



REIGN OF SOULLESS BOOK 2
SHANNON R. LIR

THESE
HEARTS
WE
SHATTER

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A faint, light gray background illustration of a skull with large, feathered wings and a crown-like structure on top, positioned behind the main title text.

CONTENTS

[Note from Shannon R. Lir](#)

[Content Warnings](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Chapter 54](#)

[Chapter 55](#)

[Chapter 56](#)

[Chapter 57](#)

[Chapter 58](#)

[Chapter 59](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Pronunciation Guide](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[The Reign of Soulless Series](#)

THESE HEARTS WE SHATTER

Reign of Soulless Book 2

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NOTE FROM SHANNON R. LIR

The first edition of *These Hearts We Shatter* was originally published in ebook form on June 28th, 2023.

While the overall storyline has not changed, certain chapters and events have been refreshed, reorganized, or cut from the second edition. There are a few minor additions as well. Without spoiling anything, I have tried to preserve my favorite pieces of the original story (and hopefully yours if you read it). The good news is that I didn't touch your beloved spice—promise!

Whether this is your first or second read, I hope you love the revised version of THWS as much as I do. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for reading!

CONTENT WARNINGS

Content warnings may contain mild spoilers.

This book contains strong language and mature content including but not limited to graphic sexual content, depictions and themes of mental illness, mentions of pregnancy and menstruation, addiction, violence, hunting, blood play, assault, human trafficking, and death.

To you.

May you feel the full spectrum of colors—but especially true pink.



Seasons

The Harvest
1 moon

Hwain

The Rime
5 moons

The Heat
2 moons

The Bloom
2 moons

Grian

(Aon's Day)

The Haze
1 moon

The Dark
1 moon



PROLOGUE

Serena



WE ALL HAVE THAT ONE PERSON WHO AFFECTS US LIKE A DRUG.

The second I met mine, I knew. The way my body subconsciously reacted when he was near. The way my breath quickened and hitched when we touched. The craving was so insatiable, so unbearable and impossible to resist, despite knowing that flames always—*always*—die out.

Though I hadn't had a taste in moons, the craving had yet to work its way out of my system. Instead, he'd ignited me with a rage and desire so potent, they vied with one another constantly, trying to prove which was dominant.

If it were possible, my feelings had deepened.

But my magic turned static. There were no more shifts in color. No presentations of fear. Few bouts of sadness. There'd been sorrow at first, of course, but the red fury refused to retreat or reset and always engulfed the blue. Same with the fear.

Nothing else remained, save for that sharp resentment that'd spread like wildfire because *my* gods-damned drug imitated the hottest of flames, consuming my entire body and mind—even my soul—when in reality, we'd always been ice. Fragile. Ready to shatter. An illusion that *needed* shattering.

He was deadly nightshade. Beautiful to the eye; fatal to the heart.

Before, I'd tried to convince myself that feeling something was better than nothing.

But when it came to Nessin Drumghoul, I wanted numbness.

That was the trouble with riding the high: there was always a comedown, and you never really knew how bad it was going to be.



My legs trembled like twigs in the wind as Ailerby and I waited for the black ship approaching—so slow—in the distance. The bow pierced the opaque fog like a Colossi reaching through it to clear the pall, reminding me just how eager I was to board that ship and depart. To get away from the Daemon King.

For good.

I was trying not to drown in my fury, tinged the crimson of freshly spilled blood behind my eyes. But Nessin Drumghoul might as well have gutted me from navel to sternum before piercing the heart that'd been his only bells before.

It might have been less painful, less conflicting than this.

Ma said once that some lessons—ones of the heart especially—were often learned the hard way. She'd also said you often knew in your bones when you were ready to walk away from something.

So why in Dúm's name my bones felt like they'd locked up, refusing to move forward when I had *no* reason, was beyond comprehension.

A private dock extended into the Wraithsea behind the citadel, built of pristine marble slabs and cloisters enclosing the edges. The width of the dock and the soundness of its structure did nothing to make me feel safe from the hundreds of translucent wraiths below. They reached up from the shimmering black water on either side with bony hands. As I peeked over the edge, my dry throat protested the swallow I forced down. Their beady eyes bore into my soul, and it was almost like they knew I still had one.

Part of it, at least.

The new king insisted I was safe from them *and* the Sluagh, but information was only as trustworthy as its source. Hopefully *that* hadn't been a lie too because in just a few bells' time, the Iarsmaí would surround me on

the isle where we'd honeymooned—now my place of exile.

As the Cradled Moons crested the jagged coastline in the distance, I refused to look behind me at the citadel—the home I'd stupidly believed might be ours after I killed Nessin's father.

His words earlier today grated my very core.

Every bit we experienced was real, I swear.

I bit my lip hard enough to taste blood before the cuss slipped out.

"Fucker."

Ears perked up, Dúma nudged my hand as a signal to scratch her head.

Standing beside me, holding a burlap bag of hand-me-downs courtesy of Draea, Ailerby kept quiet. Not because he didn't hear or feel the negative energy emanating off me. But because he knew nothing could quell this. He'd always respected my feelings—*let* me feel them as if he also knew it was the best way to work through them.

He reached into his billowing cloak then, sliding out a flask. I gladly accepted the gift of inebriation—*anything* to assuage my wrath. Surely, a drunken rage was better than the blue that'd drowned me earlier. I hadn't eaten so I'd probably reach the state quicker than usual.

Salty tears had left the skin around my eyes raw, worsened by the wind gusting past the cloisters. Fortunately, I didn't feel any new tears bubbling over. None clinging to my cheeks.

Which hopefully meant they were done.

The whip of the Rime wind might have numbed me outwardly, but maybe liquor would thaw the ice puncturing my chest.

"Shit, it's cold," Ailerby hissed through his teeth. His inscrutable gaze flicked to mine as I took a long pull.

The whiskey coated my throat in fire, leaving my empty stomach pulsing. Luckily, Ail didn't bother asking for the flask back. My scratchy throat burned when I drained the rest before I could lie that I was fine. Other than my bleeding pride, there was hardly any reason to pretend I was any *measure* of fine.

Nessin had lied enough for both of us. For probably the entire gods-damned realm.

"I stole two bottles from the royal kitchens and wrapped them in the clothes," Ail said.

No judgment. No expectations of an answer.

I pathetically squeezed his hand, the only gesture I had in me. For a

woman who'd always prided myself on being strong, I felt lifeless. I didn't want Ail memorizing this wrecked state of me.

He glanced around, his light green eyes catching the faint moonlight off the sea. He'd altered his appearance a few bells ago. Everything about his current façade was the opposite of the new Daemon King. A few inches taller than me with a stocky build, warm blond hair dusted his brow, and his skin spoke of the unforgiving sun over the Western Pointe of Clais.

Ail hadn't hesitated to clean up my appearance either. If only his imitation and illusion magic could permanently scrub the emotions whirling inside me like he'd rid my face of them.

I blinked alert once more, studying the moons. The cracks in the glowing white crescents reminded me of Nessin's scar and the color of his lustrous hair. I cradled my freshly healed hand against my chest to stop myself from striking the nearest cloister and re-breaking it.

Red flickered behind my eyes in warning. I vowed to keep it together, at least until I was alone. But another part of me wanted to scream into the void.

Thankfully, the ship docked right then.

I turned my attention to the Sluagh leading the way. Dozens guarded the dock, their silver forms stretching into the night. Talons tipped their wings on either end, and the bottom ones clicked the stone when they breathed or paced.

As Dúma scampered toward the ramp, I followed Ailerby without zeal. My thighs burned from exhaustion, from simply trying to stay standing when another powerful gust rippled across the sea.

The Sluagh I passed inhaled crisp air through skeletal nostrils, either recognizing or memorizing the scent of my soul, albeit broken. I whirled around and glared up at the spirit as it leaned in close. Its rutted eyes like two peach pits futilely sought me out. Sluagh were the stuff of nightmares.

Though I suspected a new horned monster would fill my dreams after the day I'd had.

"Sniff me one more time," I snarled.

The thing had been following me since I killed the Old King. There were others, but this one hovered so close it might as well have stepped on my heels or hopped on my back and crushed me to death.

Ailerby paused at the top of the ramp. His wary expression said he believed I was going to get us slaughtered. The horn around my neck bolstered me though. I refused to fear these things anymore.

The Sluagh straightened before me, yet I felt nothing. Not even triumph.
“As I thought, you gods-damned soulsucker.”

We followed a Soul Guard across the top deck, littered with wooden crates. A mindless, empty look haunted his eyes. As I studied the others, I realized all their expressions were identical—a dullness to them that could mean only one thing. Nessin had issued a Bonespeaker command to all the wraiths manning the ship.

With a shudder, I kept my gaze down behind my hooded cloak until we reached the mercifully dark lower deck. The Sluagh stooped to fit under the doorway and released an annoyed sound when its gangly arm knocked into the frame.

“Seriously? Is it going to sleep in your bed too?” Ailerby asked.

But he looked halfway amused as the Sluagh bent its neck sideways to accommodate its height.

“He obviously commanded it to follow me.”

Everywhere.

But my gut dipped into my toes, and something inside me insisted Nessin was taking all precautions. He was sending me away for safety. Why would he send protection with me if he didn’t care? If that wasn’t love—

No.

Wishes and fantasies were fucking useless.

When the burning in my nostrils returned, I urged Ailerby to keep following the guard deeper into the narrow halls, void of harsh light or lanterns to judge me.

The Soul Guard gestured to a door on the left. “For you,” he said to Ail, and turning to me, he nodded at the one across the hall.

“We can share...” Ailerby started as he whisked open the door. “Or not.”

The room was practically a closet with a bed and a wood burner. A toilet sat in another nook directly beside the entrance. The only solace was that it didn’t smell like piss as I would’ve expected of a ship that transported the Soul Guard. It was tidy, the walls sturdy, and the bed, though small, had pure white sheets and a feather down blanket folded up for extra warmth. Dinner sat on a little hutch to the left of the bed.

“Do you want to talk for a bit?” Ailerby asked, looking at me over his shoulder. “Or get some fresh air on the top deck?”

The Soul Guard interrupted my reply in a gruff voice, “*You* are confined to your room for the journey. You understand why.”

Then he left us at once.

“The audacity!” I scoffed. “I should go back there and put a knife to his throat.”

“I’m down,” Ailerby said quietly.

Gritting my teeth, I shook my head. “The quicker we get there, the better. I—think I need to be alone anyway.”

He nodded, but concern reflected in his gaze. “Sure. I’m going to head up and imitate a guard or two before I rest. I’ll wake you when we dock.”

“Found an interesting subject?” I asked, trying to sound lighter than I felt. I wondered how pathetic I looked.

“Maybe. See you soon.” Throwing the bag of clothes on his bed and shutting the door, Ailerby squeezed my arm one last time.

We couldn’t fit together in the hall, so I directed Dúma inside our room, shuffled in behind her, and shut the door on the Sluagh’s face. This room was identical but slightly wider, with a round rug beside the bed.

Sighing, I dropped my pack.

As the ship creaked, signaling we were already departing, I kneaded my palms into my eyes.

“Gods, strike me down,” I whispered.

Dúma sat obediently, staring at the wall, one ear perked up to listen to the sounds of the sea and wind. Her tail thumped against the wood floor.

I eyed her. “What have *you* got to be happy about?”

“*Sersa.*”

I whirled around to face the form that emerged from the shadows to my left. Recoiling, I fell back into the opposite wall and nearly rammed my shoulder blades. Nessin caught me at the last second, his gloved hand simultaneously suppressing my yelp.

“Please. You must be quiet.” He held me firm, pinned between him and the wall.

I tried to shove Nessin, but his grip only tightened. When I drove my knee upward, aiming for his groin, his hand shot out to hold my thigh in place.

Breathing deep, I closed my eyes.

Too much desire lingered there. Wrath and desire. I wasn’t sure what I wanted more—to drive a blade through his chest or to kiss him savagely, violently, until I didn’t know who or where I was.

“Don’t touch me,” I said between his splayed fingers, “or I will snap one

of those horns right off your gods-damned head!” I writhed against him, tears pouring from my eyes. The harder I tried to hold them back, the more that streamed down my cold cheeks.

“*Stop,*” he whispered.

My voice cracked as I shouted, “No!”

His hand practically fused with my lips the way he flattened it, and I had another urge—to bite him.

“I do not want to command you, but I will if I must. No one can know I’m here.”

Screw urges.

I bit him—*hard*.

Nessin withdrew his hand, shaking out the finger I’d clamped down on. As the moonlight struck my face, his eyes mapped my tears, noting the exact places I felt them gathering and falling.

“Please don’t cry,” he said instead of reprimanding me.

“Why?” Another crack in my voice. “You can’t handle the fact that *you’re* the one who’s caused this?”

“No, I really can’t.” Nessin reached up to wipe my tears one by one. The smooth leather of his glove reminded me there’d always be a barrier between us. That there *needed* to be.

I snapped my eyes shut and turned my head to the side, unable to stomach the dotting gesture.

“Can I release you so we can talk, or will you *actually* try to snap off one of my horns?”

“I’m going to.”

“Then we are staying right here.” Nessin adjusted his stance. Naturally, his groin grazed my front because the gods didn’t deem my situation bad enough. “Sersa, *everything* you have seen and heard is a deception.”

“Tell me something I don’t already know, *my king*.”

“That is my plan,” he said when I tried to tear my knee away. He only squeezed my thigh harder. “If you would stop trying to nail me”—I thrashed against the wall, and he continued through gritted teeth—“in the crotch.”

Nessin didn’t deserve my tears. He deserved pain—to feel *all* the pain I was in. Instead of fighting, I reached for the blue waves drowning me inside, my skin and bones the only things stopping them from spilling over.

Glaring up at Nessin, I let it pour into him.

His breath hitched slightly, but the waves weren’t blue. My magic refused

to wash him in the emotion I wanted, to make him feel anything but the rage.
Only red.

When my attempt didn't have the intended effect over him, I went slack.

"Please," I said between sobs, "let me go."

I closed my eyes again, not to stop Nessin from getting my thoughts but because I couldn't watch him watching *me* angry cry. It only worsened, my chest heaving, nose probably running.

And I'd believed my tears were done. Ha.

"Please look at me, love?" His whisper was soft, not the hard edge he'd spoken with this afternoon.

Teeth gritted, I met his eyes. I could barely see past the red tinting my vision. Nessin squinted like he couldn't either. As if the smokescreen between us was tangible. Every moment—every sweet word he'd uttered and every lie I'd believed—would haunt my existence, marking me as the foolish mortal who'd trusted a prince. Now a king. And a daemon who'd warned me he dealt in secrets.

The truth had always been there.

"I am not your fucking *love* anymore. You destroyed us today. Get out of my sight. Go use your new bride like you used me."

"If you will allow me to explain, I promise I'll make this right. I will help you understand. If you still hate me afterward, I'll leave right away."

"If it means you'll let go, fine. Just get your hands off me."

Nessin finally allowed me to shove him away. He swallowed as he watched me for another moment, clearly thinking, probably planning out his next moves.

I stayed where I was, using the wall to hold myself up, and eyed the door. He kneeled beside the wood burner across from the bed—all the way on the other side of the room. I could make it. Throw open the door and flee. Pitch myself into the Wraithsea and see if they really couldn't take the rest of my broken soul.

"Do not try it. You know I am faster. Not to mention the Sluagh."

He turned to look at me. As his eyebrows raised, images flooded my mind.

His palm slamming the door shut when I tried to open it. Him standing behind me, pinned in place. Our bodies aligned and pressed together.

Though Nessin's warning faded almost instantly, the realization stung. His thoughts were as bad as mine, trailing past the boundaries *he* had drawn

today—the boundaries our bodies, let alone our minds, shouldn't be wanting to cross now that we were no longer bound.

He finished stacking the wood and lighting it.

Dúma jumped onto the bed and curled into a ball, tail still thumping.

“Hey Dúm,” he whispered, scratching behind her ears. He traced her gaze to the plate of food on top of the cabinet then set a meat slab on the ground. Dúma immediately leaped off the bed to devour it. “Good girl. Would you like some tea?” Sin asked me.

“No.”

His throat worked in a swallow as he absentmindedly stroked Dúma's fur. “Are—”

“Say what you need to and leave already, Nessin.”

“You have always called me by my full name when you're cross with me.” He silenced for a long moment, so silent that his next words startled me. “Feera, come out. I'm too tired for this.”

“You're tired?”

A second delayed, I realized what Nessin said.

Feera.

“Did you bring your new *bride* here?”

If so, I would snap off more than his horns, that was for sure.

But a raspy, feminine chuckle emerged from the darkness. “I prefer Fae lovers, sorry, and there'll be no husbands for me. Feral creatures, as you can attest. Although the king has a one-track mind with you on a continuo—”

“*Feera.*” His tone was deadly.

A young woman materialized from the dark water closet the same way Nessin had before.

I was trapped between them.

Her dark blue silk shirt and matching pants hung loosely from her thin frame, and she was shorter than me but had a palpable aura that made her feel taller. Designs etched the leather of her pointy-toed boots.

I brandished one of my dainty daggers with trembling hands.

“Dúma?” I squeaked.

She kept licking the plate on the ground but otherwise didn't move, glancing up at me through bushy eyebrows and lashes.

Useless hound.

But if she wasn't reacting, did that mean she trusted them?

No. Though I didn't know the woman, Nessin ranked high amongst the

most traitorous people to walk this Dúm-forsaken earth.

“I warned him there are too many memories for one session, but he insists,” the woman said. “I suggest you sit to avoid collapsing.”

I pressed my back harder into the wall, hoping to take soulform and fall right through it.

“She’s a much better Mindblood than me, Sersa. Your mind is safe with her.”

“What—is going on.” There was no pleading in my voice.

“It’s okay,” Nessin whispered, rising from his crouched position by the wood burner. His horns stretched ominously toward the ceiling, and he held up his gloved palms as if trying to settle a wild creature. Vibrant orange flames glowed in his eyes. “Promise.”

“Because those mean anything coming from you!”

Genuine fear flooded me, but there was no hesitation in Feera’s next moves—no time to think.

Nessin and I cursed as a string of unfamiliar images hit me in an instant. A whoosh of them like a tempest strong enough to knock me over—fiber after fiber created an entire cord stretching between us, connecting him and me.

Us.

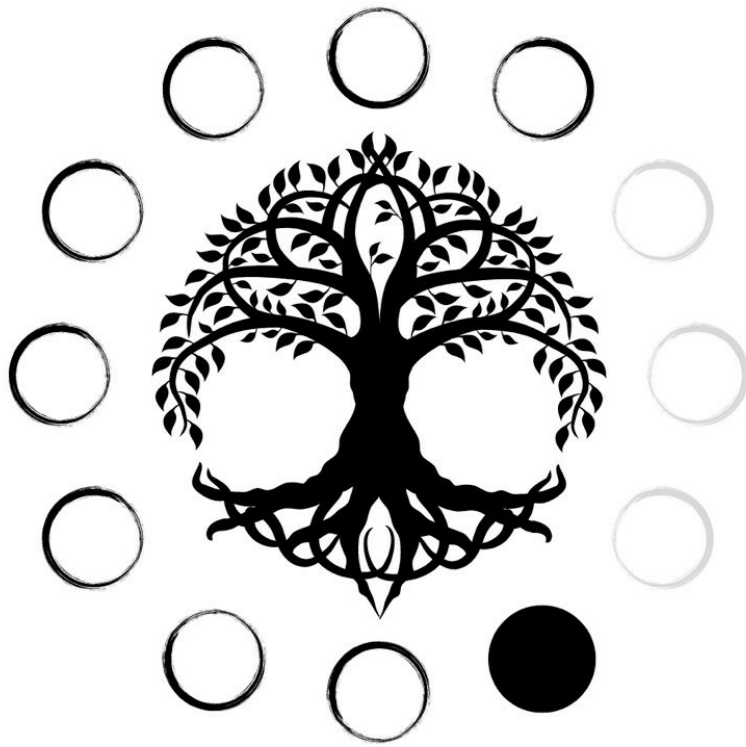
Us.

Us, every which way I looked.

All at once, memories crowded my mind until there was nowhere else to turn. As if they’d pushed all else out. They loosened their chokehold, but remained, leaving me gasping.

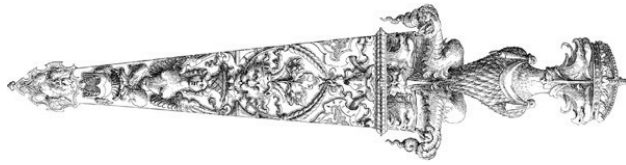
My knees buckled. I started to slide down the wall, but Sin caught me before I fell. His whisper was the last thing I registered before my eyes rolled backward.

“I’ll be here when you wake up, love. When you remember.”



3 Moony Later

Serena



I HEARD ABOUT THE WEDDING ALL THE WAY FROM NOS NUA.

On the little isle I'd begrudgingly called home for three moons now, even the Druids I lived with rejoiced over the new Daemon King and his recent nuptials. His first bride was unhinged, they said. She murdered the Old King, they said. By the time we received the news last week—almost two moons late—I wondered how it reached the remote parish, perched on the northernmost tip of the isle, at all. But one thing I knew for certain.

The news traveled too quickly for my taste.

I didn't have a problem with my new home, *per se*. The Druids were as gracious and welcoming as any. The *problem* was that my memories of the Drumghouls' fortress where we honeymooned also lived here. Though I couldn't recall its exact location, it hardly mattered. Every mile of coastland in the Soullands, every isle, and the Wraithsea stretching beyond the horizon belonged to Nessin now.

With him imprisoning a sliver of my soul, *I* felt like his too.

But I wasn't his, and Nessin wasn't mine. He'd made sure of that.

The memories from our honeymoon had since curdled like sour milk too—a taste I couldn't rid myself of no matter what I did.

Well, I'd tried almost everything. The ladies in my clan always said the best way to get over someone was to get under someone new. Ailerby

practiced it with success, dating every beautiful wraith with a beard and a tan he met in the backwoods taverns we frequented these days. Basically, anyone who looked nothing like my brother.

Reminders of Ciel irked me, especially when he had yet to come find us. Though I thought about him daily, I wondered if he knew where I was. I also wondered what Nessin told my brother about those last moments on the shore when I'd slain the king. And two days after—when he sent me away. Most of all, I wondered what Ciel thought of the king's new union.

I hoped he wanted to stab Nessin Drumghoul as much as I did.

I might've taken a replacement lover by now if not for the fact that every time I glanced at another man, I saw *him*.

From the corner of my eye, dark hair turned white. Warm brown eyes turned cold and colorless. Hardly anyone rivaled the Daemon King's stature. And yet everywhere I went, my mind warped others into elongated forms and gloved hands, all-black clothes, and smirks.

Too many gods-damned smirks to hold on to the last shreds of my sanity.

Since Nessin had evidently spread the news that I killed his father, maybe I *could* let go once and for all. But spite didn't feel like an adequate reason for me to leap into bed with another, and I didn't think the act itself would do me much good when my heart—I hated to admit—hadn't let go.

But in my dreams, sometimes the red rage lightened to a soft pink, a color as weak as the emotion it evoked. Love—that bastard—left me weak, and I despised the color both asleep and awake.

Stealing me from my thoughts, I flinched alert and blinked as Dúma dove into the frigid sea behind my easel.

Mindless tasks like setting up my painting station always sent me into a spiral with *him* at its center. Painting out here wasn't exactly enjoyable either. I'd learned the hard way the light below ground was not conducive to creative endeavors after my first client asked me to rework the too-bright colors.

Which meant redoing the entire portrait.

Ailerby stood a few steps behind my easel. Referring to the sketchbook I used to jot down all my notes and ideas for clients, he repeatedly shifted his face to match the rough sketch.

"This look right?"

I lifted my heavy eyes from my paint palette.

Ailerby held still, his brown gaze a shade too warm—an easy enough fix.

But something else didn't look right. I scrutinized his imitation another moment before he held my sketchbook up beside his face.

"Ah," I said. "The nose is off. Hers was pointier, drooped downward a bit —"

Interrupting my critique, three Druids ambled past Dúma on the pebbly beach.

"Have you seen the portrait of the Daemon King's bride?" one of them asked.

Reverting to the sun-dappled hair and angular features Ailerby usually wore around the parish, his eyes all but bulged out of their sockets. Likewise, I veered around my easel so sharply I almost fell off my stool.

Concerning yourself with others' affairs came naturally when your existence felt so small.

But *this* could not be ignored.

"Oh, my, yes. Saw the one the Circle of Gilders sent us to display," said another, chewing a biscuit. "I think the dining hall would be an ideal place to hang her."

Hang. Her. The Daemon Queen.

It was a poor choice of words on his part, but the darkness in me relished the idea. I gritted my teeth and swirled my brush in two paint dabs on my palette until they overlapped.

"Mmm. Hair like gold spun silk," said the first. "Eyes like the sea. Skin the hue of honey. She's breathtaking."

Each word drove a blade through my gut, shoved to the hilt and twisted deep. Everything about that description contrasted me. Black hair. Near-black eyes. Skin as pale as bone.

The third Druid chuckled. "The most powerful daemon in the realm? Your bride would be a vision too."

I slammed the paintbrush on the easel's edge a little harder than intended as I imagined this perfect bride I knew nothing about on Nessin's arm, beaming at him like the sun. Perhaps the light to his darkness was what he'd always needed.

What he'd always *wanted*.

Several feet away, Dúma tore through the ice like the thinnest of glass when it was probably as thick as my thigh this time of year. Her teeth were a bloodied mess from the speared tails of at least a dozen fish dangling and flapping from her fangs. Her trainer had warned me hellhounds loved to hunt.

I hadn't believed it until Dúma started bringing me full-size stags, laying them at my feet like a peace offering to the gods. Like the carcasses might *cheer* me up.

Despite the Rime season frosting nearly everything, the pungent scent reached my nose from here.

"Mornin', Dúma!" said one of the Druids with a chortle. "Looks like the catch is fresh, eh? *Oh.*" He flinched as if I'd startled him. "Mornin' to you too, Sers."

I was an afterthought.

An afterthought behind my dog.

I supposed I couldn't quite blame them. Not yet done growing, Dúma already outweighed her dam.

"We missed you at prayer last night," another remarked, though they were walking past us and clearly had no plans of stopping.

Forcing a smile that felt more like a grimace, I nodded in silence.

That was the one good thing about bleeding into my surroundings, of being forgettable, and of the Soulsmiths not knowing who I was.

My invisibility allowed me to hide.

Still, my face flamed in irritation.

I'd never had my portrait done, but it was easy enough for a practiced artist to sketch from memory—I would know. The lines of the Daemon King's face threatened to steer my pencils one too many times lately. And yet, no Soul Guards ever stopped or questioned me for killing the king. Maybe because the news was so late? Or had Nessin commanded the Soul Guard not to pursue me?

Nothing made sense.

The Druids passed Ailerby an immediate greeting—far warmer and without a comment on his absence at prayer. I couldn't curb the annoyed glance I darted his way. The soft look he returned only worsened my mood. I loathed his sympathy, and there'd been much of it these last few moons. But I loved Ailerby like a brother, so I tried my best not to snap that I was fine or to leave me alone or to pretend I wasn't drowning in my fury.

I didn't need to berate my only friend.

This was a piece of me currently, and I'd vowed to no longer hide myself. *I* was in pieces, then again, but it would pass.

It had to.

It has to.

Ailerby lowered the sketchbook to his side and approached my easel.

Crimson magic snaked around my shaking hands and the palette in front of me—yet I'd only prepared cool colors today. Sky blue and turquoise. Emerald green, teal, and the palest hue of lavender.

My wrath manifested as blood red and seeped out of me at the most inopportune times. Like now. All at the mention of the Daemon King and his new bride when I'd *known* all along he'd taken another.

“Do as we practiced,” Ail said under his breath. “Besting all the boys at the Aon’s Day tourney three years in a row. Sorcha naming you her heir. Puppy Dúma,” he added, disgusted by the fish guts hanging from her maw.

Memories of our old life in Os Íseal had absolutely *nothing* to do with the pathetic semblance of control I maintained. Instead of the memories I *shouldn't* use, another washed over me.

Ailerby and I were in the snowy woods down the shore. Red fog pulsed all around me as I screamed my frustrations at the atmosphere.

The hare crossed the path of my magic—before the red shot forward. Wrapping its body, killing the innocent creature in a heartbeat.

Ail’s mouth hanging open in horror. Me dropping to my knees. Hands shaking when I tried to scoop up the poor thing before Ail stopped me.

Swallowing, I snapped my eyes open. I not only killed the hare—I'd killed it because I lost *control*.

A cuss escaped me when I tried to reel the magic back.

Too late.

The threads of red merged, forming a single cord that flung the paint everywhere, including all over my notes.

“Perfect!” I stood, dragging my hands down the apron I wore before tearing it off. “Just perfect.”

I met Ailerby’s gaze. Sympathy. Again.

“You all right?” he asked.

Gnashing on fish bones, Dúma trotted over to us and halted where my magic curled low on the ground in a tangle of bright red streamers. She tilted her head in assessment before she tapped her paws like she was putting out a fire. Strangely, the magic never harmed her or Ailerby.

As if it had a mind of its own and knew how dearly I loved them.

“Too smart for your own good, you know that?” I said. But when she went to nuzzle me, I veered away. “Ah—fish, Dúma!”

“You can hug me with that fishy face any day,” Ailerby said in a cooing

voice as he bent at the waist.

“Until every man at the Teltavern denies your advances tonight because you reek...”

He tipped his head from side to side, face scrunching. “Aye, good point. Kisses when you’ve brushed up then, girl. Back to my previous question,” he added, staring at me pointedly. “Are you okay, Sers?”

The answer hasn’t changed since the last time you fucking asked, I thought.

Breathing deep once more, I willed my magic to retreat.

The trouble was my best memories—those that helped rein in my magic—included the Daemon King. Some weren’t memories at all but fabrications of us. Of what might have been. More often than not, the images morphed into something horrific—him with his new, faceless bride, doing all the things we had. Or the things I wanted to.

I sighed.

“I’m fine.” I tried to cage the truth with gritted teeth, but it always rolled off my tongue eventually. “He didn’t tell the Soulsmiths who I am, so of course they don’t know not to talk about him around me. It’s fine. I’m fine.” Another sigh. “I can’t stay here, Ail. It’s only a matter of time before I’m recognized.”

“We can go anywhere you like. His coin, Sers—”

“I’m not using his pity handout.”

The Daemon King had not only lent us a wardrobe of ancient, cold weather hand-me-downs but a surplus of gold too. After likely sitting in a trunk for a century, the clothes were now showing their age, the stitching tattered and unraveling in places, the ends fraying worse with every wear.

Luckily, Ailerby worked as a seamster at the marketplace in Telrach. An expert at tailoring and sewing, he’d made us a few new pieces. Still, nothing too nice to avoid questioning eyes.

The clothes were a necessity, but I hadn’t touched a single gold piece. I owed Nessin nothing, and I’d never owe him. Never let him have the satisfaction of thinking he’d done the right thing by sending me away. And I’d certainly never let him think he was taking care of me either.

I took commissions for portraits instead. The Druids wouldn’t let us starve, of course, but Ma taught me to only help others, never take it. Even Pa. Though I preferred not to think of him these days either. Not after the way he treated me when he realized his only son wouldn’t be returning to Os

Íseal.

And now, a sliver of my soul missing, neither would I.

Ailerby rolled his lip between his teeth. “Maybe we’ve saved enough to go somewhere else. Why don’t we count out our wages and see what we’ve got after work tonight? I’ll ask around about other areas today. What are you thinking? A city? A town smaller than Telrach would draw eyes for sure.”

From the corner of my eye, I recognized the rickety gait of a Druid named Bardca. Like a cart with loose wheels rolling along, he headed right for us. Impossibly white robes draped the ground behind him, clinking pebbles together with every step.

Bardca was my favorite Druid by far, an elderly man with a timeworn voice and eyes so crinkled, he always appeared to be squinting pensively. Rather gangly, he had the look of an old wraith who’d begun to shrink, his spine compressing from the weight of time. He clearly didn’t consume any of the souls the Sluagh stole either. Meaning he’d likely pass onto the Otherworld soon unless he took up the habit.

Then again, as a Soulsmith who created new souls, it probably went against everything he believed in.

I traded Ailerby my sketchbook for a clean rag to blot the paint splatters off his front.

“Let’s talk later,” I whispered and slumped back onto my stool.

The Sluagh who’d shadowed me for the last three moons trudged alongside the old Druid. It never left us. *Me*. Unless Bardca was around.

I wandered the shoreline most nights, and it followed me out of the sparse forest bordering the beach without fail every time. Running from it didn’t work. Hiding either. Fortunately, it never entered the underground parish with us, but I was no fool.

The Sluagh were *Nessin*’s.

As the creature always did when we crossed paths, it sniffed the air and grunted.

“Mornin’, Sers. Ailerby,” Bardca said, flashing us a toothless smile.

Ailerby tipped an imaginary hat. “Bardca, good sir! How are you?”

“Well. I’m well.” He bobbed his bald head as he struggled to reach the top of his breath and exhale. “And you, Mister Ipswich?”

He gestured with the rag, opening his arms to show off the mess I’d made of his clothes. “Could be better. It’s a cold one out here today.”

“Indeed. I see Dúma’s found breakfast this morning. Did you two already

eat?”

“Yes,” Ailerby said.

He'd eaten before sunrise. I'd stared at my plate until he cleaned it too.

Though Bardca frequently asked about our meals, the Druid was astute enough to know I ate only when my gut loudly reminded me. Rarely slept. Ran up and down the beach at all bells while my personal Sluagh followed. Anything to keep myself from entering the most excruciating parts of my mind.

“May I have a moment with Sers, Mister Ipswich?”

Bardca knew not to call me *miss*.

With a wary glance, Ailerby relented. “Sure. I'll see you at the marketplace?” Not waiting for my answer, he headed toward the three beehive huts that led underground.

Bardca patted Dúma's head before refocusing. His eyes shone in a strange, unreadable way.

“You have a visitor,” he said abruptly.

I recoiled like I'd choked down a bunch of icy seawater. Likewise, all replies lodged themselves in my throat. When Bardca waved at the woods behind me, a chill rippled across my body, through my bloodstream, seeping into my core.

I *couldn't* look.

The three nosy Druids must've doubled back to see who would visit their middle-of-nowhere parish at dawn. The closer they got, the wider their eyes grew.

My brain restarted as if struck by lightning, sending my thoughts spiraling to a single destination.

Gods. It can't be.

I didn't know what I wanted, but I imagined the horned bastard who haunted me day and night standing there proudly. Dauntingly. Eyes burning into mine. A cocky smile.

I would unravel at the very sight.

The Druids gasped and bowed on cue, denying me the chance to delay looking. No one but the Daemon King would elicit such reverence.

Slowly, I pivoted on my stool, clutching the edge for support.

Confusion must have crossed my face because the *female* wraith standing alone beside the huts gave me a displeased look with pursed lips.

“My queen,” the Druids stammered one after the other, a taunting echo of

the words I couldn't believe I was hearing.

Or maybe they addressed her in unison, and I spun simply from my shock—shock because I recognized her instantly.

Strawberry blonde curls framed her delicate face. Her chin came to a sharp point, softened by sea-blue eyes, and she wore a pink dress fashioned of thick brocade to ward off the season's chill. We were in the thick of the Rime after all, and looking upon her, I froze.

Hair like gold spun silk.

Eyes like the sea.

Skin the hue of honey.

“Remember, Sersa Scáth,” Bardca whispered, squeezing my shoulder with a withered hand. “Some days are harder than others.”

All the blood drained from my face. Not because Bardca never let on he knew my full name.

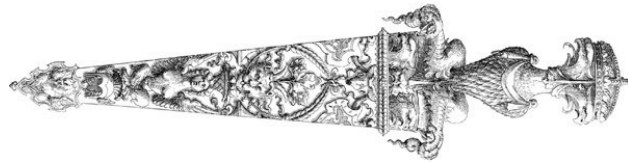
But because Aislinn Hellick stood before me.

She was the new Daemon Queen.

Nessin had taken Aislinn fucking Hellick as his bride.

That. Gods-damned. Prick.

Serena



EVERY REITERATION OF THE TRUTH—OF REALITY—DID NOTHING TO HELP ME swallow this.

Aislinn had replaced me.

Aislinn was his queen.

Aislinn had been fucking Nessin for moons.

The Daemon King had chosen the gods-damned Gilder who threw herself at him when *we* had been married for hardly a day. Which meant he'd harbored feelings for Aislinn all along. The kiss they shared hadn't been one-sided.

My heart pounded in my ears, and my mind raced against it. A dozen lies that daemon told me, but this one, pathetically, hurt the worst.

No! something screamed inside me. It sounded too familiar. Too rasped and daemoniac. Hallucinations of *his* voice, surely.

Before I could blink, Aislinn turned to Bardca and the three snooping Druids.

"Leave us," she ordered them in a tone that said she'd been born to rule.

As a member of the House of Hellick, I reminded myself that Aislinn *was* born to rule. Before his death, Nessin's father decreed the pretentiously named High Houses to fuel their bloodline with potential matches, ones to minimize the drops of mortal blood and slivered souls tainting their lines. Her

sole purpose was to provide the king with heirs since fully soulless beings could not.

My stomach flipped at the thought of her providing Nessin with *anything*. More potent was the realization that Aislinn was not only an impressive match for him, but a picturesque one.

They made *sense*.

The Druids moved at *the* slowest pace imaginable, bowing at least three times each as they backed away, toward the nearest hut on Bardca's heels. From the corner of my eye, theirs widened in question and confusion. Why wasn't I rising from my stool, curtsying, dipping my head at the very least?

While I'd never been named Daemon Queen, I'd never been *un-named* Daemon Queen either. Not to my face, at least. I wouldn't stand or bow to her—to anyone—regardless of her title.

Dúma and my Sluagh prowled closer, warning Aislinn to stay put, maybe. It struck me as odd she was alone. Surely, Soul Guards idled around here somewhere. The thought of the king—*her husband*—letting her go anywhere on her own was absurd. But was it possible he *sent* her? What in Dúm's name would be the reason for it? To enrage me worse than I already was? To get my attention?

No. Those lines of thought crept toward dangerous territory.

"We never officially met," Aislinn said as if I didn't already know.

She hadn't stopped scrutinizing me, probably noting I was Nessin's impeccably styled princess no more. No corseted dress or fancy hair. No jewels. And rather than a beautifully painted face, I was a paint-splattered mess.

Lately, I defied everything I'd once hoped to be for him.

Queen. Wife. Soulless. His.

Anything.

She closed the distance—or mostly—before deciding to keep a few meters between us at the last second. A gust of wind rippled down the shore, gently stirring the perfectly curled blonde hair around her face. Even the elements treated her like fucking royalty apparently, the flush in her cheeks mimicking rouge.

