wasn't my intention. I was honestly just curious." I'm taken aback by his question. What do I *really* want?

I've never been given the luxury of choice.

He sits down on the other end of the couch, leaning back, one arm draped along the armrest. I can make out the sculpted

muscles of his arms through the thin fabric of his shirt. The first few buttons are undone, offering me a glimpse of his smooth, hard chest.

The man exudes raw physicality. He carries an undeniable aura of power, even when he's dressed so unpretentiously.

At least one of my hopes came true.

My husband-to-be is indeed pleasing to look at.

No; he's more than that. He's perfection, even in his changed form.

I swallow the lump in my throat and cross my legs. That fluttering is still there; in my chest... growing warmer, slipping between my thighs.

He leans forward. "Finley," he says softly; slowly, shaping my name with his deep, resonant voice. "I couldn't care less about titles or status. I have enough wealth that marrying for it would be pointless. And to be perfectly honest, I find most of those that have been raised in the bubble of the Rahavan Court to be insufferable. But you... *aren't.*"

"So... you *do* wish to proceed with this... our arranged betrothal."

One pale eyebrow arches in amusement. "Does the notion really seem so terrible to you?"

My stomach flips. *A little... because I don't know what you're capable of.*

"And part of this arrangement is that you will want to..." My hand goes to my neck. With cold fingers, I feel my own rapid, shallow pulse. "You'll want my blood again... and again." My voice cracks a little. I can't help it. The thought that he might put his sensual lips on my neck again and gently suck the life out of me.

This man.

Oh, my Goddess.

For a moment, his eyes come to rest upon my neck. His lips are slightly parted. I can see the sharp tips of his fangs.

“I won’t force you,” he says softly. “And I won’t take from you until your condition has improved.”

Force me? Like you did before?

What is this feeling I have? Of dread mixed with excitement? Along with a healthy dose of skepticism. “From what I can tell, you weren’t exactly in full possession of your senses. What makes you so certain you can control yourself next time?”

“I’ll learn to control it. And if I fail to do so before the thirst hits me again, I will keep away from you and seek alternatives. Unless, of course... you are willing.”

Am I seriously contemplating allowing this man to drink from me again? “The physician says I’m to take it easy over the next few weeks. I don’t want to be fainting in your arms again.”

Are you sure you won’t force me? I remember the look in his eyes just before he drank from me. In that moment, it felt like nothing in the world could come between us.

“Drink the wine, Finley. There’s no need to be suspicious. It’s just a finely aged Tusganes merlot, laced with a few drops of my blood. One of the few benefits of this infernal state of mine is that my blood appears to have healing properties.”

“I won’t be... affected by your magic?”

“If you’re worried that you’ll become like me, then no. That’s not possible. According to the lore, only the Goddess herself can create vampires. I’ve donated my blood before, time and time again. When your brother was close to death, I gave him some. It sped up the healing process immensely, and from what I’ve been told, he’s still as human as he ever was.”

A faint smile crosses my lips. He’s right. The last I saw of Aderick, he was sitting up in bed, wolfing down a hearty breakfast and bemoaning the fact that he was bored out of his mind from being stuck in bed all day. And he was so *very* human.

“Drink the wine, Finley. It’ll heal you. There’s no point in having you spending the next few weeks feeling weak, with

the risk of fainting at the slightest exertion.”

He’s right. That sounds like hell. But he obviously has other motives, too. “And then you’ll be able to drink from *me* sooner, won’t you?”

“I do have a vested interest in your wellbeing, yes.”

“You know, for a royal, you’re rather shameless, Corvan.”

He smiles then; a bitter, wicked, and utterly charming smile, all perfect white teeth and gleaming fangs. “You think royals are supposed to be paragons of virtue? I hate to disappoint you, but we’re the most shameless creatures of all.”

“Well, at least you’re honest about it.”

It *would* be good to get rid of this feeling; this woozy light-headedness, this annoying fluttering of my heart, this restlessness, this strange, smoldering heat inside my body.

The glass of wine sits there on the table, right where Vinciel left it.

Dark, decadent crimson, staring back at me, taunting me.

Is he lying, or telling the truth?

Deep down, I know he could do anything he wanted with me. We’re bound by Rahavan law. I can’t run. I can’t defy him. Against his inhuman strength, I’m completely helpless. If he were a corrupt person... he could do depraved things. He could imprison me and take from me whenever he wants.

He has all the power here, and *yet*...

So far, he’s been surprisingly reasonable.

I take a deep breath. “I’ll tell you what. I’ll drink the wine. I’ll *consider* allowing you to drink from me again. But I have conditions.”

He inclines his head. “Tell me.”

“Firstly, you will ensure my brother has all the care he needs to make a full recovery. You will prevent my father from taking him back to Ruen prematurely. Secondly, you must promise to protect me and my family. That includes my father,

who is currently detained in your dungeons.” I pause, thinking about my father, who’s been harsh to me for as long as I can remember. Unlike the affection I receive from my brothers, I’ve never known even a sliver of warmth from him. “If you must detain him, then at least provide him with adequate food, water, and warm bedding.”

Corvan leans back, steepling his fingers, his gaze becoming hooded as he contemplates my requests. “I’ll grant you the first one. That is a given. As for your father... I can’t say I have any respect for a man who storms up to my gates unannounced and demands an audience with me. I have no tolerance for a man who disparages my loyal soldiers, *especially* Kaithar of all people. But what is most unforgivable is that he dared to strike you. And for that, he needs to face the consequences. I can’t grant your second request, Finley, but I will ensure he has the basic things you asked for. And I can promise you that I won’t kill him.”

“Be fair,” I put my fingers to my mouth, where father struck me. “Look. The injury isn’t so bad.”

Is it so bad that part of me wants Corvan to punish my father?

For a moment, his expression turns horribly cold, like a winter storm. But then, it passes. “That too, will heal,” Corvan says gently, “if only you will drink the wine.”

He’s dangerously persuasive.

Too much for me to withstand. I’m just a simple country girl from Ruen.

“Fine,” I utter at last, and it feels like a dam wall inside me is starting to break. “But you must stick to your side of the bargain.”

“I might be shameless, but I’m not dishonorable.” He rises to his feet and pads across the room, his movements slow and purposeful and graceful, like a big hunting cat. He takes the long-stemmed glass into his fingers and returns.

Then he kneels before me, offering the dark crimson elixir.

I stare down at the wine; into depthless, shadow-filled red.

Just like his eyes.

FINLEY

I take the glass from him, trying my hardest to stop my hands from shaking and failing miserably.

It's your condition, I tell myself.

He's kneeling before me.

The Archduke Corvan Duthriss, Crown Prince of Rahava, High Commander of the Imperial Armies, and somehow a *vampire*, is kneeling in front of me, watching me expectantly, as if the fate of the empire depends on me drinking this wine.

It smells of woody spice and summer berries.

I close my eyes and yearn for spring.

There's something else in there, too; a fragrance both bitter and sweet and darkly tempting.

I take a sip.

It's both acidic and sweet, rich with fruit and a hint of something faintly metallic.

I wrinkle my nose. I'm not used to this sort of taste, but I drink it anyway.

As the wine slides down my throat, warmth blossoms in my chest. I take another sip, appreciating the complex flavors.

It's not that bad, really.

Almost instantly, my body feels lighter. The foggy feeling in my head clears, and my fatigue lifts away. It does nothing

for the jittery feeling in my stomach, though. Nor does it settle my racing heart.

Neither does it stop warmth from pooling in my belly and spreading between my thighs.

But I *do* feel much better.

Corvan was telling the truth. His blood, even when mixed with wine, is a healing elixir.

I open my eyes. He's standing now, watching me closely. Everything seems clearer. The sunlight—wintery and faint as it is—appears brighter. The colors are more vivid, especially his irises, which are flecked with brown.

A strange sound fills my ears. It takes me a while to realize what it is—the whispering of many voices, speaking a language I don't understand. Frantically, I look around, but there's nobody there—only Corvan, watching me intently.

“What's wrong?” he asks, his brows furrowing in concern.

“I don't know,” I whisper.

The voices grow louder. The glass—mostly empty—falls from my hand.

Like lighting, Corvan is there, catching the glass before it shatters into a thousand pieces. His big hand curls over my shoulder, his touch gentle in spite of his strength. “What's wrong, Finley?”

I grip the armrest, my fingers digging into the wood. “I don't know. I feel better. Not tired anymore. But strange, like there's something inside me, and it's fighting to get out.” I grip the chair tighter.

Maybe I'm imagining things, but it almost feels like the wood has turned into soft wax beneath my fingers.

I must be hallucinating.

Fear grips me.

Was there something in that wine?

Did they... *drug* me?

The whispering grows louder; it's like a choir, a thousand voices speaking in unison, in a melodic, mournful cadence. I can't understand what they're saying, but it's strangely comforting.

"If... if I told you that I think I'm going mad right now..."

Corvan is staring, but he isn't looking at me.

His attention is drawn toward my hand, which is curled around the armrest.

His eyes go wide. He whispers something under his breath—a short, sharp curse.

"Ciel!" he bellows.

He turns to me and places his arm around my shoulders, pulling me into him. "That's enough, Finley. Rest easy. I've got you."

All of a sudden, the vampire archduke is comforting me, and his body feels warm and solid. His scent surrounds me; he smells faintly of leather and *myrnim* and crisp, woody fragrance, mingled with something warm and delicious and undeniably *male*.

"That's some strong wine," I say half-heartedly, hiding my terror as the sound of whispering starts to recede. Relief courses through me. *He's just as surprised as you are. He didn't poison you.* "I hope you weren't trying to get me drunk, Corvan."

"Not my intention at all, believe me," he murmurs, gently removing my hand from the armrest. He threads his fingers through mine, holding my hand still.

His palm is large and callused. That makes sense. I've heard he's a master swordsman.

Across the room, a heavy wooden door opens, and Vinciel appears. He's changed into more fitting attire; grey trousers and a blue jacket over a crisp white shirt. His long golden hair is tied at the nape of his neck with a dark blue ribbon.

"Explain this," Corvan growls, gesturing toward the chair. One of his arms is around me. In his other hand is the empty

wineglass.

The physician looks down. His blue eyes widen in shock. “You did that, Your Highness?”

“Not me. *Her*. As soon as she drank it, something strange happened. This is what she did to the chair with her *bare hands*. *Explain*.”

Vinciel slowly shakes his head. “I *can't*.”

For the first time, I follow the direction of the physician’s gaze.

He’s looking at the polished wooden armrest. Corvan’s staring at it too.

When I gripped it, it felt like my fingers were sinking into wax.

Now I understand why.

Right there, in the dark polished armrest, is an imprint exactly the same size and shape as my hand. It’s as if the wood had turned to clay when I gripped it.

And the memory of whispering voices rings loud in my mind.

“I take it you have no idea what this is either, Finley?” Corvan asks in a low, gentle tone.

I turn to him. “Maybe I’m hallucinating. Does your blood have that effect on people?”

The Archduke of Tyron frowns. The wine must be going to my head, because I can’t stop staring at him.

He’s so handsome it hurts.

“I wasn’t aware that tasting my blood could cause one to develop the ability to melt *wood*, but then again, stranger things have happened.”

CORVAN

After escorting Finley to her quarters with strict orders for her to rest, I make my way to the mess hall.

I have a thousand questions, and there isn't a single doubt in my mind that my father sent Finley Solisar here for a reason.

The ability to mold wood as if it were clay?

What is she?

I force myself to walk at a normal pace, acknowledging the servants as we cross paths. Their reaction to me is as expected; a pause, a deep bow, eyes downcast, body language betraying their fear.

I don't know all of them by name. Gerent is responsible for hiring and training them. The former seneschal of my palace in Grenovia, on the outskirts of the capital, he runs a tight ship, and I trust him implicitly.

He selects the staff carefully, combing through their family ties, work history, debts, and weaknesses.

Weeding out anyone that could be compromised.

I exit the main castle through a side-door and cross the vast, empty courtyard. It's midday. The sky is blue and cloudless.

For the first time in three years, I'm able to walk in the sunlight without hiding my face. It's *her* blood that's done this to me. I feel clear-headed and refreshed. My vision is sharper, my hearing more acute.

The terrible thirst that torments me for so much of my existence...

It's completely gone.

And yet, her aftertaste lingers in my memory, as sweet as anything I've ever known.

I reach the stone walls of the soldiers' barracks, passing rows and rows of imposing steel-and-glass windows. The stark rectangular building gives way to a hall with high walls and a tall gabled roof. Smoke drifts lazily into the air from a wide stone chimney. The aromas of beef stew and freshly baked bread fill the air.

This place... it reminds me of days of old; of long, hard training and evenings spent in the company of fighting men, with good food and cold beer.

I catch snippets of conversation. Men talking about the usual things; fighting, swords, equipment, horses, women, finances, politics. Scars of war aside, my men are as content as they can be, considering what they've been through. The least I can do is ensure they're the best paid soldiers in the empire.

As I step into the mess hall, the chatter dies. The men are seated at long wooden tables. Swords rest against benches in well-worn plain leather scabbards. *Myrnim* smoke drifts through the air, mingling with metal and sweat and leather and the aromas of the food.

These men have known me for years. They've fought alongside me in the Northern War.

They're tough, loyal men. I should know. I've hand-picked each and every one of them. Some of them are family men; they've been given land near Sanzar where they've settled with their wives and children.

They're sons. Fathers. Husbands.

The hardest bunch of bastards in the empire.

Now look at them. They all look like they've just seen a ghost.

“At ease, lads,” I drawl, hiding my vexation behind a wry smile. “I’m not here on account of anything official. Just catching up with an old friend. Listen up. This evening, we’ll do an old fashioned fight tournament in the great hall. No weapons, no armor. I want to see your best grappling and ground game. As always, striking is permitted. Winner gets five *taelins* and an open bar at the Cherry Blossom Tavern. Those who get knocked out in the early rounds are permitted to wager. You may take the afternoon off to rest and prepare.”

The tension dissipates. The men visibly relax. A few grin in anticipation.

The highborn officers of the Knights’ Academy would frown upon me for allowing gambling and drinking amongst the ranks, but they have very little experience in actual battle.

They don’t know what these men need.

The winters here are bitter and harsh.

Enough to drive a man insane if he doesn’t have an outlet.

“One more thing,” I add, catching sight of my friend across the room. He’s shaking his head in exasperation. “Kaithar is forbidden from participating.”

“About bloody time,” a grizzled old veteran called Timur cries. “Give someone else a shot at the title for once, you invincible bastard.”

Kaithar pretends to be upset. “Have I done something to offend you, Your Highness?”

“Not recently. It’s just that if I let you join, you’ll spoil it for everyone else.” Slowly, I walk through the mess hall, passing the men.

Now more than ever, I need them to see that I’m the same old Corvan. Lord and commander. Soldier.

Empress Helia’s son.

The same as I ever was.

Even if I’m not.

I reach Kaithar. He's sitting alone at the back of the room, tucking into a hearty meal of gravy-soaked lamb shanks and potato. "Don't look so miserable, Kaith. You'd pulverize everyone. Besides, I need a referee—one that can pull the men into line if things get too heated. You're the only one that can do it."

"Corvan." Kaithar stabs his fork into a large chunk of meat and puts it in his mouth. "Since when have you decided to stop being a miserable recluse and show your face in polite company again?"

"*Polite company?*" I chuckle. "Is that what you're going around calling yourself these days?"

"We're the Archduke of Tyron's Elite Guard. We're allowed to behave like gentlemen when it suits us." He speaks while chewing, relishing his food. I almost envy him. "So? How's your bride-to-be?"

"Finley Solisar is fine," I say mildly, concealing the sudden rush of heat that arrives with the mere mention of her name. "Did you get anything out of her father?"

"Nothing but threats and vitriol. Apparently, there's no way your daddy's going to stand for such reprehensible treatment of a *member of the nobility*. Code of the Noblesse and all that."

"He really does put a lot of faith in my father." I take a seat across from him.

"Well, these minor nobles get funny ideas sometimes. We haven't tortured him yet. I was waiting for *you*."

"I'll pay him a visit soon enough."

"I don't think he'll hold out for long. Doesn't seem the type. You probably shouldn't kill him, though."

"I won't. Finley asked me not to."

"Since when has a single request stopped you from killing anybody? Ah, Corvan. Don't tell me you've taken a liking to her. *You*, the ice-cold bastard who turns down all the legendary beauties in Rahava?"

“She is...” I pause, remembering her bright gaze upon me; her quick, sharp mind. She didn’t recoil in fear when I told her what I was. “She’s *interesting*.”

“That’s the first time I’ve ever heard you say that, you know. I was starting to worry about you.”

I can see her face in my mind’s eye; delicate features, almond-shaped eyes, high cheekbones. Framed with lustrous tendrils of dark brown hair. “She must be important, because someone in Lukiria didn’t want for us to meet.”

“You think all that bloodshed around her arrival wasn’t a coincidence? The lycans? The brigands?” Kaithar shakes his head slowly. “That’s a long bow to draw.”

“They tried to intercept a letter carried by a messenger hawk. It was from my father. Written in his hand and addressed to me only. Kyron found it on the body of one of the brigands.”

“Could’ve been a coincidence. Maybe he found it, or maybe they shot the bird down by accident.”

“I have far too many enemies in the palace for such a coincidence to occur.”

“Well, that’s true. But there isn’t much your enemies can do to you here. And *she’s* here now.” Kaithar shovels a forkful of potato into his mouth. The aroma of spices, meat, and rich gravy infused with wine fills my consciousness, but even though the food smells delicious, I’m not interested in eating at all.

Since the change, I’ve tried to eat normal food. The taste is pleasant, but not as good as I remember. And it does nothing for me. I don’t feel satiated at all.

The only thing that seems to truly satisfy my excruciating thirst is her.

She tasted of sweetness and light and the earth itself, and when she yielded to me for the briefest of moments, I felt like I’d transcended life and death.

“Hey, *Corvan*.”

I blink.

“You all right, there, Van?” Kaithar waves his fork around, looking slightly amused. “I’ve never seen you so distracted.”

“Just thinking.” I don’t tell him that Finley has indeed occupied my thoughts far too often. “Prepare the great hall. Lay down the mats and tell Gerent to arrange a banquet. The tourney will commence as soon as the sun sets. Once all is in place, all house staff are to be relieved of their duties for the night so they can join in the festivities.”

“As you wish.” Kaithar gives me a long, appraising look. “The men will appreciate it.”

I shrug. “Consider it my version of the Midwinter Ball.”

“At least yours is entertaining. You know, I’m glad I know at least one noble that doesn’t have his head stuck so far up his ass that he can’t see the bloody sunshine.”

“I probably have my mother to thank for that.” A wistful note enters my voice. If mother were alive...

What would she make of me now?

“Speaking of sunshine,” Kaithar lowers his voice. “I noticed you’re not cloaked up like a Vikurian desert-nomad for once.”

I give him a long, hard look. “Kaith, the sunlight doesn’t affect me anymore. Ever since I drank from her.”

He lets out a low whistle. “I take back what I said about coincidences. Your father, that wily old geezer, definitely chose her on purpose. I’ll wager he knows exactly what she is—and that you wouldn’t be able to resist her. If you really want to know, why don’t you go pay him a visit?”

Anger grips me. “That’s probably what he wants. It’s probably what he’s expecting.” *It could be a trap.* “I’ll seek my own answers first. I’m going to pay Baron Solisar a visit soon. Notify the guards so they can prepare for my arrival. I’ll question him myself. *Alone.*”

Kaithar delicately balances a cluster of peas on his fork. “Well, it’s about bloody time. We’re all getting sick and tired

of his whinging.”

“If he doesn’t understand why I’ve locked him up by now, then he never will.” Am I so terrible if I’m actually looking forward to putting the fear of the Goddess into him? “Another thing. Finley, her brother Kastel, and his friend are to be invited to tonight’s festivities. If Aderick feels up to it, he can join too, but there’s no pressure from me. Gerent is to arrange for them to be seated at my table.”

“I’ll tell him. But go easy on the lads, Corvan. They’re just kids. We both know what it’s like to be young and stupid.”

A faint smile crosses my lips as I remember our first encounter. Kaithar was one of the most promising recruits the Academy had seen in a while. Young, dangerous, and cocky. Physically gifted. An absolute terror on the training ground. And he didn’t like me because he thought I was arrogant.

He’s always been a good judge of character.

I smile. “I just want to get to know my future brothers-in-law.”

“Hmph. Anything else I can do for you, Your Highness?”

“Send a man to Sanzar. I need a drink in the form of a woman’s blood. Any woman will do, but she should be of child-bearing years, and preferably in the middle of her cycle. Give her a *taelin* for her trouble.”

Kaithar’s eyes widen. “I thought you’d sworn against doing that kind of thing. And you’ve got *her*, now. Are you, uh... troubled by the thirst again?”

“Not at all. But I have my reasons. Don’t ask, Kaith. Just get it done.”

Now that I’ve tasted heaven, I need to know if anything else compares.

The darkness in me already knows it won’t.

FINLEY

In the warm bedchambers, drenched in gentle afternoon light, I lie cocooned in soft silken sheets and toasty bedcovers. The mattress is impossibly comfortable, cradling my weary bones.

I'm exhausted. Confused. Wracked with worry and a little afraid.

And there's something else. A certain giddiness. Because of *him*.

My fatigue evaporates. I slide out of bed, feeling restless, wondering what I should do. Check on the boys? Explore the castle?

I should visit my brother first. Then, I'll go to the stables and check on the poor old quarter horse that saved Aderick's life. That's what I've wanted to do all along—before we were so rudely interrupted by father's arrival.

A knot forms in my chest. Corvan locked my father in his dungeons. Father, who always seemed so big and intimidating; whose presence made me so tense and anxious...

To a man like Corvan Duthriss, he's probably no more significant than an insect. A small, wicked part of me hopes he'll stay locked down there forever—until he dies. And I suspect Corvan wouldn't bat an eyelid if I asked him to keep him there.

But I should probably vouch for him more, if only for the sake of our family.

As I slide my feet into a pair of fur-lined slippers, I hear a gentle knock on the door. My heart flutters. What if it's *him*?

"Come in," I say loudly.

The door opens. A familiar figure enters. A small puff of relief escapes my lips, contradicting the tinge of disappointment.

It isn't *him*.

It's Gerent, accompanied by no less than four young men wearing servants' uniforms. They're hardly past their teenage years—lean, fresh-faced, and clean-shaven with neatly trimmed hair and impeccably tailored suits.

Their arms are laden with packages—flat boxes, large velvet bags, mysterious items wrapped in paper.

"Goodness," I exclaim. "What's all this, now?"

"Good afternoon, my lady." Gerent bows. "Please excuse our intrusion. We have brought a curation of items from the finest tailors, seamstresses, jewellers, and bootmakers in Sanzar. As they haven't yet had a chance to take your measurements, there are a range of sizes for you to try on. I hope some of these will be to your liking. Micah, Lyell, Rosven, and Daron will unpack and present the items for your perusal. Would you like them to remain and assist, or would you prefer to browse in privacy?"

I look at the young servants; at their carefully neutral expressions, at the lavish piles of mysterious, perfectly packaged items.

I frown. I'm not used to such extravagance. Did Corvan have something to do with this, or did Gerent just go overboard?

"Gerent," I say gently, "I very much appreciate your efforts to ensure I'm taken care of. I'm more than certain I'll find something that's to my liking." I turn and smile at the servants, concealing the fact that I feel more than a little awkward right now. I wave them away. "Just leave everything here. I'll take care of unpacking it all."

I'm not used to such treatment; to being waited on hand and foot. In Ruen Castle, I did most things myself, and my daily attire was simple and comfortable.

I pray to the Goddess that all these fancy bags and boxes don't contain the frilly monstrosities that Lady Dorava claims are all the rage in the capital.

How is an archduke's wife supposed to dress? Will Corvan even care if I'm not attired in the latest fashions?

"Arrange everything as the lady requests," Gerent orders. "Footwear by the chair. Clothing on the bed. Outerwear on the bench. Jewelry on the dressing table. Untie all ribbons and strings so that she can easily open everything."

The young servants get to work; discreetly, efficiently. It's as if they're performing a choreographed dance. All I can do is stand and watch as bags, boxes, and and cases are arranged and sorted into orderly piles and rows.

Sweet Eresus, there's a *lot* of stuff here.

"One more thing, my lady."

"Yes, Gerent?"

"The Archduke would like to formally extend to you an invitation to this evening's event. There is to be a banquet and a fighting tourney in the great hall, commencing at sundown. His Highness would be delighted if you would grace us with your presence. The invitation is also extended to all members of your party from Ruen."

My heart leaps into my throat. I try to imagine what such a scene would look like; Corvan himself—intense, enigmatic, crimson-eyed—presiding over a hall of festivities with my brothers and Garan in attendance.

The thought fills me with excitement and dread.

Not once has he objected to our betrothal, even if he claims he was unaware of the arrangement.

"I assume that the option to decline isn't actually an option?" I smile sweetly at Gerent.

“I would advise against it, my lady.”

“How long have you worked for His Highness, Gerent?”

“Close on ten years.”

“So you know him very well, then.”

“I wouldn’t presume to say I know him *well*. I’ve merely learned to anticipate his needs.”

“And would you consider him to be a fair man?”

Gerent’s expression hardens. “Lady Solisar, it isn’t at all my place to comment on matters between the nobility, but since you’re new here, and still unaccustomed to the ways of things, I will offer you an insight. Consider that all of us that live and work in Tyron Castle were given the choice of returning to Lukiria after the war. Tyron is the most inhospitable duchy in all of Rahava. The winters here are harsh, and we are far away from everything. Yet, most of us have chosen to stay.”

One of the young servants, a freckled, ginger-haired young man with sky-blue eyes, looks up as he carefully drapes a long, flat velvet bag on my bed. He clears his throat nervously. “My ma served under the previous lord. We barely saw her. They worked her to the bone. Didn’t even allow her to rest on *Seinmas*. And what did she get for it? A pittance. Barely enough to feed her five children. Now, I’m to be a father soon, my lady. With what Archduke Duthriss pays us, I’m able to afford comfortable lodgings and plenty of food and necessities for my wife and our babe-to-be. I don’t care what happened to him or what they say about him. Don’t care what he looks like. Those of us who know Tyron well would agree that life here is *far* better since he took over.”

A wistful smile drifts across my lips. These servants are more than willing to defend their master. And from all accounts, Corvan seems to treat them fairly. Is this what the lord of a castle is supposed to be like? I can’t imagine that any of the servants in Ruen Castle would go to such lengths to defend my father. “Thank you, Gerent, and... I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

“Daron, my lady.” The young man bows.

“Thank you, Daron. And *congratulations*. I wish you and your wife all the very best with your upcoming arrival.”

“Th-thank you.” A flush spreads across his cheeks.

My smile turns sincere. It’s the first time I’ve felt any real sense of goodwill since I arrived in this place. “As soon as you’ve finished arranging these packages, you may all go. I don’t expect you to wait on me hand and foot while I look at garments in boxes.” Is that what highborn ladies do? Have assistants fluffing around them all the time? I snort. I’m not *that* useless. “But Gerent, does His Highness expect Aderick to attend, too?”

“Only if he feels up to it. Archduke Duthriss is well aware that it hasn’t been long since his injury, but he also knows what lads his age are like, and bed-rest simply isn’t conducive to sanity in an otherwise healthy young man. The physician has cleared him to attend, but he’s entirely happy for you to provide guidance on the matter, as older sisters are entitled to do.”

“I thank him for his consideration. I’ll go pay him a visit when I’m done here. Gerent, I must confess that I’m not really accustomed to attending banquets in the presence of royalty. Would you be so kind as to offer me some guidance on how one might be expected to dress?” I tip my head elegantly, acting more genteel than I really am. Perhaps Lady Majurie’s incredibly boring deportment lessons have some value after all.

Gerent’s expression softens. A hint of amusement creeps into his steely grey eyes. “Of the items we’ve brought, I’m sure any combination would be acceptable. Wear whatever you like, Lady Solisar.”

CORVAN

I make my way down the damp, musty corridor, running my fingers along the rough stone wall. Beneath the surface of the earth, in the cold and the darkness, exists another world entirely.

I hear everything.

Rodents skitter. Water trickles down the walls. Insects crawl in the dust.

The faint hiss of the gas lamps.

The quiet banter of the guards.

I walk slowly; deliberately, *forcing* my footsteps to imitate a mortal's.

I should remember how to do this. It's been three years since I transformed. Not too long ago, I was an ordinary man; slow-footed and heavy.

I reach the guardroom, where warm light glows through an open door, illuminating the corridor on either side.

The smell of the dungeon is overpowering. It's the smell of ancient blood and piss and shit. It's dust and grime and damp and rot. Sweat and misery; fear and suffering.

It's the smell of death, accumulated over the years.

How many wretched souls have passed through here on their way to the afterlife?

The castle is over a hundred years old, and these dungeons were dug beneath the foundations well before it was

completed.

It was only half a century later, when my father came to power, that the castle was actually finished, but the dungeons have been in use ever since the day they were built.

Poor bastards.

I'm sure many of them were innocent.

I make a point of scuffing my boots as I step through the doorway. The guards are playing cards at a small table.

They immediately stand to attention.

“Your Highness.” Hedy is the more senior of the two; my Head Warden and manager of the keys. He's stocky, and powerful, with crude tattoos inked on his forearms. On one arm is the shield and crossed swords insignia of the Imperial Military. On the other is a beautiful woman. He gets surly if asked about her. “The prisoner's awake. Finally bloody shut up, too. You should've heard the racket he was making. You want us to bring him out?”

“No, I'll go and see him in his cell. Give me the keys.”

The other guard, a soldier called Treave, unclips the keys from his belt. “This one.” he lifts the bunch by a single saw-toothed key and walks over to me, his wooden prosthesis tapping on the cold stone floor. His features are distinctly Vikurian. A formidable swordsman, he's tall and slender, moving with uncanny grace in spite of his amputation. “You sure you don't want one us to accompany you?”

The keys clink softly as I take them. “Thank you, Treave, but that is unnecessary. Do you really think Solisar could do anything to me?”

Hedy snorts. “Respectfully, no. We just thought we'd come along for moral support. Just don't make him scream too much. I've got a bloody migraine from all his shouting. It's echoey in here. Amplifies the sound a hundred-fold.”

“He's the soft type. Won't take long to crack,” Treave says quietly. “Especially when it's *you*.”

“Let’s hope so.” *For his sake.* I turn and walk away, keys in hand, leaving the guards to their card game.

I reach the first cell. The thick wooden door has a small metal hatch for delivering meals to the prisoners. The stench of the cell seeps from underneath, making me slightly nauseous.

It’s all the noxious things I detected before, only a hundred times worse. If my vampiric sense of smell wasn’t so acute, I wouldn’t be so disturbed by it. I reach into my pocket and pull out a silk scarf that’s been doused in Ciel’s medicinal-smelling antiseptic.

I tie it around the lower half of my face, covering my mouth and nose. The sharp smell of herbs immediately cuts through the rancid stench, relieving my nausea.

I hear the baron inside; shifting around, muttering to himself.

I put the key in the lock, and turn.

Then I move, faster than he can possibly comprehend. I slam the door shut and dart across the room, grabbing the metal-and-glass lantern from its hook, shutting off the gas.

Shrouding us in perfect darkness.

All the better to unsettle him with.

Besides, I’m not in the mood to deal with explaining my changed appearance right now.

“Wh-who’s there?” Solisar hisses. He’s in bed, covered in rough grey blankets. He sits up and looks around wildly, blinking in confusion.

He can’t see a thing.

But I can see perfectly well in the darkness.

“Show yourself, bastard. How dare you ignore my requests? I demand that you take me to the archduke at once. Do you even understand what kind of punishment you’re risking by doing this to me? You’re breaking *imperial law.*”

How in the Seven Furies' names is *this* man the father of Finley Solisar?

He's nothing like her... and yet, I can see certain resemblances; in the shape of his brow, the curve of his nose, the line of his jaw

The physical similarities are there, but in all other respects, she's *nothing* like this man at all.

I lean against the wall. "Well, it seems you're in luck, Lucar Solisar."

"*Baron* Solisar." He sits up, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. "Ignorant fucking knave," he mutters under his breath, unaware that I can hear him perfectly well.

I chuckle. "Why should *I* have to address *you* by title?"

"What are you—" He peers through the darkness, pale blue eyes narrowing. "*You*. I recognize your voice. You were the one that ordered me detained. Who *are* you?"

"Lucar, you aren't into a position to demand anything. The sooner you realize that, the better things will go for you."

His tone changes, becoming less demanding, more desperate. "Th-there must be a misunderstanding. If you would just allow me to speak with Archduke Duthriss, I'm sure this miscommunication can be overlooked."

Irritation flickers. "What makes you so certain the archduke will look upon you favorably?"

"We're of the peerage. Of course he will accommodate me." Solisar leans forward in the darkness, his eyes glittering with ambition. "You're making a grave mistake. Can't you understand that my very own *daughter* is betrothed to His Highness? By personal agreement between me and the emperor himself. It was not too long ago that I was in the capital, finalizing the details of the arrangement with His Imperial Majesty. This detainment is *ridiculous*."

My irritation turns to cold anger. "Both you and my father presume a *lot*."

Solisar's expression turns blank. "Your *father*?" Almost comically, he blinks several times. "*You* are him? The son? Impossible."

The depth of my anger surprises me. In my mind's eye, I see the blood on Finley's lips where he hit her. Something inside me cracks open, giving way to a dark chasm. "You sent your daughter here," I say quietly. "In the middle of winter, through lycan country, where bandits are known to frequent. The escorting party was inexperienced and unprepared. That's why they're dead now. It's a miracle your daughter managed to survive. For that alone, Lucar, I should flay you alive. And then you have the gall to turn up at my gates unannounced, and you *demand* an audience with me?"

"My sons were missing," the baron hisses. "Do you know what it feels like, knowing your heirs could be wounded or dead because of some foolhardy decision? They came *after* her. That's how Finley manipulates them. She's had them wrapped around her little finger for far too long."

I peel off the wall and walk toward him. "If you have even a breath of sense in your body, you will refrain from speaking ill of my betrothed."

The baron stands, his eyes wide in shock and disbelief. "Y-you can't seriously—"

"You will treat her with the respect and courtesy she deserves, not only because she is to be my wife, but because she's your daughter. You will not lay your hand upon her *ever* again, because if you do, I'll fucking kill you."

He shakes his head slowly. "Don't toy with me. There's no way you can be him. Corvan Duthriss is a master strategist. An intelligent man. He would *not* be so easily manipulated."

Denial can be *such* a powerful thing.

He thinks Finley could manipulate me?

How could that gentle, exquisite creature manipulate anyone?

Everything I saw from her was *real*.

Kaithar might be good at reading people, but so am I.

My hand shoots out. I wrap my fingers around his pale, greasy neck and lift him up until his feet are dangling above the floor. Solisar writhes and struggles, his hands closing around my wrist, desperately clawing at me.

It's no use.

He coughs and splutters as I start to choke him to death.

I feel his life flickering beneath my fingers. It would be so easy to end him, but I've made her a promise.

Please, don't kill him.

How clever she is, to read the situation so well. To understand what I'm capable of.

To know not to fear me.

I let go.

Solisar collapses, wheezing and choking, clutching at his neck.

I squat down beside him. "I've killed better men than you for lesser reasons. I could end you now and bury you in the woods and none would be the wiser. Do you really think I'm worried about the consequences? I'm not afraid of my father, Lucar. You've served your purpose. You sent your daughter to me. That's what he wanted. He isn't going to give a shit about what happens to you now."

"You..." His voice comes out a cracked whisper. "Are you insane? I have the emperor's favor."

He tries to rise to his feet.

I push him back down. He lands flat on his arse. "Sit down, Lucar Solisar. And listen very carefully, because I'm not going to repeat myself. I'm going to ask you some questions. You will answer me honestly and truthfully. Every time you lie or refuse to answer, you're going to feel excruciating pain."

"What are you—"

“First question. Why are you so disdainful toward your only daughter?”

“Wh-what are you talking about?”

“You know what I’m talking about.”

“I-I’m only doing what any responsible father would do. Teaching her the boundaries of her station. Making sure she’s married off to a suitable husband. She’s headstrong. I blame myself. I shouldn’t have left her alone for long periods when the children were young.”

“Lucar, my patience is wearing *very* thin. I’m well aware that Dorava Solisar is not Finley’s birth mother. So. *Why?*”

“I... I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He shuffles backwards, attempting to rise to his feet once again.

I shake my head. It’s always the nobility that are so slow to understand their predicament. The minor lords are the worst of all.

My hand shoots out. He doesn’t even react, because he can’t see me in the darkness. I grab his right wrist and immobilize his hand. I bend his pinky finger backward, snapping it.

“Aaargh!” He cries out in pain, his voice turning falsetto. “You fucking *lunatic*.”

“That’s your sword hand, isn’t it? You have ten fingers, Lucar. I can do this nine more times. Then we’ll move on to your limbs.” My voice is flat; emotionless. I don’t relish torture, but I’m no stranger to it.

Lucar Solisar is breathing heavily. A sheen of sweat covers his face. I release his hand. He yanks it backward, as if recoiling from a viper bite.

He reeks of fear and the stench of captivity.

He won’t last long.

He’ll break soon.

I can see it in his eyes; wide with terror, the glazed stupor of denial slowly turning into realization. Through my herbal-

scented mask, I can smell him; sweat and filth and the coppery stench of his blood.

I'm repulsed.

After Finley, I'll probably never want to taste another man's blood again.

I sigh. "I can do this all day, Lucar. Maybe I'll skip the fingers next and go straight to a limb. Arm or leg. Your choice."

"Urgh." He makes a strange sound; primal, guttural, incomprehensible.

It's the sound of a man who's realized he's completely powerless.

And just like that, he folds. His shoulders slump. A tremor courses through him. He buries his face in his hands and lets out a shuddering sob. "Oh, *Goddess*," he whimpers.

"Lucar," I say softly, making it sound as if I'm relenting a little. "Focus, man."

"Argh, bloody hells, you fucking maniac. She's... she's born to an outlander, all right?"

Oh. And so we get ever closer to the truth.

It explains why Finley has dark eyes and dark hair, in contrast to her father and her brothers.

"An outlander? From *where*, exactly?"

"Batava."

Thirty years ago, my father sent his armies across the sea to try and conquer the peninsula lands of Batava. I was just a boy at the time. I would spend countless evenings poring over maps and charts with my father, playing at strategy, moving silver pieces into place.

But once his armies landed, the map reading and games of strategy stopped.

And several years later, the Rahavan forces returned, at a third of their original size, and the land of Batava had *not* been

conquered, and talk of the failed campaign was forbidden.

“How does a Batavan come to be in Rahava?”

“I brought her back,” he admits quietly, his voice tinged with bitterness. “I was one of the few that returned from the Batavan War. And she was beautiful. Exotic. A prize. I couldn’t help it.”

My anger returns, colder than before. All this talk of war is making me desolate. I’m filled with anger and dread for Finley’s mother. “What did you do to her, Lucar?”

“Sh-she left.” His left eye rolls upwards ever so slightly. Despite the cold, he’s sweating more than ever. “When Finley was a babe. She was yearning for her homeland.”

“What did I say about lying to me, Lucar?” The cold feeling is gone, replaced with incandescent anger. This is Finley’s *mother* we’re talking about, and he has the fucking nerve to lie to me about her?

I take his ring finger.

“Urgh...” He tries to yank his hand backwards, but I’m too fast.

There’s a soft crunch as bones and cartilage fold as easily as paper.

The baron lets out a desperate, choked sob. “S-stop!”

“It’ll be some time before you’ll be able to hold a sword again,” I say softly. “My physician can re-set those fingers, but if I have to break any more, you’ll never wield a blade again.”

“Just stop. I’ll tell you,” he grunts, the last of his resolve crumbling. “Th-that woman... Finley’s mother... she’s a monster. I didn’t know... she was unconscious and wounded when I took her from the battlefield. It was only later... when she healed.... we had to put dampening irons on her. If they ever release her, she will—”

I shoot forward and grab Lucar’s neck, slamming him against the floor. Right now, I really, *really* want to kill him. “Where is she now?” I relent ever so slightly so he can talk.

He coughs and rasps. “I... I don’t know. Your father was interested in her; in the fact that she didn’t seem to age. He came and took her away... for research. To the Imperial Labs in Grenevere.”

Research. The word fills me with revulsion. “And did he ever tell you what he found out? If she isn’t human, then *what* is she?”

“She’s... from the other side of the world. A place we don’t understand. Not quite a witch, nor a demon. She’s a spirit of the forest. She has the power to bewitch men and curse them. Emperor Duthriss said a certain word once. *Dryad.*”

A frisson of anticipation courses through me. The word has a familiar ring to it.

Dryad.

I need to know more. And now I have a word. It’s a start.

To unlock Finley’s truth and find her mother.

Pray that she is still alive, father. If you’ve killed her, then...

I don’t know what I’d do. The depth of my protectiveness surprises me. I’ve only encountered Finley twice, and each time I took advantage of her, succumbing to my terrible thirst.

In spite of all that, she was blunt with me when she had to be. She was courageous, putting her brothers’ lives above her own. Sharp-witted, and yet clever enough to know when to yield. She even figured out my identity on her own, putting two and two together despite my changed appearance.

And when she realized who I was...

She didn’t grovel or simper; didn’t change her behavior toward me.

Did father intentionally send me a blessing in disguise? A baron’s daughter and a dryad’s child, sent to marry me, a vampire?

Finley’s all alone. She has no friends; no allies.

The least I can do is be her strength.

I think my mother would have warmed to her in an instant.

I rise to my feet. “That’s enough for now, Baron Solisar. Get up.”

He hesitates, wincing as he wraps his intact hand around his broken fingers. Slowly, tentatively, his fearful eyes darting around in the darkness, he gets to his feet.

There’s no more talk of the almighty emperor and how he’s going to punish me. Before me, Lucar Solisar is just a man, confused and defeated, finally understanding his place.

It only took two broken fingers. It’s as Treave said.

He’s the soft type.

“I’ll send my physician to set and bind your fingers. Think of a plausible story for how you got the injury. A guard will come shortly to escort you to your room upstairs in the main castle.”

“M-main castle?”

“I’m releasing you, Lucar, provided that you behave yourself. No more running your mouth off. Do not assume that your station provides you any protection or privilege in *my* castle. You dare insult my men again, and I’ll grant them every right to respond. And never, *ever* mistreat your your daughter again. You will show her the appropriate respect afforded to the future princess consort. After all, she’s *my* betrothed, and therefore, she outranks you by far.”

He lets out a small, strangled sound of disbelief.

“Am I clear, Baron Solisar?”

“Y-yes.”

I stalk toward him. “Yes, *what?*”

Solisar stares into the darkness, trying to make me out.

He blinks several times as the answer hits him. “Y-yes, Your Highness.”

“Remember that you’re a guest here. Finley, Aderick, Kastel, and Garan are under my protection. You aren’t taking your son anywhere until the physician deems he is fit to travel.”

“U-understood.” Solisar is now a meek man who knows when to hold his tongue. I know when and how to wield my power, and men like Lucar Solisar, who crave riches and fame, need to be reminded of where they stand.

Otherwise, they go and do stupid things.

“Good. At our next meeting, I will deal with the administration of your estate and lands.”

“W-what are you talking about?”

“As your future son-in-law, it’s only natural that I take an interest in the financial affairs of House Solisar. But that is for discussion later.” I walk towards the door, leaving him in the center of the room, covered in sweat and breathing heavily, clutching his broken fingers. His eyes are as wide as plates. “One more thing... did she put really a curse on you, Lucar?”

His shoulders slump. “She said that misfortune would follow me in life for what I’ve done to her. And that if I were ever to do anything terrible to Finley, then the same fate would befall my eldest son.”

“What’s her name, Lucar?”

He hesitates. “*Aralya*,” he says at last.

Aralya.

This is the woman that Lucar stole from a distant land. Finley’s mother. A *dryad*.

Who was given into my father’s possession, to be studied.

Powerless. Kept captive against her will. *Forced* against her will. I can’t even fathom such a fate.

Is she even still alive? I need to find out.

A bitter feeling roils around in my chest. For although her suffering can’t even compare to Aralya’s, mother was like that too, especially toward the end.

I push the heavy wooden door and let myself out into the corridor, locking it behind me. Baron Solisar lets out an almighty sob of frustration.

I leave him there, to stew in his regret and impotence.

My mind is already elsewhere. I'm thinking of *her*; of her bright-eyed defiance, of how everything about her is sweet and pure.

I want to go to her; to see her again.

Maybe, like me, she isn't entirely human.

And for the first time in a very long time, I feel a sliver of hope.

FINLEY

Filled with disbelief, I stare at the growing mounds of luxurious things on my bed.

The fabrics are finer than anything I've worn in my life. Silk that glides beneath the fingertips. Wool so soft and warm it's like melted butter. The boots and shoes are made from smooth, supple leather that's been expertly crafted, the stitching immaculate.

I might be a baron's daughter, but I've never seen clothing like this before.

There are two piles. One is returns. The other is for keeps.

My *keep* pile is filled with smart, practical clothing. Plain colors. Unfussy cuts. Mostly trousers, vests, jackets, button-down shirts, and a few skirts. Things I would actually want to wear. The styles might be simple, but they're impeccably made.

The *returns* pile consists of things that didn't fit me or things I don't ever plan on wearing, like that big, flouncy lilac dress.

It isn't my color at *all*.

But surprisingly, *returns* is the smaller of the two piles. Most of the clothing fits me rather well. Whoever chose it must have a knack for guessing measurements.

I think I know what I'm going to wear to Corvan's banquet.

I don't want to turn up adorned in lace and silks and jewels like some highborn court lady. I'm not going to paint my face and display myself like a flower amongst the thorns.

I'm going to wear what *I* choose.

And I'm going to see how Corvan Duthriss reacts.

Does the Archduke of Tyron merely want a beautiful jewel sitting beside him? A trophy wife to be seen and not heard, the way Lady Dorava is to my father?

No... I don't want to believe that.

A vivid memory flashes through my mind.

Of him.

After he drank from me, he was so gentle. Protective. Warm. Unassuming. For a moment, it felt like we were just two ordinary people, and titles and ranks and his strange *condition* didn't matter.

My heart beats faster as I select a pair of trousers. They're deep blue; high-waisted and tapered at the leg. I slip out of my loose pants and pull them on.

They fit like a glove.

I shrug off my knitted tunic and select an elegant white shirt made of fine cotton. It's clean and crisp and very well fitted, just like the trousers. I do up the shimmering mother-of-pearl buttons before fixing the cuffs. Then I tuck it into my trousers, fastening the gold buttons on either side.

Next is a structured jacket, with long tails and sleek lapels, in the same rich blue as the trousers.

I walk across the room to the dressing table and look at myself in the mirror.

The wound on my lip has healed perfectly, thanks to Corvan's magical blood. I look confident and assured. The clothing fits me well, the cut accentuating my shape. I've been told that my shoulders and arms a little too strong and *un-*delicate. Lady Dorava often remarked that my small chest

needs *enhancement* to match my narrow waist and wide hips and thighs.

A rather unfortunate figure, that's difficult to dress, my step-mother used to say.

But the clothes I'm wearing now fit perfectly. Somehow, I look taller, but maybe that's just because I'm standing a little straighter.

Still, there's something missing. The outfit is a luxurious backdrop, but it needs an accent.

I rummage through the smaller boxes and bags until something catches my eye—a russet colored silk scarf, intricately embroidered with gold and green threads; twisting vines with delicate leaves.

It reminds me of autumn. It tickles my fancy a whole lot.

I pick it up, running my fingers over the sumptuous fabric. I fold it lengthways several times and tie it around my neck, forming a loose bow.

I look in the mirror again, turning my head this way and that. The gold threads shimmer in the light, accentuating the gold-and-red highlights in my dark hair.

In all of my existence, I don't ever remember wearing anything I've liked so very, very much.

I run my fingers through my hair and twist it up into a bun. A pair of gold enamelled hair pins lie on the dresser. I use them to secure my hair. Each is decorated with a small pink lily flower.

Strands of hair escape, falling around my face, but I don't mind. It softens my appearance.

The glossy lacquered boxes on the dresser draw my attention. They're of various sizes; some flat and square, about the size of my palm. Others are small, like a matchbox.

I open one.

A pair of teardrop-shaped rubies glitters inside.

I gasp. Each gemstone is as big as my thumbnail. They're suspended on curved golden hooks, brilliantly cut and faceted to catch the light.

They remind me of Corvan Duthriss's eyes.

I can't wear those. They're too extravagant; too precious. Just one of these earrings would be worth more than Dorava's entire jewelry collection. It's probably worth more than father's entire fortune in gold.

But...

They *are* beautiful. And they would match my outfit perfectly. If I were to stand beside Corvan wearing these, we would be resplendent.

I pick up one of the earrings and hold it up, allowing the ruby to dangle. The light bounces off its exquisite surface, giving off hues of fire and blood.

Gerent's words ring in my memory.

Wear what you like.

My fingers tremble as I slip the hook through my earlobe, tilting my head to admire the ruby.

As I put on the other earring, I feel a great weight slipping off me.

You're free of Ruen now.

I keep replaying it in my head. When father hit me, Kaithar slammed him to the ground.

He protected me.

Then Corvan was there, and nothing else mattered.

He didn't even hesitate. He used his power and locked my father in the dungeon.

Then he took what he wanted—*me*.

The fluttering in my chest grows wilder. Corvan Duthriss is a walking contradiction, far more complex than any rumor could convey. He's certainly capable of ruthlessness. But on the other hand, he can be impossibly gentle and considerate.

And it's becoming clear to me that this betrothal I was dreading is so very different to what I'd feared.

FINLEY

The Great Hall of Tyron Castle is magnificent. Entering it for the first time, I can't help but feel a sense of awe.

I look up at the soaring ceiling, which is buttressed by carved wooden beams. A pair of ornate wood and iron chandeliers hang from above, each adorned with hundreds of glowing candles. Gas lamps sit in sconces along the wall, suffusing the entire hall with a bright glow.

Through tall, arched windows, I see the winter landscape. Snow-blanketed hills dotted with stately pines are bathed in hues of orange and pink as the sun sets.

Part of the hall has been transformed into an arena of sorts, with mats of woven reed arranged on the floor to form a large square. Long tables and benches sit opposite, draped in pristine white tablecloths. Verdant pine boughs, holly branches adorned with gleaming red berries, and pinecones are arranged around tall white candles in silver holders.

The places are set, the crystal glasses gleaming, the cutlery polished.

"Whoa," Kastel exclaims. "And here I thought Tyron was just a remote mountain province with nothing much going for it. Just a big old stone castle and a crazy archduke in exile and a bunch of bitter soldiers. Who would've thought they could put on a fancy spread like this?"

"*Kastel*," I chide, not knowing if Corvan is nearby. With his unique powers, I wouldn't be surprised if he can hear a whisper in a crowded room. "You can't disrespect a lord in his

own castle. We've been treated with nothing but decency ever since we arrived. If it wasn't for the archduke, Aderick wouldn't have..."

I glance down at my other brother, sitting in an invalid's chair made of woven cane and timber and metal. The large wheels creak as Garan pushes him across the floor. He's recovering remarkably well. The color has returned to his face. Vinciel prescribed him a purple syrup that takes away most of his pain, allowing him to walk short distances without assistance.

The boys' eyes are wide as they take in the grandeur.

"Rick," I say gently. "You all right?"

My very own brother, baby-faced and blue-eyed, golden-haired and so handsome he's broken a few hearts already, gives me a bittersweet smile. "I'm fine, Fin. Just sorry we didn't get to you in time. Sorry you have to go through with all of this. Thinking back on it all now... I don't know how I didn't see it. It's as if a blindfold's been taken off."

"See what?"

"How... how everything's so different for you. The things you have to put up with, that we don't. Father... to put it bluntly, he's an *asshole* to you."

I nod sharply, a sudden knot of emotion tightening in my chest. "I know, Aderick." *I don't understand it either, but that's the lot that was given to me in this life.* "It doesn't matter now. You just do what you need to do and focus on getting better."

"I can't condone it," he snaps. "If you want to escape this arrangement, I swear I'll find a way."

Escape? Since I arrived, the thought hasn't crossed my mind.

"Don't be foolish. You know that wouldn't end well. We need to play this game, Rick. It's the only way we can move forward. I'd rather you and Kastel go to the Knights' Academy and make something of yourselves. I've accepted this, so *don't* waste the opportunity. Make the most of it." I lean in and drop

my voice to a whisper. *“And when the time comes for you to inherit Ruen, don’t become like father.”*

That will be my revenge. That, and joining in union with Corvan.

If I have that man on my side, father will become insignificant.

I’m not even bitter about it.

Even if father and Lady Dorava are harsh and indifferent toward me, I’ve been more fortunate than some.

Growing up, I was mostly ignored. I had the run of the castle; the freedom to poke my nose into just about anything. Some of the servants—the younger ones—were kind to me. And the boys and I... even though we were treated differently, we always played together, and later, when the tutors and instructors came to teach them, I would sit unnoticed at the back of the room, feigning ignorance when I was secretly watching, listening, absorbing everything.

I gained a lot in Ruen Castle. I was hungry, insatiable, always learning; eager for any scraps of knowledge that fell from the table.

And in some things, I quickly surpassed my brothers.

None in Ruen can shoot an arrow truer than me. Not even the most experienced soldiers.

Father has no idea of some of the things I can do.

I squeeze my brother’s shoulder.

Aderick is still young.

A ginger-haired servant appears beside us, offering a dignified bow. “My lady, may I request your presence for a moment?”

“Yes, what is it?”

“His Imperial Highness wishes to see you privately before the festivities commence. Please, follow me.”

I nod, carefully keeping my expression neutral, even as a sublime little thrill courses down my spine.

Kastel glares at the servant suspiciously. “My sister is with *us*. If there’s anything the archduke wants to say, it can be said in front of all of us.”

“Kastel, I’m fine. Thank you for your concern, but Corvan and I are already acquainted. It is *fine*.”

“My lady. Masters. May I offer you a drink?” Another servant swoops in; an older man with swept back dark hair elegantly greying at his temples. “Do you have a preference for mulled wine, or beer?”

“I’ll have a beer,” Aderick says, deliberately breaking the tension. “After all this lying about, I’m craving a pint of good stout. Meal in a glass, they call it.”

“You’re in luck, Sir. Tyron is renowned for its dark-roasted malt stout.”

“*Rick*.” I bend down and whisper in his ear. “*Don’t forget that you’re recovering. No getting drunk or doing anything strenuous or stupid, all right? I’ll be keeping an eye on you.*”

“Yes, sister,” he says meekly, an angelic smile crossing his lips. “I’ll behave. It’s just that I’ve looked death in the eye and survived, so I think I deserve *one* beer, at least.”

Aderick can be too charming for his own good, but he can be reckless. He’s the ringleader, too. I’m more than certain he was behind the decision to go after me.

Kastel’s the opinionated one, never afraid to speak his mind.

Garan is stoic. He’s strong and hard-working and has all the makings of a fierce soldier, but he’s a man of few words. I can hardly ever tell what he’s thinking.

I smile at the servant, who tips his head respectfully. “I’d better go. I’ll leave the three of you in his capable hands. Please don’t worry about Corvan. He really isn’t as terrible as you might have been led to believe.”

Aderick lets out a low whistle of surprise. Kastel looks more skeptical than ever. Garan's attention is elsewhere—he's watching the servants, who are busy setting up a large feast in the center of the hall.

I follow the servant, my boots ringing on the polished marble floors. We head across the floor toward a pair of tall, elegant glass doors. The square, gilt-framed glass panels are etched with frost, obscuring the view outside. Daron appears, bearing a sumptuous fur coat. "It's a little chilly outside, my lady. Allow me."

"Normally, I'd put on my own coat, but I suspect you won't be having any of that."

Daron's mouth quirks. "Of course not, My Lady. We can't have the archduke's one-and-only betrothed going through the hardship of putting on her very *own coat*."

"Just this once, because you offered so graciously." I'm going to have to talk to Corvan about the servants. I'll go mad if I have people waiting on me hand and foot all the bloody time.

I hold my arms out and let Daron slip on the coat. Silk-lined and luxurious, it's a delicate shade of cream. The fur is soft and plush.

I don't even know what animal this coat is made from, but I'm incredibly grateful for its warmth as Daron pushes open the massive doors, admitting an icy blast of wind.

He ushers me through. "I leave you in His Highness's eager presence, My Lady."

I step out onto the balcony.

Corvan is there, standing at the balustrade.

He stares back at me.

My heart goes still.

I can't deny it.

I'm stunned.

He's cut his hair. The silken white tresses are gone. This new style is short and crisp, shorn at the sides and a little longer on top.

It only serves to accentuate his regal features.

I almost mourn the loss of his long hair. It gave him a wild, decadent aura that made him seem like a character out of some ancient mythical tale.

But I like this too. The clean, stylish haircut doesn't detract from his hard-edged elegance, nor does it take away his subtle aura of power and dangerousness.

Corvan wears an impeccably tailored charcoal-grey suit. A tailcoat over a silk brocade vest. Elegantly tapered trousers. All trimmed and embroidered with midnight blue. The crisp white collar of his shirt contrasts elegantly with the delicate blue and grey floral design of his silk cravat.

There isn't a sliver of doubt left in my mind that he's the firstborn son of Emperor Valdron Duthriss.

I open my mouth to say something, but no words come out. He's still staring at me with that blistering intensity. The faintest pinkish hue has crept into his alabaster cheeks.

Nobody's ever looked at me like that before.

As if he would destroy a kingdom just to have me.

The sun is slipping below the horizon, painting the sky in shades of purple and pink. Light from the great hall bathes us in a warm glow.

"Hello, Finley." He smiles, fangs and all. Immediately, I'm reminded of how it felt to have his warm lips pressed against my neck.

Beneath my coat, my body reacts. The slow-burning warmth of arousal flares between my thighs.

"Hello, Corvan." My voice sounds so unlike me; low and husky and self-assured.

I feel anything *but* assured right now.

“You look good,” I say quietly, trying my best not to reveal the extent of my awe; this feeling that the entire world as I know it is sliding out from beneath my feet.

I could choose to let this moment make me feel small, but I refuse.

Nobody in this world is going to determine my fate but *me*.

I slowly walk forward, my footsteps soft on the frost-limned stone.

He’s still staring at me like *that*, and I swear I see it again.

A faint crimson glow, radiating from his gaze.

This is magic.

Everyone knows that magic exists; that beyond the civilized borders of Ruen there are monsters and ancient *inhuman* creatures, but few have ever actually seen it.

In Rahava, magic is taboo.

They say that magic comes from the blood of the gods, and humans aren’t worthy of wielding it.

“Finley...” He says my name like a caress. “You look absolutely beautiful.”

A warm flush that enters my cheeks. Nobody has ever paid me a compliment like that before.

If I’m not careful, I could lose myself in him.

“I thank you for your generous gifts, Your Highness.” I offer him a respectful little bow. “Opening all those carefully packaged and finely chosen garments was a welcome distraction this afternoon.”

He frowns. “Finley, I told you before, it’s just Corvan. No honorifics, please. Not from you. Although it pleases me immensely that you like the things I selected.”

“*You* selected them?” My heart flutters. To think he would have gone and taken the time to personally pick out things he thought I’d like? “I assumed it was all Gerent’s doing.”

“I know you much better than Gerent does.”

“You *barely* know me.”

One eyebrow arches, his expression turning a little wicked. “I wouldn’t presume to know your tastes, but I can take a guess. I’m sure there were some things that weren’t to your liking.”

“Surprisingly, only a few.”

“Good. I have a feeling you’re the practical type, but as my soon-to-be wife, you’re going to be spoiled whether you like it or not.”

Wife. The word hits me with resounding finality.

On the first night, once wed, we’re supposed to...

My flush deepens, heat spreading into my ears and down into my neck.

What’s wrong with me? It isn’t as if I’m inexperienced with men. Unbeknownst to father, I’ve had trysts with young, handsome stablehands and fanciable squires. I drank *quiros* tea to prevent myself from getting with child.