Aislinn was grace, and I...didn't know what I was, but certainly not regal in the least.

I hadn't *known* she was his new bride either. I also had yet to glimpse this portrait the Druids mentioned. From now on, I'd either avoid it like my life

depended on it or I'd drag my dagger through both their faces when the Druids were asleep.

Right before I cut out the section that was the king's groin and shredded that too.

Fury rooted itself deeper inside me. I gritted my teeth.

"It is surprising," Aislinn said, blue eyes glinting under the pink light of the brightening Cradled Moons. "The Daemon Queen who usurped the throne by regicide *in hiding*." Her statement concluded with a snicker.

She was here to mock me, then—the naïve mortal who'd expected to be queen and couldn't compare to someone of her resplendence.

I narrowed my eyes like she was a target, ready to put my spear straight through one of *her* eyes.

"I'm not sure I ever was queen. So *don't* call me that."

"The people say differently." Her elegant voice cracked softly, almost undetectably. She looked around as if worried someone might hear. "The people have already declared *you* as such, my queen. Unofficially, yes. Yet queen, nonetheless. And the Circle of Gilders knows it."

"Hard to be queen when another occupies the throne, no?"

The title Aislinn assigned *me* stifled all other facetious retorts.

I bit my tongue. Again, not because she was queen, but because I didn't want bits of this conversation getting back to the Daemon King.

Let her call me whatever she wanted, so long as I didn't break in front of her.

But her next words hit me so abruptly I almost choked on air.

"King Nessin and I were never wed." With a wave at the hut, she added, "That old Druid forged the ceremony for him. You have always been his queen, Sersa. Never me." She paused hardly long enough for me to pick apart this declaration, let alone comprehend what she'd actually said. "The day I moved into the citadel, he put me in separate rooms—not even in a chamber attached to his. Though I did ask if he wanted to lie with me. You can't fault me for doing so."

Instantly, I popped to my feet and sent my stool toppling behind me. Fists balled, the red swathed my eyes in a gossamer blindfold.

"*Can't fault you?*" I echoed.

Crimson wisps—not quite tendrils—flashed like the first sparks off a flint. I didn't bother checking myself when Aislinn took a step backward. I didn't care if the red dragged me out to the Wraithsea with her and drowned

us both.

“He refused, of course!” Now her voice trembled discernibly. “I thought he might warm to me until he told me *why* he chose me.”

Something in me eased. I clung to the fact Sin and she hadn’t—

No.

No way had the most seductive man in the world *not* touched Aislinn. Her skin and hair looked like fucking melted butter, which was a great compliment if ever I had one, and her uncommon blue eyes surely bewitched countless Gilders.

The thought of Nessin *not* wanting her almost made me laugh.

Memories of his touch halted my amusement, sending shivers through my body, low in my belly. I recalled his weight and the hard press of him, paired with the surge of pleasure that was impossible to forget.

Though I didn’t believe her, some baffling form of relief flushed out that doubt. Had he not touched her because of—us?

Me?

I scoffed under my breath to repress the tears bubbling up, starting with the burning in my nostrils and throat. I hated this natural reaction almost as much as the hope coiling around my gut. Either way, showing Aislinn Hellick the emotions her admission elicited wasn’t an option.

Aislinn Drumghoul, I reminded myself, lest that glint of hope try to outshine the suspicion.

“And what reason do you have to share your marriage bed issues? Did your Bonespeaker husband send you to say all this?”

“Ha!” The high-pitched sound showed she had *some* backbone. “That would require him to care about me or my whereabouts at all. We have seen one another three times since we allegedly wed, and once during our dragged-out engagement. I came here to say I *never* would have gone through with it if I knew you were still bound to one another.”

The fact she’d kept track of their encounters made me thumb my daggers. Her dainty, white-gloved hands quivered.

“On the day of our handfasting ceremony, he didn’t kiss me. Even on the cheek. I promise, my queen.” The cracks in her voice became more apparent, the first flaw in ice before an uncontrollable ripple split it in half. “He practically tore the cords off our wrists before I blinked—before the Druid could. I was humiliated in front of the entire realm.”

“I doubt the *entire* realm attended your wedding. You Gilders tend to

keep things exclusive, and if it makes you feel better about yourself, he didn't kiss me during our handfasting either."

What I didn't say was that we kissed the night before the wedding, almost done more, and many times thereafter until Nessin Drumghoul not only fucked me senseless but fucked me over too.

Love, indeed.

Shock crossed Aislinn's face, creasing the skin between her perfectly groomed eyebrows. "I heard you speak your mind. You challenge the king. You are not a doormat to his—sharp personality."

Sharp was a nice way to put it.

"As I stand before you now, I understand why *you're* it for him," she said, hardly loud enough to hear. A ray of rising moonlight struck her face. "I won't deign to say you're more beautiful than me. You look like a wreck if I'm being honest."

"Why, thank you, Aislinn."

She seemed to flinch at the sound of her own name like she hadn't heard it since being crowned.

"But your strength—it shines through you," she whispered. "I swear to you, my queen. My union to him was an act from the start."

"Congratulations, Aislinn—so was ours!" I shouted, thrusting out my arms.

My blood snaked low on the ground.

Gods. No.

I didn't need to kill again, and killing the queen would be far worse than a hare. Maybe not in my eyes but in the rest of the realm's.

I took a step back, pleading with it.

Don't. Not here. Not now.

The red shackles also circled my wrists. Aislinn flinched. Either she'd just realized the tendrils came from me or their initial appearance had stunned her.

"I don't know why the hell you're here, but you should leave. *Now.*" I snickered. "I mean, how does telling me any of this benefit you?"

"When you and the king reconcile, I ask but one thing. *Please*, my queen."

"Reconcile!" I gasped out. I was more likely to stab Nessin.

The thought of sitting on any throne was absolutely farcical too.

"Safety. Protection." Aislinn rushed out the words now, looking in every

direction. “He has my sister. King Nessin believed Helde would come to me and lead him to Prince Jestin. The king will never find him—never. Not when he... *Oh, Aon, forgive me.*”

“What are—”

“I-I did as you asked!” she called to someone behind me. “Now give me my sister.”

The words replayed in my mind three times before I realized what this was.

A distraction.

Meaning none of Aislinn’s claims were true.

“Grab the Druid,” said a familiar voice. “We will discuss your word vomit later.”

Before I fully registered that the prince she spoke of had found *me*, I whirled around. My hand shot outward, reaching for the short push blade he pulled on me as it cut through the air.

I saw it a second too late.

Right as Jestin Drumghoul speared me straight through the hand.

Through flesh.

Muscle.

Bone.

And out the other side.

I bit back a shriek—unsuccessfully—that twisted into a garbled scream.

Sweat immediately gathered on my forehead.

“*Sh sh sh.*” Jestin bent to stare into my eyes. “Don’t fuss. It’s only your hand.”

He fisted my hair, loosening my low bun as he yanked my head back to stare up at him.

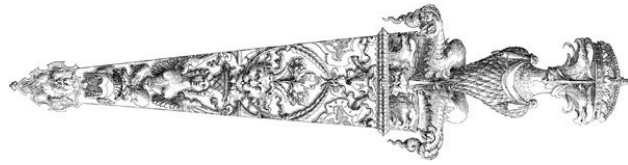
When my magic refused to emerge, I fumbled for Ma’s spear, dangling from my belt.

But Jestin pushed the dagger deeper. My gut knotted when the winged quillon connected to the hilt slammed into my palm. The blade itself was thick, spanning more than half the width of my hand. My entire body spasmed from the pain. Spit flew from my mouth as I fought the urge to gag.

“You’re lucky I’m not giving you a scar to match Nessin’s after you killed my father. Not today anyway.” All faux boyishness had disappeared. He hummed in crazed satisfaction, breaching my space to speak directly in my ear, “I could be seeing what’s so special about that mortal cunt of yours

too. Now *that* would really get under my brother's skin, wouldn't it? So be a good little queen, keep that blood of yours to yourself, and no one will get hurt, *love*."

Serena



LOVE.

Every single time Nessin called me that word swarmed my mind like a thousand Sluagh. It twisted in my gut as if I'd endured a hundred blades there instead.

On cue, the Iarsmaí emerged from the Wraithsea to stand at the edge of the shore alongside Jestin Drumghoul.

For him.

I shoved free from him—rather, the crimson tendrils did, giving me the chance to stumble away.

Sweat dripped down my back and under my clothes, despite the frigid whip of the air. Jestin looked so composed, save for short strands of white hair moving in the wind, while I felt worse than the Iarsmaí looked. I knew not to remove the stubby dagger until I could tend to the wound so I wouldn't bleed out, but it took everything in me not to.

“What did I say?” he warned, eyes accusing my magic. “Keep *that* to yourself.”

A door opening and slamming shut stole my attention, and I died internally when I saw who it was.

Ailerby gripped Aislinn by the hood of her cloak. “Well, she's not *my* queen, so I don't care who she claims to be!” he was saying over his shoulder

to several Druids on his heels, all of whom tried uselessly to reason with him. The blade in the center of my hand drew his gaze. He looked at Aislinn. The wraiths. Jestin. Back again. “*Oh, shit.*”

“Run!” I shouted.

“*Release Aislinn Hellick,*” Jestin said, almost bored.

The Bonespeaker command throttled Ailerby, but the shriek he released assured me the mental agony far exceeded the physical. Gritting his teeth, he fell to his knees and thrust his hand out to grip a nearby boulder.

“I won’t hurt you,” Jestin said, leering between us.

Mindblood wasn’t necessary to know there was more to his claims. I waited for the last words to fall like a guillotine on the back of my neck.

Much. Yet. Until everyone you love is dead.

Dúma moved to my side, her black lips twitching as she growled.

“Ah! The dog,” Jestin warned. “Control her. Or I will send her to the Otherworld, Sersa Scáth.”

I stepped in front of Dúma.

While I remembered the purpose Nessin had gifted her to me, she was not my protector. I was hers.

“D-Dúma, *go.*” A sob choked out of me as I nodded at the snowy woods. I couldn’t look at her. Couldn’t bring myself to. “I said go, Dúma!”

Whimpering, she stood her ground. Her claws dug deeper into the pebbles. She wouldn’t yield. She wouldn’t obey.

“Very well.” Jestin gestured to the wraiths behind him. Their movements were slow, their bodies at various phases of decay, and strips of tattered clothes blew in the wind as they stalked toward us.

“Stop!” I shouted. “What do you want? I’ll do whatever you want. Just leave them alone.”

“You will do as I say regardless,” he replied. “Come, Sersa Scáth.”

I swallowed uneasily, my gaze flicking from Ailerby to Jestin.

With the Iarsmaí hovering so close, what choice did I have? They weren’t supposed to be able to leave the Wraithsea. But they *had* under his command.

“Although the souldagger in your hand will prevent your magic from working, Sersa Scáth, *don’t try anything,*” he commanded. “It will only drain your blood quicker.”

Of course it was a souldagger.

“*Pick up that rock in front of you,*” Jestin snapped at Ailerby. “*The pointy one.*”

The same time that the Iarsmaí halted, Ailerby lurched forward and bent over the endless stretch of stones before him, fishing an arrowhead-shaped one off the top.

“If you do anything to him, I swear to every god, I will—”

“Everything is fine, Sersa Scáth.”

The faint tendrils dispersed to nothing.

Jestin’s words were yet another blade, cutting me off when he waved his hand. And yet, they were a salve for all my concern. His reassurance resounded inside me as Ailerby raised the rock in front of his eye.

Everything is fine.

Even Nessin’s commands had felt more like suggestions than *this*, and the few he’d given me *never* felt optional. Though I tried to fight it, Jestin’s was absolute, inexplicably stronger—backed by every drop of Bonespeaker blood in his veins. It hadn’t quite dulled my emotions or the pain, but the focus in my mind seemed to drift away from both.

I glimpsed the arrowhead rock, but the sight didn’t fully register—only that Jestin was speaking directly to my stupid bones. Maybe my mind.

Maybe to the emotions that controlled my magic.

“Come,” he urged. *“Closer.”*

Moving in a dreamlike state, I stopped mere inches away from him. I’d put little distance between us in the first place, but our renewed proximity left me feeling more unsettled than the pain.

Those worries floated away.

Everything is fine. Even the pain is fine.

Jestin was not as tall or large as the Daemon King, but his arms reached me easy enough. With a forceful tug, he closed the distance between us. Logic screamed inside me when he wrapped his hand around almost my entire neck.

Nothing is fucking fine!

“You’re not really my type,” he whispered, leering at Aislinn by the huts. “But I will say you are far easier on the eyes than Helde. If only I snagged Aislinn before that ugly brother of mine did, aye?”

“Yeah, why’d you choose Helde in the first place, then?” I gritted out. “You and Aislinn seem like a match made in heaven.”

“Perhaps I’d have chosen Aislinn if she didn’t already belong to someone. Helde’s practically non-existent soul and her womb are all that matter though. Unlike you, she knows her place too.”

“Women are not property. They do not *belong* to you or anyone else.”

“Sersa Scáth,” he snickered. “You will learn to hold your tongue quickly. Of that, I am certain.”

“Why do you keep calling me that?” I snarled. Still under his command, I held back the urge to spit in his face. I kept grasping at the threads, *hoping* I could reach the one connected to my fury.

Please, I begged the tendrils.

Everything is fine.

Nothing is fine.

No, everything is.

The back and forth made me spin. I looked left and right, expecting to see a daemon on one shoulder and an angel on the other.

“I must remind you that you’ll *never* be a Drumghoul. Not when I end my brother. Not when *I’m* sitting on the Daemon Throne. And certainly not when my brother’s whore is nothing more than—”

Another flood of Druids spilled out of the huts right then, Bardca among them—all unarmed and my Sluagh nowhere in sight. Any shred of hope I might’ve felt evaporated along with the air in my lungs.

Apart from my magic, that Sluagh was our sole defense.

Jestin peeled his gaze from mine only long enough to grin. “There you are, Bardca! Thought I would have to fetch you myself.”

“This is a place of worship,” the Druid said, his jowls quivering. “You should be ashamed—bringing violence here.”

“Should I?” Jestin’s voice dropped dangerously low, a tone I’d heard Nessin use before. I hated the comparison. “Go with Aislinn or I will have Sersa’s friend here carve out his own eye. I don’t think you need a command to know my threat means *everything*.”

Aislinn gaped at him. “W-Wait! What about my sister?”

“Leave Sersa and the boy alone,” Bardca interrupted. “You are not welcome here.”

“I said,” Jestin repeated, his teeth gritted as he gestured to the wraiths, “*go the fuck with Lady Aislinn or I will show you whose shore this is.*”

Instantly, Bardca and Aislinn’s eyes went blank. Something appeared in the air beside them—a doorway of piercing light. A sunburst exploded beyond the threshold, and before I could blink, the air engulfed them.

All went dark, the shore lit only by the weak pink light creeping over the horizon.

“Bardca will know soon enough,” Jestin whispered only for me now, “that you and your soul are quite valuable to the three realms. One for the mortal world. One for the Otherworld. And one for the Underworld. I will never hurt—well, I won’t *kill* you.”

“I will kill *you*,” I said. “I promise you that.”

“Then I will kill your friend.”

Everything happened too fast.

The Iarsmaí resumed their march toward the huts. Nothing more than skeletons with little flesh and muscle, they moved with exaggerated motions, their strides long yet sluggish and their arms swinging.

Nothing is fine.

Silently, I begged my magic once more. But the edge of my emotions felt so...dull.

“Who’ll it be?” Jestin said. “The Druids or your friend. One or many, Sersa Scáth?”

I choked on a ragged breath. “I-I— *No*. Leave them alone.”

He shook me hard, jostling something awake inside me.

The red surged—

Everything is fine.

“I’m in no mood to hear your demands.” Jestin pulled me against him, his whisper stitching my bones with fear. “I may need you alive and well, but that doesn’t mean we can’t have a little fun before my brother gets here. Why else would Bardca have sent your winged friend away? So *who* gets to die today—the Druids,” he repeated before he nodded at Ailerby, “or *him*?”

There was no hesitation. No choice to be made. And I hated myself for it. I would hate myself for this choice for the rest of my life.

“Druids,” I whispered, closing my eyes.

A single tear trekked down my face.

I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.

“Good, little queen. *Now watch the consequences of your choice.*”

Jestin spun me around, holding my back against his chest.

It didn’t matter the Druids were unarmed. They held their ground, chanting peacefully and calling upon the High Triad for strength.

No blood shall be spilled by our hands.

Dúm is an old friend.

No blood shall be spilled by our hands.

Dúm is an old friend.

My attention shot toward my hellhound. I tried to wriggle out of Jestin's grip when Dúma growled fiercely. Her hackles raised and spit dripped from her fangs. The thought of what the Iarsmaí might do to her broke me. But the single mercy Jestin afforded me was that the wraiths moved *around* her.

Ailerby's shaking arm grew weak, the rock still hovering in front of his eye. But Dúma didn't view this as a ceasefire. She attacked on cue, tearing apart the bony wraiths with little effort. Pouncing. Tackling. Teeth shredding the strips of skin hanging off their bodies. Though most had decayed in the water for far too long to put up much of a fight.

But she couldn't protect more than a few Druids at a time. The first fell soon after. His blood painted the stones in streaks so red they resembled paint.

Another.

Another.

Until *dozens* scattered the shore. Dead, all of them. My eyes darted left and right, involuntarily agonizing over the Druids' deaths.

Every single one.

As the last of them fell, the Iarsmaí turned to Dúma. I begged her repeatedly to flee into the woods. It was no use. When I tried to look away, Jestin gripped my jaw and forced me to watch. Thick strands of my hair blew across my eyes, offering a small mercy by momentarily blocking my view.

The reprieve didn't last.

"Remember you caused this, Sersa Scáth."

If Ma saw me now—the parish under attack while I stood by—she'd be ashamed. I was a lot of things, but never some helpless damsel.

Everything is fine! the command wailed inside my bones, hoping to reclaim its grip.

As I called on my magic—adamant this time—my trembling hand made it more difficult to reach. I tried to summon memories of Nessin. Not only the bad ones to supply the anger, but all the good memories branded on my mind too.

I clung for dear life to the few tendrils fluttering in the wind, taunting my fingertips.

"I know what you're doing," Jestin said, his tone light. Toying with me. "Your tells are obvious. You should relax if you want to summon your blood, you know. Would you like me to help you relax, Sersa Scáth?"

I hoped to see the red or the black when I looked down—hoped it would

shove its way inside Jestin's mouth, his nostrils, and come right out of his eyes—but there was nothing.

No red. Only emptiness. A pit of terror with no magic to help me dig myself out of this.

The tendrils had slipped right through my fingers.

"To your knees."

My body convulsed when I tried to stop myself from falling.

Chin tilted down, Jestin grinned. His grip tightened, fingertips now digging into my teeth through my skin. "My brother's whore looks so much weaker on her knees."

Hatred burned hot inside me as I glared up at him. Impending death wouldn't make me a coward.

"Get that thing under control!" he shouted over his shoulder. "Slaughter it if you fucking must!"

Dúma devoured and destroyed one Iarsmaí after another, tearing them to fragmented bones.

Lips trembling, my nostrils burned.

"Yes, do cry for me. It will make this far more satisfying. Ready to see what the back of your friend's eye looks like?"

I swallowed, tasting the salt from my sweat.

When Jestin shoved me harder, I fell forward and cried out, spit flying from my mouth. Bent over, I cradled my bad hand against my chest and tried not to glance at the blade.

"Drop the other hand," he said in a singsong voice.

Resisting was useless, but I didn't budge. My limbs turned to jelly, simultaneously feeling as heavy as stone.

"The queen resists." Jestin sounded only marginally impressed. "I said, *drop your other hand.*"

The fight in me evaporated.

I slammed my palm against the ground. The push blade struggled to pierce the frozen sand beneath the pebbles. A chorus of crows from the woods answered my scream, but I drowned out all their cawing when Jestin placed his foot on top of the blade's hilt and twisted.

Deafening sobs tore out of me. I flopped onto my face, unaware I had until he nudged me with his boot to roll me over. The kick to my side that came next hardly felt real.

Yet the pain wasn't the worst part. The worst of it was that he'd numbed

some small part of me, and because of it, I watched Dúma but couldn't move. Couldn't fight.

He knows how I reach my magic—and how to stifle it.

He had to.

Ailerby's scream sounded behind me. Genuine panic throttled me when he dragged the rock across his cheekbone, just below his eye, under another one of Jestin's commands.

"No!" I screamed. "No, stop! You said you'd leave him alone!"

"And I warned you to keep your blood to yourself."

"I have!"

My hand remained pinned to the ground, my arm twisting at the elbow. The pain was so intense that my surroundings blurred.

The gray sky above distorted too.

I closed my eyes, thinking only of the Sluagh. I'd never used Sin's golden horn, had no reason to—nor had I shown any respect to the one who followed me around—but now I implored them to come.

All of them.

Use it, use it, use it, echoed a voice.

Nessin? Another warred against it.

Everything is fine...

Pain is fine.

Loss is fine.

Death is fine.

I tried to grab the horn hidden under my shirt, but Jestin's boot landed in my side again. His force sent me inching farther to the right, and the blade tore horizontally through my hand. I clawed my fingers deeper, fisting the pebbles and anchoring myself for the next kick.

Biting back my cries, I blinked up at my last sights. A silvery cloud emerged, and I wished it were the deity Nev come to take me away.

Save Ailerby. Protect Dúma. Take me, I thought right before I blacked out and came to again.

Standing over me, Jestin resembled a phantom. As if he'd taken soulform. When I blinked, trying to stop the whirling of the world around me, shadows suddenly consumed us. Him.

Me.

But overhead, it wasn't a cloud at all—because it was closing in on us.

Lowering.

Jestin whirled around to look up at the sky right as I realized what it was.
A flock.

The Sluagh came from the south in a tight-knit flight pattern that made it impossible to distinguish one from the next. My vision cleared and blurred again, the earth still rolling, and then the Sluagh's puppeteer dropped from an unnatural height that should've killed him.

Right from the middle of the flock.

As forbidding and beautiful as I remembered, the Daemon King gripped a souldagger in one hand, the ruby red hilt shimmering like his marbled horns, and a sickle in the other.

I convinced myself this was not reality.

Another fantasy. Another false hope.

But as Nessin plunged the dagger into Jestin's eye, he hissed a ferocious sound distorted by a snarl.

"Who's ugly now, you fuck?"

The prince all but turned to ash right before us. Only Jestin vanished *completely*—like he'd never been there at all.

Impossible.

I licked my lips, wondering if I might be hallucinating. I accused my hand of deceiving me too, but the blade was still there, spearing the middle.

An imaginary rope around my waist severed instantly, letting me breathe freely.

Then a horned shadow stood over me, all but his silhouette blocked out by the moons. My vision dithered between black and red as the darkest of flames consumed Nessin's gaze. His pupils enlarged with confusion—a rare look for a fucking know-it-all.

So alarmingly alert, I should've been terrified of him.

"Are you real?" I narrowed my eyes as his silhouette glinted and darkened repeatedly. *Dizzily.*

"Yes."

Terrifying or not, I didn't care.

"Fuck off."

Nessin gritted his teeth. Then without a glance at the Sluagh, they stormed the shore in all directions. Their wings propelled gusts of air through the woods behind the huts, and their talons tore straight through the Iarsmaí. Some launched themselves into the sky only to drop the wraiths to the ground, filling the air with the descant Nessin created—cracking bones,

tearing flesh, unintelligible cries.

Chaos unfurled in every direction.

The spirits of the restless dead surrounded us, and in a sea of them was the last place I wanted to be. But this was the Daemon King's army. As much as I didn't want to admit it, I was safe.

Nessin evidently didn't need to control their every movement as he kneeled beside me. He had yet to look away from me.

But Ailerby rushed to my side and growled at him.

At the Daemon King.

"Get away from her! Sers? Sersa, are you okay?"

Nodding, I dug my head into the frozen, pebbly ground. "Dúma?"

My body shook fiercely when she trotted over. I couldn't breathe, but I didn't want to cry. Especially not in front of Nessin. Snapping out of it, I reached toward Ailerby's cheek. The cut was small. Shallow.

"Thank gods," I started, my voice cracking halfway. "Are *you* okay?"

"Fine," he promised. The teardrop of blood a few inches beneath his eye said otherwise.

Nessin's hand hovered around the dagger standing upright in mine. When he took hold, I snapped my head to the side.

All the derision I could muster laced my words. "*Not. You.*"

"Move." Ailerby actually threw his shoulder into Nessin then turned to me. "On the count of three?"

I nodded through gritted teeth. Staring at the dagger worsened the pain.

"Then look away," Nessin said.

"Stay out of my head!"

I tried to refocus on the sky—I tried so damn hard and hated myself when I failed. All I saw was the man who was to blame—the *sole* reason I'd both consoled and drowned myself in a fabricated alternate reality where *I* was Nessin's queen for three moons. He seemed almost hungry for the look I gave him. Simply the fact I *was* looking appeared to incite him in a hundred different ways, and all of them were dangerous in their *own* way.

He angled his jaw downward, drawing my eye to the stubble that was darker than the gleaming white hair on his head. The subtle changes in his appearance invited the fabrications to weave new ones—threads born of other threads.

I imagined skimming his jaw.

What it might feel like beneath my fingers.

On my lips.

I fucking hated him.

“Ready?” Ailerby said.

Swallowing, I used the Sluagh above, spiraling left and right and up and down, as my anchor and distraction.

Without warning, Ailerby tore out the blade.

My shriek ripped open my chest. My fingers reflexively curled around loose pebbles streaked with blood. The gaping hole left behind from the blade served as a visual representation of what the horned arse beside me had done to the cavity in my chest.

“Sorry, Sers.”

Before Ailerby discarded the dagger, Nessin rasped out, “Keep it.”

Glaring, he slipped it in his coat pocket. “What for?”

“Souldagger,” I gasped. “Jestin said it’s a souldagger.”

Nessin regarded my hand. “I believe he lied. Your blood looks normal.”

“What?” I spluttered.

That afforded me no comfort. Could I have summoned my magic, then? Had I simply not tried hard enough?

Evading my question, the Daemon King stretched to full height. He looked massive, his horns sinister. It was a testament to how long it’d been since I last saw him—what simultaneously felt like only a day but also like a hundred years. His pale skin glowed beneath the Cradled Moons, and his intoxicating scent like fire clouded the air, now more potent and noticeable.

“Sers?” Ailerby said.

Head whirling, I propped myself up with a grunt. Nessin moved to help me.

I tore my throbbing arm free. “Have I not made myself clear? Do not touch me. Do not speak to me. Do not *look* at me. Just because you flew in and saved the day doesn’t mean I owe you anything.”

A muscle in Nessin’s jaw twitched, but he allowed Ailerby to pull me to my feet. I cursed at my unsteady hand, dripping blood everywhere.

The Daemon King’s gaze darted to the Sluagh. I recognized his prevailing need to join them in their destruction of the Iarsmaí. When he turned back to face me, he looked like he wanted to say something else. Instead, he sheathed both his blade and sickle, pulled off his cloak, and shredded a piece off the bottom in silence. Nessin gripped my wrist when I moved away, and I decided not to fight him a second time because I needed

to stanch the bleeding. As he wrapped the strip around my palm, our eyes locked.

Though the pain should've served as a distraction, it didn't compare to his gaze.

Ridiculous.

He'd taken another bride while I'd—what? Held on to some irreparably frayed end. A cord *he'd* severed. I shook my head and closed my eyes, inhaling a crisp breeze. Letting him know everything I felt, every little effect he had on me, meant he won.

Nessin released me to arm himself once more. “Irian will take you to the fortress.”

My Sluagh took a step toward us.

Irian? Calling it by name sounded too bizarre to process.

“Tell that gods-damned thing to leave me alone.”

“*Sersa*,” Nessin warned. “Do not refuse the Bonemender’s services there. While *unlikely*, you will die if that is a souldagger. You will stay there until I —”

“Command me one more time, and they won’t be calling you the Daemon King much longer!” Eyeing his horns, I wondered what sound he’d make when I hacked one off with a steel blade.

I realized the wraiths were now on the defensive—failing completely to escape the Sluagh. Countless Druids scattered the beach, their robes splotched in crimson stains, while others who’d just emerged from the huts tended to the wounded.

As if the Iarsmaí had temporarily forgotten who ruled this realm under Jestin’s commands, they now yielded in the Daemon King’s presence. Yet the Sluagh disregarded their surrender, brutally annihilating them without pause.

I nudged my jaw at the scene. “Command them to stop.”

“I am sending a message to the rest of the Wraithsea.” Nessin’s nostrils flared as he tried to suppress his rage—and maybe his desire to stand here among the massacre around us and argue.

With no further explanation, he strode away, pursuing the only other thing that would help him expel that rage: violence.

All the Sluagh snapped alert.

I tried to resist looking behind me at the king, but that was the equivalent of trying not to breathe.

Suddenly, three Sluagh approached Ailerby, Dúma, and me. Backing up, we knocked against one another.

“Nessin, what the hell—”

His head inclined to the right, aware of me watching him, aware he always drew my gaze whenever we were near. Not only that, but he *heard* the traitorous thoughts in my mind. Knew the asinine organ in my chest had held on to him when I should’ve listened to reason, pitched them both off a cliff, and spent every night with a different wraith between my legs just to show him I’d moved on as he had with Aislinn Hellick.

That’s not true.

True or not, I hated Nessin.

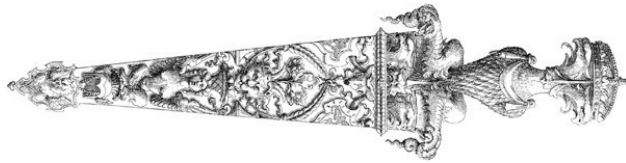
Worse was the fact that I seethed internally when he didn’t return my stare. So strong was this feeling that my magic shot outward like a lightning bolt of pure red, taking out an entire circle of Iarsmaí while zigzagging around the Sluagh.

Nessin still didn’t look my way when he scanned my magic intensely, but the space between his shoulder blades hardened.

Somehow, I knew I was still his queen. It had haunted his eyes, and like a Bonespeaker command, it lived *in* my bones. But Nessin Drumghoul was not *my* king, and I wouldn’t bow to the man—the daemon—who’d destroyed me.

The Sluagh closed in on us, the circle tightening. Then they swept us up on the wind in a flock of dark birds, spiraling and spiraling until we slammed the hard earth.

Sersa



“GET SERSA DRUMGHOUL INSIDE NOW!”

My hearing went in and out as Ailerby and I lay beside one another, hacking up our lungs from the rough landing. It took me a moment to remember where Nessin ordered the Sluagh to take us.

The fortress.

Fresh snow coated the bridge, but the dusting hadn't softened our landing one bit. The Sluagh had simply let us tumble from their arms at a survivable height, while Dúma leaped through the air with the grace of a winged faerie.

Though my body throbbed relentlessly, I swatted at the ground in search of a hand or a limb. Hopefully not just *one* of those things, but with a fully attached body too because I highly doubted traveling the way we just had ended well every time.

When I grabbed a fistful of scratchy fabric, I cursed and thanked the gods in the same breath.

Ailerby.

Relief flooded my chest momentarily, making way for a sharp stinging that tapped up and down my spine. My ribs ached on one side, and the earth flipped on its axis if I closed my eyes.

The name I'd been called tugged me back.

Drumghoul. Sersa Drumghoul.

Jestin had also called me Nessin's whore.

Today was one of extremes.

I rolled onto my front. The position did nothing to aid my attempt at turning my ruthless coughing into a semblance of normal breaths. From my belly, I blinked through my flickering vision at the sight of a male wraith approaching. All I saw were leather boots and a long cloak snapping the air behind him.

One of the king's Soul Guards then.

A cuss flew past my gritted teeth the instant I flattened my bad hand on the cobbles to lift myself. Ailerby kneeled over me, his hovering hands uncertain what to do, how to help. Dúma had no patience for that. She nudged my face with her snout, earning a growl from me when my head knocked against the stone. But I choked out praise after praise through my pain.

"Good girl, Dúma," I cried, unable to see a thing as tears poured down the sides of my face. "Please—*please*—listen next time."

Only when Ailerby looped his arm around my waist to help me up did I realize just how dizzy I was.

The wraith finally reached us. A single look confirmed he wasn't a Soul Guard at all. *Worse*. Several years older than me, at least by appearance, he looked closer to a Gilder. He wore dark green clothes from head to toe, including a long pelt dyed the richest shade of emerald that billowed wildly around him.

Ah.

Then *he* had called me Sersa Drumghoul.

But the one thing that wasn't Gilder-y about him?

Black tattoos crept up his neck from under his embroidered coat, halting just beneath his jaw. They covered all but his face and even extended to the back of his hands, the inked images like feathers reaching into the tips of his fingers. Vibrant greenish gold eyes gleamed in the waning light, brighter against his bronze complexion and windswept but clean-cut dark hair. With subtly glowing skin to rival those eyes, he appeared otherworldly. Like the Daemon King in a way.

Daemon? He wasn't showing teeth so I couldn't see fangs. He clearly didn't have horns, and I saw no tail either.

Fae? The rounded ears said no.

Whatever and whoever he was, I hoped he wasn't related to Nessin. All I

knew was that—immediately—I didn't trust him.

I was already on high alert, suspicious of all, when he held my gaze a moment past uncomfortable. I stared back, uncertain whether he planned to grant us asylum or deliver us swift deaths.

The Sluagh behind me released a shriek, spreading its wings in a reminder that it would defend me in the face of the latter. I wanted nothing to do with the Sluagh or Nessin Drumghoul—protection be damned. The sound resembled a squawk mixed with a beast from the depths of hell. When only Ailerby and I seemed to be affected, I realized why. Dozens more Sluagh stood sentinel along the bridge and the fortress's perimeter. No Soul Guards in sight.

Ailerby lowered his hands from his ears, studying the creatures. "It sounds like it's trying to say something."

The tattooed wraith eyed the whining creature. "That's because it is. Sluagh love to egg one another on in battle."

I grew more suspicious of him by the minute.

"Do you speak Sluagh?"

"No, but I speak crow," he replied, green-gold eyes sliding back to me. "Close enough."

"All right. Whatever that means... Is the king here yet?" Ailerby asked.

"You traveled by Sluagh. Do you *think* he's here?"

"He asked you a question," I snarled, pinning the wraith with a glare.

His smile held in place, though he eventually shook his head. "The king—how many did he have with him?"

"Ask the gods-damned Sluagh, why don't you?"

My reply didn't faze him as he answered smoothly, "I'm Laisrés."

"So?" I asked.

By the way his lips formed a broad grin, he was halfway stunned but entirely amused. Who the hell smiled at someone like that a moment after they'd been impaled, kicked while they were down, and then sucked up by a funnel of Sluagh?

He probably didn't know the half of it. But my hand dripping blood on the snowy bridge was clear as day, and he'd seen the way we landed.

"Well?" I gestured to the front door. "If you're not currently plotting our deaths, can we go inside already? I might've been stabbed with a souldagger so some pep in your fucking step would be much appreciated."

"Of course."

Tattoos led us toward the enormous black door being whisked open, and Ailerby offered him the blood-coated weapon.

“Uh, do something with that, would you?” he asked.

Dúma prowled inside on our heels, shooting dagger looks at every Sluagh who got too close. I beckoned the red tendrils with a string of threats and cusses.

Thank gods the damn magic appeared at all. Yet I knew they showed because *they* wanted to.

“Where the hell were you earlier?” I hiss-whispered at the air, anyway.

While the corridor connecting to the enormous foyer was empty, Ailerby passed me a concerned look. Tattoos glanced over his shoulder, immediately enthralled by my magic. Besides the hare, it hadn’t harmed a soul the last few moons. But I was ready to bleed *someone* dry, and he was the closest target.

I threatened him with a wide-eyed glare.

Laughing, Tattoos faced forward then led us through the fortress.



“On a positive note, only one of your ribs is fractured.”

This was what my life had come to—one broken rib being the silver lining.

Ailerby stood across from the settee I rested on, with the end of my shirt bunched up, panting and sweating through my pain. Because I’d refused a soul and didn’t fancy healing the natural way, a Bonemender was my next best option. Ailerby focused hard on her hands, the barely visible glow she channeled to heal me with ever-fluid movements. His eyes often narrowed and glazed over when observing someone new. Especially if they possessed magic. We had yet to meet a Bonemender in the Soullands, and he prided himself on being able to imitate every type of magic.

Unfortunately, they were only illusions, not the real thing.

With a swipe of a hand across my bruised abdomen, the throbbing beneath started to fade instantly.

“Oh, gods,” I said, blowing out a relieved breath.

It wasn’t entirely painless, but my hand had been worse. *Much* worse. I hadn’t expected to feel every fiber of muscle and skin knitting itself back

together, and I'd screamed loud enough to fill the corridors. It was how I knew Nessin wasn't here.

He'd have come for me if he heard.

Wouldn't he?

I'd believed so, but enough time had passed to know he either *didn't* care, or he really hadn't returned yet.

One thing I knew for certain. The red tendrils were stifled no more, curling around my feet as the female wraith worked. I hoped to Dúm it meant Jestin's command had passed.

The Bonemender was perhaps ten years older than me, with cropped light brown hair. She wore a headband to keep it off her pinkish face as she worked, and her clothes included a simple, long-sleeved top with a fur collar, and a matching skirt. Her leather belt had a dozen little compartments filled with various items for healing.

"Take the wrap off your hand tomorrow. Your rib will heal in the next bell or two. It wasn't in as bad of shape." She gave me a half smile. "If anything looks amiss, come see me straightaway. My name's Ranir, my queen."

"Please call me Sersa," I muttered.

The windowless parlor that Tattoos—*Laisrés*, he'd reminded me—had brought us to smelled musty. Like it hadn't been used in ages. Based on the room's archaic yet perfectly preserved details, it was likely over a century *might* have passed.

Dúma and Ailerby perked up when a *Sluagh* rolled a cart with two bowls of soup, a loaf of bread, and two carafes, one of wine and one of water, into the room. The second Ailerby realized the *Sluagh* was serving us, he cast me a wary sideways glance that said one thing.

We need to get the hell out of here.

I noted the bowl of raw meat for Dúma, which Ranir set on the ground beside another bowl for water. The hound gobbled her meal up before Ranir straightened.

"The king requested food and drink for you. *Oh.*" She pointed as if she'd just put her finger on something she'd forgotten. "The Druids are all fine."

I stared at her, speechless.

"*What?*" Ailerby asked over the sound of Dúma knocking the metal bowl, waiting for it to magically refill.

Ranir clasped her hands in front of her. "It's against the Druids' practice

to consume souls, but the king sent a message with the Sluagh, asking me to delegate a few of my peers. The Iarsmaí aren't exactly armed at the bottom of the sea with souldaggers. All the Druids are being healed as we speak."

My entire body trembled under the possibility Jestin had done everything for *show*. To put the fear of the gods in me.

I swallowed then said, "Thank you, Ranir."

Once she left the room, the red tendrils encircled my fingertips in an illusion of painted nails, and I bit back the reprimands I wanted to shriek at them.

Instead, I paced to cool my nerves as Ailerby ate in silence after I dismissed my portion. Eating right now was out of the question. My entire body and mind hummed, painfully aware of the situation I was in, and I swore I *felt* the Daemon King growing nearer. As if a string connected us, shortening with every passing minute.

My heart thumped faster and faster. My throat dried up, and my nerves distended. Though I washed a swig of water down with two gulps of wine, my head spun in the opposite direction of the room. Sitting still was also out of the question.

I glanced at a collection of hourglasses for distraction, all displayed atop a table against the wall.

Sand drained. Minutes that felt like bells passed.

Five. Twenty. An eternity. He would be here any minute.

Any minute.

I wasn't ready to see him again. Maybe because I knew it was coming, whereas before he was the *last* person I thought I'd see.

I'd expected to see Dúm, maybe the High Triad. I'd expected to *die*. Then again, Nessin wasn't so far off from the god of death in my mind.

As the door opened softly, I held my breath.

Ailerby stood.

Not Nessin.

I practically gasped when I exhaled.

Laisrés moved with light, relaxed steps and offered me Jestin's push blade, hilt first. "It's not a souldagger. Had it been, you'd likely be dead by now."

"That's not possible," I protested, though Nessin had known the second he looked at it.

"It is possible. Not a souldagger," Laisrés repeated.

That meant I was even more incompetent than I'd ever believed.

"Excellent." Accepting the weapon, I stabbed the table with it, letting it stand upright. "Then I'm glad it takes so long to assess threats around here."

Why the hell would Jestin lie? All but one explanation evaded me.

He wants me alive. He needs me.

He'd told me as much. Bardca was another story. A mystery.

Laisrés looked amused at my wit laced with annoyance. "Yes, well, we had to stab someone and wait for them to die. They didn't, by the way—*die*."

I scowled in his direction, not entirely sure whether that was sarcasm. "Maybe you should try the dagger on yourself."

"I must say"—he paused deliberately—"you and His Darkness seem well-matched."

It concerned me he was the second person to say so today.

"Does that mean you think I'm a bitch?" I asked before I groaned. "He even has his own title. Of course he does," I said, the last bit under my breath.

His Darkness.

Ridiculous.

Laisrés grinned broader. "Your husband was born at midnight on the first day of the Dark season. Thus, *His Darkness*."

"I'm sorry, but I'm not married so I no longer think we're talking about the same person. Now that we're sure about the dagger, may we leave?"

"And where," Laisrés said, feigning ignorance, "would you go?"

"Only Dúm knows, but I might go dig my grave and crawl into it if I'm kept here even one minute more."

"You're no prisoner. You just can't leave the fortress."

"Why? Did the Daemon King order you?" I asked.

"Who else would mandate that?" He tilted his chin away from me, pursing his lips. "Why don't I escort you both to your chambers?"

I rubbed my temples. "We don't need *chambers* because we're not staying."

"Hmm. Perhaps you hit your head as well? A concussion would explain such coarse manners directed at the person who provided you shelter, a healer, food." He flourished his hand at the empty bowls Ailerby had finished slurping down.

Huh. Then that was the refined way to call someone a bitch.

Instead of wasting my time on this gods-damned Gilder, I resumed my

pacing.

Laisrés watched.

Not two minutes later, both doors *burst* open.

I snapped alert and whirled around reflexively. The motion forced me to bite back a cuss. My rib may have been fifty times better than it was, but Ranir had warned me it'd take at least the full bell to heal.

The Daemon King's sudden presence made my gut dip into my toes. He whipped his used towel behind him after a last sweep over his bloodstained face. Though Laisrés managed to catch it with the force of Nessin's arm, the Gilder looked absolutely amused by the theatrics. He held it away from himself by the tips of his fingers.

"Meals? Serving as a bloody towel rack? Is there anything else I may assist you with, Nessin?"

I doubted the Daemon King would allow a Gilder to call him by name without promptly separating his head from his shoulders.

"You're very welcome to complete some chores while you're at it, Laisrés. Please start with all the bird shit I keep seeing everywhere."

Bird shit?

Nessin returned his full attention to me.

Unfortunately, mine had never left him.

He wore an all-black ensemble, absent the cloak and shimmering pelt that usually draped his shoulders. The rest of his clothes were well-fitted to his lean yet corded body—a body I'd tried to convince my touch, taste, and sight to forget. Crimson thread stitched decorative flourishes along the sleeves and chest of his coat, and a dark metal torc peeked out from his high collar.

But more than the physical, that irrepressible, palpable energy—that *draw* I'd always felt toward Nessin—overcame me. It drew a tightening circle around us, making me want to step toward him when everything that'd ensued between us should have repelled me.

Should.

I was no good when it came to the *should* side of life.

Trying to mimic the sensation Jestin created in me earlier, I shoved all those feelings down.

Everything is fine.

Though I could barely bring myself to look into Nessin's eyes, I was equally incapable of looking away from his unreadable expression.

Dried blood he'd missed flecked his face and neck. His horns gleamed

marbled black and white in the firelight, distracting momentarily from the wrath and concern burning in his white-flame eyes. They didn't soften when our gazes locked and his flicked down to my hand. Then back up to my face.

"Her ribs?" Nessin said over his shoulder through clenched teeth.

I wondered if he'd snapped at Ranir to follow him back in here with the same charm he displayed now.

Flushed and out of breath, the Bonemender cleared her throat. "Broken but healing," she said, hands clasped in front of her once more.

I didn't know when Ailerby rose from the settee near the fireplace, but thank Dúm he had because my knees buckled right as he looped his arm around my elbow.

"Why isn't she resting?" Nessin snapped at Laisrés. Or maybe at the Sluagh posted along the walls. Their mouths opened and closed like fish on a line.

"I'm afraid she would like to *leave*," Laisrés said, still amused.

The king's nostrils flared.

"I can decide for myself when I want to rest, thank you."

Nessin tilted his face in my direction, eyebrow quirking ever so slightly. "I recognize you are more than capable. What I question is whether you will *obey* your body when it clearly needs rest."

Fury might have thrived in the rational bits of my mind, albeit questionably limited as of late, but I wanted to obey my body of one too many things right now, none of which related to rest.

Aislinn's words circled my thoughts.

You have always been his queen, Sersa. Never me.

He was bound to no one. Because he hadn't stopped being mine—

No.

Aislinn was not the fucking source of truth. *This* was reality. No fabrications. No fantasies.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I tried to recover my composure. It was slipping away from me like trying to grasp wind in my fist. I couldn't let my mind wander when I was around him either. Not when he'd proven one too many times how easily my thoughts became his without trying.

I could hardly bear the feelings mounting inside me.

But I didn't have to for long.

Two other figures entered the room right then. One shoved his way inside. The second followed, close but calm by contrast.

“Sers!”

Shock froze me to the bone as Ciel and I collided in an embrace that knocked the breath out of me.

A rasped serration edged Nessin’s voice. “She is weak, Ciel—”

“Do *not* speak for me. I won’t warn you again.”

Holding back his reaction, Nessin clasped his gloved hands behind his back and tipped his chin up.

Arrogant arse.

He looked so unbelievably arrogant.

Trying to hold Ciel up proved difficult, as he was half a foot taller than me and barely supporting his own trembling limbs. Devlin frowned, evidently pained to see his husband so distraught.

“When the king told us you might be in danger, none of us knew if you were okay.” Ciel chanced a look in Nessin’s general direction.

“I’m not hurt,” I said. “Not much.”

“*Not much?*” Ciel cracked. “What happened?”

I shouldn’t have said anything.

“Nothing,” I lied. “Flesh wounds and bruises.”

Nessin’s tense jaw worked, teeth grinding behind closed lips. He looked ready to break something.

Forcing myself to look anywhere else, I caught Ciel and Ailerby exchanging a glance. Their eyes locked in a moment that I suspected felt as vast as the Wraithsea.

Ciel finally released me, though he stayed at my side.

Keeping my face neutral and posture strong, I steeled myself, turned back to Nessin, and pinned him with dagger eyes. “Bardca and Queen Aislinn are who we ought to worry about. She was working with Jestin because he has her sister.”

“All your concerns are being addressed. I believe Bardca is alive,” Nessin said, showing his first hint of soft emotion before it vanished. “I will worry about Lady Aislinn’s disloyalty.”

I bet you will.

But he’d called her lady. Not queen.

A deliberate statement if ever I’d heard one.

“Sluagh cover every inch of the realm, and I have thousands of eyes in the Wraithsea.” Nessin sounded calm. *Now* he was calm. “They will be found.”

“Eyes that would have killed us—that nearly killed *all* the Druids—if not for the Bonemenders! Pretty useless if they don’t listen to you, aye?”

Nessin’s eyebrow quirked once more, possessed by whatever feelings swirled inside him. “*Agreed*,” he gritted out.

He didn’t sound very agreeable.

“The Druids are fortunate to be alive. As are you,” he added. “Call on Ranir if you require anything. Now, if you will excuse me, we must resume our search. I *recommend* you rest, Sersa.”

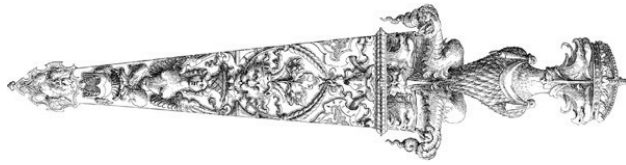
At that, the Daemon King turned on his heel.

Three moons.

Three gods-damned moons and that was all he had to say to me?

Nessin didn’t pause as he strode out of the parlor, but I watched his clasped hands behind him tighten. I didn’t need to look down to feel the red coming to life around my own fists. The tendrils seemed to singe my skin, not only like the Daemon King’s presence but also his absence.

Sersa



“WELL.” TAKING A STEP BACK FROM ME, CIEL WIPED HIS EYES WITH surprisingly tan hands. “I imagined that going much worse.”

I cut my brother a severe look. “Did you? What else did you imagine while napping beneath the Cradled Moons or whatever you’ve been doing? Did you *imagine* sending a letter to keep us informed of the situation?”

Ciel and Devlin wore pale linen pants and airy shirts unsuitable for the coldest season. Especially as far north as Nos Nua sat. Their skin was a few shades sun-kissed—or moon-kissed, I supposed—and Ciel’s inky black hair reflected a bit more light than usual.

The pair shared a guilt-ridden look.

“He barred us from visiting, let alone sending a letter. He’s been like that, in a rage for”—Ciel cleared his throat, black eyes widening—“a while.”

“I don’t care how *he* has been. *I’ve* been rotting on Nos Nua. Then I’m attacked, told I am queen, and everything snaps back to the way it was?”

Nope.

“Sersa,” Devlin interjected, soft yet careful, while also giving me the sense he and Ciel were conspiring on the Daemon King’s behalf. “You *are* queen. You have always been queen and were never unbound from Sin.”

“Not from where I’m standing!”

Devlin swept his shiny hair to the side. It was longer than the last time I

saw him, not shaggy by any means, but not the clipped style I remembered either.

“Apologies,” he said. “You’re right. This should come from my brother.”
I scoffed.

A lot of things should have come from your brother.

“Please know one thing. There was no wedding reception. No fanfare. The Circle of Gilders attended the handfasting, yes, but only for appearances. The entire thing was illegitimate.”

There were few people I’d believe in this world, but Devlin—I didn’t *want* to believe him. Yet I did. He had no reason to lie, and he wasn’t afraid of Nessin, king or not.

Unless *Nessin* wasn’t above Bonespeaking to his own brother.

Forcing out a breath, I tried to compose myself before addressing the prince again. “Look, I appreciate you keeping Ciel safe, but this entire situation is ridiculous. Jestin could have killed Ailerby and Dúma.”

“I’m fine, Sers.”

Ailerby could minimize the morning all he wanted. *I* wanted Jestin’s head on my spear.

“Oh, how rude of me.” Devlin outstretched his hand. “I’m Devlin Drumghoul, Sin’s eldest brother. I’ve heard a lot about you, Ailerby. All good,” he quickly added.

I noted the way he didn’t call himself a prince and suspected Ailerby did too as he accepted his hand. Though his lips flattened, the rest of his impassive face could have won a seven-day game of Seven Daggers.

“Ailerby Ipswich.”

“He’s a Scáth by association,” I added, trying to curb some of the irritation in my tone. “Like a brother.”

Head tilted, Ciel winced as he squinted at the wall. “Not quite.”

“*Oh.*” For the briefest moment, I’d forgotten about their entanglement.

The *wrong* moment.

My brother’s face reflected several shades of mortification as he retied his shoulder-length hair off his neck.

Devlin smiled softly, rolling one of his linen sleeves up, and I wondered if this conversation had him sweating. “In any event, you will both be safe in my brother’s care.”

I nodded at my Sluagh, standing as still as a coatrack in the corner. “Right. I was *always* ‘safe’ because the Daemon King was watching me.”

It wasn't a question.

Devlin offered another sympathetic smile, either for me or the king. "I hate to defend Sin, but he was not watching you *personally*, Sersa."

Ciel gave his husband subtle signals, his eyes shouting 'no' with the tiniest shake of the head because he *knew* the comment would set me off. Ailerby looked amused, likely hoping Devlin would dig himself into a grave with me. I didn't want to admit how much I actually liked Nessin's only sane brother.

"Sin wanted peace of mind at all times," he added, glancing at Ciel in his peripheral again.

Part of me wanted to laugh at Ciel's coaching. Another part hated that people believed they needed to walk on eggshells around me.

"I'd like to give Nessin Drumghoul a fucking piece of my mind," I said, folding my arms over my chest. "You were right, Ail. I should've gone home with that wraith we met at the bar the other night."

I'd been so inebriated, I hardly remembered his face.

With an uncomfortable laugh, Devlin shoved his hands in his pockets. "Had you done so, I think Sin would have burned the entire place down—with the wraith in it and *you* over his shoulder."

"He doesn't own me. I'm not his wife and certainly not his queen."

The room quieted. I chewed on the inside of my lip and stared into the fire, learning everything I needed to know in that silence.

I *was* Nessin's wife. And I *was* the Daemon Queen.

I looked down at my bloodstained clothes. "All right, then. I don't feel like hearing any more about how well-intentioned the Daemon King is, so we will go acquaint ourselves with our cells since we're prisoners. I need to lie down and bathe anyway—probably in that order before I pass out."

And possibly plot the Daemon King's demise.

Ciel opened his mouth twice before he said, "You don't want to talk?"

Sighing, I gestured to the hourglasses—hourglasses because the Daemon King was too pretentious for clocks apparently. "It's barely eighth bell."

Devlin nodded. "I expect Sin will hurry back in hopes you'll be looking for him."

I raised my eyebrows.

The prince hesitated. To his credit, he didn't look at Ciel before choosing his next words. "It could be days before he gathers the courage to speak to you. He truly wants to tell you everything firsthand, Sersa."

I wanted to both laugh and holler over the claim Nessin was afraid to talk to me.

First, he should be. Second, he hadn't seemed afraid. In fact, he seemed like even more of a royal bastard than before he'd sprouted stupid horns.

Devlin smiled softly. "All I mean to say is that you aren't the only one who's tortured themselves."

"Oh, has he asked you to be his messenger like Aislinn? Is that it?" I scoffed. "Why don't you ask His Darkness if he knows how long three moons feel to a mortal? He clearly hasn't noticed I'm not an ancient prick like him."

Ailerby snorted into his hand, dragging the sound out into a fake cough. I was nowhere near amused, but I *refused* to cry in front of Devlin.

How quickly would *that* get back to Nessin?

"No offense," I added. "To you. All offense intended toward your brother."

Sweat dotted my skin as my emotional grip weakened. I didn't need to bleed anyone dry, especially a prince and Nessin's last loyal brother.

My red magic didn't care. It appeared with a whoosh.

Ciel strode toward me. A line formed between his thick eyebrows. "When did this happen? The red never shows itself."

I backed away, urging the magic to follow. It rippled outward, winding around my feet. "Stay where you are."

Standing his ground, Ciel looked taken aback. "You've made my nose bleed before, Sers."

"No!" Dúma watched me with concern. I consciously lowered my voice, but it made the trembling more noticeable. "It's not the same. It's feeding off me, and it won't return to normal."

"Have you been training?"

Being addicted to imagining Nessin and me—both real memories and the ones I fabricated to get through the days—wasn't exactly training.

"It doesn't listen. I...killed a hare."

Ciel reached for me. "Accidents happen. We can work on it together. Okay?"

I retreated toward the far wall.

Ailerby scoffed. "Are you serious? You want to work on it with her now? Where have you been, Ciel? Enjoying an extended honeymoon and marital bliss while Sersa and I—" He breathed deep, shaking his blond head.

The color annoyed me to no end—a shade too close to Aislinn’s.

My brother and Ailerby regarded one another for a prolonged moment.

“You’re right,” Ciel relented. “All I knew the last few moons was that both of you were fine. The king ordered me not to pry, and eventually—I stopped trying to reason and argue with him. I gave up, yes. I’m sorry,” he finished weakly.

I waved my hand, mimicking the motion of my spinning head. “I can’t talk about this right now.”

“Sure...” Ciel seemed shocked by the way we were reacting, but I didn’t know what he expected. “I’ll visit you in a bit?”

“Tomorrow.”

I wanted to bathe, sleep, and pretend today hadn’t happened.

My brother exchanged a hesitant glance with Devlin. “Uh, can Ailerby and I have a moment alone, actually?”

I didn’t know how to respond.

Ailerby stood as still as stone, studying the hourglasses like he’d been counting the falling grains of sand until Ciel requested a word with him.

Turning jaded eyes to me, Ailerby nodded.

“If you don’t come find me after,” I warned, “I’ll find you.”

He focused on Ciel as Devlin followed me out of the room and closed the double doors to give them some privacy. After the tense looks they’d shared, I suspected they didn’t have the easiest conversation ahead of them.

As we walked to the end of the hall in silence, I realized I didn’t know where to go.

I did, but I didn’t.

I also wondered if Nessin had any ideas of where *Jestin* might have gone.

“I’m surprised you didn’t head out to search near the parish,” I said.

Devlin patted his side. “I’m afraid I was wounded yesterday. Sin can manage on his own anyhow.”

“By whom? How?” I rushed out.

He paused, clearly reluctant to tell me something. “A break-in occurred last night.”

“Who would break into a Daemon Prince’s home?”

“Jestin,” he said plainly.

My feet stopped working, and I halted in the middle of the hall. Anxiety pooled in my gut, acid creeping up my throat to leave a rancid taste on my tongue. Just the sound of his name elicited a whole-body shudder.

“Are you all right? Is Ciel?” I asked.

“Fine, fine, we’re all fine. He never got to Ciel. *Promise.*”

Reluctantly, I resumed walking, but not without another glance over my shoulder at the parlor as I contemplated checking my brother for so much as a scratch. I was truly annoyed Ciel hadn’t come to see us, but if anyone, I’d forgive him for past wrongs.

“We were groggy and near useless when we woke. The Sluagh guard us day and night, and Sin got to our rooms, thankfully, but not before Jestin commanded them all to stand down. He said I deserved the same death as our father for backing Sin and ordered me to turn a souldagger on myself. Sin searched all night and never found so much as a hint of Jest.”

“Gods, Devlin. I never got to apologize—”

Shaking his head, he held up a pale hand. “No love exists between a child and their father after you witness the act of him murdering your mother.”

“I killed Lochlainn too,” I whispered. “He told you, right?”

Devlin looked up and offered me a reassuring smile—a smile when I’d murdered two of his immediate kin.

“Correct. I admit I was a bit shocked at first.” Devlin sighed. “Especially to hear about the child he kept hidden in the city. We don’t know where the boy and his mother fled, but whatever his blood is, he must be trained properly. The intention was to have them live with us.”

The fact either of them believed they could convince the woman—who watched me *kill* Lochlainn—to live here was laughable.

Under the same roof as the person responsible? No chance.

But that implied I was staying here to live.

“Is it more likely he inherited Colossi abilities since Lochlainn had them?”

“Highly.” Devlin scanned the empty hall absentmindedly. “Though he could boast any combination of our bloods. All the more reason he needs training. Sin isn’t concerned about a potential dethroning—he’s worried about a boy not knowing our history and the complexities of our bloodline. It would be simple to weaponize Loch’s son by convincing him that Sin is the enemy.”

I couldn’t argue with that.

“What about Stellera—are she and the babe safe?”

“Yes... And you will be relieved to hear that Loch isn’t the father.” Devlin rubbed his sharp chin, calling attention to the trimmed beard he’d

grown. He glanced at me. “The last I saw her, she asked that one of us tell you. She’s in hiding with the daemon who fathered the babe.”

“Are you serious? That’s the best gods-damned news you could’ve given me today.”

Devlin chortled. “Agreed. Not that I don’t want the Drumghoul line to expand... The father’s name is Feren. An old friend of ours, actually. You likely won’t be able to see Stellera until she gives birth.”

“They must be worried about Jestin too.”

“If he knows anything about the babe’s lineage, he ought to be relieved to have one less Drumghoul with a claim to the Daemon Throne. But,” Devlin said with a heavy sigh, “the truth about Stellera and Feren has not leaked to the rest of Gilders Eye, and the couple has yet to decide how they wish to handle it once the babe is born.”

I winced, thinking of Stellera and Lochlainn’s honeymoon.

Devlin was a little too perceptive, shooting me another sideways glance. “Neither she nor Feren are bothered by the whole ordeal of her marriage to Loch. They have been together a long time—long before her engagement.”

I wanted to say I was happy for them, but too much danger existed for that. My throat felt tight, and the breath in my lungs thick.

“Devlin, I hope you understand why I’m...”

Livid.

Infuriated.

Ready to carve some cuss words into your brother’s chest.

“Upset,” I finished.

“You have every right, Sersa. Sin knows it too.”

We fell into silence for a moment. The corridors blurred by, and I hoped the rest of the day would too. Sleep was the best way to avoid life, and I planned on exploiting it for as long as I could.

Unless Jestin fills my dreams.

Devlin ran his fingers through Dúma’s wiry fur as she walked between us.

“You know, Ciel told me everything about his and Ailerby’s history.”

From this angle, his nose looked slightly crooked. I wondered if one of his brothers broke it long ago. Or maybe he inherited it from their mother. I remembered the Old King’s face well enough after driving a souldagger into him, but the prominent feature escaped me.

Like Nessin’s scars, it made Devlin more handsome.

“You look shocked,” he added with a laugh. “It’s only natural he and I discuss it, especially when Ciel knew Ailerby was in the Soullands with you.”

“Open communication *is* a shocking concept to me.”

Dúma sighed between us, and Devlin resumed his scratches.

When we reached the turning point of a dark, wood-walled corridor, he steered us left. Every hall looked the same, despite the many laps I’d taken around these corridors during that unspeakable time Nessin and I spent here.

“I normally don’t push or pry, but will you consider speaking to Sin later? He wants to see you more than anything. I would never tell him,” he added hastily. “Though my thoughts are always fair game as you know, and he will probably kick my ass when he learns what I’m telling you.”

I laughed halfheartedly. “Ciel is lucky to have you. I mean it.”

Devlin guffawed. “I’m the lucky one. I do worry I can’t protect him after the attack last night though. Being a Soulreaper in the Soullands isn’t as useful as you might think.”

“Ah. Everyone is soulless.”

“Mostly. I can’t protect him from every threat here. Not in the way Sin can protect you.”

I touched a hand to Devlin’s arm, pausing in the middle of the hall. “Ciel is strong.”

“Oh, am I aware. Your brother *nearly* bested me the other day when we were sparring. The Shadowess taught both of you well.”

“You take swings at one another regularly?”

Passing me a glance, Devlin chuckled and resumed walking. “Only in the ring. Quite therapeutic.”

Maybe it was something to try. I’d trained alone for moons now, and I knew my first target.

When Devlin halted, I instantly realized we were outside *the* rooms.

Mine and Sin’s.

“Won’t he stay in there?” I asked incredulously.

“These are yours.”

Before I could ask how long they’d be *only* mine, Devlin cleared his throat.

“You should know that when things settle, I told Ciel I’ll return the shard of his soul I hold if he wants it. He is safer—both of you are—in your current states for the time being. He was a bit devastated when he received a letter

from the mortal Druids, stating he could no longer study with them due to his marriage. Of course, he *knew*, but..." Devlin shrugged.

I recalled the letter Ma gave me. I'd lost it in the chaos that ensued in Nos Ovscura moons ago—when Gearóid Drumghoul dangled Ailerby and me over the city like insects.

"That Sluagh sniffs me twenty times a day so I'm not too sure I believe our souls are safer. But you would do that for Ciel, even if it might mean—"

"That we might not be together?" A small smile pulled at Devlin's lips. His eyes drifted to the window at the corridor's end. Snow flurried from the sky, thickening the white canvas beyond the ice-crusting glass. Its twirling motions distracted him.

Slowly, his smile faded. Lips closed. Eyes softened.

"Isn't making our own choices one of the most beautiful things? It's what makes me feel alive after all these years, Sersa. I choose Ciel every day. If *he* decides not to choose me one day—if he chooses Os Íseal or the path of becoming a Druid as he always wanted—I will accept it."

"You say beautiful. I say tragic."

"Beautiful *and* tragic." Devlin's gaze slid back to mine as he leaned forward to scratch Dúma's ears. "Anyway, I'm sure you two have grown weary. I'll send up a proper lunch later. Please call for me if you need anything."

"Thanks, Devlin."

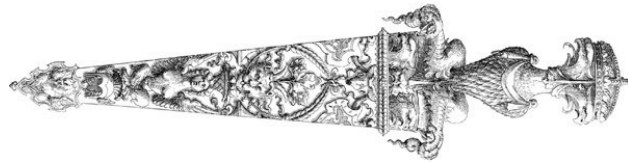
"Oh, and your Sluagh?" He straightened. "Irian sniffs you because Sin ordered him to protect you. Sluagh smell our sadness. Our anger. Our fear. Our love. Irian is aware of how serious his role is because of what Sin feels for you. They don't take my brother's commands lightly, the Sluagh. Then again, most people don't."

I cleared my throat. "Does Sin have *any* idea where Jestin fled today?"

Devlin shook his head, stirring the hair around his eyes. They were so much softer than the Daemon King's. "He said Jest was almost... translucent."

"Like soulform," I said, nodding.

"Hmm." His brow furrowed. "All I know is that you can bet Sin's main objective is to give our brother the true death he deserves—a very slow, excruciating death. Another thing I know? Sin would start great wars for you, Sersa. I agree he *was* a bit of a fool in his approach, however, so don't go gentle on him. He can handle it."

Serena

TOO SORE TO STRIP OFF MY CLOTHES OR BATHE, I SOMEHOW PASSED OUT ON the settee. By the time I woke several bells later under the waning light of the Cradled Moons, it was around dinnertime. My ribs no longer throbbed, and though my hand still ached when I flexed my fingers, it felt significantly better.

After cuddling Dúma until I dozed off, I'd expected to wake to a broken settee beneath us, but she was nowhere in sight. I sat up and looked around the room before my gaze landed on her, wagging guiltily, eyes all shifty.

As I stood, I saw why near the door.

Whatever food Devlin sent for me was gone, with the cart toppled on its side and every dish licked clean. Dúma was used to finding her own food at least three times a day, though lately she searched for snacks every time we went outside—meaning she needed to hunt tonight before bed.

"I hope it was good," I said as I cleaned up her mess.

She wagged harder.

I still reeked of blood and sweat, and I'd undoubtedly be ready to sleep again after I cleaned up, but I wanted to bathe before I took her out, lest anyone see the state of me on our way outside.

As hot water filled the bathtub, I added oil and sprigs of fresh lavender. Then I retrieved the silky nightdress left out for me on the enormous four-

poster canopy bed.

After soaking and scrubbing the paint and blood off, I drained the tub and turned on the shower to rinse off. I lost myself in the steam that pooled around me, going through the motions until I finished. Then I wrapped myself in the largest embroidered towel I'd ever seen—*D* for Drumghoul, much to my chagrin—and swiped at the steam fogging the mirror over the basin.

Staring at myself was strange. Dissociative. My one looking glass at the parish was a map of nicks and cracks from edge to edge and hardly large enough to really see my reflection.

Beneath the steam, this one was polished to perfection.

As Itoweled off and rubbed cream all over my body, the chill that hadn't left me since I saw Nessin had worsened. His actions had given me frostbite of the heart, and yet, somewhere beneath that ice, it burned harder—hotter—than ever before. I hated it. At the same time, the thought of him no longer reciprocating this feeling constricted my lungs like a corset.

I slipped into the silky nightdress and instantly realized I needed to find something warmer. While the fortress walls were thick, the naked stone floors in the bathing room adopted the chill too, turning my legs all wobbly and my toes to ice.

But my legs trembled for more reasons than the chill as I glimpsed the bed in the other room. Nessin and I hadn't consummated our union here. *Worse*—it was within these four walls where I'd stupidly fallen for him.

I studied my reflection for another long moment, wondering what made me his perfect poison as opposed to Aislinn.

Was I? Had all of that been the truth?

Full lips did little to soften my harsh eyes or the contrast of thick, black hair against my pale skin. My nose lacked the sloped look of Aislinn's, but it was relatively narrow and straight. It hardly mattered I was thinner than usual. More than one man hoping my clan would trade me like a godsdamned cow had deemed my hips—rather unfortunately—fit for birthing by fifteen years of age.

I loved my shape—had no reason not to. I was strong, quick, capable. But all of this was physical. What about the rest? Did Sin and I really know one another? Had he truly chosen me for any other reason but my looks?

They were simple questions to answer. We *didn't*, he hadn't, and reconciliation was no more plausible than me controlling the crimson

tendrils.

As I pulled Nessin's golden horn out from beneath the nightdress, a series of sounds from the main area reverberated in my chest. I whirled around and gripped the basin behind me so I wouldn't fall over.

The door swept open and slammed shut.

Followed by a frustrated sigh mixed with a growl.

Then a *thwack* punctuated by something splintering.

"Fuck!"

My gut dipped into my toes.

Nessin.

Closing my eyes, I inhaled as deep as I could and tried to hold it in, not realizing a heavy exhale would follow. Still, I tried to be as quiet as possible.

But what was my plan? I couldn't hide out in the bathing room! Nessin was bound to come in here. Bound to sense me, if not hear me.

Exhausted as she was, Dúma rolled onto her side, not bothering to rise from the frigid stone. How Nessin didn't hear *her* was a testament to his state of mind. Just as murky as mine.

Now or never.

I wavered on the threshold, staring across the spacious chambers at his back, burnished by the ocher glow of fire.

One gloved fist balled at his side, Nessin faced the wall. He'd left a gaping lightning bolt of a fracture that revealed the stone structure beneath. Muttering something indistinguishable, he ran his palm up the splintered wood wall. But his head snapped upright suddenly, followed by a cautious yet predatory turn—a hunter trying not to frighten its prey. A strand of hair fell between his eyebrows. Based on his sharp expression, he might as well have cursed a second time.

Gods.

The horns.

The gods-damned horns shouldn't have made him more attractive. And yet, here we were.

"Did you really punch the wall?" As soon as the words left my mouth, I remembered I'd broken my hand the same way a few short moons before.

"Sersa." He threw back his shoulders. There was that mask again. "What are you doing in here?"

"Your brother brought me here. The servants left me a nightdress..." I gestured to the bed but stopped when I registered just how translucent the silk

was.

Nessin's eyes dropped, then raised again, noting the thin fabric clinging to my breasts and skimming my hips too. "There are no servants here. I sent them all away, apart from Draea and Innes."

Gods.

Then Devlin *had* brought me to these rooms on purpose. Found me the thinnest garment imaginable. *I normally don't push or pry, my ass.*

Apparently, compulsive lying was a default Drumghoul personality trait.

"I will find another room for the night—and have a word with my brother," Nessin said, tapping a gloved hand on his thigh.

Always reading my mind.

My eyes involuntarily flicked to the canopy bed.

All the times I'd imagined Nessin intertwined with his faceless bride came rushing back to me. Now that I knew who she was, it was so much worse. I couldn't stop my thoughts from spiraling to whether he and Aislinn had slept in that bed together. Whether she'd lied.

Heat bloomed in my cheeks.

Maybe the nightdress was *hers*. If I weren't naked beneath, I'd tear it off me.

With a scoff, I sneered, "You stay. I'll go. Dúma, come."

From the bathing room, my hellhound groaned obnoxiously.

A war waged inside me. On one hand, I knew I *should* leave the filthy clothes I'd draped on the armchair by the fire and flee the room, but on the other, I wouldn't sleep without my daggers.

It wasn't that I wanted to smell Nessin again. Not at all.

Not to give him a chance to—

No.

His intense gaze accompanied me the entire way toward the chair. When I noticed he stood directly in my path to the door, I wondered if he might not let me leave.

"I am surprised you wanted to be in these rooms at all," Nessin said quietly. "Gods know I don't. I haven't been here since... I couldn't face this place after everything, if I'm being honest."

"*Honesty!*" I whirled back around to face him, livid at the very mention of the word. "Imagine that."

Nessin took a step toward the lounge. Toward me. "I *never* touched her, Sersa. It was all part of the deception. I believed I could draw Jestin out

before things got this bad between us. I would never do that, never *think* of it, not when—” Sin reset himself. “I told you why I took another—”

Fire licked at the edges of my eyes.

“Another what, Sin? Can you not say it? Another *bride*? A Daemon Queen to replace me? Well, Aislinn told me it was all fake before she led your brother to me, so it looks like you can’t manipulate everyone into behaving how you want. Dúma!”

“She told you.”

“She told me everything. Devlin too—or he told me *enough*. Don’t pretend you don’t already know.”

“I can’t sort through your thoughts all that well right now.” That made two of us. “I don’t suppose you’d believe the truth if it came from me first. I will have to thank her. Before I have her ended,” Nessin added as an afterthought.

My deranged scoff served as a battle cry the red tendrils gladly answered. They wrapped around me, creeping and curling over the settee next to the hearth.

“Oh, with your cock?” I shouted. “Is that your method? I played along as your wife so you could sprout stupid horns from your head. I killed your brother to save you. In exchange, you thank me by f—”

“*Sersa*.”

Nessin’s deadly tone stopped me in my tracks.

The red now clung to the walls like fingers spreading outward, clenched around the room for dear life or like it might crush the surrounding structure in its fist, revealing the broken bones it—*we*—were.

“I acknowledge the mistakes I made,” he said, eyeing the tendrils. “All I want is for you to look at me without that burning hatred in your eyes. I can’t stand it. So *please* listen. If only for a moment.”

Nessin tilted his chin downward as if trying to stupidly intimidate my magic. It held its position. A moment passed before he relented and refocused on me.

“Jestin paid the Hellicks a visit the same day you killed the Old King. He played into Lord Hellick’s lust for power, and the lord had the ear of the Circle. He was nothing but a mouthpiece for my brother, but they were desperate for information. Hellick told the Circle what he knew about the murder when they finally obliged his request to meet that night. They sprang into action, swearing they wouldn’t rest until you were dead for your treason.

Though they had no concrete proof yet. My Mindbloods at the White Plume intercepted the intel, and I was forced to make a few hasty decisions that—yes—I regret. Namely, sending you away.”

Trying to stand perfectly still, every breath prompted a pang in my chest.

He waited for my reply. He’d be waiting for-fucking-ever because I had nothing to say to that.

Nessin moved toward the lounge.

When I stepped back, he flashed his palms, signaling he wouldn’t move again.

“Because Jestin already attached his strings to all the Hellicks, I knew Aislinn would do *anything* for her sister. I used their duplicity to my advantage and visited her father with a proposal to wed. A moon later, Bardca officiated the fake handfasting ceremony. Her father was pleased, the Circle temporarily placated... I truly believed she would lead me to Jestin through Helde, but he kept slipping through my fingers. I left Nos Ovscura a moon and a half ago to pursue a few leads. All dead ends. While I purposely kept Lord Hellick in the dark and pretended not to know Jestin visited them, I informed Aislinn before I left that our union was neither lawful nor real. We obviously never consummated it in either the mortal or Soullander way, and I told her I was very much still bound to you in every sense.”

“Who other than you and your perfect Gilder bride would the act of consummation be obvious to? You lied to the Circle about our union and lied to *me* numerous times.”

“That’s true. The vows I made to my true queen and *wife* are not something I take lightly though.” He paused once more, then licked his scarred lips. “There has been much speculation that I am not the king everyone expected—that I am weak, passive, dawdling in the shadows because I have not been ruling from the Court of Soulless.”

Nessin—a *weak* king? If anything, his downfall would be in trying to manipulate everything himself.

Like he always does.

“All I wanted was to end Jestin before bringing you back,” he whispered.

“I understand everything you’ve said, but none of it explains why you couldn’t do all that with *me* by your side.”

Nessin nodded, but his hands balled into fists, straining the leather of his gloves. “When you conveniently *vanished*, as the Circle put it, they kindly reminded me that the law required action on your alleged treason. They knew

full well I had been plotting the Old King’s murder for years—alone.”

“A trial,” I said in a thin voice.

He absentmindedly adjusted his black metal torc. “That was part of it. I insisted I never took a shard of your soul, and they couldn’t prove it. The laws are intricate though. Lord Arlo from the House of Elittes warned me that if there was a *chance* you were carrying a Drumghoul heir, the law demanded your death, and royal bounty hunters would be deployed at once. When I denied everything, they presented me with”—he closed his eyes and inhaled—“our sheets.”

My eyes widened.

“From our bed,” Nessin said.

“Yes, I put it together myself!”

The sheets on which I’d given my entire fucking self to this daemon.

It was an outdated practice in the Four Pointes—used as a way to determine whether a woman was allegedly “pure”—and absolutely revolting. Ma had decreed that anyone caught practicing it would be executed. Of course I knew the Soullands—like the Four Pointes of Clais—hadn’t reached the point where women were not only viewed as equals but *actually* equals. Not everywhere, at least.

But the Circle had used the method to prove I *could* be carrying an heir.

And thank gods I was not.

“I still don’t know which servant sold them. It may not have been a servant at all. Perhaps the Old King had our room raided that same night.”

“*You* are the king now. Repeal the law. Kill the Circle.”

“I have repealed it, and trust me, their deaths are planned out in great detail. Yet barriers exist when it comes to Soullander politics. Those who earnestly believe certain laws are just—the Circle members who helped Gearóid shape the landscape, for one—do not stop following it simply because it has been struck down.”