I always knew I’d eventually be given into marriage.

My plan was always to prick my finger in the night and smear the sheets with blood. That’s what most women do, isn’t it?

“Corvan.” I reach his side, turning to look out across the darkening hills, which are shifting from crimson and purple into an inky shade of blue. “May I be blunt with you?”

“Please.”

I take a deep breath. “I have to say that I find it all very strange. The fact that Emperor Duthriss would agree to our marriage in the first place. The insistence that I reach you before winter’s end. And you didn’t even know of our betrothal until after I’d arrived?”

“It was my father’s doing,” Corvan says quietly. “He obviously has his reasons for wanting us to meet.”

“But why? I’m not anyone that stands out. If not for my father’s insistence, the emperor wouldn’t even be aware of my

existence.”

His expression turns glacial as he crosses the space between us, his movements impossibly graceful. “My father knows things about people that they themselves will never realize. That’s why he’s still sitting on the throne at such a ripe old age. It’s no coincidence that you had a taste of my blood and then were able to twist wood as if it were dough.”

“I... I’ve never done such a thing before, and no matter how hard I try, I haven’t been able to manifest it again. I honestly have no idea how I did that.” A sudden panic rises in me. What if he has reason to think I’m an enemy? That I’ve been sent here to harm him?

But much to my relief, his gaze softens. “I know, Finley. The look on your face told me that much. You were just as shocked as I was.”

Shocked is an understatement. I still can’t fathom such a thing.

Could I be capable of magic? I’ve never touched a spellbook or a magical artefact in my life. Where would I have inherited it from?

Certainly not father.

Mother?

I don’t know much about her. Only that she died when I was a newborn. It was forbidden to speak of her in Ruen Castle. There are no pictures of her; no traces, nothing to remember her by...

And as the years went by, I never felt her absence in my heart, because I’d never been permitted to *know* her.

Corvan’s scent envelops me; crisp, clean, with hints of leather and aromatic wood and spice and *myrnim*.

He reaches out, his fingers gently grazing my cheek. At his touch, a gentle tremor courses through me. “I’m ninety-nine percent certain you’re innocent in this. But even if you were complicit, I would still keep you.”

I grab his hand, curling my fingers around his—big, strong, callused. I pull his hand away from my face, lowering it. “Would you still be so kind to me if you hadn’t tasted my blood?”

Crimson eyes crinkle in pure amusement. “I would. Because I’ve never met anyone like you, Finley Solisar. And I think that I would desire you even if your blood was bitter.”

Oh, sweet Goddess. Do not lose your head over this man, Finley. Not yet.

I grip his hand tighter. “So by sending me here, does your father want to hinder you, or help you?”

“Who knows?” His lips curve wryly; deliciously. “He’s usually quite a practical man, not swayed by fear or superstition. And he *thinks* he can control magic in his empire. He’s the only person in this world who immediately relished the fact of my transformation. He’s a master manipulator, but I would wager my entire fortune that you being sent here is a good thing.”

“He *knows* about your condition?”

“The emperor knows everything... well, almost.” A devious chuckle escapes his lips.

“And he allows you to remain a part of his court.”

“If he had his way, I would still be next in line for his throne.”

“You would?”

He reverses my grip, covering my hand with his, gently stroking my palm with his thumb. That small gesture almost melts the last of my defenses. It’s swift and unexpected and shockingly intimate. But it feels surprisingly natural. “I’ve been resisting marriage for years, Finley. Even more so since I turned—for obvious reasons. And father is bitter with me for not giving him grandchildren—*more* heirs to ensure his line.”

I take in his beautiful, wintry visage; his obvious inhumanness. “Is it still possible for you to...?”

“According to some ancient, obscure text that he keeps obsessively referencing, it’s supposed to be possible for someone like me to have children, but that remains to be proven. Maybe it’s just wishful thinking on his part. Confirmation bias. Even wise old scholars come up with bullshit from time to time.”

Children...

My heart backflips. The deep, primal part of me yearns for him.

“He gave me an ultimatum. That I marry you, or be stripped of all my lands and titles. So you see, Finley, my father might still favor me, but he can be vicious when one tries to go against his will. I’ve already pushed him far enough by leaving Lukiria and creating my stronghold here in Tyron.”

Bitterness lances through me. “You were forced into this too.”

“My hand was forced,” he admits, still holding *my* hand. “Because of the emperor’s decree, there’s no way I can refuse. Too many people depend on me for their livelihoods. I don’t know why Hecoa turned me this way, and I don’t have time to dwell on it, nor do I see any point. But now that I’ve met you, I don’t think it’s such a bad thing. Rest assured, Finley. I have every intention of playing my own game in the long run. I’ll find a way to subvert father’s agenda. I’ll never take from you without your permission again. I’ll treat you as a queen, and I *will* protect you, always.”

His expression is so earnest right now. I so badly want to believe him.

There’s a poignancy to him that I hadn’t noticed before.

“I just needed you to know this, Finley, before we embark on solidifying our bond. There’s much to unravel, but I’m doing everything in my power to find the answers. It’s the only way we’re ever going to know peace.”

“Is that what you want? Peace?”

“Amongst other things, yes. Peace is fragile, and unfortunately, it can only be kept by preparing oneself for

war.”

“That’s why you’ve turned this place into a military fortress.”

“I won’t allow anyone to destroy what we’ve fought so hard for. What my men died for. The people of Tyron are my responsibility now.”

His expression turns hard. His eyes are like flint.

I sense his will; powerful and unyielding.

What really happened to Corvan and his soldiers up in the mountains? I have so often heard that the war against the barbarians was bloody and brutal, made all the worse because of the biting winter and the unforgiving terrain.

Men freezing to death.

Monsters and terrible magic unleashed.

Even *dragons*.

What happened to you, Corvan? What did you see?

I run my fingers over his hand, feeling the broadness and power of it; the old nicks and calluses that speak of brutal violence. “Did you really see the Goddess of the Underworld in your dream?”

He closes his eyes and lets out a soft sigh, dark lashes falling against his luminous skin. Although his hair has turned white, his eyebrows and lashes remain deep brown; a remnant of his human self.

“It wasn’t a dream. I felt it with every fiber of my being, more vivid and profound than life itself. I died, Finley. Then she sent me back into the world of the living, even though the threads of my soul were tethered to the afterlife. And when I opened my eyes, everything was brighter and more intense than ever before. The sun burned right through me, but I relished that pain like nothing else, because it meant that I’d been given another chance.” He brings my hand up to his lips and kisses the backs of my fingers. “The only other time I’ve ever felt so alive is when I’m with you.”

I try to ignore the thrill of being wanted; the intoxicating notion that I might be irreplaceable to him. “I believe in gods and monsters,” I say softly. “If you really did go to the underworld and return like this, then Hecoa must have sent you back for a reason.”

He frowns. “Do you really think that?”

“You have power, Corvan. And you are no demon. *Danger, chaos, and misery are as innate to the world as the night. Do not allow fear to become resident in your heart. Seek out the strong; those that refuse to enact the script Master Fate has written for them. Better yet, become one of them.*”

I quote a book I found in father’s small library. It was one of the many volumes he brought back from the capital to fill his shelves when I was a young child. Amongst the nobility, it’s fashionable to have a library filled with scholarly titles, even if those books sit gathering dust.

At least, until *I* learned to read.

“*On Power by Owasus,*” Corvan exclaims, his smile filled with surprise and delight; sudden innocence making him seem almost childlike. “He’s one of my favorite philosophers. You read the classics, then?”

“I like to read,” I say softly. “But I didn’t know that title was a classic. I just thought it was full of useful advice. Especially for a girl entering the cusp of womanhood, with nobody to guide her and the specter of a forced marriage looming in her future. I always worried that one day, I’d have to run a household. And without adequate training or experience, I figured a book about power was a good place to start.”

Corvan chuckles. “You’re much wiser than you give yourself credit for. Does marriage still feel like such an imposition to you?”

I shake my head. “No...”

“Good.” He raises my hand and leans in, planting a gentle kiss on the back of my hand.

His mouth is warm and gentle. His touch is like magic, sending a surge of wild energy through me. All of a sudden, I want his lips on mine.

“Come, Finley. It’s time to announce our existence to the world.”

CORVAN

I open the frosted glass door and lead Finley into the great hall, watching her intently as she steps across the threshold. The golden glow of the gas lamps reflects off her dark hair, catching highlights of red and gold.

She's put her hair up. She looks effortlessly elegant. Several strands escape from her updo, gracing her face. The elegant column of her neck taunts me; I want to wrap my hand around it, to run my fingers up and down... to put my lips on her just above the part where her pulse flutters delicately.

She's wearing the earrings I gave her. Pear cut and brilliantly faceted with hundreds of planes and angles to catch the light, the deep red color perfectly suits her sun-burnished complexion and her dark, intelligent eyes.

They're fire-grade rubies from the mountain heart of Pervasha, close to the Vikurian border. They are exceptional—finding a pair so perfectly identical and brilliantly hued is next to impossible. There probably isn't another pair like this in all of the empire.

It pleases me immensely to see her wearing *my* jewels.

The warmth of the hall surrounds us as I gently close the door behind her.

“Allow me to take your coat,” I say quietly, having the sudden urge to act like the perfect gentleman.

She glances over her shoulder, eyes gleaming, a ghost of a smile on her lips and a hint of a blush suffusing her cheeks. “Thank you, Corvan.”

“My pleasure.” She makes me want to behave like a gentleman, which I certainly am *not*. Standing behind her, I place my hands on her shoulders and gently remove her coat, draping it over my arm. It’s made from the luxurious fur of a *snowbeest*; a rare monster I killed when we were coming down the mountain.

Newly turned and desperate at the time, I drank its blood too, and tasted its raw, savage power.

For the first time, I catch sight of Finley in her chosen attire.

I take a deep breath, digging my fingers into the soft pelt as I inhale a tendril of her intoxicating scent.

To put it simply, she’s everything I could have hoped for, and more.

I can’t believe my luck.

She’s foregone a gown in favor of a smartly tailored deep blue pantsuit. The trousers accentuate her taut little ass. The jacket nips in at her waist, making me want to put my hand on that delicate little curve.

My gaze drops to her legs, where long burgundy leather boots encase her toned calves.

The sight of them nearly sends me to my knees. Arousal hits me hard, and it takes all of my self-control to keep a straight face.

The fight ring has been set up on the other side of the hall. The contenders are warming up; bare-chested, wearing loose trousers designed for freedom of movement.

They’re my soldiers—with the hardened physiques of warriors and the scars to match. Their bodies might be strong, but many of them hide fractured minds.

This kind of thing—it helps.

My attention snaps back toward Finley. Beneath her thin veneer of calm, she’s skittish. I can hear it in the rapid patter of her heart. I can see it in the tense lines of her body.

Father, did you really not know how perfect I would find her?

Silently, I curse him. Because before I left him in Lukiria, when he was urging me to stay by his side, I threatened to kill him if he ever tried to meddle in my affairs.

He saw the power I suddenly had at my disposal, and he wanted to use me.

“Corvan, these new powers of yours aren’t a curse, they’re a gift.”

He might have arranged this marriage, but I will viciously and savagely fight to protect Finley from the toxicity of the Rahavan Court.

My father and my brother included.

And hopefully, with time, she will learn to trust me.

I glance around the room, observing my men as they filter in. A decent crowd is starting to gather—both soldiers and servants alike. Kaithar stands at the edge of the ring, wearing the black officiating suit of a military games referee. He’s watching the entrants like a hawk, his expression severe, his powerful arms folded.

With Kaithar around, they’ll know not to try any dirty tactics.

Nobody messes with the Commander of the Black Eagles.

We make our way across the floor. I move closer, swapping the pelt to my other arm, putting my hand on the small of her back.

She doesn’t resist.

For the first time in my life, I know the feeling of extreme possessiveness.

I make sure everyone sees us as I guide Finley to the banquet area. At the far end, one table is set up for myself and my chosen guests. Two chairs in the center stand out from the others. The high backs are carved with the motifs of Tyron. Round, plump *tansem* berries nestle in thorny vines that twist

around wide-bladed broadswords. The blades taper down toward the floor, forming the back legs of the chairs.

On either side, scaled dragon claws rise above the swords, forming the backrest, holding the finials—a pair of smooth orbs. The black dragon is the symbol of Tyron—the most fearsome beast known to man. According to the myths, the black dragon nests in the highest peaks of the Khatu Mountains.

The myth is seeded in truth.

I should know.

I killed the damn beast, and it killed me.

I escort Finley toward the chairs. She looks up at me, frowning.

I bend down and whisper close to her ear, inhaling the sweet-scented fragrance of her hair. I'm still aroused. "For the Lord and Lady of the castle. I'm not big on pomp and ceremony, but we should have something to distinguish ourselves, don't you think? And maybe when he sees this, your father might understand the situation a little better."

"What are you talking about?"

"I've invited him to dinner, on the condition that he behaves himself."

On cue, Baron Solisar himself appears, escorted by one of my servants, Rugar. Well, Rugar's more of a guard, considering he was once a broadsword-wielding infantryman. The vicious scar across his left eye and the claw on his left arm—amputated at the wrist—are telltale signs. Naturally, he refused my offer of a generously remunerated medical retirement, complaining that he didn't want to grow bored and fat and lazy. "Allow me, my lord." His voice is like sandpaper. He pulls out the chair that's farthest from us and bids the baron be seated.

Baron Solisar is wearing loaned clothes—a plain shirt and trousers that were clearly designed for a larger, more muscular frame. His face is filled with thunder. There are dark circles under his eyes.

His right hand is tightly bandaged.

I never noticed before, but there's a slight hunch to his posture.

As he catches sight of us, he stiffens. His expression fills with uncertainty.

That's to be expected.

After all, he's seeing me for the very first time.

In the bright lights of the great hall, standing before his daughter, he looks diminished.

"*Father*," Finley gasps quietly.

How can she call that man father, after what he's done to her?

After what he did to her *mother*?

I'm itching to kill him, but I made Finley a promise.

Solisar hesitates, glaring daggers at Rugar.

"This is where you're to sit," Rugar insists, moving in slightly, using his considerable frame to intimidate.

"Evening, Baron Solisar," I drawl, meeting his furious eyes. "I'm pleased you were able to make it."

"*Y-you...*" His eyes widen in fear. Of course, he recognizes my voice.

"We *have* actually met," I say mildly. "And by now, I'd think you would know better than to address me improperly."

"*Y-your Highness.*" Trembling, disbelieving, he executes a stiff bow. "Forgive my impropriety."

"Sit," I order, addressing him as if he were a dog.

Petty I may be, but he *hurt* Finley. I can't forgive that.

Knowing her history, knowing his kind, seeing the way she responds, it's happened more than once.

A beast doesn't change its nature.

You're only here because I'm trying to show that I can be a family man. If Finley didn't ask me to spare your life, you would be dead.

With bitterness, resentment, and fear seeping from every pore, the Baron Solisar allows Rugar to seat him.

“*Corvan*,” Finley whispers, clutching my arm all of a sudden. “Please.”

I'm pleased that she's comfortable enough to seize me like that; to make such urgent demands of me. I lean in, making sure Solisar sees me as I put my lips close to her ear. “Why? He's disrespected you and my men, and I despise craven, shameless people. I know his type, Finley. I can't even imagine what your life has been like. You don't have to be *good* for the sake of it, you know. You don't ever have to forgive him.”

She doesn't react with outrage or anger. Instead, she looks up at me, her eyes wide and shimmering, filled with something other than spite. “That's a lot to assume about me. It doesn't change the fact that he's my father, and right now, he looks rather pathetic, don't you think?”

She has all my power at her disposal, and yet she refuses to pour salt in her tormentor's wounds.

Family ties are strange indeed. I know that all too well.

The noise in the great hall is starting to become a cacophony to my sensitive ears. I go still and focus, using her unmistakable scent to ground me. Behind us, there's a shuffle of footsteps; a creaking of wheels.

The lads have arrived, skilfully marshalled by a young servant called Daron. Two brothers and one friend, all wet behind the ears and reckless; the way most boys are at this age.

“Finley, why are you with *him*? This red-eyed bastard? And... *father*? You're here? What's going on?”

She turns around, her face turning ashen. “*Kastel*,” she chides, transforming from the alluring woman I know into a stern older sister. She steps away from me, fronting up to her brother. Her voice drops to a near-whisper, but I can hear her

perfectly. “Have some manners when you’re meeting people for the first time. You never know who you might be speaking to.”

The offender is a lad just on the cusp of manhood. With his tall, lanky frame, tousled sandy hair, and clear blue eyes, he’s starkly different to Finley, but there are subtle similarities in their features.

I can’t help but chuckle softly as I discreetly motion for Daron to take leave of his duties. Such youthful impudence. It’s hardly surprising these lads rushed here to save their sister in the middle of a Tyron winter without a second thought.

In truth, I owe them greatly. I’m told they saved Finley’s life.

A tendril of cold anger stirs within me, mingling with my arousal. That fucking baron and my bloody father. Something must be happening in Lukiria. Maybe my father is weaker than what he lets on.

Baron Solisar looks at his sons and seethes quietly. The sons look back at him, surprised and uncertain. He pushes his chair back as if to stand and half-opens his mouth, but I silence him with a look.

Stay in your place, Lucar.

“I don’t care who he is.” Kastel lowers his voice, but his eyes are fierce. “He’s a fucking *demon*.”

“That’s not the full story, Kastel,” she snaps. “Believe me when I tell you that you do *not* want to anger this man.”

“Why are you defending him? Has he threatened you? Because I’ll—”

The kid’s getting a little too heated. I move forward to intervene, but the older brother, Aderick, is ahead of me, tugging sharply on his brother’s sleeve. “Oi, brother. You need to take it easy, all right? If not for this guy and his people, I’d be a frozen corpse right now.”

The elder brother is more heavily built than Kastel. Beneath his grey coat and the generous white shirt that hides

skilfully wrapped bandages, he's broad and muscular. The lad's clearly been training, and he knows how to throw his weight around.

He turns toward me, wincing slightly as he executes a semblance of a bow. "Your Imperial Highness. Please forgive my brother. Half a pint is all it takes to get him to loosen his tongue and go ballistic defending my sister's honor. But like me, he understands little of the situation, even though he means well."

Aderick's figured out who I am.

Clever lad.

Smarter than I'd give a son of Lucar's credit for.

There's potential in this one. Maybe all of the baron's desperate efforts haven't gone to waste after all.

Kastel's head snaps toward Aderick so fast I fear he'll get whiplash. "No way. *Fuckin' oath.*"

He looks at me.

Then at his brother.

Then back at me.

"*No...*"

A soft groan of dismay escapes his lips as he bows his head. His shoulders slump. He prepares to drop to his knees, but I hold up my hand, deciding to put the kid out of his misery. He was trying to defend Finley, after all. "No offense taken, Kastel of Ruen. Apart from our brief encounter that day, you wouldn't have any way of knowing what I look like. As you can see, my condition has changed my appearance to a startling degree."

"I..." He looks utterly crestfallen. "W-what happened to you?" he blurts, shaking his head slowly, before it dawns on him that his line of questioning might be highly inappropriate. "I mean... I didn't mean to be so forward, but..."

"We waged a war against magic," I say softly. "I got hit by the magic. There were... as you can see, *side-effects.*"

“S-sorry. I wasn’t trying to be rude. I just...”

“Forgive him, Corvan. Sometimes, Kastel speaks before he thinks.” Finley attempts to smooth things over; cool and calm on the outside in spite of her fluttering heartbeat.

“It’s fine.” Unable to help myself, I move closer.

A tiny puff of relief escapes her lips.

I want to tease her. *What, did you think I’d take the lad’s head off for his unfettered curiosity?*

“Make yourselves comfortable and enjoy the evening’s festivities. The tourney is about to start.” I smile, giving them a glimpse of my fangs. I am what I am. What does it matter if I look so very different; if they catch a glimpse of my unnaturalness.

They can’t touch me.

Not here, in my very own fortress.

Now Captain Kinnivar arrives, along with his companions. Nothing like a bit of military company to dilute the family drama.

The seats at the far end—the honorary positions—are reserved for Kaithar and Vinciel.

I tip my head. “Kyron. Galaen. Ingvar. Renfrei.”

“Your Highness.” Kinnivar and his band of highly trained warriors acknowledge me with respectful nods as they take their seats at the table, masking their unease well.

I put my hand on Finley’s waist. If she’s intimidated or nervous, she certainly doesn’t show it.

In this room full of tough, scarred men, she stands out from the men like a rare and delicate flower.

One that none would dare touch, because she is so very clearly *mine*.

“Come, Finley,” I murmur, guiding her away from the shocked boys; from her terrified-yet-furious father. “Take your place beside me and see the men I serve—the ones that will

lay down their lives for you. We aren't perfect, but we'll defend these lands and people to the death. The Imperial Palace holds very little sway here."

I pull out her chair and offer her a seat.

She looks up at me with naked curiosity. "The men *you* serve?"

"A true member of the nobility understands that even though one might be waited on hand and foot, the real servant is he or she that rules."

"I'm starting to understand why they stay," she says softly as I take my place beside her. "Even though this place is terribly cold, things are so different here... to the rest of the empire. I'd imagine it's the complete opposite of what goes on in Lukiria."

"It is, and that's precisely why I don't live there anymore." *Although I'm going to have to go back to that cesspit soon.*

Finley's mother could be there, in the Imperial Palace.

Is she still alive?

Have they tortured her? Killed her?

How in the Goddess's name am I going to break it to her?

The first round of wrestling is about to start. The fighters are in the ring, bare-chested and gleaming, their hands covered in talcum powder. Kaithar is in the middle, holding them apart with his immovable hands, reciting the rules that both fighters know by heart.

"Begin." His deep voice reverberates across the great hall. The two fighters encircle one another warily, searching for an opening.

Her mother.

The cold anger in me is now directed solely at my father.

Aralya.

The only one that knows about Finley's abilities.

If I found her, would this exquisite creature sitting beside me start to trust me just a little bit more?

I know I'm a monster, but still...

I'm not a bad guy.

Most of the time.

FINLEY

The night passes in a blur. I watch as impossibly skilled fighters clash with terrifying ferocity. Corvan sits beside me on his throne-like chair, and he's being mightily restrained. He hasn't humiliated my father any further, even though it would have been easy for him. He hasn't raked my younger brother over the coals for his earlier rudeness.

He makes genuine conversation with the boys, showing interest in their training, their hobbies, their views on Rahavan politics. To my surprise, he has an easy way about him when it suits him, quickly putting them at ease.

It's only my father that he acts cold toward. The Baron of Ruen is completely iced out by the Archduke of Tyron. It's a rebuke; a subtle public humiliation.

My father says nothing, watching the wrestlers with a sour expression.

It's astonishing. Father, who used to cause me such trepidation, is completely sidelined.

Corvan reaches across and picks up a crystal decanter filled with crimson wine the same color as his eyes. "May I serve you a drink, Finley?"

His voice is deep and decadent; an overture heard only by me as the others become lost in their own conversations.

Suddenly, it's as if we're in our own little bubble.

"As long as you haven't laced it with anything that would cause me to do strange things," I say wryly, giving him a wary

look.

“Trust me if I swear that I haven’t?”

“For now.”

He raises an eyebrow, somehow managing to look both wicked and earnest at the same time. “As much as I would love for you to benefit from my blood’s healing properties, I wouldn’t dare give it to you again until I understand why you were able to do that. We can’t have you melting the table in front of your family now, can we? They’ve got enough on their plates already.” He chuckles softly. “They’re still coming to grips with *me*.”

“Very well. Pour me a glass. If I end up putting a hole in the table, it’s all on you.”

“You won’t. This is Ciel’s exceptional Tusganes merlot *without* any magical intervention.”

“Your blood isn’t a curse if it can heal.”

“I’ve heard that before. But there’s always a price to these things, Finley.”

“It’s the thirst, isn’t it?” I say gently, my voice little more than a whisper. I know he can hear me amidst all the commotion.

He pours the rich red wine into my crystal glass and hands it to me. Our fingers meet ever so briefly.

Corvan leans close. His arm brushes against mine. I’m surrounded by his scent. He feels dangerously powerful and intimately familiar. His presence really *is* maddening. How is it possible that in such a short period of time, he’s able to have this effect on me?

“It’s the thirst,” he admits, whispering in my ear, his breath feathering my cheek. He’s *too* close, and people are noticing. “Amongst other things. It’s the fact that if I don’t control myself, I could kill someone. It’s the fact that I know every single thing that’s happening in this room right now. Whispered conversations across the other side of the hall. Their breaths. Their heartbeats. I can smell their blood. But I

choose to shut them out in favor of *you*. Or *you* shut them out for me, because your presence is overwhelming. It's the swift healing; the thought that I might not ever age, the impossible power, the speed at which I move, and then sometimes I forget that I've done so—shocking people unintentionally. It's the fact that up until I met you, I couldn't feel the warm sun on my face. It's the realization that I'm no longer human, and I can't ever go back to that, and sometimes I fear what I'll be like when a lot of time has passed, living in *this* body."

In the golden glow; in the gentle warmth, I take a sip of the rich, spicy wine. It dances on my tongue and sends a molten caress down my throat.

No strange effects this time.

Thank the *Goddess*.

"You're wondering what it's like to be one of them again, don't you?"

He moves closer, until his lips are almost brushing my ear. "I didn't ask for this. I don't understand it. There are times when I wish I could sit amongst my men and banter, but those days are long gone. I'm just fortunate that they trust me enough to remain under my command. Otherwise, I would have disappeared a long time ago."

"Were you ever tempted?"

"Once or twice. But if I did that, Tyron would be defenseless, and all these people would know hard and destitute lives. The Imperial Palace won't care for them, even though it was father who sent them off to war. I *must* be the feared archduke in the north, Finley, because people would suffer if I cut ties with this place... with everything that I was in my old life. And I'd become a monster. That's why I stay. Even if it wasn't my intention, I thank the Goddess I've found you."

"But I'm human, too. Will that not cause problems, eventually?"

"Are you, really?"

Heat rises in my cheeks. “Of *course* I bloody am. And I don’t think you’re as terrible as you think you are, either.”

“You aren’t afraid of me?”

“In the beginning, I was, but now... I don’t think I should be.”

Thud!

In the background, another fighter hits the mats, down for the count. A roar goes up from the crowd.

On the table in front of us, alongside the crystal decanter, is an elegant silver pitcher. Corvan takes it and pours a drink of his own.

The liquid’s the same color as my wine, but it’s thicker; more viscous.

“Corvan, what is this?”

He puts his nose to the rim of his glass and takes a deep breath. “This is blood from a young maiden in Sanzar.”

“A *maiden*? You didn’t...” A sudden rush of anger burns through me; hot and bright.

“She’s fine. It’s a good deal on her end. Earned enough to buy her family a new house.”

“*Why*?” My anger turns into something else.

My thoughts become irrational. It should only be *me*.

“Because I needed to know...” He closes his eyes and swirls the glass, raising it to his lips. I watch in fascination as he takes a sip. The blood stains his pale lips. “Whether anything else compares to the taste of *you*.”

“*And*?” I want to take that damn glass from him and tip its contents all over the floor.

“It doesn’t. Not even close. But it will at least keep my thirst at bay so that you have time to recover from me.”

A puff of exasperated relief escapes my lips. Why do I feel so relieved?

Why does he look somewhat... *pleased*? As if my reaction is what he wanted?

Why do I want him to put his lips on my neck again; to feel the sharpness of his fangs as they sink into my skin?

My head swirls. The background noise becomes a roar in my ears. Corvan fills every other part of my consciousness.

The last contender falls. Kaithar's there, dancing across the floor, graceful and dangerous, holding up the arm of a man and pronouncing him the winner.

On a long table in the center of the hall, the last of the banquet is laid out. There's suckling pig and roast turkey and pheasant and winter vegetables with pickled berry sauce and rich gravy. The tantalizing smell of freshly baked bread makes my stomach rumble.

Soldiers and servants exchange money, some winning, some losing. Drinks are poured. Congratulations given. Corvan acknowledges the winner with a smile and a lazy salute.

The man, bloodied and bruised, his dark hair plastered with sweat, grins and bows.

As I look around the room, seeing smiling faces and warmth; men acting like brothers, and my own brothers alive and well after a nightmare, it occurs to me that Corvan needn't have arranged all of this.

None of this is for him.

It's for everyone else. The soldiers and the servants and my brothers.

And *me*.

He's showing me how he rules his world.

FINLEY

Corvan leans across, placing his hand over mine. “The night is growing long,” he says softly, “but my men will probably be at it until the birds start chirping. Would you like to escape with me?”

I hesitate.

Nobody is paying us much attention right now.

Aderick has gone to bed. Kastel and Garan have migrated to another table to play cards with a bunch of soldiers. My father has retired to his quarters. Vinciel slipped away as soon as he had a chance, muttering something about how social gatherings were the devil and stating that he much preferred to be up in his tower with a book. Kaithar and the other high-ranking soldiers—Kyron, Galaen, Ingvar, and Renfrei, if I remember correctly—are huddled together, deep in some terribly serious conversation.

“Let me rephrase that. What would you like to do now, Finley? Just tell me, and I will oblige.”

A hundred possibilities flit through my mind, some carnal.

I don’t dare. I’m not quite ready for *that*.

But there’s one thing I’ve been trying to do for days, and I keep getting thwarted. “I want to take a walk outside. To the stables.”

He chuckles softly. “Not what I would have predicted, but I’ll humor you. My lady.” He gets up from his chair and holds out his hand.

I slip my fingers into his as I rise. A hundred eyes flick toward us, but Corvan pays them no heed.

“Leaving already, Your Highness?” Kaithar is grinning.

“It’s been a pleasure as always, gentlemen.” Corvan tips his head in acknowledgement. He’s effortlessly regal. “Enjoy your night, lads.”

Kaithar rises to his feet. The others follow suit, bowing deeply. “Lady Solisar.”

“Thank you,” I say quietly. I’ll never get used to people bowing for me. “I’ve enjoyed your company this evening. I appreciate all your efforts to make me feel welcome.”

Corvan smiles enigmatically and leads me through the throng. People part like reeds bowing before the wind.

For one surreal, unnerving moment, silence falls across the room.

Corvan moves silently, as if gliding across the floor. The lamplight casts a golden glow upon his wintry visage. As he leads me away, his hand in mine is gentle and insistent, but never forceful.

It’s as if he’s standing on top of a mountain, all alone. I understand it now... a little. There’s a great chasm between him and his men, and he can never go back.

I hold his hand tightly and walk just a little bit closer.

It feels like an eternity until we reach the large doors at the end of the great hall. Corvan tips his head in acknowledgement as he draws me toward the exit. He doesn’t say a word as we depart; quietly, elegantly, hundreds of eyes upon us.

The door closes behind us with a soft *click*, drowning out the noise.

I look at him in surprise. “You didn’t address them. Isn’t that what the lord of the castle is supposed to do?”

“Sometimes, the less that’s said, the better. I don’t have to justify my existence or try to explain the unexplainable. That in itself can arouse unnecessary suspicion. Better to just *be*,

and let my actions do the talking. Sometimes, I just let Kaithar smooth things out. The bastard has a way with words when he chooses.”

“He’s a good friend to you,” I say softly, marvelling at the bond between the two men. It’s a strange thing for me to witness; men that remain steadfast in their brotherhood despite their differences. Maybe Aderick, Kastel, and Garan could be like that with time, but they’re still learning how to be men; they haven’t been hardened in the fires of war.

“You will find none more loyal than Kaith. I’d trust him with my life, *and* yours. And I would lay down my own life for him. But enough with the heartfelt confessions. I promised you a visit to the stables, so if you please, my lady.” Corvan holds out his arm.

We walk down long, warmly lit corridors. Past empty rooms and darkened windows. Tyron castle is *vast*. We walk in silence. It isn’t an awkward or hostile silence. We’re simply together, lost in our own private thoughts, and his big, reassuring presence is rather... *companionable*.

How can this be?

As we leave the main castle, Corvan materializes a black fur coat from a closet somewhere. It’s much too big for me—his, presumably—but he drapes it around my shoulders all the same, providing me with a sumptuous cocoon as we step out into the cold night.

It’s started to snow.

He’s only wearing his formal suit.

“Aren’t you cold?”

“I’m not as bothered by the cold as I used to be.” Corvan leads me across the cobblestones, through the lightly falling snow. The sane part of me wonders if it’s a good idea to be following a blood-drinking *vampire* into a dark courtyard in the middle of the night, but I figure that if he wanted to do anything untoward to me, he would have done it already.

He *has* done it already.

Besides, this was my idea.

We walk, passing buildings upon buildings until a familiar scent fills my nostrils. It's the smell of hay and manure and feed and *horse*.

Excitement swirls through me. I've always found comfort in the presence of horses. When Ruen castle felt cold and joyless, I'd steal away to the stables and spend time amongst the horses.

The stables of Tyron castle are at least five times bigger than the ones in Ruen. The building is more sturdy too, constructed from stone rather than wood. A *proper* stable. Corvan pushes open a heavy wooden door and leads me inside.

Suddenly, we're surrounded by war-horses; big, intimidating steeds that could easily crush a man to death. Their coats range in hue from dappled to glossy black. They nicker and snort nervously as Corvan passes.

"Relax, I'm not going to bother you," he mutters softly. "Normally, they'd be a lot more agitated by my presence. I don't know why they're calmer tonight. Maybe because you're here. You know, I used to be a pretty good rider, but there's no way one of these cranky old warhorses would accept me now. I think you can hazard a guess as to why. Is there anything in particular you wanted to see here, Finley?"

"One horse. The one I was riding when I..." Heat rises into my cheeks. "When I first met *you*."

"Ah. Kinnivar did mention something about finding a stray horse in the woods. A miracle it survived, really. Do you see him, Finley?"

"He's a brown quarter-horse. A bit underfed." I peer into the dimly lit stables. In a stall at the very end, a familiar looking head emerges over the gate. "Ah, there he is." I momentarily forget Corvan and rush toward the horse. He stretches his neck, nickering softly in greeting. "Good boy. I'm so glad you're alive." I reach out and give him a good neck rub.

Corvan remains a good distance away. “I don’t want to spook him, Horses are sensitive creatures. They’re good judges of character. He’s yours, if you would like him. The stablemasters will fatten him up and make sure he’s properly groomed. When the snows thaw, you can take him riding in the woods.”

“I... I’d like that. And I’d like to come down sometimes and groom him myself.”

Corvan smiles. It’s a soft, gentle smile, devoid of any ulterior motives. He looks genuinely pleased. “He’ll need a name.”

“Hmm...” I inhale the horse’s familiar, comforting scent. “I’ll call him *Solstice*, because that’s close to when I found him. And because after all that, he deserves to enjoy a bit of quiet and stillness, don’t you think?”

“A fine name. Take your time. He’s obviously happy to see you.”

“Poor boy,” I murmur. “He’s probably traumatized.” I can feel the horse’s nervous energy as I run my palm over his neck. I close my eyes and try to imagine myself drawing it away from him, dissipating it into my own body, because I can absorb it better.

I’d like to think my goodwill helps him, somehow.

Corvan waits patiently in the background, allowing me time to commune with my horse.

“Here, Finley.” Then he plucks an apple out of somewhere and tosses it to me. I snatch it out of thin air and give it to Solstice.

He happily gobbles it up, noisily smacking his lips. I rub his neck. “See you later, buddy. You’re safe now, okay?”

Solstice lets out a deep snort of satisfaction.

“You’re a natural with horses,” Corvan murmurs as I return to his side. “I’ve never seen them so calm in my presence.”

“I’ve enjoyed being around horses for as long as I can remember. Ruen Castle can be a... *cold* place. But horses are never cold.”

“You may visit here whenever you wish. I’ll notify the stablemasters. You may ask them for anything. There’s a riding arena near the eastern wall. Use it as you please. And the castle grounds are yours to explore.” His indulgent look sends heat right into the tips of my ears.

I’m not used to being spoiled.

“Was that all you wanted to do? It’s late, but I wanted to show you something before I escort you back to your chambers.”

My heartbeat accelerates. “What is it?”

“Come with me.” He holds out his hand.

His undivided attention burns as hot and bright as the sun.

“Maybe I should just pick you up,” he murmurs, weaving his fingers through mine. “I’ve been so tempted to. You have no idea, Finley. You smell so good, and you look *incredible*.”

I frown as I glance down at the sumptuous fur coat, hiding my giddy reaction to his compliment.

Whoosh. I find myself weightless, wrapped up in warmth and held by his powerful arms. “Why not? I can easily carry you.”

I glower, ignoring the fact that it feels so *good* to be held like this. “That doesn’t mean you *should*.”

“I’ll put you down if you want.”

I act surly, even though I’m enjoying the feeling of being held against his broad, solid chest. “It’s fine.”

He sweeps through the castle grounds; across empty squares, through hibernating gardens, down deserted open-air passageways, up and down flights of steps, along stone paths... until we reach a great old stone arch that frames a deserted garden.

Corvan sets me down with great care. “This is *Edinvar*’s central garden. It’s a little neglected at the moment, but now that you’re here, I have a reason to have it tended to in the springtime.”

We step through the arch and into a wonderland.

The moon is almost full tonight, huge and bright in the winter sky, allowing me to see perfectly well. In the center of the garden is a frozen pond. Moonlight paints it white; so bright it almost glows. It’s surrounded by big, ancient pines, their boughs laden with snow. The trees are almost big and thick enough to erase the castle’s stark stone walls.

“This pond is ancient. It was here long before *Edinvar* was built. It’s fed by a deep underground spring—the same one that supplies the castle’s water. They built the castle around it. When it’s warm enough, it’s a nice place to take a dip.” Corvan beckons to me. He leads me across the snow-covered ground, through a gentle swirl of snowflakes, out onto the frozen surface of the pond.

A strange feeling comes over me. It’s as if the shackles of my past life have fallen away, and I hold something unfathomable—a kernel of possibility—in the palm of my hand.

“It’s beautiful, Corvan. There’s something different about this place. It feels peaceful here.”

“I had a feeling you’d recognize what I felt the first time I saw it. I consider this place to be the true heart of Tyron. At the bottom of the pond, there’s an ancient statue of the Goddess Hecoa—it’s probably a thousand or more years old. A lost relic from the Khaturian Tribes.”

“The barbarians used to occupy this land?”

“I wouldn’t call them *barbarians*. That implies they’re uncivilized, which couldn’t be further from the truth. For a very long time, all of this was their land, until my great-grandfather sent his armies to colonize the North, and they redrew Rahava’s borders and created the duchy of Tyron. My great-grandfather, Lyzar, understood that this land was

defensible, because he led the campaign himself. But he knew that taking his armies any higher into the mountains would be treacherous. The Khaturians are magic-wielders and fierce fighters, and the slopes are near-unassailable. So he wisely drew the border at the edge of the Khatu, and left it at that. It was my father who got greedy. He wanted the riches that lie beyond the mountain ranges, so he sent a full legion of men up into the Khatu to subdue the tribes and take the lands above the clouds.”

Realization dawns on me. “The barbarians didn’t attack Rahava unprovoked. Emperor Valdun started the Northern War.”

“Contrary to the official reports, the entire thing was of my father’s making.”

“And you...”

“When it became clear that his forces were going to lose, he sent me here to clean up the entire bloody mess. We were victorious in the end, but we paid a heavy price. I do not intend to fight a war in these lands ever again.”

“Is that why you claimed Tyron? To keep this region under your control and out of reach of the Imperial Palace?”

Corvan reaches out, gently caressing the side of my face. Despite the biting cold, his fingers are warm. “Finley, I intend to expand Tyron and make it stronger; more prosperous... to the point where we’re untouchable. It’s the only way to stop the Imperial Palace from destroying what they don’t understand. The Khaturians won’t accept anyone as ruler but me.”

“Ruler? But I don’t understand. I thought the Khaturians were the enemy.”

“They were, but we have a treaty now. They worship strength, and they’ve recognized me as their *Kral*.”

His crimson eyes are filled with secrets and terrors. I berate myself for naively believing the rumors of the mad archduke. What I’ve discovered in Tyron is so very different. “What is a *Kral*, Corvan?”

He shrugs, his cold expression giving way to bemusement. “They think I’m some sort of god.”

“I don’t entirely blame them. *Look* at you.”

It’s true. In the silvery glow of the moon, he appears more inhumane than ever, like an exquisitely sculpted statue come to life.

His brows draw together in frustration. “I didn’t choose this.” His nostrils flare. His lower jaw trembles ever so slightly. “Finley, I never expected someone like you, but now that you’re here, I’ll do everything in my power to protect you. You will be my duchess. An archduchess of the empire is second in rank only to the Emperor himself.” His lips twist wryly. “Sounds like a terrible proposition, I know, but I’ll make sure you have all the preparation you need to equip you for what lies ahead.”

I’m just a lowly baron’s daughter, I want to say, but instead I give him a sharp nod of understanding. “I don’t want to be kept in the dark; placated with lavish gifts and jewels and vapid entertainment, given no other purpose than to be pampered and prepared for the task of bearing your heirs.”

And giving you pleasure.

My insides clench as I wonder what it would be like to have him in my bed; his naked body pressing against mine.

I always believed that when I married, sex would be a joyless task; a forced rutting for the sole purpose of getting me pregnant.

I thought my husband would be a humorless old bastard like my father.

Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined I’d end up with *this* man.

And he’s opened his entire world to me in such a short time.

He leans in. “I wouldn’t dare waste you on such an existence, Finley.”

He tucks his finger underneath my chin and tilts my head upwards until we lock eyes.

I lose myself in midnight and crimson.

Unbidden, my lips part in invitation. My thoughts turn dark and lustful. My body is on fire—yearning for his touch.

He kisses me. Softly; tenderly, taking his time, with such terrible sweetness.

I annihilate my own doubts and kiss him back. His lips yield. He tastes bittersweet and utterly addictive.

His fingers dance along the back of my neck, tracing up my nape, threading into the upswept strands of my hair.

He holds me there for a moment, his kisses growing deep and insistent.

And then he lets go.

I look up at him, stunned.

“You have no idea how utterly alluring you are, Finley. I...” He shakes his head.

For once, the charming, eloquent vampire prince is lost for words.

He takes my hand. “We’d better get out of here.” He quickly leads me across the frozen surface of the pond. At least he isn’t sweeping me up into his arms again. I don’t mind it all that much, but he can’t be carrying me everywhere.

I’m not a child.

As we reach solid ground, we turn and look back at the icy lake.

Crack.

In the centre, a dark fissure appears, spreading apart to reveal the inky waters below.

I raise an eyebrow. “Did your kiss do that, Corvan?”

He chuckles. “If there’s ever a metaphor for what you’ve done to me, that’s it. Maybe it’s a coincidence... maybe

something else. Let's go back to your chambers. You need to rest, because tomorrow we're going on a journey."

"A journey?" I'm still reeling from his kiss.

"Tomorrow we'll go up into the mountains, to Niize, to pay the Khaturian elders a visit."

"Why?"

"Because Khaturian lore is ancient and deep, and they might know something about a woman who can bend wood with her bare hands." He smiles in the moonlight; enigmatic, radiant. "Don't worry about a thing, Finley. You'll be perfectly safe as long as you're with me."

CORVAN

In the early hours of the morning, before the sun rises, while Finley and most of Castle Tyron are slumbering in their beds, I summon Baron Lucar Solisar to the throne room.

He's brought in by a small, wiry, sharp-eyed guard called Marcus, who's sworn off alcohol for life and religiously wakes before the crack of dawn.

I lean back in my throne, watching as Marcus leads him into the room.

"Kneel," Marcus commands, his voice hoarse and menacing.

Solisar takes one look at me and wisely drops to his knees. He opens his mouth to speak, looks at me again, then closes it.

He's a different man to the belligerent fool that was banging down my gates. His head is lowered. His posture is slumped.

I wait, allowing the silence to stretch out between us. Kneeling on the cold stone floor must be uncomfortable for him.

I don't care. I'm feeling a little bit savage this morning.

I've just returned from killing three lycans outside the castle walls. They came in the early hours of the morning, vicious and hungry for human flesh. I heard them. Scented them. So I stole outside with my broadsword without anyone noticing.

I needed to release some pent-up tension, anyway.

It isn't the first time I've gone out to hunt lycans in the middle of the night, but the accursed beasts have never dared to venture so close to the castle before.

"You are to return to Ruen today," I say at last. "Aderick Solisar will remain here, in the company of Kastel Solisar and Garan Lorian, until he is deemed fit enough to return home."

The baron stiffens, but says nothing.

"Furthermore, from this day onwards, I am taking over stewardship of the Solisar Estate. This arrangement shall remain until I deem that one of your heirs is qualified enough to inherit your title."

Now the outrage overrides his fear of me. "*What?* You can't do that! You have no right or authority!"

Lucar Solisar attempts to rise, but Marcus warns him with a quick tap of his sword hilt. "His Highness did *not* give you permission to stand."

"Your father won't let you get away with this," Solisar hisses. "It's against the laws of the Empire."

"I can assure you, I know the laws of this empire intimately. And your estate is operating from a position of insolvency. If you want your heirs to inherit it, I would suggest you do not protest my generosity, because I could just as easily claim the entire estate for myself."

"W-what are you talking about? I don't understand."

"I've bought your debts, Lucar. I *own* you."

He looks up. His pale blue eyes are lifeless. He shakes his head, as if trying to break out of a trance. "I... I should never have..."

"You did this, Lucar Solisar. You wanted this. Be careful what you wish for. Finley is mine now, and if you ever so much as harm a single hair on her head again, I'll kill you—or worse. Now, get out of my sight."

Marcus quirks a grey eyebrow, giving me a half-amused, satisfied look. He enjoys this sort of thing. “You heard His Highness. Get up, Baron. You can fuck right off now, all right?”

FINLEY

Since I was reliably informed that the boys are still snoring in their beds and will probably remain that way until at least midday, I take breakfast in my chambers at a small, elegant table by the window. There's scrambled eggs and freshly baked bread and figs and smoked trout and strong black coffee.

I wolf it all down. The coffee annihilates the drilling pain and the pounding in my temples. I must've had more wine last night than I thought.

I'm dressed in warm traveling gear—boots, leather trousers, woollen undergarments and tunic, fur-lined jacket. All in tasteful shades of brown and russet, trimmed with creamy white. My hair is tied in a high ponytail.

Gerent advised me to dress like this. Apparently, Corvan and I are going on a *trip*.

He told me so last night.

I take a bite of the perfectly light, crispy, buttered baguette, followed by a mouthful of rich, fluffy, savory egg.

Tyron Castle's chef must be a genius.

Corvan sits down in the chair opposite.

I blink. I didn't even hear him enter. Butterflies swirl in my stomach, but I pretend to keep my composure. "Do you regularly entertain yourself by startling the living daylights out of people?" My words come out muffled through mouthfuls of delicious egg and bread.

He gives me a slight frown, trying to look contrite. “I should have announced myself, but you looked like you were enjoying your food too much. Couldn’t bring myself to spoil the moment.”

“*You...*” I shake my head as I take him in.

The Archduke of Tyron leans back in his chair, allowing a shaft of morning sunlight to catch his elegant features.

He’s dressed as practically as I am, in sturdy trousers tucked into long leather boots and a leather-trimmed jacket with grey fur lining the collar.

But his outfit is all black. His hands are encased in black gloves.

He looks like a villain from a fantasy tale.

In some of the books I read as a child, the villains were beautiful and powerful; flawed and selfish. I don’t know why I always found the bad guys more interesting than the noble heroes.

They always seemed more human; more *real*.

“I ordered your father to return home this morning,” Corvan says lightly. His gaze is fixed upon my lips as I take another bite of bread. “I don’t suppose you would have wanted to see him before he left.”

Crispy crust and warmth and decadent butter explode in my mouth. “Is he already gone?”

“He’s about to pass through the main gate. If you really wanted to say goodbye, I could get him back...”

I wave my hand in the air. “Let him go. I won’t. I want to do the right thing by him, but I feel no affection or loyalty toward him. That man has always been indifferent to me.”

The only reason I can say these things to Corvan is because I saw how he dealt with father last night.

I’ve never seen my father appear so meek in all my life.

He shrugs. “That’s what I thought. I just wanted to make certain. Being the dutiful son-in-law and all that.”

His voice is deep and intoxicating. I can hardly believe that *this* beautiful, formidable creature is to be my husband. I take a sip of my bitter coffee, letting it warm my throat.

I cradle my coffee in both hands, partly hiding my face, because I don't want him to see my expression right now.

The memory of his kiss lingers on my lips. All of a sudden, I'm terribly aroused.

What would it feel like... to...

"When are we to be married?" I ask, taking another sip of coffee, allowing the bitterness to distract me.

"In the springtime. I'll leave it entirely up to you to choose what kind of wedding you would like."

Springtime? But that's so far away. How does he stay so in-control?

So long until...

I look him up and down. As I take in his big, powerful form, I grow more and more aroused.

"Nothing too big," I murmur, unable to focus my thoughts. "Nothing too ostentatious."

I've never organized a wedding before, let alone attended one. I'd have no idea where to start.

"We could have an elopement," Corvan suggests.

My eyebrows rise sky-high as I set my coffee down. "You would agree to that? The whole empire would be banging down the doors to receive an invitation to the imperial prince's wedding."

Corvan smiles, showing the points of his fangs. "I couldn't care less what the rest of the empire wants. Our wedding shall be what *you* want it to be."

Oh, Corvan.

Is it possible that beneath his cold, beautiful exterior, this man is truly sweet?

Sitting across from me with the morning light on his inhuman face, looking so relaxed and peaceful, he's more mesmerizing than I've ever seen him.

More alluring.

My body reacts more strongly than ever before.

I truly want this man... to feel his touch upon my bare skin... to taste his...

My cheeks are on fire. Between my thighs, there's a slow, aching throb.

I take a long, slow sip of my coffee, trying to clear my thoughts. But all I can think about is *that*. Last night, I wasn't quite ready to entertain such things.

But now, in the cold clear light of the day...

Do I dare?

To be so bold...

What if he bites me again?

I fear I'm doing a really bad job of hiding my thoughts. Perhaps I'm very transparent to him right now.

"Corvan," I say slowly, rolling his name off my tongue.

He leans forward; attentive, intense, his gaze sharp and focused entirely on *me*, as if he knows exactly what I'm thinking. "Yes, Finley?"

"I understand that we're to travel to Niize today, but before we leave..."

"Yes, Finley?" On the surface, he appears as calm as a pond on a still summer's day, perfectly patient and restrained, as if he's just waiting for me to say it.

My heart hammers like a war-drum. Could he possibly feel the same way?

Does he *know*?

"I want..." I set down my coffee cup with a deliberate *clink*. "Corvan, you don't have to act so gentlemanly with me."

“Gentlemanly?” A low, dangerous chuckle escapes him. “I’m just training myself to not devour you every single time I catch your scent.”

“We are to be husband and wife. Is it merely my blood you desire?”

“Would you feel so emboldened to ask me such a thing if you thought that was the case?”

“No.” Excitement surges through me. Last night, Corvan made his intentions perfectly clear.

His lips upon mine; that *kiss*...

It wasn’t an accident.

I’m here now. My father’s gone. I’m all alone, and my fate is sealed. Vampire or not, Corvan is destined to be my husband. Why should I sit back and act passive when this thoroughly charming man is so obviously trying to seduce me?

“Then don’t ask me again. I would have all of you, Finley, but I won’t use force to take what I want. I’ve already done that once; twice... I won’t do it a third time.”

“Force won’t be necessary,” I whisper, hardly recognizing myself, “if I’m the one that’s asking.”

Crimson eyes widen. His eyebrows rise. His sensual mouth is caught somewhere between surprise and delight.

I can see his fangs again.

“I won’t deny you.” His voice grows hoarse. “In this, you will forever hold the advantage.”

“Well, I intend to make full use of it. Our departure isn’t urgent, is it?”

“It won’t take us long to reach Niize. Whether we leave now or later, it doesn’t really matter.”

“We’ll leave later, then.”

Corvan’s look of surprise morphs into a look of pure delight. His lips curve into a wicked smile. “Finley, I was prepared to be patient, you know. To take things slowly as you

ease into your new life here. I would never have suspected you'd have such a side to you."

I return his smile with a slightly devious one of my own. "Well, you hardly know me. It's been less than a week since you bit me."

He feigns contrition. "You're never going to let that go, are you?"

"It *was* rather shocking."

"I was a desperate man. The very moment I set eyes upon you, this *unbelievable* thirst came over me. I can't explain it. It was like nothing I've ever known before." He draws a deep, ragged breath. "Please. Don't drag this torture out. I don't plan on losing control like that *ever* again."

"And what if I tell you that I wouldn't consider it a total disaster if it were to happen again? Though I would also be pleased if you developed restraint..."

"Do you really understand what you're asking?"

"I think I do. I know what you are now. You don't terrify me."

"I'm *very* pleased to hear that. But... do you trust me yet?"

Well, you could have done whatever you wished with me, and you didn't.

He could have locked me away and drained me to death.

He could have killed my father and let Aderick die.

He could have abandoned Tyron and its people.

But he didn't.

He isn't that kind of man.

"I trust you enough to make an advance on you." I feel strangely confident. I don't know why. Maybe this is all his doing.

"Well, that's a start. A welcome one. Because you should." Corvan rises and moves until he's standing behind my chair. His hands come to rest on my shoulders. His touch sends a

pleasant thrill through me. He leans in. “So. You’re making an *advance* on me, hmm?”

I look up into his startling eyes; his impossible-to-resist face. “A woman has needs, too.”

“I’ve never known a woman who’s as straight and to the point as you, Finley.”

I tip my head upwards. My smile is sharp-edged. “I’m probably not like the women you know from the Court. Anyhow, I should *hope* you haven’t... *known* anyone else like me, I mean.”

“It’s as I said last night. Nothing else compares.” He gently caresses my neck with his gloved hand, making me yearn for the feeling of his bare fingers on my skin. “You only have to say the word.”

“The word?”

“What do you *want*, Finley?”

“Isn’t it obvious, Corvan?”

“Maybe I just want to hear you say it.” His voice is a deep, irresistible rumble.

I melt under his touch. *Fine*. I can’t deny that I’m attracted to his dangerousness; his *otherness*, which is wrapped up in gentleness and decency, surprising me. *All right, fine. I want this man.* “I want you to fuck me, Corvan.”

He leans in. His lips meet mine in a slow, searing kiss. “That can certainly be arranged.”

Why should I hold back when I have nothing to lose? When he’s so obviously willing?

I bring my hands up to his. He slips his fingers into mine and pulls me to my feet, turning me around, leading me away from my almost-finished breakfast.

We pass the window, where he draws the curtain half-shut. “I’ve missed the sunshine, but not *that* much.” His eyes glow in the shadows.

He leads me across to the bed, where he places his hand on the small of my back and gently lays me down.

I stare up at him. “You’re obviously not worried about doing this out of wedlock.”

He chuckles; a low, decadent sound that invades every fiber of my being. “Do I look like I give a shit about convention?”

“Surprisingly, no.”

“Surprisingly?” He arches one eyebrow dangerously.

“You’re an imperial prince, aren’t you? Your people *own* the conventions.”

“All the more reason why I don’t care.”

“What a privileged bastard.”

He smiles; fang-tipped, mischievous. “And I intend to use it, my sweet Finley.”

Deft hands strip my jacket from my arms. He pulls my tunic over my head and unfastens the buttons of my trousers, pulling them down to reveal my silken panties. My boots fly off, followed by my pants.

He moves too fast.

He’s too much. I can’t resist.

All of a sudden, I’m naked before him. The room is toasty warm thanks to the glowing embers in the hearth. My body is on fire.

Corvan looks me up and down. He moves until he’s poised above me like a big predator, and there’s hunger in his gaze.

Wild energy ripples through my body, heightening my arousal. Corvan gently strokes the side of my face with his gloved fingers. “You’re stunning,” he murmurs. “I’m a very fortunate man.”

I count my blessings as he peels off his gloves and discards them. He cups my face with his warm hands and kisses me.

His taste reminds me of morning frost and smoky spice.

I gaze at him, taking in his powerful form, wondering what he'd be like underneath his clothing.

As if reading my mind, he rises up on his knees and discards his jacket. His black shirt follows.

I stifle a gasp.

All of a sudden, he's bare-chested, looming over me like a pale god, only he can't possibly be a god, because his body is covered in scars.

Do gods wear scars?

Faded to pale pinkish-brown, they're a shade darker than his alabaster skin. Some are long and vicious and jagged, others short and precise, as if he's been stabbed. One crosses his taut abdomen just above his navel.

Corvan isn't one of those nobles who holds an empty military rank just for show. This man has known real combat. His body tells of a life sworn to the blade.

And in spite of the marks of violence, his body is chiseled perfection; abdominal muscles etched into a pack of eight, chest and arms broad and powerful. Every inch of him is cut and honed. If not for his scars, he could be a living sculpture.

A soft whimper escapes me.

He lowers himself, pressing his palms into the bed on either side of my head. "Caught you staring."

"Your scars..." I whisper.

"Happened before I died." His lips quirk wryly. "I'm a soldier."

A tendril of horror tugs at my heart. "Some of those wounds look like they must've been *awful*, Corvan."

"I can't expect unquestioning loyalty from my men if I don't fight the same battles they do. A commander who's afraid of going to the frontlines is weak. You don't have to look so worried, Finley. This body can't scar anymore. Besides, I'd like to think you were staring at more than just my scars."

I was. A flush fills my cheeks. He kisses me again; deeply, savagely. I yield, enjoying the feeling of his big, warm body hovering just above mine; his big hands sliding over my shoulders, down my sides, my waist, over my hips, until he finds the edges of my undergarments and deftly slips them off.

He hooks his arm under my right thigh and pushes my leg up.

Then he buries his face between my thighs and delivers bliss with his tongue.

I close my eyes and dig my fingers into the silken sheets, whimpering softly as waves of pleasure build and build.

I never knew *this* could feel so good.

I run my fingers through Corvan's soft white hair, tracing them down his neck; across his powerful shoulders.

All the while, he gives me pleasure beyond my wildest imagination.

And I keep falling.

Deeper and deeper.

He curls his fingers around my wrists and holds me still as he caresses the part of me that's exquisitely tender, gently sucking on that tiny pearl of flesh.

I didn't know that... one could *do* that...

Could make me feel like *this*.

All coherent thought is swept away.

There's only *him*, and the undeniable ecstasy of his touch.

The waves build until they're so big that everything crashes together, and I'm drowning in bliss, and then something inside me breaks.

I'm undone.

Completely and utterly unravelled.

And my world will never be the same again.

CORVAN

She's such a sweet little thing. I savor her climax as my own arousal strains to near-breaking point.

I've tried to hold back from fucking her; tasting her first, and giving her as much enjoyment as she can take, because it's so damn rewarding to hear her whimper and beg, to hear the surprise and sheer pleasure in her voice.

This is new to her.

She hasn't been fucked properly before, has she?

Her scent floods my awareness. The sound of her breathing is delicate and raw and rhythmic; it invades my consciousness and makes me want to possess every last fiber of her being.

After three years of existing in a wasteland, this is a torrential downpour.

She writhes and shudders, straining exquisitely against my grip. Her slender wrists are encased in my grip.

Her scent drives me to madness.

Thank the Goddess I drank from her only days ago, because if I hadn't, I would surely have lost it by now.

I want to bite her as I fuck her.

Don't you dare.

I release her as the climax spreads through her body, sending gentle shockwaves through her. She tips her head back

and howls softly, and it's the most elegant, arousing thing I've ever seen.

The sight of her naked. The faint sheen of sweat on her luminous skin.

Her *scent*.

I rise up and cup her chin with my thumb and forefinger, holding her there as I kiss her gently on her lips.

My erection is painful. I can't stand it anymore. With my other hand, I hastily unbuckle my belt and lose the pants.

She closes her eyes and somehow finds my cock with her fingers, curling them around me, teasing my shaft as I wrap my arms around her and kiss her neck.

I inhale her; human-scent and blood-scent. She's layered and complex and decadent.

How am I going to ever recover from this?

Control yourself.

I can fuck her, but not taste her. Not *yet*.

It's very important that I don't taste her yet. She has to be able to trust me.