Nessin was being drowned in the guilt so clear on his face that I truly believed him. Maybe that made me foolish. But every second I spent alone with him was reckless.

Dangerous.

“I can’t be here,” I whispered.

I turned my back to him. Shackled in red, my hands shook as I swiped at a loose sock on the ground next to the armchair. Heart racing, my chest started rising and falling, every heaving breath audible. I needed to get out of

here before I acted on this feeling that Nessin was no longer lying.

Sock in hand, I straightened.

“All of it was a deception.” His whisper made my blood thrum. “Nothing more, Sersa.”

I looked to the side, though I wasn’t brave enough to turn around and face Nessin.

“But it was real to *me*. Every day, every pain, was *real*.”

Quivering all over now, the little hairs on my arms prickled, despite the closeness of the fire. I wondered how much of this Nessin noticed. Probably all of it.

As I gazed into the dancing flames, flashes of our bodies working against one another moved through my mind. I shut my eyes in hopes the memory might disperse.

His hand pinning mine against the pillows.

A kiss near my navel.

One between my legs.

The pain.

His patience.

His gentleness.

The feel of him as I cried out and he spilled into me.

The memory always morphed into him and his bride.

Nessin’s boots were silent on the red-and-black carpet as he moved closer, equally unable to resist.

But *I* needed to resist because so many other lies existed. Pa was just the start.

“Once you know everything, you may go back to hating me. All I want is to explain myself first. If you’ll allow me.”

When I didn’t reply or spring for the door, Sin cleared his throat.

Though my magic retreated, my tears didn’t. Angry, hot tears.

So little explanation already had my head whirling. I opened my eyes, the looming shadow on the ground telling me how close he was. A foot away at most.

His voice felt like a tangible caress.

“As for your father, it’s true Thane bought him. The night I found him, I learned the House of Turrian had already stolen a shard of his soul, presumably as soon as they purchased him. Your father was trapped here, and I couldn’t risk waltzing up to him and asking which Turrian took it. If others

knew a Daemon Prince was trying to buy some seemingly random mortal, the Old King would have questioned me endlessly. Prior to our betrothal, I spent moons checking up on him, trying to find his soul shard.”

“Why would you go out of your way to help him?” The crackle of the fire muffled my whisper.

Nessin seemed reluctant to reply, more so than ever before. Like he didn’t want me asking this very question.

“I saw you in the city. We...met.”

Redirecting my glare, I spun around to face him. “Is that another way of saying you were *stalking* me, because how does that explain why you’d help a stranger?”

“I want to tell you everything that has consumed me for moons. This is a heavy conversation though—one that may not be opportune for tonight, Sersa.”

The tendrils surrounding us resumed their pulsing.

No black. No blue. Only red.

I wondered frequently when the fear or sadness might break through. If ever again. I heard the pain, the anger, the torture also lodged deep inside Nessin, but I wasn’t about to protect his feelings when he hadn’t done the same for me.

“You want to explain? You get one chance,” I said. “Take it or leave it.”

Nessin licked his scarred lips and nodded. “Your father—”

“Do you actually think I care about him—that I’m mad about *that*?”

Pa had turned on me in a heartbeat. Blamed me when I’d saved him.

“I am sorry he was ungrateful. You were so determined,” he whispered, raising his hand, maybe to touch me.

It fell to his side.

Fantasy took over as I imagined he *did* touch me. While we were apart, I’d craved so many things, the loudest of them all being a rationalization that would wash away every shred of hatred I felt toward Nessin—or maybe not just my anger with him but *every* feeling.

Only now I felt myself growing weak in his presence.

“Tell me what I’m missing here, Nessin.”

“Okay,” he conceded. “The short version is that we—I—*Fucking Dúm.*”

I’d never seen him stammer this bad. It turned my gut into knots.

Just come out with it already! I wanted to shout, but my tongue felt as heavy as iron. The anticipation was making me dizzy, as was the certainty

that this wasn't some lovely surprise ready to launch us into a state of complete and utter bliss.

I *felt* the lie clouding the air between us.

“We have more history than you know—than you remember, Sersa. I courted you well before we were betrothed. No ruse. No lies. You were mine before everything.”

Serena



AS IF I WERE SPEEDING DOWN AN ICE-CRUSTED HILL ON A POORLY constructed sled with no safety guards to keep me from flying off the edge, my gut dropped before it ascended jarringly.

I stilled and silenced and *swore* I would turn to ice, never to thaw again, despite the vicious burning in my cheeks. My body caught up to me when my mind couldn't.

"We courted," Nessin repeated.

As if I hadn't heard him. He knew I had, and that my reaction was the anger pulling back to let my shock take the reins. I could see the unease in his gaze, the agonizing wait for the blade to fall on his neck. He looked like he wished to Dúm he were lying.

Which meant he wasn't.

Fuck.

The resounding cuss rattled the walls of my mind. It didn't *feel* like it came from me. Either way, that single word jostled me alert.

And with it came my savagery.

"*Nessin.*"

"Shall I start from the beginning, or do you have—specific questions?"

"Specific questions!"

All the rage burst from me like a blood blister poked with a needle. My

magic slithered up the walls, the ceiling, covering the room like red ivy.

“Talk.”

I no longer cared what Nessin told me, so long as truth poured out of him before I ruptured again.

“Before our betrothal, I took your memories to protect you. You were fully aware. One of my Mindbloods helped me return them once already—the night I sent you to the parish. I wanted to let you keep them so you wouldn’t hate me, but you insisted on returning to Nos Ovscura at my side. I fucked up, Sersa. I stole them a second time to keep you away. My Mindblood had left us by then, and in my haste, I sort of...*broke* yours on the ship to Nos Nua.”

Suddenly, I was inundated by images that resembled a hundred candles flickering behind a frosted window.

Nessin and I got dressed in a narrow, all-wood room, balancing as the floor teetered left and right.

I groaned at our unclad state, no words needed to know what we’d done.

“You begged for it,” he said, flashing his palms as if that pardoned him.

I put my hands on my hips. “I don’t believe that is a necessary detail to share, thank you.”

More of the memory flashed—mere pieces of a complex puzzle he was allowing me to put together.

I gritted my teeth as I tried to flee the tight cabin belowdecks. Nessin’s thick arm wrapped around my waist. I braced myself in the doorway until he wrenched me backward and kicked it shut.

“I told you no one can know I’m here, Sersa! You must stay away, at least until the Circle—”

“You expect me to hide in the shadows while you plan to share a bed with another?”

“I told you,” he said rigidly, releasing me and blocking the door, “that we will not be actually married. I’m not sleeping in the same bed as her, let alone the same room. Nor will I be touching her. Or anyone, for that matter.” Nessin wrung the air in contorted hands, absent of his gloves, like he was ready to shake some sense into me.

The images skipped ahead confusingly until Nessin pinned me to the ground. His nose was bleeding, and his tongue swiped at a split lip.

I writhed beneath him, but it was no use.

“If you won’t stay away, I will have to make you, love. Forgive me. Gods,

please forgive me.”

I couldn't begin to make sense of the memory when it released me. Nessin returned my memories—only to steal them.

Twice.

Twice he'd done this?

“That is *more* than fucking up,” I said.

“You were intent on being queen once you learned the truth. You disregarded the dangers. The bounty hunters. The Circle. You got a few solid swings in that night though, I'll give you that.”

“Is this *amusing* to you?”

Nessin clamped his mouth shut for a long minute before he swallowed. “Not at all.”

A breath spluttered out of me alongside a possessive sense of urgency and desire to know everything.

“All right,” I said, resetting myself. “How did we meet? The first time.”

“On Hwain.” Now he couldn't hide his reluctance to share with me. “I commanded you to forget me that night as well. I didn't pilfer your memories that time, and it didn't work so—”

“Then you're a gods-damned repeat offender, aye? Is *third time's the charm* the Daemon King's motto?”

But I puzzled something out myself. We'd spent last Hwain together at the Druids' parish after marrying on the last day of the Harvest season.

“Hwain—as in *two* Hwains ago.”

Nessin nodded cautiously, his colorless eyes telling. “The night your father disappeared. We didn't court until after the Rime season.”

“And why would you want me to forget that night too? Did you have yet another fuck up to *cover* up?”

“Our first meeting was a less than ideal situation. For both of us.”

I was about to show Nessin a less than ideal situation when I shoved a dagger hilt-deep in his thigh.

“You are twisting the truth. Speak plainly.”

“Very well.” His mood darkened. Glaring down at me, he squared his shoulders. “I walked up on you partaking in some acts I'd rather not speak of with a young man. A lad named *Roarke*,” he admitted, a spiteful tinge to his voice. “A lad you continued to court, might I add, into the Rime.”

“You *did* stalk me, then.”

“Only when you were in my city, thank you. I wasn't actively stalking

you either. Though I did fuck with that soot you called a suitor whenever he accompanied you and effectively ruined my night.”

A stunned guffaw barreled out of me. “And?”

“What? Would you like me to relive every moment of him touching *my* future wife? The fuck is lucky I let him keep his fingers at all!”

“Don’t call me your wife.”

As Nessin’s words finally settled into me post-shock, I dropped into the armchair. My feet rested on the ground, my hands flat on my thighs.

I needed to feel grounded. Any way I could.

Nessin didn’t look sure where he was safest, sitting or standing, but he took a seat on the coffee table in reaching distance of my armchair. He put a gentle hand on my knee, testing the waters when he knew I wasn’t any old waters to be tested. I was a sea with a storm brewing overhead based on the surging thoughts he had full access to.

He cleared his throat, that hand retreating slowly.

My blood purred, tendrils throbbing.

Unthinking, I shoved free from my seat, whipped the bundle of clothes at the ground, and flung myself at Nessin. He fell backward from my force, slamming the coffee table, and I reached for the sickle at his waist. Even on his back, Nessin had the advantage of sheer strength. He gripped my wrists, but I was straddling him. On top. In charge.

I wouldn’t let him win.

“Where in Dúm’s piss are my daggers?” I growled, looking around.

“*Sersa.*” He sat up beneath me. Every muscle in his lower abdomen flexed against my squeezing thighs.

“I am actually going to kill you.” I separated each word. “I won’t even give you the mercy of using a souldagger because I *want* you alive so I can torture you first!”

My wet hair hung in my eyes, and I choked on a strained breath.

“You not only bribed me with my pa but also assumed that after all this deception I’d fall in love with you again?”

I kept wiggling my wrists in his hands.

“Did you *not* fall for me again? Did either of us ever have a chance of not falling?” Nessin breathed deep, his wide chest expanding. My gaze flicked up to the torc he wore under his high-collared coat, then the scar bridging his jaw and neck, snaking up his face. “You consumed me the instant we met, *Sersa*. I will never belong to another after meeting you. Daemon King, I may

be, but I *am* your servant.”

I tried to deny the existence of that pull Nessin spoke of between us—some invisible force I didn’t understand.

“I want the memories.” I shoved his chest. His muscles beneath my trembling fingers tensed, but he didn’t budge an inch. “This very second, Nessin. They weren’t yours to take.” I lifted my elbow, attempting to ram it into his face this time. “Let me go!” I bared my teeth like a savage. “I *will* bite you.”

“Try me, love.”

I ripped my wrist to the side, nearly hitting myself in the face as I twisted free.

Without thought, I slapped him.

A shared breath passed, our faces so close I felt his exhale. Only at the top of mine, unsteady by comparison, did I realize I’d halted altogether too.

Though Nessin’s eyebrows raised in surprise, he looked otherwise unfazed. No mark left behind. “Well done. But you’ll need to get stronger if you plan on *hitting* demons.”

“I slapped you. Big difference.”

“I warned you how dangerous being with me was,” he said. “You understood when we courted before.”

“Return my memories, and I’ll decide for myself,” I snarled.

“Alas, I don’t specialize in memory restoration.” Nessin’s lips downturned, his expression unreadable. “My best Mindblood will have to do it.”

“Send for them now!” I shouted, gesturing to the door.

“She’s tending to other business back in Nos Ovscura presently. I swear on my life, Feera *will* return every memory. Selfishly, I need them returned to you too. Maybe *then* you won’t hit me or hate me.”

“Doubtful.”

“You’re right. If you hate me so much, why are you still sitting in my lap, Sersa?”

I looked down to see I’d aroused him. Gritting my teeth with a growl, I brushed the messy hair off my face and stood.

“You could only dream. Enjoy your hand,” I said.

But I wanted to keep yelling at Nessin. I spiraled and threatened the damn giant with a finger in his face.

“You know, I drove myself mad on our honeymoon. All I wanted was the

truth from you. To know what was happening. To know you felt the same way.” My voice broke. “And then these last three moons, I hoped—this pathetic part of me always *hoped*—you would return with some grand gesture I couldn’t refute.”

“I will do that and more,” Nessin said, his voice as sharp as glass. “I am trying now, but there are going to be a lot of hard truths I must share. Tell me what you want, and I will do it or explain it, Sersa.”

I laughed—a sound that was filled with all the bitterness in the world.

“You know the worst part? The worst part is that I *should* hate you. Truly hate you to pieces with everything I have.”

And now I wanted Nessin more than ever.

His protectiveness.

His scheming.

His possessiveness while speaking of Roarke.

All of it did me in.

“And do you—hate me, Sersa?” Nessin rose from the coffee table and stared me down, definitely fueled by the thoughts I refused to acknowledge.

“*Move.*”

“Not unless you admit what you were thinking,” he said, desperate now. “I feel it, hear it in your head, when you look at me.”

“Yeah? That’s because my head is fucked up, thanks to you.”

“Hit me all you want. Yell at me. Take everything out on me. Sit in silence if you must. Anything. I don’t care so long as you *stay.*” The pleading in his voice revealed emotions that were deep enough to break me worse than I already was. “I have been waiting for what feels like an eternity to say all this, love. Look at me.”

“No. Not when everything was a lie.”

“Everything and *nothing* was a lie, and after today—after seeing you lying there with that blade in your hand...”

Images blocked my sight, and I thought my black magic had returned until I saw a second glimpse into his mind.

Shadows swathed Nessin beside the moonlit balcony in my bedroom back home while I slept soundly. He kept his distance as he beckoned an orb from my chest. It landed in his bare, bleeding palm—a thin cut drawn across it.

“*Cría naam,*” he said in the memory.

As I snapped my head up, white eyes ran straight through me.

The words *meant* ‘heart and soul’ in the old tongue.

“When did you visit me? What did you do to my soul?”

“Heart and soul,” he repeated softly. “I vowed that I was yours so no daemons would come after you, and Soulreapers couldn’t touch your soul.”

“Do you mean you *claimed* me?” I shook my head. “Why would you do that to my soul then return it?”

Nessin looked the slightest bit ashamed. “It was the only way to ward off the royal Soulreapers. Devlin can track souls and recognize ones that have been re-embodied, and he isn’t the only one. He never forgets the scent of a soul either. Although the mark wouldn’t have prevented the reapers from thieving yours, it would have brought them instant true death. It was my way of showing the Old King how serious I was about *you*. Deadly. I still am and will be. Always.”

Biting my chapped lip, I tasted blood. It was all I could do to keep myself rooted—and to believe this *was* reality.

“You marked my soul, took me as your wife, *chose* me—and then refused to return the shard before casting me aside like an exile? Telling everyone I’m mad?”

“I never once called you mad.” His eyes fired in caution, a warning that he would not be accused of allying himself with his enemies. “The Gilders learned you slayed the king and ran with it. I *couldn’t* return the soul shard the day I sent you away because it has latched onto me somehow. It’s as if the shard has become *one* with me. I can’t have Devlin try to retrieve it without risking his life after I marked your soul either.”

“What about a Sluagh?”

“It was the first thing Bardca recommended. No luck though.” Nessin shook his head. “I did not mean to make you feel like an exile, Sersa. I could have visited Nos Nua, but not without endangering the groundwork I’ve been laying so that you and I—*we*—can live without fear. Out in the open. Together. I simply did not have the capacity to keep you safe beside me.”

“Do you truly believe I can’t protect myself?” I said.

But today proved...I *couldn’t*. Not from Jestin.

“Of course I don’t believe that. I left you alone, didn’t I?”

Apart from the Sluagh and the horn around my neck that literally *summoned* Nessin’s army, that was true. It still didn’t justify his flawed thinking.

“Let’s get one thing straight. You still underestimated me—the woman who *killed* your brother and father for *you*, Nessin. You chose wrong.”

“I did. And I fucking hate myself for believing you were safer without me.” Nessin’s chest expanded in the deepest of breaths. “Ultimately, it’s your decision whether you want to give me a second chance to repair things, but everything I did *was* an illusion. Nothing is real except for us. Your mind is not the only thing that betrays you. Your body—the way it reacts in my presence. I felt your heart race as soon as you saw me earlier.”

He stood only a few inches away, dying to burn through that distance.

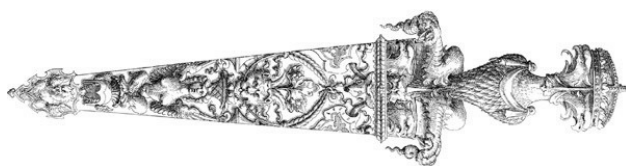
Believing him so easily would make me a complete and utter fool.

But I... I wanted so much right now. To pretend my reality hadn’t been a living hell without him. To pretend Nessin and I stood on solid ground instead of ice. To keep living in the beautiful, fabricated images that helped me get through the worst of days.

Nessin flexed his fingers as he watched me, clearly driven mad by my thoughts.

“I will respect whatever your decision is,” he continued in his rasped voice, “but I cannot—*will not*—be away from you again, Sersa.”

Sersa



NESSIN WAS RIGHT, OF COURSE.

His proximity hummed inside me, my mind subconsciously *aware* of him at all times. Equal measures of desire and restraint marked his rigid stance. Yet I knew I was safe here with him. In charge of whatever did or didn't happen between us. He'd never try to convince me by using his body, his touch, his kiss.

No matter how easily those things *could* convince me to bare all for the Daemon King.

He'd always asked my permission before he touched me in the past. If what he did to me was okay. But I wanted to know what *he* wanted. I almost wished now of all times he wouldn't be so respectful, wished he would shove me against a wall and show me just how much he regretted his words. Actions. Everything.

That was undoubtedly a reckless wish on my flawed brain's part.

"I will do whatever you want me to," Nessin said in my ear. "But you know what I want. You are a need, Sersa. The blood in my veins. The air in my lungs. The soul I have been missing for centuries."

Gods.

My stomach flipped at how much I wanted that too, but my heart burned from all the deception. The lies about my father didn't hold a *candle* to what

bothered me the most.

It was no longer about Nessin refusing to give me back the shard either.

What bothered me most was the way he'd ended things—illusion or not—and that my memory wasn't whole.

He'd let me live in my head for moons.

If I knew one thing, it was that becoming dependent on your fantasies made a bleak reality that much more difficult to face when the glittering mirage turned to dust. When you were forced to see what remained. My fabrications both altered and damaged my view of the real world.

I wasn't unaware of what remained in their place exactly. I simply hadn't wanted to *live* in that reality without Nessin.

I closed my eyes, trying to fend off the potent ache awakening inside me for him.

"I swear." Nessin grabbed my wrist and pressed my palm to his chest. His warmth seeped into my fingertips. "*Cría naam*, Sersa. I have lied endlessly. Except for this. I want you to believe me more than I want to be alive," he said with shallow breaths. "Living in any world where you loathe me is not living."

"I loathe you, Nessin," I said, palm above his heartbeat. Finally, I raised my eyes. "Yet you're still breathing."

I didn't know if my mind or heart, maybe both, told my body to act. Or if my body responded of its own accord. But by the time I threw myself at Sin, his lips were claiming mine as he'd claimed my soul.

I wanted him to claim me. Have me. Take me.

Pushing down all my other questions, I focused on what I *wanted* right now—and what I wanted was to lose myself in Sin, the maze of secrets that he was.

Only then did he take this as permission to touch me elsewhere. His feverish hands squeezed my waist, sliding to my lower back while the other cupped my jaw. I tangled my hands in his silk hair, and Sin melded our bodies against one another. Every hard plane of his against every curve of mine. He lifted me with a possessive grip, cupping my rear as he carried me to the desk across the room.

"This *is* mine," he said, lowering me onto the desk.

Desire pulsed between my legs.

As I slid my hand under his waistband and gripped him, he growled in my mouth and had to stop kissing me for an intake of breath.

And I almost pulled back because of what I felt.

To say I hadn't memorized Sin's cock would have been a vast lie. If anything, my retentiveness would lead to my ruin. I'd replayed the moment we'd lain together too many times to count, grasping at each second, all while hoping I *wouldn't* remember every detail.

But *this*.

My brow furrowed as I slowly opened my eyes and looked down, realizing we'd stopped kissing. Sin was watching me, his hands now flat on the desk, caging in my hips. He leaned forward so our eyes were almost level, and that daemoniac stare *screamed* of his readiness to make me his over and over.

I couldn't hold back my question if I tried. "Can Colossi shift *specific* parts of their bodies?"

Sin chuckled. "Yes, love."

I inhaled sharply and thought I might choke on it. The breath.

Well, him too, evidently.

Heat crept up my neck, into my cheeks. "Anything else I should know?"

He smirked. "Colossi can shift marginally smaller."

"And before was your—uh, *its* normal size. Right?" I squeaked.

Sin ran his tongue along his back teeth. Still smirking. "No, love." His gaze flicked down to my hand. "This is. Hence why I said we can also shift *smaller*."

When I tried to swallow, a pitiful whimper cut it off.

"Oh."

"You were a maiden, Sersa." A long finger tipped my chin up to look at him. "Of course I adjusted for you."

"Adjusted." My voice cracked the word right in half. "You didn't know I was."

I distinctly remembered his shock.

His eyebrow raised, waiting for me to catch up.

"Ah. Then you did know because *of course* you knew. We courted."

"I *believed* you still were. We were only apart about a moon before we wed. Although you had a few prospects vying for you—chieftains of neighboring clans, no less. Regardless, I thought it was a good idea for our first time together."

That was an understatement.

I laughed into my bandaged hand, fighting the urge to gawk. "You're

lying. I saw your...*situation* on our honeymoon. In the hot springs.”

He'd been well beyond average before. *That* was borderline not normal. This—I was as good as dead. Likewise, the ladies of my clan would've died to hear this. I didn't know if they'd believe it because *I* barely did.

Sin was careful with his horns as he hung his head, failing completely to hide his laughter now. He seductively grazed his teeth along my collarbone.

Thank gods those horns extended backward rather than forward. Pleasure shot right between my legs every time he used his teeth on me.

“I knew you couldn't resist checking me out, so I gave you a nice enough show, I'd say. But I didn't want to scare you, which I obviously am now.”

“I'm not scared. Shocked? Yes.” Had I known before? Gods. This was too much. “Gods-damned Colossi.”

“It isn't the easiest body part to shift without immense focus, and I'd prefer to direct all my focus to *you*, but I will.”

“Did you—on the ship to Nos Nua?” I asked.

“Mm, no.” Sin chuckled again. “You took every *fucking* inch of me, love.”

Smug arse.

The flush in my cheeks deepened to crimson.

“What?” He smiled seductively. “Can you not handle me talking filthy to you, Sersa?”

“I'm not sure I can handle anything about you,” I said, readjusting my grip on the smooth skin of his cock. I tilted my head slightly, still not sure *how* but imagining it, nonetheless. “Good gods, Sin.”

Whatever our issues, surely we can work them out, I thought deliriously.

“Do you want me to shift?” He didn't sound convinced *he* wanted to when his voice broke with pleasure.

I whimpered when Sin took my nipple between his teeth through the silk. My back arched for him, but he quickly straightened to tantalize my lips instead.

“Sersa, shall I?”

I wanted to feel him this way. Thank gods he was hard already because more? No.

“If I didn't make myself clear, I am done with deceptions. Even...an odd one.”

“Then we will take it slow,” he whispered.

Sin nipped at my shoulder as he gripped my thigh hard, his body

stiffening with each stroke I made. Seeing him this way made me feral too. I squeezed my legs around his hips, seeking whatever friction I could. Descending my body, he kissed every spot he bit and pushed my flimsy straps down to free my breasts until the top pooled at my waist.

He fondled the golden horn for a moment then draped it over my shoulder, letting the chain dangle against my spine.

“Thank you for not pitching this into the Wraithsea, love.”

“There’s still time.”

Sin leaned forward to capture my lips with his, deepening the unbearable pressure between my legs. He released my breast from his teeth, forcing me to pull my hand out from his pants. His hair was a mess from fingers I hadn’t realized I was raking through it.

I hated that the stupid saying was true.

Absence makes the heart grow fonder.

In our case, it was all lust, no heart.

I hadn’t permitted myself a moment to process his explanation because I suddenly didn’t *care* why he’d done what he had. All I’d done at the parish was think.

I’d given him my soul out of love. To save him because a world without him was unthinkable.

My vision tunneled, showing only him and me visible together at the end. My soul be damned. If I had the Daemon King, what need was there for a soul?

Surely, that was my body persuading my mind to believe everything was fine between us.

Pausing, he asked, “Do you want this?”

“Yes!”

Smiling, Sin bit the tips of his glove, the first followed by the second, and whipped them somewhere across the room. A ring I’d never seen before adorned his pinky and another right beside it.

But the firelight from the hearth offered me another distraction as it illuminated his face, highlighting the dark circles beneath his eyes. Light danced along the length of his marbled horns too, calling attention to them.

Sin took a step back to watch my reaction as he ran his bare fingers up my calf and thigh. I traced the trail of hair leading into his unbuttoned pants, but he pinned both my hands behind my back blindingly fast.

My skin tingled as he slid the short nightdress upward to reveal all of me.

Noting my nakedness beneath, he released a satisfied yet tortured sound.

“Are you not allowing me the use of my hands tonight?” I asked.

“I enjoy restraining you.”

I squirmed. “You can restrain me when you’re undressed.”

Sin tsked.

More than anything, I wished I’d shoved his pants down his hips already. I didn’t desire his fingers, despite their also freakish length. Still, when he teased the part where my thighs usually touched, my legs widened submissively. He leaned forward and parted my lips for his tongue. I bit him in return.

He smiled, loving it, loving everything I did.

I loved the things he did to me even more.

Sin adjusted the hand between my thighs, thumb resting against my center. “I knew how badly you wanted me, Sersa, but not *this* badly.”

I was dripping.

He slid a finger inside me, curling it forward as if beckoning the gasp that tumbled out of me. The way he stretched me elicited a heady feeling, and when he created the perfect sensation and pressure on an outward stroke, I matched him and rocked my hips.

“Always so tight for me, love.” Sin brushed his lips against my cheek. “How ever did I fit the last time?”

“From my memory, only about half did.”

He threw his head back with an unrestrained laugh. Pressing his fingers deeper, he purred, “You certain you want all of me tonight?”

Gods. He was right. I didn’t want the painful sensation that accompanied the first time we’d lain together, the first few minutes at least. But I knew we’d overcome it together, that I wanted to overcome it just to feel him again.

I wanted Sin.

I *needed* him.

“I’ll make sure you’re ready for me.” He wore a questioning look. “Sersa, you know we don’t have to either.”

“Shut up.”

Sin continued to plunge his slick fingers in and out of me as his thumb circled the bundle of nerves. “What a little daemoness you are these days.”

“Tell me it really was all a lie, Sin. Tell me she was never your wife. Tell me you only thought of me.”

“I promise I only thought of you.” But he pulled back, fingers pausing.

“Can I still call you my wife?”

I didn’t know the answer to that. To a lot of questions.

Breaking free of his hands, I pulled him against me. “Talk later.”

He worked me harder, and the contrast of cold metal rings grazing my center made me shiver as I met each of his movements with a roll of my hips.

“I need more, Nessin. *More. Please,*” I begged.

“Come for me first.”

The peak was in reach. So soon. Too soon.

“Let go,” he demanded. “One will not be enough tonight. I won’t be satisfied if you come for me just once, love. Once on my fingers. Once on my tongue. And you can guess the last.”

Leaning back on my elbows, I widened my legs and closed my eyes, yielding to the pleasure, allowing my body to take over. I kneaded my breast, teasing my nipple.

“*Fuck, Sersa.*”

Not a minute later, I shattered around his fingers. Sin savored the feeling of me tensing, easing me down from the high with gentle caresses.

As he halted, the moment slowed too, and my labored breaths joined the moans. Sin brought his fingers to his lips and sucked them clean.

“*One.*”

“Pants,” I said, my head too hazy for full sentences.

He was still fully dressed, though disheveled. As he lowered to his knees, he yanked my hips toward the desk’s edge with zero gentleness, cupping my backside. Our eyes locked before mine flicked to his horns. His scars. I traced every slash with my gaze as if touching them with my fingertips. Sin was both utterly beautiful and menacing. The Daemon King was every decadent thing I’d ever wanted, and both of us were powerless to look away.

Part of me despised him for breaking us. Another part only cared about my unmet needs. This moment. Us reunited.

Slowing my breaths, I swept Sin’s white hair back to reveal eyes tinted gold from the fire. “When you refused me the last night of our honeymoon, I swore I wouldn’t give you any part of me until you were on your knees—begging *me.*”

That notorious smirk played at his scarred lips as he bit my thigh. “Then let me beg you, love. Let me touch you. Let me have you.”

I licked my lips and nodded.

“So you know, I would kneel before you any day, any night, whenever

you ask.” He flattened a hand on my belly in silent instruction to lie all the way back on the desk. “I wish I were used to going down on you with horns by now, but alas, we’ve been apart too long. I’ll need to practice morning and night.”

I giggled, imagining the positions that might not work with those glorious horns.

Sin’s hand pinned me harder as a prelude to his lips brushing the soft skin of my inner thighs. Then a smirk curled one end of his lips before he propped my legs over his shoulders and dove between them.

All patience gone, he didn’t hesitate to give me the pleasure we both sought—him the one to give, craving his name on my lips as he always did, and me, so eager to receive.

My hips twitched as Sin cupped my rear harder, pulling me deeper into his mouth. Every subsequent flick of his tongue made me shiver, my muscles alternating between tightening and releasing. He raised the small of my back off the desk.

I wouldn’t have protested the use of his fingers, but *gods*, the daemon didn’t need them. I cried out, unable to contain myself as he devoured my flesh until I gasped and moaned against the table. An irrepressible shiver rolled down my entire body.

“Nessin!”

I lost all sense.

“Two.” Finally, with a kiss on both thighs, Sin straightened before me. “You taste just as I remember, love. Fucking divine. Morning and night,” he repeated.

It took me a moment to recover. He watched maniacally, gripping my thighs as I writhed against the desk in pleasure. I wasn’t sure whether I could take more.

But pure instinct took over.

Sitting up, I fumbled with Sin’s waistband, shoving the hem of his shirt out of my way to yank down his pants. His desire heightened mine, his body shaking as he let me take control, positioning him between my thighs. Looking down, I swallowed. Too much of him and not enough of me.

“You’re holding your breath, love.”

“Right.” With a heavy exhale, I kissed Sin softly.

“I want to be inside you, Sersa. We *can* wait though.” His groan set me afire. “Fuck, I don’t want to wait. Do you?”

“Stop talking.”

Still gripping him, I slid my hips forward. The length was impressive, more or less the same, but the thickness. *Gods*. I squeezed his arm to ground myself, feeling nothing but him pressing into me. Sin was even more satiating than I remembered, summoning feelings and pale colors only my daemon could.

Every inch made my breath hitch.

My whimper shattered the silence, halting Sin instantly. Our foreheads touched as we shared breaths.

“Sersa?”

Biting my lip, I started to form a lie that I immediately swallowed. It was a strange sensation, foreign still. I, too, wished I’d gotten used to Sin by now. But it was time lost.

“We can stop—”

“*Stop* saying that,” I said. “I’ve thought about you every night.”

Sin nodded, planting a tender kiss on my lips.

Then he moved, unable to contain himself when my hips prompted him with thrusts to match, and he buried his face in my hair.

It took all of seconds for me to want more. Harder. Deeper.

“Yes, Nessin. *Yes*.”

I closed my eyes.

“Call me your daemon.”

“Hush, Your Darkness.”

Sin chuckled. “That will do.”

When I tore his shirt down his muscular shoulders, he grinned and kissed my cheek. The desk screeched against the floor with each thrust, and I lost the ability to keep quiet as his chest rumbled in matched pleasure.

“*Gods, I love you*,” Sin whispered beside my ear.

Hands halting with his shirt stuck around his biceps, I tensed all over. My eyes snapped open to focus on the door straight ahead beside the fireplace. Whereas I wanted to feel his body again, my *feelings* were a whole other mess entirely.

Love.

His certainty he’d never stopped loving me made me stiffen because I had convinced myself he’d acted purely out of *never* having loved me. At least, when I wasn’t fantasizing.

Sin trailed kisses back down my neck, fisting my hair behind me. His

body stiffened, his peak so close.

Did *I* love Sin still? My anger clouded me impossibly. Our history—all unknown—made deciphering it that much more difficult.

What if I wanted him because of desire alone?

What was I doing?

“*Nessin,*” I gasped, despite the familiar, welcome feeling of this moment and the ferocity with which I’d craved him for moons now.

Desire and fury were a dangerous combination.

I forced the words out of my mouth, fully aware of how badly I wanted him to stay right where he was.

“*Stop, Sin.*”

He tensed, hands dropping abruptly.

The absence of him reached into the traumatized part of me that’d woken up in the middle of the night one too many times, sobbing into my hand so the Druids wouldn’t hear me.

I wanted to pull Sin back to me when he straightened, no longer accommodating my height as his fingers slid off the desk. He withdrew from my space. His breathing evened, but his mouth hung halfway open in question. Confusion knotted Sin’s brow as he raked his ringed hand through his hair.

“Are you okay? Did I hurt you?”

Refocusing, I shook my head and dropped my eyes. “No, I’m fine.”

Maybe I understood Sin’s reasoning—his explanation thus far—but it didn’t change the fact that so much between us was still so very wrong.

I *did* need time to process everything.

“I can’t—do this. Not tonight.”

Nodding, his throat bobbed in a swallow. “I understand. We can rest. Or I’ll get us some food. I meant what I said. We don’t have to do anything. Forgive me if I read things wrong.”

“*No, Sin.*” I buried my face in my hands. “You didn’t read anything wrong.”

Gods. What I was about to say couldn’t be undone. But what he’d done—destroying us—also couldn’t be undone.

Could it?

I dropped my hands and looked up. “What I’m saying is I don’t know if I love you anymore. Maybe you never loved me either since you were completely fine with deceiving me for so long.”

“*Completely fine?*” Sin echoed.

“Either way, I can’t lead you on like this. You may have broken me, but I don’t want to hurt you. I can’t lie about how I’m feeling.”

Sin’s eyes darkened. His teeth visibly clenched, but then his expression went from hardened to confused to almost...

Hilarity?

“You don’t *know* if you love me anymore?” Head tilted, he snickered. Again, all daemon. No heart. “Do you forget I am a Mindblood? Because your thoughts say completely otherwise.”

“You can hear my thoughts. You can’t understand how I *feel*, and I think you mean my body says differently.”

Sin un-cocked his head and took another alarmingly rigid step back. He shoved himself in his pants and yanked them up, while I tried not to focus on his persistent hardness, begging me to finish on him.

His always unreadable emotions were tearing straight past the mask he wore now.

“Must I remind you of what I hear every time we’re around one another? Do you forget I hear your thoughts with stunning clarity?” He gestured between us. “*This* is no simple attraction. The word ‘love’ does us zero justice, Sersa. *Zero*. Even if you don’t want to admit it,” he said, a hard edge to his voice.

I recognized a piece of Sin that also bore the wounds my words inflicted. He could read my thoughts, but I was forced to rely on the infrequent cracks in his unsolvable façade.

“Not to mention, your feelings for me remained in the absence of your memories. You still love me in a way, and whatever way that is, it can grow back into what it was.”

“Listen to what you just said! You *stole* my gods-damned memories. Who in their right mind does that?”

“I never claimed to be in my right mind,” he said gravely.

“It’s ridiculous you think things can return to normal before I have them back. Even then—”

“I *will* fix us.”

“To love someone, you must trust them.” My voice shook as I blinked up at Sin. “I mean, who’s to say you don’t do this again—send me to some remote isle and let me rot away while you visit your harem every night or whatever? Do you *know* the pain I’ve been in? Can you even imagine what

it's been like, thinking everything was real, then learning nothing was?"

"You know I do not have a harem," Sin said, sharp yet even. "Nor will I ever, Sersa. I am yours. Only yours. I have never and will never break my vows to you. *Ever.*"

"Is lying not breaking a vow?"

His nostrils flared. "I know you were—*are* in pain, and I regret my actions more than you will ever know."

"Yes, but *you* have not been destroying yourself to accept that things were the way I believed they were. *Perception*, Nessin. The point is, my brain has come up with all these scenarios of what you've been doing, and I can't simply turn them off after a few pretty words."

"Us courting before—you consider the truth to be pretty words?" Sin asked. "We were in love, Sersa."

Keyword: were.

"What I'm saying is that I don't trust you fully, Nessin. Not after what you did. So for you to insist I love you"—I shook my head—"I question whether you know what love is."

The wound grew deeper, wider. Fury turned to dismay before he shuttered his expression completely.

"Trust can be rebuilt." He spoke so low, I wondered if he feared his voice trembling.

"It can. But right now, I don't know how. I don't see the way, Sin."

"Then let us find it together."

I slid off the desk until my feet touched the ground. But I had to lean on it when all the blood rushed toward my toes. Half my nightdress fell to mid-thigh. The other half got stuck near my hip. When Sin's jaw firmed and his eyes twitched toward my bare skin, I shuffled hastily to lower it.

Realizing this *entire* conversation ensued while I was topless, I bit my lip and lifted the front to slide my arms through the straps. Though Sin had ruined us, I didn't want to torture the man.

But I'd shared my truth.

Sin deserved to know where I stood. I couldn't lead him on. Not when I still cared deeply for him, despite everything.

Even if—maybe—he hadn't earned that care.

He kept his gaze on the floor, darting back and forth repeatedly as if searching for answers.

Holding my breath, I started for the door. Passing him, I tried not to fall

apart completely and turn around so I could take from him what I wanted.

As I reached for the doorknob, the Daemon King's voice strengthened once more.

“Soullander law says that for two to be bound, *neither* may be bound to another. Your soul shard binds me to you in all ways, meaning you are Daemon Queen. We were never unbound, and it's more than the union we entered. The gods ordained us to be together.”

Ordain?

That was a little dramatic.

My shaking hand rattled the doorknob. I failed to steady it, making an even louder noise as I fumbled around. Tears I didn't want Sin to see burned my eyes, but I glanced over my shoulder anyway.