She wraps her legs around me and pulls me forward.

Blessed Goddess. What sublime torture is this?

I slip inside her. She's molten velvet and sweetness. I hold her close and fuck her; gently at first, then harder. She grips me tighter with her powerful legs, and I run my hands up her back; up her neck, threading my fingers through her bound hair.

I loosen her hair, allowing it to cascade around her face, letting its sweet floral fragrance envelope me.

I inhale her essence, putting my lips on her neck, stopping just short of sinking my fangs into her soft, sweet skin.

The thirst hits me like a cannonball, colliding with desire, and even the brutal act of self-restraint stokes my arousal.

I taste her skin—sweet, musky, intoxicating. Her pulse flutters beneath my lips. I’m so excruciatingly *close*.

I savor her entire being as I go deeper, harder, melting into her. She moves with me, digging her sweet little nails into my back.

That little bit of pain is the thing that tips me over the edge.

I’ve never known this feeling before; where the pleasure is so intense it’s almost excruciating. My senses are filled to the brim. It’s too much.

I gasp as I find release.

“Oh, *Finley*,” I groan, holding her tightly; savoring every last drop of her being.

She wraps her arms around my neck and moans softly.

I come inside her.

And then, when I’m all but undone, I drown in the devastating temptation of her blood-scent.

I put my lips to her neck, feeling the rapid thud of her vital artery. I bare my fangs just a little, pressing the tips against her skin ever so slightly, but I never draw blood.

“Please, *Finley*,” I whisper, enjoying the feeling of standing on the precipice between fine control and savage indulgence. “Can I *just* have a little taste of you?”

I’m still inside her; spent and buried in her warmth. I look down into her depthless eyes.

They narrow ever so slightly. Her lips press together in a taut line. She denies me with a short, sharp shake of her head. “*No*,” she mouths.

“Why?” My voice comes out strained. Her refusal flutters before me; fragile and ephemeral, like a newly-emerged butterfly with a fleeting lifespan.

She knows I could crush it in an instant.

But I won’t.

“You said you would learn to control it.”

“Are you testing me, Finley?” I kiss her neck tenderly; reverently, smiling as I engrave my kisses into her warm, soft skin.

“Perhaps.”

“Or are you *training* me?” Feeling indulgent, I tease her a little. One of my hands curves around her pert breast. I gently roll her taut nipple between my thumb and forefinger.

She gasps. “I wouldn’t dare presume to... I just want to know if you’re truly a man of your word. If I recall correctly, you said something about learning to control yourself... or else you would keep away.”

“I keep my word when it suits me, but I’m also known to change my mind from time to time. It doesn’t help that you’ve gone and made my task a thousand times harder.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you’re the one that invited me into your bed, aren’t you?”

“What does that have to do with...”

I kiss the hollow of her neck and gently withdraw. “My sweet Finley, when it comes to you, it’s all linked.”

“What’s linked?”

“*Everything.* Arousal. Sex. Feeding. Blood. The Universe.” I roll onto my side and put one hand behind my head, feeling both relaxed and thirsty.

For now, it’ll have to do.

She frowns. She’s flushed and radiant with the afterglow of sex. She looks utterly gorgeous. “Maybe I shouldn’t be so strict on you, then.”

“I promised you I would learn self-control, and so I won’t drink from you until I become absolutely desperate.” Last time, I lasted three days. Perhaps this time, I can extend it to four. “And then, if I absolutely have to, I’ll ask nicely, I promise.”

“And you want to take me up into the mountains when you’re like this?” She lets out a tiny puff of exasperation. “Maybe you can try this instead. Take from me, but only a little. Enough to quell your temptation. Nothing more, nothing less. *Control* yourself.”

It isn’t three days yet, but she makes perfect sense. If I can have just a drop of her before I become ravenous, I’ll be able to hold out for longer.

It’s like taking a potent and addictive drug. Regular, steady dosing prevents the madness.

I’ll stop at a taste.

Just a taste.

“Very well,” I murmur. “Is there any particular place you prefer me to bite?”

The way in which her eyes widen is oh-so adorable. “How considerate of you, Corvan.” She raises her left hand, offering me her slender upturned wrist. “You may take from here. Just *enough*.”

I take her wrist and kiss her skin just above the part where her artery sits close to the surface; that little hollow where I can feel her rapid pulse fluttering against my lips.

Slowly, tenderly, I break her skin with my fangs. Sweet, heady nectar stains my lips. I kiss her again, lapping up her precious essence.

A tendril of warmth courses through me, infused with light.

It’s magic.

Her magic.

I feel light and euphoric. Powerful. As if I could vanquish all my enemies and conquer the Four Continents.

I almost want to.

She writhes gently as I hold her. I savor her taste, allowing myself to take just *enough*.

The dark part of me wants to take much, much more, but I stop myself there. This time, it's easier to control myself. And it's important.

She *must* learn to trust me.

I can understand her skepticism; the way she keeps a little bit of distance between us, even when she demands my presence in her bed.

It's because of where she's come from; her family, her upbringing.

Because her life started in tragedy.

I lick over the tiny puncture marks in her wrist, careful not to bite my own lip—as I normally would—even though I'm so tempted to give her a little of my healing blood.

I don't want to accidentally invoke her powers again. Not until we know more.

If anyone can give me a sliver of knowledge about her dryad heritage, it would be the Khaturian Elders.

She doesn't know it yet; I've intentionally kept her in the dark, waiting until we can be alone together... until I feel she can process the truth. But sooner or later, she will find out, and when she does, her entire world is going to come crashing down.

How will she take it?

I honestly can't predict.

I release her arm. She lowers her wrist, staring at the spot where I bit her. There's a faint blush in her cheeks.

She meets my gaze.

Really, she's utterly gorgeous.

"Was I good?" I ask, unable to stop myself from teasing.

She gives me a baleful look. "It depends on what you mean by *good*."

I reach out and brush a stray strand of hair away from her face. She's radiant. "I was restrained, wasn't I?"

“Yes, and no.” Her expression turns coy as she pulls the sheets over her body and curls up beside me. “But you *were* perfect.”

Ah. Why does her praise strike me right in the center of my chest, like a pitch-tipped burning arrow?

I smile at her. It’s the first time in years that I’ve felt so unburdened. “I enjoyed it *very* much. As for the other thing... perhaps a schedule is in order.”

“The *other* thing?”

“Well, I don’t want to turn into a ravenous bloodthirsty lunatic again. Regular dosing should keep me sane. At least you’ve given me enough to tolerate a few days in the mountains.” Unable to help myself, I lean in and kiss her.

She yields, then kisses me back.

Her warmth spreads through me, thawing my undead heart. “As much as I’d enjoy lying in bed with you all day, we must get going. I want to reach Niize before nightfall.”

“You get dressed first,” she says softly, a slightly devious look entering her eyes. “I’m spent. I’ll just lie here a little longer.”

“Oh?”

“Well, I don’t mind watching you while you get dressed.”

I chuckle. “The audacity.”

“Hasn’t anyone ever told you that you’re very pleasing to the eye, Your Highness?”

There’s that burning arrow sensation again. “Not really.” Well, Kaithar does, but that’s just stupid banter; my commander swings strongly in the other direction.

“Well, I’m sure there are many that have thought it, but considering who you are, I can see why nobody would dare.”

“And yet, you have no reservations about objectifying my naked form.” I’m surprised at how much I’m enjoying this lighthearted back-and-forth.

“Well, I *am* betrothed to you, and now we’re lovers, so I should think this sort of thing is entirely appropriate.”

“As you wish, my lady.” With a resigned sigh, I caress her cheek and roll out of bed.

She props herself up on one elbow and gives me a heated look. I feel her eyes burning into me as I turn and retrieve my clothes. Glancing over my shoulder, I snort softly and quickly get dressed.

I’ve never been so blatantly ogled by a woman before.

“You have a magnificent ass, Corvan.”

I pull up my trousers and fasten them, before slipping my belt through the loops.

I smile, baring my fangs. “A schedule, then.”

She holds up her wrist, where I’ve marked her. “For *this*, yes. As for the other thing...”

I silence her with a look. “*That* will never be scheduled. It will be spontaneous and frequent. Initiated by either party. And *always* freely given, never forced. Do you agree?”

A fleeting look of surprise crosses her face, quickly hidden. “Yes...” She tips her head; a little deferent now. Her lips curve ever so slightly. “*Your Highness.*”

“The only time I would ever want you to call me that is in bed,” I tease as I don my shirt and fasten the buttons.

The fact that I *can* tease her like this... it pleases me immensely. For although I’ve become monstrous, she treats me as if I were still human.

She isn’t afraid of me. She invites me into her bed as if I were a comely lad she’s decided to have a quick fling with.

I put on my jacket, keenly aware of the way she watches me.

“Well, if that is what you please,” she says quietly, giving me a demure little look. I can’t tell whether she’s being serious or not. It drives me a little crazy.

I'm starting to get aroused again. As I bend down and retrieve my boots, I allow my gaze to linger. "We'll continue this discussion later, Finley. I'll wait for you in the antechamber."

FINLEY

We leave Tyron Castle on foot, discreetly exiting through a side gate with not a single soul to bid us farewell.

It isn't the departure I'd expected for a Prince of the Empire, but Corvan is unexpected in so many ways.

It's midday. The sky is clear and brilliantly blue—a rarity in the middle of winter. The bright sunshine reflects off the snow, turning it incandescent. As we step outside the castle walls, I shield my eyes with my gloved hand.

“Here.” Corvan reaches into his pocket and retrieves two pairs of gold-framed glasses with dark lenses. He hands me a pair and dons the other, concealing his crimson eyes. “For the glare. I had these specially made for my light-sensitivity, but they're also useful to ordinary folks.”

I put the glasses on. Suddenly, my world is tinted a darker shade of grey, as if clouds have fallen across the sun. The snow-glare no longer bothers me. “This... *sensitivity* is because of your condition?”

“The sun and I are no longer friends,” he sighs, a resigned look crossing his handsome features. “I used to tan and never burn. Now, the sun makes me blister and peel immediately. Although your blood seems to temper the effects completely—for a certain amount of time, anyway. It doesn't happen with the others. Only you.” A strange note enters his voice; as if he's aware of some terrible secret about me.

My suspicion rises. “And you wouldn’t happen to know *why* that might be the case?”

“Perhaps. We’ll speak of it when we reach Niize.” His tone becomes stern and resolute. I recognize it now. Corvan won’t be swayed on this. Sometimes, it’s easy to forget that he’s the ruler and master of everything within these borders. “Now, do you wish to walk a little before we make the journey proper?”

“Is this it? We’re not going to have an armed escort, or horses, or woodsmen to accompany us? It’s just you and I?” I stare at him in disbelief. He’s armed now, having stopped by his office to retrieve his weapons on the way out. A wicked-looking dagger hangs from a sheath attached to his belt. There’s a broadsword, too; long and wide and quietly threatening. The hilt is wrapped with leather bindings and well worn, as is the leather scabbard.

It’s a tool of war; frequently used.

With his weapons and dark glasses and his shorn hair—which has quickly grown long-ish and tousled—he looks rakish and terribly dangerous.

“Finley.” His voice turns quiet and cold. “There isn’t anything or anyone amongst my people that could afford you better protection than I alone. And an escort would just slow us down.”

Oh. I can hardly believe my own audacity. What possessed me when I invited this man into my bed?

Ever since I left Ruen and entered this wild, wintry land, I’ve felt strangely free.

Sometimes, I forget that I’m completely powerless here. I sigh and look toward the forest. “Let’s walk a little.”

“Delighted, my lady.” Corvan flashes me a charming fangy smile. He bows slightly and offers me his arm.

I slip my arm through his and we walk away from the hulking stone monolith that is Tyron Castle. We traverse a stone road until we reach the edge of a dense wood. Some of the trees are skeletal, having shed their canopy entirely, but

there are evergreens too, treating us to glimpses of green from beneath their snowy blankets.

The woods bring an incredible sense of peace. I feel safer here than I ever have before, even though the memory of night-time monsters lingers in the back of my mind. And once again, I get a sense that the soaring trees are watching us; that they're ancient and wise in ways we could never fathom.

They don't feel hostile. There's a benevolence about them that fills me with peace.

Even when my companion is inexplicable; a magical creature that unashamedly craves the taste of my blood.

In the calm embrace of the woods, I'm filled with a false sense of security.

I turn to him. "Is it true that you were first in line to take the throne?"

A shadow crosses Corvan's face. For a moment, I fear I've strayed into forbidden territory, but then he lets out a soft sigh of resignation. "I was bred for that role, Finley. All my training was for the sole purpose of becoming emperor. My father wanted to shape me in his image; to ensure I carry on his legacy when he dies."

"And what is that, exactly... his legacy?"

"Strength. Military supremacy. Power at all costs." Corvan looks up to the skies above, the dappled light floating across his pale features. "He made sure that I grew up living, breathing, and sleeping all things military, because he seemed to think that I needed a certain toughness in order to hold the throne. Before the Northern War, I simply accepted it as my fate. But that campaign was a foolhardy one. Father overstepped his bounds and nearly led the empire into ruins. Most people have no idea how close we came to disaster. And it backfired spectacularly, didn't it?"

His expression is difficult to read. I can't see his eyes behind the dark glasses, but I can hear the rawness in his voice.

“Because you transformed, or because you changed your mind?”

He stops and looks down at me. “Both. You see, Finley, the mountains contain magic, and father has suppressed magic because he fears it. All his life, he’s desperately tried to understand it so he can control it. It’s the one thing he sees as the most direct threat to his power. But the Khaturian tribes we fought... they wield magic. Their magic practices have been passed down through generations. He underestimated them because the Rahavan Court has this misguided idea that the Khaturians are uncivilized barbarians. Actually, nothing could be further from the truth, as my men and I found out—the hard way. It was a war of attrition, Finley. I will *never* put my people through that again.”

His voice grows distant. His presence feels cold. It’s as if he’s hundreds of leagues away.

The wind whispers through the trees. I’m imagining things; in my mind, I hear a word.

Danger.

I unlink my arm from his and put my fingers to his cheek, gently caressing his warm, smooth skin. He looks like a statue, but he’s warm, not cold.

It’s an instinctive gesture. I can almost feel his pain; icy and sharp, laced with cold fury.

“So, you’ve been cursed with the very magic your father tried to suppress,” I say softly, suddenly enveloped by a great sadness. “And yet, because of his laws against magic, you can’t find the knowledge you seek—about what you are.”

“It *is* a great irony, isn’t it?”

How can he smile bittersweetly like this when he’s lost so much?

And yet... Tyron has become so strong under his watch.

“Have you ever met another... like you?”

“No. There are records of vampires, but not in Rahava. Across the mountains, perhaps. In lands beyond the borders of

our maps. If they ever existed in the empire, father would have found out a way of driving them out or destroying them long ago. He wouldn't allow someone like me to exist alongside him."

"And yet, you live."

"Because I have shown myself to be quite sane on the surface, and he's confident I won't go against him. The very fact that I've sworn to protect my people is evidence enough that I'm no threat to him. Besides... he *still* wants me to become emperor. I'm the son he's invested all his time and energy in. He didn't plan for Ansar to become emperor, which is stupid, really, because firstborn heirs are always at risk of assassination."

"Your younger brother is going to succeed him now?" Skepticism must've entered my voice, because Corvan chuckles. I've heard the rumors. That Ansar Duthriss is a flamboyant character; a womanizer, the type that openly flaunts his power.

"*Half-brother*, I correct. He *was* immature, but I'm sure he's grown since I last saw him. The Knights' Academy would have sorted him out."

"You don't sound entirely convinced."

"When my father is gone, the Rahavan Court will regulate itself. I've no appetite for it. I never did. And if Ansar oversteps or becomes corrupt, I *will* pull him back into line." Corvan goes still, holding up a hand. He cocks his head to one side. "Finley. Wait here. I'll be back very soon. I need to go and check on something."

And just like that, he becomes a blur and disappears, leaving a rush of cold wind in his wake.

One moment, we're talking about the deep secrets of the Rahavan Empire. The next, I'm standing alone in the wintry forest, surrounded by trees and silence, with disquiet brewing in my heart.

Disquiet quickly gives way to a gaping chasm.

What if this is all a ploy, and he just planned to leave me here? What if he isn't coming back?

Deep inside me is a great fear of being abandoned by this man, and I despise myself for it.

If he left me, I'd find a way to survive.

But he isn't going to do that. I force the dark voices in my head to shut the hell up. I'm *not* in my father's castle anymore.

This is *Corvan*. He looks like a beautiful monster, but he's got more honor in his little finger than my father and Dorava combined.

CORVAN

I keep one ear attuned to Finley as I dart between the trees, heading for a familiar place—a small clearing where I’ve placed a lycan trap.

She’s safe for now, but the moment I hear anything untoward, I’ll be back by her side.

A foul stench fills my nose, making me wish for a dose of Ciel’s astringent antiseptic. I know that smell—putrescence and decay. It’s the same smell that comes when a rotting corpse has been sitting under the hot sun for days on end.

It makes me want to retch.

Dread courses through me. Even if there’s a dead body nearby, it shouldn’t smell this bad in the middle of winter.

There’s no lycan-stench here. Just foulness.

I reach the trap; a large iron cage that would accommodate a dozen men. That’s what it might have been used for in another time, but I’ve had these specifically made to entrap the magical wolveren beasts that come down from the mountains.

At first, they were quite effective. I trapped and killed dozens simply by hanging a few dead hares inside the traps.

But the lycan appear to have become wise to my tricks.

Now, it matters not, because there are no lycan inside the cage.

There’s only a man.

At least, what *used* to be a man.

I stop breathing as I near, because the stench has become unbearable. The man—*thing*—stands, but he isn't breathing either. He's grasping the bars of the cage, staring at me with unblinking blue eyes. The whites of his eyes have turned cloudy grey. His golden hair is matted and falling out in places. His skin is dull and grey. In some places, it's bruised and ulcerated, festering.

I recognize his tattered uniform. It's the standard kit of an Imperial Military soldier.

"You're undead," I murmur, horror and revulsion welling up inside me.

This poor, wretched soul. He was a man, once. Now he's just an animated corpse. There's no life or intelligence behind those dull blue eyes.

He probably has a family somewhere. Do they even know he's dead?

I've read about this phenomenon, but I've never seen it in real life.

As the undead catches sight of me, a low moan issues from his throat. He pulls his weapon—a crude broadsword—from its sheath and tries to impale me through the bars.

I dance backward, easily avoiding his blade. The creature roars and pitches the damn sword at me, point-first.

The blade sails through the air at considerable speed. I dodge. It lands in the snow with a dull *thud*.

That was some serious strength. To an ordinary soldier, these things could pose a serious threat. And an army of them...

Would mean serious trouble.

The only reason a corpse would be able to reanimate like this is through necromancy.

Where did it come from? More importantly, who's behind this?

Someone is responsible for this.

I add them to the list of people I need to kill.

“Stay there,” I growl. The undead gnashes its teeth and rattles the bars, but it can’t do anything.

The cage will contain it. That thing was built strong enough to keep lycans imprisoned.

In an attempt to preserve my sanity, I seek out Finley’s sweet, familiar scent. It occurs to me that I’ve forgotten to breathe. The lack of oxygen hasn’t bothered me at all.

Hm. That’s new. I have never before realized that I don’t *need* to breathe anymore. I could probably swim to the very bottom of the Istrivan sea and float amongst the monsters in the depths.

I hear her; pacing around, her breathing fast and shallow, her heart thudding.

As I seek out her scent, my breathing drive kicks back in, settling into an unconscious rhythm.

Strange. But I can’t afford to dwell on it. She’s uneasy. That was *my* doing.

I rip through the trees, scooping her up into my arms as I pass. She gasps, but quickly recovers once she realizes she’s with me.

“Sorry to startle you,” I whisper in her ear as we shoot through the forest. “Something came up. We’ll resume our journey shortly, but I just need to return to the castle and inform Kaithar of something.”

“Wh-what is it?” In my arms, she offers no resistance. She’s breathless and oh-so adorable.

“Nothing for you to worry about. A small security matter.”

We reach the outer grounds of the castle. I accelerate, drawing power into my legs.

“A little warning,” I murmur. “I jump high.”

Then I leap.

I hold her tightly. We sail through the air. She lets out a gasp as we fly over the castle walls, and for a moment, I have a perfect view of my domain.

I catch sight of my soldiers. They're doing sword drills in the training grounds. I see Kaithar amongst them; he isn't hard to spot. I control our landing, dropping onto the balls of my feet.

In a heartbeat, we're just outside the entrance to the training square. I gently set Finley on her feet. "Sorry, Finley. I'm going to have to ask you to wait once more. This won't take long."

She straightens her jacket and gives me a wry look. "You didn't tell me you could fly."

"I'm still getting used to this body," I lament. In truth, being able to move like a god with her in my arms is exhilarating and addictive.

"You're lucky I'm not the squeamish type."

I chuckle, genuinely delighted by her company.

It's been so long since my mood has been this light. Even my discovery of the undead creature can't put a dampener on it.

Finley Solisar makes me feel *alive*.

Did my father really know what effect she would have on me when he sent her to me?

I take her hand into mine and squeeze. She gives me a look that's part exasperation, part astonishment.

I leave her standing by the wall. Forcing myself to move at a normal pace, I walk into the square, where the sound of men grunting and swords clanging assaults my hyper-acute hearing.

Good thing I have the dark glasses on. The sun's glare is just a little too much.

"Keep going," a deep voice bellows. "I want you to practice that maneuver a hundred times over. Until it feels as natural to you as breathing."

Kaithar is already striding across the square. In spite of the cold, he's wearing only a light shirt. His forehead is damp with sweat.

I hang back in the shadows, not wanting to create a disruption.

"You're back already, Van?" He reaches my side. His expression tells me he knows something serious is going on, but he can't resist the opportunity to give me a ribbing. "I thought you'd take the opportunity to spend at least one night in a well-insulated Khaturian tent with your newly betrothed. Under the stars, the snow and mountains all around... how bloody romantic."

"We're still going. I just returned to inform you of a little gift that's been left for you in the woods."

"I already don't like it. You get to cruise off on a little jaunt into the mountains, leaving me to clean up the mess?"

"How do you know it's a mess?"

"I just do. I've got Vikurian instincts. Spill it, Your Highness."

I lean forward, lowering my voice. "In the lycan trap at the first perimeter, there's an undead creature. Former imperial military, by the looks of what's left of his uniform. Poor sod. The man's long dead and departed from his body, so don't you get any compunctions about destroying the husk. I left it animated because I want you to take a squad and study the accursed thing. Figure out the quickest and most efficient way to kill it. Then prepare for more to appear."

Kaithar curses in Vikurian. "There's no such thing as the undead."

"There is now. If *I* can exist, then so can that."

Kaithar's expression hardens. "I'll prepare a squad. I don't think it's any coincidence that this is happening now. I wouldn't be surprised if this is linked to someone in the capital."

“There are always going to be people that want to get rid of me,” I say quietly. “Let’s bide our time—for now, we gather intelligence and bolster our defenses. But if it escalates, I *will* act.”

“T’would be easy enough for you to go to the capital alone,” Kaithar whispers conspiratorially. “Find out who’s behind it. Kill them. With your speed and strength, it wouldn’t be difficult.”

“Patience, brother. It’s best to understand before rushing in. There might be one, or many. They might be concentrated in the capital or spread around Rahava. Best to exercise caution. I’ll take action when the time is right.”

If Aralya is alive and my reckless and impatient actions caused anything to happen to her, Finley would never forgive me.

“We’ll be back on the morn. Quietly prepare our defenses. And if I return with a Khaturian mage or two, don’t be surprised.”

“You would use magic to defend us?” A dark shadow crosses Kaithar’s face. He remembers all too well how they fought us. Bolts of flame and arrows of ice. Poisonous miasmas and mind-tricks; men descending into madness from unseen horrors, twisting in their minds. “They wouldn’t be welcomed by the troops.”

“They don’t have to be welcomed. Just accepted. The Khaturians won’t defy me. And when it comes to defending my land, I’ll use everything at my disposal. Those that don’t agree are free to leave.”

FINLEY

We're moving again. I'm in Corvan's arms, and he's warm and solid and faster than the wind itself.

I've wrapped a thick woolen scarf around my face to shield myself from the ferocious roar of the icy wind. The dark lenses were an inspired thought; they protect my eyes from the cold air, which becomes a powerful torrent when he moves *this* fast.

Faster than a horse. Faster than a mountain cat. Faster than an arrow shot from a crossbow, I'm certain.

I'm astonished by his strength and speed. My mind can barely comprehend it. Just a few weeks ago, I was a simple baron's daughter, waiting to be married off to some miserable old lord who would parade me around and take me to his bed and expect me to keep quiet and demure and bear his heirs.

Never could I have predicted I'd end up with *this* man.

He's truly like a god upon this earth.

As we head into the mountains proper—leaping across chasms as if they were nothing; running up the side of murderously rocky slopes as if they were flat ground, and he takes us airborne time and time again until I grow used to the sight of the uninterrupted blue sky and the clouds with nothing to anchor us but Corvan himself—a profound thought hits me.

This man... this *vampire*...

He could do anything. To me, to the ordinary humans that populate Rahava. His power is seemingly endless.

To see Corvan angered would be a terrifying thing indeed.

And the only things tethering him to the world of mortals; to goodness and dignity and honor...

Are himself and his people.

And perhaps... *me*.

How strong he must be, of mind and character, to stay in that castle and carry out the duties of a lord; to take responsibility for his people and attend to mundane tasks like paperwork and administration and taxes, to continue to pay heed to the wellbeing of his servants and his soldiers.

To show such discipline and *restraint*.

Here is a man of immense power, and he chooses to stay bound to his mortality, even though he could take the entire world for himself if he wished.

Other men I've known... with such power in their grasp, they would behave very, very differently.

What makes a man good?

What makes a man evil?

The air grows thinner, the cliffs more precarious. Snow is everywhere, pristine and blinding. I start to feel lightheaded and giddy. All I can focus on is his broad chest and the feeling of being encased in his powerful arms; it's as if he'll never, ever let me go.

I don't *want* him to let me go. And now I know that he won't hurt me.

Back there, after we fucked, when he tasted my blood once again...

He was so magnificently restrained.

Delicate and tender.

Erotically so.

And here I am, being carried away into the dangerous Khaturian Mountains, and I'm getting all warm and flustered,

and it's a good thing I can't see his face right now, because I don't know what I would do.

The last time... when he drank from me...

I'm loath to admit it, but I *enjoyed* it.

Suddenly, we shift direction. The momentum changes as Corvan begins to slow.

We're going down, and the precarious stone slopes have turned into a gentle undulating mass of snow.

We're descending into a valley, and there's a river there, snaking through the snow-covered plains, and it's not frozen over; in fact, steam rises from its brilliant aquamarine surface. On either side of the river are verdant green bushes, thick and lush, leaves gleaming in the brilliant sunlight. Now I can see stones as well; flat, polished by the constant flow of water, covered in silvery-green moss.

It's breathtakingly beautiful.

Corvan stops on a rocky outcrop that gives us a commanding view of the landscape below.

In the distance, I see a herd of hulking black shapes moving slowly across the snowy plain. They look like cows, only they have long horns and long coats of shaggy fur.

"*Karakin*," Corvan informs me.

I've never heard of such creatures. There's so much beyond the borders of Ruen that I don't know.

The river rushes down a slope, through smooth boulders and over sculpted rock basins. The clear water turns into white-peaked rapids before the slope flattens out, feeding it into a wide mouth filled with flowering reeds. After the reeds, the waterway opens up into a turquoise lake surrounded by ancient pines. The water's so clear I can see the perfectly preserved logs resting at the bottom.

Faint tendrils of mist rise from the lake. How is it warm in the middle of winter?

At the far edge of the lake, there's a crescent-shaped beach of fine white sand. Beyond it rises a village of circular huts with walls of whitewashed clay and roofs made from cured animal hides.

Plumes of smoke drift lazily into the blue sky, emerging from central chimneys.

The village is bigger than I thought; it has to contain at least fifty huts. The walls of some are decorated with vibrant painted patterns composed of geometric shapes in shades of green, ochre, red, and black.

"That's Niize," Corvan says softly, the wind catching his words. "Home of the Khatur."

"It's so peaceful here, and incredibly beautiful. I can hardly believe my eyes. It's chilling to think that you were at war with these people not too long ago."

Corvan's expression is distant and unreadable. With his eyes hidden behind the dark lenses, his face looks like a beautiful mask. For a strange moment, I almost feel he's unreachable. "As I said, the war was a great folly. The Khatur are fierce defenders, and they will fight to the death to protect what is theirs, but they have a different philosophy when it comes to existence."

"Oh? And what is that?"

"*Balance.*"

"I don't understand."

"I don't completely understand it either, but we aren't at each other's throats anymore. There's no more killing, and that's all I care about."

"But there must still be bad blood. People say the war was the bloodiest and most terrible one ever fought on our lands. What stops your men and the Khatur from killing one another out of revenge?"

Corvan smiles, revealing his fangs. "Me."

I give him a long, hard look. "That's a great responsibility to carry."

“Then perhaps you can understand why I’m still here in Tyron, doing my very best to do ordinary things; be an ordinary man.” He takes a deep breath. “The only problem is that your blood drives me absolutely mad.”

I can feel the intensity of his wanting. A wild part of me craves the feeling of his lips against my skin; the exquisite bright-and-sharp pain of his bite. “Then why didn’t you send me away?”

“I won’t lie. At first, I thought to do just that.”

“Then why didn’t you?”

“Because when I tasted you again... the second time... I knew without a doubt that I could never let you go.” He takes a step forward and puts his hands on my waist.

I don’t resist. There isn’t a thing I can do to stop him, and neither do I want to.

A gentle breeze swirls around us, tugging at the ends of my hair.

Corvan simply leans in and kisses me on my lips; gently, sweetly, sending a pleasant ripple through me.

“Just as well we’re betrothed, then.”

“Just as well,” he murmurs. “Now, I must warn you. Khaturian customs are very different from ours, but as long as you’re with me, you have nothing to worry about. Just follow my lead, all right?”

“Fine.” Why does it feel like my blood is humming? Why is my heart beating so fast? It isn’t just Corvan’s presence—although he’s enough to drive any woman mad.

It’s the feeling that something profound is going to happen, and when it does, there’s no going back.

I’m so far away from home.

But really, I’ve never had a home. My father is cruel; my stepmother’s a stranger.

I have no home but here, in the arms of a man who I barely know; and yet right now, I feel closer to him than anyone else

in this world.

Why does it feel so precarious?

“We need to know what you are,” he says, his deep voice wrapping around me, pulling me into a trance. “The answer lies in your blood. Why it’s so sweet to me; why you reacted so strongly to mine. Why you have abilities beyond our comprehension. Tell me, Finley. Don’t you ever wonder why your father never speaks of your mother?”

My chest tightens. My breathing intensifies. “What would *you* know about that?”

He lifts his dark glasses, revealing his eyes.

His gaze softens.

He’s never looked at me so tenderly before.

Why then, am I afraid?

“Finley, what I’m about to tell you might not be easy to hear, but it’s important that you know.”

“You know something,” I whisper, suddenly reminded that I hardly know this man. Is he using me? “You knew, and you didn’t tell me a thing. You had ample opportunity to do so. What are you playing at, Corvan Duthriss?”

Trust hangs between us by a thread, threatening to be swept away by the wind.

“Finley, I’m sorry.” He tips his head in apology. “It isn’t my intention to hurt you or keep secrets from you. *Never* that. But you were sent to me for a reason. My father’s behind it; he knows something that neither of us do. It’s no coincidence that you manifested magic back there. I thought Lucar Solisar might know, but he’s as ignorant as I when it comes to my father’s true intentions. He did, however, reveal a certain truth. An important one.”

“My mother,” I whisper. The sun above is so bright. The sky is so clear. The snow glitters brilliantly. But my thoughts are being suffocated by something vile and noxious.

Your mother didn't want you, Finley. You were a mistake. She never wanted to be tied to me. But it doesn't matter now. She's dead.

Why have I never had room in my heart or my mind to acknowledge her existence?

To even *wonder* what she was like?

And now, when I try to imagine what she could have been, it feels like a very old wound, scarred over, is being ripped open.

My mind slowly starts to shatter. There are a thousand different fragments inside, like broken glass; painful memories that I've buried deep inside me, with the intention of never seeing them again.

I'm staring at Corvan's face; at his tender eyes, filled with concern, but I'm far, far away.

I'm eight years old again. I'm in the great hall of Ruen Castle, sitting on the floor, and Lucar is there, and he has a cane in his hand.

My legs are covered in welts and bruises. The skin is broken in some places. I can barely walk. Gritting my teeth in pain, I look up at the man who claims to be my father.

I refuse to cry. I won't give him the satisfaction.

"Stupid girl," he snarls. "I told you never to go into that room."

I say nothing. It's pointless. He'll just beat me harder.

"Your mother is dead, Finley. There's nothing left of her in this castle. Do not defy me again."

The doors burst open, and Dorava comes rushing in, hiking her skirts up as she crosses the cold stone floor. She doesn't even spare me a glance. "Lucar, come quick. It's an emergency."

"What is it, Dorava?"

"Aderick... he was climbing a tree. He fell. His leg is broken."

I watch as the color drains from the baron's face. He whispers something under his breath, before turning to me. He raises the cane, his hand trembling, but he doesn't strike me again. "This is all your fault," he hisses.

Then they're gone, leaving me alone in the cold hall. And somehow, I feel terrible guilt for something I couldn't have possibly done.

"Corvan, what are you doing to me?" I whisper, suddenly back in my own skin; acutely aware of his gloved fingers curled around mine, at the way he looks at me, with fire in his eyes.

"I'm doing only thing I could think of," he says at last, and there's a tiny crack in his voice. "I interrogated your father before I ordered him to leave. He told me the truth about you. About who your mother is."

"Is?" The ground falls away from beneath me. "Why did you say it like that?"

"Because I have reason to believe that she might still live."

My heart clenches. My father's cruel words echo in my mind. If she despised father, then surely she would despise me, for I am *his* child, after all. "So she left me, then."

"She didn't leave you," Corvan retorts fiercely. "I believe she was trying to protect you by whatever means possible."

Hope flickers in my chest, but it's too cautious to ignite.

"Finley, your mother isn't an ordinary mortal. You have some of that in you. Of *her*. That's why I'm bringing you to the people that know about magic. The Khaturian shamans might be able to explain why you reacted the way you did to my blood."

What if I don't want to know about it?

I don't even know her name.

I still don't know my own mother's name.

"And what will you do, Corvan, when you find out what I am?" My voice trembles. The glorious day means nothing in

the face of my desperation.

“I just want you to be strong,” he says softly, squeezing my hand. “But sometimes, if you don’t feel like being strong, that’s all right too, because I’ll always protect you.”

He leans forward, and I know his intention right away. I bury my face in his shoulder as he wraps his arms around me and holds me.

He just holds me.

And after a while, he whispers in my ear. “*Aralya*. Your mother—that’s her name. And I’m going to do everything in my power to find her.”

FINLEY

Corvan drops us right into the center of the bloody village.

Just like that, we're in the middle of Niize, the mysterious heart of the Khatur.

We stand there amongst the brightly decorated houses, on a stone and gravel path that's been cleared of snow. The scent of woodsmoke fills my nostrils. I smell baking bread and something else; something sweet and laced with exotic spices.

The wind swirls around us. Corvan puts his arm around my waist and holds me close.

I feel his aura of protection. I feel like nothing in this world could possibly touch me.

Ever since he told me my mother's name, I haven't been able to speak. But now I need to be strong. I need to find the fire that's sustained me for so long.

It comes from anger, and something else entirely.

Corvan waits. He holds me and stands perfectly still; expectant yet patient.

And after a while, a man appears.

A Khaturian.

The first thing that catches my attention is the color of his hair. It's pale blue, the same hue as a cloudless sky. Arranged in a high topknot, it offers a startling contrast to the silvery

grey of his skin. His ears are slightly pointed. His eyes are angular, with deep black sclera and amber-hued irises.

The man's coat is made from a thick white pelt, the collar trimmed with ebony fur of which the strands are long and silken. I can't even begin to imagine what animal it might have come from—perhaps more than one—but it looks awfully warm.

Beneath his coat, he wears a suit of pale, supple leather—almost the color of the snow. A pair of sword hilts emerges from his back, just above his waist; I catch a glimpse of wickedly curved blades hidden in pale leather sheaths.

Lithe and graceful, he walks up to us, but makes a point of avoiding eye contact with Corvan.

“*Yenabe, O’Kral.*” His voice is deep and resonant. He gives me a quick, appraising glance as he takes a step backwards.

“*Yenabe karazu, Zuhalla.*” Corvan looks directly at the Khaturian, who still refuses to meet his eyes.

Is it out of deference, or disrespect? I don't think it's the latter; the Khaturian's demeanor is reserved and dignified.

But then he looks over his shoulder and yells something in Khaturian.

“You speak Khaturian?” I whisper, knowing Corvan can hear me perfectly well.

“Passably.” He slips his fingers into mine. “Zuhalla's called them. They'll all come out now—the warriors, clerics, shamans, and elders.”

“Why?” I feel like I've set foot in another dimension. This can't be real.

“I'm the *Kral*. In their culture, I'm revered.”

“What is a *Kral*, exactly?” I glance up at him.

Behind the dark glasses, he looks a little miffed. “It's... *complicated*. As I mentioned, it's something akin to a god. They call me a *son of Hecoa*. They believe I've been granted

this power for a reason, and so they rely on me to uphold peace in these lands. It isn't blind worship, though. The moment they sense I've strayed from the path, they would hunt me down and destroy me at all costs."

Oh? I stare at the Khaturian called Zuhalla in surprise. He's as tall as Corvan himself; lithe and rangy and graceful. He certainly looks like he could do some damage with those curved swords of his.

Someone at least, is keeping an eye on the mighty Corvan Duthriss.

But...

"Can they even harm you, Corvan?"

"I'm sure they could. They have more than a few highly talented shamans."

"Oh." Through my tinted lenses, I stare in fascination as more Khaturians start to emerge from their dwellings. Some of them are like Zuhalla—attired in white leather and equipped with deadly looking weapons. They must be the warriors. Some of them are women, which surprises me, because in the Rahavan Empire, there's no way a woman could become a soldier.

More villagers appear; male and female, both old and young, dressed in different styles of clothing; long fur coats, thick black and brown robes decorated with intricately embroidered bright geometric patterns, or sleek white leather armor. Their heads are adorned with warm fur hoods, their necks wrapped with brightly dyed scarves—green, orange, pink, red. Some of the men and women have adorned themselves with necklaces of polished stone beads in dazzling shades of blue.

They all have blue hair, in hues ranging from the palest sky-blue to deep cobalt. Khaturians keep their hair long; either loose, tied up in high tails—a style adopted by the warriors—or braided. Their eyes are striking—black sclera contrasting with lighter colored irises. Some have amber eyes like Zuhalla. Others have irises of pale green, or even white.

Now there are at least a hundred Khaturians standing before us. They look at me, but not directly at Corvan. He looks across the crowd, his expression cold and distant.

I get the sense he's not entirely happy about this. Right now, he's so different to the Corvan I've come to know. It's as if he's putting on an act; tolerating this spectacle for the sake of whatever we're supposed to do here.

For *my* sake.

A woman emerges from the crowd and walks toward us. She's tall and slender, with long, flowing hair the color of cornflowers. Her irises are pure white, and her skin is like polished silver. She wears a long grey dress, fitted around the sleeves and torso, with a flowing skirt that reaches her ankles, revealing boots made of deep green leather.

There are markings on her face—tattoos. Two dark blue stripes across each cheekbone.

I can't even fathom her age. She looks similar to me in years, but at the same time, she seems much older.

She reaches Corvan and stops. Then she presses her palms together, fingers pointed toward the sky, and bows.

"*Yenabe, O'Kral,*" she says. Her voice is soft and musical, her tone both reverent and filled with authority.

"*Yenabe karazu, Sylhara.*" He doesn't bow; he just stands there, lips curving into a benevolent half-smile.

I shoot him a skeptical look. Since when has Corvan been so adept at playing a god?

The woman called Sylhara rises to her full height.

Then she looks up, directly meeting Corvan's eyes. Out of all of them, she's the only one that's looked him straight in the eye.

"I can see that your power has grown, my *Kral.*" Effortlessly, she switches to fluent Rahavan. "You no longer need to hide from the light of day."

Corvan tips his head in acknowledgement, but says nothing. He just keeps that smooth, cryptic expression on his face, as if he's wearing a mask. Why is he being so stiff and reserved? I don't sense any hostility from these people at all.

I have no choice but to follow his lead.

"And you've brought an honored visitor." Sylhara's attention turns toward me. I look into her striking black and white eyes, and for a moment, I feel the force of her presence. She's standing perfectly still, the wind tugging at her long hair, but it feels like she's reaching toward me. A gentle pressure feathers the edges of my consciousness. All of a sudden, I feel strange; similar to the way I felt when I tasted Corvan's blood, when the whispering voices intruded on my mind.

"Sylhara," Corvan says, his voice ringing with authority. The strange feeling stops immediately. "This is Lady Finley Solisar, of Ruen. She is my *Orama*."

A faint murmur ripples through the crowd. I don't know what an *orama* is, but I can imagine it has something to do with us being betrothed.

My stomach feels funny. My chest swells with warmth. The way Corvan said it, his voice filled with pride and possessiveness...

That was genuine. It felt natural.

The Khaturian's eyebrows lift in surprise. "*Orama*," she exclaims, a look of genuine shock crossing her features. She turns to me and offers me the same deep bow she did with Corvan, her palms pressed together. "It's an honor, Lady Solisar."

Sensing the formality of the occasion, I respond with a formal curtsy in the Rahavan fashion. "I'm honored to meet you as well, Sylhara."

Corvan edges closer to me, placing his hand on the small of my back. It's an intimate, possessive gesture, and oh-so deliberate.

Sylhara's eyes widen, but she quickly conceals her surprise. "Allow me to escort you to the Meeting Tent. There

will bean offering for you, my *Kral*.”

“We will gladly accept your offering,” Corvan says. “At the same time, I will speak with the elders and the elite shamans... including yourself, Sylhara *Otian*.”

Sylhara nods. “It is your will, *O’Kral*.”

“Lead the way,” he commands, waving his hand imperiously.

I can’t help but stare. He’s acting *so* different to the Corvan I know—the one that hates formality and titles.

And I’m very aware of the fact that not too long ago, Corvan’s people were slaughtering Sylhara’s people, and vice versa.

It’s chilling and surreal. The Khaturians may appear calm on the surface, but there’s an undercurrent of danger about them; I can’t ignore the fact their warriors carry wicked-looking blades and move with sinister grace; that their pale leathers that would make them all but invisible against the blinding white snow.

As we follow Sylhara to the Meeting Tent, the crowd of Khaturians parts like an ocean splitting in two. Many of them melt away; disappearing through the network of buildings, slipping into hide-covered doorways.

Only a small group of Khaturians remains now. As we pass, they fall into step behind us, forming an escort.

Corvan leans in. “Finley, I’m going to ask them to tell us everything they know about you. The Khaturians know a lot about magic; about ancient lore.”

The feeling of his hand against my back is the only thing keeping me sane right now.

I’m afraid.

Back there, at the edge of the valley, Corvan told me her name.

Aralya.

There's a reason my coloring is so different to that of my brothers. There's a reason father treats me with such disdain.

There's a reason I've always felt rootless; like I don't belong in a world where everything is measured by wealth and status and breeding... and the *ability* to breed.

This is happening too fast, and it's all orchestrated by Corvan.

I've lost control.

Not that I ever had control in the first place.

We reach a hut that's three times as large as the others. Oval-shaped, it's surrounded by a lagoon of pristine turquoise water carpeted with small lily pads. Elegant stems emerge between the floating leaves, bearing delicate white flowers.

I catch a glimpse of silver; a school of tiny fish darting beneath the surface.

The water's so clear it could be glass.

A curved timber bridge leads to the entrance. As we reach it, Corvan stops and draws me close.

He turns to Sylhara. "Go inside. All of you. I will have a moment alone with my *Orama*."

She gives us a curious look, then quietly nods.

The Khatarians disappear inside the tent in a soft murmur of voices and a flurry of furs and robes, leaving us standing together beside the lagoon; surrounded by snow and drenched in the bright sunlight.

Something's wrong with Corvan's face.

His skin... it's turning red; blistering and peeling.

"Corvan," I gasp. "What's wrong?"

He touches the side of his face and smiles wryly. "Too much time out in the sun. The effects of your blood must be wearing off. Don't you think your magic is powerful, though? To be able to protect me from the sun for so long... and even

against the glare of the snow... it's quite remarkable. Just like you."

"You should be taking this more seriously, Corvan." I quickly unwrap my scarf and offer it to him. "Here. Put this on."

"I'll be fine, but I appreciate your concern." He takes the sky-blue scarf and wraps it around his face, covering his peeling skin.

The tent casts a small shadow. "Step into the shade," I urge, suddenly filled with worry. It's strange to see him vulnerable.

We step onto the small wooden bridge.

A fish flips out of the water, creating ripples on the surface.

"Sweet Finley," Corvan murmurs. He looks down at me, and although I can't see his expression right now, I can feel his tenderness. He gently caresses the side of my face. I'm relieved he's wearing gloves. I don't want his hands to burn, too.

"What is it, Corvan?"

"I'm sorry." He places his hands on my shoulders. "In such a short time, you've dealt with so much. The journey to Tyron. Your brother's injuries. Your idiotic father. *Me*. And here I am, leading you into this immense truth when you aren't yet ready for it. If I could give you all the time in the world, I would, but there's no room for complacency. Things can become precarious too quickly, and your heritage is far too important to ignore."

Everything is different now. I'm not just a simple baron's daughter from Ruen.

I'm *Aralya's* daughter.

And everything I thought I knew about her was a lie.

"Tell me everything you know about her," I demand, wrapping my fingers around Corvan's wrists. I pull his arms

down and move closer, until our bodies are almost touching.
“What is she? What am *I*?”

“Your mother was brought to Rahava from across the seas.
According to your father, she’s a dryad.”

Dryad. The word hits me in the chest like an arrow. I don’t
know what it means, but I know it’s the truth.

“What... what is a dryad?”

“A magical being.” His voice is gentler than I’ve ever
heard it. “Born of the forest and attuned with nature. A true
child of Eresus. Of the Life God’s direct line. The embodiment
of life and rebirth, possessing power over the trees. That’s all I
know, Finley. It’s all I’ve been able to glean from the rare
books in my library. There isn’t much written on dryads. I
wish it were more, but that’s the reason we’re here.”

A spark ignites in me; tiny but destructive. “Before... you
said you were going to find her. If she’s alive...” A dark
thought hits me. “Did he *hurt* her?”

Whatever shred of leniency I felt toward my father, it’s
completely gone now.

I *despise* that man.

“Finley.” Corvan lifts his dark glasses, allowing me to see
his eyes. He might be the imperious *Kral*, but he’s also the
man who’s delighted me and made me feel safe.

Even though he *bit* me.

I can probably forgive that now.

He takes my hands into his and pulls me even closer. “I
cannot say that your father didn’t hurt her. I can’t say that. I
know for a fact that he brought her to Ruen against her will
and then had her sent away after you were born. And it’s
entirely possible that your mother’s still alive, held somewhere
in Lukiria. If that’s the case, then time is of the essence. Now
that we’re officially betrothed, it’s only a matter of time before
the Rahavan Court finds out.”

“That’s why you’re in such a hurry. Why you’ve brought
me into the mountains so soon.”

“Knowledge is power. I believe my father sent you to me for a reason. There’s something he isn’t telling me, either because he’s trying to manipulate me, or because he *can’t*. And there are others that might not want our union to happen. Unfortunately, I have a lot of enemies within the empire.”

“You’re an imperial prince. I wouldn’t expect any less.” There’s a little tremor in my voice. My legs feel like jelly.

He gently kisses the top of my head. For a fleeting moment, I feel the insistent pressure of his lips through the soft scarf. He radiates warmth and tenderness. “Are you ready to face them?”

No, I’m not.

But the world isn’t going to stand still for me. I need to move forward.

Or else, I’ll drown.

I look up at him; at a crimson gaze that burns through all my doubts.

I have to face this. *Especially* if there’s a chance my mother’s still alive.

“I am.”

He takes my hands. “I don’t know what the Khaturians will do once they learn what you are. I have no doubt they’re going to use magic on you. Rest assured that I’ll be by your side, and as long as I’m here, nothing bad will happen to you.”

His aura washes over me; powerful and protective.

Corvan isn’t a knight in shining armor. He isn’t a golden prince or a noble saint. His hands are stained with blood—as are his lips. He knows how to wield power, and I’m sure he has his own reasons for seeking the truth of my heritage.

Nobody’s *all* good; there’s shades of grey in between.

But he’s never betrayed me. He’s treated me more respectfully than anyone I’ve ever known.

And with all the power he has over me, he could have done anything he wanted.

Did I ever have reason not to trust this man?

CORVAN

We sit at the head of the room, in chairs made from the bones and tusks of *pachydar*, the massive white-furred beasts that roam the valleys and tracts between the mountains.

A low table with a lacquered black surface stretches the length of the tent. The elders are seated on the left, on low cushions. The shamans are on the right.

Sylhara sits at the other end, directly opposite us.

After all, she's the *Kiza*. The one that speaks to the gods on behalf of the people. Sylhara herself told me that she almost died once. When she was a child, she fell through black ice and into the frozen waters of the Lake Beyond the Peaks.

She says the Goddess of Death spoke to her.

That's why she's able to look me in the eyes. According to Khaturian lore, she's been *anointed*. The others won't. They believe I'm directly connected to the underworld, and thus I can't possibly be treated as a fellow human—to do so would open a connection to Hecoa's domain, leading them to an early death.

I'm bad luck, apparently.

I glance at Finley. She's terribly tense. It's completely understandable.

I've placed a huge demand upon her.

I wonder if I could have done things differently; given her more warning, handled matters more sensitively. But I'm not

in the habit of beating around the bush, and sometimes these things are best dealt with by confronting them directly.

It's imperative that I know what she is before my enemies do.

Why her blood does this to me.

"Let's begin," I say, raising the silver goblet that's filled with the blood of a Khaturian. "I thank you for the offering. The essence of life itself."

Sylhara quietly translates my words. The Khaturians tip their heads in acknowledgment.

I take a sip. The blood is still warm. It tastes pleasant, but not exceptional. Then again, I knew that would be the case.

Nothing can compare to *her*.

Finley's eyes flick toward me. Her lips are pressed together in a disapproving line... almost as if she's annoyed.

Surely not. She can't be annoyed by *this*, can she?

I drink again, watching her out of the corner of my eye. Almost imperceptibly, she stiffens.

Are you annoyed that I'm drinking the blood of another, my sweet Finley?

Ordinarily, I would delight in teasing her, but now isn't the time. If she's truly feeling possessive of me, then it isn't an unwelcome development.

I down the entire glass, making the Khaturians wait. Serves them right for putting us through all this fucking custom and ceremony. I play the role of *Kral* because it's what's expected; they *need* me to be this mythical figure, the one that will protect them from the dangers that lie beyond the mountains.

Out of respect for their traditions, I play the role.

According to their ancient wisdom, a being like me only appears in these lands when the world is facing great upheaval.

It's how the gods keep the balance in the mortal world, apparently.

I set the cup down on the table. It's probably for the best that I've taken this sustenance. I can't drink from her now. Not when she's in this state.

"Finley," I say softly, leaning in so only she can hear. "Your sweet essence is the most exquisite thing I've ever known. By that alone, you own me. But I don't want you just for your blood. In truth, I never thought that a woman like you could possibly exist. You're everything I could have hoped for in a partner."

She lets out a slow, shuddering exhalation. Her sweet fragrance surrounds me. Although her expression remains stony, a faint flush blooms in her cheeks.

I move closer, ignoring the stares of the Khaturians. My speech is low and rapid. They won't understand me. Sylhara can't hear me. "And I *will* have you again. If it were up to me, I'd have you and only you. Every day. Every waking moment. I would drown in your scent and take my fill until I was drunk off of you. That's how I feel when I'm around you, Finley. That's why you don't ever need to fear me, or worry that I'll abandon you. I will *never*. And if I drank this blood before me—this inferior offering, which is like a match-flame to your sun—it's only because I don't want to put you at a disadvantage right now."

At last, she turns and looks at me. Her eyes are a rich shade of brown, shot through with flecks of amber and green. "*Don't leave my side,*" she whispers, barely moving her lips, for she knows I can hear perfectly well. "*And don't let them beat around the bush. I'm not interested in drawn out ceremonies. Nor do I need to be treated like a delicate flower. Let's get this over and done with. And if I come out of this as something unfathomable, well, you of all people will know how to handle me, right?*"

Ah, there's the Finley I've come to know. She's breathtakingly fearless.

I look at the Khaturians. "*Kohien ammanu.*"

Let's begin.

I switch to Rahavan. Sylhara can translate. “The reason for my visit here is simple. I’ve brought my precious *Orama* to you in the hope that you will share your vast and ancient knowledge with us. For although she is born of Rahava, her mother hails from over the Sea of Istrivan. From Batava. Although Finley never knew her mother, I’m reliably informed that she is a dryad.”

I wait for Sylhara to translate; for my words to sink in.

A low murmur ripples through the Khaturians. The shamans are all watching Finley with renewed interest.

One of them, a woman with a piercing white gaze and a short bob of pale blue hair, turns to Sylhara.

She speaks. I can understand the gist of it, but I allow Sylhara to translate anyway, for Finley’s benefit.

“Maiian tells me that your words ring true, because they’ve already sensed it—she’s no ordinary mortal. But if she truly is the daughter of a dryad and a human, then at this age, she should be manifesting her powers.”

“Well, I haven’t,” Finley says, loud enough for Sylhara to hear. “Maybe there was *one* time that I felt a glimmer of something; that I could possibly have magic in me, but it was so fleeting. I’ve never felt anything like that again.”

She turns and gives me a *very* pointed look.

Sylhara translates. The elders and the shamans nod in understanding, speaking softly amongst themselves in Khaturian.

I command Sylhara’s attention. “Can the learned ones enlighten us as to why this might be the case?”

The one called Maiian speaks. Something about *ancient magic* and *seals*.

She walks forward.

“Respectfully, she wishes to examine her,” Sylhara informs me in a cautious tone.

I take Finley's hand. To my relief, she doesn't resist. "Are you all right with this?"

"I want to know once and for all. If she knows something we don't, then let her examine me."

I watch Maiian like a hawk as she walks toward us. Carefully avoiding my gaze, the shaman presses her palms together and offers me a deep bow.

Then she turns to Finley.

"*Masara naudan. Tochero nuzat.*" Maiian says.

"She wants to take a closer look at you," I translate for Finley. "She's asking if she can take your hand."

"She may." Finley holds up her left hand.

She's playing this well. She looks composed; almost imperious.

Like a queen.

Maiian takes Finley's hand. The backs of the Khaturian's own hands are covered in intricate white tattoos; swirls and patterns of leaves and flowers. She strokes Finley's palm and murmurs something in another language altogether.

It sounds like a chant; low, lyrical, and incomprehensible. As I listen to her rhythmic words, I'm lulled into a trancelike state.

I can't stop looking at my future wife.

I watch as she studies the shaman, her dark gaze sharp and analytical. She goes still as Maiian traces her thumb across Finley's palm.

The tattoos on her hand start to glow, emanating a faint white light.

Finley stiffens.

I tense. All of my senses are on high alert. Even the simple act of this stranger touching my wife stirs a deep protective instinct within me.

I want her. I want to devour her, and I'm ready to strike at the slightest hint of anything sinister.

Was I always like this?

Finley closes her eyes. She sways. I lean closer, filled with a terrible kind of restlessness.

She lets out a gasp of pain.

I'm already moving, wrapping my hand around the shaman's wrists. "*Karazu dene antam?*"

What are you doing?

Maiian freezes. I can sense her fear. I should stop, but I'm not quite rational right now. Finley's scent is driving me mad.

"*Corvan,*" Finley hisses. "Calm down. Whatever she's doing, it's working. I can feel it. Don't interfere. I'm *fine.*"

The shaman tips her head and waits patiently, as if she understands exactly what's going on between us.

Slowly, I release her hand. "Very well. *Kemashen.*"
Continue.

Maiian presses her thumb firmly into Finley's palm and asks a question in that strange language.

Finley looks her straight in the eye and nods. "I can hear them. It's the strangest thing. Voices whispering in my head. Welcoming me. They call me *daughter.*"

Maiian closes her eyes. The glow of her tattoos intensifies. Finley winces. "*Ah!*" she gasps.

I'm just about to tear Maiian away from my wife when the shaman releases her and steps back. She says something to Sylhara, speaking so rapidly I struggle to make out her words.

"What did she say?" My impatience spills over. "What did she do?"

Sylhara clasps her hands together. She takes a deep, steady breath. She's the picture of serenity; the antidote to my seething mood.

Finley reaches across and places her hand on top of mine. Her touch is like cool water on the kindling of my irrational anger.

When it comes to her...

Am I *always* going to be like this?

Silence descends across the room. One could hear a pin drop.

“There’s a seal,” Sylhara says at last. “A barrier between her and the magical world. Not a harmful one, but a protective one, put in place by someone very powerful.”

“What is the meaning of this?”

Maiian speaks again, her tone dry and sarcastic.

Sylhara struggles to keep a straight face. She hesitates.

“I know what she said, Sylhara. Translate for Finley’s benefit.”

To her credit, Sylhara’s expression remains completely deadpan. “Even a halfling with direct *dryad* lineage can become immensely powerful. Her magic concerns the forest, from which all wood is derived. Therefore, she should be able to manipulate any kind of wooden object, and commune with the trees themselves. Under her power, some of the ancient ones can even grow beyond their earthly limitations. The *seal* was probably put in place to protect her from stupid Rahavans, who shun magic as if it’s worse than the plague. If she had shown any signs of magical ability when she was young, your people probably wouldn’t have let her survive. But you can’t escape magic. You *are* magic now, *O’Kral*.”

“Considering that I *am* of those stupid Rahavans, the irony of it all hasn’t escaped me,” I say dryly. Perhaps this is the Gods’ way of getting back at my father. “So. What are we to do about this seal?”

“A powerful seal requires powerful magic to break. How fortunate that we have you, a Son of Hecoa, with the blood of the goddess herself running through your veins. This must be a fated meeting, for you have death-magic and she possesses

life-magic. Just as your magic can reverse death to a certain extent, hers can erase it altogether. In particular, you would find her incomparably invigorating. Life negates death. Death negates life. But when all is in balance, life and death also sustain one another.”

I meet Finley’s eyes. Her delicate lips part in surprise.

Suddenly, it’s all so obvious. Why she reacted that way when she took that wine, laced with my vampiric blood.

“My blood can break the seal,” I murmur.

Sylhara and Maiian nod in unison before Sylhara even has a chance to translate.

“And what happens to me when the seal’s broken?” Finley’s voice is brimming with nervous energy. “What if I can’t control the magic? Is there anyone here that can teach me how to use it?”

Sylhara consults with the shamans and the elders. They speak for a while, carefully weighing up the possibilities. Sometimes, they speak in proverbs, the concepts too complicated for me to grasp with my limited Khaturian.

But it’s clear that breaking Finley’s magical seal isn’t without its risks. The Khaturians haven’t encountered someone like her before.

They don’t really know what to do with her.

For me, the answer is already obvious.

Aralya.

I lean across and whisper into her ear. *“I’m not going anywhere. And I have the key to your power. Let’s keep the seal intact for now, until we know more. Until we find someone that can truly teach you what you are. I want you to be safe, Finley.”*

She looks up at me. Her eyes are wide and filled with trust.

It’s a look that spears right through my heart, putting tiny hooks into my soul.

How can I disappoint her? This fragile, brave, trusting creature, who's both calculating and innocent?

The more I understand her, the more obsessed I become. And if there's one thing I can use all my power to defeat, it's her father's stupidity and wickedness.

We're going to the capital.

We're going to find her mother.

Nothing can keep me from the truth. All of father's armies can't stop me.

And those who plot from the shadows; who dare try and meddle with what is *mine*...

If any harm comes to her, I'll destroy them.

Even the emperor himself.

CORVAN

By the time we return to Tyron Castle, the sun has started to slip behind the mountains, casting the valley in shadow.

Through my dark glasses, I have a clear view of the castle from up high as we stand on a precipice, taking a small rest before we rejoin the world.

The entire trip back, Finley's been uncharacteristically quiet. She was muted when we bid farewell to the Khaturians, her eyes brimming with unspoken thoughts.

She said very little as I took her into my arms and brought her down the mountain.

The shamans gave her a gift. A pair of slender gold bracelets inset with sapphires and *serpenstone*, designed to be worn around her wrists. The craftsmanship is exquisite; unlike anything I've ever seen before, with delicate patterns etched into the gold, geometric and yet flowing.

There's so much about them that I still don't know; that will forever remain a mystery to me.

I might be their *Kral*, but that title will only take me so far. They treat me as a deity, not a person.

I fulfill a role in their world.

They'll never allow me to know them intimately.

Finley wears the bracelets now. They fit her perfectly. According to the shamans, they dampen magical powers. It's thanks to the *serpenstone* within them, which has magic

absorption properties. If the time comes that we decide to unlock the seal, the bracelets will suppress her full powers until she's learned to control them.

That's the theory behind it, anyway. In truth, I fear we won't have the luxury of time.

As I watch me castle and the surrounding lands, I see movement. Violence. A plume of smoke. A hint of terrible stench floats toward me on the breeze, detectable even through the thick material of the scarf covering my face.

Finley can't pick up these things with her human senses. We're too far away. But as she looks at the castle, unease flits across her beautiful face.

"What's wrong?" I murmur, putting my arm around her, pulling her against me so her back is pressing into my torso. She smells delicious. She's utterly tempting. I drink in her glorious essence; sweet florals mixed with the intoxicating magical aroma of her blood.

Her disquiet affects me.

I want to see her happy and content above all things, and yet I'm the one that dragged her into this mess.

"I'm scared," she admits, her words carried away on the swirling breeze. The mountain air is cold, so I hold her closer, trying to impart some of my warmth.

She doesn't resist.

"You shouldn't be scared. You're with *me*."

"That's exactly it, Corvan. Being with you feels good. *Too* good. You're all-encompassing. You fill an emptiness within me that I never knew existed, but now that I've seen it, I realize I've always had this terrible hunger within me. You're not what I expected at all. You're so much more. Once, I wouldn't have imagined I'd be worthy of being with someone like you, and yet—"

I squeeze her gently. "Don't be ridiculous. Are you talking about me? *Me*? Corrupted by magic, flailing with this goddess-damned curse, and I cannot even control a simple

craving? I'm not the golden son the Rahavan Court made me out to be. And you say *I'm* the worthy one? If anything, I need to prove that I'm worthy of you. *You're* the strong one, Finley. Even when the world around you looks so ugly, you burn so brightly."

I bend over and kiss her soft hair through my scarf. It's a temporary, ephemeral barrier between us, and right now, I need it to be there.

I'm barely able to control myself. If not for this scant layer, I'd be tempted to devour her again.

"I've never met anyone like you, Finley, and now more than ever, I *want* you."

Ever so slightly, she trembles. "I yearn for so many things. Safety. Belonging. Something to fill the emptiness in me. *You*. Only you can do that. And what if this so-called seal inside me is unlocked and something impossible comes out? What if I have power that's as great as yours? Will I turn into a monster?"

"No," I say softly, a glimmer of understanding entering my mind. "You won't."

I think I know what she's getting at.

She's afraid of what she might do if she's hurt again—the same way she's been hurt over and over by the people that raised her.

And she's afraid of what might happen if she had power far beyond what the ordinary mind could comprehend—and it is entirely possible that some day, she will.

I can understand her so well, because I, too, have been tempted to lay waste to the world.

There's a very fine line between being virtuous and evil.

I brought her here.

I need to pull her through to the other side... where she can see the light.

I have no idea how to do that.

“Finley,” I whisper, my soul unraveling a little. “I don’t know how this has happened, but as much as you yearn for me, my need for you is even greater.”

Because you dragged me out of the cold and convinced me that I’m not doomed to become a monster. You made me feel normal again.

“Dryad or not, I couldn’t care less. I’d be desperate for you regardless.”

She lets out a slow, shuddering exhalation. I feel her through her winter layers; filled with nervous energy, trembling slightly.

But not resisting me.

Not hostile.

I watch the valley below, my attention drawn to the grounds around my castle, just outside the eastern wall. A squadron of my men are there, hurling missiles of burning pitch at some unseen enemy beyond the treeline of the forest.

It’s a good thing those pines won’t burn in winter. Not with all the snow around.

I think I can guess as to *what* they’re fighting. The stench of corruption and decay is unmistakable.

Why am I not surprised that the lone undead creature I found was a harbinger of an entire fucking horde?

I gesture toward the valley; toward the imposing walls of Tyron Castle and the faint outline of Sanzar’s peaked roofs in the distance. “All of this will be yours, Finley. You’ll be magnificent as the Archduchess of Tyron.” I gently wrap my fingers around her neck, stroking her gently, feeling insanely protective. I turn her head slightly until my lips are brushing against her ear. “And it may be possible... I don’t know, but I hope against hope that we might have the chance to build something together. Even... a *family*.”

I can hear the rapid patter of her heartbeat. I can smell her arousal through along with the crispness of the snow and the winter wind.

“I would welcome that, Corvan,” she whispers, seeking my hand, twining her fingers though mine. She’s warm and delicate. I can’t get enough of her touch. “I would just ask that you give me time.”

“I will. As much as I can.” In the far distance, a body falls onto the snow, decapitated. *Although that might not always be possible.*

Where the first undead came from, there are more. *Many* more. And they’re attacking.

My castle is under siege. It’s a declaration of war.

It was inevitable, I suppose.

Whoever’s behind this is going to pay. I’ll force them to reveal themselves, then I’ll crush them.

I take her into my arms. “Are you ready to go?”

She puts her arms around my neck. “Yes, Corvan. I am. But why do I have this feeling of unease, like the world’s about to throw us into hell itself?”

“Because you’re clever, and you’ve heard of it—*seen* it—time and time again. We Rahavans are always fighting. I expect a challenge sooner or later. My father’s growing old, and soon there will be a vacuum of power in the capital. My brother... when he takes the throne, I don’t know what kind of ruler he’ll be. Maybe he’s matured. Maybe he hasn’t. I expect others may try to sabotage his power.” I chuckle softly. “I have quite a few ambitious relatives.”

And my half-brother, Ansar, the Archduke of Kilivel, is one of them. He might be Valdón Duthriss’s son, but he’s also consort Leticia Talavarrá’s firstborn. If Ansar’s learned anything at all, he’ll be trying to seize power in whatever way he can.

In addition to being the emperor’s son, through his mother he’s a descendant of one of the most powerful families in Rahava—the Talavarras.

It’s a significant advantage to hold.

Ansar has the full weight of the Talavarras behind him. As soon as my father shows the first sign of weakness, they'll make their move.

If I were a betting man, I'd wager half my fortune that Ansar and the Talavarras are connected to these attacks on my castle. A ploy is afoot. They're trying to weaken me; distract me. I've already renounced my claim to the throne, but I know that many in the court still feel threatened by my existence.

After all, they think I'm mad.

I could return to Lukiria at any time, right? I could change my mind... and father would embrace me.

They can't have that.

What a boon it would be for them to have one of their own as emperor. The Talavarras crave power as much as I crave blood.

But I'm not afraid of them; not even of the patriarch himself. Duke Rhaegar Talavarra is a seasoned commander and one of the most powerful men in the nation. He cultivates a benevolent persona in public, but he's vicious and cunning, and I'm more than certain he's behind several of the assassination attempts on my father.

Rhaegar might be a war veteran, but he hasn't seen or done what I have.

And I know how to quash dissent.

Unable to help myself, I press my lips against Finley's neck, kissing her through layers of fabric. Thank the Goddess for that, otherwise I would have bitten her again. She's exquisite. Fragile yet strong. Impressively composed, yet brimming with untapped potential.

She's *mine*.

An odd and wicked thought occurs to me as I hold her tightly and leap off the precipice. If, by sending her to me, father's aim was to convince me to take back what is rightfully mine, then he has *almost* succeeded.

FINLEY

When we reach the castle, there are soldiers everywhere. They work with silent, practised efficiency, like a well-oiled machine.

They're in the forest. They're outside the castle, defending the walls and the outer grounds.

They're in the courtyard, setting up war-machines.

I saw everything from above as Corvan leapt over the castle walls. The enemy were men in what look like official imperial uniforms.

But there was something strange about them.

Something different. I didn't get a good enough glimpse to be able to put my finger on it.

“What is going *on*?”

We land in the central courtyard, Corvan not even making a sound as his feet hit the cold, hard flagstones.

How does he *do* that? I'll never get used to it.

“Corvan, why are they fighting? And why are the enemy wearing military uniforms?”

He turns to me, unwrapping his scarf. The sun has dipped behind the mountains now, shrouding the courtyard in shadow. There's no need for him to hide from the harsh light anymore.

In the distance, I hear the horses whinny, fear in their shrill voices.

Corvan's expression is colder than I've ever seen it, but I know it isn't directed at me. "They're undead, Finley."

Undead.

My shocked mind fails to comprehend his words.

"H-how?"

"I don't know. Looks like they're coming out of the woods. Let's get you inside."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll take care of the enemy myself. You'll be safe here. They aren't going to breach the castle walls."

I stare at him in disbelief. This is really happening. An attack on Tyron Castle. "Is this somehow related to me being here?"

"There's no point in fretting about that. Please, go inside. Go to your brothers and reassure them. I know what lads their age are like. Next thing you know, they'll be wanting to armor up so they can go out there and fight."

"Not on my watch."

He leans in and kisses me on the cheek; a sweet, gentle gesture that contrasts with his fearsome expression. "That's more like it. It might be a long night, but we'll get them all."

Part of me wants to tell him *to hell with it. Just let me bite you; taste you. Break this seal once and for all.*

If I had power, I could help.

But that's ridiculous. I can't risk unlocking some wild, untamed magic within me.

When the Khaturian shaman touched my hand, for a moment, I felt it.

I heard the voices. I felt power rippling through my veins, trying so desperately to come to the surface.

And I was afraid.

Corvan was right. It wasn't the time to do anything rash.

“Be safe,” I say instead, touching the side of his face. His skin is inhumanly smooth, but warm. “Even *you* should be cautious.”

“I know, Finley.” He captures my hand and presses his lips against it, grazing over my knuckles. “The only thing that makes me cautious is the thought of coming back to you.”

And then he’s gone, leaving me in the deepening chill.

FINLEY

There's a guard stationed at the entrance to the guest wing. He's big and intimidating, with a grizzled face and bulging arms and black hair bound in long braids. Half-Vikurian, by the looks of it. He wears black leather armor and a menacing scowl. A large halberd is held upright.

Standing as still as a statue, he doesn't move one bit as I approach.

"My lady," he says, his voice deep and rumbling. "You may enter, but the lads are not to leave until the danger has passed. Try and talk some sense into them, won't you?"

My eyes narrow. "They're being detained here? That wasn't part of the agreement."

"An undead horde is attacking the castle. *Someone* thinks it's a good idea to go out and fight. Maybe you can understand why we aren't letting them go anywhere. Especially the injured one."

I sigh. The guard's position is perfectly sensible. My brothers and Garan can be hotheaded at times. "I suppose nobody's really explained the situation to them."

"We're at war. This isn't a picnic." He tips his halberd to the side, allowing me to pass. "Although now that His Highness is back, I'd expect it'll all be dealt with pretty quickly."

"You don't seem particularly fazed that there are undead monsters outside these walls."

The guard smiles, flashing perfectly straight white teeth. “Compared to what we dealt with in the Northern War, this is nothing.”

I make my way past, reaching Kastel and Garan’s room. Aderick’s room is separate; the next one down.

I knock.

“Who is it?” It’s Garan, sounding tense and hostile.

“Just me.”

The door opens immediately.

“Finley!” The lad gestures for me to enter. “Where the hell have you been? We were worried sick for you.”

“I’m fine,” I say mildly, thinking about everything that’s happened in the last day.

Going up into the mountains with Corvan. Seeing things that no ordinary Rahavan would ever witness in their lifetime. Meeting the enigmatic Khaturians. The feeling of *magic* snapping through my veins, yearning for release from the seal inside my body.

So much has happened.

And I had Corvan in my bed...

And it was glorious.

I’ll never be the same again.

I look around the room. The boys’ quarters aren’t as sumptuously furnished as mine, but the decor here would outstrip even the most luxurious room in Ruen Castle. We’re in a central antechamber framed by a large arched window, the stone floor covered in thick furs and finely woven rugs. Wide, comfortable sofas overlook a view of the central courtyard. On either side are the bedrooms, and in the middle of the room is a roaring fire.

It’s deliciously warm in here.

If not for the view, one wouldn’t even realize it was cold outside.

“Finley, I’m so relieved you’re back. You okay now?” Kastel is pacing up and down beside the window. He’s a bundle of nervous energy. So is Garan, who stands there fidgeting, moving from side to side, clenching and unclenching his fists. They don’t even realize where I’ve been. “That fucking archduke. Can’t believe we got deceived. For all his charm and fake hospitality, he’s gone and sent father away, and now they’re fighting off the fucking imperial army. We’ve got to get out of here, Finley. Back to Ruen. I don’t care if we have to fight our way out. He’s as mad as the rumors say. I *knew* we were right to come after you.”

I glance at Aderick. His face is pale, but he’s standing on his own, without the wheelchair. A loose white shirt covers his wound. He’s slightly hunched over, but he doesn’t look to be in significant discomfort. “What do you think, Rick?”

“Realistically,” he says slowly, cautiously, “it would be stupid for us to try and bust out of here. We stand no chance against the Tyronese, and if he got word you’d escaped, that inhuman bastard would come after us.”

“We gotta try *something*,” Garan protests. “Otherwise we’ll be stuck here forever.”

The faint screams of men reach us from outside, accompanied by the terrified whinnies of the horses. I’ve never heard stable horses so spooked before.

The sun sinks deeper, painting the sky red.

The atmosphere is strange. It’s as if the air is filled with a certain kind of madness, and it’s affecting me.

I want Corvan. I want to feel his touch; his warmth, his addictive presence, protective and yet undeniably dangerous to his enemies.

I’m addicted to him; to his power, his elegant-yet-brutal beauty.

It feels like anything could happen.

And yet my brothers and Garan don’t understand a thing. How could I ever explain to them that I’ve already tasted

ecstasy with the Archduke of Tyron, and I'd do it again and again?

I'm changing.

I yearn for him to drink from me again.

For better or worse, I'm changing.

Oh, to hell with it all.

I take a deep breath.

"Has he treated us badly?" I ask softly, meeting each of their gazes in turn. "Since we've arrived, he's shown us nothing but hospitality and courtesy. He saved Aderick's *life*."

"He locked our father in the dungeons," Kastel says flatly. "For no reason at all."

Anger flares inside me. "*Your* father hit me right in front of Corvan's men. He hit me, just like he always does. He arranged for me to be married off without me having any say in the matter at all."

All this when he *knew* the rumors about Corvan. How ironic that his plans have backfired spectacularly.

And all along, he knew about my mother.

He hid the truth from me. I don't know whether she's dead or alive.

"*Your* father's lucky he isn't dead." I snap. Trembling, I realize my hand is raised, as if to strike Kastel.

No. You can't become like him.

Slowly, I close my fingers and make a fist. I lower my arm.

"*Finley*." There's a tremor in Kastel's voice. "What's *wrong* with you?"

An icy calmness descends upon me. I've never felt this way before; detached, but able to think with perfect clarity. I look at each of my brothers in turn, then at Garan. "Stay here. Don't do anything rash. Don't provoke the guards. *Don't* do anything that would land you in the dungeons. Corvan's been good to you so far, but I can't predict what he'll do if you test

the limits of his tolerance, and I don't know him well enough to be able to beg for his leniency on your behalf.”

Well, that last part's a small lie. Corvan would listen to me. I'm fairly certain of that.

But I need to get these boys to think twice about doing anything rash and foolish. Even if it saved my life, their adolescent impulsiveness is what got them into this mess in the first place.

I'm not going to let them put themselves in danger again.

This time, I actually have the ability to influence things in some small way.

Outside, the horses are still shrieking. Their panicked whinnies grate on my nerves like cutlery on glass. I hate the fact that they're so afraid. It's unnatural. There's a *wrongness* about the undead horde that permeates the air all around us, repulsing me.

I can *feel* it.

That must be what they're reacting to.

“You're safe here,” I tell the boys. “There's no point in getting worked up. And if you think they're really fighting against the imperial army, take a closer look outside. Wait and see. Those men are *not* part of the emperor's army. They're... let's just say things are a lot more complicated than what they appear to be on the surface. But when I say that *you'll be fine*, you just have to believe me.”

Aderick leans heavily on his crutches, his blue eyes wide. “You're different, Fin,” he says quietly. “You've changed.”

“Did you expect me to stay the same after everything that's happened? I dare say you're different too, Rick. All of you are. And if you don't start to see what's going on in the world outside Ruen's borders, you'll make the same mistakes our father has.” Bittersweet emotions swirl in my chest. “My betrothal was in exchange for your admission into the Knights' Academy. You and Kastel both. And as much as I appreciate your efforts to rescue me, I don't *need* to be rescued. I'm at

peace with my fate. So when Corvan releases you—and he will—go and join the academy. Become *somebody*.”

My brother, who risked his own life to save me, swallows hard. “Y-you sure about all this, Finley?”

If you can learn to become a decent man, and put half the energy you put towards rescuing me into being a fair and just Baron of Ruen, it will be all worth it.

“I’m sure.”

Besides, with everything that’s happened to me; the promise of magic flowing through my veins, and damn *Corvan* himself, I’m pretty sure I’ll be fine.

I’m more in control of my own fate than I ever was.

FINLEY

As I leave the guest quarters, the big guard offers me a respectful bow. “My lady.”

“What’s your name, Sir?”

“Malkham, milady.”

“Malkham. Pleased to meet you.” I offer him a smile. “Thank you for keeping an eye on my brothers and their friend. They might act a little rashly from time to time, and I only ask that you grant them a little patience and understanding. I’ve done my best to reassure them, but they really don’t have an inkling of what’s going on outside these walls.”

And neither do I, really.

All I know is that Corvan’s out there, fighting. He might seem invincible, but part of me can’t help but be deathly worried.

The thought of him battling those undead monsters makes my skin crawl.

Malkham regards me with an impassive expression. “Understood. I trust you’ve dealt with the situation appropriately, milady. If the boys are still eager to see action after all that, we’ll try our best to handle them gently.”

“Much appreciated, Malkham.”

The guard nods stiffly.

His attention snaps to the left, and I see a man striding down the hallway, his knee-high boots ringing on the smooth stone floor. He's dressed in the uniform of Corvan's soldiers—trousers of deep grey, a black coat, red and gold embellishments. His shoulders are decorated with gold-and-black epaulettes bearing three stripes. A golden eagle with outstretched wings is affixed to his left breast.

I recognize him from the other night; from the tournament dinner.

“Captain Kinnivar,” I say softly, feeling a sliver of unease. I don't really know why. Shouldn't he be out fighting monsters with the rest of them?

“Lady Solisar.” Kinnivar executes a slight bow. “His Highness has asked that I escort you to your quarters. For your own safety, we've been assigned to protect you until the disturbance has been dealt with.”

We? I look around. Three more soldiers appear behind him, making a total of four.

Stern-faced, intimidating men, the lot of them. They're all physically powerful; walking lightly on their feet and carrying big swords.

“Is this really necessary?” I ask. “I don't recall being surrounded by guards in the first instance.”

“Well, you were with His Highness most of the time, so a guard wasn't really necessary.” Kinnivar is cool and composed. Butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. I can't even begin to try and guess what he's thinking. “And there's the small matter of the castle being surrounded by an undead horde. Once they're subdued, things will go back to normal.”

Normal? Nothing here is normal. What choice do I have but to go along with it?

“And how long do you think that will take?”

“Hard to say,” Kinnivar shrugs. “But now that His Highness's become involved, it shouldn't take all that long. You've had quite the ordeal. Allow us to take you to the dinner

hall, where a meal will be served. Then you should take your rest, my lady.

I stare back at the captain; at his pale features and dark, impenetrable gaze. He might be human, but he appears more stiff and statue-like than my sweet, inhuman husband-to-be.

I don't like being ordered to rest, I want to tell him, but now isn't the time to make a scene. Corvan's out there fighting monsters, and I can do nothing but wait.

"What about my brothers? Surely they should join me for dinner."

"The situation's still a bit too volatile for them to be traipsing around the castle just yet. They'll be served dinner in their rooms. It's just easier that way. Emotions are high, and I don't want to have to forcibly restrain them over some juvenile misunderstanding."

At the mention of dinner, my stomach rumbles. "Fine," I sigh. "Lead the way, gentlemen."

I glance out the window. The sky is darkening now, turning from deep red to inky violet. The winter chill seeps through the walls and penetrates my clothing.

I rub my hands together in an attempt to feel warmer.

Actually, it would be good to be in my chambers again, enjoying the warmth of the hearth. But I can't help but feel guilty that Corvan's out there in the cold and the deepening darkness.

Fighting an eldritch horror I can't even imagine.

A terrible thought occurs to me.

What if some of the undead are the soldiers that served under him... the ones that died in the war?

How mentally strong must one be to deal with that?

If only I could help him in some way. I might not be physically strong or able to control my dormant magical powers right now, but I *do* possess something that can soothe him.

When he returns, I'll freely offer him my blood. I'm no longer scared that he'll forcibly drain me or hurt me.

He wouldn't lose control like that.

Not *Corvan*.

I follow Kinnivar and his guards, who surround me like a phalanx, making me feel more like a prisoner than one being guarded.

"Did Corvan order this?" I ask quietly.

Kinnivar glances over his shoulder, but he doesn't directly meet my gaze. "Yes. His *Highness* is rather indisposed right now, and the situation outside is still volatile. He wants us to keep a close eye on you until the threat's been completely eliminated. With these sorts of things, you never really know what might happen."

I don't like Kinnivar's tone; he's brusque and arrogant, as if I'm more of an inconvenience than anything else.

I'm going to have to speak to Corvan about this. These soldiers are being heavy-handed. I don't like being treated like a prisoner in the place that's supposed to be my home.

It's so different to how Corvan is when he's with me.

The guards set a brisk pace as we walk down empty stone corridors, passing tall arched windows that reveal the night sky. The sun has completely disappeared now, and the sky is an inky shade of blue, illuminated by the cold full moon. I catch glimpses of the internal courtyard. There's a stillness about the place that sets me on edge.

Where are the men?

Where's Corvan?

An occasional scream splits the air. In the distance, I hear faint, chilling howl.

Is that a lycan?

If lycan are roaming the forest, even Corvan might face a challenge.

The memory of my close encounter with those terrifying beasts turns me cold. I can't forget their awful snarls; their sickeningly strong stench, the way their claws shattered the sturdy wooden door of my carriage as if it were made of glass.

We go down a curving flight of stairs. The gas lamps flicker in their wall sconces as the winter wind swirls outside, howling faintly.

I don't remember this part of the castle.

"Is this a different way?" I ask, my voice sounding hollow as it echoes off the stone walls."

"Tyron Castle is vast. There are many ways to reach a destination." Kinnivar's tone is clipped. "Let's go, Lady Solisar."

I look up at the guards. They're wearing plain black leather armor without any insignia. Each of them is massive—at least a head taller and twice as wide as me.

They don't even spare me a glance as we enter a windowless part of the castle, lined with plain-looking wooden doors. The ceiling drops. The air is stuffy in here. We descend another flight of stairs, and all of a sudden we're in a basement corridor of some sort.

Kinnivar takes a gas lantern from a hook on the wall and lights it with a match. Golden light flares, casting shadows against the walls.

This doesn't feel right.

"Captain Kinnivar," I say sternly. "I think I'd rather return to the guest quarters. I'll take my dinner in the rooms with the boys."

The guards tense. Kinnivar turns and holds up a hand.

We stop.

It's rather dark in here. There's only his lamp, and the corridor has become low and narrow. There are no doors; no windows. There's only me and these four big, armed men.

Something *definitely* isn't right. Corvan would never have approved of this.

I berate myself for being so trusting. In the heat of the moment, with danger swirling outside and Kinnivar being a familiar face—one that I thought was loyal to Corvan—I dropped my guard.

I shouldn't have gone with them so easily.

"Take me back at once," I snap. "This is highly inappropriate."

The guards are as still as statues. Kinnivar looms over me, suddenly menacing. Since when did his eyes look so flat and cold?

Like he's dead inside.

"We stop here," he says stiffly. "And things will go easier for you if don't fight it."

"*Fight it?* What are you—"

Kinnivar makes a little sign with his hand. The three big guards close in on me, forming a cage of bodies that I can't possibly hope to escape.

I know what's going to happen next. I can sense the terrible resolve of these men. I glare at Kinnivar, who's standing behind one of the guards. "I don't know what you think you're trying to do here, but when he finds out what's happened here, Corvan's going to kill you."

Kinnivar just laughs, long and hard. For some reason, he finds my statement *so* amusing.

I step forward, trying to force my way through the guards, but it's futile. Big hands clamp around my arms. I strain against his grip, but the man's impossibly strong.

"Stop, or I'll break your wrists," the guard growls.

I go still.

My arms are yanked behind my back.

Irons are clamped around my wrists. The shackles are wide and cold, and the feeling of metal against my bare skin makes me slightly nauseous.

A thought occurs to me. He's far away, but with his vampiric hearing, Corvan might be able to detect my voice.

"Corvan!" I scream at the top of my lungs. *"Help me! They—"*

A big hand clamps over my mouth. I bite down. He tastes of salt and bitterness. His hand smells like blade-oil. I nearly retch.

My teeth don't even break his skin.

They stuff my mouth with foul-tasting rags and tie a strip of cloth across my face to prevent me from crying out.

I can only hope that Corvan heard me.

I can only hope he's going to destroy these bastards.

I've never wished for someone's death before—not even my father—but now I pray that he kills them all.

Especially Kinnivar. That traitorous bastard.

Anger burns inside me as I think about the way Kinnivar's betrayed him. His own *man*, supposedly loyal, has turned around and is taking me to Goddess-knows-where.

Every fiber of my being wants to fight them, but I force myself to be still. I don't want to give them the satisfaction of seeing my distress.

I don't want to give them any reason to hurt me.

One of the guards pushes me in the back. "Walk," he grunts.

My arms are secured so firmly they feel like they're about to be pulled out of their sockets. The rope bindings are uncomfortably tight, putting pressure on my arms through the thick fabric of my jacket.

Where are they taking me?

A dozen possibilities flit through my mind. Is Kinnivar working for one of Corvan's enemies? Someone in the capital? Corvan had hinted there were people who didn't want us to marry.

Do they know about my potential?

Do these men want to take me as a hostage, to use me to extract something from Corvan? Or do they want to manipulate my powers?

I trudge forward, acutely aware of the threatening presences behind me.

The floor slopes downwards. We're going deeper underground.

I glare at Kinnivar's broad back, despising him. Why betray Corvan like that? After the steadfast loyalty shown by Kaithar and the other men, it's the last thing I'd expected.

Quietly, I seethe. And I fiercely wish the mysterious powers the Khaturians spoke of were mine to wield. I wish I was strong right now, but I'm not.

I'm powerless once again.

If only I knew how to break the seal.

But for that, I'd need Corvan's blood.

All I can do for now is follow, and hope that Corvan comes for me before something terrible happens.

CORVAN

Tired, my throat burning with thirst, my nostrils filled with the stench of corruption and decay, I make my way through the castle gates, my footsteps heavy on the cold stone.

I'm filthy.

My clothing is stained with debris from undead bodies. Gunk. Serum. Whatever this foul shit is. They don't bleed, their bodies just turn to mush when you sever their limbs and heads.

I don't know how many I've felled; hundreds, thousands, even.

That's how many dead men came down from the mountains. After a while, I started to recognize them. The features. The uniforms. My very own insignia.

My very own dead.

They're the men that were killed in the Northern War. Over the past few years, we tried to retrieve as many of the bodies as we could, but there were those that lay hidden in the snowdrifts, or high up on the mountains.

I refused to send my men to areas that are too treacherous—where the risk of death is higher than the chance of retrieving the bodies.

Now, someone's animated them.

I've read about this. The darkest of all the occult magics.

Necromancy.

Which idiot has dared to animate these bodies and use them against me? Who would be so contemptible as to disrespect these corpses; to use them as puppets against me?

What makes it so much worse is that some of the dead are just killed. *My* men. Found in the snow outside the castle walls. The first time, they were killed by the undead. The animated dead resort to crude methods. Biting. Impaling. Tearing off limbs and gouging out eyeballs. They're monstrously strong.

Some of my men were killed.

Not once, but twice.

The second time, they were felled by me. I couldn't let myself show even the slightest hesitation or shred of misplaced sympathy.

Their bodies were still warm, but their eyes were soulless and unblinking.

I've discovered that's one way to tell the dead from the living. Those whose bodies are still warm and fresh—from afar, it's so hard to tell the difference.

But the undead don't blink.

For the first time in a long time, my footsteps feel heavy. My limbs are drained of strength.

I'm weary.

The thirst is growing stronger and stronger, to the point where my vision is starting to blur, and a red haze descends across my sight, and I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that the only thing that can satisfy me right now is *her*.

And ever since she invited me into her bed, my need to drink from her has been intertwined with my desire to fuck her.

I drop my face into my hand and massage my temples. Goddess, I even have a headache now. The soft, familiar sound of footsteps makes me look up.

“Kaith,” I say softly as my commander approaches. He’s still wearing his steel-plated battle armor. A big war-axe is slung across his back, stained with the grey-black filth of the undead.

“Corvan.” He acknowledges me grimly. “That was hard going. We caught a few stragglers on the way in, but the horde’s been completely wiped out.”

“Are you injured?” I look him over in concern. The armor-plate on his left arm has been damaged. There are puncture marks in the steel, stained with blood.

“Lycan bite,” he grunts. “Bastard’s dead now.”

“*Shit.*” Almost inevitably, a lycan bite will lead to madness. There’s no known cure, magical or otherwise.

And Kaithar surely knows this.

The only thing I can think of is...

“Quickly,” I urge, reaching for a dagger at my waist. I make a deep cut across my left palm and offer it to him. “Drink.”

Kaithar looks at me with some trepidation. “I can’t—”

“You won’t turn into the likes of me. But this blood heals bodies remarkably fast and counters magic. Better to take rather than be left wondering. I’ll take you to Ciel immediately and consult with the Khaturian shamans.”

Still, the big guy hesitates.

“That’s an *order*, Kaithar. Come here.”

Slowly, he walks forward. I hold up my hand. “Drink.”

Gingerly, Kaithar takes my hand and sucks from my bleeding cut, which is already starting to close. It’s something, at least.

“This blood healed Finley’s brother, amongst... *other* things.” *And it almost broke the magical seal in her body.* “If there’s anything that can counter the lycan scourge, it’ll be this.”

Kaithar looks up, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. There's loyalty and affection in his dark gaze. A terrible feeling of dread courses through me. If anything were to happen to this man...

I'd never forgive myself.

"We have three days to figure out a cure," I say quietly. "I'll mobilize all my resources to help you. Hopefully, this will buy us some time."

"Thanks," Kaithar grunts. Then his face contorts into a grimace of pain. He swears viciously in Vikurian, clenching his jaw and grabbing his arm where the lycan bit him. "That fucking *burns*."

He drops to his knees. I drop to haunches with him, peeling off his armor with my inhuman strength, tearing away his leather under-sleeve to reveal vicious tooth-wounds in his forearm.

They're sizzling. As if someone's poured gunpowder in there and set it alight. Almost instantaneously, the wounds start to heal.

"Looks like that worked a little," Kaithar grunts.

"Somewhat." But I'm still unsatisfied. The taint of the lycan's bite lingers in Kaithar's bloodstream, and we don't know how to counter it.

Silently, I curse my father for his tyrannical suppression of magical knowledge. At times like this, it's rendered me helpless.

I clap Kaithar on the shoulder. "I'll do everything in my power to prevent you from developing the madness. *Everything*. Go to Ciel. Get yourself looked at. Then take your rest and put your subordinates in charge of the castle defenses. I'm going to go to the capital."

"The capital? You sure about this?"

I sigh. "My old friend. You were right. I can't just hole up in Tyron and hope that the empire will sort itself out."

My father's getting old, and the power vacuum he leaves behind when he dies is going to create chaos.

I've been away from the capital for too long. Although my spies occasionally send word about various political events that happen in Lukiria, I haven't heard from them for some time.

I'd assumed it was because of the winter.

Turns out I'd gotten complacent. It's no coincidence that Tyron Castle is under attack once again.

And for the first time...

The tentacles of war and corruption have almost reached something that's become precious to me.

"Where's Finley?" I demand, suddenly overcome with the need to see her. My thirst burns more powerfully than ever, and I wonder if I'd even be able to control myself if I caught her scent now.

Surely, she'll let me have her.

"She went up to the boys' quarters," Kaithar tells me. "Talked some sense into them, apparently. They're chomping at the bit to go out there and fight, but they don't seem to understand whose side they're on. Then Kinnivar came to escort her to the main hall for dinner."

"Kinnivar?" My voice is sharp. "Who told him to go and retrieve her?"

Kaithar frowns. "I thought *you* did."

"I left her safe in the main courtyard and went straight to the battlefield," I snap, unease coursing through me. "She knows her way around. Everything within the walls is safe, and she has the run of the castle. Nobody should be escorting her."

What the bloody hell does Kinnivar think he's doing? Taking charge of *my* betrothed?

The captain isn't stupid. Why would he overstep like this?

No excuse is going to save him. I'll flay him alive.

“Kaithar, go rest. I’m going to find Finley.”

I close my eyes and try to find a tendril of her bloodscent, but the stench of corruption from the undead is overpowering.

I can’t detect her at all.

It’s strange. Her scent has been in my consciousness ever since I first encountered her. Arousing as it was, it also had a comforting effect on me.

Now it’s gone, and I’m unsettled.

I’m about to be furious.

And thirst burns the back of my throat, dragging me one step closer to hell.

Kaithar grabs my upper arm, squeezing me in his powerful grip as if to steady me. “Corvan,” he says, his brow furrowed in concern. He’s the one that’s suffered a lycan bite, and he’s concerned about *me*? “Are you all right? You look like hell.”

In truth, I feel hellish. Fighting against a relentless onslaught of inhumanly strong undead monsters has left me feeling drained.

Seeing faces I thought I’d long since buried has shattered me.

I make a silent vow. Whoever is behind this desecration is going to die.

Anger overrides my weariness. “I’m fine,” I growl.

“I don’t know what the hell Kinnivar’s thinking. But it’s possible he’s misinterpreted something.”

I wish it were so, but experience tells me otherwise.

I’ve beheaded one too many a traitor in the past.

There’s a chasm forming in my chest, filled with fury and dread.

Something’s wrong.

“Kaithar, go and see Ciel at once. Tell him *exactly* what’s happened. I’m going.”

In a flash, I'm gone, moving faster than the wind itself,
leaving my commander standing in the courtyard.

I can't spare even a moment longer.

If something has happened to her.

If they've *done* something to her...

I can't even imagine.

What I'd be capable of.

FINLEY

For what feels like an eternity, they force me to walk. The air becomes colder, smelling of damp, musty decay. The light down here is dark and gloomy.

I want to turn around and bolt, but there's a wall of bodies behind me, and I wouldn't have a chance against them.

It would just give them another excuse to hurt me.

So I keep going, because that's all I can do.

Corvan will come for me. He *will*.

We reach a cellar-like chamber where the air is laced with the faint smell of sewers. Nausea roils around in my stomach. I force myself to go still... to fight it. I can't vomit here, not with my mouth stuffed full of rags.

Kinnivar strides across to a metal door and yanks it open. The hinges squeal in protest. One of the guards prods me in the back. "Go."

I follow Kinnivar as he enters the door. It leads to a flight of stairs. "Up."

We start to climb. We walk until my legs are burning; until my arms—so tightly bound and wrenched back until they feel like they're going to pop out of their sockets—go numb.

At last, Kinnivar stops. He opens a door. Cold air streams down from above.

The stairs have led us to the outside. I can only guess that we've traversed a tunnel of some sort.

They're taking me away from the castle.

Corvan, where are you?

I have never longed to see him more than I do now.

Because I know he would tear them apart.

I take the stairs, step by agonizing step, up to the top. We emerge into the cold night, where the stench of decay penetrates the cloth covering my nose.

Gripped with dread and fear, I stop.

They're going to take me away from here. Once I'm outside the castle walls...

He might never find me.

Never before have I felt so helpless.

Not even when father forced me to come here.

Anger eats away at me. I wish I was strong like Corvan. I'm supposed to be a half-dryad, aren't I?

If there was ever a time for my powers to manifest, it would be now.

A powerful seal requires powerful magic to break.

"Move," one of the guards grunts, roughly shoving me forward. I stumble and fall onto the hard pavement. Pain shoots through my knees. I grit my teeth and refuse to cry out. I don't want to give them the satisfaction.

"Get up." Kinnivar stands over me. He reaches down and yanks me up by my collar, choking me. I hold my breath and try not to gag. I don't want them to see my weakness.

Filled with fury but unable to do anything, I trudge forward, my boots crunching the snow. It's a full moon, and the moonlight is unnaturally bright tonight.

I risk stealing a glance around. We're just outside the perimeter of the castle. Thick stone walls loom on one side. On the other side is the edge of the forest, dark and brooding.

The trees stand perfectly still, their stately boughs laden with silent snow. Between them is the darkness; pitch-black

and deeper than than infinity.

I glance at it. I can't help it.

The forest beckons to me.

Come.

I thought I was imagining things before, when I sensed it had a presence.

Now, under the silvery moonlight, it feels alive.

The forest is ancient and immense, but it isn't sinister.

In the face of all this awfulness, it's strangely comforting. The trees can't hurt me. They can't steal my will or my fate.

I realize what they're pushing me toward. A dark carriage is parked at the edge of the treeline. The windows are opaque, blacked-out with some sort of dark film. The vehicle is simple and unadorned, the cabin large enough to fit a party of four, nothing more.

It looks sinister.

Hitched to it are a pair of horses. One is grey, the other piebald.

Unlike the horses in the stables, whose terrified whinnies carry through the night, these horses are completely silent. They're still, too, not making a sound. Not even scuffing their hooves or snorting.

They're strange; unnatural.

Something's wrong.

Terribly wrong.

I steel myself for pain and risk a glance over my shoulder, meeting Kinnivar's eyes, glaring at him with all the venom I can muster.

A chill enters my heart.

The captain's eyes glow.

The unearthly green hue fills me with dread. There's no warmth in those eyes.

Does Kinnivar have magic too? He isn't a vampire, though, so what is he?

"*Move,*" he hisses.

The guards are behind him, blocking any possible escape route. And even if I were to try and run, my arms are bound at my back. I'd be slowed down; unbalanced.

Now I can see that there's something strange about them too. How did I ever miss it? Their movements are stiff and unnatural; almost machine-like.

Does everyone in the Goddess-forsaken empire suddenly have magic?

I fear that if they get me into that carriage, I'll never return.

I am *so* tired of being bundled into stuffy carriages and carried away against my will.

If only I could scream, surely Corvan would hear me. But I'm silenced by this cursed gag, and these bastards are right behind me, breathing down my neck.

I need to trick them. I need to disrupt them somehow.

Clearly, they want to capture me alive. Someone knows what I am, or they want to hurt Corvan. Whatever it is, it's obvious that I'm no use to them dead.

My life isn't in danger, at least, even if they *are* prepared to hurt me.

"You." Kinnivar points at one of the guards. "Pick her up. If she refuses to walk, you'll just have to throw her in there."

I have to do something.

I close my eyes and go still. The wind rushes through the trees, becoming a gentle roar in my ears.

I let go of everything.

Confusion.

Fear.

Control.

Against my screaming instincts, I force my body to go limp.

I fall to the ground.

Thud.

Pain shoots through my body. I don't care. I hold my breath and simply *stop*.

I'm lying on the cold, hard ground, unmoving. Holding my breath for as long as I possibly can. I'll hold it until I go blue.

"Fuck," Kinnivar snarls. "What's wrong with this bitch now?"

My eyes are closed, but I can hear him moving. He squats down beside me and grabs my shoulder, shaking me roughly.

I don't dare move. This is becoming *very* uncomfortable. My lungs are starting to burn.

But I can't let go now.

I need to create just a little bit of doubt in his mind.

"Get up. What's wrong with you? Wake up."

My lungs are about to burst.

Just a little longer... I need him to...

"Shit." At last, his hands go around my face. He unties the gag and pulls the rags out of my mouth. "Why aren't you breathing?"

Now. Do it.

Just as it feels like my lungs are about to explode, I suck in the sweet, frigid air.

I breathe.

Then I open my mouth and scream his name as loud as I possibly can.

"Corvan! Help—"

But just then, the wind blows fiercely, rustling and howling through the canopy above, masking my cries.

“Shut the fuck up.” Kinnivar clamps his disgusting hand over my mouth, sticking his fingers in to stop me from screaming.

Maybe it’s just my imagination, but I thought I detected a note of panic in his voice.

Of course he should be panicking. Corvan’s going to tear him to shreds.

Filled with sudden fury, I bite down on his offending fingers, *hard* this time. I want to make him feel pain. I want him to bleed.

His skin breaks. He grunts in pain.

His blood fills my mouth, and it tastes strange; bitter and foul, a mixture of acid and rot. It burns my tongue. I hate it, but I have no choice but to swallow it down as the captain wraps one arm around my neck and slowly starts to choke me. “That was a mistake,” he says softly. “Go to sleep now, Finley. There’s nothing you can do. Corvan Duthriss isn’t going to last long. He’s an abomination. Should never have been given his titles in the first place.”

Kinnivar’s grip is unbreakable. I stare up at the night sky; at the huge, bright moon. My eyelids flutter. I start to drift. My consciousness is fading. The stars are so brilliant; glittering jewels of light in the inky blackness. They’re becoming blurry.

The whisper of the wind through the branches is louder than ever. It seethes and pulsates, developing a rhythm. The skeletal arms and fingers of the branches are above us, crisscrossing the star-speckled tapestry.

How did I not notice it before? There’s definitely a rhythm to it. Almost like music; like the pounding of drums and the rise and fall of strings.

Child.

What was that? A voice whispering in my mind?

Child, don’t despair. You’re under our protection. Hidden from us for far too long. How could we have missed you?

Another voice joins the first, speaking alongside it.

Child. You are bound up in a shroud of your mother's own making. You have the seal of protection upon you. Come now, it is time to break it.

A third voice joins in, over the top of the other two.

She has no heart-seed. How can she be grown, and yet have no heart-seed?

The voices grow louder; more insistent. There are a dozen different conversations going on at once. It's as my head has become a busy hall, filled with a crowd's endless chatter.

"*Stop,*" I try to whisper, but Kinnivar's terrible arm has cut off my ability to speak.

My body feels strange. As if my heart is a woven tapestry, and each painstakingly woven thread is being violently unravelled.

Everything's coming undone.

These voices are going to make my head explode.

Stop.

"Take her to the carriage. We've already lost too much time."

Rough hands grab me.

The voices are deafening.

The stars above swirl and twist, and the sky itself cracks.

It cracks.

But then the cracks move, and I realize that they aren't cracks at all, but branches, stretching downwards.

Am I hallucinating, or are the trees really moving? The winter-stripped branches stretch downwards, long and thick like limbs, the twigs at the end forming fingerlike projections that twist and writhe, no longer angular sticks; now sinuous and reaching, grasping, extending toward me.

Twigs have turned into tendrils.

The branch extends toward Kinnivar and wraps itself around his neck like a snake, yanking him backwards with

brutal violence. He doesn't even have time to shout.

I hear a sickening crunch. Then a thud. In horrified fascination I dare to take a look.

Kinnivar's severed head is lying on the snow, several feet away from his decapitated corpse. The branch hangs down, fingerlike twigs brushing against the snow, as if it were a willow tree.

The voices in my mind grow louder and louder; an intolerable cacophony.

I pull myself into a sitting position and look around wildly. The guards are just standing there, staring at their fallen leader in silence.

At first, it's as if they don't even notice me.

Then one of them—the largest of the three—turns, and his eyes are glowing that same eerie shade of green.

He doesn't speak. He just starts to shuffle toward me, his movements stiff and mechanical, as if he's a machine.

Why do I get the feeling he isn't entirely sentient?

With the cacophony in my head, I can barely bring myself to move, but I force myself to anyway, rising shakily to my feet. The tree sways and reaches for the guard, wrapping its fluid branches around him. The tendrils slip beneath his leather armor.

I stare, frozen in horrified fascination as a whispering sentient tree squeezes a fully grown man from the inside, turning him into a limp ragdoll.

And yet he still moves, and his eyes are glowing, and his expression is terrifyingly blank, as if he feels no pain at all.

I rise to my feet, clumsy and disoriented, stumbling as I struggle to regain my balance.

I try to run, but I can't because the trees are reaching for me too, and the branches are wrapping themselves around me like snakes, restraining me.

I scream.

Hush, child. We only seek to protect you. Do not fight. Do not despair. Wait a moment while we eliminate these undead aberrations from our land. Come here, Finley, daughter of Aralya, who was hidden from us for so long.

I'm utterly helpless as the trees wrap their fluid branches around my arms and legs; as they slip around my waist, drawing me away from the bodies and the guards.

Behind me, they close in on the remaining two guards, forming an inescapable net.

And the guards are destroyed.

And then they go after the unmoving horses, who've done nothing wrong apart from just standing there.

The sounds that reach me through the chatter of a thousand voices are sickening.

The crunching of bones. The crushing of soft flesh. A foul stench permeates the air. And the trees have me now, and they're pulling me up into their dark canopy, and it's cold and terrifying, as if I'm being sucked into a vortex.

What just happened? I accidentally tasted Kinnivar's blood, and then my world turned to insanity, the same as when I drank Corvan's blood and melted that chair, only this is a hundred times worse, because the trees have me, and I can't escape.

Did... Kinnivar's blood do that? Is it because I accidentally drank magic?

I try break free, but I can't move at all. The trees feel stronger than steel, and my arms are still bound behind me.

This is the *worst*.

I close my eyes and breathe deeply, trying to fight the sheer panic that threatens to overtake me.

The trees didn't kill me.

They killed everyone else but me.

And surely Corvan has heard me. I pray he heard me. He's the only one powerful enough to fight this... whatever it is.

The wind surges again. The bare trees sway back and forth.

Be calm, child. We aren't your enemy. You are one of ours.

The pressure at my back lessens. The restraints loosen. They're unravelling the tight rope bindings.

The ropes fall away, and suddenly I can move my arms. My joints pop and crack as I bring my arms in front of me, trying to shake out the stiffness.

But then the cursed branches are there, twisting around my arms, suspending me in mid-air.

"Stop," I cry out, my voice a hoarse whisper. "Release me."

Not yet.

The tendril-like branches wrap around my neck, but they aren't forceful. It's a dark caress that I'm helpless to resist. They prise open my lips, and something enters my mouth.

Eat, child.

The voices in my head grow louder. I can't distinguish one from another anymore.

And then they all start saying the same thing, in unison.

Eat.

The thing in my mouth is small and round. It tastes sweet and salty and bitter and aromatic, like cinnamon, all at the same time.

I have no choice. I swallow it.

It burns a little. Warmth enters my chest and flows through my body. A sensation close to pain—but strangely pleasant—shoots through my limbs.

The *serpenstone* bracelets around my wrists shatter and fall to the ground. They were supposed to contain my unfettered power, but it seems to be all for naught. The ancient tree's power is far, far greater.

"What is this?" I cry.

You ate my heart-seed. Now, you will carry a piece of me wherever you go.

“Who... *what* are you?”

My name is Eulisyn. I am your Source.

“S-source?”

A child of Eresus. Our Creator. Hidden in plain sight. It was the corrupted blood of Hecoa that broke the seal and revealed you to us. Now you are bound to me, and my power is your power.

My body feels like it's filled with molten lava. My limbs feel both powerful and weak. Although the voices no longer crowd my mind, Eulisyn's presence is overwhelming.

I feel like I'm about to be swallowed alive.

“Let me go,” I whisper, icy terror coursing through me.

As you wish. You carry my power now. You are free to do with it as you desire.

Eulisyn lowers her branches and gently sets me on my feet. The fluid tendril-branches release my legs and arms.

I watch in horrified fascination as her twigs and branches turn from fluid to rigid; as the trees retreat back into their solid, upright forms.

Then there's silence, and I'm left with nothing but this pleasant heat in my body and the memory of a cacophony of voices.

The heat is felt most strongly in my chest. It starts to grow, turning into an insistent kind of pressure.

It's pressing outwards; this thing, stretching into my arms, my fingers, demanding release. I drop to my knees and press my palms against the cold, hard earth. It's the only thing I can think of.

Like lightning to a conduit, the pressure shoots through my fingers and into the barren soil. It feels like my entire body's growing, stretching, but really it's only my hands, reaching

down into the earth, extending for what must be hundreds of yards—at least, that’s what it *feels* like.

And then, all of a sudden, I’m stuck, and whatever’s grown from my fingers has anchored me firmly into the ground.

“Eulisyn,” I say weakly. “Help me. What has happened now?”

But the damn tree is silent. Why is everything to do with magic so infuriatingly cryptic.

I stare up at the tree that gave me her heart-seed, and I can see that she’s ancient; she’s one of those trees that would take at least ten men, arms linked, to encircle her.

Now she’s gone to sleep again.

I grit my teeth in frustration and try to pull my hands out of the ground, but it’s no use.

This is bordering on ridiculous. A sentient tree has just killed four men with its branches, and fed me a strange tasting seed. The forest has spoken inside my head and now I seem to be growing roots.

And I’m *stuck*.

“*Corvan!*” I scream, violently flexing my arms in frustration. “If you mean all those pretty little things you said about me, then you will come to me *now*.”

It’s more of a wishful plea; a prayer to the gods and a cry of futility.

But... I must be dreaming, because all of a sudden, arms wrap around me. Warm, familiar arms. I can’t mistake that embrace for anything else.

He’s already imprinted on me.

“*Finley,*” he murmurs.

His deep, resonant voice wraps around me, a salve for my fractured soul.

A tear slips down my cheek and falls onto the cold ground, turning into frost. He reaches up to my face and wipes its track

with his thumb.

He's behind me, engulfing me, impossibly gentle and warm. His scent—I would know it anywhere—surrounds me; male, musky, laced with woodiness and leather. It cuts through the cold and the lingering stench of decay.

“I can't believe you're here,” I whisper, still in shock. Too many unbelievable things have happened, and my hands are inexplicably anchored to the ground.

I can feel *beyond* my hands. My roots stretch right down into the soil; into the warm, ancient depths of the earth itself.

Corvan places his big, rough hand on my cheek and tilts my head ever so slightly.

He plants a kiss on my lips; slow, insistent, wanting. “I'm sorry, Finley. I took *far* too long to get to you. The undead stench obscured your scent, and I swear the forest conspired to hide the sound of your voice from me. But still, it's inexcusable.”

“But you're here now.” I turn my head and meet his gaze. In the bright moonlight, he looks even more inhuman; as pale as the winter snow and as hard and flawless as marble.

His eyes are glowing again. That tends to happen when he's hungry.

I'm starting to recognize the signs.

Relief surges through me. I might be in a predicament right now, but Corvan's here now.

He didn't abandon me.

Everything's going to work out.

“Look at us,” I say, shaking my head in disbelief. “You're thirsty and I'm stuck in the dirt. What a pair we make.”

He furrows his brow, his expression turning terribly serious. “It's no laughing matter that you were stolen from me. I should never have allowed that to happen.”

“Your castle was attacked by a terrifying horde of undead,” I point out. “And the ones that took me were relying on you

being preoccupied. I dare say that was an almighty diversion.”

“I’m going to destroy them,” he says mildly, his tone deceptively light as he wraps his hands around my wrists and gives them a gentle tug. Predictably, they won’t budge. “What are we going to do with you, hmm?”

“Ask the trees,” I growl, my voice sharpened by annoyance. “They’re the ones that got me into this mess, and now they’ve conveniently gone to sleep.”

“The trees spoke to you?”

“As unbelievable as it seems, yes. That one just above us... she’s called *Eulisyn*. She’s ancient, and she’s being *very* unhelpful right now. At least she killed Kinnivar and his lackeys.”

“Oh?” Corvan’s voice turns deathly cold. “I’m thankful she protected you.” He looks up, taking in the mangled bodies of Kinnivar and the guards. “They got what they deserved, even if I *would* have preferred to tear him apart with my bare hands.”

His voice trembles. There’s a tremor in his hands. I can feel his anger; white-hot and powerful.

I’d hate to make an enemy of him.

And I *swear* I can feel his thirst, too. It’s dark and pulsating, like a wild river barely dammed, held back only by the iron force of his will.

“Corvan,” I say gently, sensing that I need to take the edge off his anger. He’s been fighting for most of the night. He must be tired.

Vampires... surely they get tired too?

“What is it, Finley?” But when he speaks to me, his tone is oh-so tender.

“Before we go about trying to figure out how to extricate me from this bloody *thing*, why don’t you drink from me?”

“*What?*” He blinks several times, dark lashes falling around radiant crimson. For a moment, he’s aching innocent.

“I can’t... not while you’re like *this*.”

“Corvan,” I murmur, and even though I’m restrained by magic I don’t understand—my *own* magic—suddenly, I feel powerful. “You’re on the verge of unravelling. If the world is falling apart, isn’t it better that you face it with a clear mind?”

“*Gods*, Finley,” he whispers. He lifts me up a little, taking the pressure off my arms. Then, with impossible speed and strength, he manoeuvres so that he’s lying on the ground, and I’m on top of him, still with my damn palms glued to the ground. He wraps both his arms around me and holds me tightly. “How do you know me so well when we’ve only just met?”

There’s something strangely thrilling about being trapped and helpless with him underneath me, his eyes glowing with hunger, his embrace infusing me with warmth.

“You’ve shown me enough,” I whisper, tilting my head forward, inviting his kiss.

He yields, pressing his lips against mine, letting his fangs graze my lower lip.

His jaw quivers. He’s barely restrained. “You drive me to madness.”

“I could say the same about you.” The forest above me whispers rhythmically, almost as if it’s singing. I can feel the power of the earth flowing through my veins, swelling, creating warm pressure inside my chest.

And of course, I’m aroused.

This man could do anything to me right now, and I wouldn’t care. “Stop overthinking things and bite me,” I growl.

Corvan laughs softly. “My dear Finley, it almost sounds as if you enjoy being bitten by me.”

He isn’t entirely wrong. I relax my arms and let him take my weight entirely. “As long as you’re gentle...” In fact, I yearn for his lips against my neck; for his tender, bittersweet bite, for the sublime hint of pain that would accompany it.

“Never in a million years could I have imagined my dear wife would *enjoy* being bitten.”

“I’m not your wife yet.”

“But you *will* be, very soon.”

“Your Highness, I need you sane, so hurry up and bite me. We’ll worry about the rest afterwards.”

He makes a soft sound; halfway between a strangled cry and a groan of desire. “As you wish.”

Then he presses his lips against my neck, just beneath my jawline, where the large blood vessels run. He kisses me tenderly. His lips are warm and savage. He runs his hands up my back and through my hair, holding me, twining his legs between mine.

In the middle of the winter night, I don’t feel the slightest bit cold.

I feel pain.

Warm, blossoming pain, more pleasure than agony, floods my consciousness. The whispering of the trees becomes a symphony.

He takes.

He takes my essence; that strange energy that swells inside my chest, and I can feel the wild magic flowing out of me.

It’s only when he brings me release that I understand how much pressure has been building up inside me.

I melt into him.

He’s here now.

I close my eyes and let him drink. His mouth is the most tender, decadent thing. My pain dissolves into pure bliss, and my body is on fire, arousal unfurling in me like a blossoming bud.

My hands, still connected to the earth below, suddenly feel lighter. The tendrils or whatever they are start to retract, ripping through the earth, returning to my body.

And all of a sudden, I'm no longer trapped.

I can move. The whispering of the trees isn't as loud anymore. The rush of the wind dies down. The burning pressure in my chest is gone.

And Corvan lies beneath me, his lips stained with my blood, and he's smiling, and he looks so damn irresistible that I can't help but lean in and kiss him.

He runs his fingers through my hair; tenderly, reverently.

Nobody's ever held me with such tender feeling.

"I'm sorry," he whispers in my ear. "For causing you all this trouble. But I'm glad you're safe, and I swear to the Goddess that this will never happen again."

I reach down and caress his cheek, basking in his protectiveness.

Then the most ridiculously outrageous thing happens.

Before my very eyes, his hair begins to grow, moonlight-streaked tendrils extending at an impossible rate, until his once-cropped hair is long again; as long as it was when I first encountered him.

"*Corvan*," I gasp.

His eyebrows narrow. "What is it?"

"Y-your hair. It's grown back!"

He runs his hand through his pearl-hued hair, a look of bemusement crossing his features. "I knew your blood was powerful, but I didn't realize it was *this* potent. And it smells sweeter than ever."

"Must be the dryad thing," I say weakly. "And you drinking from me has tempered my magic."

He grins wickedly. "So you *need* me to drink from you now."

"It appears so. I suppose it isn't the worst outcome in the world." I curl my arms around his neck, staring into pools of

depthless crimson. The unearthly glow in his eyes has faded. “But I’m left with...”

“Oh?” One eyebrow quirks. His expression turns darkly mischievous.

I can feel his warmth through my clothes. I can feel his hard, tempting body. It might be the middle of the night in winter, but I don’t feel cold at all, and my need for him is almost unbearable, making me twist and writhe ever so slightly.

It’s a tender, throbbing ache between my thighs, spreading through my very core.

Out here in the cold; in the moonlit darkness, I want this man, more desperately than ever before.

“Corvan,” I say quietly, urgency in my voice. “I... I have a terrible need of you.”

His damnable smile could melt snow on the mountains. “Why Finley, are you asking me for something?”

“Yes, you idiot.”

“Begging?”

My insides twist, in a good way. “If that is what you please.”

“For what, exactly?”

I grit my teeth. “Do I have to spell it out for you?”

Even though the heat in his gaze is obvious, on the surface, he’s insufferably calm. “I just like to hear you beg, that’s all.”

“I want you to fuck me, Corvan.”

The magic has left me hollowed out and wanting. His blood-drinking has aroused me to no end. Even his silly, haughty teasing turns me on.

He falls silent, staring at me with all the intensity of a hungry wolf. Now he’s perfectly serious, and once again, his eyes faintly glow red.

He slides his hands down my back; over my hips and ass. Then he kisses me; deeply, insistently, and he tastes sweet and spicy and faintly of coppery blood.

“Finley, as much as I love hearing you ask, you must know that there’s no possible scenario where I *wouldn’t* want you. I can barely hold myself back as it is.” He kisses my neck, my jaw, my cheek. “And your blood is the perfect aphrodisiac to me. You smell *incredible*. Even more so than before. I don’t know what that damn tree did to you, but you’re driving me insane. So even though I’ve vanquished an undead horde and the world around us is unravelling and I have to strike at the heart of all this madness before it destroys us, I don’t care. You get what you want. *Always*.”

Oh. This man. How is it possible that when everything’s falling to pieces, his presence makes everything better?

“As much as I’m dying to have my way with you right here and now, I cannot in all good conscience allow you to be fucked on the cold, hard ground.” He rises up into a sitting position, bringing me with him. “Let me bring you somewhere more comfortable. A place more befitting of my queen. From now on, I only want to see you ensconced in the finest luxury.”

“I refuse to be cosseted,” I remark, keenly aware that Corvan’s the sort who might react to my abduction by going overboard to protect me.