“The gods may ordain whatever they wish. It's always our choice what happens in the end. And you? You had the choice not to lie to me. Not to put on some charade instead of working through things together. You chose. I'm no more your queen or wife now than I ever was—damn what you or the gods say. I want you, but I don't know in what way right now, Sin.”

SIN



IT ONLY TOOK FOUR BREATHS FOR THE BLIND RAGE TO DOMINATE ME completely. Sersa was far enough, and my short fuse was no longer than four inhales, four exhales.

One breath.

The wardrobe nearest me crashed against the wall by the fireplace. Splinters of wood scattered the floor, striking the starting chord for my violent song of rage.

Two breaths.

A kick to the coffee table sent the leather armchair and settee screeching across the floors, taking out a credenza with it.

Three breaths.

I could not be certain how, but the bed was suddenly collapsing in on itself as the pillows erupted in feathers.

Four.

Fists clenching and unclenching, I towered over the desk, noting the indentations I'd left from clawing at it. No sooner than I gripped its sturdy legs and whipped it at the wall did the remorse set in.

I stood amongst the ruins of my chambers—the rooms that contained far

too many tormenting images of Sersa to hide from them all. Like a translucent phantom, I watched her move from one space to the next, her expressions changing, shifting, sometimes staring right at me, other times pretending not to be.

Hallucinations, then.

Fucking brilliant.

In destroying the furniture, I'd destroyed reminders of our honeymoon. The same as I'd destroyed *her* memories of *us*.

My chest heaved as I looked upon scatterings of smashed glass. Splintered wood. Feathers. I hadn't spared even the desk upon which I'd devoured and taken Sersa at her insistence for the first time in—

Three.

Fucking.

Moons.

My first sick thought was that I needed to get it repaired because when that infuriating woman returned to tell me she hadn't meant *it*—the lie she'd not only told me but also herself—I would have her on that desk repeatedly. Until I left it completely unsalvageable.

Of course, I had agonized endlessly over whether Sersa would forgive me. Yet never in a million years had I imagined a world where she claimed she didn't *love* me.

Sersa was gone, and in her wake, I'd become a storm. It was shameful. Although the servants were gone and no one else would question their king, this was clear as fucking day. Sersa Scáth had happened. She could say whatever she wanted though.

That woman was a Drumghoul.

It was no coincidence she'd returned, and I'd gone haywire. In truth, I had been haywire for weeks now. Moons, more like.

This was a new level.

I looked around before I dropped my chin to my chest and pinched the bridge of my nose. Naturally, the raging headache had stopped in her presence, only to resume as soon as she left. Worse than before, it was doubtful I'd make much progress in clearing away the wreckage.

"Shit."

None of this was her fault—not my behavior, my claims, my *explosion* following her absence. Nor did I blame her for the relapse. This was all me, all of it my fault—namely her confused sentiments toward me.

Even if I didn't believe Sersa for a godsdamn second.

My body trembled from the very center of my core as sweat broke out on my forehead. I glimpsed myself in the mirror above the hearth—one of few things I hadn't trashed in my fury—and noted the dark blue circles under my eyes.

Trashing the furniture was not enough. I felt insatiable, and I only knew two fixes.

One had left the room.

The second... It was fail-safe.

All willpower gone, I stormed into the bathing room and gripped the doorway. I was godsdamn pathetic to believe I might resist before it was too late. It already *was* too late.

Taking a deep breath, my gaze locked on the vanity across the room near the enormous stained-glass window. My fingers reflexively drummed against my thigh.

No.

I couldn't.

The vanity throbbed and pulsed, calling my attention like a siren.

Gritting my teeth, I slammed my palm into the stone archway and turned to my shower.

Ignoring the craving, I twisted on the water—the hottest it would go—and stripped off my disheveled clothes. I let the scorching stream cascade between my shoulder blades and down my spine. One fist on the wall, I stroked myself with the other, imagining my wife's body. Her soft, lavender scent clinging to me. The taste of her had stayed on my tongue. The feel. Her little laughs every time I earned a smile from those rosebud lips. Her round breasts. The feeling of her cunt tightening around me. She'd been so close.

I replayed every touch up until those words.

I don't know if I love you anymore.

Maybe you never loved me either.

Shaking my head, water dribbled down my face. I growled under my breath and only worked myself harder, picturing Sersa. My own soul was trying to convince me she didn't love me—both laughable and maddening.

I screwed my eyes shut and continued the motions she'd eagerly made. My hand was more than double the size of hers, my grip better, and yet couldn't compare. But I needed an escape—a temporary relief.

The tighter my body wound, the harder my other hand dug into the stone.

Cracks in the surface formed as I finished with a grunt and Sersa's name distorted by a roar.

Waiting for my breaths to level out, I recognized *it* though.

My appetite persisted.

I tried to focus on the sweltering water pouring onto me, though I hardly noticed the heat. I wanted it to scald me. Perhaps it could burn the craving out of me.

Sweat broke out on my forehead instead, and my insides rattled.

I was worse—more reliant than I believed. Not more than twelve bells had passed. And had I been any worse off that morning, I wouldn't have reached the shore in time.

Jestin could have captured Sersa easily. Which posed a question.

Why hadn't he?

Trembling, I bowed my head to the stone and closed my eyes. Truthfully, I'd needed Sersa to stay and distract me. Not her body but her *presence*. With that off the table, I refocused on what I had.

Rudimentary things like counting helped.

For how long?

"One."

Yes. Only one won't hurt, answered a greedy voice inside me.

"Two," I said, louder to drown it out.

Two is better. Yes, two.

"Three."

What's the difference between one and three?

The craving tugged at my fingertips, clawing up my forearms like the Sluagh's talons responsible for my mutilation.

If I didn't obey what it wanted—what *I* wanted equally—it'd force me to do it.

Yes.

With a growl, I slapped the wall again, using the momentum to propel myself out of the shower. Flickering vision. Wet feet.

Then the vanity stood before me, its edges out-of-focus.

Feverish and possessed now, I rummaged through the drawer for the stash beneath a fresh stack of towels. I'd never touched them before, giving Draea no reason to replace them with fresh ones.

The ampoules were there. Full. Untouched.

"Thank fuck."

With a heavy exhale, I slid down the vanity onto the floor. It had to be cold on my bare ass and balls because the hair on my thighs stood on end. Shaking fingers rolled the ampoule, and although I recognized them as *my* fingers, my senses were noticeably jacked-up when I wasn't even high.

Yet.

Shimmering souls imprisoned within the glass glowed like a hundred will-o'-wisps, urging me to follow them into ecstasy.

I could resist.

No, you can't.

I didn't have to do this.

Yes, you do.

I do.

The disembodied souls eddied round and round.

I'd initially relapsed under the guise of hope that they might restore me. Now though? The undying craving—my unquenchable appetite—always coerced me to seek this sustenance I somehow believed would absolve me of all pain, weakness, inability.

In the moments after I consumed, I felt whole. The promise of respite was enough, no matter how transitory, and it always was. Always driving me toward the next.

The next.

The next.

Until no end existed in sight.

Day and night, they were the one thing capable of keeping my mind off Sersa. I wanted *all* the souls.

Fuck it.

I unscrewed the cap and tipped my head backward, swallowing one after another after another, so many compressed into the tiny ampoule. My blood sensed every single one. I licked my lips, relishing the calming sensation that settled into me. My breaths grew farther apart, and a cloud of haze eased me into satiation. Water droplets raced down my face, neck, and chest, but they slowed as the souls hit my empty gut.

Numbness started in my fingertips. It felt so good to be numb.

Yet I fished around the bottom of the drawer for another ampoule.

A third. A fourth...

Until my surroundings glowed like the translucent orbs behind the glass.

Until the room itself *became* iridescent hues.

Until I was the numbest I'd been in a long time. I blinked at the ceiling, watching it swirl around me as I laughed and laughed.

Minutes or bells later perhaps, I jerked alert. I hadn't realized I'd passed out at all.

A single touch yanked me back down from the ceiling.

"Let's get you up."

Thane's pinched expression came into view briefly. The walls closed in then, and a black void swallowed him. When he reappeared, his dark brow crumpled with concern. He reeked of mead and smoke—of the Gilder revels that took over the Eye as the end of the season neared. He wore a flashy blue suit, and he'd actually styled the brown curls on top of his head tonight.

"Dev, can you get him some clothes?" Thane called over his shoulder, hunched over me. "Sin, we've been over this. The excess is not going to fix you."

Somehow, I reached my feet. *"It will."*

Devlin stormed toward us. He stepped around puddles on the floor, and I registered his hand not a second before it struck me across the cheek.

"I'm done with this!"

His palm throttled me awake, the impact speeding up all other surrounding movements. The room tipped sideways before righting itself, and the running shower behind my brother came into focus first.

I licked my lip. Tasted blood.

Dev gripped my jaw and forced me to look at him. His hair, tousled from sleep, stood up in places. "You *promised* you would not do this anymore. So you've lost your blood. You know what you could lose next? Your life! You are alive. Sersa is alive. And Jest will be dead in a matter of weeks. I will not lose my last brother, but lose you I will if you do not *get. It. Together.*"

"Sersa—"

"What—she needs some godsdamn time? What did you expect after everything? Your wife murdered our father for *you*. Then you told her you were remarrying. However little she managed to heal, you brought it all crashing down tonight. Irrespective, it's not an excuse for you to slip back into old habits, and I won't make excuses for you anymore. I don't give a damn if you're king. You are not our mother. You will not cope or try to heal yourself how she did—or whatever in Dúm's name you believe you're accomplishing. Do you understand me? Say you understand."

Devlin hardly ever looked at me with disappointment. Nor did he

frequently speak to me in the tone of an older brother who'd been forced into the role of father too young.

Yet I felt the intensity of his reprimand like a second slap.

My suddenly chattering teeth alerted me that my senses were returning. Thane went to drape a robe around me but struggled, as he was also supporting all my weight. I focused on standing.

The room darkened around me once more.

Dev shook me. "Answer me!"

"F-Fine," I agreed. "I'll...stop."

"Stop what?"

"Stop—"

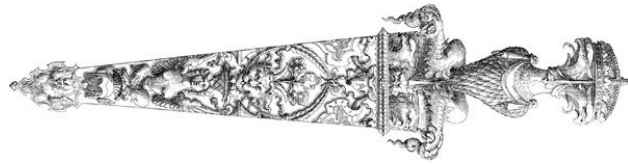
The rest of it wouldn't come. Devlin would hold me to my word, and that was reason alone to tell him the truth.

Piss off. It's been this long, what's another backslide?

"I will stop consuming souls," I said.

Devlin sighed. "I don't believe you. But you are my brother, and I want to." He gripped the back of my neck firmer still and stared into my eyes. Up close, I failed to bring him into focus. "We'll talk in the morning after you sleep this off. Jest isn't going to drop dead on his own. You wanted to be king, brother. So act like one."

Serena



AN OVEREXCITED KNOCK ECHOED THROUGH MY ROOMS THE NEXT MORNING, officially concluding my nightlong staring contest with the doors across from my bed.

Just when I started to wonder how long I could sit here, ignore it, pretend I was anywhere else but in this room, the knocking grew sharper, each rap insistent I answer.

Undoubtedly, the Daemon King stood outside. But it was unlike him not to storm in here, which led me to ponder how long I had until he broke down the door.

After I fled Nessin's—*our*—chambers last night, the red magic refused to disperse. Instead, it had lurked in the corridors like eels at the bottom of the sea. Lacking the mental strength to shoo it away, I'd hastily followed Innes to a vacant room, shut the door on the tendrils, and flopped face-first on a settee near the fire until Ail found me.

He barely got out a greeting before I started venting and pacing. Rattling off my frustrations. Detailing every minute of our honeymoon. Picking apart events and moments to see if any meaning might have existed behind Nessin's words and actions.

I hadn't slowed to ask Ailerby about his conversation with Ciel either. I *couldn't* because I couldn't stop obsessing over every little detail.

The history I spoke so little of at the parish enraptured Ail at first, but before long, he'd fallen asleep on me.

We have more history than you know—than you remember.

Every gods-damned thing I felt for Nessin on our honeymoon—no, the first day he brought me to his apartment—suddenly made sense. Had I fallen for him so pathetically quick because it was there already?

All the feelings.

The pastel colors I tried to run from.

The unending desire—*need*—for him.

Though I'd asked for time to process it, there really was no point in stewing. I had questions, sure, but I doubted I'd find answers in my own head.

As I rose from the bed, a surprised sound cut through me. Between my legs was a lovely reminder of Nessin, and along with it, the taunting images of his *situation*. Either I'd been too dazed and strung out on adrenaline to feel this after our first time or the inches he'd hidden really would be the death of me. I gritted my teeth to ward off the annoyance, the minor regret, and—worst of all—the lingering desire.

I stumbled into the lounge connected to the bedroom, noting Ailerby wasn't here, and threw open the door.

“Yes?” I growled.

Not the Daemon King at all.

Laisrés stood across the threshold like prey stalking a predator in a way that reminded me of Nessin. I couldn't be sure which of us was which. His dark, neatly trimmed beard highlighted the contour of his sharp jaw. His angular nose wasn't quite crooked and not as pronounced as Devlin's, but subtler, more like his natural features than as a result of a break. He wore emerald green from head to toe again, with his sleeves rolled up to the elbows. I eyed his tattoos, wondering what they meant.

“Good morning, Sersa!”

“Laisrés,” I replied tightly.

“Don't you look happy to see me?”

“There is nothing to be happy about before tenth bell,” I said, glancing at the clock above the hearth in the lounge.

“Sixth bell nearly on the dot,” he said, beating me to it. “Early bird gets the worm. Or so they say. Have a pleasant night?”

Scowling, I folded my arms over my sweater. “Don't tell me we're

neighbors and I can expect a wake-up call from you at dawn every day.”

“Actually, I am so glad you brought up the location of my accommodations. I’m staying in the room right next to the king’s and let me just say”—he leaned across the threshold and dropped his voice low—“you might as well have granted me a front-row seat last night.”

“Ah.” I tilted my head. “You said you speak crow. They do have fantastic hearing. Is that your magic—eavesdropping?”

“There was no need to eavesdrop. I heard every octave you hit, Sersa Scáth, and I am used to loud noises. *Very loud noises.*”

“Ew,” I said, recoiling. “Why the hell are you here—and who the hell are you exactly?”

“Laisrés Crónan at your ser—well, at Nessin’s service, since you don’t wish to be Daemon Queen. I oversee the Legion of Crows and supplement your husband’s security detail.”

He paused, waiting for something. Unimpressed, I glared at Laisrés until his face twisted up in confusion.

“The Legion of Crows,” he repeated. “How have you never heard of the Legion of Crows? The Mórrígan? I am the goddess’s only child.”

According to Claisin myth, the Mórrígan was the queen of Nevre—a nightmarish domain in the Otherworld. At least, she called herself queen.

“Sure. And I am the—”

My sleep-deprived brain almost replied, *And I am the Daemon Queen.* But since I technically was, it failed to achieve the retort I sought.

“You’re serious,” I said. “Your mother is the goddess of war?”

Phantoms. Fate. Nightmares. Death. Like most deities, the Mórrígan was a goddess of many things.

And *crows* were her symbol.

Laisrés said nothing. Didn’t move. He had a quiet yet flagrant sort of confidence that assured me he really *was* a god.

“And Dúm’s nephew?” I said.

Again, he didn’t answer. Which was an answer.

He was visiting from the Otherworld, then. The main entrance was through Faerie Forest, and that was about all the facts I had straight.

It was too early for this.

“Can I help you with something at *sixth* bell?” I reminded him.

“I’m only getting acquainted with your—personality.”

“Do you mean my *coarse* personality?”

“Mm,” Laisrés said.

“Acquaint yourself later, god.” As I tried to shut the door in his face, it nearly hit me when he kicked it with a sturdy boot. It wavered back and forth on its hinges until a tan hand shot out to steady it.

Laisrés pinned me with his gaze. “*Half god*. Not nearly as impressive.”

“Now’s as good a time as any for me to tell you I despise the gods.”

“That makes two of us some days.” He swept his lustrous hair backward. “For the record, you needn’t call me a god because I won’t call you queen either.”

From our limited interactions, this man seemed a step past brutally honest.

I shifted on the threshold.

“My ma always says the Mórrígan is three in one like the High Triad, and you never know which you’ll get on any given day.”

Laisrés regarded me silently for a moment.

“So...is she a triple goddess?”

Ciel would love to know too—unless he’d already picked Laisrés’s brain.

“Mum certainly has multiple personas,” he replied, eyes crinkling with a fake smile.

“Which name does she answer to, then?” I asked, nudging my chin at him. “My clan prayed to Maris.”

“The very goddess herself.” Laisrés paused calculatingly. “I heard a rumor on the wind, you know. That you’re having *difficulty* with your blood. I know every type of blood to be had if you want to put your time to good use.”

“A rumor. Right.” He’d seen and heard me cuss out the tendrils yesterday. “And you think I need your help?”

“Let’s just say blood comes from the gods. Show me it.”

“Pass.”

Laisrés cocked his head. “Excuse me?”

“I said, I will *pass*.”

“Your loss.” Laisrés shrugged. “But gods do excel at giving advice. People talk to us about all types of shit. Shall we start with your very public quarrel with the king yesterday?”

I scoffed. “Please enlighten me. I have been waiting three moons for a man to explain things so why not you?”

His little smile told me he liked that answer. “Then it seems the issues

stretch beyond the cracks in the surface. Would you care to talk about it over a glass of wine?" Laisrés offered, sounding perfectly level and calm while I felt like a bird with ruffled feathers. "It's fifth bell somewhere—drinking time as they say."

"And *here*, it's sixth bell. Again, I'll pass."

"It seems to me your hesitance to admit you are queen is due to another underlying uncertainty of whether you wish to be with Nessin still." I opened my mouth to protest, but Laisrés added swiftly, "No one would blame you. Not after he took Lady Aislinn as his wife and queen—for appearances or not. Do you feel it's made a mockery of you?"

My eyebrows raised. "I certainly know how you feel about it."

"One last parting advice I will give," he said in a quiet but assured voice. He clasped his hands in front of him as he breached my personal space. "There *is* another way to be sure you and King Nessin belong together."

I glared at him, waiting.

"It's an age-old trick, used even by the gods. Although we're not much for monogamous couplings. You've heard the tales, I'm sure."

"And that is—this mysterious method?"

"If I were you, I might not tell His Darkness," Laisrés said, hesitating to drag out my curiosity, "but taking another lover always assures me that my body, my mind, and my heart are aligned. Kings have countless lovers before they ascend the throne. You ought to experience others too, and sometimes, it takes the second lover to know what you were missing with the first."

I gritted my teeth. "The number of notches on my bedpost is none of your concern."

"Last night it was."

Glaring, I snapped, "You are *definitely* a god—meddling in people's private business. But for the record," I mocked, "Nessin Drumghoul is the only notch I need, thank you."

"At least you took the night to figure out what you want."

I glared harder. Blots of red roses bloomed behind my eyes.

Laisrés knew he'd hit a nerve when my magic wrapped around my wrists. The number of lovers Sin had taken over the years was unfathomable. No, not even years or decades but *centuries*. He was an ancient daemon—so old I'd probably think he was lying if he ever told me. Then again, I always thought he was lying.

Laisrés grinned in satisfaction, so pleased he'd stirred up all my doubts.

“This was an elucidating chat, Sersa. Remember—a *touch* louder for me next time.”

“Mind your own business!” I slammed the door in his face but not before I saw him lick his lips as his gaze moved down my mostly bare legs.



A groan rolled through me when Dúma nudged open the doors to the lounge not two bells later. From the bed—already sloping downward on one side from her weight—I heard her tail thumping loudly against something.

Through the cracked door, I glimpsed Ciel and counted to five.

“Hello, Ciel,” I said with a yawn as he popped his head in.

“Hi. I know you didn’t want to talk yesterday, but I’m here and not taking no for an answer—Daemon Queen or not.”

I rubbed my eyes and stretched my arms overhead, testing my bandaged hand by flexing my fingers.

While my plan involved hiding all day to avoid Nessin, my restless legs needed something to expel the pent-up energy the king had left me with. Rather, our *encounter* had left me with.

“Fine,” I said. “We can take Dúma out together. Let me get dressed.”

“Great.” Ciel smiled nervously as he eased the door shut.

In the daylight, the room’s décor felt harsher, in dire need of new drapes, though preferably not another pair of velvet ones, which were already attracting every black hair Dúma had shed overnight. Depictions of—*big surprise*—Sluagh carved the walls with gilded details, and a ray of light speared the room through the stained-glass clerestory window.

The moons weren’t bright enough today, and with the Dark season ready to descend, soon *everything* would be drowning in darkness.

I rummaged through a trunk to find a change of clothes, but the mirror beside my bed distracted me.

And the marks along my neck.

“Dúm’s teeth,” I hissed, almost dropping the garments.

More like Nessin’s teeth.

Frantically examining the multicolored skin, I recalled where else his teeth had been. When I peeled the front of my sweater and nightdress

forward, I closed my eyes and shook my head at the lovely marks there too.

“No one will see.” I inhaled. Exhaled. And hurriedly changed into fresh breeches, leather boots, and a long-sleeve shirt to hide the evidence.

I pushed open the doors to the lounge after another adjustment to my clothes. Something caught my eye, glinting atop the fireplace mantle—my dainty daggers. I wondered if Nessin had hidden them last night so I couldn’t stab him. Had he dropped them off himself? And why did it further annoy me he *hadn’t* come to me for a second round of beseeching my forgiveness?

With a sigh and a swallow, I faced Ciel.

He looked well-rested, no signs of staying up too late reading on his face, with his black hair gathered into a bun. His light gray shirt was unbuttoned at the neck beneath a royal blue coat with fur lapels, and he’d tucked it into brown breeches.

“Ready—” he started.

Irian opened the door for Ailerby and Draea in the hall with a grumble as if announcing them at a ball. They were sharing a laugh about something, mid-conversation, when Draea turned to us with a cheery smile.

“Ah. Good.” She wiped her hands on her apron. “You found your wardrobe.”

Breathless, I flew across the room and all but body-slammed Draea, wrapping my arms around her. Thankfully, she matched my embrace.

“There, there,” she cooed. “All right after yesterday, dear?”

I nodded against her shoulder, and she gave me a motherly smile as we pulled apart.

Swallowing, I tried to smile back. Though after yesterday’s events, there were too few reasons to try, let alone to actually smile.

I gestured to Ailerby. “I guess you two met at the Daemon King’s Citadel a few moons back.”

The day the Daemon King exiled us to fucking Nos Nua.

“Indeed, we did,” Ailerby said. His eyes were the palest brown today, and delicate freckles scattered his nose. He, too, looked like he’d basked under the sun.

For not the first time, I was envious I couldn’t doctor up my appearance when I wasn’t feeling my best.

Draea nodded, smiling brightly as she patted him on the cheek. “A fine boy.”

Ciel looked displeased she’d complimented Ailerby, like we were eight

years old again and he hadn't earned top marks from our tutor.

I turned back to Draea. "Speaking of clothes, thank you for the wardrobe."

"Yes, I had Innes fetch them this morning after I was alerted of all the *shouting* that occurred last night. But you can thank the king. Well, thank Claud," Draea said. "He designed everything. You didn't partake in any training or sport on your honeymoon, so they're all unused too."

"Ah." Ailerby perked up, eyebrows waggling as he altered them from dark brown to a vibrant red that matched hers. "Would you care to have and spill some tea with me, Draea—perhaps this afternoon? Haven't gotten much out of Sers in terms of this *honeymoon*, but I'd be delighted to hear all about it."

I scoffed. "You fell asleep when I was telling you everything last night. Also, there is nothing to spill. Our so-called honeymoon was a bore, and the king was quite the prude."

Innes choked on an inhale, announcing her entry along with a floral fragrance. I breathed it in, overwhelmed with memories of Pa forcing me to help with the gardens during the Bloom, though I possessed no green thumb. When Innes brought me to these rooms late last night, that same scent had clung to her skin, hair, and clothes.

I'd briefly speculated that she might have a lover. Maybe a secret one. Now that I thought of it, maybe an annoying half god. Though she could do worse, at least in terms of looks.

"Was he—a prude?" Ailerby said, swiping two fingers along his neck in a subtly suggestive way.

I tugged my turtleneck up.

Ciel might not call me out, but Ailerby was ruthless, his perceptiveness a symptom of scrutinizing people under the magnifying glasses that were his eyes. I'd always thought it might be why he loved tailoring—working with clients meant unlimited time to observe, always distracting and getting them to talk endlessly, all while committing to memory their quirks and speech patterns.

"Come to think of it," Draea said, "I *do* recall finding our queen here astride His Darkness in the gallery. Perhaps that is the flavor of tea you mean, Mister Ipswich?"

Innes laughed a little awkwardly as she pushed her red fishtail braid over her shoulder. "Anyway! Good to see you, my queen. You look well. Or better

than yesterday.”

I snorted. “Gee, thanks, Innes.”

I thought we’d gotten past titles moons ago, but it seemed it would take a while to oust this *new* title.

“I didn’t mean it that way,” she said, her freckled face now flushed. “Um. How’s the hand?”

Unraveling the dressing, I twisted my wrist to reveal scabbed skin on both sides. I tossed the wrinkled bundle into the fire and wiggled my fingers.

“Good as new. Time to release the hellhound before she cleans out the kitchen though.” I turned to Ciel. “Up for a run? Or maybe we can spar a round or two? I’ll tie my bad hand behind my back.”

Draea tsked. “Is training really a good idea when your rib was broken just yesterday?”

“The alternative is languishing in bed,” I said. “Training is the *only* good idea right now. Besides, Ranir healed it. I am perfectly fine.”

I heard the denial in my own voice.

Draea clearly did too as she pursed her lips. “Very well, Queen. Will you take your breakfast afterward?”

“Only if you stop calling me that,” I said under my breath.

Ciel clasped his hands in front of him. “We can kill two birds with one stone. Hunt. Sweat a little. Catch up.”

“That’s three birds,” I said. “Also, I hate that expression. Coming, Ail?”

“Ailerby probably prefers to follow Ranir around some more,” Ciel answered for him. He tipped his head...in challenge? “Of course, you’re always welcome to tag along.”

I looked between them. “I take it you two had a productive talk?”

“Sure,” Ciel said curtly.

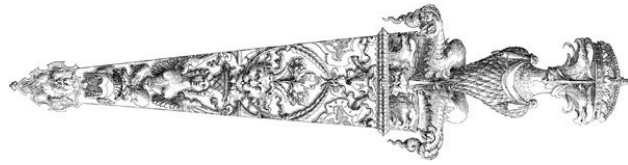
“Sure,” Ailerby mocked. “I think I *will* tag along. I’ll take any excuse to throw a few punches.”

Not so productive, then.

I dithered between biting my tongue and mediating.

“Maybe we can all spar with our hands behind our back for old time’s sake—or just go for a walk. How ‘bout a nice, leisurely walk?”

Serena



THOUGH CIEL AND AILERBY WERE SHORT ON CONVERSATION, I TRIED NOT TO let my thoughts wander in the silence as Irian led us through the fortress. Instead, I focused on the straight corridors, the sharp turns—

The tenderness between my thighs.

Nessin would know *the second* we ran into one another.

Irian released an impatient sound when it took a sharp right turn at a three-way fork. Its ribcage protruded unnaturally, straining in distinct breaths that always sounded a hint like a growl. But the leathery wings were the Sluagh's most formidable feature. A map of veins sprawled its almost translucent skin, and those wings moved and twitched as it walked.

When we reached an open-air courtyard beside the woods, Dúma darted off, her paws kicking up snow. Between gaps in the fir trees, layers of Sluagh dotted the woodland's depths. I wanted to shout after Dúma to stay close, but that wasn't fair. Just as I needed to expel my excess energy, she needed to hunt.

Tall cloisters wrapped in ivy enclosed the perimeter of the training courtyard behind us. Snow fell in thick flakes that melted as soon as they touched the cobbles yet clung to the frozen greenery. Markings on the light stone demarcated several practice rings, along with targets and a rack of spears on the outskirts.

In a loose white shirt and tan breeches, Devlin was training alone out here, and by the looks of his sweat-soaked shirt, just finishing up. A small smile curled his lips, his focus lingering on Ciel before he returned to tidying up after himself.

Always so polite. Except for last night when he *purposely* led me to his brother's rooms.

"Morning," Devlin called to us.

Dúma paused only long enough to blink at him as she relieved herself. Then she continued her trek into the woods.

I turned to Irian. "Would you please go with her?"

"Did you just say *please* to a Sluagh?" Curiosity and surprise instantly filtered into Ciel's expression when two of the lanky, silver creatures stalked off after Dúma. "Huh. I didn't realize they understood us."

I wished I'd known back at the parish before I'd yelled at Irian every day in hopes it might reach Nessin.

"Maybe it listened *because* I said please."

Ciel snickered. The wind stirred strands of his hair as he shook his head.

"Should we go with her?" I asked.

Ailerby slithered between two Sluagh and looked over his shoulder. "The wall of winged fiends tells me a certain someone would *not* permit that. At least not you."

"Ail, you should stay here," Ciel called. It earned him a short-lived glower before Ailerby veiled himself. Two additional Sluagh headed after the trail of footsteps he left behind.

"So," I started. "Did you and Ailerby actually talk, or did you vow to be at each other's throats?"

Ciel snorted. "That obvious?"

"I think it's obvious to *them*." I nodded at a few Sluagh who'd tilted their heads toward the sky, their skeletal nostrils twitching because their pitted eyes were incapable of detecting anything.

"We talked. Mostly about you," Ciel admitted.

"I doubt talking about me led the two of you to *this*."

"Ail said you haven't been sleeping much."

"Ah. What *else* did he tell you?" I asked, running my tongue over a snowflake that landed on my lip.

"Not much." Ciel shook his head. "Other than Pa... He sure earned the Father of the Year award the day you left Nos Ov, aye?"

“Nos Ov? Look at you with your fancy Soullander speak.”

Ciel rolled his eyes. “I’m glad I didn’t go back. Hearing Pa’s reaction when you showed up without me was *all* I needed to know that I made the right choice.”

I didn’t want to get started on the topic of *choices* when Devlin’s words had stuck with me throughout the night. While I felt I had little choice in anything right now, I was well aware not all choices ended in our favor after Jestin made me choose between Ailerby or the Druids.

Something a few hundred meters into the woods yelped. I flinched and closed my eyes, knowing Dúma found her breakfast.

Ciel squeezed my shoulder. “Hellhounds are merciful, Sers. They don’t play with their food.”

“I think you’ll find she’s not exactly a textbook example.” I chanced a covert look behind me at Devlin, dragging out his tidying. “How is he, by the way? He told me Jestin broke in.”

Ciel flattened his lips. The tension palpably thickened in the air.

“Says he’s fine. Can’t even tell he was wounded, but he’s acting peculiar. He and King Nessin are always meeting behind closed doors and whispering like gods-damned schoolboys in some exclusive club.”

I sensed not everything had been as cheery for my brother as Ailerby and I believed.

Ciel looked to the side, but not directly at Devlin. “I suppose I expected to be more in the know. As the king’s advisor, Devlin isn’t very forthcoming.” He raised his thick eyebrows. “Actually, Dev told me something this morning—you and the king *courted*? I mean, what brand of prick cleanses his wife’s mind? Or betrothed back then, I guess. Did you tear him a new one last night?”

I howled with laughter.

Then my reaction *was* justified. Ciel was far more level-headed than me, so it seemed *any* reasonable person would be livid. Confused. Torn apart.

“I’m glad you didn’t know before me,” I said with a long sigh. “But I don’t know what to make of it. Sin says he needs a Mindblood to return the memories.”

“Feera.” Ciel nodded. “Do not think about *anything* in front of her. You’ve been warned.”

Huddling with him, I weaved my arm through his as our breaths mingled in the chilly air. Right then, a flock of black birds whooshed out of the

treetops. Dúma disturbing them, surely.

“The dog’s a nut!” Ailerby called as he reappeared, trying to dodge the spiraling birds and get away from my hellhound. He waved behind him dismissively, headed back toward us with a bright red nose and cheeks. The Sluagh who’d followed him into the woods stayed on his heels.

I didn’t doubt the Daemon King himself had ordered them to tail Ailerby.

“So, based on the lovely tension in the air...” I started.

“Our chat went incredibly well, as you can tell,” Ciel said, his deep voice full of sarcasm. “I told Ail I loved him—and I did. Before, I mean. Then I got married. Now Dev is trying to extend some awkward olive branch that Ail wants to set on fire with his eyes.”

I tried not to laugh as Ailerby headed toward us.

“He can read lips.”

Ciel folded his arms. “What does it matter? He already hates me.”

“Leave it alone for a few days—at the very least.”

“Believe me, I am. But Dev is another story. He always feels the need to clear the air. Immediately.”

“I bet he was the peacekeeper among his brothers.”

Ciel blinked at me. “What makes you say that?”

I recalled one of the few stories Sin had shared from his childhood.

“When the Sluagh attacked Nessin, it was Lochlainn who told Jestin to command them. Devlin tried to help. Just a thought,” I finished with a shrug.

“Huh.” Ciel picked apart the information in silence for a minute. “I can only imagine the things they went through with Gearóid Drumghoul as their father. Dev doesn’t talk about him much.”

“I wouldn’t either,” I whispered.

“Agreed. But *I’m* always here if you want to talk, Sers.”

I found I didn’t have the nerve to tell Ciel everything about last night. Along with my feelings, I buried the rest of my conversation with the Daemon King.

“You and Devlin didn’t court before you got married, right?”

Ciel grinned wider and shook his head. “Said ‘I do’ mere days after we met at the Devil’s Tail, where I essentially proposed to King Nessin and made a fool of myself.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“Don’t make it weird,” Ciel added. “You knew I wanted to find Pa. Your husband casually introduced me to his brother. Dev mentioned the royal

library during our first conversation. And the rest is history.”

“When you came home that night, you were already betrothed?”

“Betrothed. Besotted. Blottoed.” Ciel smiled in memory, as if imagining simpler times. The trouble was, the past always seemed simpler in hindsight.

Our lives weren’t simple now, and they hadn’t been before.

I sighed. “I thought you wanted to be a Druid more than anything. I’m not convinced Ailerby understands why you changed your mind about him either.”

“Why did you break up with Roarke?”

I practically snorted. “Ciel. Ailerby will set *you* on fire if he hears you comparing him and your relationship to that fuck and a half. And I wouldn’t stop him.”

Neither of them liked the young man who’d courted me around the time Pa disappeared. But no one outdid Nessin’s hatred for Roarke after he’d apparently witnessed one of our more scandalous moments.

That was a memory I *could* wait to see. Then again, maybe Nessin’s reaction would be entertaining. My old flame couldn’t compare to the Daemon King on any level, but I was positive he’d act as if *I* had taken Roarke as my fake second husband.

Ciel guffawed. “Roarke was way less than a fuck and a half. That’s an entire fuck more than he was.”

Grinning, I nudged him. “I missed you.”

“Missed you too, Sers.”

Licking her chops, Dúma bounded ahead of Ailerby. The look on his face told me he was in no hurry to get to us. Ciel and I looked over our shoulders in time to see Devlin crossing the courtyard too.

“Morning, Sersa.” The careful look the prince gave me clearly meant he was gauging my present level of irritation with him. “Did you get some good rest last night?”

“Not much resting to be had, it seems,” said Ailerby, briefly shifting his face to imitate Nessin.

A scoff scraped up my hoarse throat. “Must you?”

“King Nessin doesn’t seem so bad once you talk to him,” Ailerby added, refusing to look the prince’s way.

Great. Then the Daemon King had gotten to my only friend.

But I couldn’t break it to Ailerby that Devlin was likely one of the nicest people alive—despite his plot to get Sin and me alone last night.

“What did he say to you?” I asked.

“Didn’t have to say much other than he’s going to prevent that Bonespeaker brother of his from mutilating or murdering me. Or both.”

Nessin certainly knew how to win someone over.

An awkward silence passed between the four of us.

“Well,” Devlin said optimistically. “Are the three of you training this morning? I’d love to join if so.”

“Didn’t you just *finish* training?” Ailerby retorted.

“A little extra won’t kill me if that’s all right with you.” Devlin tried to smile, but he looked more uncertain than anything. I wondered if he had a jealous bone in his body. Maybe he wanted to linger around Ailerby and Ciel. To observe them?

Then again, not everyone was Nessin Drumghoul.

“Someone did tell me taking swings at others is therapeutic,” I said. “Join at your own risk, Devlin.”

He scrunched up his nose. “Both of you needed a push.”

Sure. A push that’d caused me to momentarily lose all sense and beg Nessin to clear my mind of all his deception by fucking me.

I sighed and looked across the training courtyard, noting all the different devices and weapons. But what caught my eye were the pairs of shackles. The reminder of all the times Ma bound our hands and pitted us against one another flooded me with a wave of color—a hue that should’ve been blue but swathed my sight in red.

“Your arms are only as good as your legs,” I started and headed toward those weapon racks.

The trio followed on my heels.

“And your offense is only as good as your defense,” Ciel and Ailerby recited, almost in unison, before they glowered at one another.

“I miss Sorcha,” Ailerby added.

“Same,” I whispered.

Truthfully, I’d been so preoccupied with my anger at the parish. The only time that I thought of Ma was when I remembered the missing shard of my soul left me trapped in the Soullands.

Dúma trotted over, her bushy black tail swishing as she sniffed the courtyard’s perimeter.

I unhooked one pair of shackles and tossed it to Ciel.

“On that depressing note, let’s do a few rounds.”

Shit.

Hands bound or not, was it safe to train with others?

The red persisted behind my eyes. Even when I was just standing here.

“Great,” Ciel said, feigning a buoyant tone that mirrored Devlin’s and made me want to swat him upside the head a little. “You and Ailerby want to warm up first? Dev can step in when you’re ready to use magic—if you want to. No pressure.”

“Good luck,” Ailerby muttered. Folding his arms, he walked the length of the courtyard and shook his head.

“I agree with Ail.” Ciel didn’t understand what they were getting themselves into. “My magic is haywire. It doesn’t listen to me.”

“Jest *commanded* you yesterday, Sersa.” Commiseration filled Devlin’s snowy eyes. “Don’t beat yourself up.”

“Hard not to when Druids almost died. Ailerby or Dúma could have died.” I licked my lips. “Devlin, I mean it. We all might be safer if I target a tree or something, actually.”

“Ciel said you won’t hurt me, and I believe you won’t,” Devlin affirmed.

“Say that to the hare,” Ailerby mumbled.

Gods, he was in a piss-poor mood. I wanted to ask him about it, but I couldn’t until we were alone.