He slips his hands into mine and rises, pulling me to my feet. Then he kisses me again, pulling me close. “*Never* that. Soon, you’ll become too powerful to be held back—even by me. Is it so wrong that I just want to give you everything?” He leans close, his breath feathering my cheek. “So much has happened since you came to me. And... I never expected someone like you. How easily you fit with me and all my fucking foibles, even though the *why* of it all has been kept from me—by intention, I suspect.”

“You and me both,” I say dryly, even though I’m breathless. I feel his need and his vulnerability. His protectiveness. His desperation. And how lost we both are, caught in a vicious current not of our making. “The least we

can do is satisfy ourselves, then. That's how you wrangle fate, isn't it?"

Once again, he takes me into his arms. I tremble with anticipation. I know what happens next.

He lifts me up, as easily as if I were a leaf.

"One of the advantages of possessing this terribly unnatural speed," he says quietly, "is that one can accomplish more in a day—or night—than what one usually would."

"Hurry up then, Corvan," I whisper; half plea, half whimper. "Before we find ourselves under siege again."

"Siege?" He laughs darkly. "The only one laying siege to my very existence is you, my love."

And then he takes a step forward, and the wind rushes past, and the world becomes a moonlit blur.

FINLEY

I should be used to this by now. Corvan's faster than the spell of the moonlight; faster than wind and spirits.

He blasts back into his castle and steals through the halls, managing to evade people entirely.

There's no sign of the undead attackers.

There's just stillness and silence. Perhaps the soldiers have retreated to nurse their wounds. Perhaps the servants are bunkering down, fearful of the next onslaught.

He brings me to a large room, where the moonlight filters through tall windows, heavy drapes pulled back to reveal the brilliant night sky. This room is similar to my own quarters; large and high-ceilinged, with stone floors dressed in opulent rugs and a fire smoldering in the hearth. A large, impeccably made wooden four-poster bed is the only furnishing. There isn't even a couch or a table.

He sets me down on my feet in the center of the room. Breathing heavily, I can't say a word. I'm simply astonished.

"My quarters," Corvan says simply.

Then he proceeds to undress, wrinkling his nose as he strips off his jacket, shirt, trousers, and boots. He bundles the clothes in his arms and walks across the room, dumping them in a round wicker basket.

"The stench of battle lingers," he growls. "Even more so when the slain are the cursed undead."

I sense anger in his voice, even though his back is to me. I can't stop staring at his perfectly naked form; at his rippling shoulders and back, vampire-alabaster and marked with old scars. His ass is sculpted perfection. His legs are impressively powerful.

My breath catches, and words fail me.

"You should undress, Finley, and come to the baths with me." He turns and looks me up and down, his crimson eyes smoldering.

"H-here?"

"Yes, here."

"You have your own private baths?"

"You think that we northerners are so backward we don't have piped water and private bathchambers?" Now he's teasing me.

I don't tell him that in Ruen, we all have to go across the grounds and bathe in the communal bathhouse, which is shared between my family and the servants.

"I didn't say anything like that," I huff. I turn away, unable to look at him for even a moment longer, for fear I'll lose all of my senses.

I need to take back control. Put *him* on the back foot for once.

So I start to strip, peeling away my jacket and my tunic and shirt, kicking off my boots and slipping off my trousers.

Until I'm standing there in just my silken pink underwear, then even that is discarded, dropped to the floor amidst all my other clothes.

It's a little cold in here.

The air brushes against my bare skin, raising goosebumps. My nipples are hard with cold and arousal. Suddenly, his hands are on my back, and his lips are pressing against my neck, just above the hollow of my collarbone.

He really moves so *fast*.

I didn't even hear him.

If anything, the goosebumps on my skin intensify, but for different reasons this time.

"*Gods*, you're beautiful. Close your eyes, Finley. Let me lead you."

"You promised a bath," I say.

"Yes, I did. And I always keep my promises to you."

And so I allow myself to be led barefoot across the cold stone floor, over the soft silken rugs, past the warmth of the hearth, until I can no longer hear the rushing of the wind outside.

We've entered another chamber. In here, it's still and silent and *warm*. It smells faintly of night jasmine and citrus.

"Come," Corvan urges. Suddenly, he's behind me again, putting his hands on my waist, easing me forward until my toe dips into something—a pool of luxuriously warm water.

It smells good in here—of orange blossom and jasmine and mint. I don't know how he's captured the scents of summer in this place—whatever it is.

I haven't opened my eyes yet. There's something delicious about the anticipation of the unknown—when I'm in his hands, anyway.

Nothing can hurt me here.

His presence is the most reassuring and arousing thing I could ever have imagined.

He guides me into the water, taking my hands, ensuring I don't slip or lose my footing.

He slips into the pool with me and guides me toward a stone ledge—a bench.

I sit.

"Good girl," he whispers. "Keep your eyes closed."

The water feels so good against my tired, aching body. It caresses my skin and elicits a deep sigh of satisfaction from

me. I reach out for Corvan, but he isn't there anymore.

I didn't even hear him move.

Then I feel something; his hands underneath the water, moving up and down my thighs, gently parting my legs.

Oh my Goddess.

Then, underneath the warm water, he proceeds to put his lips on my entrance, and his tongue darts forward, caressing my clit.

Pleasure shoots through my body. I twist and writhe in the water, leaning back against the ledge, closing my eyes. The absence of sight eliminates distractions and accentuates the sensation of his mouth against my nub. He knows exactly where to apply pressure and where to relent.

He very quickly sends me into the next dimension of bliss. It's a completely new experience for me—sitting on the stone ledge surrounded by warm, fragrant water, stars swimming behind my closed eyelids, my body infused with a feeling of wild, rippling power that threatens to unexpectedly burst forth.

That time in the woods changed me. Eulisyn changed me. She made me eat that *heart-seed*. What does it mean? What's inside me now?

I'm scared. What if my powers go out of control again?

But Corvan doesn't seem to care. He's still submerged, engulfing me with his devious mouth. How long can this man go without taking a breath?

So I forget about my strange powers and the incomplete puzzle that's my existence. I forget about the unspoken threat of dark magic; the shocking appearance of the undead.

I forget that Corvan's a prince of the empire with a terrible weight of responsibility upon his shoulders; that he's undergone an unthinkable transformation.

I forget that dark manipulations brought us together.

I let it all go. What choice do I have when he's here before me, giving me the most wickedly intense pleasure I've ever

known.

I open my eyes and look down. His pale hair floats close to the surface, fluid and ethereal. I run my fingers through it.

For a moment, nothing else exists.

Just beauty, and pure bliss.

I wrap my legs around his broad back. He slides his hands over my hips and grasps my waist. He takes me higher. I slide off the bench, slipping underwater, and he goes with me, holding me in a dark entanglement.

There's no air. There's only the gentle sound of water, swishing and swirling.

He grips my thighs and sucks me harder. I reach for the surface, my head breaking through the water, and I gasp as he triggers my release.

Still holding me tightly.

Never relenting.

He's in complete control, and I'm lost, and I don't mind.

I float on the surface, and still he caresses me with his tongue.

And at last, I come, gently writhing and twisting as the water holds me aloft; as Corvan's rough-yet-tender hands encircle my wrists.

I let out a great sigh of contentment as he scoops me up into his arms and lifts me out of the water, gliding up the stone steps, padding across the cavernous chamber without a sound, gently wrapping me in thick, fragrant towels that feel like silk against my bare skin.

Then he carries me down the stone corridor, through silence and into his bedchambers, which are filled with the soft light of dawn. He pulls back the covers and gently deposits me into his soft, luxurious bed. The sheets are buttery silk. A soft floral fragrance surrounds us. I'm warm and spent and tingling all over. The room is toasty, thanks to the fire in the hearth.

Corvan stands at the bedside for a moment, looking down at me. His eyes glow in the firelight. His skin is illuminated by the soft pinkish glow filtering through the windows—the first light of dawn.

He hasn't dried himself. He's still wet and glistening from the bath. His hair is slicked back. His body gleams, every rippling muscle and plane accentuated.

My gaze is drawn to his cock, which is unashamedly erect and dangerously hard.

He's a prime specimen, eyes glowing with thirst and desire.

And my body, still reeling from his decadent caress, yearns for him.

I'm a mess. He's completely unravelled me.

This wasn't my intention at all, but when have I ever been in control of my fate?

"Corvan," I whisper. "*Just...*"

He leans in and gently caresses my cheek. "I know, Finley. I know." His voice is deep and smooth and tender, a salve for my desperate need.

He comes into the bed, hovering over me, his gleaming body rapidly drying in the warmth. Only his hair remains damp.

He lowers his lips to my ear and cups my cheek. "Don't worry about a thing. Everything's going to be fine."

He's warm. Powerful. Right now, he's everything.

He hooks my leg up, exposing me; tender, throbbing, desperately needing him. One hand goes around my neck. The other, around my thigh.

Something inside him seems to break.

He trembles all over, and the tension inside him spills out through his gaze, which is as hard as rubies and as hot as molten lava.

He enters me slowly, with devastating intent. His cock stretches me and fills me with overwhelming pleasure. Tightly coiled bliss unfurls throughout my body, and I cry out in tension and delight as he fucks me gently.

I become even more lost, cocooned in warm sheets and engulfed by his body. Not a single inch of me desires to be in control right now. It's all *him*.

Ever so slowly, he increases the pressure, moving a little faster, a little harder. He lowers himself until his body is pressed against mine, his heat seeping right through me. Then he puts his lips on my neck, kissing me just above the hollow, and he's shaking all over, his grip tightening, his motions growing ever more frantic.

I know what he wants.

Apart from *this*, of course.

And I'm surprised at how much I want it too; the exquisite pain of his fangs upon my skin, the feeling of his lips against me, the slow-burning draining of my essence.

The thought arouses me ever further.

"You can," I whisper. "Corvan, you—"

He doesn't hesitate.

He bites me and takes my blood *again*. This time, I'm not even feeling drained. The trees have done something to me. I feel lighter. Stronger. More *alive*. There's no weariness. The wounds from the last time have already healed.

"*You're so fucking sweet,*" he whispers.

I unravel completely.

He takes me closer to the edge of oblivion.

Madness overtakes me. Just as he needs my essence, I need his. I take his face into my hands and raise his lips to mine. The taste of my blood lingers on his mouth. It's coppery but also sweet. I kiss him and bite down on his lower lip, breaking his skin.

"Mm," he moans as he thrusts deeper.

My bite sends him into a frenzy. He fucks me harder, completely filling me, engulfing me with his presence.

And as soon as his blood hits my tongue, I *feel* it, as if it's infused with hot spices and effervescent magic. It dances down my throat and sparks the feeling of warm pressure in my chest—*again*.

Magic.

Mine, reacting to his.

Engulfed in his presence, I can barely question the impossible.

Better just to *accept*.

It feels good. I want this—I want *him*.

And he devours me, both inside and out.

He tenses and shudders, his thrusts becoming more and more savage. He clamps his lips on my neck again and bites.

He takes, and takes.

Then he finds release, and it's blissful.

The dancing energy inside me bursts forth. I wrap my arms and legs around him and hold on tightly as wave after wave of pleasure crashes through me, making me twist and writhe against him.

He holds me.

I'm filled with the sudden urge to consume him—his dark intensity; his tapestry of secrets and pain.

And the magic in me unravels, wild and uncontrolled.

The sun bursts forth through the high windows, crowning us in gold. The world shifts and tilts. My mind explodes with pain and desire and wanting.

My fingers thrum with power. I run them through his soft, damp hair and let out a soft moan.

I come.

Again.

The bed seems to buckle and melt. It bows in the center. I open my eyes just in time to see the wooden posts twisting and bending, splitting into multiple tendrils that weave together to form a living-wood cage around us.

If Corvan notices at all, he doesn't show it.

This is *my* power, but I don't know how to stop it. Panic rises in me, along with urgency, along with euphoria, mingling with the afterglow of the most intense pleasure I've ever known.

The living wood closes in around us, wrapping us in a strange cocoon.

It doesn't hurt us, though. Its touch is gentle; almost a caress.

And then it stops moving. It solidifies.

I look up at Corvan in surprise, meeting his smoldering half-lidded gaze.

A lazy smile drifts across his lips. "What did you do to us, Finley?"

At least the rogue wooden tendril-monster—which has developed a mind of its own—isn't stopping us from being face to face. I can see him so clearly, right down to every last inhumanly perfect detail. His eyelashes are long and dark and soft against his austere features. His gaze is molten. I could drown in him.

And although my powers are out of control, I don't even feel afraid right now.

"I don't quite know," I murmur, tempted to rest my head against his broad chest and close my eyes. "I don't know anything anymore."

"You know how to ruin me," he says quietly, a hint of amusement in his tone. "And entrap me. That's no small feat."

"Corvan..." My cheeks heat up as I feel a flicker of irritation. "We are trapped in a wooden, er, *morphology* of my own making. I fear that if I don't try and get a hold of this thing, it's going to get us in trouble sooner or later."

Corvan's lazy smile turns a little wicked. "My dear, we're already in trouble. I'm intoxicated by you, and you seem to manifest power every time you take a bite of me. So just stop biting me... or learn to control it."

"C-control it?"

"It seems like you have too much magic at times. That you don't know how to contain it nor release it. You don't even know what it feels like. So these things occur at certain moments—when your threshold for control is lowered. You melt the arm of a chair. Get stuck in the ground. It seems ingesting my magic sets it off. So you could just stop doing that for the foreseeable future."

"The second time it happened—when I was tethered to the earth—I didn't taste your magic."

"No, but the effect lessened after I drank from you—when I took *your* magic. And the only thing that happened to me was that I felt invigorated beyond belief."

"So I make you strong, and you restrain me?" I stare at him in disbelief. "We're a likely pair, aren't we?"

"I wouldn't have to *restrain* you, as you put it, if you could control your power." Corvan reaches up and caresses my cheek, barely able to move through the tangle of deformed wood. "But that will come with time. You've only *just* come into this, Finley. It's incomprehensible and frightening, I know. You'll probably lose control time and time again before you can master it, to the point where you'll feel like you're going insane. But don't worry, because I'm here, and I'm not going to let you slip. And I suspect that when you're done, you'll be immensely powerful."

"I don't want to be powerful," I grumble. "All I ever wanted was to..."

"Was to *what*?" his touch becomes achingly gentle. At least the rogue wooden tendrils haven't restrained his hands.

Corvan's simple question floors me. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, trying to think beyond the cold walls of Ruen castle and the faint hopes of my previous existence.

“What I want...” I inhale his delicious scent; I savor the feeling of his warm body welded against mine. Spent, he’s still inside me.

I want you to stay with me, always.

I open my eyes again. “I want my life to be my own. I want you to be mine and mine only. I want those I cherish to be protected. I want to know my mother’s truth; whether she’s truly alive. I want those who hurt her to be punished. And if she *is* alive, I want her to... to...”

A trickle of wetness slips down my cheek.

Am I... *crying*?

I didn’t expect to...

Corvan doesn’t say anything. He just waits, giving me time to gather my thoughts.

And in the space between us, I find my yearning.

“If it came to pass that my mother were alive, and I was somehow able to meet her, I would understand if she were to harbor resentment in her heart, and yet... I wouldn’t want for her to despise me.”

“Finley.” Corvan’s voice is impossibly tender. “How could *anyone* despise you?”

“I carry my father’s tainted blood. The harsh light of reality makes the truth obvious to me now. That he’s a cruel man, of feeble character, opportunistic and vain; wantonly ambitious. She had no choice in my conception.”

Corvan’s gentle fingers brush a tendril of stray hair away from my cheek. “Finley, our blood doesn’t define us.”

The tenderness in his face leaves me breathless. My thoughts are a visceral mess of desperate wanting and dread. “How could *you* of all people say that?”

His expression turns aching bittersweet. “An apt question, considering that all I own and command has come to me through birthright, not hard work and merit. I’m ashamed to say that when I was younger, I was mostly indifferent to the

gravity of the situation— to what it truly means to be my father’s son. It was only when I went into the military—when I traveled across countries and fought battles against ordinary men who march beneath *other* flags—that I began to understand.” His lips twist with dark amusement and sorrow. “I take no pride in being the once-heir to a genocidal maniac, Finley. And I have spent the latter part of my life quietly fighting against everything that my father represents. It’s a cruel trick of fate that the gods, in all their bloody mystery, have chosen to grant me the power to take everything in one fell swoop if I choose. So you see, Finley, my father is no better than yours, and if I were to give in to all I’ve learned from him, I would be a hundred times worse. But somehow, there’s enough in this world to keep me from turning into some kind of monster, and now that I’ve found you...” He goes quiet, studying me, his eyes ablaze. “It makes it all worthwhile. *Everything*. I shouldn’t even have to say this, but you’re nothing at *all* like your father, Finley, and if we happen to find your mother, I have no doubt she’ll see beyond the wrongs that were done to her.”

I cling to his words desperately. The supple wood cage encasing us tightens ever further, as if it were my heart itself, greedily holding onto this man, who makes me more than myself.

Because I never want to let him go.

“You will learn to control it, Finley. You *will* overcome yourself, because the sum of us is far greater than the parts.” His smile turns a little bit wicked. Fangs gleam in the ever-brightening sunlight. “Until that happens, I can, of course, volunteer to absorb your excess magic.”

I’m still caught up in the heat of his desire.

I can never escape, nor do I want to.

I can’t take this anymore; this pressure, this uncertainty.

He’s the only one that’s ever made me feel perfectly whole.

“*Fine*, Corvan.” As magic crackles and seethes in my veins, I tip my head back and offer him my neck—*again*. It’s just too maddening—the thought that he’ll drink from me again and again, and he gets terribly aroused by it. “Just... *fine*.”

“Hmm,” he rumbles, managing to look both supremely satisfied and terribly thirsty. Hasn’t he just had my blood? He’s already wanting more?

And he’s hard again, and he’s still inside me. I never knew a man could become aroused again so quickly, but then again, he isn’t an ordinary man.

I close my eyes and tremble as he kisses my neck with such tender intensity. His lips form delicious imprints against my skin—as if I’m being branded with his wanting.

And it occurs to me that as much as he gives succour to me, this man needs me too.

Not just for my blood.

This man has been teetering on the edge. For all his outward perfection and natural ease at command, he’s been a little bit... *lost*.

Maybe I could be the very thing that stops him from becoming what he despises.

As his fangs pierce my skin, I shudder in awe and delight. Realization unfurls like a cautious bloom.

Corvan Duthriss is so much more than what I’d imagined him to be.

And the way he feeds from me—deeply, reverently, as if my blood is the most precious thing in existence—is everything.

What use is there in demanding restraint when his bite feels *this* damn good?

The wild power drains out of me, and the restrictive warped wood cage—hard to believe it’s *my* doing—unravels and retreats along with the pressure inside my body.

“Mmm,” Corvan rumbles, withdrawing his fangs, kissing me gently over the place where he’s ravaged me time and time again.

Then he leans in and kisses me on my lips. Something crackles between us—a faint frisson of energy; a tiny burst of stars and magic.

And the wooden posts above us swirl and solidify back into their normal, rigid form.

I’m spent and euphoric. Corvan caresses the side of my face with a touch so tender I melt all over again.

He kisses my forehead. I’m completely helpless against him.

“Sleep a while, Finley. You’re safe here.” Slowly, tantalizingly, he withdraws himself from me. My insides clench and I briefly lament the loss of him; of the way we fit together so wickedly perfectly.

Corvan slips out of bed and pulls the silken covers over me, tucking me in as if I were a precious child.

“Where are you going?” I murmur, languorous and adrift.

“Not too far.” He rises to his full height, treating me to a sublime view of every last cut and honed inch of him. The rising sun bathes him in gold, making him appear godlike. “I’ll be within earshot of you. I just need to make some preparations.”

“Preparations for what?” I’m hardly able to concentrate on what he’s saying. His whole damn presence is just too distracting.

“Finley…” His expression hardens. “I’ve been turning a blind eye to the obvious for far too long. I’ve been away from the capital for far too long. And in my absence, the fools in the court have grown arrogant. I need to remind them of their place.”

He radiates a cold, terrible anger. I almost fear he might lay waste to Lukiria itself.

“Corvan,” I say softly. “I’ve come to know you as a fair and just ruler. A man who understands the consequences of power wielded thoughtlessly and cruelly. If you weren’t that man, I wouldn’t be here before you, like *this*. So don’t allow anger to cloud your judgement.”

There’s a terrifying stillness about him. For a moment, I catch a glimpse of the *other* Corvan; the one that’s carved out a stronghold for himself in the icy, unforgiving North. “My sweet Finley.” He leans in and kisses me again, so gentle in spite of his harsh demeanor. “Actions have consequences, and whatever I end up doing will be a reaction to the fact that someone tried to take you away from me. They *harmed* you. And I will use every last sliver of power that I possess to ensure that nobody ever hurts you again.”

I open my mouth. A retort dances on the tip of my tongue; a reflex. *I shall be fine. I can weather pain and humiliation. I’ve endured before and I’ll endure again. It isn’t anything to be taken so seriously.*

But I hold my words, because there’s a small part of me that so desperately wants to let him tear the world apart for me.

CORVAN

I leave her spent and nestled in my very own bed.

It actually doesn't take much to convince her to rest. Dark lashes flutter against her luminous skin. She's tired from the journey to Niize, and exhausted from the terror of almost being stolen away. She's still in shock from the aftermath of the forest; of the ancient tree that unlocked her uncontrolled power.

Let her rest as I fail to contain my astonishment.

My wife-to-be is a dryad.

Such a thing is almost unheard of, but she's here with me, and she's brimming with power and she's utterly intoxicating. Her blood is the sweetest thing I've ever tasted, and it's only become more tantalizing with her transformation. Now that I've had it, I cannot want for anything else but *her*.

And despite all the madness that has assailed us, she refuses to let herself succumb to fear.

Just like when she first encountered me.

Soon, I'll be traveling to Lukiria, and I'll be bringing her with me, because there's no way I'm going to let her leave my side again until I have the entire Rahavan Empire under my control.

Unable to help myself, I steal another glance at her as I hastily dress. The more I get to know her, the more gorgeous she appears.

Her eyes flutter gently as she drifts into sleep. Her dark hair is strewn across the white pillow; an ethereal halo framing her face.

In the soft morning glow, she's utterly radiant.

And she's in *my* bed.

I'm consumed by her, to the point where my sanity might just shatter if anything were to happen to her

That's why I have to take her with me. I don't trust anyone else to be able to guard her. From now on, until I feel that she will be safe, she remains by my side.

Forever, if she has to.

And it's dawned on me with icy clarity.

Exactly what I must do.

I'll destroy anyone that seeks to harm her. Even if that happens to be my father, although I don't *think* he was the one behind this.

I exit my chambers and cross the hallway, entering my office, where embers still glow in the hearth. I reach a nondescript wooden door at the end of a long row of bookcases.

I open it and step into my private armory.

It's a windowless room enclosed on all sides by thick stone walls. I don't need a lantern to help me see. My vampiric eyesight quickly adjusts to the darkness.

In the distance, I can hear Finley's breathing, slow and rhythmic, deepening into sleep. I can hear her shifting slightly in the sheets, and the faint whisper of the breeze outside.

If anyone dares step inside my chambers, I'll know.

I'll be there in a heartbeat.

She'll be perfectly safe, as long as I'm near.

My attention turns to the swords hanging on the wall, nestled in their sheaths. I have at least a dozen swords to my name. A couple are sturdy and basic—I use them for training.

The rest are proper war-swords; forged by masters, their blades kept finely honed.

The sword was always my weapon of choice. Kaithar uses his axe. Some prefer maces or halberds or crossbows.

I like the blade for its speed and swiftness and simplicity. When I was human, I was considered unnaturally gifted at the sword. So much so that after a while, I became used to fighting alone in battle.

My men knew to give me a wide berth, as anyone that got in my way risked his head.

That was why I went into the mountains alone, to slay the dragon the Khaturians had summoned from its millennial slumber. Some would say it was sheer folly; a commander risking his life when he should be giving orders from the back.

But if the dragon were allowed to rise, the battle would be over, and the empire lost. The Khaturians have no respect for weakness. They would have driven down into Tyron and seized the Northlands.

And the morale of my men was low, shattered by the constant attrition of arcane magic, which they'd never had to face before.

I knew that if I could slay the dragon, the battle would be over.

They never expected me to steal into the valley and lure it to me; to shoot it with poison-tipped bolts, taking both its eyes out.

Of course, it wouldn't be a feared dragon if it hadn't scorched me with its fire and rended me with its claws; if it hadn't viciously whipped me with its tail. With my body broken and burned, I knew I didn't have long. As the poison took hold and it fell to the icy ground, roaring with all the fury of a summer firestorm, I fought through excruciating pain, drawing on the very last of my strength to take my sword to its neck.

Dragons have a vulnerable part, just below the angle of the jaw, where their scales are thinner than anywhere else.

I read that in a book somewhere.

Turns out, the book was somewhat accurate. But it didn't explain that a dragon's blood is as hot as lava, and deep cerulean in color.

It spurted all over me, burning my already scalded flesh, and I was certain I was as good as dead.

I remember collapsing into the snow, surrounded by the burning blood of a dragon.

I died. I know it, because I saw the Death Goddess herself, and at the time, I thought she was the most beautiful thing I'd seen in my life.

That was until I met Finley.

A sigh escapes me as I walk toward the wall and select a sword. This one is made from Solkrian bluesteel. It's simple in construction, with a perfectly balanced heft and a blade made from thousands of layers of folded steel.

It's the sword I slayed the dragon with.

I'll use it again, to slay anyone or anything that poses a threat to Finley.

Even if they're of my very own blood.

A suit of black leather armor hangs on the other side of the room.

Battle-armor.

I quickly don it. The leather is supple and flexible, yet thick enough to deflect a glancing blow from a sword or dagger. Not that I need it—I heal quickly enough—but if I'm going to be stealing into Lukiria with the intent to mete out justice, I might as well look the part.

That's how they speak of me, isn't it? A bloodthirsty warmonger. A mad general. Apparently, I've used the Khaturians' arcane magic to gain unnatural strength and immortality.

I tighten the buckles and fasten the ties. The leather is form-fitting, molding perfectly to the shape of my body. I hang

the sword at my waist. It feels comfortable and familiar, only now, I wield it as easily as one might carry a feather.

And yet, Finley sleeps.

To the chaos and fury of my thoughts, the sound of her slumber is peace.

Let her rest for now. Soon enough, I'll have to ask her to endure again.

I almost feel guilty. She's been taken from her simple life in Ruen and thrust into my dangerous world. I could *almost* feel terrible about it, but she's faced it all with no complaint.

And now my fate is tied to hers.

I close my eyes and tip my head back, listening to the sounds of the castle; men stirring, servants going about their morning duties, horses snorting, the wind rising and falling, howling past the rooftops.

Everything is more acute than before. The sounds are sharper. My body is lighter.

Actually, I feel invincible.

That's her doing.

Her sweet, glorious blood.

If my power is drawn from Hecoa, and she is a child of Eresus, then it makes perfect sense.

Death feeds on Life.

Life cannot exist without Death.

Outside, I hear the grindstones. Blades are being sharpened and whetted. Fortifications are being prepared for the onslaught that we expect to come tonight.

The Khaturian shamans will be here soon. When Finley and I visited Niize, I asked them to come down from the mountain to protect the castle. I'll ask them to see to Kaithar, too, for they might know something about treating Lycan bites.

Gods, Kaithar, I hope you don't succumb.

I'm not the sort of man who relies on prayers, but now I visualize Hecoa's smooth, eternal face in my mind. She's silver like the stars and completely impervious to time itself.

Her obsidian eyes see right through me as I recite an invocation in my head.

Eternal Goddess, it appears I've become somewhat of your ilk. And so I must tell you my wishes.

That my people remain safe from harm. My friend Kaithar included.

That Finley's mother is alive and can be granted succour and deliverance from the ones that have tormented her.

That I will have the strength to vanquish evil and protect all that is precious to me. And if the one most precious of all were to risk falling into your domain, you will send her back, for she is mine.

As always, the Goddess remains silent.

Even when I fell into her domain, she was silent. Almost oblivious to the trials and tribulations of mere mortals such as I.

Only, I'm not quite mortal anymore.

I wrap my hand around the familiar hilt of my sword. This one is my favorite, even though it has no name. We Rahavans make a habit of naming our swords, but this one, the dragon-killer, remains without.

Nameless, I call it. I'll take it to Lukiria. A nameless blade that's held steadfast in battle, and most recently, felled the undead that returned from their icy graves on the mountain.

They sent my own dead soldiers to attack me. As I cleaved through rotting flesh and brittle bone, I recognized many of them.

Is this also your doing, Goddess? Or is it an abomination; an affront to your very existence?

Someone in the empire is using magic to raise the dead.

A necromancer.

How dare they desecrate my loyal, faithful soldiers, who died for the sake of the empire?

Who would be so desperate that they would resort to necromancy to attack me? And who would have the means to invoke forbidden magic in the Rahavan Empire itself?

My thoughts turn to my brother, Ansar. Son of Leticia, the first daughter of the Talavarra family. My father married her not long after my mother died—for strategic reasons, of course.

I was seven years old at the time.

The Talavarras control the rich, fertile lands of the south. And unlike my mother's family, who have never set foot in the capital, the Talavarras are well and truly ensconced in the machinations of the Rahavan Court.

Duke Rhaegar Talavarra is one of the most powerful men in the empire, perhaps second only to my father, the emperor. It would actually make perfect sense for Ansar to succeed the throne and not I. And indeed, when I turned vampire, I had no objections to my half-brother inheriting the crown.

But Ansar's always resented me; a sentiment that's perhaps been fueled by Rhaegar and Leticia.

He's seen how I've changed, even if he doesn't truly understand what I am.

Suspicion snakes through my mind, threaded with anger.

Could the Talavarras be responsible for this?

And what role does my father, the master schemer, have to play in all of this?

I've had enough. I don't like the feeling of being manipulated; of being made a pawn in someone else's machinations. That's why the very first thing I do when I arrive in the palace will be to pay the old bastard a visit.

And he will understand that up until now, I've been *very* restrained.

FINLEY

I wake slowly, in a haze of disbelief and wonder, the memory of Corvan's touch lingering on my bare skin.

And the sheets are so soft and silken and warm, and I'm naked. I'm encased in pure luxury and it feels unnatural, because I'm not used to it.

Was all that has passed just a dream?

It's so unreal, it easily could be, but as I trace my fingers along my neck, I feel the faintest of indentations in my skin.

It's where he bit me, again and again.

There's no pain. Just a warm, tingling sensation as I remember the feeling of his lips on me; of his hands caressing me, of...

Heat rises into my cheeks. I twist and squirm, consumed by the thought of him.

He left to do something or other. If only he were in this bed right now. I would demand his kisses. His touch. His tender bite and his hard, impressive cock.

Oh, my...

I can't believe how easily I've become consumed by carnal thoughts of this man. Especially when I'm supposed to be trying to understand how to contain my newfound powers.

Tyron's being attacked by monsters, and it's entirely possible that my mother's still alive, held against her will by those that seek to exploit her power.

Just as my father did.

Abruptly, I sit up, the sheets falling away from my body. Bright morning sunlight streams in through the windows. Outside, the sky is glorious, brilliant blue. One would never imagine that last night, undead hordes were at the gates, and I was being brutally abducted by Captain Kinnivar—a man possessed by strange and terrifying magic—and his robotic guards.

I came so close to...

I close my eyes and shake my head. It matters not. I'm here now, in Corvan's chambers, and I'm safe.

I lift up the sheets and inhale deeply, imbibing traces of his delicious scent. It's the most arousing thing. I can hardly believe it. That this man—this powerful, beautiful, magical creature, this walking contradiction of darkness and light—is mine and mine alone.

The fire in the hearth is dying. The winter chill mixes with the glorious warmth of the sunshine, which carries with it a hint of spring.

It's only then that I notice something out of the corner of my eye. A thrill courses through me. The cold air raises goosebumps on my skin and tautens my nipples. My attention snaps toward the corner of the room, where the windows end and the thick stone walls begin; where the room is untouched by sunlight.

A soft chuckle escapes me. I'm almost giddy with delight.

Because he's there, sitting in a high-backed, winged leather chair as if it were a throne, looking as regal as ever with his aristocratic alabaster features and his long white hair.

He's dressed from neck to toe in black leather armor. It's perfectly formed for his powerful body, making him appear both menacing and irresistible.

He exudes power, effortlessly as always.

A shiver of delight courses through me.

He's *mine*.

“How long have you been here, Corvan, *watching* me?” I glare at him, feigning indignation.

A lazy smile spreads across his lips, making me weak. “Not too long, but long enough. I couldn’t bring myself to wake you. You look so adorable when you’re sleeping, you know? And even more so when you’re waking up. I’m dying to know what’s going through your mind when you’re making such a face.”

I do my best attempt at a deadpan stare, carefully hiding the fact that my heart is hammering wildly. “My lord, that is for me to know and you to find out. I had no idea you were a voyeur.”

“I’m no such thing. It’s only you that I enjoy staring at.” His eyes are glowing again, smoldering in the shadows.

“Don’t tell me you’re thirsty again,” I growl. “Are you really so insatiable?”

“When it comes to you, it appears so. You’re always going to have me on the edge of arousal, Finley. You’d better get used to the idea, because now that you’ve come into your powers, it appears I can drink from you again and again without you suffering from the effects of blood loss.”

I glower. Corvan’s too clever for his own damn good. How does he know that I feel more refreshed and vital than ever before; like I could move mountains on my own? “And how can you be so sure of that? I might be on the verge of collapse, for all you know.”

“But look at you. You’re glowing. Your hair is radiant and your skin looks like it’s been suffused with the essence of a thousand roses. And I can smell your desire from here.” His smile widens, revealing a single wicked fang. “There’s no way you’re drained, my love. You *need* me to drink from you, otherwise you’d be overflowing with wild power.”

“Oh?” I slide out of bed, naked, and walk toward him, my bare feet silent on the cold floor.

Almost imperceptibly, Corvan stiffens. Oh, he’s trying to act smooth, but I can see the way his jaw tightens ever so

slightly; I can see his nostrils flaring.

He's just as aroused as I am.

I walk into the shadow, trapped under his gaze, growing slightly intoxicated by the power I have over him.

I walk right up to him and slide into his lap, bare skin against supple leather, and it's all I can do not to shudder in delight as he runs his gloved hand around my waist and down along the small of my back; over the curve of my ass. "You're reckless, Your Highness. I didn't believe that the man who has so cleverly and meticulously constructed this duchy from the ruins of war could be so reckless."

"Whatever do you mean?" His hand rests on my ass. The other hand goes to my neck, his gloved fingers curling around the spot where he bit me. He smells of leather and musk and spice.

And I *do* want him to fuck me again.

"Well, there was all this talk about a seal, wasn't there? About dangerous unfettered powers and magical bracelets that could contain me. And somehow, the bracelets are destroyed and an ancient tree has made me eat a seed, and I have no idea what's happened to this supposed *seal*. Don't you think it's reckless, then, that you would continue to tempt me in this manner? For all you know, I'm a loose cannon. I could destroy you at any given moment."

In truth, I *am* fearful of hurting someone—of hurting *him*. Those times when my power manifested in wild and unpredictable ways, I was helpless to control it.

I fear the power of the earth; of the trees and the wood that turns to a wild, living thing within my grasp. I could accidentally strangle someone, or crush a body without meaning to.

Corvan simply smiles; a slow, indulgent smile. "Finley, in this strange new world of ours, it seems we deduce most things by accident and chance. And it's become obvious to me that whenever you're overflowing with power, the only thing that can contain you is me. When I drink from you, it subdues

your power. So if you can't control it, I'll simply bite you again and again—until you *learn* to control it.”

“Huh,” I say weakly, overwhelmed by his simple logic and his overall sexiness. “It seems you get the better deal out of this.”

“Are you sure?” He slides his hand around the curve of my ass and over my thigh, slipping his fingers between my legs, parting them ever so slightly. “You know that every time I bite you, I can't help but want to fuck you, too.”

He takes a deep breath.

A gentle shudder goes through him.

“But then again, even if I didn't bite you, I'd still want to fuck you. You're so gorgeous, Finley. More beautiful than anything I've ever laid my eyes upon before.”

I shrug—or at least, I attempt to shrug, my composure quickly falling away. “Well, you're beautiful, too, even if you are a *little* too cocky at times.”

His thumb finds my entrance. Encased in supple leather, it feels rough and smooth at the same time. A different sensation. I rather like it.

His eyebrows rise as he feigns innocence. “Whatever do you mean by that?”

“I'm a dryad, remember? If you get out of hand, I might just bind you with wood.”

“If it's you... I wouldn't mind being bound.”

I laugh. “You're impossible, you know that?”

“As are you.” He slides his thumb inside me. Then a finger, then another, stretching me.

I gasp as my arousal swells; as he gently moves his fingers back and forth, pleasuring me.

He leans in, his warm breath feathering my ear. “And here I was, all ready for battle; preparing to storm a castle for your sake.”

“Well, the storming of said castle’s going to have to wait a little, isn’t it?”

“So it seems.” He withdraws his fingers and gently rubs my clit, sending me into a silent little frenzy. Suddenly, he’s on his feet, lifting me up in his arms and gently depositing me in his big leather armchair.

He drops to his knees.

Spreads my legs wide.

Kisses me between them.

I close my eyes and arc backwards, consumed by pleasure—and *him*.

Enemies can wait.

We’re a little preoccupied right now.

FINLEY

After Corvan found me awake, he made sure I was well fed. I had a sumptuous lunch of smoked river fish and freshly baked bread, accompanied by verdant salad of garden greens and fragrant herbs with a delicate citrus oil dressing. Then there was stewed cinnamon apples and whipped lemon yoghurt, and mint tea to wash it all down.

He ordered me to rest again. Then I bathed and dressed—in simple black traveling garb of warm, sturdy fabric and leather.

Corvan has been in and out all day, attending to business around the castle. He's coordinating the defenses and arranging the burial of the dead. Occasionally, I hear the solemn chanting of burial rites, delivered by a Hecoan priest.

They're burying both the recently deceased and the corpses of those that became undead, giving last rites to both. They're arming the soldiers and setting up weapons on the battlements.

Corvan's expecting an attack. He thinks someone's waiting for him to leave the castle.

Suddenly, all of Tyron is in war-mode.

From my vantage point through Corvan's window, I watch as heavily armed men march across the grounds. Occasionally, a great boom rocks the glass—they're testing the cannons.

It's a world away from the bliss I enjoyed at the soft emergence of dawn—with *him*.

Corvan's come back to check on me several times. He's been terribly doting and protective today, bossing me about resting, eating, making sure the bite marks on my neck have healed—which they *have*; I seem to heal much easier since my powers were unlocked. When I took him to task for his overbearing behavior, he cupped my face and looked into my eyes. "*Finley, I know you aren't used to being treated like a queen, but you must allow me to take excessively good care you, even just for today.*"

"*Why?*" I'd asked, bemused by his sudden intensity.

"*I nearly lost you. And the realization of it has driven me a little mad. So don't take me to task if I want to spoil you a little. I can't help it.*"

And it occurred to me then that something inside of him had changed.

He was different, somehow. More protective. More doting. And a little on edge. I can sense a cold anger inside him. It fills me with a hint of trepidation when I think about what he might be capable of.

And when I think of it the other way round—if someone were to try and steal me away from him *again*—I can understand him perfectly well, because I, too would be furious.

I want nothing more than to stay here in Tyron, by his side.

I want peace. I want the ghosts of the past to stop haunting Corvan. And it were up to me, I'd vanquish them all.

I close my eyes and try to feel the strange, unfamiliar power within me. I seek that pressure; the feeling that my own soul is too big for my mortal body, that wild energy that needs release, bursting forth from my hands, forming living tendrils out of wood and summoning the ancient forest trees.

I demand to control that power.

And yet, I find nothing.

It's so *frustrating*. Eulisyn gave me that damn heart-seed, and for what? What good am I if I can't even use my powers

to protect and defend Corvan the way he does me?

Never before in my life have I yearned for power.

Now, I wish I was so strong I could vanquish all of Corvan's enemies with a thought.

I don't want to rule over others. I don't want to try and claim some sort of false superiority.

I just want peace.

I want Corvan to know peace.

Why do they torment him so? Why can't they just let him *be*?

A deep sigh escapes me as I open my eyes and contemplate the deepening shadows in the courtyard. The sun is starting to fade. The promise of night looms, and with it comes a sense of foreboding.

I know that Corvan wants to depart at first darkness; he plans to steal into the imperial palace under the cover of night. He said it so easily, as if stealing into the place unnoticed is as easy as taking a stroll in the woods.

One does not simply infiltrate into the emperor's inner sanctum, but apparently, Corvan can.

"I grew up there. There isn't a single nook or cranny that I don't know like the back of my hand."

And just like that, I feel his maddening presence again, as if merely thinking about him has summoned him.

I didn't hear him—I never do.

But his approach was perfect—a whisper of warmth across the back of my neck; his hand, gently resting on my waist. And he gives me time to register his presence.

"I don't mind being spoiled," I say at last, drinking in his familiar, comforting scent, "as long as you promise to let me shoulder some of your burden now and then."

Warm lips press against the back of my neck, planting soft kisses. I curl my fingers over his, my thumb grazing his rough,

callused palms.

Deep in his throat, he makes a low, soft sound—like a growl, or a purr of a contented predator. “What if I don’t wish you to?”

A knowing smile curves my lips. I knew he would be like this; hard and stubborn and unyielding. He isn’t used to letting anyone take care of what he sees as *his* responsibilities. Except for Kaithar, maybe. “You can’t have it both ways, Corvan. If you want to take me, then you have to take all that comes with me.” I lean into his solid form, basking in his warmth; his strength. It feels as if nothing can shake this man. “Have you ever really had anything you truly wanted in this life?”

“Huh. That’s a strange question to ask a Duthriss like me, don’t you think?”

I turn my head and look up, meeting his gaze, which is soft and slightly bemused. “You told me you were destined to take your father’s throne. That you never had any choice in the matter. And everything you do is out of service or duty. So tell me, what do *you* want? Not Archduke Duthriss, lord and protector of Tyron. I want to know what *you* want, Corvan.”

He gently caresses my jaw with his leather-encased thumb, sending a thrill through me. “Astute as ever, my love. Believe it or not, there *are* things I’ve learned to enjoy in this life. My books. Swords. Traveling to distant lands in the deep of night. The cold and silence of an early winter morning—which I hadn’t been able to fully appreciate for so long until I met you, because the sun was forbidden to me. But you are right, Finley. I’ve lived most of my life according to the will of another, and I’ve grown damn sick and tired of it. Hence why I left the capital and consolidated my power here. And months ago, if you were to ask me the same question, I would say there were only a few simple pleasures that could give me a shadow of the feeling people call *happiness*. And now?” He leans in and kisses me softly, his lips meeting mine, making my toes curl in the best of ways. “Now, I know what it’s like to see the face of the divine before me. I know what it’s like to touch her and taste her. And nothing in this existence is more

coveted by me than *you*, Finley. Next to you, all my earthly desires become trivial.”

My breath catches. I falter. Can I really go through with this? Wouldn't it be easier to just let all-powerful, hyper-capable Corvan have his way and do whatever he wants with me? Can't I just drown in his perfection?

No.

I can't do that. I would never forgive myself.

I turn around and face him. I look up into his crimson eyes, which burn so bright-and-dark in the wan light of the setting sun. “I can't stand back and let the world consume you, Corvan. I can't pretend to understand what it's like to be raised as you've been, nor can I comprehend the horrors you must've faced as you fought an old man's war up in the mountains. But I have keen eyes and a quick mind and I can think for myself. And I learn fast. Whatever you have to deal with, I can help you shoulder that burden.” I take his hands; so big and rough and powerful. So pale against my own skin. He's the night to my day. And he's completely entranced by me. “Let me serve you,” I entreat him, surprised by the intensity in my own voice. “Just like you serve everyone else.”

Corvan blinks. His eyes widen ever so slightly. I relish his reaction. It's so rare to see him caught off-guard like this. “It isn't a problem, Finley. This is what I do. I'm used to it. And there's no reason why I can't serve *you*.”

“Well, that's a given, but you can't do everything on your own.” I reach up and touch his face, caressing his jaw. He's filled with dark tension and quiet anticipation. He's holding onto things. Secrets of the empire. Unknowns of his own existence. Responsibility for the whole damned empire. How can a single person carry all of *that*? “I'm here now, and as you said, I'm going to be powerful. I'm *determined* not to let this ability of mine go to waste. So you have no choice but to humor me, my lord.”

His nostrils flare ever so slightly. His eyes are glowing again. My body fills with desire as he puts his arm around my waist and pulls me toward him. “Fine. I'll humor you. And...

thank you. I will take you up on your offer to serve, as long as I can serve you however I please. And as long as you understand that you aren't leaving my side until I can be certain that I've destroyed everything that's a threat to you. *And* until I'm convinced that you can hold your own against extraordinary enemies."

"That I won't dispute." In the face of his fierceness, I just smile. He's too delectable.

"Good." His expression softens a fraction. "Finley, when we reach the palace, I'm going to go straight to my father. I suspect they'll be expecting me. I wouldn't be surprised if the whole thing is some sort of attempt at a trap. But it means that I might have to do some bad things."

"I know. What's at stake. What you're capable of. And I won't hold you back."

His lips twist into a bittersweet smile that makes my heart ache. "Oh, my love. But sometimes, you *have* to. Because you're the only one that can."

CORVAN

The last thing I do before we leave for Lukiria is visit Kaithar.

The sun has disappeared below the wintry skyline, granting me the welcome respite of darkness.

Finley comes with me—she insisted, and who am I to deny her? It's just as well, for her quiet presence beside me is a salve for my cold anger. She's the only one that can temper my discontent.

We navigate three flights of stairs until we reach the top floor, where Kaithar's office is located. His personal living quarters are adjacent to his office, although he spends most of his free time in Sanzar, where he owns a house.

Kaithar is an avid gardener. Vikurians are brilliant agriculturalists, and the produce that comes out of Southern Vikur is second to none. Utilizing greenhouses, Kaithar has even managed to grow some of the rare fruit and vegetable cultivars from his homeland in cold Tyron.

The door to his office is open. Warm lamplight flickers from inside.

I knock.

"Come in." Kaithar's voice is a deep rumble, laced with a hint of his usual wry humor.

We find him sitting in an old, worn armchair in the corner. His expression is strained—the hard line of his jaw betrays the tension in him.

He has visitors.

A Khaturian and a medic.

Sylhara sits across from him, immediately recognizable by her striking blue hair. A mortar and pestle are cupped in her hands, filled with a thick black poultice. An astringent herbal smell fills the room, overwhelming my heightened senses.

Vinciel's here, too. He leans against the wall, arms folded, a frown crossing his elegant features.

It's no surprise that the Khaturians have answered my summons so quickly. Just as I was able to cross the mountains with Finley in my arms, using the power of my magically transformed body, they're able to use magic to travel vast distances quickly.

It's nothing short of a miracle that we were able to hold them back for so long. I put it down to the sheer grit and tenacity of the men that serve under me.

My gaze drops to the wound on Kaithar's forearm. It's been covered in an astringent black poultice that makes my eyes water.

Kaithar's dark gaze comes to rest on Finley and I. He tips his head respectfully. "Finley. I'm happy beyond hope that you're safe and well." He gives me a meaningful stare. I know what he's thinking. *For his sake, as well as yours.*

Finley tips her head in acknowledgment. In spite of what's happened to her, she's amazingly calm, radiating a perfect mixture of restraint and concern. "Corvan told me about what happened. I don't think you'll lose yourself to the madness of the lycan, Kaithar. You're far too intelligent and strong for that. Besides, *he* needs you, so you aren't allowed to succumb, all right?"

"My lady." Kaithar offers Finley a wry smile. "Now that you've said so, I obviously *can't* succumb. I appreciate your concern, but between Sylhara and Ciel here, I'm sure I'll be taken care of." He chuckles; a deep, rumbling sound that betrays none of his worry. "I'm probably too stubborn to lose to a stupid lycan-curse, anyway. Besides, your future husband

here would drag me back from Hecoa's domain by force if he had to. The only person I know that's more stubborn than I am is *him*."

I roll my eyes at Kaithar. "I don't know whether that's a compliment or an insult."

"You know I hold your stubbornness in the highest esteem, Your Highness."

I almost want to cuff Kaithar over his head for his sarcasm, but I refrain. The man's injured, after all, and a lycan bite is no laughing matter. If not for Finley's serene fortitude and Kaithar's insistent good humor, I'd find myself in a disastrous mood right now.

I turn to Ciel and Sylhara. The physician and the one the Khaturians call *Kiza* are staring at Finley and I with unabashed curiosity.

I feel a prickle of irritation as I glare back at them. "You will cure him. There is no alternative. *Report*."

A chasm threatens to open up inside me. The possibility of losing Kaithar to the affliction of the lycan is unthinkable.

And to think that when we first met, all those years ago, we despised one another.

Now he's my loyal commander. My good and cherished friend. He's gotten me out of a sticky situation more often than I can remember.

And I still haven't gotten the chance to make right the injustices my family perpetrated on his family.

Kaithar is the rightful heir to the Bareem Estate. I've long wanted to seize those lands back and return them to him, but Kaithar's the one that convinced me to wait.

Wait until the emperor dies. Your father surely doesn't have much time left in him. The situation in Vikur is still delicate, and I don't want my people to suffer any more than they already have. Have patience, my brother.

Once again, Kaithar was one that tempered my impatience.

But now, my impatience is more than justified.

Recognizing my mood, Ciel offers a placating gesture. “He took your blood. That’s a start. The *magic...*” he gives Sylhara a wary side-eye, because Ciel has always been cautious around magic, “that resides in you will slow down the effects of the lycan curse. This poultice of Blackroot and Elfrey neutralizes the burning acid. But ultimately, he needs to go to Niize urgently. For a purification ritual.”

“Purification?” I arch one eyebrow in curiosity. I’ve never heard of such a thing.

“We’ve existed alongside the lycan for thousands of years,” Sylhara says calmly, her tone cryptic, as if she knows something incredibly important that we don’t. “In the mountains, getting bitten by a lycan isn’t unheard of. They’re the Goddess’s beasts, released from the underworld against her will. Over time, they’ve adapted to the mortal world. And we don’t seek to eliminate their magic, just harness it. Some of our warriors yet live... *transformed.*”

I don’t like the sound of it, but who am I to argue? “And one who undergoes this purification ritual... can go on to live normally afterwards?”

“In most cases, yes.”

I turn to Kaithar. “Do you have any concerns? Objections?”

Wearing an enigmatic expression, he shrugs. “I don’t want to turn into a yellow-eyed, frothing-at-the-mouth lunatic. I wouldn’t do that to you, Corvan. Couldn’t bear the thought of you having to be the one to put me down. I’ll go up into the mountains. It isn’t even a question.”

Around the edges of his dark irises, I can see a faint ring of golden. The lycan magic’s already starting to infiltrate his body.

My throat grows tight, turning my voice hoarse. “Then go. Don’t waste time here. The battle plans are drawn. The captains and lieutenants have their orders. And this time, the Khaturians fight alongside us.”

Kaithar chuckles softly. “Times change, eh?”

“Times change, Kaith.” I exchange a quick glance with Finley, who is perfectly composed; expectant, curious. Right now, she feels both vulnerable and volatile, with the promise of immense untapped power lurking beneath her calm surface.

My focus returns to Kaithar. I lean forward, dropping my voice so only he can hear. “I’ll end this madness once and for all. Whether it’s my father’s doing, or that of someone who seeks to usurp him, I’ll destroy them. They dared to desecrate our dead. They dared to lay their hands on my betrothed. And you’ve been gravely hurt.”

Kaithar gives me a long, appraising look. Then he nods in approval. “I can see that you’re furious, my brother, but no matter what you find in the capital, don’t ever forget what we fought for.”

It’s both a warning and a caution. Kaithar knows me too well.

I don’t say anything. Cold anger makes me silent. And part of me is afraid of what I’d do—if they harmed her.

I’m not so sure I can make any promises to Kaithar right now. “I’ll do what needs to be done. And I’ll seek out and strike at the heart of whatever’s causing the undead to rise.”

Kaithar’s expression turns solemn. “I believe Kinnivar and the guards were being controlled. There’s no way they would have betrayed you otherwise.”

At the mention of the betrayal, my anger burns ever colder. I remember Kinnivar’s strange behavior when we last met in my office. Was he already planning on betraying me, or had his mind been corrupted by dark magic?

And to think that *he* was the one that found my father’s message scroll.

That was genuine, though. Nobody can duplicate my father’s handwriting.

My mind spins. None of this makes sense. And I know for certain that outside of my innermost circle, I can’t trust

anyone.

“Some can be infected,” Ciel says softly. “From a bite or scratch of an undead, the living can be infected, and controlled by the same one that commands the undead horde.”

That would make sense, and it would be the most reassuring explanation.

The implications are terrifying. If more of my men were to be turned...

“Make sure command and all the soldiers are aware of this,” I order. “They must wear protective attire and avoid being bitten or scratched at all costs. If an injury from an undead is to occur...”

“If your men are infected by the undead, we can attempt *purification*,” Sylhara says gently. “But a cure isn’t guaranteed. It depends entirely on the will of the infected individual. The only other alternative is death.”

I meet her pale-and-dark eyes. “See to it that whatever needs to be done is done.”

She offers the slightest of bows. “Your will shall be done, *O’Kral*.”

Her words are deferent, but there’s a warning in her wintry gaze.

Uphold your end of the bargain.

There’s always a condition. I must continue to keep the lands of the Khatu safe. The Rahavan Empire will never invade beyond the mountains again.

I glance out the window. The moon casts a silvery glow across the land. Cold seeps through the walls, overpowering the warmth from the glowing hearth.

It’s quiet.

Unnervingly so.

And I’m about to walk into a trap, with Finley by my side.

FINLEY

We stand high on the castle walls, watching thin clouds scud across the night sky, momentarily dampening the bright glow of the moon.

The wind whips around us.

Energy ripples through my body. It feels like sparks are dancing in my veins. I can barely hold myself together. I fear that if I lose my composure, the wild dryad magic will spill out of me in all directions, tying me down to the earth itself.

The trees sway in the wind, whispering their dark secrets to me.

Release our daughter from the prison of iron and stone, which reeks of corruption and decay. Release her. She must claim her dues. He must take it all.

And our child will come unto her own.

He must take it all? Are they talking about *him*? I steal a glance at Corvan, who is looking out across his lands. His expression is cold and distant, his face inhumanly flawless. He could be carved from marble right now. Since I met him, it's almost as if... he's changed a little. Become *more* unearthly, less human. I suspect that *I've* contributed to that change more than a little.

Not that I mind. Underneath it all, he's still the same old Corvan, and his presence beside me is the most reassuring thing ever.

“Ready?” he says softly. He doesn’t need to say much more. He’s already explained it to me in detail—what to expect when we enter the Lukirian palace; the seat of all power in Rahava and the place where Corvan was raised. He’ll go straight to the emperor—his father.

It doesn’t matter if they try to stop him.

He’ll kill anyone that stands in his way.

The thought of it fills me with horror and dread, but I don’t dare hold him back. I know what’s at stake. I know what he’s been through.

I know what *I* want.

And Valdron Duthriss—Emperor of Rahava—isn’t exactly a saint himself.

Neither are the nobility of the Rahavan court.

In fact, they plunder, steal, and kill with surprising regularity.

My father included.

Steeling myself, I nod.

I’m ready.

With great tenderness, Corvan takes me into his arms, and I’m used to it by now; the feeling of weightlessness, of his immense and impossible strength. “I’m sorry, Finley. This is unorthodox, and rather infuriating, I’d imagine, but it’s by far the quickest way for us to move. Consider it an aerial tour of our beautiful country.”

“The calm before the storm,” I say softly. “I’ve never been to Lukiria, so I’m rather intrigued by it all. If it weren’t for the circumstances of our visit, I’d be quite excited.”

“Really? No matter the size of your family’s estate, you’re still a lady of the peerage. I can’t believe you were never afforded the opportunity to visit the capital.”

“You’ve *met* my father.”

“Fair point.” His brow furrows in consternation. “I should have dismembered a limb, at least. Let me make it up to you. When I’ve brought the empire under control, I’ll take you on a personal tour of the capital and the surrounding regions. I know that place very well. It’s where I grew up, after all. I’m quite certain I can find a few spots that will take your breath away.”

I stare at him in mild disbelief. How is it possible that he can speak of dismembering my father and yet be so sweet within the same sentence?

You’ve already taken my breath away more than once, you know. You infuriating, magnificent man.

“I’ll be content with just the view for now,” I murmur, pressing into his unshakeable form; his familiar, comforting warmth. “When things have settled down, you can take me wherever you want.”

A tiny thrill courses through me as I imagine the possibility of a life without threat; with Corvan at the height of his powers and I, free from the shackles of my past.

Ruen Castle, which once felt so vast, suddenly feels very, very small.

“I’m sorry our first trip away from the castle has to be this, but I’ll make it up to you.” Corvan tightens his arms, making me feel safe against the cold and the whipping wind and the terrible unknown.

Then he leaps up onto the parapet, soundless and light, as if he’s floating in the air.

“*Let’s go,*” he whispers in my ear, his tone both deep and featherlight, sending a ripple of goosebumps across my skin.

How delicious he is.

How can I be afraid of anything when I’m with this man? When he backs me up with his heart and soul?

And he’s swift and resolute. Always constant. Never wavering.

Together, we step into the frosted, moonlight night.

We're in the sky, amongst the glittering stars, and the trees are whispering my name.

Could darkness's embrace feel any more seductive than this? And if the world, lying at our feet, falls away, what would I do?

What *could* I do?

FINLEY

The entire nation of Rahava flows beneath Corvan's massive leaps. He covers leagues upon leagues in a single jump. We cross forests and rivers, frost-limned fields and tiny hamlets, crude dirt roads and wide paved highways. We fly over villages and townships, patchwork fields lying barren in the winter.

We even pass over Ruen. I recognize the castle from the air, and it is indeed smaller than what I remembered. Compared to Tyron, it's insignificant.

And I wonder exactly what my father was so proud of all these years. Ruen is barely productive. Aside from its small army and a scattering of wheat and sheep farms, there's nothing much.

Father just squeezes every last drop of taxes out of the villagers. Season after season, they grow poorer.

Corvan's feet hit the ground again, but I never feel the impact. He absorbs everything with his strong, inhuman body.

He leaps.

Again and again.

We've left Ruen. We're flying over a vast network of lakes, dotted with islands covered in silver-trunked trees. The onset of spring is earlier here; I can make out tiny buds on the ends of the branches.

We cross a rocky landscape, where the stone formations give way to open pits where they're digging things out of the

ground. Then there are farms. Acres upon acres of farmland, fields ploughed and planted; waiting for the onset of spring. They're lined by long, straight irrigation channels that stretch as far as the eye can see. There are more houses here, large farms and lands giving way to smaller blocks and narrow streets. Eventually, there's nothing but buildings and houses.

Corvan drops to a rooftop. And then we're off again, with a clatter of roof tiles.

Moonlight gives way to artificial light. Tall lamps illuminate the streets, giving off a warm gaslight glow. The streets become straighter. I can see vehicles. Carriages and carts. Horses asleep, tied to their posts for the night.

Occasionally, I even see a person, walking hastily, eyes downturned, coats tightly buttoned, as if they're trying to ward off the night.

They have no idea of what soars overhead.

We're ghosts in the sky; mythical things that only exist in fantastical stories.

The houses grow larger, the buildings grander; now they're made of more substantial materials, wood and tin and reed giving way to stone and tile and brick. There are taller buildings, too, not just one or two, but three, four, even five stories.

We cross a river spanned by four or five bridges, some made of stone and graceful arches, others metal, suspended by an array of metal cables.

I see avenues. Trees. Skeletal branches are budded with the promise of spring. Corvan lands on the street itself. A passerby turns in the darkness, startled by something—a sense of our presence, perhaps—even though Corvan doesn't make a sound.

And then we're gone again, before they have a chance to perceive what was right in front of them.