“It will be okay. Promise, Sers. All right,” Ciel said, clapping his hands as he turned to Ailerby. “Since you haven’t been training lately, I’d be happy to give it a go first if you like?”

Ailerby’s presently brown eyes blazed, and he yanked the shackles out of Ciel’s hands with more force than was necessary. “Are you asking me if I’m *afraid*?”

“No.” Ciel shrugged. “Perhaps you shouldn’t *assume* anything.”

“You two will definitely not be sparring together,” I muttered.

They would be safer sparring my magic.

Swallowing, I turned around to let Ailerby secure my wrists. Then he stepped inside the ring.

Ciel hopped up onto one of the cloisters’ ledges, flipping open his journal to scrawl something.

“Are you taking notes or training?” I asked him, wiggling my wrists as I got used to the cuffs.

“Both.” Ciel readjusted on the ledge, leaning against the arch beside him. “I’ve been chronicling everything I’ve learned in the Soullands so far.”

I wonder why your husband isn't telling you much, I wanted to say. I had little room to talk when I wanted to punch Nessin for that very reason, but at least I wasn't keeping a journal about it.

"Of course you have," said Ailerby.

Ciel didn't look up. "All the best Druids do."

"And *you* are not a Druid."

I sighed. "Today is going to be a long day."

But it wasn't fair of me to be so dramatic and think *my* day was going to be bad. Guilt seeped into my blood and bones, and my gut dipped at the thought of where Bardca and Aislinn might be. What Jestin might be doing to them. Though I was thankful the rest of the Druids were fine, I still wanted to throttle Aislinn. But I knew she was in worse hands.

Shaking those thoughts off, I turned back to Ailerby.

But he kicked into motion and lunged for me immediately.

"Dúm's piss! Thanks for letting me warm up!"

"Not like Jestin Drumghoul's going to wave a flag to warn you."

Ailerby's fists were swift, his feet swifter, but I slipped past him untouched each time. Fighting without hands wasn't exactly my favorite form of combat, but it allowed me to fight dirty.

Headbutts.

Sweeps.

Hip checks.

Simply dodging the person until they'd worn themselves out.

But because Ailerby knew me and my tells, the disadvantage was mine without my hands.

Tells.

Jestin's taunts flooded me.

I know what you're doing. Your tells are obvious. You should relax if you want to summon your blood, you know. Would you like me to help you relax, Sersa Scáth?

Gasping, I staggered backward.

But unlike me, my magic had no fear.

Ailerby recoiled as the tendrils shot outward. The weak little sparks didn't quite deter him, but he knew as well as I did what existed beneath.

Still, he persisted.

"*Stop. Ailerby—stop it!*" Trying to thwart his attack, I drove forward with the boniest part of my hip, aiming for somewhere soft—his thigh, his gut, his

groin. He shifted forms right as I did.

His body proportions changed too, and it caught me off guard.

Ailerby knocked me onto my back. I seethed from the ground, my wrists aching from the iron shackles. My recently healed hand too.

Standing over me, he put his hands on his hips. I expected him to look smug, but there was only anger in Ailerby's pinched expression. I didn't know why either.

When I realized he looked faintly like Jestin—an uglier version—I scrambled backward frantically.

Ciel snapped to his feet. "What the hell, Ailerby!"

"This is the Soullands," he said. "You could easily run into someone with magic like mine."

"He's right." Devlin nodded, folding his arms. "There are Changelings everywhere."

The courtyard silenced. Time seemed to still.

Ailerby shifted his appearance, this time to one of his common forms that helped us recognize him—green eyes, shaggy black hair, and a lean build.

My shoulders strained from the shackles pulling my posture stick-straight. "*Changeling?*"

I looked between Ciel and Ailerby...and realized neither looked surprised.

Devlin opened his mouth to speak before inhaling deeply. "Neither of you told Sersa."

That was no longer a shocking statement.

Ailerby's teeth pulled at his lip. "Please don't look at me like that," he said softly. "I wanted to tell you before. I wasn't sure where to start."

For a second, flashes of the many faces he'd worn over the years shuffled through my mind like a deck of cards.

I struggled to my feet. "Why not last night when I was telling you everything about how the Daemon King *lied* to me?"

"Maybe I would have if you stopped talking long enough for me to get a word in!" The time between Ailerby's breaths shortened. His fists balled. "These last three moons, all you've done is hold things in, train, work. The only time you talked to me was when you needed me to imitate a client for you, or when you were drunk, and only half of it made sense then! I've always been here for you, but both of you," he fired off, cutting Ciel and me a glare, "abandoned me in Os Íseal."

I forced out a deep breath.

Ailerby snickered. “So I’m sorry if I didn’t tell you I’m a Changeling. It’s none of your gods-damned business, anyway. Either of you.”

Changelings were feared in Clais—among the most terrifying of the Fallen Fae, thanks to the stories of them replacing mortal babes in the middle of the night. I’d always believed it was just a cautionary tale our parents used to keep us in line.

I’d met both of Ailerby’s parents when they gave him to Clan Scáth like a sack of rice. It was how they’d treated him, but Ma and Pa had adopted Ailerby, loved him, and raised him as their own. In truth, he’d won the hearts—and envy—of most of our clan members.

His magic *was* enviable, but it wasn’t about that. It wasn’t about the revelation either.

He didn’t feel like he could tell me.

Because I hadn’t shut up. Because I was an awful friend.

“Ailerby, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“I don’t feel like training anymore,” he said. “See you guys later.”

“Jestin is a threat to you too,” Devlin started.

Ailerby spiraled under the stone archway leading inside. “I don’t *need* to excel at fighting!” Disdain oozed from his words like an infected wound, unable to be overlooked. “My magic actually *has* its uses in the Soullands, Prince Devlin.”

As he turned to leave, the crimson tendrils snapped at Devlin. Almost as if they knew I’d do anything to protect Ailerby.

Including harm anyone who hurt him.

Devlin leaped backward. I popped to my feet and flung my body in front of his.

“No!”

When the crimson magic instantly backed down, I stood tall. Without my arms for balance, my footing was a little shaky. Ciel took a step forward, and Ailerby whirled back around while Dúma stood erect, watching me as if I’d reprimanded her.

The Sluagh stood at attention too.

“You do not touch him,” I snarled at the tendrils, nudging my chin at the others. “None of them!”

Only when Ciel cursed did I peel my attention from the magic. He’d dropped his journal in the snow, but he was watching me.

I turned to face Devlin. “Are you okay?”

The prince nodded with a convincingly calm expression. “No harm done.”

That wasn’t true. Fury could do a lot of harm. So could the unknown, and my tendrils allied with both.

“It appears to be teachable, Sers,” Ciel whispered.

Not without thinking of Nessin.

Not without turning to the fabrications of him. Us.

My brother’s face softened when Ailerby handed him the damp journal after brushing off all the snow. I didn’t know why I expected Ailerby to stay, but as he headed into the training room, then the hall, I had no words to bring him back.

So I let him go, recognizing he needed his space.

More had happened in a single day than in the last three moons at the parish.

I should have been capable of *more* yesterday too.

If I couldn’t summon my magic or defend myself—*control* myself—how could I defend those around me?

“Ailerby didn’t mean that, Devlin,” I said.

The prince watched the falling and melting snowflakes for a long moment. Finally, he looked up, expressionless. “Did you know souls can feel pain too? So can the essences the Fae possess. It’s the deepest sort of pain. I can’t fault Ailerby when I have neither a soul nor an essence. Nor can I pretend to understand what he feels, but I have felt it within the souls I’ve reaped.”

He headed for the hall next.

“Dev? Where are you going? We—” Ciel looked conflicted as he glanced at me.

“Go,” I said with a nod. “He needs you.”

Ciel scoffed. Under his breath, I heard him say, “Yeah, which one?” He tucked his damp journal under his arm and hurried after Devlin. Strained whispers reached my ears before disappearing altogether.

And like that, I was back at the same place I’d been only a day before. Me. Dúma. Irian. Ready to train alone.

Until I realized my hands were still shackled—and something rustled the trees straight ahead.

SIN



“AILERBY IPSWICH RECOUNTED HIS MEMORY OF THE GATEWAY BARDCA created yesterday. He saw nothing,” I said, recapping my earlier conversation with him. “Meaning it could have led him and Aislinn anywhere.”

Meaning back to square fucking one. Yet again.

Laisrés followed my lead when I paused at a fork in the corridor for two Sluagh rolling a wooden barrel of mead.

“You breached the Changeling’s thoughts, correct?” he asked.

Laisrés—the absolute bastard—always had a question. Logically, he liked to question my authority most of all, and he never referred to me as king. Although he claimed he did not want my title, he liked to provoke me as if he did.

He was an Otherworlder of contradictions.

Tactical yet brash.

Loud yet watchful.

A loner yet surrounded by his crows.

He’d offered them up to help *monitor* the Soullands—an offer that promptly followed Gearóid’s death and my dismissal of the Soul Guard, no less. I knew the Mórrígan too well to sit contentedly when her only spawn

had appeared out of thin air. Fucking mercifully, the goddess couldn't leave the Otherworld herself.

So she'd sent him in her place.

"Don't call him a Changeling," I snapped. "That is neither Ailerby's title nor his name."

Laisrés twirled a crow's feather between his pointer fingers as he ambled along. "Says the daemon who expects others to use *his* title rather than his name."

Rays of gloomy gray light slivered the floor at the end of the long corridor, pouring in from the floor-to-ceiling windows. Almost unbearably so with all the velvet drapes pulled back today—a plea undoubtedly from Draea for the Dark season to stay right the fuck where it was.

It reminded me of Mum, of the way she'd never deemed a single ray of light too small to help brighten the citadel before the Rime departed and the curtain of darkness fell.

"Every little moonbeam counts."

I pictured—hallucinated—her moving through these corridors during the "family" trips we'd taken before Niuna's birth. Mum's translucent form resembled the one I'd glimpsed of Sersa last night. My throat tightened at the thought of the souls I'd consumed right after she left, and my gloved fingers tapped my thigh.

Fuck, I needed one.

This second.

I traced the path to the soulstock vault with my eyes. A right at the fork ahead. A left after that. A straight shot from there.

Pinched between two tan fingers, a monogrammed handkerchief obstructed my line of sight.

Laisrés cleared his throat. "You are sweating, Nessin."

I swatted his wrist away. "You could not pay me to touch that thing to *this* face. I don't doubt you use it every time one of them shits on you," I said, nodding at the pair of crows waddling several feet in front of us.

A blank stretch of skin on his neck told me where they'd come from.

"Mm, bird shit has its many uses," Laisrés said. "It's good for the skin. Perhaps you should try it."

"I'll let you try it first and tell me how it goes, thanks."

"Who says I don't already?"

"I meant what I said yesterday. Get cleaning."

Laisrés knew nothing of the situation concerning my blood. No one but Dev, Thane, and, unluckily, Bardca knew. A single slip, a single challenge or question of my abilities, and he *would* have the upper hand. Not that Laisrés was weak—far from it. He believed he had something to prove. Perhaps to me. His mum. Himself.

We might have been friends in another life. Residing in different worlds for centuries couldn't erase history though. Feera didn't trust the half god whatsoever either. With good reason. She was centuries older than me—her skill utterly unmatched—and Laisrés clearly knew I kept company with the Mindblood because he'd repeatedly dodged my attempts to get them in the same room. I had a solution though.

“As I was saying, Ailerby did not lie about the gateway,” I said to avoid lying myself.

I hadn't managed to read any of Ailerby's thoughts this morning when we met. And not for a lack of trying. Changelings' minds were notoriously secure.

“Since Jest could be anywhere, thanks to Bardca's skill at creating gateways, tonight we'll head to the safehouses,” I continued. “Be ready to leave at dusk. Thane is still occupied in the city, but he will be your safehouse *buddy* when he returns. Hopefully, his business does not delay him much longer. I'd hate for you to be alone.”

Laisrés would *never* be alone. Not with the Sluagh stalking him. But I didn't doubt he picked up on my meaning. More than one location comprised Bardca's web, and Laisrés was not about to stay under the same roof as me.

And definitely not my wife.

He grunted. “Brilliant.”

Thanks to the rumors Feera and Thane had subtly introduced over the last few weeks, talk of my absence from the city buzzed among the Gilders. If not for them, I wouldn't be able to stay away. The empty throne I'd left for Jestin served as but one temptation—one shiny object dangled in his face.

Sluagh all over the city for my Bonespeaker brother to command.

Our father's cursed torc, left out in plain sight.

A brimming soulstock and the gift of buying the positively *rabid* Gilders after I'd halted Reaping Hours.

And countless heads to fill with promises and solutions his hypothetical reign would bring about.

The conditions would entice anyone out of the shadows. Especially a

fallen prince with a thirst for the throne. My brother was a fledgling though, waddling after bait on a line. Like the little crows right in front of me—and the one at my side.

“I thought Bardca never finished testing the web,” Laisrés said. “Will the safehouses actually serve their purpose?”

Fucking alarm bells blared in my head.

I didn’t have patience for his disingenuous inquiries. Especially when I hadn’t consumed a soul since Thane and Dev found me last night. Meaning I wanted to ram Laisrés into a wall. I approached every conversation with great caution, never giving him more than was necessary.

But his godsdamn crows were to him what the Sluagh were to me.

Spies.

The webs Druids weaved were easy enough to understand yet intricate to design and far more difficult to execute, only the most skilled capable of linking locations to a central one. I’d requested the web for Sersa—to keep her safe but not confined—a few days after I sent her away when the Circle twisted my arm.

Rather, they *tried* to twist my arm. I remained a step ahead. Eager to rip their last breaths from their bodies.

Bardca hadn’t made a web in centuries, and I would’ve had him start on it sooner had I believed Jest could evade me this long. The old Druid only started testing it a little over a week ago, despite my impatience and insistence it was *time* to pull Sersa from the parish.

She’d been safe enough under his care.

Until she wasn’t.

And the danger she’d encountered was no one’s fault but my own. *I* had miscued. *I* should have known to keep her at my side.

I needed to make things right.

“The web is secure,” I said evasively. “Even you and your crows won’t be able to get in or out without the Sluagh.”

“Sluagh travel. How fun—”

“*You stupid things! You wouldn’t exist without me, you know that?*”

Laisrés stopped mid-sentence and mid-stride. He tucked the feather into his breast pocket as he looked over his shoulder.

I traced his gaze to the training courtyard next to the forest.

Where my wife raged against her very red blood—out in the open for all to see. Snow peppered her long raven hair, and with her back to us, I only

saw one thing.

Manacled hands behind her back.

“Is she wearing...” Laisrés trailed off. With a spiraling whoosh of air, his crows returned to him and slipped beneath his skin. “Never mind. I suppose we’ll continue this conversation later. Luck be with you, Nessin.”

The crow was wise when it came to certain matters.

“Tell me when Yeserra returns from her rounds.” I did not give a fuck about the information his crow returned. Lies. All lies. His intentions were the true enigma.

As I stalked toward the training courtyard, neither of us acknowledged one another further or said goodbye. These exchanges were about the extent of our rapport. Not quite respect but not blatant disrespect either. I upheld my end of the Soullands-Otherworld border relations, and Laisrés deployed his crows for me when I asked. Or pretended to. It gave him a task. A busy crow meant he stayed the fuck out of my business because he was too busy hatching his own fake happenings to present me with.

I reached the courtyard.

Sersa spun around the instant she realized she wasn’t alone.

And immediately cussed.

“Do I *want* to know who shackled you?” The rasp in my voice shot lightning down her body.

“None of your gods-damned business.”

“Or perhaps the gods left *me* an early birthday present.”

Flashes of last night distracted her. *Us*. They formed a charged current, buzzing along a tether connecting us that would either bring me back to life or send me straight to true death.

I gestured. “May I?”

“Fine,” she sighed and put her back to me.

Ordering my gaze not to lower was impossible. Her bound hands dangled right in front of what I’d told her was mine last night.

Because it is.

Although I wouldn’t touch, I *would* indulge in a long assessment of her form-fitted training clothes.

“I can feel your eyes, Nessin.”

“I recall *your* eyes on your favorite parts of me plenty yesterday.”

“By that logic, I ought to be finding a fake husband right now, no?”

I gritted my teeth.

With a tug on the irons, they snapped in half. Luckily, I didn't need Colossi strength for everything. Yet the thought of *not* being able to break them—of failing in front of the woman I loved—left me uneasy.

I was a fraud without my blood.

It was yet another reason I hadn't brought Sersa back sooner. The Sluagh served me, yes. But I couldn't protect her *myself*, and I didn't understand the extent of it yet. Three moons. No progress.

Sersa spiraled to face me, her dark gaze dropping to the irons looped around my finger.

"Next time restraints are involved, do invite me," I purred.

"I'll be sure to do so when I get *my* invite to the memory party, Nessin," she snarled, glaring up at me.

Showing Sersa why I'd done the things I had became my sole focus after coming down last night. Letting her into my head sounded about as enjoyable as taking a souldagger straight to the chest. And I would know.

Yet the alternative of losing Sersa—*that* was out of the question, unbearable, not going to happen.

"How did you sleep?" I asked, my voice stretched so tight it might snap. "I noticed you chose accommodations in the south wing last night. Coincidence our chambers are in the north?"

Sersa honed in on a single word.

Our.

He's always deliberate, that's for sure, she thought.

I bit the inside of my cheek to avoid smiling at her.

"How did *you* sleep, Nessin? Or were you at your harem all night?"

The urge to smile vanished.

Keep talking of this harem and I will summon the entire court to watch the things I do to its sole member. You.

She put her hands on her hips. "Seriously?"

"I said nothing."

"Is this your idea of giving me space?" she asked.

I forced a deep breath to fill my lungs and exhaled, to my credit, without growling. "Fuck. Fine. In case you are unaware, *space* is neither a concept I understand when it comes to you, nor one I want to practice. Not after all we've *had* is space. Not when all I want is to have zero space between us."

"I bet, you horned bastard."

"That's no way to talk to the daemon you called 'Your Darkness' not

twelve bells ago.” Immediately, I flashed my gloved palms under the pressure of her glare. “It slipped. Promise.”

Sersa pursed her full lips, urging me to recall every word and sound she’d made for me last night. So many moans. Screams.

I don’t know if I love you anymore.

Fortunately, her retort landed swift and true, jousting those thoughts instantly.

“Are you seriously going to act all arrogant because you got under my dress last night?”

“I am not acting arrogant, Sersa. I am elated you’re here.”

“This is you elated?”

I sighed as I tossed the shackles to the cobbles. “For what it’s worth, I told Dev off this morning. He won’t be trying to get us in a room alone anymore.”

In fact, Dev is on your side.

Once more, she caught me studying the swinging silhouette of her hips when she threw a look over her shoulder. Sersa wavered on the small set of steps under the vine-covered archway and faced me.

“So…” The gilded horn around her neck moved with an unsteady breath in her chest. “Should we talk about last night?”

I shifted my weight, standing two steps below hers yet still not seeing eye to eye. “I told you where I stood. You told me where you stood. I must respect that boundary. Is there more to say?”

“Don’t be stubborn,” she murmured, reaching for my hand.

Sersa pretended she didn’t see me clench my jaw as I pulled away, and she clenched hers to avoid starting an argument. I wished she would.

I wanted to incite her until she negated her false claim that she didn’t know if she loved me.

A chill seeped into her bones as she stared up at me, and likewise, I took in every detail of her delicate yet hardened face—an expression I’d carved with my actions. It was more than that. Ailerby said a shift neared, that she experienced them with the seasons after her father disappeared. I hadn’t noticed anything when we courted, and I hated myself for failing to recognize the episode during our honeymoon while selfishly keeping my distance and *trying* not to spill all my secrets to her.

I wouldn’t miss it this time. Even if I got it wrong, I would be here for her.

As I laced my fingers with hers, Sersa straightened reflexively.

These simple touches were so dangerous. For both of us.

“You told me that only your body wanted me, Sersa. I neither need nor want to convince your body though. I want to convince *this*,” I murmured, placing a kiss on her forehead. “‘Convince’ is not the right word either. I want you to surrender to the truth.”

Sersa tilted her head. “Is that something you excel at well enough to be giving advice on?”

“I am well aware of my very few shortcomings.”

Her eyes raised to my scarred lips, curled up in mischief. Brow furrowed, she wondered whether I intended for that comment to elicit images from last night. Yet they were all she saw suddenly.

Breathing deep, Sersa shook her head and avoided my eyes. “It’s hard to stay mad at you when you keep making me feel like this.”

“How am I making you feel?” I asked, planting my foot on the step above. My knee grazed the side of her hip, and she brushed my leg with her fingertips. “Hmm?”

Sersa caved, turning only her head to stare into my snowy eyes—a color she deemed as striking and as rare as me.

“Like everything is the way it was before.”

The moment seemed endless as it passed in utter silence—until Sersa fidgeted, her shirt shifting to reveal purple marks sprawling her neck. Tilting my head, I reached to move her hair out of the way. Regret laced with satisfaction shot down my abdomen, my core, awakening my cock.

Sersa refused to glance down, knowing exactly what I saw.

I fought a smirk. “Did I leave you with a few surprises this morning?”

She swatted my hand away. “What did I just say?”

“Ah.” Nothing in her thoughts suggested the teeth marks were tender. No, what I saw in that beautifully chaotic mind nearly killed me. Bite marks all over that godsdamn perfect body. “There are others, then. Apologies. Ranir can heal these if you’d like.”

Sersa shook her head. “And live up to the shame of—”

“Of what? Being reunited with your—” I halted, waving my hand because she didn’t want me calling her my wife. “Indulging in a night of passion we both very much wanted?”

“That was hardly a night of passion.”

I scoffed. “You would have come for me a third time, Sersa. And anger is

a passionate emotion too.”

“You call it passion all you like.”

“You are angry with me because you care. Though I promise to be more careful with your feelings from now on.”

“Speaking of being careful, I hear *you* were keeping tabs on me at the parish. Seems the stalking wasn’t an isolated incident, after all.”

Though my voice softened, my face did not. “The woman I care about more than anything in this world—how could I not, Sersa?”

“Looking for something doesn’t always go over well. I hope you received a report about a bloke chatting me up at the Teltavern a few nights ago.”

That made me straighten.

No longer accommodating her height, I put my hands on my hips. I gave her a slack-jawed look, my tongue grazing my back teeth, and my jaw tightened to the point where I could pulverize a fucking tooth and spit out the dust.

“I tell you I *love* you, and you taunt and lie to me about other men? What happened to you not wanting to hurt me?”

Sersa glanced down my body as a dark energy rolled off me. We were only inches apart, and with how powerful it felt, how magnetic, she swore it would reach out and yank her against me. Fuse us together. Crush her entirely, perhaps.

I *wanted* to fuse our bodies together right now, to bury myself inside my wife and show her just how dark this energy could get.

Her teeth fumbled her lip. “How do you know it’s a lie?”

“That bloke—*Laisrés*—was looking at you because I *ordered* him there. He asked to buy you a drink because another wraith was looking to do the same.”

It had been a last resort when I was too high to storm the tavern myself, let alone think straight.

Breathing out through my nose, I gritted my teeth. “I am doing my best not to shove you against this wall and fuck that lie out of you until the entire fortress crumbles around us, Sersa. Do not tempt the daemon side of me when I am trying to behave and give you time. But trust me when I say gods aren’t worth it and half gods are worth half of that. *No one* will fuck you like a daemon, especially this daemon, and I can promise you that, love.”

Eyes wide, her cheeks heated for my own personal amusement. But I *wasn’t* fucking amused.

I flexed my fingers, realizing I'd leave bruises on my own hips if I didn't relax.

"Look." Another sigh gusted out of me. "I realize I owe you a dozen apologies for multiple offenses—what I said right before you left last night among them. It was in the heat of the moment, and I did not aim to sound as though I am entitled to anything, least of all you. I told you I want to rebuild trust between us, and I stand behind that."

My undivided attention made Sersa's cheeks flush a deeper hue.

"I accept your apology," she started, "if you'll accept mine over the harsh delivery of what I said last night and for halting everything."

She was apologizing?

That wouldn't fucking fly.

I stared into her. So deep that Sersa had no idea what I was about to do. She reached for my hand again. Reassuringly, I squeezed hers.

"I will only say this once, Sersa. You *never* have to apologize for telling me the truth, saying no, or anything else that has to do with your body. Never apologize to me or anyone else for taking charge of yourself. So we're clear... That does *not* include the lie you told me last night," I murmured. "Do you understand?"

Biting her lip, Sersa nodded.

I couldn't stop myself from leaning forward and sucking on her bottom lip—just once—so she couldn't dig her teeth into it. Not quite a kiss but enough for Sersa to whimper and close her eyes.

"Nessin," she said breathlessly, seeking to close the distance once more. Her fingers ghosted over the teeth marks I'd left on her neck. "You shouldn't do things like that."

"I shouldn't, or you don't want me to?"

Sersa bit her lip. *Again*. "The problem has nothing to do with *wanting*."

"Then stop *that*," I said with a nod.

The wind spiraled through the courtyard from the woods, and I shifted under the archway to brush the hair out of her dark eyes.

I needed to steer us back to where I was going with this.

"I *can't* return your memories, Sersa. As I said, I accidentally broke yours in my haste because, evidently, even the Daemon King has things to work on."

"Evidently?" She flattened her lips, looking thoroughly unimpressed.

"While I can't give *yours* back, I don't wish to make you wait, and I am

willing to try something else.”

“And what’s that?” she asked, attempting to suppress the curiosity in her voice in the most endearing way.

“If you’ll let me, I will help you see from where I stand. By giving you *my* memories.”

“Now?” Sersa practically shouted in my face.

My dry laugh echoed between the cloisters. “Whenever you like. I want to try—for you.”

Her core brightened internally. “Now!”

Shit.

I had expected a few bells at the very least to prepare myself. I blew out another short-lived laugh through my nostrils. “Hold still, okay?”

Reluctantly, I pressed my forehead to hers.

Sersa tensed the instant the images flooded into her. I felt the pressure *she* felt—like she had entered a vault. My mind clamped down on hers, shooting pain into her temples, and she recognized that it *clearly* wanted to lock her out.

Her brows pinched together, and a shocked cry overpowered her gasp.

“Fuck!” I pulled away and ran my hands through my hair. “No. Forget it. We are not doing this.”

I’d shown Sersa glimpses last night, but that fucking *lie* had me on the defensive. I’d been willing to be vulnerable for her. With her. And now?

Letting her in was my worst godsdamn idea yet.

“Yes, we *are*.” Sersa crowded me, noting I’d backed at least two steps away with strides so much longer than hers. “You want to build trust? Then I need to know everything. Otherwise—”

“Okay,” I rushed out.

Pressing her back against the stone, I dug my palms into the wall on either side of her face and bent down until my hot breath dusted her lips.

“There is no *otherwise*, Sersa. I will do whatever I must.”

“Show me or—or we’re *done*,” she finished anyway.

I pulled back to see exactly what her face said about that assertion—only to be met with no resolve. Flushed cheeks. Parted lips. A breath caught in her lungs.

She quickly recovered. “I wanted to hear how that sounded.”

I tilted my head. “Oh, and how *did* it sound, love?”

“I—don’t know.”

A faded red hue cloaked her, pulling us beneath it together. Her mouth twitched, but not quite in a smile as we watched a space in her mind unfold.

Our wedding night. My old rooms. Us playing a game, the board and pieces sprawled across the bed as we argued over the rules to play by. Then I chucked the board across the room, onto the balcony, and swept the pieces off the bed before I pinned Sersa down and kissed her feverishly.

Two shallow lines formed between Sersa's eyebrows.

Her thoughts raced, uncertain what to say yet cognizant that I loomed on the threshold of her mind more often than not.

She knew I'd seen it too. Perhaps she meant for me to.

"Sersa, what was that?"

"I have these memories. I mean, they're not real. Just fabrications that used to help me get through the days." Nervously licking her lips, Sersa's fingers skimmed my waist.

"What are you doing?" I murmured, tensing as I glanced down.

Her gaze traced the hand she moved along my torso with innocent but firm touches. "I feel like you're not real, Nessin. I used to pretend you didn't remarry, and we were so in love nothing could come between us. *Nothing.*"

I drew in a breath as Sersa prodded at my chest. She had me in her grips, entranced by her existence and presence.

"Now there's too much in my head."

I studied the outline of the rings I'd been wearing for three moons—the wedding bands Sersa didn't know existed beneath my glove. The leather vanished in a timely hallucination. Our rings caught the rare light above the courtyard—the tiniest glint that screamed at me to tell her the rest of our story. To do so would only overwhelm her worse. If I let Sersa into my head, it was very possible I might fail to compartmentalize. She might see things she shouldn't. The things that made me the monster I'd always warned her I was. If she learned what a lack of control I had when it came to souls, she would lose all faith in me.

The hallucination tugged at my awareness. Instantly, I realized how hot I was—not only from Sersa, but from the lack of souls too.

The wind blew right then, cooling me momentarily.

"Show me something real, Sin."

I didn't know if her murmur was real. Or the chaste kiss she stole. But the way she pulled my hips flush against her stomach was absolutely real. Our hips were not level—and yet, she rubbed herself against my thigh.

“The hell are you doing now, Sersa?”

“Relaxing...us. I want to see and feel something real.”

Dúm.

The soul shard affected her too, evidently, and her scent clouded *my* head. I buried my nose in her hair, nudging her neck. “And *I* want to respect the lines you’re drawing between us, but you tempt me to cross them repeatedly.”

Not to mention, her mind constantly revealed that she didn’t *want* those lines drawn but also needed time, while also uncertain if she should cross them again.

Maddening. This woman was *maddening*.

“Not this one. Cross this line, Nessin.”

Fucking gods.

All I saw were the most vibrant hues, practically breathing inside us—her mind the purest of reds as fresh as blood.

“Stop riding my leg before I *choose* which line to cross, love.”

Halting, Sersa held my gaze. Her lips parted in an innocent look that would end me.

“I want Feera to show you the most significant memories in full since I can’t,” I said. “But I will let you into my head because I *do* know I love you—and after this, you will *never* claim I don’t. Understand?”

Swallowing, she nodded.

“Breathe in for me,” I murmured, trying to ignore my overreacting body.

Then I started to reintroduce the memory.

SIN



SOMETHING IN THE TREES JABBED AT THE FRINGES OF MY SENSES.

Although my sight, hearing, and smell were honed beyond a mortal's, another set of senses entirely lived deep inside me, innate and sharp—mine and yet *not* mine all the same. Sersa and I were not alone.

I should have fucking guessed Jestin could not resist.

I abandoned my attempt to let Sersa into my mind at once and focused on the woods where my Sluagh stood sentinel. One after another, the internal strings connecting me to them tugged at my fingertips. Like a violinist plucking, testing note after note.

Jestin, the fuck, was trying to *snap* those strings.

The Sluagh's limbs awakened, and their wings twitched in response to a command, but not my own. It was impossible to explain because no one ever commanded them. Besides me.

No one else *could*.

I yanked Sersa away as two Sluagh slammed the ground, blocking us in.

Taloned feet crashed into the courtyard's side wall, taking it out completely. The cloisters and the archway crumbled. Pieces cascaded across the cobblestones, and more Sluagh joined the quickly multiplying circle

around us.

A hand—also tipped in dagger-sharp talons—slashed out at me.

Jestin plucked a string. I yanked it back. And so we danced to the silent yet blaring music our Bonespeaker commands made as they jerked the Sluagh back and forth.

A pair of wings snapped outward, rippling like a ship's sails. The force shoved Sersa backward. Through the sheer skin forming a wall between us, I glimpsed her silhouette. Watched her stagger backward. Hit the stone.

Rage didn't fucking explain what I felt. Something akin to Sersa's vibrant crimson overpowered me.

“STOP!”

Utter stillness fell upon the courtyard.

The ruined walls expelled clouds of rubble dust like final exhalations before death. I counted the seconds until it settled.

As a haunting echo of laughter cut through that silence, I flicked my hand at the Sluagh beyond the tree line in a silent command.

Go.

The Sluagh surrounding Sersa parted for me, but she remained huddled around Dúma protectively. Little did she know they were *protecting* her. They would never truly turn on my queen.

Loose debris knocked against my boots as I closed the distance between Sersa and me. Crimson magic pulsed around us as it had last night, restraining the Sluagh's limbs. I sat her upright and cupped her face, staring into midnight eyes. Sersa was unharmed physically, but shaken up all the same.

“I need you to trust me—and please don't be mad,” I murmured, then glanced at Irian. “*Safehouse.*”

I fished a traveling stone from my coat pocket and slipped it into the one sewn along the thigh of Sersa's breeches.

She started to argue when Irian stalked toward her and Dúma.

The trio disappeared into nothing under the weight of my command. At once, Sersa's magic dispersed and released all the Sluagh she'd restrained.

Fuck, was Sersa powerful. Her colors slightly defiant of her but powerful all the same.

“*Find him,*” I said.

At once, the Sluagh's focus turned to the interior woods.

Laisrés appeared at the edge of the courtyard, right where the destruction

abruptly ended. “Well, shit.”

“Get everyone out of here,” I threw over my shoulder.

Not waiting for his reply, I leaped over the wreckage and dashed into the woods, ducking under branches frantically.

Jestin resumed his testing of the Sluagh’s connections. His threat was apparent, his touch swift and fleeting—a glissando across piano keys.

He recognized my love for control, and he’d fuck with it until his end.

I stared through gaps in the trees, waiting to see something. Anything. I felt him—near but retreating—somewhere in here. I couldn’t let him leave.

Evergreens shed snow and ice as I crept past them.

“*Ready to chat civilly, brother?*” Jest called out, level and calm.

Now the Sluagh’s reactions clanged inside me—a *hundred* piano keys all being struck simultaneously instead of a quick sweep across them.

I snickered.

I tried to catalogue the distinct notes, their awareness, their position within the woods.

“I am always civil, no?”

Jestin chuckled. “*Not when I only plan to insult you and your whore some more.*”

I clenched my teeth. Hard. Sluagh turned my way—turned on me for only a second. I halted them with a glance. “You know you can’t win this, Jestin.”

“*I can ruin your day at the very least. That’ll have to be enough for now. How was your reunion with your estranged wife, by the way—as serene as you hoped?*”

“Everything and more.”

“*Doubtful,*” he sneered mockingly. “*I’ll bet she hates your bloody guts by now. She’d probably ally herself with me if she knew all your secrets.*”

Jestin was close, his voice near enough to hear clearly.

One of my Sluagh—Teirna—alerted me from a hundred yards away at most. Teirna’s call equated to sticking a pin in a map.

Follow him when you get the chance.

“Secrets or not,” I said, refocusing, “my queen is far too smart to play along with a fool like you.”

“*You did not play fair, Sin. You took the throne when it wasn’t yours to take. You cannot tear through millennia of tradition and bypass the trials.*”

“I already did. I am the true Daemon King. And you? You’ll never be.”

A taloned hand came slashing through the tree to my right.

“Ah!” I warned. The Sluagh stood down with little fight. “They listen to me. You know this, Jestin.”

As if to prove me wrong, Sluagh whipped down from the sky, one after another, crushing and flattening masses of trees as they landed. I zigzagged out of the way as thick firs toppled, each collapse chasing me deeper into the woods. Jestin’s laughter never ceased. The Sluagh picked the goading sound up, transferring it to me through their senses. Though the chaos of the fallen trees should’ve drowned his laughter out completely.

But I *felt* it the second Jestin vanished. The void he left behind—the absence of him testing their strings—was evident.

He was already gone. The fucking question that haunted me was *how*.

Trees continued to domino around me. I regained control of the Sluagh nearest me, and they pulled me out at once.

Thank fuck.

I landed hundreds of meters away—back in the courtyard. Hanging over my knees, I glared up at who I already knew was still there.

“Did I not order you to get the others?” I snarled.

Laisrés stood before me, a little breathless as he glared into the trees. His crows traveled just like the Sluagh, who took the form of ravens—in a flock. I was okay with my Sluagh pulling me out. But not his crows. Not *him*.

I straightened and shoved Laisrés.

“Strange way to thank someone when you were about to become one-dimensional.” Snow dusted his bronze face, and his eyes fired with irritation. “He is gone, and you *know* it. What was your plan?”

“To find out *where* he went,” I growled, fighting the urge to tackle him into the hard stone this time. “I did not need your help.”

“Seemed like you did,” Laisrés argued. “A bit rusty, ay?”

Ignoring him, I put my hands on my hips and turned to face the woods once more. “He must’ve used another gateway.”

“Like Bardca’s yesterday.”

“My Sluagh did not sense him in there with Jestin.”

“No offense, but—I *repeat*—they weren’t exactly listening to you. Not fully. I can’t imagine having to vie for attention. My crows listen solely to me, not random Bonespeakers.”

I didn’t bother responding.

Let him believe whatever he wants.

I shook the snow from my hair, now tousled from the commotion. I’d

purposely slicked it back for Sersa this morning—tried to make myself look presentable. Last night had left me looking a right fucking mess. Apart from the healthful glow souls left behind, they didn't hide everything.

At least not when you were withdrawing.

Thinking only of those vials of souls suddenly, my fingers twitched.

I reset myself. *Sersa*—she was all that mattered. I needed to get to her. To see if she was okay and to see how furious she was with me.

I looked to the sky where the *Sluagh* hovered. “*Keep searching.*”

Satisfied by their collective nod of understanding, several trampled back into the trees, while a dozen or so spiraled in opposite directions of the sky. Their wings tucked against their lanky bodies, shimmering beneath the Cradled Moons.

Then they vanished.

I stalked toward Laisrés, fishing a stone from my pocket on the way and slamming it into his chest. The symbol of the rolling hills—the safehouse a few miles south of the Knot—reflected back at me.

I kept my hand over the stone, pressed against his chest.

“You know what’s strange? The second *you* show up, my brother *disappears,*” I said, not looking at him but straight ahead instead. “The *Sluagh* will take you to the safehouse. Don’t try your crow fuckery again, or you and your birdies will cease to exist.”

“I doubt Sersa would like that,” he retorted. “She’s a bit soft-hearted for creatures, no?”

How would Laisrés know *anything* about Sersa?

I reared back to glower at him. Shadows from my horns traversed his face. His eyes. Turning them darker than they were.

“The *barriers* surrounding the safehouse will turn you and your crows to dust without that stone. So don’t fucking misplace it. And my wife is Queen Sersa to you.”

Head tilted, his eyes narrowed. “If you have something you want to say, *say it, Nessin.*” Laisrés tore the stone from my hand without looking at it.

“Yeah? Okay,” I relented. “Your mum sent you here for a reason—other than to aid me with *security*. Stay within those parameters, or I will send you back to her in a heap of feathers. *There.* I said it.”

Rather than relying on Laisrés, I ordered the *Sluagh* to get everyone out of the fortress myself. Then I traveled to Knot Cottage immediately.