We're so fast. We're invisible. The realization is intoxicating.

We can go *anywhere*.

And all of a sudden, Corvan stops. We're standing on the rooftop of a four-story tall building, one that gives us a wide, sweeping view of the city.

My breath catches.

Lukiria is magnificent.

It's a vast sea of glittering lights, almost as dense and infinite as the stars themselves. It's wide roads and intricate architecture. It's tree-lined avenues and stately parks. It's hewn sandstone and smooth marble.

And everything leads upwards. The higher they go, the larger and grander the buildings become.

It's astounding. Lukiria really is beautiful.

All the wealth in the empire is here, in this city.

And right at the top, on a vast hilltop surrounded by imposing granite walls, topped with parapets and battlements that make Tyron Castle's defenses look small in comparison, there's a palace.

The palace.

It's grander and vaster than anything I could have ever imagined.

It glows, illuminated by powerful lights that form a gradient of light and shadow on the walls.

It's flat and wide and rectangular, and it's the size of at least a hundred Ruen Castles combined. The walls are made from pale sandstone. Tall columns rise on all sides, forming elegant arches between one another.

That's the Lukirian palace.

The seat of all power in the empire.

The jewel in the crown that Corvan was supposed to inherit.

The palace. The vast city. The lands and the rivers and the people.

All of this was supposed to be under *his* command.

I open my mouth to speak, but no words come out. The man holding me against him with such gentleness... this sweet, clever, man, who tries to be righteous in the face of all that he is...

He willingly gave up all of this, without even a hint of regret or bitterness.

It's almost as if he didn't want it in the first place.

"It's bigger than I'd imagined," I say softly, the gentle breeze stealing my words away. I'm a little breathless. A little stunned. My world is expanding at blinding speed. It feels like my mind's about to explode.

"Annoyingly big," Corvan grumbles. "Takes half a morning to walk from one end to the other. But that also makes it easier to infiltrate. We'll go in through one of the underground tunnels. Through the sewers. I apologize in advance for the inconvenience, but I promise you won't get wet."

"Stop apologizing, Corvan." I squirm in his arms. He relents, setting me on my feet. "I'd rather traipse through the sewers than have you carve a path of blood overland."

"We'll come up through the dungeons. Nobody will expect it. It's the middle of the night, after all. From there, we must pass through seven rings of security. My father's chambers are in the innermost sanctum of the palace. *That* part will get bloody, but as you know, I move very fast, so it'll be over before you know it."

My blood runs cold, but I steel myself. This is necessary. If he doesn't strike at the heart of the matter, the attacks on Tyron will continue, and I won't get any closer to finding my mother. I need to stand beside Corvan at all costs. It can't be easy for him. He's returning to the place where he grew up, and he's resolved to become an instrument of death if he has to.

I suspect he doesn't know the full limits of his power.

Regardless, I can't just stand back and watch.

“I feel like I should have something... a weapon of some sort.”

Corvan turns to me, his eyes glowing faintly. He looks both hungry and controlled. A flutter of desire stirs within me.

The mysterious power in my veins reacts to his very presence, filling me with effervescent energy.

How I wish I could control it. I'd spare him all of this pain.

“I will not allow the blood of men to sully your hands for *my* sake,” he says softly, his tone both dangerous and comforting. “No matter what happens, just stay close to me. Whatever strength I need, I'll take from you.”

Then he leans in and kisses me, and whatever stray thought had crept into my mind; whatever fear, or doubt, or worry...

They're all snatched away by his inevitable force.

FINLEY

And that's how we found ourselves walking down the marble halls of the Imperial Palace in Lukiria at a leisurely pace.

It happened faster than I could have imagined. Corvan stole through the streets; through the foul sewers and the oppressive dungeons. All the while, he carried me, never once letting the dirt touch my boots.

It's absurd that he just carries me around like this.

In a vain attempt to preserve my dignity, I offered some feeble attempt at a protest, but he was insistent, as I knew he would be, and what am I supposed to do against an unstoppable force of nature, who bends the fabric of time itself so that we're moving through it at the speed of light itself?

We shot through the sewers and made our way through a maze of iron gates and grilles and massive stone doors. When they were locked, Corvan simply tore metal apart with his bare hands.

I knew he was strong, but I didn't realize he was *that* strong.

When we encountered guards—dozens of them, stationed to guard even this narrow, dank, entrance—he simply became a blur and rendered them unconscious before they knew what was happening.

He's *that* fast.

Several times, he even caught a crossbow bolt, plucking the damn thing out of the air, his vision perfectly sharp in the shadows.

Soon, we found ourselves in the dungeons amongst filth and misery, passing cells with wretched prisoners inside; some displaying signs of torture—poorly bandaged wounds and naked terror in their eyes.

And once again, Corvan left my side several times, disappearing into thin air. Bodies fell to the floor. Not dead, just unconscious, he reassured me. He doesn't *want* to kill, even though it would probably be easier.

He cleared the dungeons with ease, before leading me up many narrow flights of stairs, through dark corridors and hidden passageways, past the servants' quarters, where the palace staff are still asleep in their beds...

Through kitchens and bathhouses. Past cavernous offices and empty chambers that echo with the sound of my footsteps. Everything vast and grand. Everything made from white and grey marble.

There's something cold and sterile about this place. The absence of anything organic—even wood—makes me feel slightly nauseous.

I try to imagine Corvan as a child, walking along these vast corridors. There's no warmth here. It feels like they've tried to recreate someone's vision of heaven—only, it's empty.

Growing up, was he lonely, or was he always surrounded by people? Did he have friends, or was he waited on hand and foot by the ones that served him?

Moving through the empty space, imaginary ghosts of the past flit through my mind.

In this part of the palace, there are no guards, no servants, no administrators or nobleborn lords and ladies.

There's just the gas lamps, glowing mutedly in their sconces.

The floor is polished to a high sheen. It gleams brightly under the golden light. It reminds me of ice—dangerous and slippery.

And moonlight filters in through the tall windows, reminding me that the depths of the night are upon us.

I feel a terrible sense of unease. It's far too quiet. And the magic inside me—the *dryad* side of me—shrivels and recoils from the energy in this place.

“Are you all right, Finley?” Ever perceptive, Corvan must have noticed something.

“I don't like this place,” I whisper. “It feels malevolent.”

“I never liked it either,” he admits quietly. “For many reasons. But it's just a building. Built in my father's time. And he's just a man.”

Suddenly, Corvan stops. He wraps his hand around my wrist and pulls me close. “*The worst is about to come, but it'll be over soon,*” he whispers, his warm breath grazing my ear, sending a ripple of goosebumps across my arms. “*I think my father's at death's door. This is his last chance to rage against the inevitable.*”

I freeze, taken aback by the surrealness of his words.

Valdon Duthriss is... dying?

This is the emperor we're talking about. Corvan's father. And there's no trace of sadness in his voice.

I glance up at him.

He's cold and emotionless. As if he were carved from the marble itself.

“*Oh, Corvan,*” I say, my heart aching for him. “How can you tell?”

His eyes soften as he looks at me. He taps the side of his nose, then points toward his ear. “I can tell. Too many signs. The senses are too acute. I know what death smells like.”

Still, he doesn't betray any grief or sadness.

“What will you do?”

His pale lips curve into a cold smile. “As a son, I should see him one last time. As *his* son, I should rip those secrets from him once and for all, before he takes them to the grave. Don’t stray from my side, Finley. I *need* you now more than ever.”

It’s then that his facade cracks, just a little. I see it in his eyes; the barely restrained emotion. As if the smallest thing could cause him to break.

I curl my fingers around his. Although he’s wearing gloves, I can feel his warmth; the way he trembles ever so slightly. “I’m here. I’m not going anywhere, Corvan.”

Now it’s my turn to lead him. Hand in hand, we walk down the silent corridors until we reach a pair of golden doors. They’re magnificently inlaid with the Imperial Crest—a pair of fierce looking golden phoenixes wearing crowns, staring fiercely at one another as if they’re about to tear each other’s throats out.

“No guards,” Corvan murmurs in surprise. “That means he’s been expecting us.”

He pushes the door open.

We walk through, into another corridor, where the floor is made from polished pale green stone.

“The outer circle,” Corvan says wryly. “We go round and round. Next, we’ll see the first of three gardens.”

And so we walk, and the corridor curves gently around, taking us in a half-circle. At the end is another set of doors. This time, they’re made of gleaming dark wood.

At the sight of the wood, my inner dryad breathes a sigh of relief.

My fingers tingle. The wood is drawing me to it, begging for release. I try and get it to come toward me, but nothing happens.

It’s as if there’s a lock, and I have the key, but I can’t get it to slide in, or turn.

So frustrating. I just want to be able to *do* something.

But the doors aren't the most imposing thing about this entrance.

For the first time, there's somebody *else*.

A pair of guards stand at the entrance, clad in full armor and bearing menacing looking halberds. Large swords hang in sheaths at their waists. Their armor is made of black metal, but it looks light and sleek.

These men are *huge*. Bigger and taller than even Corvan, and *he's* a big boy to begin with.

Undeterred, he releases my hand and walks right up to them.

To my surprise, both guards remove their helms and bow deeply.

Formidable, imperious, Corvan stops and regards them.

His aura washes over me, and for the first time, I get a sense of how intimidating he can really be.

Because he's sizing up these guards, deciding whether or not their act of respect is genuine, and if they try anything stupid...

Goddess help them.

But the guards don't seem to be hostile at all.

"Your Highness." The one on the left, a man with intense blue eyes and a big rust-colored beard, bows again, his demeanor solemn. "His Majesty has been expecting you."

"How long has he been like this?" Corvan's voice is taut with barely restrained anger. I want to go to him, but I sense that he needs to face this alone.

It strikes me that Corvan didn't *know* his father was dying.

Nobody told him.

The guard lowers his eyes. "Can't say, Your Highness. He ordered us to keep it quiet. Nobody but his inner circle and the Elite Guard know of it."

Corvan lets out a soft sigh; part exasperation, part despair. “He’s in his personal chambers?”

“Aye. You’ll find him in his bedchambers. Please, go on right through, Your Highness.” This massive guard, so hard and dangerous, is suddenly gentle. “There’ll be no resistance from us.. None at all.”

Corvan inclines his head in acknowledgment. “And if you swear fealty to me, I won’t hold you accountable for the sins of his rule.”

Then he turns to me, holding out his hand.

I take it without asking, feeling reassured by his strong, warm grip, even though *I’m* the one that should be doing the reassuring.

The guards give me a passing glance, but they stop short of scrutinizing me. I sense it’s out of respect and deference for Corvan.

How surprising. I’d always thought the people in the capital would be hostile to him, but that isn’t the case at all.

I take his hand. We pass through the first entrance. Once we’re out of earshot of the guards, I look up at him. “Those men have a lot of respect for you.”

He shrugs. “The Elite Guard know me well. For a time, I was overseeing their training.”

I take a deep breath. “I’m sorry about your father.”

Corvan squeezes my hand. “It’s okay, Finley. I was expecting it. He’s seen seventy-two summers. A considerable age. He’s been fortunate to live this long, considering who he is. Most of my ancestors were lucky to reach even half his years.”

I fall silent. It never occurred to me that carrying the Duthriss name would be so fraught with danger.

But Corvan won’t have that problem.

Who could kill him now?

“My father’s no saint either,” Corvan says quietly. “He’s inflicted his share of good and evil upon the world.”

“Nobody’s just one or the other,” I say softly, as the promise of power prickles the back of my awareness. How sweet it would be if I could just make everything go away. “But maybe for some, there can be redemption.”

He stops and leans in to kiss me. His lips are warm, his kisses tender and filled with need.

“Perhaps,” he whispers, before taking my hand and leading me the rest of the way, right into the innermost sanctum of the most fortified place in the entire continent.

CORVAN

My father's chambers are at the very heart of the Inner Sanctum. Surrounded by windows on all sides, they're a light-filled space looking out upon lush, delicately manicured gardens.

It's also one of the most heavily fortified places in all of Rahava, with Elite Guards stationed within each of the Seven Circles, and elaborate hidden traps built into every layer.

The second last ring of the Inner Sanctum is his personal library, where he keeps the most precious and forbidden texts—rare books on distant lands beyond the borders of the empire; on the topic of forbidden magic. Some of those books are the only remaining copies in existence.

He's ordered all the others to be destroyed.

How much knowledge has been lost from the empire, all because of my father's pathological need for control?

This place is as familiar to me as the back of my hand. As a child, I played alone in these chambers, running down the empty corridors under the watchful eyes of the Elite Guard. I remember staring at my own reflection in the windows, daring myself to race, imagining that boy was another child—a brother, or a cousin.

Ansar was rarely allowed in here. We're ten years apart—by the time he was old enough to run around, I'd been sent to the Military Academy.

It's a little ironic, then, that I've returned with a companion. Not a sibling, but a mate.

My future wife.

The one I cherish with all my being.

She instinctively moves closer to me as we near the final set of doors. I breathe in her sweet scent, and as always, it grounds me.

It overpowers the stench of sickness and decay that seeps from my father's bedchambers. I can hear his breathing—slow and erratic.

Gods, father, why didn't you send word earlier?

But it's just like him to not tell anyone that he's bloody dying. Valdón Duthriss wouldn't want the world to pay witness to his weakness.

He'd rather die first and shock them all.

He would have planned his funeral procession already—right down to the very last detail.

He always *was* obsessed with details.

We pass through the antechamber, where a large arched window overlooks a pond filled with golden koi set amidst immaculately landscaped gardens. My boots land on plush silk carpet. Between a pair of life-sized bronze statues—depictions of mother and father in their prime—rests a sofa upholstered in sumptuous green velvet, where one can sit and meditate upon the view.

Father used to sit here alone. As a child, whenever I intruded, he'd chase me out.

I never knew what he was thinking; why he sat in that place so very often.

I glance up at the statue of my mother.

Empress Helia.

Her face is as I remember it; serene and beautiful, her eyes conveying warmth.

How the artist captured that, I don't know.

Mother... if only I could have shown you...

Me, as I am now.

And Finley.

My memories of her from when I was a little boy are still so vivid. She'd always had a commanding presence; an aura that would make everyone in the room focus on her. She was incredibly beautiful, with raven hair, flawless skin and eyes that were a curious shade of violet.

Nobody else in Rahava had eyes like hers.

And yet, it was her incredible warmth I remember the most. She was never cold and distant. She was funny, kind, loving, mischievous.

The formidable Empress of Rahava would exchange her lavish dresses for a simple loose shirt and trousers. She would sit on the floor and play toy soldiers with me.

With me, she was simply *mother*.

She made me feel safe.

And I loved her so. That's how I remember her before she fell ill; before father confined her to her chambers like a caged bird, and as the days passed, I saw her less and less...

She wasn't from one of the powerful noble families. My mother was from a small village in the mountains on the northern border of Tyron. It's a big part of the reason I've vowed to protect Tyron, although I seldom speak of it.

Father didn't marry my mother for strategic reasons. On a visit to Tyron in his younger days, he'd caught sight of her... and become entranced by her beauty.

He'd made her, a simple villager, the Empress of Rahava.

Not just his consort.

The *Empress*.

It was unheard of. The court was in an uproar. But father quickly silenced any dissent.

I put my arm around Finley and pull her close to me. As I close my eyes and inhale her sweet scent, I tremble.

I kiss her forehead.

She leans into my kiss. “It’s all right, Corvan. Go and do what you have to. I’ll wait here.”

“Thank you.” I say, absorbing a fraction of her quiet strength.

Nothing more needs to be said. She reads the moment perfectly, offering to wait instead of forcing me to ask.

I leave her in the antechamber, seated between the statues of my mother and father, immortalized in their prime.

I suspect father always thought of himself as a god amongst ordinary men. He cared more about how his deeds and actions would be remembered, rather than how they’d affect the common folk.

And mother was truly a goddess, and she left this world too soon.

She’s with Hecoa now.

I walk forward, my body feeling heavy even though I move like a damn wraith. There are no guards here; no servants, no attendants.

There’s just the sound of my father’s heavy, rattling breathing.

Part of me doesn’t want to see him; not like this, not ever. I could simply refuse to see him; I could deprive him of my presence in his last dying moments.

Part of me wants to be so cruel.

But the boy in me that once yearned for his approval is still there, telling me I *must* speak with him one last time.

I need to know.

Why he sent Finley to me after all these years.

What *really* happened to her mother—and mine.

And why does he still want me to inherit this cursed throne? Even when I’m cursed by this mysterious magic;

magic that he's shunned and forbidden for as long as he's ruled.

I walk forward, across carpets made of the finest golden silk. Into a chamber that smells of sickness and pungent herbal incense. It's stuffy in here. A faint haze of medicinal smoke hangs in the air.

I see his bed; a large, imposing thing of gilded wood, with four posters rising to a silken canopy, the wood carved with the most intricate scrollwork.

The sheets are pure white silk. The covers are made of supremely rare *slynkan* fur.

Diamonds and jewels are woven into the fabric.

And in the center of it all lies the Emperor of Rahava.

Asleep.

I take a moment to study him.

He's so very different to how I remember. His hair, once thick and dark, has become thin and grey. His skin is pale and papery, his cheeks sunken, his body frail.

Age and illness have transformed him.

This is what it's like to be *mortal*.

I can no longer fathom it.

Eventually, he stirs. His eyes flutter open. He sees me, and for a moment, his eyes are clouded and confused; he doesn't recognize me.

Then the haze clears, and his gaze becomes sharp once again.

That's the father I remember. The ruthless, cunning bastard.

"My son," he whispers. There's something else in his voice, too.

Adoration.

It's the closest he'll ever come to showing me love.

His hand, papery and frail, emerges from beneath the covers. “Come closer, son. Let me look at you.”

A torrent of emotion rushes through me. I conceal it carefully behind an expressionless mask.

I step forward. Bend over just a little so he can see me better.

A ghost of a smile flickers across his thin lips. “My boy. You’ve come to me at last.”

I feel anger, sharp and cold. “How long were you planning to wait? You could have sent word.”

“But what I sent you was far better, don’t you think?”

Finley...

I always hated it when father proved to be right.

“How did you know... that she would be so right for me?”

He chuckles softly, and for a moment, the weight of illness lifts from his shoulders. The old arrogance returns. “I have known about you ever since you were born, my beautiful boy. About your *true* potential. And I know that there’s one thing in this world that’s as sweet as ambrosia for your kind.”

“*My kind...*”

“You know what you are by now. Or must I spell it out for you?”

“Go on, then,” I say softly, baring my fangs. “Spit it out.”

“You’re a direct descendant of the Goddess of Death. The old texts call your kind *Vampyr*, but that’s a term that’s become maligned by myth and superstition. In truth, you’re a descendant of a tribe, just like the Katurians and we Rahavans... and the Batavans across the sea. And the *Dryads*. Being what they are, it stands to reason that *dryads* are completely irresistible to *vampires*.”

I stare at him in shock, half-tempted to wipe the smug expression off his mortal features. “Are you saying my transformation was predetermined? That this... *state* of mine is inherited?”

I hate appearing at a loss in front of my father, but my shock is too great. My thoughts are in flux—how is this possible?

“You got that from Helia.”

“From... my *mother*? But she’s human.”

Propped up on mountains of pillows, my father sits up with a groan. A hacking cough bursts from his lips. He covers his mouth with his hand. When he stops; when he pulls it away, there’s blood all over his palm.

“Take it easy,” I growl, leaning forward and putting my hand behind his back. Beneath his silk nightshirt, I feel the bony protrusions of his spine. He’s lost so much of his bulk and vitality. “What ails you, anyway?”

“It’s the consumption. Even I have to accept that my time has come. You can’t reverse it or cure it, so don’t even think about it. Believe me, I’ve *tried*.”

Of course you have, father.

There was a time when I truly believed my father would live forever.

How quickly time passes, making fools of us all.

“Your mother wasn’t an ordinary villager. She was from the place beyond the Khatur; the unmapped zones, where no Rahavan has ever set foot. Your grandfather tried, but every exploration team he sent in that direction failed to return. But that’s not surprising. The *Vampyr* Tribes wouldn’t just allow humans into their midst. But *she*... she was an outlier. Curious about humans and Khaturians. She was one of the few that came to the mountains and offered a trade with the Khaturians. Protection in exchange for blood and the chance to live amongst them. When I was a young prince of the empire, father sent me to broker a deal with the Khaturians. A treaty involving the trade of magical artifacts. That’s when I first saw her. I was immediately smitten, and she...” A soft, bittersweet laugh escapes him. “I suppose she was curious, at first. I was a novelty to her, because she’d never really encountered a Rahavan from the Central Plains. And I was full of tales and

wit; she loved to hear stories of the lands across the seas and the warm Southern Regions. She was already centuries old by the time I met her. Maybe she was bored of her old existence. I know not. But I suppose you could say I charmed her, and convinced her to come with me, and in my mind, only *she* could ever be worthy of wearing the crown of the Empress of Rahava. I *worshipped* your mother, Corvan.”

My legs turn weak. I force myself to sit down on the side of the bed, beside my father.

Just like I did when I was a small boy.

“Are you telling me that mother was a vampire?” I shake my head in disbelief. “It isn’t possible. I saw her... many times... in the sunlight. And she didn’t have... red eyes and white hair like me.”

An image enters my mind, so vivid and bright it could have been yesterday.

We’re in the courtyard garden just beyond her chambers. She sits on a small patch of crisp, manicured grass, her voluminous pale blue skirts laid out over her legs. And I sit in her lap and play with her long black hair, so lustrous and brilliant. I breathe in her sweet, comforting scent, and then I squeal with laughter as she tickles me.

The balmy spring breeze swirls around us, plucking blooms from the cherry tree above, scattering them through a shaft of warm sunlight that illuminates her porcelain features.

In my mind, she’s always bathed in sunlight.

How could she have been a creature of darkness, like me?

My father’s lower jaw begins to tremble. Tears well in his eyes. I’ve never seen him like this; spilling over with emotion, so frail and vulnerable.

Is this the power Death has over a once impregnable man?

“My son, it’s only now that I can look back and profess shame and regret. For I did something truly monstrous, and she never forgave me for it.”

My hand goes to the side of his face. I caress him gently, but somewhere in the back of my mind, there's this thought that I could so easily choke him to death. "What did you do, father?"

"I lied to her. I told her I'd found a remedy for her weakness against the sunlight. Because all she wanted to do was be able to enjoy the daylight with her half-human son. She did not know that the remedy itself was bound in iron and stone, chained up in a dungeon beneath the palace."

His voice has twisted into a mockery of itself; thin and filled with remorse and bitterness.

That won't help him now.

Without me realizing, my hand has curled around his thin neck. Cold anger surges through me. "*Aralya*. You took her from Solisar, didn't you? You used her to sustain my mother?"

"I'm not proud of what I did. And Helia was as pure as the driven snow. She didn't have any part in it. She didn't know where I was getting the cure from. I told her it was an elixir from the distant lands across the ocean. For a while, she was so pleased with me. She said it was the sweetest thing she'd ever tasted. And her delight at being able to enjoy the full sunshine was intoxicating. You might not be aware of this, but purebloods like her are far more vulnerable to the sunlight than a *dhampir* like you. It's why her kind rarely venture out of the unknown lands. For a while, I thought I could win her happiness like this, but eventually, she found out... and when she did, she was furious. I think she would have left me then and there, if not for you. Nevertheless, it was the beginning of her madness."

I can feel his feeble pulse, fluttering away in his feeble neck. I am *this* close from killing my very own father. "And what happened? What did you *do to her*?" My own voice is so cold I barely recognize myself.

"At first, she refused to take anything more. I brought it to her... tried to tempt her, but her will is stronger than even mine. *That's* where you get your stubbornness from, my boy. Not from me. She demanded I release the dryad, but I refused.

When Lucar Solisar brought her to our shores, he had no idea of the treasure and peril he had in his hands. After what we'd done to her, that creature surely would have killed us all if I'd released her."

This is Finley's mother he's talking about. Not a pile of coins or jewels or a land to be conquered. Her *mother*.

Father coughs and splutters, making me realize that I'm squeezing his neck a little too hard.

Red haze clouds my vision.

"*I should kill you for this,*" I whisper at last.

His face turns grey. His eyes bulge. Mustering the last of his strength, father nods. "Go on. Do it. I'm as good as dead, anyway. I'd rather die by your hand than sit here waiting for Hecoa to take me. The pain... it's fucking intolerable."

Coming to my senses, I release him. "What did you do to her?"

A lone tear slips down my father's cheek. "She... was going to kill me. What else could I do? If only she'd accepted my offering. She was weakened with thirst and desperate."

I rise to my feet, recoiling from him. "You *killed* her."

Horror and revulsion course through me. My stomach roils. My senses are flooded with disgusting filth. Never before have I wanted to kill someone more badly than I want to kill him right *now*—this man that sired me.

How, though?

If my mother was a pureblooded vampire, she would be equally—if not more—powerful than I. How would my father and his mortal guards have managed to defeat her?

Knowing my father, the answer is obvious, but I don't want to believe it.

I can't change it, though; the long-suppressed memory that comes to the forefront of my mind. Of father taking me all of a sudden, and locking me here in this very room, and there were no less than *ten* guards standing around watching me like

hawks, and at the age of seven, I wondered what I'd done wrong to warrant such a discipline.

I thought it was because I'd pitched a leather ball at one of the windows in the corridor, accidentally smashing it.

But he was *using* me against her.

Because not long after that, he came to me, and he was angry, and he told me that she'd died.

The illness caught up with her, my son. I'm sorry. But don't worry. You'll be fine. I'll look after you. I'll teach you to be strong, Corvan, and one day, all of this will be yours.

Funny how it all comes back.

Now it all makes perfect sense.

My hand drops to the hilt of my sword. I grip it tightly, my knuckles taut. I'm *this* close to drawing it and impaling him where he lies, but I need to hold on just a little longer.

For Finley's sake.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

Her scent floats to me, calming me. I listen to the sound of her heartbeat; calm and steady in a sea of fury and malevolence.

She's my essence. More precious to me than life itself. And I will make sure that the sins of our fathers are destroyed.

"If there's one last thing you can do before you die that goes *some* way toward reversing all the damage and stupidity you've caused, then you will tell me where Aralya is."

If he refuses, I'll make his dying moments worse than anything he'll experience in the afterlife.

My father stares back at me, and he's smiling.

Why is he smiling?

"You're truly a Duthriss, my son," he says, his hoarse voice filled with pride. "And yet, you're clearly *her* son. Don't you understand? Nobody can unify this nation better than you. I might have consolidated power in the central regions, but the

borderlands are fractious. There's dissent in the south and untapped magic in the north. And you, my chosen heir, are a god amongst mortals. Why don't you use the power that you have, Corvan?"

I say nothing.

I'm cold inside.

My father doesn't love me. He's in love with the idea of me; the immortal, his legacy made flesh.

"That brings me to my second great regret." He coughs and splutters again, spraying the sheets with droplets of blood. "After I lost your mother, I married again, as you know. I had no choice. The war in Batava had weakened my position, and the Talavarras were conspiring to destroy me." A deep, laboured sigh escapes him, as if he's the great victim in all of this. "So I married Leticia, and she bore me your brother, and I thought they would be content with having their firstborn daughter as the Empress Consort, but in truth, Rhaegar harbored greater ambitions for his grandson, didn't he? And so I thought I was doing the right thing by letting Ansar and his mother spend most of the year at the Talavarra estate, because perhaps the boy would be disinterested in the politics of the court. It proved to be true for a period of time, but ever since you gave up your right to the throne, Ansar's been chomping at the bit, and like all Talavarras, it's never enough for him. He wasn't pleased to hear that you'd come into your powers, Corvan. In fact, he's become terribly threatened by you. So much so that he's holed himself up in Deignar and turned to the arcane arts himself. To *necromancy*. And I wonder if it's all my fault; if only I hadn't neglected him and focused all my hopes on you. But you'll go ahead and take care of him now, won't you?"

Shaking, I inhale deeply and try to calm myself, catching a faint tendril of *her* scent. I seek and hold onto the reminder of Finley's presence for dear life, because I've never been so angry before, and yet there's nothing I can do to harm father right now.

“Where is she?” I ask softly. Sweet Goddess, grant me fucking strength.

“Don’t you know how powerful a pureblooded *dryad* is? I’ve grown complacent in my old age, my son, and your brother’s more cunning than I gave him credit for, because while I was distracted with this damn illness, he discovered her. And he’s gone and stolen her right from beneath my very nose and taken her to Talavarra. To Deignar Castle. They’ve been using her power. How else do you think a mere mortal would have the power to be able to raise the bloody dead? So go and get her back, my son.”

The only thing that tempers my anger right now is a flicker of hope. Finley’s mother is in the Talavarra Estate, and she’s *alive*.

She’s alive.

That’s all that matters. I will go get her, but it will be on my terms. Not *his*.

Right until the very end, I feel like I’m being swayed by father’s manipulations, but the difference now is that he’s dying, and I’m very much alive.

A sudden feeling of urgency grips me. There’s one more thing I need to know. “When you started the war with the Khaturians, what were you trying to achieve?”

A certain look enters my father’s eyes—one I’ve seen many times before. He used to get this way when he’d speak of the lands he was planning to conquer. “Tyron was mismanaged for years. My fault, for I’d overlooked Feyrun Bengar’s incompetence and believed his promises. But he didn’t have what it took to venture beyond the foot of the mountains and undertake the minerals exploration I needed. There are rich veins of *serpenstone* in the area. Our stockpiles were running dangerously low, the mines in the south almost fully depleted. I needed a new source. I just didn’t expect the Khaturians would be so obstinate about it.” He stops, his face contorting in pain. His breathing becomes shallow and rapid. “I sent you there because I knew you would get things done. And it wasn’t a bad thing that you died.”

My anger, once cold, turns white-hot. Knowing him, he probably predicted it. “That I *died*?”

“A half-breed *dhampir* like you is human until death. It’s only once you die that you undergo the Change and the other half awakens. It was about time, don’t you think? Only I thought that you’d revel in your newfound power. Instead, you had to go and be difficult. Stubborn as your mother, you are.”

I snap. My sword is out, pointed right at the center of his chest.

“I really don’t give a shit if you kill me here, son. Just take the *fucking throne*.”

I barely hear him. All I can see are the faces of dead men—my *men*. Sent to their deaths, and for what?

Fucking *serpenstone*?

My own goddess-cursed transformation?

And now I can’t even have the satisfaction of seeing terror in my father’s eyes, because he already knows he’s a dead man.

“This world isn’t yours to toy with anymore,” I say quietly, sheathing my sword before I lose every last shred of my self-control. “I’ll take your empire. But I will never carry on with your legacy.”

“Wh-what are you on about, boy?” The Emperor of Rahava wheezes and splutters.

I smile, showing him my fangs—which I now know I’ve inherited from mother.

And when she turned on him for his betrayal—he had her killed.

My smile hides a feeling I’ve never known before.

I want my father to suffer. I want him to know nothing but pain and torment as he passes from this world into the next.

I lean in, putting my lips close to his ear. Death hovers around him. I can smell it on him. “When I become emperor, the first thing I’m going to do is separate your head from your

corpse and display it on the traitor's pike above the outer walls."

"Y-you can't do that," he hisses. "The population will revolt."

"You might be feared, but very few revere you. Aside from your supporters in the nobility, I suspect that most won't bat an eyelid."

The last of the color drains from his face. "You can't do this, Corvan. It will just feed into the rumor that you're unhinged."

"This is what you wanted, isn't it? For me to take over?" I don't care what the court thinks of me. If they consider me mad, then all the better. I can use that to my advantage.

Besides, I have the luxury of time—something most of the court don't. With time, the people will see what kind of ruler I am.

"Not like this." Father's eyes bulge, as if he's straining to change my mind just by willpower alone. "I *built* this empire, boy. Without my approval, the lords aren't just going to submit to you. *Don't* be so fucking arrogant. Without the structures I've put in place to ensure power remains in our family, this empire will fall apart. Do you not remember a *thing* I taught you?"

"I remember everything," I say softly. "And I know exactly what I should do. The second thing I'll do is return the Vikurian territories to their rightful owners."

Father sent his troops into Vikur shortly after he ascended the throne. Grandfather had left the empire teetering on the verge of collapse after his repeated attempts to conquer the Northlands.

So father had waged war on the Vikurians and forced them into submission, and the rich, fertile lands of Vikur were absorbed into the Rahavan empire.

It was the very thing that allowed him to consolidate his power.

“*No...*” He sits up and coughs violently, bringing the sheet up to cover his mouth. “I will not allow you to...”

I place my hand in the center of his chest and push him back down. “Did you enjoy it, father? Being a god amongst men? At some point, it seems you forgot that you *aren't* a god. Power is useless if you can't win over people's hearts and minds.”

A roar fills my ears. My heart starts to beat again, thudding loudly in my head. My vision clouds red.

My hand goes around his neck.

They say I'm insane. Right now, I truly feel like I'm going mad. Memories of my mother swirl through my mind, mingling with the faces of the men that served under me—all dead now. The stench of father's sickly blood becomes overpowering.

I want to retch.

I squeeze harder.

His eyes roll back into his head.

The roar in my ears becomes louder. It's the sound of war-drums; the screams of men, the thunder of cannon fire.

It's the blood soaking the marble walls of this cursed palace.

I want to raze it all to the ground.

“I'll tear your legacy apart,” I growl. “Until there's nothing left of your memory but the image of a traitor's head above the gates. I'll burn the portraits and turn the statues of you to rubble.”

His eyes bulge. *Now* I can see fear—*good*.

And hopelessness, because he knows I really can do it.

All he fought for, all he built—in the end, it's going to come to naught.

“*Stop,*” he wheezes, but it's too late. I am the very monster he made me into. I can do whatever I want.

But then a pair of slender arms goes around my waist, and the towering rage in me—that terrifies even me—is tempered just enough for me to regain a small piece of my sanity.

“Corvan, *stop*.”

And her glorious essence fills the chasm in my soul.

I stop. I close my eyes and drink her in, letting her scent permeate every last fiber of my being.

Nothing else in this world can douse the flames of my rage. Without her, I really would go insane.

My grip loosens. My father takes a deep, shuddering breath.

His eyes go wide as he catches sight of Finley. I almost want to kill him just to stop him from looking at her.

He should *not* be permitted to lay eyes upon her.

She’s pure, and he’s the embodiment of corruption.

“*Corvan*,” she whispers, her warm breath dancing against my skin. She’s right behind me, her lips close to my ear. Only *she* could dare come up behind me like this and expect to remain unscathed. Because all along, I knew she was there; listening, watching, approaching. But the storm of my rage had deafened me, and I chose to ignore her existence for a moment.

Maybe it’s because I knew she would stop me.

“You don’t have to be the one that ends him. It would leave such a hollow feeling, don’t you think? He’s already helpless against you, and nature will take its course. Hecoa’s hand is already resting upon his brow. Does he really look like he’s going to last through the night?”

I look down at my father; at his skeletal frame, his hollow, sunken eyes.

He’s a shadow of his former self, already with one foot in the afterlife. Finley’s right. Killing him now would leave nothing but emptiness. There’s nothing to be gained from defeating a helpless man.

The only revenge I can have is to live and rule *my* way—undoing his excesses and evils.

He thought I would jump at the chance to seize power.

My father really doesn't know me at all.

What did you expect, with that deathbed confession? Did you want me to forgive you so you could go into the afterlife with a clean conscience?

“You should have summoned a priest instead,” I mutter bitterly.

On his deathbed, he has nobody.

Who would come?

The advisors?

He can't trust them.

The clerics?

They would try and take advantage of him.

The priests of the Eresian Temple?

What could they do? Their prayers won't prolong his life.

And Ansar would probably just kill him.

All he has are his guards to protect him.

And the two of us.

His attention is completely transfixed by Finley. He's staring at her as if she were the Goddess herself.

“I brought you to him,” he whispers at last. “In truth, I'd forgotten about you until Solisar showed up at the palace and begged for an audience. But once I understood that you were the dryad's child, I knew exactly where you needed to go. I knew that as soon as he caught sight of you, your fate would be sealed—both of you. Such is the nature of a child of Hecoa and a child of Eresus.”

He reaches toward Finley with his papery hand.

She moves to my side, and I almost want to stop her from letting him touch her, but she gives me a quelling look, and

she's the only one I would ever obey in an instant.

"My child," the Emperor of Rahava begs. "For all that I have done to harm you and your kin, please forgive me. This old man became blinded by power and hardened by fear. I thought I could bend the world to my will."

Finley takes his hand. She's impossibly gentle as she strokes the back of his hand with her slender, graceful fingers. "Your Majesty, there must be a part of you that can tell right from wrong, because otherwise, you wouldn't have cared to confess your darkest sins to Corvan. It counts for something, even if you lacked the courage to do right when it mattered."

A shadow flits across father's face. It's as if two different sides are waging war inside him.

In the face of his despair, Finley's unshakeable. "For you and I, this is both an introduction and a farewell. You can indeed take credit for delivering me to Corvan. I just want you to know that I will never stray from his side. I will protect him just as he protects me, and *our* love will always be freely given, never falsified or forced. As for forgiveness, it isn't mine to give. When you pass into Hecoa's domain, you should seek the ones you've wronged and beg their forgiveness."

A tear slips down father's cheek. He turns to me. "Corvan, forgive me."

My heart is encased in walls of steel. And yet it beats steadily in response to Finley's presence beside me. "For what you did to my mother, I can't. For what you've done to the people of Rahava, you'll have to beg them yourself. I can only give you my gratitude for sending Finley to me. That is all."

My throat tightens. My heart feels like it's being squeezed in a vice.

I want to be away from here.

I still want to kill him.

His tight expression softens just a fraction. He closes his eyes and lets out a faint sigh. "It's all I can hope for. All the knowledge and secrets contained within the walls of this palace b-belong to you now. A-and I kn-know you will put

them... to good use. Ch-check in the m-middle of the p-pond..."

Finley lets go of his hand, gently placing it on his chest.

Father doesn't say anything more. His chest rises and falls in a steady rhythm, his breaths becoming slower and deeper, until so much time passes between each one that I wonder whether he's breathing at all.

And each breath becomes labored, grating against my ears. From deep within his throat comes a faint rattle that grows louder and louder.

Finley reaches for my hand. I can hear her heartbeat, strong and vital. I can hear father's heartbeat, fading away.

It's obvious he isn't going to speak anymore.

Right before our eyes, an era is passing. News of my father's death is going to shake the entire continent. Perhaps that's why he locked himself away here and kept his presence so tightly guarded right up until the end. As far as I can see, not one of his advisors or clerics or attendants has been here.

He kept his true condition a secret from everyone. Only the Elite Guard, who swore an oath of blood loyalty, were permitted to know of his illness, and they've protected him without uttering a word.

And he's spent the very last of his life-force telling me all these damned truths.

Why do I suddenly feel so bereft? If Finley wasn't here with me, I don't know what I might have done.

She's both gentle and mightily formidable. Even when the Emperor of Rahava begged for her forgiveness, she didn't yield.

And now, my father is slipping into Hecoa's embrace.

The Goddess of Death and Darkness, who denied me entry to her realm, will take him. She won't deny him.

I should be feeling something right now—rage, vindictiveness, satisfaction, regret, sadness...

But I'm just numb.

The rattle in father's throat grows slower and louder. Finley squeezes my hand and leans closer, leaning her head against my shoulder. "I think that in his dying moments, he really wanted to do the right thing by you, Corvan."

"Death is the great equalizer," I say softly as at last, he stops breathing. His heart stops.

For a moment, we just stand there, staring at the once mighty and and feared Tyrant of Rahava.

The man that sired me, and left me this mess for me.

I feel nothing.

I'm not even angry anymore.

I reach for the edge of the silk sheet, gently pulling it over his face.

For the first time in a very long time, I feel lost. It happened so fast; so unexpectedly, and the truths he left behind have shattered me.

I step away from the bed, pulling Finley with me. "At least I have you," I murmur, burying my nose in her hair, planting a soft kiss on her head. "It was inevitable, I suppose."

She looks up at me, tears welling in her depthless brown eyes. "Corvan, I'm sorry."

"Don't be." I lead her away, back into the antechamber. Things are going to have to be sorted out, matters of the emperor's death dealt with. The empire will be thrust into chaos and infighting if I don't take control.

But all of that can wait.

I stare out the window at the pond, teeming with golden fish.

My father's last words ring in my head.

Check in the middle of the pond...

Come to think of it, there's something there, under the water. I can't make it out clearly, because it's half-hidden

beneath a swathe of floating winterlilies.

I see a rectangular shadow.

It looks like a metal chest of some sort...

Hiding in plain sight. How had I not noticed it before?

“Corvan.” But all of a sudden, Finley is saying my name, her stern tone, cutting through the noise of my thoughts. “Hold on for a moment. Before you go saving the world, look at me.”

She reaches up and wipes something away from my cheek with the pad of her thumb.

A tear.

“*Hells.*” I shake my head in surprise.

She gives me a smile; a wry, secret, understanding little smile. “Don’t cry, do you?”

“No,” I growl. “I don’t.” I look up at the bronze statue of my mother; at her beautiful, otherworldly features. I can only cling fiercely to my memories of her.

Suddenly, it makes sense that father had her likeness captured like this—like a goddess.

In death, she’s perfection.

It’s so twisted I can barely make sense of it.

He was like that, too.

A walking contradiction.

If only things had turned out differently...

I’d rather have her alive and imperfect than dead and immortalized. Every year, on the first day of spring, there’s a national day to honor her.

I feel sick from the hypocrisy of it all.

“Corvan.”

And then Finley’s there, drawing me into her embrace, pulling me back from the madness of it all.

My tears are flowing again. They feel strange; viscous. I'd almost forgotten what this feels like. But it doesn't matter, because she's kissing me, and somehow, she knows exactly what I need right now.

She always does.

FINLEY

Corvan's tears are startling.

He didn't even realize he was crying, did he? But that's to be expected, for he's a man who isn't used to shedding tears. His inner walls are stronger and thicker than the walls of Tyron Castle itself.

And he's carried so much on his shoulders, for so long.

The air around him feels thick with anger and sorrow. It isn't my imagination. I can actually feel his aura.

Ever since that damn tree put its heart-seed inside me, breaking the magical seal that's kept me hidden since birth, I've been extra-sensitive to everything around me. Sounds. Smells. Energies. Auras.

Corvan.

A tear slips down his cheek, touching the corner of his mouth.

I go up on my tiptoes and kiss him.

He returns my kiss with sweetness and light, in spite of his obvious grief.

If I could take away all his pain, I would.

Our lips meet. His blood makes my mouth tingle. It's the magic in him, reacting with mine.

"*Finley*," he whispers, and the way he says my name just shatters me, because I know he needs me more than anything right now.

He kisses me back, taking control. His mouth is insistent and demanding; savage and gentle.

“Thank you,” he murmurs, holding me in his warm embrace. He’s so big and reassuring. It’s hard to imagine that he was on the verge of killing the dying emperor just moments ago.

Whatever for? I didn’t do anything special.

“For reminding me that there’s more to this life than suffering and revenge. And that I have much to do before I let this empire fall into ruin.” He gently releases me and walks toward the window. There’s a small door at one end, made from the same panelled glass as the widows. He turns the brass handle.

It opens with a creak, admitting a crisp gust of wind from outside.

Corvan walks into the small garden.

I follow.

His demeanor has changed. Grief, rage, and sorrow have disappeared, tucked behind an enigmatic mask. I can decipher him, though. I’m probably the only one that can.

He walks toward the pond and squats down beside it, peeling off his gloves and cupping his hands.

He sluices water over his face.

Then he rises to his feet and steps *into* the pond.

“Corvan,” I gasp, but then I remember what his father said.

There’s something in the pond.

Corvan strides forward through the knee-high water until he reaches the center of the pond. He reaches down and retrieves something.

A metal box. It’s covered in a green and white patina.

Corvan locks eyes with me. His mask is back in place; strong, resolute, determined.

Unbreakable.

His powerful strides make waves in the water as he returns to my side.

Fascinated, we both stare at the box.

“What could it possibly be?” I ask.

“An admission that my father knew he’d done wrong.” A look of wry resignation crosses Corvan’s face. “For him to keep something like this so close to him, yet buried in plain sight...”

“At least he had enough of a heart to keep it for you.”

His expression turns grim. “I always found it difficult to understand his intentions. I don’t know if he’s left me a parting gift or a curse. Let’s find out.”

He steps out of the pond, water sluicing off his leather armor and his boots. There must be an oil-coating on his armor, because the water dries almost instantaneously.

Corvan wipes away some of the pond-slime and patina, revealing a waterproof wax seal that runs all around the box. He whips out a dagger from somewhere on his body and deftly runs the tip of the blade along the seal, severing it.

He balances the box on his other hand. It’s about twice the size of his hand.

He cracks the lid.

I hold my breath.

There’s another box inside, made of waxed leather and sealed with red wax on all sides. It’s perfectly dry.

Corvan slices around the seal and opens it.

I hold my breath.

Inside are two things.

A lock of deep black hair, tied with a black ribbon.

A sealed envelope made of thick cream colored parchment, the surface textured and luxurious.

I’ve never seen paper like that before. On the back of the envelope is a crimson wax seal bearing an insignia.

Corvan lets out a deep, shuddering sigh. He sheaths his blade and gently picks up the lock of hair and holds it to his nose, inhaling deeply.

He closes his eyes. His expression becomes distant, as if he's been transported to another dimension.

For a heartbeat, I'm taken aback. Whose hair is that? But then it hits me. From the snippets I overheard of Corvan and Valdon Duthriss's conversation, I deduce that it must belong to his mother.

Empress Helia Duthriss.

She's revered throughout the empire. It was widely said that she died of a terrible illness, but now we know the truth, and the truth is mind-blowing and heartbreaking.

How is it that we all grew up knowing nothing at all?

Now it makes perfect sense that Corvan's a vampire. His mother was from a mysterious tribe high up in the mountains. From a people that have magic flowing through their veins—just as my mother does.

But he's also half-human, and his human half had to die before he came into his true powers.

How callous of his father to leave him in the dark about all of this, forcing Corvan to figure it out himself.

Was this his way of trying to keep him under control? Was he afraid of how powerful Corvan would become if he knew the truth?

Because if he'd found out what had happened to his mother earlier, Corvan surely would have killed Valdon. By revealing these secrets on his deathbed, Valdon denied his son the opportunity to seek justice.

And he knew—that bastard *knew*—that Corvan would have no choice but to take control when the empire started to fall into chaos.

Now I can see why Valdon Duthriss was unopposed in Rahava for almost the entirety of his reign.

What a calculating bastard.

Corvan sheaths his dagger. He gently places the lock of hair back inside the box and picks up the envelope.

I reach out, offering to take the box.

His hands tremble as he gives it to me. His eyes are filled with sorrow—and yet he’s trusting me with this most precious memento.

He shakes his head. “For him to keep this... the bastard must’ve truly had feelings for her.”

I’m quiet. There’s nothing I can say that can possibly make things better.

I don’t know what lies inside that envelope, but I’m certain it’s going to shake Corvan’s world.

CORVAN

Filled with trepidation, I open the damn envelope.
Enough, already. Get it over and done with.

Part of me wants to leave it unread until after I deal with Ansar and the Talavarras and their infernal stupidity. Only the truly craven could delve into the forbidden arts of necromancy. It's an affront to Hecoa herself and a grave insult to the dead—stealing them away from the underworld to animate their decaying corpses.

But this envelope has my mother's sweet fragrance all over it.

Perhaps that's why father had it sealed away and hidden underwater; so her scent would be preserved over the years. Perhaps he knew that someday, my sense of smell would grow so acute that I'd be able to detect the faintest remnant of her presence.

I almost drop to my knees.

Oh, the memories that come flooding in, hitting me with the force of the midday sunshine.

Scent is a powerful thing. I didn't realize how powerful until now.

And the one thing that stops me from slipping into the past is *her* scent. As my mother's sweet fragrance—of her favorite perfume, irises—lingers in my consciousness, another scent surrounds me, and it's the one that's brought me back to sanity over and over again.

It's here. It's now.

It's *her*.

And there is nothing that affects me more powerfully than her.

She edges closer, resting her hand on my arm. Her touch grounds me, as if she's anchoring me to the earth itself. I wouldn't mind if she could draw forth the branch-tendrils like she did before and tie me to the damn ground.

I can't believe that in such a short span of time, I've become so dependent on her.

Her presence beside me gives me the courage to retrieve the crisply folded piece of paper inside the envelope. Even this is imbued with my mother's scent. It floods my senses, threatening to drag me to a dark place.

I unfold the paper.

It's filled with handwritten script. *Her* script, I instinctively realize, even though I don't remember exactly what it looks like.

It's a letter.

Dearest Corvan. My most precious son. If you're reading this, then your father will have decided that it's time for you to know the truth.

It's for me. As I read her words, they echo in my mind with the sound of her voice—as if she's speaking to me.

If you're reading this, I will be long departed. If anything, the fact that you have this letter in your hands means that he's retained the tiniest shred of decency.

I only want you to know the truth. You're old enough now.

My sweet, beautiful boy. I never wanted to leave you. If I had my choice, I would raise you. I would keep you safe until I knew you were strong enough to protect yourself against the cruel world. I would give you everything.

But he's ruined me.

He did the one thing that's forbidden to us Vampyr.

Without my knowledge, he fed me the essence of a pureblooded Dryad.

There's a reason the Vampyr and the Dryad are forbidden from meeting. The Dryad have made their home across the seas in the jungles of Batava, well away from the Vampyr lands. Our people are high in the mountains, in a place that's inaccessible to humankind.

That's what you are, my sweet child. A half-Vampyr. Dhampir. You are very rare and very special, for unlike me, you can tolerate some of the effects of the sun.

I should have known. Only something as powerful as a Dryad's blood would have made me immune to sunlight for those short periods of time. But Valdon didn't know that her blood would also drive me mad. Her magic is too powerful, and I am not her Mate. He has forced an unholy bond, and the essence of a True Daughter of Eresus has transformed me.

This Thirst of mine has become unrelenting. The Blood Haze is impossible to control. Her blood is so sweet that I crave it constantly, and when I cannot have it, I start to have withdrawals, and those times are the most dangerous, because I will take anything and anyone that's in front of me.

I don't want to hurt the servants and the maids.

And I will not take any more from the Dryad. The way I am now, I cannot afford to become powerful again, and I'm horrified that she's been imprisoned and forced to sustain me.

Valdon—I would most certainly hurt him, but I don't want to hurt you, my child. Never you. Yesterday, I came so close—and it tore me to pieces.

In our lore, there's a rule. One must never, ever take blood from a Dryad unless one intends to form a Mate Bond.

Otherwise, the Life Magic will have no release, and like with all things, imbalance corrupts and erodes.

Heed my words, my son, for one day, you will need this knowledge. Dryads are infinitely potent. Death consumes life.

Their blood is a thousand times more addictive than that of a human. That's why, when in the presence of one, it is so very easy for a Vampyr to lose control.

My child, I am ruined. My mind is gone. I know only thirst, and I do not want to hurt you. I don't want you to know me as a monster. That is why, when I walk out those doors at first light, I will allow your father's guards to impale me, and then the sun will take me.

I wish I could have done more for you, but even your very existence is a miracle in itself. Just know that I love you with all my heart.

Your father—as much as I revile him now—loves you too, and he will do everything in his power to make sure you grow into a strong and formidable man. He promised me this, and I believe him. By the time you've died and returned in your Vampyr form, you will be wise and powerful enough to temper your urges and use your gifts for good.

For a Vampyr amongst mortals is akin to a God. You must never, ever abuse the power you've been given.

My time here might be coming to an end, but I have no regrets. I plead with you not to feel sorrow for my passing, but joy, that I, a mere Vampyr from the cold, distant Heart of Ice, have had the chance to walk with you in the sunshine. I've brought you into this world, and that is my greatest blessing.

And although I have no desire to see your father's face anymore, know that you were truly conceived out of love.

My sweet, beloved son.

You will be a good man. Use your gifts for good, Corvan Taelinor, and defy the archaic laws that have kept our peoples in constraints for so long. Protect your own. Nurture them.

And know that you are cherished.

I love you with all my heart,

Mama

FINLEY

We stand there in the garden; in the silence, with the koi gliding through the glassy water at our feet and the moonlight streaming down upon us.

The moonlight catches Corvan's pale hair, making it appear as if he's surrounded by a halo.

He meets my gaze.

His eyes are the color of deep, dark wine.

I didn't read the letter with him—that was for his eyes only—but I can see that it's invoked deep pain within him.

A lone tear slips down his cheek. "This life... sometimes I don't understand it at all. But at the same time, it all makes perfect sense now."

He leans in and kisses me gently. I taste his blood-tears; his sorrow and his pain.

And I kiss him back, letting him know that I'm here, and I *know*. "You're here, aren't you? And there's a reason you've become so powerful. They both wanted you to become strong. For different reasons, maybe, but you *are* strong now, Corvan. It's up to you to choose which path you'll take. I know you'll choose the right one. I *know* you. And I'll stand beside you."

He kisses me again, caressing my cheek, his touch reverent. "You have," he says gently. "*Oh*, you have. More than I deserve."

"No," I counter. "We deserve each other. I'm fairly certain of that."

“Well, then. Who am I to argue?” He looks down at the letter in his hands. With careful, precise movements, he folds it and slips it back in the envelope. Then he takes the box from my hand and places the letter in it, alongside the lock of his mother’s hair. “There’s a lot that we still have to learn, but the most important thing right now is that we go and find your mother.” His expression softens. “She’s alive. I’m certain of it. And she’s suffered far too much.”

Doubt and fear mingle with excitement and hope, fluttering wildly in my chest. “If we find her alive, I’d be overjoyed. But I’m also afraid, Corvan. If she’s been held captive all this time, then she’s been treated terribly at the hands of both our fathers. I want her to be free more than anything, but... what if she holds their sins against us? What if she’s vengeful?”

What if she despises me?

Corvan gives me a gentle, patient look; an almost-smile. “Well, then we’ll just have to convince her that we’re *nothing* like our fathers. Freeing her and killing the ones that are holding her captive should go some way toward starting that conversation, don’t you think?”

“I should hope so. She’s been imprisoned for a very long time. I have no idea what state of mind she could be in.”

“No matter what state she’s in, I’ll make sure she’s safe and taken care of. Even if she despises us at first, she’ll come to understand that we’re different to the ones that sired us. I promise you, she will.” Corvan slips his arm around my waist and pulls me against him. He smells of leather and spice; of warmth and *male*, and he’s perfectly intoxicating. “Besides, *you’re* with me. I don’t see how she could possibly despise you. How could *anyone* despise you, Fin? If anything, I’d wager she’s been waiting for you. Imagine what Aralya could teach *you*, her own flesh and blood.”

At the mention of her name, the magic inside me ripples and dances, making my skin tingle, filling me with pent-up anticipation. There’s that feeling again; of pressure building inside me, with no way of finding release.

“I have a hunch for these things.” Corvan taps the side of his nose. “Battle-sense. You have all this pent-up magic inside you. I’ve seen how powerful it can be. And the trees themselves have chosen to speak to you. Imagine what’s going to happen when you encounter the one that gave you life.”

As the magic dances through my body, heightening everything—the feeling of his leather-gloved hands against my bare skin, the fragrance of winterlilies mingling with his unmistakable scent, the moonlight reflecting off his hard, elegant features—I can’t help but feel the truth of his words.

Even now, in the serenity of this small garden, life separated from death by mere glass and stone, I feel the hibernating trees and the dormant plants. A sound echoes in my mind; a low, resonant hum.

Oh my Goddess.

My heart swells with hope.

It’s good to see that Corvan’s regained his usual steely determination. It’s as if he’s buried his grief inside the box, the lid hiding his emotions under layers of strength.

I remember what he said earlier, when he was speaking with his father. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but certain things were impossible for me to un-hear.

It’s because of the magic in me. It makes everything more acute.

“Corvan?”

“Yes, Finley?”

“I heard you say something before, to your father. That you’re going to... *take the empire.*”

A puff of exasperation escapes Corvan’s lips. “It wasn’t in my plans, but I fear I have no choice now. Ansar’s chosen a despicable path, and I can’t afford to let him consolidate his power.” All of a sudden, he looks contrite. “There isn’t anybody else that knows the empire my father built better than I. If Rahava is to survive and prosper, I don’t see any other alternative.” He takes my hand and plants a gentle kiss on the

back. “All I ask is that you bear with me while I bring this chaos under control. I know being married to a bloody emperor wasn’t what you’d bargained for, but I swear, I’ll do everything in my power to protect you from the treachery of the court.”

A soft, incredulous laugh escapes me. He’s just so adorable like this; somehow apologizing for the fact that he’s about to seize power and fulfil his father’s grand plans for him—although I know he’ll do things his own way; he always does.

I can’t stop him. What he’s saying makes perfect sense. I’ve seen firsthand how he runs Tyron; how his men are still loyal to him despite the great transformation he’s undergone.

He regards me with the most earnest crimson gaze, his brow furrowing slightly. “What’s so amusing, hmm?”

“Well, I’d imagine that most eligible nobleborn ladies in the empire would be delighted to learn that they’re going to marry the future Emperor of Rahava.”

He frowns. “Well, you’re not *most* ladies.”

“And the possibility of you becoming emperor is the least of the surprises I’ve uncovered about you, isn’t it?” Still caught in his tender grip, I turn my hand around until my wrist is facing his lips. “I mean, it positively pales in comparison to the *other* truth I discovered about you, doesn’t it? I thought you relinquished the throne because you believed the people would never accept you as you are now.”

Corvan gently kisses the inside of my wrist. “You make a fair point, my love, but my reasons for stepping back weren’t entirely because of my transformation. Even before I changed, I was just sick and tired of the whole damn thing. I wanted to build something on my own, away from father’s machinations. And then I died, and the Goddess gave me life, and it made me all the more determined. The only difference now is that I have you, and if my dear brother and his mother’s family are dabbling in the Death Arts, they need to be stopped at all costs. I will *not* allow anyone to threaten our existence, so forgive me if I become a little overbearing.”

I savor the feeling of his lips; the anticipation of his thirst. “The only thing I object to is the fact that you feel like you have to always protect me from the court. When I learn how to manifest and control my powers—and I *will*—I should like to think that you wouldn’t have to protect me at all. But until then, by all means...” I caress the hard angle of his jaw. “*Do whatever it takes.*”

“I have your permission, then?”

I give him a wry look. “Since when have *you* ever had to ask permission for anything?”

“Since I realized I was in love with you.”

The ground falls out from beneath me. My legs turn to jelly. Warmth spreads through my chest.

For the first time in my life, I’m truly speechless.

And I’m pretty sure my cheeks are on fire. “*C-Corvan...*”

He smiles; a secret little smile laced with a hint of deviousness, because he *knows* the effect he has on me.

“May I, then?” He grazes his fangs across the unbroken surface of my skin. “On both counts?”

How is it that the simple act of him asking permission makes me want to swoon?

And although he’s dangerously charming as always, there’s a hint of vulnerability to him now that makes him all the more irresistible. As if he *needs* me now; like a balm, like a salve, against his father’s death and the terrible truths he’s just been forced to discover.

Who am I to deny him?

“You may,” I whisper, my voice cracking with emotion.

And he bites me gently, his razor-sharp fangs sinking into my skin, and apart from the faint bloom of pain at the beginning, there’s nothing but warmth and the thrill of his mouth against my wrist.

Everything fades to grey. For a moment, I’m aware of nothing but his decadent lips and fangs and the thudding of my

own heartbeat in my ears.

The magic in me snaps and fizzles, a faint rippling sensation running down my forearms.

Then the world returns to me in stark relief, and the fractious magic in me yields to his thirst.

Everything goes quiet.

I let him take my essence, because he's in need.

It feels so good when my magic is subdued by his. I close my eyes and savor the feeling of being so utterly wanted and cherished.

I feel at peace. *He* makes me feel this way.

And if he intends to tear the world apart and put everything in its right place for me, who am I to stop him?

CORVAN

Adjacent to the Inner Sanctum is the headquarters of the Elite Guard. I know this place like the back of my hand.