When I reached solid ground, the pair of *Sluagh*’s wings snapped outward

like curtains thrust open around me. And there Sersa was.

Knelt on the jagged stones in the cottage's shadow.

Safe and in one piece.

Constructed entirely of small stones cemented together with clay, Bardca and I had built the safehouse at the bottom intersection of three grassy mounds—an earthen well, basically, but one as dry as bone. Thank fucking gods you couldn't see the Knot from down here. The grass walls stretched at least twenty feet up, only disrupted by a single, straight staircase built into its side.

I crouched beside Sersa, turning her toward me. "I'm here."

Irritation filled her eyes as she lifted her head. "I should *really* stab you this time."

I kissed her forehead and scanned the perimeter. "Stab me later."

Sersa pulled away. A moment passed in silence. Only her breaths were audible. Yet her mind screamed of one thing.

A circle of Sluagh. Blood everywhere. Slashed-open skin and bits hanging off my small body.

"That was how the Sluagh—did what they did to you," she murmured.

Sersa knew no specifics. Only the fragments I'd given her on Hwain last year. I supposed the blood and skin slashed to ribbons about covered it though.

"You can say it, love. Maimed me. Mutilated me. Made me an ugly fuck, according to Jest," I laughed.

She forced out a relieved sigh. "You're always fishing for compliments."

"Aye."

I studied the well the cottage sat within. Looked over my shoulder. Toward the stairs. He wasn't here.

He can't get in here if he tried.

"What is it?" Sersa asked.

"Jestin was sending me a message: he'll use my Sluagh to destroy me if he must. But he can't get to you now—not here." Gripping her upper arms, I stood and lifted her with me. Then I thumbed her cheek. Dangerous was the fact Sersa could wash away everything else, including my concerns over Jestin. I whistled through my teeth at Dúma to follow then guided Sersa toward the cottage. "Is she okay?"

Behind me, she nodded. The utter awareness was bizarre, I had to admit. Sersa could do little behind my back these days.

“The Sluagh didn’t touch Dúma,” she said. “Where are we?”

I turned just in time to see her fish my traveling stone from her pocket. She studied the image etched into it with a puzzled expression.

“You need *that* to get in here.” Gesturing around us, her eyes followed, and I snatched the stone away. “You are lucky I had a spare on me.”

“Lucky? Being flung through the air by Sluagh is *lucky*? You cannot simply keep sending me places when it suits you either, Nessin.”

“I *can*, and I *will* if it means keeping you alive.”

“You *can’t* if you ever want a repeat of last night,” she growled. “That was our chance. I could have helped.”

“Not with Jest commanding Sluagh left and right. I couldn’t—I can’t focus with you near me, Sersa. Not when you’re in danger.” I draped her hair over her shoulder and unclasped the golden horn’s chain. Curiosity filtered into her expression, but she remained quiet as I reached into my coat for the miniature stones from Bardca, counting off one, two, three. He’d drilled a hole through each.

One of three symbols marked their faces.

A trio of rolling hills for the land surrounding the Knot.

A snowflake to represent the Theas Mountains.

And wavy lines to represent the sea.

They were lightweight, more like pebbles. Sersa probably wouldn’t notice them much, but they could save her life if it came down to it.

“Bardca created and fortified a network of safehouses. This is one of them. Certain Sluagh have been assigned to each, and you must have the associated stone on your person to travel with them.” I slid the first stone onto the chain, followed by the second. “They’ll work for you and you alone. So long as you are wearing them, you can get past the barriers.” I pointed upward and circled my finger to signal the top of the well’s perimeter. “This entire safehouse is protected. And that is all I can tell you for now.”

“Of course,” she muttered.

I tipped up her chin until she looked into my eyes. “I promise *everything* I am doing—everything I *have done*—is for your protection. I will tell you their locations if it becomes necessary, okay?”

Brow furrowed, she nodded.

I flashed an identical, though smaller, rolling hills stone. “This one obviously brings you here, and this—”

Sersa wrinkled her nose at the snowflake-etched one. “Nope. Not going

there.”

I smirked at her. “Draea helped separate your wardrobe between the safehouses since the weather differs among them. We will be staying at one of them for at least the next week.”

“What if my favorite comfy pants are at one of the other houses?” she asked.

“*Comfy pants*,” I echoed. “We can certainly ask Claud to make multiples of everything for you. Though I am *hoping* we’ll be staying at the location where pants are not required.”

Sersa snapped her head up.

“I mean that I want to stay where it’s *warm*.”

“Sure, you do.”

Smirking, I threaded the chain through the final stone then re-clasped it around her neck. “*There*.”

“You went to great lengths, it seems—to keep the ones you love protected.”

I hummed. “Much of this was Bardca. He has done a lot for me, not least of all keeping you in his care. I hope it’s a debt I can repay him for.” Sersa recognized the burden of uncertainty bleeding from my voice. “Please don’t take this off until Jestin is dead. Ever.”

She pressed her downturned lips together. “You’re not going to track me with these stones somehow, are you?”

If only my queen knew. “I don’t need to track you. The Sluagh tell me everything I desire, love. *Everything*. But I *do* need to hurry. Let’s get you inside. I’ll be back within a bell.”

Sersa’s brow furrowed. “You said Jestin fled.”

“He did.”

“Then where could you possibly be going?”

“To check on the Sluagh.” It wasn’t a complete lie. “That’s all you need to know for now.”

“Ah, back to this shit. *That’s all you need to know, Sersa. Yes, love, all my secrets are super secretive. I broke your memories because I am good at everything*,” she mocked bitterly.

“I know I still owe you a memory.”

“Like I can believe anything you tell me.”

Words teetered on the tip of my tongue. And yet, nothing came. I wasn’t trying to argue further either. I needed to repair things, which meant shutting

the fuck up for at least a day.

Perhaps Jestin's appearance was an omen warning me against sharing the memories at all.

I led Sersa inside the cottage, giving her little choice in holding my hand or not. Her grip slackened, not protesting but easing into it, until she held onto me tight enough to assure me she still loved me.

Sometimes walls were necessary, and mine were there for a reason.

So many reasons.

Yet I wasn't the only one keeping walls up. Sersa still wanted to be my queen and wife as much as I wanted her to be. Where the trouble lay was that she didn't want to admit any of it after the things I'd done. Not to herself. Not to me. Not even to the damn gods.

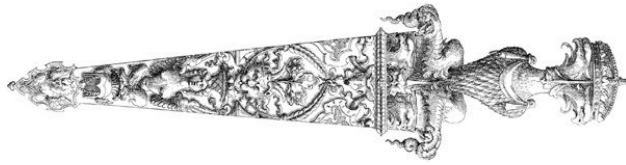
If I knew anything about holding things in though, it was that the truth always came out eventually. I only hoped it wouldn't be too late for us, that the next of my secrets to be revealed wouldn't tear us farther apart.

The fact of the matter was that she'd either forgive me or kill me because Sersa Scáth had agreed to marry me of her own accord, no convincing or deal needed.

To call us ordained was putting it lightly. I didn't need to track her with stones, follow her, or spy on her. I lived *within* my wife, my queen.

Independent of me marking Sersa's soul, ours were eternally intertwined.

Serena



“DID YOU SEE HIM?” DEVLIN ASKED THE SECOND WE STEPPED INSIDE THE cottage. He and Ciel popped to their feet at the same time.

The safehouse’s circular foyer boasted a curved ceiling, all-glass to showcase the smoky gray sky. It sure felt and looked like night had fallen, and I hated the reminder that the Dark season approached—and quick.

At my side, Sin stiffened. “He fled.”

“Did he say anything?” Devlin pressed, his brow creasing.

“We will discuss it later,” Sin said conclusively.

After what Ciel had told me, I suspected none of us would be included in their conversation.

Draea prepared tea at a sort of frantic pace in the kitchen, which sat on the other side of a hexagonal sitting room. With how bad her hands were shaking, I assumed the Sluagh had flung her here too. Laisrés leaned against an all-wood island. Looking the most relaxed out of everyone, he repeatedly tossed something in the air and caught it.

One of the stones.

Sin raised an eyebrow at him. “Well, didn’t *you* get here quickly?”

“I take all your commands very seriously, Nessin.” Laisrés smiled, showing no teeth.

I looked around for Ailerby right as Draea knocked on one of the doors,

holding a teacup and mismatched saucer. The door opened a sliver, and they exchanged a few indiscernible words before he accepted the tea and closed the door.

“He wanted to be alone,” Ciel explained.

Solitude seemed unlikely inside the safehouse. The all-stone room ahead was crawling with Sluagh. At every window. Standing on each of the descending steps into the sitting area. Six doors branched off from there, but we outnumbered those private rooms.

Sin sighed and raked his snow-damp hair off his face. “All right. I need to head out. Do *not* lose the stones. Tomorrow, we will randomly select new ones and split up among the other safehouses.”

“Why would we do that?” Ciel asked, examining his.

Sin’s eyes darkened as he looked toward the sky, not for the first time. Flashes of light illuminated the clouds swirling above the cottage, but no lightning actually speared the heavens. “It’s far too dangerous for everyone to stay under one roof.”

“But are we *actually* safe here?” I asked. “Because if Bardca knows where we are, Jestin knows. Or it’s only a matter of time.”

“Valid point,” Laisrés echoed.

“Memory censoring is a frequent tactic of mine. I am *positive*,” Sin said with a little too much assuredness.

Especially after two run-ins with his brother in as many days.

“That is not something to be proud of,” I said. “But okay...”

Then we’d just sit around here and *wait* until Jestin showed again. It sounded nerve-wracking to say the least.

Sin nodded at one of the closed doors. “Is Niuna still asleep?”

“Afraid so—” Draea started.

“Not anymore, thanks to you loudmouths,” said a pubescent girl with a yawn as she appeared from one of the rooms with a stuffed animal tucked under her arm. Her cheeks were flushed, her pure white eyes rimmed in dark circles, and she wore a pair of tan-and-white leggings, a thick white sweater, and long socks.

She navigated around the Sluagh, thanking each by name with impeccable manners. Her white-blond curls bounced.

My brain caught up to the sight when she halted right in front of me.

“*Niuna?*” I stammered, studying the girl who stood almost as tall as me. That wasn’t saying much as I was rather short to begin with among a family

of half Colossi, but the youngest Drumghoul had grown exponentially.

Impossibly.

My hellhound nudged past me to accept the stuffed wyvern the princess offered.

“The wind told me you’d like Lacha. You are most welcome.” Though she sounded half-asleep, she turned to face me in a very queenly manner.

“What? Niuna, how are you—” I waved my hand.

“Grown, yes. We can discuss my growth spurt later. Mortal minds have difficulty understanding how we soulless progress. Though my case is a bit unique. Anyway, how opportune you’re here—the wind also told me that Grandma Riona wants to meet you and Brother Ciel today.”

Brother Ciel?

Ciel darted an apprehensive glance in my direction from near the settee before looking to his husband. I doubted they’d discussed the situation earlier. Or so I thought, until Devlin slipped his arm around Ciel and pulled him close. My heart melted for my brother but also broke a little for Ailerby. In no way did I hope the tension between the pair persisted, but I also hoped Ailerby was all right.

Niuna gestured to herself then Ciel and Devlin. “We all must visit Grandma Riona after lunch. It is very, very necessary. You know, in case of danger. Rather, *more* danger, which is inevitable as I understand it.”

“Um, what?” I asked.

The Daemon Line Trials always culminated in the deaths of all siblings but the heir. Before Sin became king, at least. With how ruthless Gearóid had been, I’d never thought about relatives, let alone grandparents.

“Can I politely decline? I’m not really in the mood to meet other Drumghouls.” I turned to Sin. “I want to go with you.”

While he stared back at me, expressionless, Niuna’s eyes rounded.

“Of course not! How else will she memorize your scents?”

“*Scents?*” Ciel echoed.

“Is this grandmother at least on Queen Niuna’s side?” I asked.

Devlin shifted, resting a hand on his pocket as if he were looking for something—probably the nearest lie like his brother. Sin chortled at the dread no doubt reflected on my face.

I glared over my shoulder at him.

Niuna circled her finger at me. “I will find something more formal for...a Daemon Queen to wear.”

I huffed in mild offense. I was receiving style advice from a girl who had no teeth moons ago. To top it off, she wanted me to meet their *grandmother*, whom I hadn't known existed.

"Come, Brother Ciel! We have a book collection you'll want to see before lunchtime." At that, Niuna roped her arm through his and dragged him away.

Nervously licking my lips, I grabbed Sin's coat sleeve. He stared down at me. "Your grandma—is she friendly? Why didn't you tell me you have a grandma?" He hadn't told me a lot of things. "Don't answer that."

"She will love you," he said, heading for the glass front door.

"I didn't ask that!"

Sin backpedaled the rest of the way. "I'd kiss you for good luck if you hadn't wanted to stab me only twelve bells ago. And five minutes ago. And probably this very moment." He winked as he reached the foyer. "Be back soon."

He was delusional if he could wink and jest at a time like this.

I followed, watching Sin from the foyer. Outside, the Sluagh's wings wrapped around him. Then they swallowed him up into nothingness.

Seeing it happen to someone else was even more unsettling.

"He's going to the Knot."

Swallowing, I turned to face Niuna. I had no idea what she meant or how far that was from here. In one of the rooms behind her, Ciel was pacing the length of a bookcase, tracing their spines and reading the titles aloud.

Niuna's gaze halted where the top of the hills and the sky merged in darkness. "He'll be checking on his flocks."

"His flocks?"

She passed me one of her perceptive looks. "Of Sluagh, naturally."

I'd put that much together myself. Other things, not so much.

"How many does he have? And what exactly is that—the Knot?"

Niuna's brows raised. "It is probably best if Sin tells you himself. Come on. He'll be done before you know it. Innes should be almost finished preparing lunch."



We helped Innes and Draea clean up after lunch. Ailerby never appeared for the meal, so neither Ciel nor I disturbed him to ask if he wanted to meet Grandma Riona with us.

It was unlikely to be a yes, anyway. I didn't exactly want to meet her either.

Niuna led the way outside. We'd dressed in the finest thick dresses and fur-lined cloaks. It was colder here than on Nos Nua. Windier, too, despite the numerous hills.

In the seemingly perpetual darkness, Ciel stooped to grab a deep blue lantern off the ground. Dozens marked the jagged stones at various points to keep the area around the cottage alight.

"Grandma prefers the dark," Niuna called behind her. "Put that down, Brother Ciel."

I shuddered. Maybe from the cold, but more likely because their grandma sounded more suspicious by the second. "How far is her house?"

"Not far at all," Niuna replied cheerily and gestured under the mossy stairs when we reached them. Beneath the steps, a tunnel burrowed through the hill. Latticed metal bars blocked off the entrance. "That leads to her lair. We can't enter that way though."

Lair? Gods, we were definitely *not* going to meet a little old woman who knitted socks in her rocking chair all day.

Icy moss clung to each stair, growing up between the cracks and cleaving the stone in places. Niuna continued to lead our ascent, with Devlin and Ciel on her heels, and I wondered if this felt as off to my brother as it did to me.

We crested the stairs, and I looked around warily—or tried. At the height of the grass walls, we might as well have been at the bottom of another fifty-foot-deep well. A dozen Sluagh marched in a tight formation around us, and I could scarcely see anything but the sky directly above, thanks to their height and the breadth of their bony yet strangely corded shoulders.

I crouched as I walked, managing to peek between gaps in their monstrous wings.

A sparse, patchy dusting of snow covered the rolling hills in every direction. Footprints marked the land too, but that was all I gathered, and I quickly gave up trying to see.

"It darkened so early here," Ciel noted in a rare moment of confusion.

"The Dark season hits certain areas harder and quicker than others," Devlin said. "Not like on Fient."

As soon as we reached the dip between the two mounds, the next ascent started, denying my lungs and burning thighs a reprieve. Thankfully, we paused at the top to take a breath. I peered toward the horizon, but the visibility improved little from up here.

I was *just* able to make out a curved entrance, punctuating the lowest point of the mound in front of us.

A tunnel hollowed right through the hill's core. The entrance wasn't quite a cave, but inside it was just as dim as one.

"Down here," Niuna said.

"Be careful, it's steep," Devlin added, offering Ciel and me both a hand.

Animal-like daemons surrounded the entrance below. Some snoozed and lounged, while others grazed like cattle. But a closer look at their prey had my stomach flipping and souring.

It definitely *wasn't* grass.

I looked away from the carcasses, some of which appeared to be charred to a crisp.

Plenty of daemons populated the village of Telrach near the Druids' parish, though I'd never seen quadrupedal ones there. Several stirred the closer we got to the tunnel, but Niuna's greetings and polite nods of recognition quelled them immediately.

Their skin gleamed a shade of night so pure, they'd blend into the skies of the Dark season. Unnervingly, they all resembled the one that'd attacked me in Nos Ovscura moons ago and the stuffed animal Dúma was now carrying around.

I kept my distance.

Ciel's dark eyes wandered over them with unbridled curiosity and fascination as we continued toward the tunnel. "Interesting. These are referred to as pets."

Devlin leered his way. "We will have to find you a very large book about the particularly complex daemon hierarchy, husband. I will quiz you when you finish."

"I like the sound of that."

"Which part?" Devlin asked, taking a step toward him.

Ciel matched his grin. Maybe they *were* perfectly fine. Maybe they just excelled at working through their issues. I shook my head at how lovesick they were. If only the Daemon King and I could have something so simple. Something void of secrets and fabrications.

The trouble was, my palette called for Sin and all his darkness. Exclusively.

I am working on it, love.

The thought Sin shot me was like a skipping stone right to the forehead.

When he strode forward, his hands clasped behind him, I startled. He placed a hand on the small of my back as he passed me, taking the lead by his sister at the tunnel entrance. His presence and touch both chilled me to the bone and set me afire. I hadn't expected him to be done doing—whatever he had been so soon, and I certainly hadn't heard him approach.

But something didn't sit right with me.

Before our wedding, Sin had told me he read others' thoughts by seeing their eyes. With my back facing him, that should have been impossible.

"Grandma Riona lives here among the pets?" Ciel asked. He narrowed his eyes, looking around in search of this secret relative. "Does she study them or something?"

"No studying," Devlin said, hesitating.

Niuna smiled, baring all her new teeth. I was dying to ask how she'd grown so much and so quickly. Soulless children took longer to mature, but this wasn't the first time the Soullands had shocked me into simply accepting something as truth.

"Where else would she live?" she said cheekily.

"A house?" I offered.

Enjoying himself way too much, Sin shook his head at me, and I decided against hitting him in front of his not-so-little sister.

Before my apprehension got the best of me, Sin gestured me over. Though I sensed something seriously off about this, I reluctantly obeyed.

Still, I kept my gaze on the tunnel straight ahead. "How did your mysterious business go?"

He hesitated then whispered, "I took care of what I needed to."

Another vague answer.

"What lives in there?" I asked, distracting myself from the budding irritation inside me.

Sin snickered. "*Who*, you mean. She doesn't like to be called a what."

Ciel had crouched beside the snoozing pets to observe, but he was too curious not to follow us.

Glowing emerald eyes pierced the darkness beyond the entrance right then. Those eyes enlarged when the creature neared. Frozen in place, I

shuddered as steamy breaths that smelled of blood and the Rime coiled in the air from massive nostrils.

While Sin stood still, looking utterly fearless, it took everything in me not to back away. Hands wound behind his back, he bowed his head. “This is Grandma Riona. She is the origin of the Daemon Line’s very existence. Many thousands of years ago, she pierced the chest of a king.”

Ciel perked up, sensing the storytelling in Sin’s voice.

“Being soulless, the king didn’t die. Instead, a drop of Riona’s blood joined his, forging an unbreakable bond between them. That drop still flows through our blood, enabling our direct kin to influence Riona, while *she* controls her army.” He gestured to the daemons around us. “There are thousands of pets in the Soullands, all of whom she directs.”

“She’s the queen bee,” Ciel whispered.

“Yes.” It was obvious Sin was proud of his bond with her.

An irrepressibly frightening energy rolled off the lair’s entrance the closer we got, reaching toward me like invisible hands.

Something about it resembled the energy emanating off Sin.

“Now that I’m Daemon King, my bond with Grandma Riona transcends the one she shares with my siblings. Even a Bonespeaker’s commands don’t last forever—with one exception. My bond with her *does*, however, and it will stand the test of time.”

Ciel couldn’t look away from the tunnel either. “And this one exception to a Bonespeaker’s commands is what exactly?”

Sin narrowed his eyes. “Something called the Ordé. Also known as a god command. Only a Bonespeaker can wield one, and a mortal under it becomes wholly submissive.” He paused to assess my reaction, which was nonexistent because I didn’t understand. “Our bond—mine and Riona’s—is as secure as if she were under my Ordé.”

“Ordé,” I repeated, testing it on my lips. “How is it given?”

“Specific conditions must be met,” Sin said. “Alternatives exist to control fully soulless individuals indefinitely, of course.”

Sin lowered to one knee. Devlin followed, and Niuna sat on his leg then hooked her arm around his neck.

“Afternoon, Gran!” She cracked a grin and waved. “We brought the new kin for you to meet.”

Ciel and I retreated—stumbled backward, more like—to create a wide berth for the daemon that emerged from its lair.

The ground shook beneath us. My vision blurred.

“*Oh, fuck.*”

Ciel hissed at me to quiet then yanked me into a knelt position beside him.

Grandma Riona was somewhat like the pets physically, but on a much larger scale, her shimmering body longer and less stocky. She appeared to be almost spineless, save for the spikes protruding from her back half. Horns akin to the Daemon King’s stretched high above her over a meter long, and just as menacing were her pure white fangs, dripping with saliva. Her snout reminded me of the *dragans* in the tales Pa read us as children, as did her wings. Though she kept them close to her body, they were easily twenty times larger than the Sluagh’s.

To call Grandma Riona terrifying was a vast understatement.

She was the stuff of nightmares.

My gut spun as I glanced down at my wrists, shackled by my magic once more—still red because nothing scared me enough to summon the black magic.

I moved away from Ciel and tugged on my coat sleeve. But he and Sin had already seen.

If I could grasp the magic in my fist, I’d have strangled it for exposing me.

“You’d be unwise if you weren’t afraid. Gran is an Archdaemon,” Sin said, rising to his feet. Devlin followed, taking Niuna with him and setting her on the ground. She had no fear whatsoever and skipped over to the massive daemon.

Ciel and I took that as our cue to stand too.

“She is a Dreither specifically and the last of her kind,” Sin said over his shoulder.

“A Dreither,” Ciel echoed. He, too, kept his distance, though his eyes shimmered with fascination.

I froze up when Riona lowered her face to mine in a swift movement.

I couldn’t take a breath. Couldn’t blink. Couldn’t move.

If ever, the confused tendrils curling around my wrists should be black now. Yet the stubborn things retained their bright crimson hue.

“She won’t hurt you.” Niuna ran her hand up the Dreither’s glistening scales. “Brother Ciel, come here so Grandma can sniff you.”

At once, she tugged him toward Riona’s other side with Devlin.

I glanced at Sin as he came to stand beside me. “Then she knows I’m—yours. According to the blood mark on my soul,” I whispered, glad the others weren’t in earshot.

Why did I feel like there was more to what he’d shown me?

Because there always is with him.

“She knows I am yours—if not the reverse.” Sin didn’t hide his pleased smirk, and I felt warm suddenly. Not in a bad way, but almost comforting. “Female Archdaemons are *highly* possessive of their mates. They have been known to kill another who so much as looks their way during mating season.”

Riona exhaled deeply, the damp cloud of her breath rousing chills across my skin.

I swallowed and looked away from him. “And the males? Are they not possessive?”

“Oh, they are,” Sin said in a lascivious tone meant only for my ears. “Once the female expresses she’s ready to begin, the male hardly gives her a rest until she falls pregnant. Sometimes for a *moon straight*. Or so the history books say.”

“Well, thank gods I’m not married to an Archdaemon,” I sneered. “Poor Riona.”

“They happen to *like* when their mates tend to their needs. The drop of Archdaemon blood in my veins is why my own *attentiveness* has—”

“Reached a height so ridiculous you can’t hide it anymore?”

“You’ve noticed.” Sin fought a smile. “All thanks to...the shard, we’re a bit more attached to each other. In a primitive sense, it’d be to produce heirs, but that is a barred topic for now.”

Barred? I was fine with it, of course, but still curious.

“Meaning?” I asked.

“Your soul shard is twisting me into an extra predacious version of myself,” he whispered beside me.

“Is that really your excuse?”

“What’s yours?” Sin countered. “While I will try to rein in the daemon for your sake, I make no promises, Sersa.”

Giving me no chance to reply, he whistled through his teeth. The Archdaemon whipped her snout around, and Sin thrust a gloved hand in my direction to hold me back. Probably to stop me from taking a horn to the gut.

How was I supposed to move on from the conversation when my cheeks were suddenly flushed and my mouth dry?

“Gran.” Sin’s commanding voice mimicked a whip, but there was veneration there. Kneeling in her presence proved that. “You are to protect Sersa and Ciel at all costs.” He took a step forward, clasping his hands behind his back as he looked her square in the eye. “*At all costs.*”

Riona bowed her head, eyes fluttering closed before they snapped open with the look of murder I often saw in Sin’s.

I peered into the lair behind her. The seemingly endless black tunnel gave nothing away. I couldn’t see the end, much less the space directly beyond the entrance.

“Why does she stay in there?” I asked.

Sin lowered his voice. “When the first Daemon King passed onto the Otherworld, Riona was hunted for a century. Her spawn and mate were poached in the Theas Mountains. Slain for their scales, talons, and wings to be fashioned into items and sold. She retreated after that.”

Riona flinched as if the admission still wounded her.

Devlin glimpsed me around her gigantic leg. “Gran reigned back when only daemons populated the Soullands—well before the Colossi settled on our shores.”

“How many children did she have?” I asked.

“Spawn,” Sin corrected. “Daemons have spawn, not children.”

I stared up at him like he’d grown a second set of horns. “You think you’re calling our spoiled-ass children *spawn*?”

It was out of my mouth before I could stop it.

As Niuna tried to contain a squeal, Ciel and Devlin purposely ignored me. *Thank gods.*

There was no reason to thank any of them with the look Sin gave me as he licked the front of his teeth.

“Now *that* sentence has a lot to anatomize so I will attempt to gloss over it for the time being.” He exhaled with flared nostrils. “As I said, it’s the shard speaking to your desires as well.”

Mortified, I turned my back to Sin.

Devlin reached up to stroke Riona’s shimmering flank, his eyes full of admiration for the Archdaemon. “Gran hasn’t allowed anyone inside her lair for thousands of years. Not since the first Daemon King’s reign.”

I tilted my head and blinked up at her, unable to imagine the loss she’d experienced. Her past had warped her, forced her to retreat because it was safer to be alone. Without the risk of being hurt again, but so very alone.

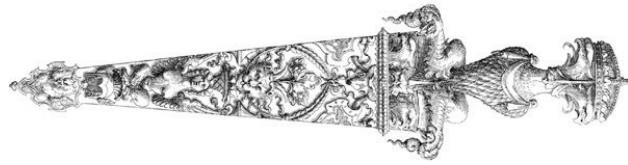
Her history and the thought of losing those *I* loved frightened me beyond belief.

I moved closer still.

Riona's eyes flicked to mine when I rested my palm on her snout. Her enormous form visibly stiffened before she relaxed, her breaths warming my skin. I felt Sin watching me, but I did my best to pretend the Dreither and I were alone.

“If you would be so kind, Grandma Riona,” I whispered, “I ask that you protect Sin at all costs too. Please protect the Daemon King for me.”

Serena



FLURRIES TRUNDLED ONTO THE TOPS OF OUR BOOTS AND SHOULDERS AS WE headed back over the hill toward the safehouse. Somewhere along the way, Sin had torn free a clump of grass. He kept shredding it, separating each blade into tiny strips before letting the wind take them away.

He paused at the top of the stairs and nodded at the others. “Go on without us.”

Niuna shrugged and kept walking. Devlin and Ciel, lost in conversation with one another, hardly noticed.

I reached up to catch a dozen snowflakes in my palm, simultaneously fondling the three stones dangling alongside the horn around my neck. “Will it ever stop snowing?”

“It is sort of the Rime’s thing,” Sin said.

“As secrecy is yours?”

“Mm hmm.”

Right as I folded my arms to warm my hands, Sin unhooked his pelt and draped it around my shoulders. Then he slipped off his gloves and put them on me, every touch thoughtful. They were massive yet toasty-warm.

Light from the lanterns at the bottom of the hole illuminated the stairs, faintly highlighting Sin’s profile as he lowered onto the top step. I didn’t know what to call this place, but *hole* seemed appropriate for the one my life

currently resided in.

“So.” I took a seat next to him. “You went to the Knot?”

Leaning back a little, Sin stretched his arms behind him. “How ‘bout I try to give you that memory I promised earlier, and we agree not to talk about the Knot?”

I rolled my eyes. “Because that’s not at all suspicious.”

“You said you do not want pretty words. My secrets are not pretty either, Sersa. Do you still want them?”

“Yes!” I jabbed my finger at his chest. Naturally, he caught my wrist without releasing my gaze. “I am asking for them, aren’t I?”

The alternative was me stonewalling him, and that seemed highly unhealthy.

“You really want to know? *Fine.*” Sin tilted his head as if to stretch a sore muscle. Then, standing abruptly, he pulled me up with him. “Come with me.”

We’d just sat down to rest our legs. “What? Where?”

“*Come,*” he repeated.

This had to be a trick. Sin wasn’t one to give in and tell me anything and everything I wanted so easily.

Sin led me around the hole’s perimeter. The hand of darkness the sky dealt was no less cruel than before, although it could be no later than sixteenth bell.

We halted on the hole’s other side. I looked around uncertainly.

“*There,*” he said.

Lightning flashed in the distance, but it was far more erratic than seemed reasonable. Each strike tried to illuminate *something* dividing the dim terrain and endlessly undulating hills.

Were they...*walls?*

After what Niuna had said, I was even more curious.

Sin pointed toward the indistinguishable structure in the distance.

“What am I looking at? I can’t see much of anything,” I griped, squinting harder.

“Probably for the best,” Sin rasped out. “The Knot is on the other side of these hills. The Colossi Mounds provide excellent cover for the safehouse, and the Knot... Well, let’s just say it deters visitors in these parts.”

I gave up and turned toward him. Another cerulean flash ignited the hills right as Sin raked a hand through his hair—

And left dried flecks of *blood* intertwined with the strands.

I snatched his arm, fighting him to let me see it. Naturally, he relented only after a struggle. Though he gritted his teeth, the muscles in his arms relaxed, and his fist unfurled to reveal a swipe of crusted blood marking the center of his palm. It was fresh, a clean cut drawn with a blade.

“What did you do here?”

“Nothing,” he lied. Right to my face. A sigh gusted out of him. “How in Dúm’s name do you *know* I am lying, Sersa?”

“I know you—” I quieted, attempting to stop my shaking voice. “Or I thought I did.”

Holding my gaze, he didn’t pull his hand away either. “I was making sure the Sluagh were satiated. *Fed*, Sersa. That they’d had their fill of souls. Because without souls and Reaping Hours, they are *weakened*. And evidently, my brother can control them quite effectively when they are weak. Does that truth sound pretty when spoken aloud?”

“I don’t care about the prettiness of it. I *care* about being honest with one another.”

His pinky and ring finger drew my attention, as they had last night. I grazed the metal rings, lost in thought for a moment.

“These are new too,” I noted.

“Heirlooms.” Sin stole his hands back and put them low on his hips. “The truth is, I released a flock of Sluagh too. *That* is what I was doing.”

“Released a flock from...” I looked back toward the horizon.

“The Knot, *yes*.”

I tucked my arms beneath the pelt he’d given me. “And how many Sluagh are in a flock?”

His jaw tightened reflexively. “A hundred.”

“Huh. That doesn’t seem so bad.” It didn’t sound *great* either, but a hundred Sluagh—*minimum*—used to torment Os Íseal during Reaping Hours.

That fact was like a rock in my throat. I tried to swallow it, to no avail.

Sin licked his lips. “Good to hear. Because I was *going* to release one flock...until I decided ten sounded better.”

A thousand Sluagh.

“Is that hard to do?” I stammered.

Sin sighed. “The last thing I want is to frighten you, Sersa.”

“Maybe you should challenge your perception that I’m fragile.”

“I do not believe you’re fragile. *At all*.”

“Then stop lying. Altogether.” I nudged my chin at the lightning’s origin.

“Since I can’t see the damn thing, what is the Knot exactly? Niuna told me to ask you about it.”

“Of course she did,” he said. But Sin’s lips quirked upward. “Did you do no reading while staying with the Druids? The parish has one of the best libraries to ever exist.”

“Okay, Ciel.”

Sin nudged me playfully with his elbow. His eyes narrowed on the horizon, and I had to wonder if *he* could see the walls I couldn’t.

“*Jestin* is the reason I released more Sluagh—I want him dead as much as you do. Maybe more, Sersa.”

Blunt truth. There was no denying that his brother’s death was our common goal.

“You released *more*—even though he can command them?” I said.

“I need the Sluagh stationed all over the Soullands to hold their positions. I ordered three flocks to monitor the fortress and the citadel while we’re away too. We can’t risk staying at either, of course.”

“Okay... But how long will we wait things out, Sin? We can’t forever.”

“No, we can’t.” He inhaled the fresh, damp air and closed his eyes. “Absent a continuation of my direct line, my sister is my heir. I am hosting a fête on the Dark Eve, and it is then and there where I believe *Jestin* will reveal himself—when I pronounce Niuna as heir.”

With the Dark less than two weeks away, the fête was mostly self-explanatory, but the event sounded a little too Gilder-y for my taste.

“Then you think he’ll strike *before* you can name her as your heir.”

Sin nodded and met my gaze once more. “Devlin privately renounced the throne years ago, but he reminded the Circle when I became king. *Jestin* and Niuna are the only prospects. Challengers to the throne—siblings—always died during the trials. There is no precedence for this. So,” he said, blowing out a breath, “lying low until the fête is our best option.”

“And the Knot?” I repeated, trying to ignore his skeletal fingers, now toying with my hair. My throat caught on a swallow when warm knuckles brushed my neck.

Sin clasped his hands behind his back. Maybe to avoid touching me. “I’m a little disappointed you didn’t read any tales. I wanted you to be impressed when I told you I *built* the Knot—a maze in which I confined thousands of my Sluagh.”

My gaze shot to the foggy horizon. Still nothing. I couldn’t see a gods-

damned thing.

I feigned a scoff to hide my shock and slight horror. “And why would I be impressed by that?”

Sin passed me an annoyed look with flared nostrils. “Now I think I *will* bring you there—give you a tour, perhaps, since books are not your thing. Who doesn’t like books? Do I need to rethink this marriage too?”

“Ha. I like them. My mind just drifts a lot. But I may rule in favor of reading if touring a maze of Sluagh is the alternative.”

Especially when Sin claimed *thousands* lived inside it. That did not sound appealing in the least.

I licked my lips. “Ciel told me something your brother shared with him after we wed.” The chill in the air had me feeling lightheaded. Or maybe it was Sin’s full and undivided attention. “He said that your strange connection to the Sluagh is because they attacked you as a child.”

Nothing.

No expression.

No reaction.

“Is that true?” I pressed.

“Yes.”

I waited for more. It didn’t come. So I tried another question.

“Don’t you want the horn back?”

Another flash of light halved his face. “I gifted it to *you* for a reason, Sersa.” He fondled the stones. They jangled together, though he was careful not to touch my chest.

“Obviously you don’t need it to control the Sluagh,” I assumed.

Eyes narrowed, Sin tilted his head. “Do I?”

“You are just a naturally evasive person, aren’t you?”

“I do not need the horn, no. I told you it calls my personal Sluagh, did I not?”

I licked my lips again, growing more chapped by the second out here, and noted the effort it took Sin not to look when his jaw clenched.

“How’d you confine them to this Knot, then?”

“*The Knot.*”

Another silence. Another dodged question.

“During Hwain, when my Sluagh are at their hungriest, they find broken souls—sad, sick, and wronged souls—to steal. It’s said that for every spirit of the restless dead, every Sluagh who felt their time in the mortal lands was

unfinished, a new Fallen is born in the stolen soul's place. My mum believed that when a Sluagh reaped a truly restless and deserving soul, that body became one of the Fallen while their spirit was left behind."

"Really?"

"Do I know if it's true?" Sin shrugged. "Tell me honestly, Sersa. Are you afraid of the fact I control the Sluagh?"

The little hairs on the back of my neck raised on end.

"I already knew you were a Soulreaper." He simply controlled thousands of a far more ominous type of Soulreaper. "What's the difference?"

We both knew it was a lie, but he dipped his head in acceptance just the same.

"We should head inside. I know you're exhausted."

Sluagh materialized out of nothing. They overtook the top of the hole, the bottom—everywhere. I couldn't begin to understand *how* they traveled that way, but the daemon leading me back down the steps was the answer.

Irian no longer looked out of place with all of its kin on guard. Some hovered in the sky. Others paced. But no matter their position, they sniffed the air as we passed. With daemoniac yet skeletal faces, it was hard to say what the Sluagh were—if not for the fact they were called spirits of the restless dead.

But I'd never thought of them as spirits either.

"Can you tell the difference between all the Sluagh, then?" I asked, fighting a yawn.

Sin failed to keep much distance between us. Shoulder to shoulder, his smooth laughter was a caress I didn't know I needed right now. "Of course. I assigned Irian to you because he's been with me the longest."

"*He*? What made you name—him?"

"That is a story for another time." His lips quirked downward. "A tragedy, I am afraid."



"Queen first." Sin pushed open one of the bedroom doors, his back flat against it. "*In.*"

Dúma scampered into the room ahead of us, but Sin and I stared one

another down—frozen in place. Rather, I was.

“Look at that.” He folded his arms over his broad chest, a smirk curling those beautifully scarred lips. “Even the hound listens better than you.”

Fake smiling, I gripped the edge of the door. “We are *not* sleeping in the same room, Nessin.”

“Now you’re fucking talking, love. What are you thinking exactly—desk again? Dresser? Floor?”

“You can’t help yourself, can you?”

Sin grinned broader. “Either you get in there,” he purred darkly, leaning down, “or I *will* carry you over the threshold, love.”

“But it’s early. You can’t be tired,” I argued.

“You have yawned five times in less than two minutes. You need rest, and I won’t sleep if you’re alone.”

“Then I’ll call upon someone else to keep me comp—”

Sin lifted me effortlessly, set me inside, and locked the door. “You must *really* want me to fuck you.”

I balled my fists and put my back to him. “*Not. At. All.*”

Too bad he was probably infiltrating my mind this very second.