I spent many a time here when I was a boy, fascinated by the men of the Guard themselves; by their armor and weapons.

The soldiers were gruff but well-meaning; they accommodated me good-naturedly, although now I can understand that they probably didn't have much of a choice.

Overqualified child-minders, they were.

I thought they were incredible—big, powerful, larger than life and equipped with the finest weapons I'd ever seen.

Never in a thousand years could have I imagined I'd be training them when I was older.

The very first time I was allowed to hold a sword was when one of them—a burly, gravelly-voiced man called Braemar—called me over.

How they'd laughed when I tried to lift it—and failed miserably.

That moment is etched into my mind. It's probably the very thing that ignited my passion for the sword. I couldn't have imagined that someday I'd wield it with such ease.

The trainers called me a freak of nature. It was soon discovered that I had a great aptitude for the fighting arts. I progressed at an alarming rate, besting seasoned veterans, easily winning tournaments.

Now I understand why.

I push open the big wooden doors and enter the War Room. The scent of aged oak fills my nostrils. That's because of the large oval table in the center. Worn and pitted and ancient, it's where the Guards sit and plot strategy; where they eat and drink and smoke and wager.

Where I used to play with my toy soldiers.

I pull a chair and take a seat in the middle. There's a seldom-used chair at the end of the room, elevated on a wooden platform. A smaller version of a throne, where my father used to sit and receive briefings or issue orders.

I'm not interested in sitting in that chair.

I wait.

My mouth is filled with the taste of *her*. Her scent lingers in my consciousness. I can hear her, several rooms away, leafing through ancient texts.

She's in my father's secret library, searching for information about her Dryad heritage; about her mysterious powers.

A feeling of calm descends upon me. I don't quite know why. I'm just filled with certainty that Finley will become formidable—even more so than she already is.

She managed to handle *me*, didn't she?

If she wasn't there at the pinnacle of my anger, I probably would have done something destructive.

But now I'm satiated and somewhat contained, so when I hear footsteps—one of the Guard, no doubt—echoing down the corridor, I'm able to compose my thoughts and conceal my emotions behind an expressionless mask.

Eventually, he enters the room. He stops dead in his tracks as he catches sight of me.

He's one of the guards that greeted me at the entrance. I know him. Tarron.

Huge, muscular, freckled, and crimson-bearded, he's a warrior to be feared for his cunning, endless stamina, and incredible strength. He's also blessed with unwavering loyalty and a relentless work ethic. I'd gladly have had him in my crew, but there's no way he would have left the Elite Guard.

Once an Elite, always an Elite. They swore an oath. They would have defended my father to the death.

And now that he's gone...

Who are they going to be loyal to?

It's up to me to convince them to swear fealty to me, and Tarron, their leader, is instrumental in that equation.

He approaches me, holding his hands with his palms facing outwards to show that he's no threat, even though I know he could have his fingers curled around the hilt of his broadsword faster than the human eye can see.

I tip my head in greeting. "Tarron."

"Your Highness." His tone is grave. I wonder if he realizes what's come to pass. "I'd be lying if I said I was surprised to find you here."

"Thank you for respecting my privacy earlier," I say quietly.

He offers a gruff nod in response.

I gesture toward a nearby chair. "Let's talk, Tarron."

"Course." He takes a seat, moving gracefully in spite of his bulk.

He waits for me to speak. Tarron's smart. He knows when to keep quiet.

I stare at him intently, trying to read him. On the outside, he gives away nothing, but his heart is beating a little faster than it should.

I make him uneasy.

"What are you going to do, Tarron, when the old man dies?"

Tarron lets out a deep sigh. “I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t thought that far ahead. I’ll be straight with you, Your Highness. We can’t serve your brother. He isn’t his own man. I fear he’s been corrupted by the Dark Arts. If he’s going to succeed your father, we’ll all relinquish our positions and go look for private mercenary work. The young prince would probably have us gone, anyway. He’s surrounded himself with people from House Talavarra.” He gives me a wry look. “I hear there’s a certain young lord in the north who hires mercenaries from time to time, if they’re good enough.”

“And if this young lord had need of you for more than a season or two, would you consider permanent employment?”

Tarron shrugs. “Might consider it. If the pay and conditions were right.”

“I think the young lord might be highly suggestible when it came to pay and conditions. There might even be the opportunity to remain in Lukiria.”

“We’ll only follow someone that’s stronger than us. I think the young lord might fit that criteria.”

“Absolute loyalty. No questions. No objections.”

“Once we swear an oath, that’s a given.”

Have we just negotiated the terms of the Elite Guard’s new contract?

I lean forward. “Tarron, he’s dead.”

For a moment, the Commander of the Imperial Elite Guard says nothing. He just looks at me, his brow furrowing in concern. He doesn’t seem the least bit surprised.

“My condolences, Your Highness,” he says at last. If he’s aware of the rift between father and I, he doesn’t show it.

“Under no circumstances should news of his death reach the outside—not yet, anyway. There are a few things I need to sort out before the rest of the empire finds out that father’s gone. Can you accept this?”

“I can understand the reasoning behind it. There’ll be vultures swooping in from every angle.”

“Exactly. I’ll ask again, Tarron. Can you and the rest of the Elite Guard abide by my orders and make sure not a single hint of father’s death leaks to the outside world?”

Tarron frowns. “I’m sure it’s possible. And we... would be willing.”

“I *kill* rats, Commander. And I’m sure you can understand that there’s nothing that would stop me from doing so.”

Tarron appraises me warily. “Not a single one of us would be so stupid. Once we’re sworn, there’s nothing that would compromise our loyalty.”

“The loyalty you’ve shown to my father is to be commended. Even when there might have been good cause to question his orders, you’ve served him unfailingly.” I give Tarron a pointed look, for my statement is more of a question. As my father’s personal bodyguards, the Elite Guard have witnessed the empire’s innermost workings. They would know that father, for all his strength, was also imperfect.

And yet they’ve never betrayed him.

“I believe in Rahava,” Tarron says quietly. “Before your grandfather and your father came along, we were all just a bunch of warring tribes. Your grandfather united this empire, and your father kept it together. Stability. That’s what we want.”

I bite my tongue. Father incited more than a few senseless wars in his lifetime, but now isn’t the time to be arguing the point. “And if I swear to you, Tarron, that I’ll do everything in my power to keep the empire stable; to ensure the people of Rahava know *peace*, will you look beyond what I’ve become?”

The big warrior chuckles softly. “You don’t have to question such things, Your Highness. We’ve already seen how you go about things; what your intentions are. The Duchy of Tyron is proof enough of that. You’ve transformed that place from a shithole into a powerhouse. One of my cousins on my da’s side lives there. He’s one of your boys; fought in the Northern War. He writes me from time to time. He’s married a

Tyronese woman. They've got a baby on the way. Says life's good in the north. He used to be a doubter, but now he wouldn't live anywhere else. And he won't tolerate a single bad word against you. That man would die for you, Your Highness."

"What's his name, Tarron?"

"Erdion Brancun. You probably wouldn't remember him, but—"

"I know him. He's a gunner, isn't he?"

"That's him." Tarron's bushy eyebrows lift in surprise. He leans forward, his gaze sharpening. "Your Highness, if I might be frank with you...?"

"Go on."

A deep sigh escapes him. "I can't think of another person that has what it takes to sit on that throne. There's only you. The dukes of the Noble Houses are just too damn greedy, and they would favor their own, causing a power imbalance. And your bloody brother has been influenced by the mages of Deignar. I fear he's lost to the Dark Arts. Rhaegar and Leticia Talavarra have got their hooks in that boy. He'd be a puppet at best."

My chest tightens. Ansar and I have never been close. There's an age gap between us, and our parents had always found reasons to keep us apart.

I don't have many memories of him from childhood. I remember encountering him at formal events; balls and banquets and the like. I was on the cusp of manhood, and he was but a boy.

He was always impeccably dressed, and surrounded by family members from the Talavarra clan. At first, he was quiet and reserved and very well behaved. And he always seemed to have very little to say to me.

It was only when he became older that he started attracting the attention of the ladies of the court, for Ansar Talavarra-Duthriss had apparently become *very good looking*, according

to public opinion. He started to gain a reputation for being a wrecker of hearts and a master of wild, lavish parties.

What kind of life has he led since then? I almost regret not getting to know him better.

Maybe, just maybe...

Ansar needs protecting too.

Tarron shifts uneasily. He swallows. Then he takes a deep breath. “Your Highness, we want you to take the throne. The Elite Guard will support you without question. I don’t care if you’ve been touched by magic or whatever, and I doubt most regular people care about that, either.”

My heart starts to beat again. My resolve strengthens.

If this is how it must be, then I can’t refuse it any longer.

A wry smile tugs at the corners of my mouth. “You’ve been talking to Kaithar, haven’t you?”

I know that Kaithar and Tarron are good friends.

Tarron gives me a cryptic look. “We, er, *correspond*.”

“Unbeknownst to me, two commanders of the empire have been plotting to install me as emperor.” Irony fills my voice.

“It’s not like that, Your Highness. I merely—”

I make a silencing gesture with my hand. “If you’re true to your word, then swear fealty to me here and now.”

“I will. And here I was thinking you’d never bloody get around to it.”

“Swear,” I command him, rising to my feet, “that you will be loyal to me and no other master. That you will protect what is mine and carry out the duties of a Commander of the Elite Guard with the same integrity that you demonstrated under my father. That at times, you may need to risk your life to fulfil said duties.”

“I know that already,” Tarron growls, also standing. “And I swear it under the name of Eresus.”

I pull out my dagger and make a cut across my palm. “Swear it in blood, Tarron Markanian.”

“Fine. I have no hesitation in doing so.” He unsheathes his own dagger and slices his palm. “ I swear fealty to you, Corvan Duthriss.”

I hold my hand above his, allowing my own blood to trickle into his palm.

“And I swear that I will fulfil my promise to you to become the emperor of Rahava. I will personally eliminate any threat that could undermine the stability of the empire and the safety of its people. I will treat the Elite Guard fairly and reward you handsomely, and as much as you work to protect me and mine, I will use all my power to protect you.”

My blood mingles with Tarron’s, and the cut in his big, callused palm begins to heal.

“Well, that’s something else,” he mutters, his eyes going wide in shock. “I’ve never had a prince of the empire swear an oath to me before.”

“You might be used to my father’s ways, but I do things differently.”

“Oh, we already know that, Your Highness.”

“Summon the other guards. They will swear fealty to me in the same manner. Any that aren’t willing are free to leave.”

“Don’t you worry, we won’t have none of that.”

“Good. After that, you can go find an embalmer. They’re to prepare the body and remain here until his death is made public.”

“As you command, Your Highness.”

“And, Tarron...”

“Yes, Your Highness?”

“Now that you’re one of *my* Elite Guards, there’s no need for formalities. You can call me Corvan, just like you used to.”

At last, Tarron's serious mask slips. A grin breaks through, gleaming white against his russet beard. "It's gonna take a while to get used to all the changes around here, but I can't say I'm complaining."

FINLEY

At last, it's time to leave for the Duchy of Talavarra.

Corvan has handled everything. Somehow, he's convinced the Elite Guard swear fealty to him, and he's summoned an embalmer to attend to the emperor's body. I don't know if he'll make good on his threat of sticking his father's head on a pike above the castle walls, but I'm not going to try and convince him otherwise.

Valdon Duthriss was a bastard through and through.

All that's left is for us to find my mother—and Corvan's half-brother, who we suspect might be responsible for the undead army that attacked Tyron Castle.

Corvan's back now. I hear his footsteps ringing on the marble floors. Instinctively, I know it's him. His strides are swift and inhumanly perfect. He's probably doing it on purpose so as not to sneak up on me. When he wants to, he can be terrifyingly stealthy.

I put down the book that I've been thumbing through—an old, leather-bound tome that smells of age and ancient paper. It's a strangely comforting scent.

There's a simple title printed on the spine, in faded gilt lettering: *Dryadae*.

The book is written in archaic Rahavan. The words are embellished; the phrasing quaint.

But the meaning remains the same.

Long before the Duchies of Rahava were united by Emperor Lyzar Duthriss, people used to study magic as an art. They wrote books such as this one—a scientific study on dryads.

I look up from where I'm sitting—in an old, leather-upholstered armchair that reminds me of the one in Corvan's chambers.

How many nights did Valdon Duthriss spend here, learning ancient secrets that helped him cling to power for so long?

It feels so surreal; that *I* now have unrestricted access to some of the most valuable texts in the empire.

As for what I've been able to discover in such a short amount of time...

“Anything interesting?” Corvan murmurs, sidling up beside me, placing his hand on the back of my neck. He isn't wearing his gloves anymore, and his hand is warm and pleasantly rough.

His touch sends a little shiver down my spine. I can hardly believe he feels this good to me; this familiar, as if we've known one another for years.

The book lies open on my lap, at the part I found most interesting of all. I look up at Corvan.

He's smiling.

In the midst of all this darkness, he's smiling, and it's a true smile, devoid of cynicism or bitterness.

“Actually, there *is* something.” I gesture toward the page, which has turned yellowish-brown with age. “You know the heart-seed that was put inside me by the ancient tree, *Eulisyn*?”

“Hm?” He caresses my neck; gentle, reverent, possessive.

My heart beats ever faster. “Look at this passage.” I point to the paragraph, printed in ornate, archaic lettering.

The Heart Seed: A Divine Gift

Deep in the ancient forests, there exist certain trees that have grown for a millennia or more. So ancient are these beings that they have grown sentient. Witnessed have they the passing of time and mere mortals, the changing of the seasons and the song of the earth. Thus, we can equate them to deities. They have names; seldom attained, seldom offered, and imbued with power. Only one of Dryadae lineage can converse with the ancient trees. A god-equivalent tree may choose, at any time, to offer protection to one of their children in the form of a heart-seed. Such an event is extremely rare; a once-in-a-millennium occurrence. The heart-seed is an extension of the deity's power, and when combined with the magical potential of a Child of Eresus, it will grant untold protection.

Source: an oral account provided by one of Dryadae lineage.

“That tells us a lot, but it’s also infuriatingly cryptic,” I complain. “Why are these things always so cryptic? I find it hard to believe that people like you and I are so vanishingly rare that we have to go searching for crumbs of information. Can’t anyone tell us anything?”

Corvan runs his devious fingers beneath the neckline of my tunic, massaging the hollow of my neck, sending warm ripples through me. His touch draws the nervous energy out of me. How is he so calm at a moment like this? “It’s fascinating,” he murmurs. “And reassuring. I have no doubt that many of our kind exist, but they’re far away from here. With the exception of your mother. I suspect she holds answers to so many of your questions. Patience, Finley. I’ll go to Talavarra now and set her free. All will be well.”

“You’re going to go?” I look up, taking in his earnest expression, and the look of certainty in his crimson eyes. He’s made up his mind. Stubborn man. Iron-willed man. “Alone? I thought you didn’t want me to leave your side.”

He takes my hand. Slips his fingers into mine and draws me upwards out of the chair. “On the balance of what I knew back in Tyron, that was what I thought. I was expecting a bloodbath in Lukiria, *not* my father on his deathbed. Human opponents I can handle easily, but Ansar and his people are

using magic. I might have to rely on all my powers to fight them... and whatever's inside Deignar castle." He pulls me toward him, his arm curling around my waist. "Now that the situation is clearer, I'm afraid I'll be drawn into a fight I can't avoid, leaving you vulnerable to attack. Talavarra isn't my territory. I don't know it as well as Lukiria. I'll be at a disadvantage going in."

"So what do you propose?" I lean into his embrace, wanting to be held like this forever. "That I stay here, in the Inner Sanctum of the Imperial Palace, while you go and singlehandedly fight your half-brother and his extended family; people who have the power to raise the dead and bend them to their will?"

He raises an eyebrow and chuckles softly. "That's pretty much my plan. You're in the most secure part of the most heavily fortified building in Rahava, and the Elite Guard have sworn to protect you. The forces defending the palace know nothing of my father's death. They'll maintain the strictest security because they still think they're serving Emperor Valdun Duthriss. I daresay you'll be safe here until I return."

I gave Corvan a wry look. "But *you* breached the Inner Sanctum so easily."

"For one like me, who knows the secret entrances and can immobilize mortal guards easily; who didn't face *any* kind of resistance because father was expecting me... that's a given. But anyone else that tried to infiltrate like that would be long dead by now. The Elite Guard are truly formidable. Nothing will get past them."

"And yet you could have... if you wanted to." They're amongst the most skilled soldiers in the empire, and Corvan could have felled them in an instant.

"That's why my enemies Talavarra have resorted to arcane magic." His brow furrows in consternation. "I don't know when they started doing this. I don't know how my spies in Lukiria failed to pick up the signs, but I'm going to make it right." He leans in, pressing his forehead against mine, taking a deep, shuddering breath. "If you weren't here earlier... I

would have surely gone mad. So thank you, Finley, for reminding me of who I am, and what I need to do.”

I reach up and caress the side of his face. He really is too hard on himself sometimes. “Go, Corvan. Be strong. Stay safe. You are *not* allowed to go and do anything stupid like get gravely injured or die on me. Even you aren’t invincible. So you’d better keep that in mind.”

He lets out a tiny puff of astonishment. “You’re taking this all in your stride, aren’t you?”

“Barely,” I admit. “But what other choice do I have? From here on in, I can only trust you.”

“So you *should*.” He leans in and kisses me with terrible urgency. His tongue probes my mouth; insistent, wanting. He tastes of sweetness and ice.

My body responds immediately. My magic reacts, sending a ripple across my arms and down my back. I want more of him, always.

Don’t go.

When it comes to Corvan, I could become so very selfish.

But now I tilt my head, offering him my neck, because I know my blood makes him stronger, and I want him to be at the height of his powers when he arrives at the Talavarra Estate.

For all the forces and weaponry and resources he has at his disposal, he chooses to go alone. To risk his own safety.

Nobody is faster.

Nobody can do what he does.

And Corvan cares deeply about this land and its people.

About *me*.

That’s what it comes down to.

Despite all he’s endured, he wants to protect us.

“*Finley...*” he gasps, his voice turning hoarse with desire. “Are you sure you want to—”

“*Take* it,” I whisper, suddenly overcome with the urge to be devoured by him. My body aches with need. I curl my fingers around his neck and pull him towards me. “I insist. It’s obvious that you want to. And you *need* to.”

“*Fine.*” All of a sudden, his voice is strained. He plants soft kisses along my jawline and down my neck, until he reaches the base of it, where my pulse beats wildly. He kisses me there too, lingering there in an exquisite moment of tenderness and wanting before he gently pierces my skin.

There’s that familiar sting of pain again, accompanied by warmth and the firm, commanding press of his lips against my bare skin.

My body reacts before my thoughts arrive. Arousal surges through me; so acute I can barely contain it. In the end, it’s the tough layer of Corvan’s leather armor that stops me.

If not for that barrier, I would have jumped his bones already.

His thirst; his *need* for me...

What a blessing it is, to be wanted like this.

At last, he breaks away, satiated, breathing heavily, his lips stained crimson, his pupils dilated. “I could devour you right now,” he whispers.

“*Don’t.* As tempted as I am, save it for when you get back. I feel you’ll be a lot more vengeful toward your enemies when you’re like this. I shall be your reward.”

“Then I’ll definitely come back as soon as I can,” he growls, tasting my lips again, leaving me with a hint of my own coppery sweetness. My mouth tingles with magic. “And I’ll bring your mother to you. How could I fail when the only thing I’ll be thinking of is you, waiting here for me? *Gods*, I would raze their castle to the ground if it meant I could come back to you.”

And that’s how we parted; in longing and hope, and I let Corvan go, because I know that he’ll be a hundred times more dangerous and when he’s on his own, for he won’t have to worry about unmasking *that* side of himself.

Not that I'm bothered by it.

I love all of him; even the side of him that's savage and ruthless.

CORVAN

In an instant, I'm away from the Imperial Palace.

Away from my father's mess and the honorable Elite Guard—who now serve me.

Immediately, my heart clenches in protest, because I don't want to be away from her.

It's astonishing. Me, who's practically been living as a recluse for the past three years or so? Who turned away all the eligible ladies of the court, because I found most of them vapid and self-serving; because I could not stomach the thought of being wedded to someone that would see only my titles and my inheritance?

I've fallen in love with a baron's daughter who hasn't had a single thing to do with the Rahavan Court.

And how *right* she is for me. She's fearless and grounded. Humble. Not pretentious or putting on airs.

She's fierce and clever, and there isn't a single malicious bone in her body.

If anything happened to her, I would be destroyed. If not for the lingering memory of her touch; the steady whisper of her voice, the unwavering faith she has in me, I would be irrational right now. I was barely able to leave her as it were.

But it's necessary. It's for the best. I can't possibly take her into unfamiliar territory with the threat of necromancy hanging over us. And Tyron Castle has turned into a warzone, overrun by an army of undead.

The Imperial Palace is the safest place for her right now. Outside the two of us, the Elite Guard, and a single embalmer, not a single soul knows of my father's demise.

In the next day or so, nothing's going to change.

Besides, I have a certain amount of faith in *Eulisyn's* magic. It's saved Finley's life once before. That infernal tree knew what it was doing when it gave her its *heart-seed*.

I find it reassuring that she's got such powerful magic in her, even if we don't yet know much about it.

I need to end this quickly. I have no way of knowing what's happening in Tyron right now. The longer the undead roam my lands, the more dangerous the situation becomes.

I can't allow the people of Tyron to face that sort of danger.

If I can destroy the necromancer in one fell swoop, the threat will be gone.

For the first time in my life, I'm truly grateful for the powers that have been bestowed upon me by my mother's rare vampiric blood. For the first time, I'm not left wondering. Perhaps that was her parting gift to me—the gift of *knowing*.

The cool afternoon breeze whips my hair as I soar through the skies, high above the red-tiled rooftops of the outskirts of Lukiria. My body feels light, thanks to Finley's intoxicating blood. The warmth of the setting sun touches my face without burning me. The broadsword sheathed at my waist feels light as a feather, and my armor hardly weighs me down.

I feel invincible.

Dangerously so. *Caution*. I can't afford to become overconfident and complacent.

I drop through the clouds; through the deepening darkness, as evening descends upon the capital. The short winter day has passed, and night is settling upon the land once again.

I land on the parapet of an outer wall, just for a heartbeat. With a single leap I'm in the air again, my legs generating immense force; enough to propel me for several leagues.

I soar over the outskirts of the capital; blocks upon blocks of small, haphazardly constructed dwellings. Rickety lean-tos made of salvaged timber and thatch. Clay brick houses with small bent chimneys exuding lazy plumes of woodsmoke, fires burning as the residents prepare for the onset of the bitterly cold night.

This place has grown since I was here last. There must be thousands living here; entire families squeezed into dwellings less than the size of my own chambers.

The narrow streets are made of packed Earth. Refuse lines the gutters. I catch a tendril of scent; of bodies and cooking and woodsmoke and waste.

For all the empire's riches, people still live like this. My father's always had a habit of turning a blind eye to them.

But I won't.

I leave the outskirts of the city behind, travelling over a scattering of farms and industrial areas. There's the forest, up ahead. I descend. Land. Leap. Again and again, gathering momentum, moving faster than I ever thought I could.

I follow the map that's etched into my mind. Over forests and rivers and rock formations. Across roads and well-trodden paths. I pass villages and hamlets, their windows suffused with the warm glow of lamplight.

Warding against the darkness; against the things that cause terror in the night.

Like me.

The air changes, becoming warmer, infused with a hint of humidity. The gleaming Ophirion river system stretches out before me, burnished golden by the glow of the setting sun.

The forests change, leaves appearing on the trees; there are more evergreens here. The fragrance of early spring fills my nostrils.

The scent reminds me of my betrothed.

Hurry.

I can't afford to become distracted by thoughts of her right now.

And I'm filled with an increasing sense of urgency. I can't afford to let anything happen to her mother. I know how important she is to Finley.

I swear by Hecoa, I'll protect anyone and anything that's important to her.

What's hers is mine now.

What's mine is hers.

I land at the edge of the river, where the snaking water coalesces into a wide delta filled with reeds and birdlife.

The welcome cloak of darkness is settling upon the land. I embrace it. I feel comfortable in the midst of it, for I can see perfectly under the cover of the night that hides.

I'm pretty certain I've crossed into the Talavarra lands by now. I've only been here a handful of times, but I recognize the distinctive vegetation; the wide, flat leaves, and spearlike trees that look more like gigantic grasses. The branches and trunks are covered in patches of green and silver lichen, mosses draped across them like remnants of some ghostly, ethereal being.

It's warmer here. I can no longer detect the scent of the mountains, which travels all the way to the capital on the icy winds.

This is the Duchy of Deignar, ruled by the Talavarra clan for centuries.

These lands are vast and lush, blessed with frequent rainfall and rich volcanic soils that wash down through the river system. Their fortune and power has been built upon agriculture—rice, grains, sheep, and *koruu*, which is used to make a potent medicinal sedative.

There's no doubt this region has been instrumental to Rahava's success as an empire.

I'd be loath to destroy it.

I can see glittering lights now. That would be the city of Padra, the capital of Deignar, nestled in a wide bend of the river. I've only visited on official business; military business, staying in the lavish imperial residence that adjoins the Imperial Barracks. It's a charming city, far smaller than Lukiria, but bustling and vibrant. The people here are blunt-spoken but incredibly hospitable. They tend to be quick to anger but equally quick to drop grudges—it's against their religion to hold grudges—and they laugh easily and freely.

I hold nothing against the people of Deignar.

It's a pity that Rhaegar Talavarra is too ambitious for his own good. He's always had his eyes on the throne, and there was a time when he'd gathered enough support within the court that he almost succeeded in taking it.

But then father started the war in Vikur, and most of the soldiers he conscripted were from Deignar.

Rhaegar couldn't refuse. To do so would have made him look cowardly and unpatriotic.

In one fell swoop, father stole Rhaegar Talavarra's power. And then he requested his daughter's hand in marriage—in exchange for the return of Duke Talavarra's troops. By agreeing to the marriage, Rhaegar was forced to recognize the legitimacy of father's power.

What a *bastard* my father was.

I reach the center of Padra proper, landing on a tall spire that gives me an uninterrupted view of the surroundings.

The moon hangs low in the sky, tinged yellow and waning. Wispy clouds scud across its face, throwing ghostly shadows across the landscape.

In the distance, I see Deignar Castle. Rectangular, symmetrical, and featureless, its walls made of thick granite, it sits imposingly atop a small man-made hill in the center of a wide moat.

A muted glow flickers in the windows. It isn't lit up for all the world to see, like the grand palace in Lukiria.

For a moment, I simply watch and listen.

Here the wind is little more than a gentle breeze, lacking the cold bite of the northern winter. But it carries with it a certain fetid stench that's all too familiar.

The sounds of the city are a muted hum in the background; people going about their business, settling in for the night. Padra is quiet. *Too* quiet. It isn't the raucous, energetic place I used to know. Where are the street vendors, with their mouth-watering charcoal-grilled meat, fragrant with herbs and spices? Where are the horses and the carts? The buskers? Where are the people, spilling out onto the footpaths where they sit on rickety tables and benches, enjoying simple food as the night deepens and the drinks flow?

Curious.

It's rather ominous, isn't it?

In the distance, a wolf lets out a mournful howl. It's quickly accompanied by several others.

The wind picks up, bringing with it the stench of decay.

Something's rotten in the heart of Talavarra Country.

Time to go.

Once again, I leap, this time in the direction of the castle. The moat can't stop me. Neither can the walls or the guards.

I have a feeling they're expecting me. The attack on Tyron Castle was intentional; a provocation, designed to draw me out of my territory.

Well, it worked.

CORVAN

I land silently atop the castle's defensive walls, quickly crouching down to avoid being silhouetted against the night sky.

The moat was no barrier to me. An ordinary invader would have found it troublesome indeed—wide, deep, filled with carnivorous fish that would tear the flesh of any creature foolish enough to take a dip.

But I simply leapt over it.

I've spotted at least six human guards stationed on the battlements. Crossbows in hand, their eyes are trained upon the skies.

They're waiting for me.

But they didn't know that I move faster than light; I'm almost invisible against the night sky. I've pulled a black hood over my hair and face, hiding the paleness that would make me stand out.

I hardly make a sound.

I listen to my surroundings; to the faint shuffling of feet, to the gentle hiss of the wind and the whispers of movement within the castle proper.

The air is thick and oppressive, as if I've waded into a miasma. The stench of decay grows ever stronger.

Instinctively, I recoil. I yearn for Tyron; for the big skies and the majestic snow-capped vistas.

I yearn for Finley. For her sweetness. Her pure, bright energy.

The memory of her strengthens my resolve. I know what I must do. And it means that men will die here, but I can't afford to hesitate.

There is no point in showing mercy. It will only make things worse.

The Talavarra Fortress has stone walls reminiscent of Tyron Castle's, only these are made of pale, golden-hued stone. The main entrance is a pair of imposing metal-studded wooden doors set in a stone arch.

I could probably go in through the side or the back, taking a stealthy approach, but it's pointless if they're already expecting me.

They know they can't best me with physical force alone. They can throw men at me, but I'll cut them down—each and every one of them. Compared to when I was human, I'm a thousand times stronger.

That means they have a trump card. Something they'll bargain in exchange for my cooperation.

I suspect it has to do with Finley and her mother.

Their plan seems painfully obvious to me. I suspect they'll try to threaten me with Aralya's life; make me yield in exchange for her freedom or something equivalent.

I think I have an idea of how this is going to play out.

And I know what I'll do.

There are many ways to win a war—many ways to gain leverage.

I leap off the wall and land in the forecourt, my boots barely making a sound on the cold stone pavement.

All of a sudden, I'm surrounded by monsters. Undead souls; sons of Deignar, judging from their dark, matted hair and distinctive angular features. Some are long dead; shuffling corpses of desiccated skin and exposed bone. Others are fresh

from the grave. They're more animated, with intact bodies and an *almost* sentient aura about them.

There must be at least a hundred of them flooding into this stone-walled courtyard—or more. A veritable army. And they just keep on coming. They have weapons, too; halberds and broadswords and war-axes and crossbows.

I throw my hood back. No point in hiding myself now. They know I'm here. I whip out my sword and wait, perfectly still as the undead army advances.

The easiest way to put down an animated corpse is to separate the head from the body. Some of these undead soldiers wear chainmail and plate-armor. No doubt it's to make it harder for me to decapitate them.

Well, this is going to be interesting. I haven't really had a chance to test the full power of this body of mine. And now I'm brimming with Finley's power; with the knowledge that what I am isn't an abomination but a gift.

I am my mother's legacy, made flesh.

I trace a path with my gaze, determining the path of my blade.

Then I move, becoming a blur. The undead might be brutally strong, but they're also much slower than I am. I catch one mid-stride, lopping its head in a swift arc. A crossbow bolt whizzes toward me, but I snap my head to the side, allowing it to narrowly miss my eye socket.

I move again, felling several more, creating a storm of foul ichor and rotten flesh. As they fall, the sentient undead rage and curse at me, mouths snapping even though their heads have been separated from their bodies.

But eventually, the unholy green light in their eyes goes out, and they return to Hecoa's embrace.

I draw my dagger, using my other hand to impale as I cut a swathe through the sea of bodies. It's a grotesque crush; a pulsating, unholy mass, seething with the magic of corruption.

Before I left Lukiria, I spent some time in father's secret library. I consulted the old tomes and gleaned valuable knowledge.

I discovered what I'd always suspected—that necromancy is a truly vile art. It channels the power of the Life God, Eresus, into the dead, animating them unnaturally, drawing the essence of life away from the creatures it's supposed to sustain.

It prevents the dead from crossing into the afterlife, denying them peace in the arms of the Goddess.

It desecrates their bodies and makes a mockery of their lives.

It turns once good people—like Kinnivar—into malevolent caricatures of their past selves, opening their arrested thoughts to the necromancer, leaving them prone to manipulation. They, in turn, become extensions of the necromancer's will.

And the immense life-force needed to generate necromantic magic...

It can be generated from sacrificing the living.

When it comes to these wretched undead, my mission is simple.

Send them to Hecoa's domain, where they belong.

A big, armored figure rushes toward me, taking a swipe with its massive war-axe. The weapon comes down with impossible force, narrowly missing me. I swerve to the side and meet the blade of a staggering undead. The tip penetrates my leather armor, piercing my side.

Pain lances through me, but it's only momentary. I grab the blade with my gloved hand, cutting myself in the process, and yank it out.

My blood spurts, then stops.

I'm already healing.

Funny how the Death Goddess's magic can heal, as well as take away.

I spin. My broadsword flies around in an arc, separating the attacker's head from its body. The axe-wielding one falls too as my blade crunches through the chain-mail covering its neck.

Bodies fall with a sickening *thud*.

I need to move faster.

So I do. And I say a silent prayer of thanks to my betrothed for giving me the strength I need.

My blade is sharp.

My resolve even sharper.

I may get stabbed here and cut there. A crossbow bolt might penetrate the thick hide of my armor, piercing my shoulderblade. But none of that matters, because I pull everything out, and my body heals, and even though each attack weakens me slightly, I have plenty of reserve to go on.

I could do this all night and day.

Thrust. Slash. Spin. Impale.

It feels endless until it isn't, and at last I'm down to the final dozen or so, and it's obvious they're being controlled, for ordinary mortal men with the fear of death in their hearts would have dropped their weapons and run by now, but these poor creatures don't.

And all I can do is cut them down, again and again. My hands and armor are soaked in blood and filth.

The last of the undead falls. I throw a silent prayer to the Goddess, whose blood runs through my veins, imploring her to ease these poor bastards into the afterlife.

I flick my sword, removing the dirt from the blade, and quickly sheath it.

Then I cross the square and arrive at the imposing double doors.

I push. Unsurprisingly, they're unlocked.

There's a great creak as the timber door swings inward, admitting me to the entrance foyer of Deignar Castle.

And inside, I meet another horde.

Hundreds, if not thousands of them. A sea of decaying, animated bodies lurching toward me.

Horror and revulsion well up inside me, threatening to spill over. I quickly convert them to anger. Anger fuels my destructive force.

I start to hack through the bodies as if I were a butcher, caring less about technique and more about efficiency. Thank the *goddess* for this dhampir body of mine. If I were anyone else, I'd be dead by now.

They really want to see what it takes, don't they? To slow me down?

I cut a swathe through the horde, earning my share of stabs, cuts, and nicks in the process. My body heals quickly, but my armor isn't infallible. I choose the leather armor because it affords me greater freedom of movement, and I value speed over protection. But even chainmail and plate-armor can be penetrated by a sharp enough blade.

And the edge of my sword is starting to get dull. I need another blade.

A hulking undead rushes me, his massive war-axe raised. I take his head off in an instant. The axe falls, clattering loudly on the stone floor. I sheath my sword and pick it up. There's another body nearby, with a similar sized axe lying close to its outstretched arm.

I take both.

Before my transformation, I would have struggled to wield these heavy weapons.

Now, they're perfectly weighted; comfortable.

I spin and slice an undead corpse in two. Then another, and another. My attack becomes a gruesome dance; it's easier to spin and whirl than to cut straight through. The blades are sharp and carry wicked momentum.

Better.

Much better.

Eventually, I clear the room, leaving a pile of mangled bodies in my wake.

I don't look back. I feel sick to my stomach. So many dead men; so many of them freshly dead, too. How did the Talavarras gain so many bodies in such a short amount of time.

Are they *killing* them?

Did all these men die for the sole purpose of becoming fodder for me? Are these people really so threatened by the mere fact of my existence?

I'm sick.

Sick and furious.

Rage eats at my insides, making me a little bit insane.

Kaithar was right. I never should have relinquished my claim to the throne. If I hadn't been so blind to it, maybe I could have stopped this rot before it even started.

I know what Finley would say; that I shouldn't be so hard on myself, that I can't hold myself responsible for the actions of others.

I go up a curving flight of stairs, encountering even more undead attackers. There isn't a single living body amongst them, but from a strategic perspective, it makes perfect sense, because I would kill *living* men far more easily than dead ones.

I have a rough idea of the layout. I'll turn this place over in search of them—and most importantly, Finley's mother. I've visited this castle before, on official business. A banquet was held in my honor, hosted by Duke Rhaegar Talavarra himself.

The duke was pleasant on the surface, following imperial protocol to the letter, but sometimes the mask would slip, and I'd see his resentment.

I didn't pay it much heed at the time. A lot of people resented me, and still do.

It comes with the territory, I suppose.

I speed down another corridor then turn a corner, where I come face to face with a squadron of men.

Not undead, but *men*.

They're in full plate-armor, their faces hidden behind curved helms, their breastplates adorned with the twin serpent insignia of House Talavarra.

I stop, lowering my twin war-axes.

I stare at them.

They stare back; unspeaking, unmoving, as if they've encountered a ghost.

"Bloody hells," one of them curses. "He's here *already*."

"Fucking *monster*."

The irony isn't lost on me.

I count at least a dozen soldiers. Some of them have crossbows.

One is raising his, firing it straight at me.

His aim is good. The bolt would have hit me right in the heart if I hadn't plucked it right out of the air.

I throw the steel bolt to the floor.

The sniper swears.

"I'd rather not kill you," I say quietly as I approach.

The soldiers don't move. They simply stare at me, frozen and silent. I don't know what I must look like to them; covered in the stench and filth of the undead, my armor torn and shredded, a pair of massive war-axes in my hands.

My body is strong—I feel like I could go on fighting for an eternity—but the thirst is starting to creep up on me again.

I can smell their blood. It isn't tantalizing like Finley's, but I know it will make me strong.

The primal part of me is overcome with a sudden urge to feed.

Blades are drawn. The men advance, but there's hesitation in their steps.

Unlike the undead, mortal men are influenced by fear.

"I'll give you one chance," I inform them. "Stand aside, and you won't be killed."

But they refuse to move.

I sigh. "Why are you doing this? You have to know that what's come to pass here is an abomination."

"Evil to fight evil," one of the men replies, a tremor in his voice. "We can't allow one such as *you* to take all the power in this empire. Your kind don't die. It's *wrong*. Better to have one of our own ruling us. Not a blood-drinking monster."

And you think that one who resorts to Death Magic would be any better?

"You don't even *know* me," I growl, stalking toward the speaker. He lifts his sword and rushes me.

I dance around his swift attack. Dropping my axes, I grab his sword-wrist and squeeze hard, crushing his armor and his bones. I pull him close and tear off his helm.

He's just a young man, with dark curls and a neatly trimmed beard. His ears are adorned with several golden hoops—in the way of the Padran people.

His pulse beats wildly in his neck. He thrashes and writhes, but I easily overpower him, holding him still as I sink my fangs into his neck.

I drink. Quickly, efficiently. It's nothing more than sustenance at this point.

Nothing like the sacred bliss I experience when Finley offers herself to me.

This is forced.

I'd rather not, but I have no choice. I can't afford to become weak here.

Recognizing that he can't fight, he goes limp in my grasp. I wrap my arm around his neck, cutting off his air until he goes unconscious.

I let him go, and he slumps to the ground.

I leave him there and advance up on the remaining soldiers. "If you attack, you'll die. Then what do you think will happen? Your lord will turn you into monsters like the ones I destroyed downstairs. You'll become undead fiends, and then I'll have to kill you again."

A barrage of arrows flies at me. I duck and deflect. Suffused with the blood of the soldier, I feel invincible again. When one of the crossbow bolts penetrates my armor, I simply yank it out, and my body heals.

I'd really prefer not to kill these men.

They know not what they do.

I stop.

The men hesitate, the tips of their swords wavering.

I see a gap; man-sized, leading toward a wide set of doors, through which I can see another corridor.

I know what I'll do.

Why should I fight them?

"When I become emperor," I say softly, seizing the last moment of their hesitation, "just remember that I could have killed you, and I didn't."

Then I move through the spaces between them, faster than the eye can see, disappearing before their very eyes.

They can't catch me. I don't *want* them to catch me, either.

I reach a vast hall, lined with polished parquet floors, the ornate ceilings inlaid with gilt. My boots leave a trail of filthy footprints across the pristine floor.

Another set of doors greets me—carved with motifs of vines and flowers and scrollwork, their entire surface painted in gold.

If I remember correctly, this passage leads to Deignar Castle's great hall and throne room.

And there are people inside. Presences; at least three of them. I can hear their slow, steady breathing, and the rapid thud of their heartbeats.

A soft sigh escapes my lips. Is this what they wanted? To throw the full force of a necromancer's powers at me before I reached them?

Did they think all that would weaken me?

If anything, it just strengthens my resolve.

What comes next is going to be difficult, but if what I think I know about Finley's mother proves to be right, this could all be over very quickly.

Knowledge is the key to power in this empire, and I don't think the Talavarras truly understand what they're dealing with.

CORVAN

As I approach, the doors silently swing open before I even touch them.

I walk through without hesitation.

What point is there in being cautious, when I already know they're expecting me?

Besides, I want to see my little brother. It's been so long since I've spoken with him.

I want to see how he's grown; what he's become.

Whether he's salvageable.

This is indeed the Great Hall of Deignar Castle, also known as the throne room, where the duke sits when he attends to his official business. It's smaller than the great hall in my own castle, but the decor and furnishings are much more elaborate; all gilt and velvet and polished floors and ornate carvings.

Silence hangs over the room, thick and oppressive. But I can hear the presences within it. They shift and move in their silks. They breathe and tense.

I can smell them. *Human* traces. Things I know so very well. Sweat and cloying fragrance.

Woodsmoke. Ash. Incense.

Decay. Old, dried blood.

I can hear their pulses. Steady, predictable. *Mortal*.

I can smell their blood as it percolates through their arteries and veins. I know exactly how to get it.

They can't escape my attention.

They're like prey.

There's a raised platform at the far end, upon which sits an imposing throne, with armrests and legs carved into a lion's paws. Atop the backrest sits a likeness of a lion's head, teeth bared in a vicious snarl.

I know this, because I've seen that throne before. I can see it now, silhouetted through a gauzy curtain that obscures the figure sitting upon it, turning them into a dark shadow.

Why hide?

How ridiculous.

I walk right up to the dais and rip the curtain away, revealing the figure within.

Ansar stares back at me.

For a moment, we're both quiet.

My brother has... *changed*.

Ansar Talavarra-Duthriss is as tall as I am. He's filled out—no longer the slender, delicate looking youth I remember.

He has a lean, powerful physique. His complexion is deeply tanned—he's obviously been spending time outdoors. His hair—as dark as his mother's—has grown long, curling over his shoulders.

He's pierced his ears in the fashion of Padra—with priceless jewels befitting a son of House Talavarra.

Set in gold, a perfectly symmetrical obsidian pearl hangs from each earlobe, its surface gleaming with iridescence. The pearls are perfectly tear-shaped and almost identical.

Incredibly rare. Unfathomably precious. Such a pair could buy a minor lord's castle.

And curiously, his eyes, once deep brown, now exude a faint emerald-hued glow.

I can feel his magical aura, the same way I feel magical energy when Finley's power is activated, only where she feels warm and bright, his is suffused with iciness and anger; it seethes and flickers, prickly like static.

But that isn't the most startling thing about him.

Ansar wears a sumptuous robe of dark green—so dark it's almost black. The fabric shimmers in the dim light. A deep v-shaped opening reveals his bare chest—and thousands of intricate glyphs tattooed into his skin, rising all the way to his neck, ending just below his jawline.

I recognize the characters, even if I don't understand them. It's an ancient language from across the ocean—from the lands beyond Batava.

Ancient Perigian is what we call it. I'm sure it has another name, but I don't know much about the world beyond the vast deserts of Homana.

Ansar has changed indeed.

Clearly, a lot has happened since I left.

What has driven him to become like this? Father and Tarron's information was correct.

My little brother is the one raising the dead.

I stand before him, my danger-sense prickling, my fingers itching with the urge to grab my sword and impale him through the heart before he has a chance to open his mouth and utter the spells that would defy the very laws of the gods themselves.

I would kill my very own brother in a heartbeat.

But I can't.

Not until I find out where Aralya is.

Maybe he senses the intent behind my thoughts, for a hint of a smile curves his mouth, breaking his expressionless mask.

For we both know that there is no physical barrier that could prevent me from killing him now—or the ones standing behind him, hiding their faces behind yet another curtain that

hangs across the rear section of the dais. Deep blue silk, contrasting with the golden ceiling, hiding their faces.

What's with all the bloody smoke and mirrors here?

I temper my urge to kill them all.

Soon.

They know they can't defeat me.

So what's their ploy?

"*Why?*" I say at last, breaking the silence.

Ansar sits there on his lion-shaped throne, deceptively calm. He rests his chin against one hand and shrugs. "You see why. A son of Duthriss has been given such power. Everyone knows you were never just going to sit in Tyron and tend to your lands in peace."

"I was, until you provoked me." It occurs to me that Ansar was behind the attempt to steal Finley away from me—before she ever arrived.

Anger fills me again, and this time it's glacial.

I could do the unthinkable right now, but I must be patient.

Ansar laughs softly. "My brother. Do you think I don't know you? You and our father might have wanted to have very little to do with me, but ever since I can remember, I've been watching you. Admiring you. *Despising* you. I know you better than you think, Corvan. You know, I always wondered what it would have been like if *I* were the Golden Child of House Duthriss. I never understood why our father was so blinded by you. Obsessed with you. So much so that when he got a hint of our plans, he sent that girl to you. That *half-dryad*."

"How did you come to know of it?" My voice becomes terribly cold. I can barely contain my rage. How *dare* he speak of her like that; as if she were a mere inconvenience to be eliminated?

"You've been away from the court for too long, brother. It always mystified me that you were so disinterested in the

affairs of the other houses. Hubris, perhaps? Did you overlook the fact that Dorava Solisar is my mother's distant cousin? There are no secrets between them."

It's news to me, but I'm hardly surprised. Nobles are always marrying amongst themselves, and a daughter of an offshoot of House Talavarra would have been considered a suitable match for a newly titled baron.

"That's how we learned of the dryad. When we found out that you and the dryad's child had indeed met, I knew you would become even more powerful. So we took the mother. It's so typical of father to keep something so precious locked away and of use to nobody, just so *he* could keep her. But that doesn't matter anymore. The old bastard's dead, after all."

So he knows.

My thoughts must be a little obvious, because Ansar chuckles softly. "Brother, I can *sense* it."

"So you want me gone," I say quietly, "so you can sit on the emperor's throne? Then how are you any different from me?"

He extends his arms so his forearms are facing upwards. Then he pushes back the long sleeves of his robes to reveal even more *Perigian* writing. But these aren't simply inked into his skin. They're branded. "Unlike you, who's been gifted *everything*, I've had to work for my power. You have no idea what I've been through—what I've *sacrificed*—just so I can grow strong enough to match you. And *still* I can't, because in the end, you mowed down all my undead armies. Do you think you're bloody Heco's reaper, or something?"

I say nothing. It's obvious that my little brother harbors more than a few ill-founded misconceptions about me. All lies fed to him by his mother and grandfather, no doubt. They would have fostered and nurtured this enmity; this twisted rivalry.

He's as much a pawn as I was.

Goddess's curses. I really should kill him.

But part of me can't help but feel that there's a lot more to this than what I see on the surface.

"Rhaegar Talavarra, show yourself," I growl, staring at the opaque curtains. "There's no point in trying to hide from me. You as well, Leticia."

Why do I somehow feel like a schoolmaster, catching the bad behavior of a group of wayward youths?

Ansar lets out a disdainful snort. "I told you he would know you're here, grandpa. He's a monster."

I shoot my half-brother a dark look. *Speak for yourself.*

The curtain slides back. Rhaegar Talavarra and his eldest daughter, Leticia, appear from the shadows.

The head of the Talavarra family can't disguise his hatred of me. It's in his hard gaze. It's in the tight line of his mouth; in the way his grey-speckled brows draw together. Once a large, formidable man, much of his bulk has given way to loose skin and bones, and his dark hair has turned grey and wispy.

Still, he carries an air of authority about him.

Leticia follows him. She's inherited her father's tall stature and dark eyes, but her hair is the color of autumn—deep burgundy.

In contrast with the all ornate trappings of this room, she's dressed simply—in a flowing cream-hued gown that gives the impression of purity and innocence.

A stark contrast to the vile stench of death that permeates this entire place.

She regards me coldly, her regal features expressionless. Leticia Talavarra is a beauty. The lines of age have barely touched her. There was always a great question mark as to why father never warmed to her in the way that he'd been obsessed with my mother.

Maybe Leticia's only mistake was being born human. My father wanted a goddess, not a wife.

A dozen questions linger in my mind, but I don't have the time nor the interest to pursue them.

Nor do I care for introductions, or any more self-indulgent waffling on.

I get straight to the point.

I'm impatient. And the longer I'm away from Finley, the more impatient I get.

"Where's the dryad?" I lock eyes with Rhaegar.

"She's in Ansar's hands," the old duke says simply, not missing a beat. "As is your betrothed."

What?

My mind goes blank, my thoughts incinerated by white-hot fire. In less time than it takes for a mortal heart to beat, I've drawn my sword and moved to Rhaegar's side.

My blade is at his neck. I've already decided he's a dead man. "If you don't explain *exactly* what you mean by that, I'll end you right now, Rhaegar. And if anything happens to either of them, I'll kill your daughter and your grandson and I'll destroy every last living branch of the Talavarra line."

"She's important to him," Leticia says calmly—*too* calmly. "Who would have thought? It's as I told you, father. The firstborn Duthriss has always had this weakness. He's too soft; too easily swayed by emotion. Nothing like Valdon. If it was *Valdon* we were dealing with, we wouldn't even get a word in. For the sake of power, he would have sacrificed *me* without a second thought. He did it to the *vampyr*, didn't he?"

I press the edge of my blade deeper into Rhaegar's neck, drawing blood. I meet Leticia's gaze. She's intentionally trying to goad me.

I force myself to remain still and expressionless. It takes all of my self-control not to kill her father right then and there. "This is your last chance. *Explain.*"

Rhaegar trembles. A trace of fear leaks from him. *Good.* "It makes more sense if you just look."

Ansar holds up his hands. “Look, brother,” he taunts.

And for the first time, I see.

Death Magic.

Necromancy.

In this form, it appears as slender, ephemeral red threads tangled between Ansar’s long, bejewelled fingers. He wears multiple rings—made of gold, silver, and precious gemstones. They must have magical properties, for the crimson threads wind themselves around them, glowing in places.

Ansar lifts up his left hand. “The *Dryadae* woman’s life-force is contained between my fingers. I could snap it in an instant if I wanted to.”

“You won’t. She’s too valuable to you.” *And Finley’s too pure. You can’t touch her.* “You can’t control my betrothed.”

“That’s true, but did you forget that you left a corpse in the Inner Sanctum? The fresh ones are the best, because some of them still retain a will that can be manipulated. And... now there are *two*.”

My father. Did he just animate my father’s corpse, turning him into an undead?

“Our father and the embalmer are now under *my* control,” Ansar says softly. He sounds distant, his voice completely devoid of emotion.

Keeping my blade at Rhaegar’s neck, I force my body to become perfectly still. I’m like the frozen pond in Tyron Castle. One wrong step and I’ll crack and absorb everything into my abyss.

I remind myself that the Elite Guard are there, and between the dozen of them, they should be able to handle a couple of animated corpses.

And if that fails...

Finley.

The sweetest, most precious being that has ever graced my existence.

I'm so tempted to rush back to her and protect her, but that would defeat the purpose of what she truly needs from me.

And she's imbued with the power of a god-equivalent ancient tree. I truly believe she has *Eulisyn's* protection.

So I continue to force myself to be calm—on the outside, at least.

My time will come.

“So you've shown your hand,” I say softly, keeping my eyes trained on Ansar as he lazily rolls the crimson threads between his fingers. They aren't actual threads, of course, but skeins of visible magic; ephemeral and fleeting. I'm sure he could make them disappear if he wanted. “What is it that you want?”

“Well, obviously I'd be overjoyed if you disappeared altogether,” Ansar replies, “but *you* of all people aren't going to go quietly into the night, so let me offer a proposal that's sure to guarantee your cooperation.”

“Go ahead.” The calmness of my own voice surprises me. “But if you hurt *either* of them, you know what's going to happen to you.”

“I can only imagine,” Ansar says dryly. “Conversely, if you try anything extreme, *Aralya* will be no more. I know you came here for the dryad. If you didn't *care* so bloody much, you wouldn't be in this predicament in the first place. But I need someone like her. Tapping into her power makes my work so much easier. I'm loath to just *give* her to you.”

Rhaegar lets out a grunt of pain. Blood is tricking down his neck. Its scent permeates the air.

“It seems we've reached a stalemate.” Leticia walks across the dais, reaching her son's side. She places her hand on his shoulder. “You want to unite *Aralya* and her daughter. We want a being we can draw power from, and we also want you neutralized, Corvan Duthriss. So how about a trade?”

“A trade.” My tone is flat; I can see where this is leading.

“I won’t harm your betrothed, and we’ll release the dryad. If you agree to take her place.”

Horseshit. There’s no way they’d allow a full-blooded dryad to go free. She’d destroy them all.

I just need to play the fool; let them think I’m *easily swayed by emotion*, as Leticia says.

“Let me see her first.” I inject a hint of desperation into my voice. “If you can show me that she’s alive and well, I’ll consider it. But you have to show me proof. Take me to her. Only then will I agree to it.”

Still, I keep pressure on Rhaegar’s neck. The old duke tries to shake his head, but he can’t move for fear the edge of my blade will bite him.

“Very well.” Ansar rises from his seat. “Let my grandfather go, and I’ll take you to her.”

“Deal.” I sheath my sword and release Rhaegar. The old man loses balance and stumbles, falling to his knees. A hiss of pain escapes him. “Lead the way, dear brother. And remember that if you try anything stupid, your head will be separated from your neck before you realize it.”

In response, Ansar holds up his hands, showing me the red threads. “I don’t think you’d want to do that. Kill me before I release her life-thread, and the dryad’s as good as dead. Come with me, *dear* brother.”

Rhaegar and Leticia start to follow.

Ansar turns around and glares at them. “Only me. *I’ll* deal with him alone.”

“Ansar,” the old duke growls. “We shall join you. I insist. Corvan Duthriss is not to be underestimated.”

“And neither am I,” my brother snaps, his eyes widening. “I told you, it will be *only me!*”

All of a sudden, he’s shouting, and yet his mother and grandfather don’t look the least bit surprised—as if they’re used to this sort of thing.

And they're a little bit afraid of him, it seems.

Interesting. Either Ansar is unhinged, or he's a very good actor.

"Summon what's left of your armies, grandfather," Ansar snaps. "We will go down into the crypts, and you will seal the entrance behind us. Do *not* enter until I return. Or do you think I can't handle this? Isn't this what you wanted? For me to become strong?" He stalks back toward Rhaegar, his feet silent on the polished timber floor. He's completely barefoot. "Careful, grandfather. I can see your life-thread."

Rhaegar Talavarra stops dead in his tracks. "Don't you fucking *dare*, boy."

Leticia says nothing. She just looks at her son, and her expression is strange; a mixture of awe, fear, and pride.

Ansar just laughs. "Let's go, *vampyr*-brother. I will take you to the dryad, and you will give me what I want." He dances away on bare feet, leaving me with little choice but to follow.

And so I walk after him, because all this time, I've wanted nothing more than to be in the same room as Finley's mother; to see her, to feel her presence, to *know* that she's alive.

To be within reach of her.

I've seen the effect my magic has on Finley.

I can't imagine what it would do to a full-blooded dryad.

In my experience, wars are won not just on strategy, but on faith and risks. A commander has to know the people around him.

I know that Finley and the Elite Guard will overcome the danger they face. Power seethes just beneath her gentle surface—before I left her, I could *feel it*.

She's under the protection of the godlike ancient tree.

I know that Aralya loved her daughter enough to place a seal on her—hiding her true nature from the dangerous world.

And she put a curse on Lucar Solisar so that he could never harm her.

I know that my mother never wanted to hurt Aralya, even though the dryad's potent blood drove her to madness.

It's *her* power that I've inherited.

The Talavarras think they know me.

They don't.

Not one fucking bit.

And neither do I know this half-brother of mine, who leads me down the dais and across the hall, through a side-door and into a narrow corridor, his velvet robes flapping behind him as he walks faster and faster.

His hands glow crimson with magical threads.

His movements are filled with frantic energy; his steps almost seem gleeful.

The thought has crossed my mind time and time again—*what if this is a trap; something even I can't overcome?*

But no; Aralya's definitely here. Ansar wouldn't have become so powerful otherwise, and I *know* my father wasn't lying.

I just have to trust that this blood of mine—this *gift*—can do what it always does.

FINLEY

A fragile stillness hangs over the Inner Sanctum of Rahava's Imperial Palace.

Corvan's gone.

It feels strange.

Ever since I first encountered him, he's been close by, whether it's within the walls of Tyron Castle or at my very side.

The only time I lost him was when Captain Kinnivar, influenced by a necromancer, tried to abduct me, but in the end, Corvan came for me.

How strange that I, so used to being alone, could yearn for someone so deeply?

I've grown used to him. To knowing that he's just a step and a breath away; to his powerful presence, his protection.

And now he's gone, leaving me here in this lavish palace, surrounded by a unit of the most dangerous soldiers in the empire.

The emperor's chambers have been sealed off. An embalmer is working on the corpse. Nobody is to go in or out, because Corvan doesn't want anybody to know that Valdun Duthriss is dead.

Not until he's dealt with his half-brother and the Talavarras.

He's gone alone. Right into the maw of the beast.

It feels surreal.

I can hardly believe it, and I hate this feeling; of waiting, of not knowing.

Of being helpless. How I wish I could protect him the same way he does me.

I glance up at the guard that walks by my side. His name is Einvar. He has long black hair and a shadow of a shaven beard covering his hollowed cheeks. I'm dwarfed by him.

The blond one on my left is called Kharuk. Ever since Corvan left, I've been assigned a pair of hulking Elite Guards to watch over me. They take shifts, swapping out at regular intervals.

The men of the Elite Guard are tight-lipped and terribly serious. They've barely exchange a word with me, but at least they're unfailingly polite and courteous, making every effort to accommodate my needs.

Like now, for instance, when I've requested to visit the garden space at the center of the Inner Sanctum.

My guards are more than happy to oblige—as long as they watch over me at all times. Their presence is both reassuring and stifling. I can hardly believe what's happened. Emperor Valdón Duthriss is dead, and his personal Elite Guard have sworn complete loyalty to Corvan.

Just like that.

They fully support him to become the next emperor of Rahava.

My betrothed is going to be the emperor.

What would that make me, then?

Empress?

But first, Corvan needs to return. I know he's immensely powerful, with godlike abilities and formidable battle skills, but even he must have a weakness.

I'm afraid for him, and yet there's nothing I can do.

It's all so overwhelming.

That's why I've requested to return to the inner gardens. The small chambers they've given me feel stifling and cold. I need to feel the fresh air on my face; to look up and see the stars in the night sky.

I need to inhale the scent of the freshly budding blooms and new leafy growth.

I *crave* these things, more than ever before.

I feel like I'm going mad, and not just because of *not knowing*.

My body feels strange. As if lightning is dancing through me. Magical energy rippling through my veins, with no way to find release.

If only I could harness that feeling I had before, when I momentarily bent the trees to my will and the magic bubbled over and sent roots out of my body and into the ground.

Unbelievable, isn't it?

I've scanned the books in Valdon's secret library. I've learned that my mother's kind are powerful and that the ancient heart-seed is supposed to protect me. In theory, I *should* be able to manipulate the trees and even wood that's long dead.

I just don't know *how*.

Apparently, a dryad is just supposed to know from the beginning. It's an instinctive thing.

We reach the garden. Einvar opens the door. Kharuk ushers me through. They begin to follow me.

I turn around and hold up my hand. "Would you mind giving me a moment? I just need some... *space*. You can keep an eye on me from the doorway. It isn't as if anyone can come in here, anyway."

The guards exchange a glance, some silent communication passing between them.

“As you wish, my lady,” Einvar says at last. “Take as much time as you need.”

“I appreciate it.” I leave them guarding the doorway, watching me through the tall windows as I step out into the small garden. It might have been Valdon Duthriss’s private sanctuary, a place where I comforted my betrothed at the height of his grief, but it still brings me a sense of peace.

When I’m around living things—plants and trees—the wild, brittle magic inside me becomes a little calmer.

It’s growing. It’s changing.

I’m changing.

And just as I yearn for Corvan, the magic inside me yearns for him too, for when he’s here, we’re in perfect balance.

I look up at the clear night sky. The air is cold and crisp. A soft woollen shawl—given to me by the guards—is draped across my shoulders.

I pull it tighter.

The stars are bright tonight; pinpricks of brilliance in the darkness.

I wonder if Corvan can see these very same stars right now. Or is he caught in some terrible battle?

Whatever he’s doing, I can only put my fear aside and trust him. He’s far too clever to get caught...

Isn’t he?

A gentle breeze tugs at my hair. It’s strange, but I almost think I can feel the plants and trees around me; reaching toward me, exuding a certain sense of comfort.

I can’t explain it.

Everything will be fine.

That’s what I try to tell myself.

But then I hear something behind me; a commotion, a clash of metal on metal.

Peace was only fleeting; I should have known it would go back to this.

For chaos seems to be the eternal state of the world.

Did I read that in a book somewhere?

I turn around.

The Elite Guards are fighting... with Emperor Valdon Duthriss.

Emperor...?

I blink furiously, trying to clear my vision. Am I seeing correctly, or am I hallucinating.

No. It's real. The dead emperor is on his feet, swinging a heavy sword in a way that should be physically impossible for his frail body. Behind him is another attacker—a slender man wearing white robes, his hair concealed beneath white wrappings.

The *embalmer*.

He's got a sword too. How does an embalmer know how to wield a sword?

There's a crimson bloom in the center of his chest. *Blood.* He's been stabbed.

Dread turns my throat dry.

As I catch sight of them, both the emperor and the embalmer look at me.

Their eyes glow unearthly green—the same as Kinnivar's did when he abducted me.

They turn toward me.

Oh, my Goddess.

They're *undead*, and someone's controlling them.

My mind makes a silent plea; a desperate wish. I say a silent prayer to my beloved. *Corvan, if you're anywhere near the necromancer, please do something!*

Einvar and Kharuk attack, holding the animated bodies—for that's all they are—at bay with a supreme display of swordsmanship. I can see why they're Elite Guards. They move with deadly grace and brutal efficiency, in contrast with the undead, whose attacks are crude and vicious.

But the undead are frightfully strong and fast, thanks to the magic that animates them. I swear I can *feel* it; a dark, discordant energy that fills the space between us.

Einvar is yelling, calling for his comrades; barking orders at his battle-partner.

Kharuk raises his blade and backs away, moving in my direction. He enters the garden, never taking his eyes off the attackers.

Protecting me at all costs.

Bless these guards. They really did swear complete loyalty to Corvan.

Einvar fights like a tempest; fierce and unrelenting. He kicks the first undead—the creature that was once Valdon Duthriss—in the stomach, sending him staggering backwards. Then he swings his blade and lops off the other one's leg.

The undead figure—that poor, wretched embalmer—loses its balance and crashes to the floor, sword clattering away.

To my horror, it starts to crawl, leaving its severed limb behind.

“Take off the head!” I shout. “That's how you kill them. You must cut off the head!”

But Einvar suddenly has his hands full with the other one. The once-emperor of Rahava is nothing but an empty husk, filled with the malevolent will of a master manipulator.

He's caught up in a flurry of vicious sword blows, and he appears to be losing ground.

Meanwhile, the crawling undead has reached the gardens.

“I'll take care of it, my lady,” Kharuk growls. “Stay there. Don't move.”

Believe me, I wish I could.

Why, oh why, is this feeling of dancing lightning spreading through my body? Why do my fingers tingle? My mind feels detached from my body... as if I'm both inside it and outside it at the same time.

And there's that tightness in my chest again; that pressure, growing so intense I can barely breathe.

And the world moves both fast and slow. I can see everything in vivid detail, right down to the fine hairs on the back of Kharuk's neck as he walks toward the undead creature, his blade raised. I see moonlight gleaming on cold steel. I see the tremor in the guard's powerful arm.

I smell the sweet fragrance of the winterlilies, a dozen times more potent at night.

Kharuk's blade falls. Einvar's attack falters. He's being pressed back. The emperor has been transformed into a glowing-eyed demon.

It's impossible, how that *thing* can move so fast.

At this rate, Einvar will fail. He's a formidable warrior, but he's only mortal.

Kharuk goes for the neck, just like I told him to.

But the crawling undead creature moves unnaturally fast, evading the blade. The silks covering its hair come undone, revealing a shock of russet curls, a reminder that this body was once human.

It launches itself at the guard. Kharuk throws his blade, piercing the undead's chest.

The creature falls, impaled by four feet of cold steel.

For a moment, it's perfectly still.

But then it rises to its knees; teeth bared, eyes glowing lurid green. It curls up like a spring, body becoming taut. It's going to strike again.

Kharuk has no blade. Said blade is still protruding from the undead's chest.

But he doesn't back away.

He's going to defend me with his bare hands. This brave, loyal man.

I don't want him to die. I don't want Einvar to die either, but even though he's fighting valiantly, he's starting to tire.

He's wounded. Blood drips from his right arm; his sword-arm.

I look around wildly, searching for something I can use. I rack my brain, trying to remember all the infuriating little snippets of knowledge I've gleaned from the books. I try to recall *Eulisyn's* brief conversation with me.

But there's nothing.

The undead moves as fast as an arrow through the garden, leaping off one foot, becoming a blur as it spins around, and now its back is to Kharuk and it's flying toward him with the pointy end of the sword extending *out* of its back, thrusting toward the guard.

"My lady, stand aside!" Kharuk shouts as the undead crashes against him.

The blade pierces his chest, skewering both of them together, and they're falling, and too late, I start to move, but Kharuk's body has been pushed back with great force, and he collides with me.

We fall.

There's a sharp burst of pain in my belly, just below my ribcage. With growing horror, I realize what it is. The tip of the sword that's gone through the undead's chest, then Kharuk's, has impaled me too.

Warmth blossoms in my upper belly. Sharp, agonizing, terrifying warmth.

We hit the ground. I can't move. Kharuk's on top of me, and he's *heavy*.

Still breathing, though. Still moving.

Is that my blood, or his? I can't tell. I'm filled with horror as I realize that on top of us all is the undead creature. It kicks and flails, and the blade moves with it, worsening Kharuk's wounds—and mine.

Stop.

Somewhere in the periphery of my vision, I'm aware of men surging into the garden. Frantic shouts fill my ears. My vision fades in and out.

The tightness in my chest is growing. The pain is becoming unbearable. The crush of Kharuk's heavy body on top of mine makes me feel like I'm drowning.

I can't stand it.

Stop.

I want to end it.

Stop.

I can't die here. I can't let my guards die. Why is it that I supposedly have so much power, yet I can't do a thing?

Eulisyn, if you're there, listen to me. Help me. Do what you did before, and end this.

What if I... won't see Corvan again?

Something inside me breaks. It isn't supposed to go like this. All of a sudden, I'm filled with anger. Pure, white-hot anger.

It's like an inferno, threatening to consume me. I've *never* felt this angry before. At my pathetic father. At the selfish emperor. At the ambitious fools that would desecrate the dead in order to gain power.

Tormenting innocents for their gain. My mother. Corvan's mother.

And for what?

How dare they cause such suffering?

How dare they keep me from what is mine?

Anger consumes my soul, threatening to engulf everything I've ever known.

And something inside me slides and clicks, like a key turning in a lock.

Everything falls into place.

A familiar voice echoes in my head. *Righteous anger is the most cleansing fire of all. And after the fire comes renewal.*

The tightness in my chest is so strong it's turned into pure agony, fanning the flames of my anger.

Eulisyn?

But she's silent again, and all I know is that the delicate manicured trees inside this perfectly landscaped garden are reaching toward me, and as I lie on my back with the weight of two bodies pressing down on me, my palms are pressed flat against the earth, and the tendrils shoot forth, forming roots that anchor me to the ground.

In the back of my head, there's a faint rumble.

It grows. Louder and louder.

A little tremor courses through the ground. Through the cold, hard earth under my back, I can feel...

Everything.

The trees...

They start to grow.

Grow might be the wrong word. They explode, trunks groaning and stretching, turning massive in the blink of an eye, branches stretching toward the sky, leaves unfurling in a shock of verdant green. Taller and taller they grow, smashing windows, bending steel frames, cracking the stone walls.

And for the first time, I can *feel* them, as if they were an extension of my very own body.

They feed on my anger; on my despair, on my desperate wanting. Branches and vines grow long and move of their own accord, and I can't see what's happened to the undead, but I

hear the crunching of bone and flesh, and all of a sudden, the coppery scent of blood is permeating the air, but it's quickly swallowed by the earthy green scent of spring.

I'm in the earth. I'm in the trees themselves, being encased and lifted by their sentient branches, and Kharuk is being separated from me, and the undead creature is long gone, Goddess rest his soul.

Don't hurt the guard. He's a friend. Make sure he lives.

I plead with the trees, even as they grow and grow, and part of me is still tethered to the raw earth below, and I want to submerge in it, because I *need* something more.

I'm searching, frantically.

Because a part of me is still missing.

CORVAN

We go down several flights of stairs, deeper and deeper into the earth below. The air grows stale and dank. My senses tell me we're well below the surface of the earth.

Ansar is silent. I stare at his back, wondering about the madness of ambition and all that comes with it. Discordant energy seeps from him. *Death Magic*. Chaos and corruption.

How in the Goddess's name did Ansar think he was going to rule over Rahava when he's like *this*?

One can't rule over the living by raising the dead.

I'm ninety-nine percent sure I'm going to kill him for all of this.

The other one percent thinks that just maybe, Finley's mother will do the job for me.

I just need to see her—to be able to touch her. She's been imprisoned for so long—first by Lucar Solisar, then by my father, and now the Talavarras have locked her up in the crypts of Deignar castle.

There are many ways to suppress a magical being. *Serpenstone*. Dampening irons—ancient and extremely valuable artefacts brought from Batava. Arcane enchantments that can drain a being's innate magical energy.

I need to be careful here.

Things that are used to suppress something as strong as a dryad can also be used to suppress me.

And yet, I know Aralya's alive. Without her, Ansar wouldn't have become so powerful.

Besides, I *think* I can feel her.

The deeper we go, the stronger it becomes. An energy; similar to what I feel from Finley sometimes.

But if Finley's magic is pure, sweet sunlight, then *this* aura is heat from the molten core that lurks deep beneath the surface of the earth.

As we reach the bottom of the stairs, Ansar stumbles. He utters a vicious Lukirian street-curse and presses his hand against the wall, steadying himself.

When did my sheltered-in-the-palace little brother learn to speak like that?

As the thought drifts through my mind, I'm already at Ansar's side, my blade at his neck. His curious scent—incense and metal and blood—fills my nostrils. "What's happening, little brother?"

Ansar grits his teeth. "A minor disturbance. It's *nothing*. You want to see the dryad, or not?"

I sheath my blade. "Lead the way."

His right hand hangs by his side, entangled in glowing crimson threads. His left is tucked inside his robes.

How *curious*.

I can't help but wonder if half his gambit has already failed.

Ansar shoots me a baleful look and pads down the steps, reaching the bottom, where a large, circular chamber with walls of roughly hewn stone leads to a dark tunnel beyond.

A thought occurs to me.

What if I just cut off his hand at the wrist and severed those red threads?

Would it free her, or harm her?

It's tempting.

It would be so easy.

Too easy.

I can't risk it.

So I continue to follow him as he heads down a pitch-black tunnel, and he must have the same ability to see in the dark as I do, for there are no gas lamps or torches down here, and he doesn't seem perturbed in the slightest.

The aura I felt before; molten heat, as eternal as the world itself, yet dampened and suppressed, grows ever stronger.

Can Ansar feel it too?

If he does, he gives no indication.

How can he act so arrogant; so indifferent? And yet I sense nothing from him—not anger, nor malevolence.

No remorse.

“What's wrong with you?” I growl, unable to contain my dark thoughts any longer.

“Me?” My half-brother lets out a bitter chuckle. “You, the Golden Child in Shining Armor, are wondering why I, the second son that father barely acknowledged, would lower myself to the corruption of necromancy? You have no idea how the world is for *ordinary people*, Corvan.”

No idea? I resist a sudden urge to yank him backwards by his hair and wrap my hands around his neck. “Ordinary? You're a Duthriss, Ansar.” *Raised in privilege and wealth. Wanting for nothing.*

He thinks I've been handed everything on a golden platter.

He has no fucking idea.

“I'm more Talavarra than Duthriss,” Ansar hisses. “Father was never interested in me. Never wanted me to get within striking distance of *his* throne, because he feared grandfather would use me as a proxy. The only reason he married my mother was to appease grandfather in the first place—so he would never try and take the throne. No, *Valdon* wasn't

interested me at all. He might have been, had he known that the dead have spoken to me for as long as I can remember.”

This is news to me. “Just because you have a talent, it doesn’t mean you should use it like *this*.”

“Bit of a hypocrite, aren’t you? Isn’t that what you do, brother? The reason you’ve been able to rule Tyron is because they’re all bloody terrified of you. Who are you to tell me what I can and can’t do with my talent?” He stops and turns. “*You*? No one person should have as much as you have. You’re fucking *dangerous*.”

Before I know it, I’ve moved. I’m standing right in front of him, my face just inches from his.

Is he mad?

Is he intentionally trying to provoke me?

I draw on every last ounce of my self control.

Then I raise my hand and slap him, *hard*.

For a moment, Ansar just stands there, staring back at me, a look of perfect incredulity crossing his face.

“Just as I know little about you, you know next to nothing about me,” I say quietly. “Don’t presume to think you know me. And do not justify your actions with presumptions. Things are not always what they appear. And I am *not* responsible for our father’s actions.”

Ansar’s mask slips. For a heartbeat, I see uncertainty and fear; shock and disbelief.

He’s losing control.

Down here, *I’m* in control.

In the cold; in the darkness, I’m in my element. I can feel the subtle changes in the air; the faint tremors that run through the tunnel walls. I can see perfectly well, and I can *hear*.

The trickling of water. The slithering of small creatures that have never seen the light of day.

I can feel her aura; trapped, stifled, fractured.

She's been waiting. She's ancient and powerful, but she's been unjustly held captive by lesser men with treacherous devices.

They can't let her go, because they're weak. Avaricious. Ambitious.

I slap my brother again, just for good measure. Just hard enough to leave a red welt on his cheek. Perhaps I've broken something.

His left hand flies to his cheek. He staggers backward. "You fucking *bastard*."

"I've been called much worse," I say mildly, even though I'm still seething inside. I could have so easily taken Ansar's head off just then.

The crimson threads no longer surround his left hand.

"If you touch me again, I'll kill her," he snarls, holding up his right hand—the one that's still adorned with glowing crimson threads. "Just one of them needs to unravel, and her soul will be sucked into the afterlife."

Try it.

I can feel her aura, and now I can *hear* her.

Her heart beats.

Mine doesn't. Not right now. It only beats for Finley.

Her mother's heartbeat is glacially slow.

I don't really need Ansar anymore.

I just need to follow that sound.

Ba-bump.

If only he'd release her life-threads.

He's just lost a few—the life-threads of my father and the embalmer have disappeared. That means someone's sent them to the afterlife. The Elite Guard are more than a match for two undead beings. I even wouldn't be surprised if Finley herself has ended them.

If she's come into her powers, then that would be a wonderful thing indeed.

I can't wait to get back to her.

My anger at Ansar's stupidity turns into impatience.

Did Ansar and his family really think they could defeat me by provoking me and luring me here?

I draw my sword and point it at the center of Ansar's back, letting him feel the pressure of the tip of my blade. It pierces his robe and makes a tiny nick in his skin.

The acrid scent of his blood fills the air. It's strange, laced with intoxicating poison. Even if I were desperate, I wouldn't drink it.

"It seems our little stalemate has grown more acute on *your* end," I say coldly. "Lead the way, little brother."

"If you kill me, her life-thread goes with me," he warns.

But the necromancer still values his life, it seems, for in spite of all his scorn and fury; his sheer hatred of me, he turns and starts to walk.

CORVAN

The tunnel slopes downwards. We go deeper into the Earth, and the air around us becomes heavy. The sounds disappear, too. I can no longer hear the trickling water or the skittering of creatures.

There's a certain kind of pressure here; closing in from all sides, enveloping me in darkness and silence.

Cutting out the world above.

It's stifling.

I feel like I'm being encased in cold tar, and the tar is quickly drying.

I force myself to ignore the sensation, even though a trickle of fear has entered my chest.

Yes, even *I* feel fear from time to time.

Finley's words ring in my mind.

What if she's vengeful?

The creature I'm most afraid of is down here, in the cold, silent crypts beneath Deignar Castle.

It doesn't matter. She deserves to be free. And I'm fairly certain she would never harm Finley.

My task is to convince her not to take out her anger on the ordinary people of Rahava.

That's the real battle here.

Not fighting the undead or Ansar or the Talavarras. They've thrown their armies at me and failed.

We reach a small door set into the crude stone wall. As I look at it, a pinprick of agony enters my temple.

It's covered in *Perigian* glyphs. The metal itself gives off a painful energy, like heat radiating off coals.

It must be an antimagic spell. It makes me slightly nauseous.

"Open it," I order.

Ansar presses his left palm against an indentation in the center of the door. It swings open, revealing a vast chamber.

It isn't just an ordinary chamber. It's a natural cave, with stalactites hanging from the ceiling and mineral deposits shimmering in the walls and the natural stone floor.

I recognize them at once.

Serpenstone.

It's little wonder they're able to keep Aralya contained in here. The sheer amount of *serpenstone* in this cave is staggering. It affects me too, dulling my senses, making me sluggish. It's as if a heavy weight is pressing down upon my shoulders. I almost drop to my knees.

But I'm fortunate to be half-human. The *serpenstone* doesn't affect me as badly as it would if I were a pureblooded vampire.

It must be dampening Ansar's magic, too.

"Go inside." I prod him in the back with the tip of my blade.

Ansar enters, and I follow.

And stop dead in my tracks as I catch sight of *her*.

For the first time in my life, I encounter a pureblooded dryad.

At last.

Relief surges through me. It's really her. She's alive.

They've locked her in an infernal cage—made of dampening iron and inset with thousands and thousands of *serpenstone* gems. The structure is domed like a birdcage and large enough to contain a person at full height.

She hangs suspended from the top of the cage, her wrists and ankles bound in dampening shackles, her body clad in rags and bound again in shimmering threads, into which more tiny *serpenstones* have been woven.

Her eyes are closed.

Her expression is *almost* peaceful, but twisted into a slight grimace, as if she's in silent agony.

I stare at her.

It's impossible to draw my eyes away.

She isn't like anyone I've ever seen before.

She's so very clearly *not* of this world.

Her hair is verdant green; the color of emeralds, of lush jungles in the rain. It's so long it hangs down to her ankles.

Her skin is like polished oak, luminous and ageless.

And in her ageless features, there are unmistakable echoes of Finley.

My chest tightens.

This woman has endured so much. I can't bear to see her like this.

"Ansar," I say softly, both awed by the dryad and disgusted at what they've done to her. "You will release her life-thread. *Now.*"

He laughs. "You know why I can control her like this? It's because she's half-dead. It's the only bargaining chip I have. You really think I would release her so easily? As I told you before, you take her place in there, and I'll release any thread you want."

"All right." I sheath my sword, releasing him.

Ansar spins around in surprise. "What are you—"

But I've already moved. I reach the cage and wrap my hands around the bars, pulling them apart. The metal yields easily. I step through the gap I've created and walk right up to Aralya.

She doesn't move.

Is she aware of me? Can she hear anything? Or is she completely oblivious to the world?

I grab the cords wrapped around her body and tear them away.

"*Stop,*" Ansar cries in the background, but I barely hear him.

He's found a way to bind her to him using Death Magic. All this time, he's been siphoning her power to create his undead armies.

Could he really sever her life-thread?

Not if I get to her first.

I glance over my shoulder. Ansar glares at me and holds up his hands. Slowly, deliberately, he plucks one of the red threads, pulling it out.

A low, guttural moan escapes from Aralya's throat. Her voice is thin and weak, fading to a whisper.

I glance at her in alarm. The hollows of her cheeks have become sunken. Her smooth skin is shrivelling right before my very eyes, becoming desiccated and cracked, like a parched tree.

I need to get her out of here—out of this vile cage, which saps even my energy.

I pull out my dagger and turn, flicking it through the air. It lands in Ansar's left shoulder.

He lets out a howl, and for a moment, Aralya's moaning ceases.

Good.

He's distracted.

I reach up to rip off the dampening irons encircling Aralya's wrists.

I crush the metal with my hands. Even through my leather gloves, it burns as if I were wrapping my fingers around hot coals.

She collapses into my arms, her body as light as a feather.

I gently lay her on the floor and do the same to the shackles around her ankles, moving as fast as I possibly can. I'm starting to grow weak. I can't afford to stay in this cursed thing much longer.

It's staggering to know that Aralya's had to endure this infernal contraption for years upon years. If I'm feeling this way—head pounding, vision dimming, body sluggish—I can't imagine how terrible it must be for her.

Gently, I take her into my arms and tear out of the cage; out of the *serpenstone*-studded cave itself.

I take her into the outer corridor, moving far away from the magical seals and dampeners—until my own vision starts to clear.

We're in a dark part of the tunnels, where it's silent and the floor is bare swept earth.

I lay Aralya down. Her face looks weathered. Her body has become worryingly frail. In just a short amount of time, Ansar has drained so much vitality from her.

Her lips are slightly parted.

I bite my own thumb, drawing blood. Then I gently place the pad of my thumb against her lips.

It's time to wake up. I'll take you out of here, Aralya.

I can't help but feel reverence when I look at her preternatural face. She's the *mother* of my precious bonded one.

Kaithar and Ciel told me my blood was a gift. They've been saying it all along. I was in denial; unwilling to accept what I truly am—until my mother spelled it out for me.

Bless her soul.

Kaith and Ciel were right.

My blood *heals*.

It's counterintuitive. Considering that vampires are of the direct line of the Goddess of Death, one might think that shouldn't be the case.

But my blood breaks seals, and it's always been able to chase away death.

Suddenly, I understand.

I'm a Child of Hecoa. My ancestors are descended from the Goddess herself. And when I died and went to the underworld, the Goddess of Death gave me a drop of her essence.

But my power isn't death.

It's the absence of it.

My blood doesn't give life. It simply reverses death.

Finley is life itself, and she sustains me.

The ground beneath my feet begins to tremble.

It worked.

Green eyelashes flutter.

Then her eyes snap open, and I'm looking into twin pools of glowing green, and for a moment, her gaze is the most terrifying thing in the world, because it's filled with wrath, but as she catches sight of me, her eyes soften.

She *knows*.

"Don't be afraid," I say gently.

"Afraid?" Her voice is deep and resonant; inhumanly so, like a chorus of a thousand voices distilled into one. "Why would I be afraid of you, sweet child?"

"You must understand that I'm nothing like the others—the ones that captured and hurt you. And..." I hesitate, unsure whether I should reveal something so vital lest she become

protective. “I’m bonded to your daughter. I’m here on her behalf, to set you free and bring you to her.”

“I *know*.”

“You know?”

She rises to her feet, moving like water; impossibly graceful in spite of her condition. “An ancient tree told me so. Quickly now, child. Take my hands into yours. Be at ease, for I will take care of everything.”

My ears alert me to Ansar’s presence; he’s followed us out of the cage. His footsteps are loud and clumsy. I can smell his pungent blood, seeping from where I impaled him.

“Don’t move, Corvan. Step back right now, or I’ll destroy her.”

I don’t care. I pull off my glove and press my palm against Aralya’s.

He can’t do anything now.

I’ve freed the dryad.

I’m fairly certain she could crush Ansar beneath her foot like an insect if she wished.

As my skin touches hers, a frisson of energy passes between us.

“Don’t you want any more... of my blood?”

“I thank you for your offering, but that won’t be necessary. I don’t need to take your physical essence in order to draw magic from your being. I can just take it through *you*.” A soft snort of amusement escapes her. “Your people are very good at suppressing and destroying magic, but they know so *little* about it. It’s as if you’re fumbling in the dark. But never mind. I only ask that you lend me your power.”

Immediately, I trust her. I don’t know why. It’s just an instinct. “Anything.”

“Good. All will be fine now.

Through my hand, she starts to take from me. I don't know how it's possible, but I can feel the power leaving my body. Instantly, I become lethargic, but the feeling is pleasurable, not painful.

The glow in her eyes intensifies. Her hair writhes and swirls, tendrils flying around her face.

And as Ansar tries to stab me in the back from behind, Aralya simply turns her arms into thick, swirling vines and wraps them around my half-brother, immobilizing his arms and legs.

A blade clatters to the ground. A hoarse scream escapes him.

The red threads disappear entirely.

“His magic is useless against the true power of Hecoa. In so many ways, there was nobody more fitting than you to free me. I've waited so *very* long for you to come. Corvan Duthriss, my son, be at ease now. You've done enough. I'll take care of the rest.”

And with that, she disentangles her hand from mine and steps away from me, with Ansar still imprisoned in her tentacle-like branches.

She holds him in her arms as the packed earth around her bare feet starts to crack apart, forming a gaping chasm.

Aralya's verdant hair lifts up with the sheer energy of her magic, forming a wild halo around her face.

I stare at her in disbelief. “Where are you going?”

“Into the earth, of course. To hibernate, and regrow. And to teach this stupid child and his forebears a lesson. Then, I will go find the Baron Solisar, and give him what he deserves. I ask that you allow me to take *my* revenge on the ones that have wronged me. It's the only way I'm going to assuage the anger burning inside me. Don't fret, my son. When I am finished here, I will come and see you and my most beloved daughter. In the springtime. I can't wait to meet my child again, and I'm so very *pleased* she's found you.”

I stare at her in disbelief. Did Finley's mother just give me her blessing?

With that, she starts to submerge. Tendrils emerge from her body; vine-like, root-like, extending toward the ground, penetrating the shifting earth.

She takes Ansar with her. He can suffocate under there for all I care.

“Goodbye for now, Corvan. You have my eternal thanks.”

All of a sudden, she's gone, leaving me standing in a room of *serpenstone* and mangled iron, and above me, the castle is shaking, as if struck by an earthquake.

The curse of the necromancer is gone, swallowed by life itself.

All that remains is that terrible *serpenstone* cave, where Aralya suffered so much. I can feel its oppressive presence even now; it spills out from the open doorway like a toxic miasma.

I can't wait to be out of here.

I take off like the wind, surging up the stairwells, speeding through the corridors, higher and higher until I'm back in the main castle, and I don't really care that branches and vines are shooting through the halls of Deignar Castle, wrapping around anything and everything, and Rhaegar and Leticia Talavarra are nowhere to be seen.

I resist the temptation to hunt them down.

Aralya said she would deal with them, and that's *her* revenge to take.

She deserves it more than I, and I have no doubt she'll deal swift justice to all that have harmed her and her child.

A vengeful dryad is loose in my empire, and I don't care.

Right now, all I want to do is return to Finley.

FINLEY

I've turned into a monster, and I can't undo it.
I can't believe this is happening.

These *things* have grown from my hands. Branches and roots, twisting and knotting together to form a massive tree trunk that's so big it would take a dozen men to encircle it with their arms fully extended.

I'm attached to the damn thing. My outstretched arms have turned into branches that are joined to the whole. My back is against the mass of the trunk. It's grown out of the inner garden, upwards and upwards, reaching higher than the buildings; higher than the rooftops, soaring over the Imperial Palace itself.

I can see everything from up here. The pale greenish-grey roof tiles of the palace. The ponds and manicured gardens. Spires and rooftops; walls, statues, courtyards...

People scurrying about.

Some notice. They look up in astonishment and fear. I don't think they can see me—it's still dark, after all—but they would see the shadow of this massive tree, blocking out the stars and the moon in the night sky.

Eventually, when the sun comes up, they *will* see me.

What am I supposed to do then?

All I can think is that Corvan had better hurry up and get his beautiful ass back here.

Corvan, I hope you're safe. Come back to me soon.

I'm consumed with dread and worry. The *not knowing* aspect of it is pure torture.

But it's *Corvan*. He's the most capable and formidable person I know.

I just have to believe he'll be fine.

And...

My chest tightens with hope.

"My lady!" A deep, slightly strained voice reaches me from below. I look down and see Tarron, surrounded by his men—all heavily armed and looking terribly nonplussed. "*What...?*"

He shakes his head in disbelief. I get the feeling it's very rare for the Commander of the Imperial Elite Guard to be rendered speechless like this.

There are at least half a dozen men down there; big, burly, armed to the teeth, and staring up at me in the darkness as if they've just seen a ghost.

I sigh. "Tarron, I am fine. This is but a... *temporary* situation." *I hope*. "When Corvan returns, he'll know what to do. Until then, I'll just have to wait up here."

It isn't so bad. A slight breeze is blowing, but I don't feel cold. The tree has wrapped itself around me, and it exudes gentle warmth.

"Er, right. Ordinarily, I'd go seek out someone from the Magical Research Tower to try and help us make sense of this, but His Highness has ordered us to keep the situation here contained until he returns. Tell you what..." he glances at the guard closest to him, a small, wiry man with long golden hair tied in a ponytail. "Rhylin here is pretty good at climbing. I'll get him to go up there with an axe and cut you down."

Rhylin looks askance at his commander. "*Me?*"

"*You're* the lunatic that scaled Hindra's Peak. Go on, then."

“A mountain’s a bit different to a bloody tree, isn’t it?”

“You’re not cutting me down,” I cry, suddenly fearing they might do something rash. It probably isn’t a good idea to try and hack at a tree that’s crushed two undead bodies in its writhing branches. “For now, just leave me be. Don’t worry. I’ll be fine. The tree isn’t out to harm me. It’s *of* me.”

Tarron’s bearded face is illuminated by the soft light from the inside. “I’d tell you stranger things have happened, but I’d be lying. Can we at least get you something? Must be cold up there. You need a shawl? Something to eat or drink?”

“No,” I call, raising my voice as the wind picks up. The tree has formed a protective little cove of branches around me. The wind doesn’t touch me. I can see the glittering lights of Lukiria, and the faintest blush of dawn on the horizon. “I thank you for your concern, but I’m fine, Tarron.”

“My lady.” He drops to one knee and lowers his head. “Please accept my apology.”

“Whatever for?”

“We failed to protect you. The undead should *never* have been able to reach you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Tarron. How was anyone supposed to predict that would happen? Your men did their very best. Kharuk is...” I remember seeing him get carried away, his armor pierced through in the chest area, a small trickle of blood coming from the wound.

But he was alive. I saw his eyes, open and filled with awe.

“He’s alive,” Tarron says solemnly. “The tree—*your* tree—did something to him. Staunched the bleeding with little fines. He’s with the physicians as we speak. They reckon he’ll live.”

Relief surges through me. “When he’s well enough to talk, please convey my gratitude. He risked his life to protect me. I wish him a speedy recovery, and I’ll go and visit him myself... er, when I can.” I try to move my arms, but the tree simply tightens its grip on me—as if I’m a precious object that it doesn’t want to ever let go.

“I reckon he’d appreciate that. Just don’t stay up there too long, all right? I don’t want His Highness to tear me a new one because his betrothed has gotten stuck in a giant tree.”

I laugh; I can’t help it. The ridiculousness of it all is just too much. “You have nothing to worry about. Corvan won’t be mad. He’s seen worse.”

The faint blush on the horizon turns into a warm orange glow.

The sun is rising in the east.

My body is tingling all over, filled with wild, dancing energy.

I feel like I could lift the entire world.

Soon, the whole world is going to see me; an anomaly, an oddity, an baron’s daughter from Ruen—unladylike and outspoken—who fell into the arms of a vampire prince and found out she was a daughter of the *Dryadae* line.

And together, we grew... and became entwined.

What will they make of me—of *us*?

He’s coming back to me... isn’t he?

“Tarron, you may leave me now. I’m honestly fine up here. Take some well deserved rest and stop fretting.”

“I appreciate your consideration, my lady. It’s just that... His Highness gave us orders. We have to guard you and ensure your welfare at all costs. He’d be livid if anything happen—”

“Do you really think a gigantic magical tree that destroyed two undead beings in an instant would let anything bad happen to me? Nothing can hurt me now. And if Corvan takes you to task, tell him that *I* told you to stand down. Sometimes, my orders override *his*, you know.”

Tarron stares at me in disbelief. “If you insist, my lady, then there’s really nothing else we can do.”

“There’s really nothing else you *need* to do, Tarron. Just leave me be.”

“Very well.”

And with that, the men of the Imperial Elite Guard bow deeply and quietly depart from the inner garden.

After the chaos; the terror, I have a sudden need to be alone.

The only person I want around me right now is *him*.

Suspended high above the Imperial Palace, looking out across the mysterious glittering lights of the capital, I feel safe. The tree makes me feel this way.

But I’m not yet fulfilled.

Anticipation and hope swirl in my chest.

Cocooned by night, the tantalizing blush of dawn beckons.

Come home to me, Corvan.

FINLEY

The promise of dawn blossoms into golden sunrise,
bathing my face in warm light.

Birds chirp and twitter, finding shelter in the branches of
my tree.

A small rainshower passes through, a fine mist of
raindrops creating an ephemeral rainbow as they fall through a
column of sunlight.

The rain hits my face.

I don't mind.

The coolness is refreshing, although I hope this rain
doesn't get heavier, because I wouldn't want to be drenched. I
wish the damn tree would make me a little umbrella out of
leaves or something.

Just as I think of it, the branches move and green leaves
sprout, forming a thick canopy over me that blocks out the
rain.

Huh.

Is that how this works? I just think of something, and the
tree does my bidding?

Let me go, I command.

The branches let go.

I fall.

No, not like that!

I panic. The tree catches me, branches and vines swirling around my body; around my arms and legs.

My power overflows; wild and erratic. My heart pounds like a drum. That was *close*. I almost fell from a dizzying height.

I would have broken a dozen bones, for certain.

The rainshower abates. The morning sun bursts forth, warm and blinding. So much so that I have to close my eyes to avoid being blinded.

A gust of wind swirls around me, drying my wet face.

And when I open my eyes again, the subject of my dreams is there, casually sitting on a horizontally curving branch, head cocked, pale lips curved in a lopsided smile.

His ruby-hued gaze is as tender as I've ever seen it. "I didn't expect to find you caught up in such a predicament, but then again, stranger things have happened."

In the dappled sunlight, he's achingly gorgeous.

My heart nearly bursts out of my chest.

"What took you so long?" I grumble, feigning annoyance.

"There were a few things I had to sort out," he says lightly. "But it's all done now."

Come to think of it, he looks a little haggard. His armor is cut and torn in places, and there are shadows around his eyes.

"Did you get caught in a storm?"

"Something like that."

He's been drenched by the rain. His snowy hair is slicked back. Droplets of water glisten on his ragged armor.

The wind ruffles the leaves, sending a flurry of light and shadow across his aristocratic features.

His skin starts to blister and peel.

Oh, he must be exhausted.

But if he's bothered by it, he doesn't let it show.

He just looks happy to see me.

“You’re in quite a bind, aren’t you?” His smile becomes indulgent. “Shall I help you out?”

“If you must. You actually look like you need it.”

“Always.” He becomes a blur, disappearing into thin air. “I *always* need you.”

Suddenly, he’s beside me, casually standing on a sturdy horizontal branch.

Still looking at me like *that*.

My heart melts all over again. I’m a complete and utter mess.

“What are you doing, standing in the sun like that? Come *here*.” I can’t move my arms right now. I should probably try that *thing* again—moving the tree with my thoughts—but I haven’t gotten the hang of it yet.

I don’t dare risk it.

And besides, Corvan’s here now.

He traipses down the branch until he’s pressed against me, one arm curving around my waist. He leans in, his lips *so* close to my ear. I can feel his warm breath against my cheek. “I’m so happy to see you,” he murmurs. “I’ve been to hell and back, and nothing soothes my fractious soul more than finding you here. Now look what you’ve done. I *told* you you were powerful, Finley. You got that from your mother.”

“My mother?” My heart pummels. “Did you...?”

“I certainly did. And she’s everything we hoped she would be. And more.” He grins, mischievously flashing his fangs. “I’m going to have to be on my best behavior now, because my future mother-in-law is a force of nature to be reckoned with.”

“You spoke with her?”

“Indeed. I found her in Deignar Castle. She’s free now. Nobody will ever be able to exploit her again.” He leans in and kisses me; sweetly, slowly. “She’s suffered immensely, but she

doesn't hold it against us. Aralya might be fearsome, but she's also wise—as a dryad should be. She's going to take care of a few things, and then she'll need some time to regain her strength. She's going to come visit us in the spring.”

“*Oh.*” My relief is tempered with disappointment. Part of me was hoping I'd get to meet her sooner.

“I'd imagine she wants to be at her best before she reunites with her one and only daughter. Patience, my love. There's no urgency to it. She knows you're with me, after all. When she pays us a visit, I'm sure your reunion is going to be everything you wished for.”

He tightens his embrace, pulling me into his arms. He's warm and strong and wonderfully familiar.

His body presses against mine. The tree yields slightly, offering me into his embrace—but not giving me up completely.

Corvan takes a deep breath. He's trembling.

I can sense the palpable ache of his thirst.

And yet, he's being so restrained.

The emptiness in me melts away, replaced with a warm, fuzzy feeling.

Of course, there's the heat of arousal, too.

I want him more than anything. I want him to satisfy me. And I also feel the urge to satiate him.

“Corvan...” I tilt my head, baring my neck. “I think my power is out of control again. I need you to do something about that.”

When his magic feeds on mine, my soul becomes calm.

“As you wish, my lady.” He rains kisses down my cheek; along my jaw, against my neck, pressing his devious lips to my wildly beating pulse. “Just look at you, Finley. You're the most glorious thing I've ever beheld. My sweet, brave love. If it weren't for you... I don't know what I would have done. *Goddess*, you give me life.”

“I don’t know what I would have done either,” I whisper, heat unfurling in my core. I want him so badly. I want the sharp, exquisite pain of his bite. I want *all* of him. “If I hadn’t met you, I wouldn’t have...”

I wouldn’t have been able to keep it all together.

When I started to change, Corvan didn’t see me any differently. He didn’t become threatened by me or try to stop me.

He simply accepted me, flaws and all.

And he’s held me, every step of the way.

I can hardly believe that this man—beautiful, patient, fearsome—is all mine.

“It’s all right, Finley,” he rumbles, caressing my jawline with the pad of his thumb. “Everything is well. And you’re *perfectly fine.*”

His fangs pierce my skin. His bite is more like a caress.

I swoon.

And his roving thumb dances between my lips. I close my eyes and bite on him gently. Lips parted, a soft groan escapes me.

If I was aroused before, I’m on fire now.

He takes from me.

He takes, and brings the wild magic in me to heel. The branches and vines slowly unfurl, releasing me, but I don’t fall.

I’m in his arms.

And he’s kissing me; holding me.

Knowing me.

I let go, but I don’t fall.

Corvan’s here. He’ll never let me fall, and I’ll never let him become lost.

High up in the canopy, in the dancing morning light, we discover each other again.

Everything is in perfect balance, and the world belongs to us now.

EPILOGUE

Finley

In Tyron, it felt like the winter would last forever.

But then the trees sprouted tiny leaf buds, and the snows became lighter and lighter until they were no more, and the ponds and streams started to thaw.

And then all of a sudden, the world just decided to burst into bloom.

All around Tyron Castle, there grow trees that exist only in this part of the empire.

Now they bloom in hues of pink and red, decorating the forest with brilliant color. I don't know what they're called, but I can smell their sweet, heady fragrance from afar, and sometimes I catch a burst of gloriously frenetic energy from them.

Suddenly, the air is abuzz with insects.

For someone like me, the springtime is intoxicating. The plants and trees hum with the euphoria of new life, and I can *feel* it. Like a drug, it affects me too, at times making me giddy.

It doesn't help that my husband-to-be is here, and he finds a way to spend every spare moment with me—when he isn't dealing with the responsibility of holding the empire together.

After his father died and his half-brother, Ansar, disappeared in rather mysterious circumstances—along with

Rhaegar and Leticia Talavarra—Corvan returned to Lukiria and made his presence known to the world.

At first, there was shock and disbelief amongst the citizens. People were afraid of him. His changed looks were the subject of wild rumors. They said he'd returned from the dead; that he'd turned into a demon, that the Goddess Hecoa herself had cursed him. Some of the fiercest hatred and opposition came from members of the nobility, who used all their influence and power to spread lies that Corvan was a madman who'd changed his body with arcane magic.

But none of them knew what to make of the gigantic tree that had suddenly appeared in the center of the Imperial Palace, towering above the buildings.

I soon discovered I could bend that tree to my will—like pretty much all trees I encountered. My full powers had finally been unlocked.

I'm still learning how to control them. They're tied to my emotions, which can be dangerous. If I get too angry or too afraid, the trees can grow unpredictable and harm anyone in the vicinity—even innocent bystanders.

So I must be careful until I know how to control them better.

If only my mother would hurry up and pay me a visit. If there's anyone that can teach me how to use these damn abilities, it would be her.

As for the dissenters in the capital, Corvan quickly silenced them. I don't know how he managed to do that quite so fast, but being a prince of the empire and a well-respected one at that, he has many allies and supporters in Rahava. The full extent of which I'm still discovering.

When it comes to matters of politics and power, Corvan can be tight-lipped, but his influence is far greater than what I'd imagined. There are many that simply don't care about the rumors or what he looks like now.

It didn't take long at all for the entire Rahavan Military to pledge loyalty to him. In fact, the military were easier to sway

than some of the nobles. It turns out that Corvan and Commander Kaithar Bareem are held in the highest esteem by high-ranking officers and infantry alike.

After all, they protected Rahava's Northern Border from the fierce Khaturian Tribes.

Most people don't realize that Corvan and the Khaturians now recognize each others' power.

Corvan is their *Kral*.

The Khaturians keep him in check.

And as for Kaithar...

He's well. Changed, but well. Sylhara took him up into the mountains, to Niize, where Kaithar underwent secret rituals known only to the Khaturians.

I'm told they managed to contain the lycan-magic within his body, stopping him from transforming into a monster.

The only remaining trace of his ordeal is in his eyes—they've turned from dark brown to startling amber.

And he's as jovial and good-natured as ever, ribbing Corvan every chance he gets.

I'm just glad he's alive and well.

Everything is coming together. I never could have imagined that my life would become so amazing. It's so different here to the bleak existence I knew in Ruen.

I can hardly believe that once, Ruen was my whole world, and Lucar—the man I used to call my father—used to rule over me.

Ever since he was sent packing, Lucar has been deathly quiet.

At least one of his wishes will be fulfilled, however.

My brothers and Garan are off to Lukiria soon, to start training at the Imperial Knights' Academy.

They don't even plan on stopping by Ruen to visit Lucar and Dorava. It seems Aderick and Kastel have had plenty of

time to dwell on our family's toxic dynamics. They've seen how a proper castle should be run. Surrounded by tough, honorable men, they've started to understand that Lucar's way of doing things is a coward's way.

My husband-to-be is the complete opposite.

Honorable and fearless. As hard and unyielding as diamond when he needs to be, and kind at all other times.

I've truly fallen head-over-heels in love with him.

And today, I'm finally going to marry him.

I'm sitting in a large, plush chair in my quarters, looking out across the rolling hills of Tyron. Soon, I'll be surrounded by maids who will take me to the bathing chambers to be washed and perfumed and made-up before being dressed in my pale blue gown.

It'll be a small, intimate wedding. Only family and close friends. My brothers and Garan will be attending. On Corvan's side, Kaithar, Ciel, and Gerent will witness the ceremony.

Sylhara will be there too, on behalf of all the Khaturians.

Later, there will be a large and lavish celebration, to which the entire castle staff and the residents of Sanzar have been invited. There will be nobles and military personnel from all over Rahava, too, as well as dignitaries from neighboring kingdoms.

The anticipation dances through me like sunlight on water. Our union is already iron-clad, but I can't wait to make it official.

A soft knock on the door makes me turn my head. I rise to my feet, sliding my feet into fur-lined velvet slippers.

"Yes?" I call as I cross the room. "Who is it?"

It can't be Corvan. He wouldn't knock.

The door opens. Daron appears, offering me a small bow. He's dressed in formal attire—a sleek black velvet jacket with long tails, white silk shirt, and sharply tailored trousers. His ginger hair is neatly slicked back. "My lady, I apologize for

the intrusion. His Highness requested that I convey a message to you.”

At the merest mention of Corvan, my heartbeat quickens. “What is it, Daron?”

“You have a visitor.”

“A *visitor*?” My heart flutters wildly.

We weren’t expecting anybody else.

“She’s waiting for you in the garden by the pond.” There’s a note of awe in his voice.

She? Could it be...?

“I’ll be right there, Daron. Just let me get my coat.”

Hurrying, I put on my boots and grab a coat from the antechamber, throwing it over my simple tunic and trousers.

Daron waits patiently. “Would you like me to escort you there, my lady?”

I wave him away. “No need. I know the way.”

Tyron Castle is my home now, after all. I feel perfectly safe within these walls, especially when Corvan’s around. Although he’s been spending a lot of time in the capital as he prepares to officially take the mantle of emperor, he rarely stays there for long, preferring to return home at the day’s end.

It’s quite easy to traverse the empire when you can move at the speed of the wind. Home is just a hop, skip, and a jump away.

“Thank you, Daron,” I say. He wears a wide-eyed expression as I pass him, rushing out of my chambers and into the corridor. Of course, they’re my chambers in name more than anything else. Most of the time, I’m ensconced in Corvan’s quarters, and it’s blissful.

My coat flaps behind me as I pass startled servants ferrying all manner of items—from decorative garlands to carts laden with food and bottles of wine.

I exit the castle through a pair of arched doors, making my way down a stone staircase that's been decorated with verdant garlands of blossoming vines.

I cross the square, passing the barracks and the stables. The few soldiers I encounter salute as I pass. In the distance, I catch *Solstice's* whinny of greeting.

I walk faster, stopping just short of breaking into a run.

Until at last, I reach the hidden garden.

I stop, taking a moment to appreciate the transformation.

I haven't set foot in this place for several weeks. The pond has thawed. The water is a stunning turquoise hue, perfectly still and crystal-clear. It looks like glass. Fallen branches decorate the floor of the pond, covered in emerald moss that gives them a surreal, otherworldly appearance.

A tree on the water's edge has burst into soft pink blossoms. A delicate fragrance fills the air. Some of the blossoms have scattered across the lake, forming a carpet of pale pink against the startling blue water.

There's something in the pond that wasn't there last time—when Corvan and I stood on its frozen surface and shared our very first kiss.

A pavilion has been constructed, attached to an elegant bridge extending from the footpath beside the water. The pavilion is octagonal in shape, made of wood and steel, its curving roof covered in porcelain tiles that are a delicate shade of pale green.

My mouth hangs open. When did Corvan arrange *this*? And without me even noticing.

Life is full of surprises when the one you're bonded to can do literally *anything*.

But the biggest surprise of all is standing in the center of the pavilion, looking out upon the serene waters.

As I approach, she turns around.

I forget to breathe. My chest tightens. A tingle of magic dances across my skin.

We lock eyes.

Her gaze is the color of emeralds; of the new spring and the deep forests. Her long hair is a rich shade of bottle-green, so deep it's almost black. It's been bound into a pair of long braids that trail down her back.

She wears a dress made of foliage; of thousands of tiny leaves knitted together without seam or stitch, clinging to her lithe form like a second skin before flaring out at her hips to form a long, flowing skirt.

Her skin is flawless; ageless, she could be mistaken for being on the cusp of womanhood if not for the weight of her gaze and the wisdom etched into her expression.

She looks formidable; unimpregnable.

For a moment, I'm awestruck and utterly intimidated.

But then she breaks.

Her expression crumbles. Her eyes shimmer with tears.

She might look like an ethereal being, but her expression right now is so *very* human.

She opens her arms, beckoning to me.

I have no words. As if in a trance, I walk towards her, my feet moving of their own volition.

Into her embrace.

She wraps her arms around me, and suddenly everything feels *right*.

"*Finley*," she whispers, her voice smooth and resonant. It's like a balm for my anxious soul. "I'm sorry it took me *so* long to reach you. What a fine young woman you've grown into." She softens her embrace and extends her arms just a little, putting some distance between us so she can take a good look at me. Tears are streaming down her cheeks. I reach up and wipe them with my sleeve. "If only I could have nurtured you the way I wanted..."

I can't bear to see her like this; filled with bitterness and remorse and grief. This should be a joyous occasion. "I'm sorry, too. For so long, I didn't know. That man hid your existence from all of us. I'm sorry it took us so long to find you. *You* don't need to be sorry for anything, *mama*. You never did anything wrong, and by placing the seal on me and cursing Lucar Solisar, you protected me. It worked out all right, didn't it? I'm here. I'm well. And so are you... I hope."

"I am well, my child." She leans in and gently kisses me on top of my hair, her love and warmth radiating through me. "Now that I've found you, I am well, and I know that you'll be in good hands. You've made a fine choice of mate."

"I certainly have." I beam through my own tears. "Did you know that we were getting married today? Is that why you're here?"

She nods, a knowing smile curving her lips. "Corvan and I have been in communication. One might say that all of this was his idea. I am sorry I didn't come and see you sooner, but I was in no state to meet you yet. I was weak, and consumed with the need for vengeance. But all that has been dealt with now—Lucar Solisar included.

Oh? My eyes narrow in curiosity. "What did you do to him?"

Her smile turns devious. "I have my ways. I could have simply devoured him, but I thought it best that he should suffer. He works for me now—both he and the one called Dorava. He's to make me a forest in the middle of the empire. After that... I'll decide what to do with him, but regardless of what I choose, he's going to be my slave for the rest of his life."

Her eyes glow faintly. For the first time, I get a sense of how terrifying she can be if crossed.

She wraps her arms around me again. "But let's not worry about that now. Today, you're to be wed, and I am so very happy for you—and proud." She takes my hands into hers and squeezes tightly. I don't feel even the tiniest sliver of ill intent. She exudes warmth and love, and it's as if I've known her my

entire life. “The entire time I was held captive—when those stupid Rahavans used my power for ill-conceived purposes—the only thing that kept me going was the thought that I’d meet you again someday. But even though I wished for it, I never imagined that our reunion would be as perfect as this. I’m here now, Finley, and I *will* be here for you from now on. I’ll teach you all about your heritage; about the power that you are yet to unlock, and although you probably don’t need it, I offer you my vow of protection.”

“Of course I need it,” I say gently. “And I would gladly become your pupil, *mama*. Now that you’re here, I want to make up for all the time we’ve lost—and more.”

She reaches out and brushes a stray strand of hair away from my face. “Of course we will. But first things first. It’s your wedding day, and I still haven’t given you and Corvan your gift.”

“G-gift?” I hadn’t even thought of such things.

“Indeed.” She releases my hands and lifts her arms up into the air. The faint light in her eyes becomes more intense, casting an emerald glow across her features.

I feel the power radiating from her, and it is astounding.

It’s pure euphoric energy washing over me. It’s life itself.

A soft hum emanates from her, and the birds and the insects fall silent.

All around us, the garden starts to grow. Trees burst into full bud and bloom. Flowering plants emerge from the ground. Lily pads appear on the surface of the water, and huge purple flowers emerge, unfurling to reveal the most fragrant flowery scent I’ve ever known.

Vines snake up the far wall, unfurling deep green leaves and bright orange flowers.

The existing trees around us grow, arching overhead to form an interlinked canopy.

And something appears in the center of the pond—a tree of twisting roots and branches, rising up out of the water.

Something comes with it.

It's the statue of Hecoa, the Goddess of Death.

She's chipped in places and covered in pond algae. I stare at her calm, benevolent face; at her blank, all-seeing eyes.

"She's Eresus's lover, and therefore, she belongs here amongst *his* glory." The tree unfurls, branches reaching toward the bright, cloudless sky. "You and I are of the direct line of Eresus, the God of Life. Corvan is of Hecoa. Everything is interconnected. Life and Death. Senescence and rebirth. It's fitting, don't you think?"

Astonished, I look around. The garden has been transformed into a place of incomparable beauty.

It's become the living, beating heart of Tyron Castle.

"This is my gift to you and Corvan," my mother says gently. Her voice is a little strained—I suspect the sheer effort of doing this took a lot out of her. "It's my sincere hope that the two of you will always live in harmony."

"It's beautiful," I whisper, tears coming to my eyes. I squeeze her hands. "*Thank* you, mama."

"No need for thanks, my daughter. It's the very least I could do. To see you grown up and so strong and capable—that's the greatest gift *I* could ever ask for." She lets go of my hands and gives me a stern look, her expression turning businesslike. "But enough of this now. You have a wedding imminent. It's time for you to prepare, don't you think?"

I hesitate, suddenly uncertain. It's strange to think that I might have her around from now on—my very own mother; this fearsome yet gentle woman, who loves me unconditionally and has my back in all things.

I'd become so used to doing things on my own, but ever since Corvan and now mother have come into my life, I've realized that sometimes it's *good* to be able to rely on others.

"Mother..." I shift uncomfortably, unused to asking such things. But here goes anyway. "Would you like to assist me... with the bridal preparations?"

After all, I don't have anyone else but the maids. Gerent has recently overseen the hiring of a number of female maidservants from Sanzar. At last, Tyron Castle has both male and female employees.

She beams. "I would be delighted. You're going to look so stunning that the boy will be rendered speechless."

Boy? I laugh. "Only *you* could get away with calling Corvan that. He'll be emperor soon. After we're wed, there will be an official ceremony and a coronation."

My mother raises one eyebrow. "And *you* will be empress. Don't forget that."

"I know." My chest tightens. The thought of taking on such a responsibility is terribly daunting, but never once have I thought of shying away.

Not when I have Corvan by my side, and my formidable dryad mother behind me.

My destiny is my own now, and I'll do everything in my power to protect all that we've fought for.

Corvan

I stand in the pavilion, staring out at the crystalline waters of the pond. The garden around us has been transformed into something utterly astonishing—a paradise made of blooms and lush plants and verdant trees. A swarm of blue-winged butterflies drifts upwards on a swirling breeze. The sun is high in the sky, bathing everything in pure brilliance.

The shade of the pavilion protects me. It's been a day and a half since I've seen Finley, and thirst is creeping up on me again, but I pay it no heed. There will be plenty of time for that later. I've given her ample time to rest and prepare and ready herself for this moment, and the anticipation is killing me.

Anticipation makes everything sweeter.

It makes my once-cold heart beat again, and sets my senses on fire.

Even before she appears, I catch her intoxicating scent.

It's sweetness and musk; fire and earth, sacred magic and *life* itself.

Immediately, my attention turns toward the path, which is surrounded by wild blooming hedges.

Our small party of guests stands to one side, in a clearing at the edge of the pond.

I glance at them.

Kaithar—resplendent in his maroon velvet suit—winks back.

Hecoa looks down upon us from her vantage point in Aralya's tree, and it's almost as if I can feel her benevolent presence.

Before me stands an Eresian priest, officiating over the ceremony. He wears simple white robes embroidered with an intricate motif of silver vines.

As for myself, I'm wearing a suit of deep grey over a white silk shirt. My accents are dark blue and silver—tie, cufflinks, subtle embroidered details.

Finley and I are similar in that sense. We appreciate the goodness of simple things.

My once-still heart beats faster. My thirst intensifies. I can't help the sudden feeling of arousal that seeps into my chest and pools lower; in my belly, one step away from becoming full-blown arousal.

She has this effect on me, each and every time.

I wait.

Time slows to a trickle.

The anticipation of it all is almost unbearable.

My nostrils flare.

Her scent invades my consciousness, and all of a sudden, she's there, walking down the path, bathed in glorious sunlight.

She wears an elegant blue gown of fluid silk that matches the colour of the sky and hugs her glorious curves. The jewels I gave her—the Pervashan rubies—dangle from her ears, the only ornamentation she wears.

Her feet are bare.

A crown of white blooms graces her long, unbound hair.

Alongside her, hand in hand, walks her mother, Aralya; proud, regal, and unmistakably *dryad*.

My mind goes completely blank. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't utter a single word right now. I'm just floored by Finley's beauty.

She's perfect, and she's mine.

As they reach the bridge, Aralya lets go of her hand and waits. Finley makes her way toward me, a coy smile dancing across her lips.

My chest feels like it's about to explode. Pride, love, desire.

Pure euphoria.

Never could I have imagined that a feeling like this existed.

What have I done to deserve such good fortune?

Finley reaches my side. I catch her scent—floral, intoxicating, sweeter than anything I've ever known. Instantly, I want to devour her. I want *all* of her.

It takes all of my self-control not to ravish her there and then.

Because the priest needs to say his vows.

My smile splits my face from ear to ear. I lean in and force myself to refrain from kissing her—not *yet*. “You look absolutely stunning.”

She trembles as she turns to me, her eyes meeting mine for just a heartbeat. “You’re not too bad yourself, Your Majesty.”

There’s a hint of mischief in her tone; a promise of wicked things to come. The way she addresses me like that—both teasing and adoring—nearly brings me to my knees.

Officially, as we prepare to say our vows, I have a raging erection.

“Let’s begin,” I say to the priest, a venerable old man called Hermus. He’s the head priest of the Eresian Temple in Sanzar, and right now, he looks more than a little overawed.

I don’t blame him.

But Hermus is experienced enough to know how these things should go, and he quietly gathers his composure.

He clears his throat.

“We are gathered here today, under the benevolence of both God and Goddess, to witness the union of two worthy souls. This is a Marriage Vow; a proclamation of an eternal bond that will sustain throughout both life and death. That you will both cherish one another, through times of both abundance and difficulty. That each of you will protect and uplift the other. That neither of you will ever stray from the love that has grown through your union. In the name of Eresus, God of Life, I ask whether you, Corvan Ithar Taelinor Duthriss, accept this bond?”

“I do.”

“And do you, Finley Araluen Solisar, accept this bond?”

She gives me a look; a sweet, smoldering look. I nearly lose it then and there. “I do.”

“There is nothing further needs to be said. I pronounce you both husband and wife.”

The priest raises his hands and places his palms on our foreheads. A warm, tingling energy passes between us.

Magic, no doubt.

I can’t explain it.

I simply accept it.

And all of a sudden, Finley is here before me, and I know nothing but her; her glorious beauty, her mesmerizing scent, her presence... engulfing every last one of my senses.

I lean in and kiss her, and her lips, as sweet as the first days of spring, seek mine; soft, hopeful, wanting.

“You’re mine now,” I whisper, lifting her into my arms. “*Officially.*”

Cheers and applause rise from the small crowd.

I catch a glimpse of Aralya. The dryad is beaming.

Finley smiles, and she’s utterly radiant—a goddess if I ever saw one. “As I ever was. And you... I just want to lay claim to you over and over again, Corvan Duthriss.”

“Well you can, Mrs Duthriss. My *empress*. And I’m going to show you what it truly means to become my wife.” I lean in and whisper into her ear, my tone becoming stern. “In my chambers. *Now.*”

“*Oh?*” She raises an eyebrow suggestively, driving me mad.

I can barely keep my composure as we pass the guests. “Honored guests, thank you for joining us,” I tell them as we walk down the garden path. “We look forward to seeing you at the banquet. Now, if you’ll excuse us...”

Judging from the benevolent smiles and nods, it seems that everyone understands the situation perfectly well.

As soon as we’re out of sight, in a small grove of lush bushes, I set Finley down on her feet and kiss her deeply.

Hungrily, insistently, she returns my kiss with equal fervor.

Sweet Goddess.

I would die for this woman. I would topple empires for her. I will rule this empire in order for her to be safe.

With great tenderness, I lift her into my arms once again.

She lets me, enjoying my undivided attention.

I move like the wind, heading for my chambers. I'm about to devour her from head to toe, and she's going to enjoy every moment of it.

She's mine now.

And nothing will ever come between us.

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