“Your continued taunting only whittles down my restraint quicker, love,” Sin answered. “Also the shard—I told you it connects us. So, no, I no longer need to see *your* eyes.”

“*Of course* you don’t,” I said under my breath.

Dúma had already found her place in a corner of the room by the hearth. The glow danced across her black flank.

“Do not fret, love. We’ll only share tonight,” Sin said, loosening the neck of his coat before he undid the top buttons. “It’s fucking blistering in here.”

He started to open one of the windows.

“Absolutely not! Not after you said we’re miles from your lovely maze of soulsuckers.”

“*Soulsuckers.*” He raised an eyebrow and kicked off his boots. “Is that what you call them?”

“*Yes.*”

I crossed the room for something to do—I couldn’t keep looking at him in the soft glow of firelight—and sifted through the trunk at the foot of the bed.

Likewise, Sin found a pair of sweatpants to sleep in and peeled off his fine attire right in front of me. He stripped down slower than was necessary, with a whisper of a smile at the edges of his lips, while I struggled out of my

dress and into plush pants and a baggy cotton shirt I found.

He nudged the curtains open an inch to peek out the window. “Sersa. I *need* fresh air.”

“Sleep in another room, then. Or outside perhaps?” I offered.

With a glower, he lowered to the ground.

Confused, I made my way onto the bed and peeked over the edge. Lying on his stomach, Sin sprawled out on a rug beside the hearth, tapping his fingers on his forearm. The corded muscles in his back twitched with even the smallest of movements.

“Maybe you’re sweating because you’re right next to the *fire*,” I said. “Is this some dramatic act?”

“Have you seen the things sticking out of my head?” he countered.

“They are kind of a focal point—more so than that thing in your pants.”

Sin chuckled. “Still not over that little detail, aye?”

Little.

I cleared my throat. “I don’t think anyone can get over *that*.”

He rolled over and propped himself up on his elbows. “I can’t sleep in bed. Not that one, at least. They’ll hit the headboard.”

I burst into laughter when he gestured to his horns.

Scowling, Sin sat up all the way until our faces were level. “Not one Daemon King or the sole Queen before me mentioned this in any of their accounts. My horns bled for two weeks straight. I had to change my bandages every other bell, you know.”

I faked a pout. “Too bad you didn’t have a... Oh, what *is* that word for a life partner?”

“*Cute*.” He lay flat again. “Goodnight, *life partner*.”

I shoved the pillows and bedding onto the floor, effectively burying Sin.

“*Sersa*.”

Bent over him, I lifted the knitted blanket now draping his horns. “We can sleep sideways, genius. Get up here before I change my mind.”

His demeanor shifted. A sly smile curled his lips. He popped up, bringing all the covers with him, and we spent the next few minutes straightening everything, with the pillows on the side rather than up top.

I lowered onto my stomach as he did, and we studied one another carefully. His horns extended well over the bed’s edge.

Cheek flat against his hand, Sin said, “My legs are hanging off the bed too.”

“All three of them?”

“I can’t wait to fuck that mouth of yours.” Chuckling, he dug his forehead into the mattress. “Now go to bed before the Archdaemon *really* comes out. *Please.*”

“And doesn’t stop until he impregnates me?” I mocked and rolled away to face the headboard.

“Barred topic. I haven’t forgotten about the memory though...”

It was the last thing I expected Sin to say.

Breathing deep, I stiffened when his knuckles grazed my back. Flashes of him unbuttoning my dress when I first came to the citadel moons ago flooded me, along with all the mixed emotions he’d felt. Everything he’d hidden from me.

Sin had retained all our memories and moments, along with the control he loved so dearly, while I’d lived in the dark.

Red colored my sight suddenly, painting the room. I rolled over and reared back.

“No,” I said sharply. Though my voice trembled, thanks to my still-confused emotions. “I changed my mind. I *don’t* want to see it.”

Slowly, Sin propped himself up. His abdominal muscles tightened, drawing my eye. “May I ask *why?*”

My heart pattered in my chest. “Maybe I’m just not ready to start forgiving you.”

There. It was the truth. A part of it, at least.

“Then you believe seeing the memories *will* make you forgive me?” he asked.

I wanted them—I *had* last night.

“I think you being open with me will make me forgive you.”

Sin reached for me, scooting closer. “Then *let me.*”

“No!”

Nessin flinched and glanced at the floor. As if he were reconsidering sleeping there.

The silence that stretched on for a few moments ate at me, but I needed a break from explaining my feelings and the reasons behind them.

“Very well,” Sin whispered. “Then you *tell me* when.”

Swallowing, I rolled to face the wall again. I knew sleep was the only escape from this conversation, but closing my eyes reminded me that my dreams would result in a replay of the last two days.

Ailerby. Dúma. The Druids. Aislinn. And Jestin's threats.
I couldn't let myself think about any of it tonight either.
"I'll see how I feel tomorrow, Sin."
"Tomorrow," he agreed quietly. "Goodnight, cría naam."



I woke drenched in cold sweat, confused where I was for a moment as the scent of wax and smoke filled my nose.

The draft whistling through the room had extinguished the lantern atop the fireplace mantle. The culprit—an open window.

I'd specifically told Sin to keep it shut or sleep elsewhere.

It was an irrational fear when he controlled the Sluagh, *yes*, but I wouldn't be rid of it anytime soon. Not after enduring *years* of Sluagh finding west-facing windows to slip through in Os Íseal. Not after all the screams. The bloody fingernails left behind from people clawing at their bedposts when they were taken. The broken families...

Shaking my head, I shucked the covers off my legs and stooped to look through the window. Curtains waved back and forth around it. I pinned them in place to watch the Sluagh, circling over the cottage like vultures rather than trustworthy patrols. I wondered if Sin had returned to check on the Sluagh this morning.

Scents of warm, buttery crust and something sweet filled the air. My stomach grumbled, reminding me we'd gone to bed early. Before eating.

I yanked the window shut then searched for fresh clothes in the leather trunk. Everything was silk, lace, or both. I looked around for something like the dress I'd worn yesterday—or better yet pants—but ended up having to settle on a matching set made of white creamy fabric. The red plumule fringe left me feeling like a baby bird. But it covered everything that mattered, and not all the garments in the trunk could say the same.

Slipping a sweater over it, I wandered out of the cold room, only to find the cottage almost silent.

But Draea was always up at dawn.

"Morning," she said, quiet yet jolly.

I was glad to see she'd recovered from yesterday's scare and from

traveling with the Sluagh. With a hand dusted in dough and flour, she patted the counter in front of her, signaling for me to take a seat.

I spread my arms wide to show off my outfit. “Draea. Please tell me there will be *practical* clothes for me at the other safehouses. What in gods’ names are these?”

She chortled as she wiped her hands on a towel. “Seems you found the honeymoon sets Claud designed for you. I’ll have to find your other trunk.”

“The—*oh.*”

“King Nessin told me to gather all the items you might be inclined to burn and to hide them in a trunk.”

I snorted. “Of course His Darkness did.”

“Can I get you anything to eat or drink, dear?”

Waving Draea off, I wove around the kitchen island to assess a bowl of fruit, some of which I’d never seen before.

Right as I popped a few grapes in my mouth, the front door opened.

I couldn’t help but jump a little as I spun around. After the last two days, I expected Jestin Drumghoul to appear at any time.

Sin. I forced out a breath. It was just Sin.

He’d halted at the edge of the foyer. His hair was wet, either with sweat or snow, and his teeth pulled at his full bottom lip.

“*Sersa.* What are you wearing?” Without shame, Sin adjusted himself. Right in front of Draea.

But his energy shifted, and mine answered—brightening inexplicably in the safety of his presence.

“Honeymoon attire.” I accepted a cup of tea Draea offered me and blew on it, smiling over the rim. “Compliments of Claud.”

“I *would* be giving Claud all my compliments,” Sin said with a hint of a growl, “if we had not discussed Archdaemons and their attentiveness only yesterday. The lingerie has got to go—as in for the ever-fucking-love of Dúm, please wear regular clothes around me.”

“Lingerie *can* be worn as regular clothes,” I retorted, lifting my nose in a supercilious way.

“Lingerie can also be *torn off* a little too easily. On second thought,” he said slowly, “I think we’ll bring the whole trunk with us when we leave.”

I chucked a piece of fruit at Sin. Even in a trance, he caught it.

Draea tutted. “Food is not for throwing!”

“I take whatever weapons I can find. Besides, *he’s* looking at me like a

gods-damned ripe piece of fruit.”

Sin took an aggressively seductive bite of the peach he’d caught. “*Very ripe.*”

I wasn’t sure I wanted to know all the filthy things he was imagining right now.

“There are perfectly good rooms other than this one to have this conversation,” Draea said, using her knife to gesture. The other hand remained firmly planted on an onion. “We can’t afford to waste food either, Queen.”

“She’s right. Crops have been insufficient this season—leading into the Dark, no less.” Sin’s pale eyes said nothing, but I recognized the stiffness in his body. He took a seat at the counter across from me.

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on the surface. “I am sure there’s plenty of the Soullander delicacy to go around, Your Darkness.”

His eyes sharpened on my bent-over position.

I snapped upright.

“Souls are considered a delicacy here, yes, but really, they’re a narcotic.” The muscles in his jaw drew my eye to the hellhound torc around his neck as he chewed. Snarling faces were soldered onto both ends. “There are benefits, of course. They heal. Extend life. Keep us and our greedy, vain Gilders youthful. They also suppress appetite and provide a sort of partial sustenance.”

Draea cut him a warning look as she swept the diced onion to the side of her cutting board. “The drawbacks far outweigh the good. Souls are highly addictive. Hallucinogenic. A fine line exists between the occasional indulgence and *overindulgence*—one not known amongst the Gilders.” She concluded by pouring the onions into a buttered pan, and they sizzled on contact.

Sin took another bite of the peach. Juice ran off his bottom lip, but his adept tongue darted out to stop the drip.

Oh, gods.

I buried my nose in my mug and took a long sip of the peppermint tea.

He smirked. “The soul trade booms when crops do poorly. Gilders, of course, don’t concern themselves with the cost, but just one soul equates to nearly a moon of average wages in the slums. Demand has soared, and subsequently, the price. It’s tripled since the bridge collapsed. Many Gilders have been making a case to resume Reaping Hours.”

“And the Circle hasn’t simply made you?” I asked.

“The *Circle* will soon be ash on the wind,” Sin said tightly, standing as he finished the peach. He headed toward the hearth and tossed the pit inside. “I planned to take care of them right after you left, but I had one too many bounty hunters to deal with. The Circle issued dozens to find you. For that reason, I want you to watch me kill them all at the fête.”

Take care.

Watch.

Kill them all.

“It will be a lovely event,” Sin said as an afterthought, smiling slightly as he licked his thumb and forefinger clean for show. “I picture it occurring before dinner. To ruin the Gilders’ appetites, of course.” He wavered on the bathing room’s threshold as he pulled off his shirt. “Do change before the others wake—last thing we need is breakfast with a side of exhibitionism in front of all our kin, love.”

“Not sure what you mean. But whatever it is, there’ll be *none* of it.”

“It’s when—”

“Good gods—another room!” Draea said over Sin, now waving a spatula at us.

Chuckling, he closed the bathing room door behind him.

Innes entered the house from the side entrance, carrying a basket of freshly picked wildflowers. Laisrés yawned as he, too, emerged from one of the rooms and stole a seat at the counter next to me.

I looked between the two of them, though neither paid the other any attention.

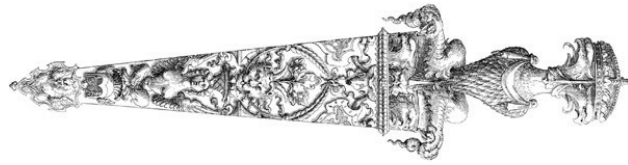
Hmm.

Was it a coincidence they had appeared at the same time? I wondered if maybe my inkling was correct and Innes had taken the Mórrígan’s pompous son as *her* lover.

Laisrés’s annoyingly smooth voice interrupted my speculations. “My offer still stands, Sersa—free love advice from a god.”

“*Half* god,” I sneered at him and finished my tea.

Serena



WE JOINED THE OTHERS, ALL GATHERED OUTSIDE AROUND A HALF-STONE wall, a few bells later.

Sin shuffled a velvet pouch in his gloved fist like he was about to toss a hand of dice. As everyone's gazes landed on his other hand, I realized we'd approached them with *ours* fused. His gloved, mine bare. Rings beneath his glove dug into my fingers.

Immediately aware of it, Sin relaxed his grip before he released me to loosen the pouch strings. The movement seemed...reluctant. Like he never wanted to let go, and I didn't think I wanted him to either.

He balanced the pouch in the center of his palm. "Stones—in they go."

On cue, Ciel, Devlin, Ailerby, and Laisrés dropped their stones, all etched with the rolling hills symbol, inside. Sin catalogued each clink as it joined the contents of the pouch.

Sin cleared his throat. "Only a few of us are to stay together at any given safehouse. We'll meet at a rendezvous point, which I will order the Sluagh to bring everyone to *daily*. Until the Dark Eve Fête."

"That doesn't seem secure," Laisrés noted.

The king flashed a fake smile. "The rendezvous point is *the* most secure location of them all." He twisted his torc as if to scratch an itch. "In the event one of the safehouses becomes compromised—unlikely as they are

glamoured, but not impossible—the fewer of us that are there, the better. Same thing if Jestin gets ahold of one of you.”

Devlin studied something along the rocky ground, his brow creased in concentration. “Jestin can command you to stab a comrade in the back as easily as he can make you turn the blade on yourself.”

Ailerby shifted his weight. “I’ve always heard Bonespeakers can’t command other Bonespeakers.” It was the first time I’d heard him speak in two days. “That true?”

Ciel looked like he was in physical pain as he let Sin answer.

“Yes.”

“What if Sersa is commanded? Will the shard of her soul you hold shield her?” Laisrés’s expression communicated a measure of defiance, and I got the sense there was something more to his affiliation with the Daemon King.

It felt like a reasonable thing to ask, but the irritation in Sin’s white eyes gleamed like a blade.

“Sersa and I will *never* be apart.” As if that was ever a question. He hadn’t let me sleep alone, even at a *safehouse*. “Thank you for your concern though, Laz.”

The sobriquet didn’t sound grateful on Sin’s lips.

Laisrés couldn’t help himself. “Always looking out for you and the queen.”

Sin treated him like an attention-seeking child and ignored him. “Niuna and Draea will be staying here. Innes has been assigned to another safehouse, and Ranir will roam a bit in case anyone requires healing. Do try to keep yourselves intact though. Any questions?”

“None,” Ciel answered for everyone, always the dutiful student.

Ailerby didn’t hide his eye roll.

Sin gave the pouch a good shake and offered it to Devlin. When he chose the stone with waves on it, I fought the urge to snatch it from him. Sin had hinted that one of the locations was somewhere warm, and with one of the markings being a damn snowflake and *this* one being almost as miserably cold, I needed the waves too.

Laisrés slid his tan fingers into the pouch next and tossed his stone in the air before flipping it on the back of his hand. “Waves, it is.”

“How many are there of each?” I asked impatiently.

Sin smirked but didn’t answer and offered the pouch to Ciel.

“Oh. I can’t go with Devlin?”

The king shook his head as Devlin darted a glance in his direction. With a defeated sigh, Ciel selected the first rolling hills stone. His face fell as he realized he'd be stuck here. He peeked over at Ailerby and frowned when he got the first snowflake.

"Would you like to choose for us or shall I?" Sin asked me.

Like a child trying to fish out their favorite sweet, I shoved my hand in the pouch and shuffled them around for an entire minute.

"Whichever stone you choose is predestined," Laisrés said, his lips pursed.

"I have three souldaggers on me. Do you suppose your demise is predestined too, Laisrés?"

Sin snorted, but the half god practically leered at me, and it didn't go unnoticed by either of us as I finally selected a stone.

I looked down, turning it over and over. "A fucking *snowflake!* I haven't suffered enough?"

"All alone in the mountains with your *king?* The days will fly by," Laisrés whispered. He strode past us to his Sluagh and winked, his eyes like tarnished gold still shining with roguery.

Surely, I was imagining the way he kept looking at me.

Dropping it, I turned to Ailerby and gave him a hopeful smile. "At least we're together, right?"

He cut me a glower that spoke volumes. "Joy. Last time I was with you, I nearly carved my own eye out."

"Ailerby—"

"Save it, Sers."

"I'll switch," Laisrés volunteered, tossing his stone to Ailerby.

Sin fluidly intercepted it, then whipped it back with unnecessary force. The palm in which Laisrés caught his stone received a harsh *snap*, turning his tan skin immediately red.

"Only you and I understand the Sluagh. Should there be an issue," Sin said, "we will need a backup communication method."

"Understood." Laisrés clearly didn't believe the explanation. "*However*, you will always be leaving one house vulnerable."

"Mitigation of risk, Laz." The king smiled tightly before handing Ailerby a wave-etched stone. "Go enjoy the warm weather."

With a nod, he raised it in gratitude. "Will do."

"Don't you want to switch with me?" Ciel asked him, eyeing Devlin.

I felt a measure of selfish relief when Ailerby also passed my brother the driest look imaginable, likely capable of starting a forest fire rather than burning the olive branch Ciel had mentioned yesterday. “I don’t, actually. Thanks.”

“Niuna has a wealth of knowledge on any number of topics and histories, Ciel.” Sin nodded at the front door. “This safehouse is also the safest. Grandma Riona. The Sluagh.”

Though that seemed to quell my brother, he watched as Ailerby vanished with his assigned Sluagh. Then, taking a final look at Devlin, Ciel sighed and headed back inside.

One by one, the others disappeared until we were alone.

The Sluagh gravitated toward Sin naturally, as did I, though he yanked me flat against him. Our proximity ignited his white eyes with a flame of desire.

“Don’t get your hopes up, Your Darkness. This is the closest you’ll be getting to me anytime soon.”

“Doubtful,” he whispered in my ear, darker than ever before. “We both know I’ll be inside you soon enough, love.”

Shoving him did nothing. Sin only held me tighter, and I swallowed hard as my cheeks flushed crimson. The spirits tossed us on the wind then, in a dizzying spiral of air that couldn’t compare to what Sin’s presence did to my head.



The second we landed at the snowy base of an even snowier mountain, I decided I would be perfectly fine with never seeing the powdery substance again. But Dúma? My hellhound loved the Rime and all that came with it, so I sighed in resignation and watched her roll around.

“Welcome to the Theas Mountains,” Sin said. In the range’s presence, he looked small for once. Almost.

The ground here was hard and icy, and trees as far as I could see dotted the base, surrounding us in all directions but up. Irian and two other Sluagh stood beside us, steam blowing out of their nostrils in loud exhales.

I waved at the all-white landscape. “You don’t look too upset by this.”

“We both know my heart made of ice loves the cold.” Sin didn’t smile. Or laugh. Or show any emotion.

Probably because he was serious. To deceive someone you loved was as cold and callous as one could get. That heart of his was likely encased in ice.

Sin cleared his throat. “Before you say you hate this place because of the weather alone, you should know that prior to Bardca’s renovation, it was a one-room shack in which Thane and I froze our asses off while tracking Dúma’s pack last year.”

Thane. I had mixed feelings about the Gilder. He’d known all of Sin’s secrets and, likewise, had the chance to tell me when he visited us at the fortress on our honeymoon.

“Dúma pissed on every rug in an impressive span of two bells while Thane and I ate dinner,” Sin said. “She also gnawed at all two doorways and the windowsills.”

Dúma ceased rolling in the snow. Still lying on her back with her fuzzy feet in the air, her nose twitched fiercely as she picked something up on the wind. I couldn’t help but smile. If there was one way to tug on my heartstrings, it was her.

“When we courted,” Sin continued guardedly, his voice low, “you used to pet or feed every hound we passed in Nos Ovscura, you know. It was difficult to go unnoticed by citizens and tourists alike with my soon-to-be betrothed drunkenly talking in her dog voice everywhere we went. Although we wore masks from the Plume most nights.”

“You should refrain from using the saying ‘you know’ because I *don’t*. That does sound like me though. The dog voice in particular.”

That got Sin to smirk. “I realized my future queen couldn’t have any old hound.”

At our wedding, Devlin had said Sin searched for my gift for weeks. I chewed on my lip, wondering if it was yet another hint of our past.

Snowflakes clung to Sin’s eyelashes as he squinted up at the dusting beginning to fall from the heavy sky. The hand he combed through his damp hair reminded me of the other night, of him gently scraping up the back of my neck and scalp. He didn’t react, and I assumed he either ignored it or hadn’t heard.

Jarringly, he snapped his gaze down to mine. “I *cannot* ignore it. It’s impossible. And you can’t either.”

No matter the distance, time, and thoughts lodged between us, we

ventured into that unknown territory.

I pulled back. He stepped forward.

“If a chase is what you want, a chase is what you’ll get,” Sin said in a voice that was all Daemon King before it crumbled. “But seeing you try not to feel anything—*fuck*, Sersa.”

I didn’t need to ask what he was thinking.

I don’t love you anymore.

Sin swallowed, his gaze piercing straight through me. “The exact words were ‘I don’t *know* if I love you anymore,’ and I’d know because they are ingrained in my brain forever.”

“You’re acting like I told you I hate you. I didn’t say I felt nothing either.” I chewed the inside of my cheek, then added, “It was cruel of me to claim I was planning to go home with another person. You know there are no others.”

“You are right of that much. Because they’d be fucking dead.”

I clamped my mouth shut to stop it from falling open, but I ended up bursting with a laugh.

Sin scowled. “Do not act so stunned, love. I have killed for you before, and something tells me it will be a common theme for our marr—*relationship*.” The dazzling grin he flashed assured me his blunder was intentional. “Anywho, I asked Irian to bring us down here so you could see the barrier that Bardca created. Dúma, faa.”

It meant ‘stay’ in the old language, and she instantly stopped sniffing a nearby tree to sit still for him. Her eyes widened when Sin fetched a loose stick from the snow and whipped it at the imperceptible barrier.

Imperceptible, that is, until it singed the stick to ash.

I realized Sin was just *inches* from that barrier.

I lunged for him and tripped, falling to my knees with a garbled cry. Red burst from my fingertips when he crossed it—

Only the barrier *didn’t* immediately disintegrate Sin.

Fisting the snow, I gasped from the ground and blinked up at him in shock. Bile crept up my throat as I waited for him to become a pile of ash like the stick.

One second. Two. Three.

He was fine. Whole.

Red fingers appeared behind my eyes now, along with the sensation of a collar around my throat. I tried to keep my magic behind the bars of my

mind. Still, I checked my hands and wrists where the cuffs usually started.

But the tendrils not only started—they *surged*, curling up my arm and over my shoulder. I couldn't stop picturing the hare I'd killed. The thought of *Sin*, lifeless on the ground, followed.

He strode back toward me and helped me up.

"I thought you were dead!" I shouted. The red encircled us like a bullseye.

"Hey," he said softly. "I'm fine, love."

Sin's form swathed me fully, and I hated the degree of assurance I felt in his shadow. He laced his hand with mine.

"Don't, *Nessin*. I'll hurt you."

"Then *hurt me*," he said, vehement, holding me in place. He squeezed my shoulder. "I wasn't here for you for—too long, *Sersa*."

"I said *let go*." I tried to sound firmer.

"And I said *no*." Sin pressed my palm to his abdomen, the contours of each muscle distracting me. "Feel my breaths. Match yours to mine. In. Out."

I might've imagined the small groan he released when I pressed harder, but then his hand was on top of mine. Sin didn't miss a beat, despite my delirious exploration of the body he'd honed over hundreds of years.

I was kneeling before the hare on the snowy ground...

Pushing those images away, I followed the rise and fall of his stomach with my hand. Then my breaths.

Inhale. Exhale. In. Out.

"Good," he whispered. "Keep breathing with me."

The swirling in my gut settled only momentarily because Sin's words summoned a memory. Of the night we'd consummated our marriage.

*Breathe for me, please, *Sersa**, he'd said.

I swallowed. I couldn't look away, even under the pressure of his intense gaze.

But Sin wasn't getting anything in return right now—not my body, not my love. And yet, here he was, comforting me. Giving to me with no expectations.

Sin was *here* for me.

The tension in my body dispelled so easily for him. As we worked to loosen my imaginary corset together, a red mirage unfolded between us, rolling like fog over the Claisin cliffs. The mirage contained us, and little glints of light danced at the edges of whatever Sin was trying to show me.

Us in bed. Our first time together. He watched me as we moved—

I snapped my eyes shut. “Don’t.”

“You said I must show you or else. I’m not taking that risk with you. You are the one with walls up right now, not me, Sersa.”

Sin gripped my face.

Shocked, I stared up at him as the images engulfed me. Everything flooded into me, tinted red, but Sin’s emotions scared me most. Apprehension. Fear. Need. Love.

Sin was shirtless, leaning over the desk in his dingy apartment in the Nos Ovscuran slums. His fingers drummed the wood as we both stared down at a ramekin.

“It’s called a soufflé,” he said.

“You did not make this, Nessin.”

He set the spoon on the little plate the dish sat atop and turned toward me. “Why don’t you believe me?”

I folded my arms. “Okay. What’s it made of, Chef Nessin?”

“Whiskey and sugar and...” He fought a smile. “Those are the most important ingredients, so they might as well be the only ones.”

I threw back my head and laughed loudly. “Mm hmm.”

“Fine. I did not make it. But I do know this particular dessert goes best with crème.” Sin picked up the spoon and smeared a bit on my neck before he licked it clean. “And I know how much you like—”

I picked up the dish and shoved Sin’s nose in it.

He closed his eyes, mouth hanging open. “You—are—done—for.”

I bolted for the single room in the apartment. But he caught up to me easily, pinned me to the bed, and nuzzled his face against mine until I was a mess too.

Our laughter filled the room...

The images faded out of existence when all I wanted was to see more. The rest. Everything. I leaned forward as if I might reach them—reach the connected rope and tug them back to me.

And while the crimson faded too, the memory left me confused, seeing pastel colors I wasn’t ready to see.

Sin’s gaze heated me from the inside out. Those shared moments had helped slow my breaths, but I found my lungs were back to fighting an imaginary corset for a new reason.

Tears pathetically speckled my cheeks.

No hesitation, Sin drew his thumbs under my eyes. His expression shifted, now fighting a smile. “These must be melted snowflakes, aye? Since you don’t love me, I mean. Must be why you asked Gran to protect me too.”

I didn’t know what I felt as he grinned down at me, but I knew when my body took over.

I raised onto my tiptoes, simultaneously pulling Sin toward me. His hands slid around the small of my back as he spread my lips, and our tongues created a fevered dance without restraint, pause, or second thought. He tasted of the crisp air. Of desire like flames in the freezing cold. I pictured the crème he’d licked off my neck, and Sin breathed in the moan I painted his lips with like his survival depended on it. Mine probably did too.

But the kiss ended too soon.

Neither of us could let it continue when we knew I’d let him take me right here in the snow, beg him even.

“Sleep with me tonight again,” Sin said playfully, bending his knees to look me in the eye. “*Just* sleep.”

After that kiss, that was more than a lie.

“We shouldn’t,” I said. But *gods*, I wanted to.

“Fine,” he said. Immediately. Stubbornly. Back to the Daemon King. Sighing, Sin turned his gaze to the sky. “The snow is picking up. We should head in.”

I sensed Sin’s hope that I’d reacted differently to his invitation. He was hiding his hurt. I grabbed his arm, urging him to look at me. “Wait. Will you show me more? Later.”

His brows raised of their own accord. “You actually *want* to see more?”

“I think...so. Yes.”

“Later, then,” Sin agreed, adeptly hiding whatever he felt about it.

If only I was so lucky. The red tendrils surrounding us had yet to retreat, revealing everything I felt.

No. That wasn’t right. I didn’t feel angry right now. I felt every mixed emotion *for* Sin. And yet, the red hue wouldn’t release me.

Swallowing, I stared into the thick woodland once more. “Do other animals know not to approach the barrier?”

“Gran can fly past it. Smaller creatures are unaffected as well. Same with the other safehouses.” Sin left it at that, likely knowing the answer would make me uneasy. “You have strength in your kindness, Sersa. I told Bardca you are fond of creatures. He tried. There are too many daemons in these

parts. Including one very frightening and insatiable Archdaemon.”

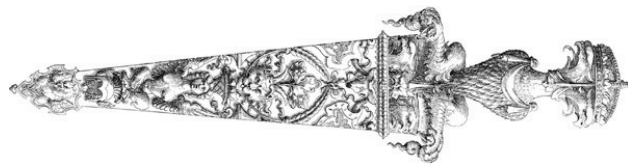
Sin looked at me like the daemon he spoke of would have his way tonight. One way or another.

Finally, he retook my hand and dipped his head at Irian, signaling for him to take us all up.

“Do you say please to the Sluagh?” I asked, right as we were wrenched through a void.

“Please *and* thank you.” His voice echoed in the nothingness. “The same thing you’ll be saying to me when you climb into my bed tonight.”

Serena



THE CHALET BUILT INTO THE SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN WASN'T LARGE, BUT what there was of it had clearly been well-planned.

The layout was simple. A kitchen sat on one side of the main room and a sitting area on the other, with an enormous fireplace at its center. Four small bedrooms branched off from there, and the bathing room was much like the springs back at the fortress—an open space with three circular baths, separate yet connected at the edges.

But the view was the best part.

Floor-to-ceiling windows gave the space the feel of living among the elements alongside its earthy textures and décor. No angle of the house failed to showcase the fact that the chalet was quite literally perched on the mountain's peak like a bird clutching its post. The blustering wind would take some time to get used to. With each gust that hurled itself past the chalet, I flinched.

At the same time, the structure felt sound.

An unseen energy charged the room, leaving me unsure whether the barrier surrounding the entire peak was the source, or Sin.

“My mum would have loved this place—the *new* place. And the view.” Standing by the windows, his eyes scanned the woodland sprawling the land below. “One of the worst parts about Gearóid’s death is that I think about

what a good life they could have had together all these years. If he'd been different. Not a ruthless fucking monster."

I held in a sigh, thinking only of what *our* life could look like. And I suspected Sin was too.

"How did your mother find this place?"

He clasped his hands behind his back. "It served as a hideaway for Daemon Queen Raielina—the First and Last Queen as she was known. She was hunted for 'soiling' the bloodline by marrying a mortal. Bardca created the first web of safehouses to help her escape her enemies. He relinquished his throne at a young age to become a Druid, handing the title of heir off to Raielina, but it wasn't enough. He studied day in and day out, seeking ways to keep her safe. In the end, her and her husband's enemies were too great. That's how Bardca tells it."

It was a sad story, but I could only focus on one part.

"Bardca the Druid?"

Sin nodded. "He is the First Queen's older brother. Bardca Drumghoul."

"Nessin." I sighed. "I had no idea."

"Mm hmm. My great uncle to the eighth degree." Warning me not to pry, Sin immediately gestured to a flat surface out front that served as a landing of sorts—like a Colossi had taken an axe and slashed the top of the mountain right off to form a smooth plane outside. "We leveled that landing. For Dúma mostly. But training as well and skating, perhaps, since it's pure ice out there."

I smiled at that, imagining the enormous horned daemon beside me with blades strapped to his feet.

"Magic?" I asked, not wanting to say Bardca's name again.

Sin nodded silently, and I continued my exploration.

An array of daggers sat atop the fireplace mantle. The stone chimney that reached the ceiling behind it displayed several swords, all in a line, their pommels pointing down. An imposing wood cabinet sat in a corner of the room, the glass face displaying a compendium of scythes and sickles.

"You never know when you may need a weapon," Sin said.

"Clearly."

He reached up to trace one of the blade's filigree hilts. I watched him raptly, following the curve of his throat then back up his hard jaw. Soft lips. A sharp, straight nose. My thoughts must have reached him because he turned toward me, his eyebrow arched.

“Yes?”

I folded my arms and leaned against the stone fireplace. “One should not be *allowed* to look like you.”

“Agreed. One would not believe *anyone* can resist me. And yet, here the goddess of willpower herself stands before me.” He studied me in silence for a prolonged moment. “You know... I should remind you that we *do* have quite a lot of practice sleeping in the same bed without sleeping *together*. And yet, you declined my invitation,” he said, tilting his head. “*Why?*”

I knew it'd bothered him.

I fought the urge to bite my lip and shrugged.

Sin was quiet for a long moment, our breaths the only sounds besides the crackling fire.

Unexpectedly, he pinned my back to the stone and pushed my hands above my head. Blinking up at him, my heart raced.

“Three moons I've pictured you. Us. My wife—my queen,” Sin said. “I was so fucking deranged while we were apart, I asked Bardca to notify me if any handsome Druids were befriending you.”

“And did he?” I stammered.

“Of course not.” Sin kept me restrained with one hand, the other stroking my cheek. “He knew he'd have to stop me from—being the daemon I am.”

“That sounds like a nice way to say *murderer*.”

His serious expression hardened further. “I would never shed blood at the parish. Not like my brother. But I would have shown every Druid exactly who you—” He cut himself off with a growl under his breath. “Since you want space and I am trying to be less of a daemon for you, I will refrain from saying and *doing* what I want to you. Just know that your willpower will break. You said it best yourself yesterday. This isn't solely about want, Sersa. Yes, I want you. More than that, I *need* you. And you need and want me too.”

My gaze flicked up to my wrists, contained by his hands, then back to his gaze. “It concerns me that this is you trying...but *that* is off the table for the foreseeable future.”

Sin's eyebrows raised over blazing eyes, and he licked the front of his very white teeth. “Fair enough. You and I used to play games of denial all the time. So until you admit to the lies you told both of us, I won't fuck you. I've experienced enough meaningless pleasure in this life to know that's not what I want with you. I need every part of you to be mine—I won't settle for your uncertainty.”

Sin released my wrists, but I couldn't bring myself to move. I watched him walk away—maybe in hopes he'd come back to me. He didn't. Instead, he halted in the kitchen and poured himself a short glass of amber liquid.

"Tomorrow we should further discuss the Dark Eve Fête," he said. As if everything between us was normal.

My throat felt thick, incapable of forming any questions I had.

Focusing on my breath, I closed my eyes and forced myself to nod.

"I will show you your room so you can settle in."

It wasn't lost on me that Sin actively ignored my thoughts this time.



Dúma was gnawing on an enormous bone on the kitchen floor when I finally left my room the next morning.

"Oh, good. You're up," Innes called, brushing strands of red hair that'd come loose from her fishtail off her face. "I was about to wake you for breakfast. How'd you sleep?"

The night had been lonely and freezing, indeed, and rather than dreams, pastel colors chased me until dawn. As did a replay of us in Sin's apartment.

His memory.

Sin won pieces of me over with nothing more than images that *could* be fabrications of his own mind's making.

"Better than the other night," I said unconvincingly. "Need help with anything?"

"Ciel says you're a terrible cook. I'm afraid I'll have to decline."

Ranir chuckled from the table, raising her coffee cup. "Morning, Queen. Hope you don't mind I took Dúma out to hunt her meal this morning." Gesturing to the table, she added, "And ours. Innes did everything else because I'm no chef either."

My stomach turned at the sight of Dúma's bone as I realized it had been very fleshy that morning and was now bare as...well, *bones*. Usually, I made her leave the carcasses outside, but I had to admit the hound looked overjoyed.

I laughed groggily. "Morning to you too, and glad I'm not alone. Dúma needs to hunt, so thank you."

Ranir smiled in answer.

Innes had created an impressive spread on the dining table next to the panoramic windows. Steam coiled above a platter of eggs. She'd also prepared diced potatoes, strips of bacon, muffins, and two types of fresh-baked bread.

"This is a lot of food for—four people?" I asked.

"Yep," said Innes brightly. "His Darkness and us three."

Ranir wasted no time digging in, her plate halfway cleaned, and I didn't blame her. Just looking at the food made my stomach grumble.

I entered the kitchen and looped my arm around Innes's, guiding her to the table. "Thank you for all this. Wake me up tomorrow? I promise not to burn the chalet down if you tell me what to do."

"We'll see, Queen Sersa."

I helped Innes into her seat then doled out the plates, setting an extra one at the head of the table. I wasn't officious enough to sit there with Ranir and Innes, but I suspected a certain missing king was.

Ranir pushed a pot of coffee and a porcelain creamer dish toward me when I yawned. I poured myself a large cup of the black liquid, foregoing the creamer, and took a sip of my morning lifeblood.

"How was the hunt?" I asked, scooping a generous serving of eggs and potatoes onto my plate, followed by toast with a dollop of butter and one of jam.

Innes laughed sheepishly. "I imagine it was frightening because *Dúma* is quite frightening these days."

I turned to see the hellhound rolling around on the wood floor as she scratched her face with enormous paws.

"Yes. Very frightening."

Both of them looked and laughed. As if *Dúma* understood, she flipped onto her stomach, trotted over, and set her chin on the table to beg. I reached for a crispy piece of bacon and tossed it behind me, hearing a chomp a second later. Then she was back beside us like the beggar she was. Innes scooted away from her as drool dripped off the table's edge and onto the floor.

Ranir shrugged. "The hunt was good. I wanted to look around because I sensed something wounded."

"Did you find it?" Innes asked, frowning.

"No. I didn't want to stray too far."

I swallowed a forkful of eggs. “Bonemenders can sense wounds?”

“Pain.” Ranir nodded between bites of toast piled with fixings from all the other platters. She’d broken up the strips of bacon and mixed it with the potatoes and eggs. “You should try it like—”

The front door next to the dining table opened. Then Sin stepped inside and shook the snow out of his hair.

“Morning,” he said, aware we were all staring.

Because he was shirtless.

Sweat gleamed on his chest, but it was the rest of his corded body, lit up with rays of rising moonlight, that held my attention. I watched a droplet slide under his waistband, others running down his perfectly taut abdomen.

Seriously?

Innes interrupted my daze as she popped out of her seat. “Morning, King Nessin. Can I get you anything?”

I shoveled a large bite of potatoes in my mouth.

“Or he could eat the perfectly good meal that is right in front of him,” Ranir said.

“Perhaps after training. We’re headed to the rendezvous point,” he explained.

“You ought to eat something between trainings,” Ranir insisted.

I recalled what Laisrés said yesterday. “Why so soon?”

Sin accepted the clean towel Innes handed him and proceeded to glide it across his sweaty chest. The scars raked across his front made it difficult not to stare. *More* difficult.

“To perform daily checks on everyone’s minds,” he answered.

“Ah, what a privilege it must be to have your mind breached only once a day,” I muttered.

Reaching around me, Sin grabbed a piece of toast and copied Ranir, piling potatoes and eggs on top.

She watched him with vacant, shining eyes. “No matter what was on the table for breakfast, his mum would pile it all on a single piece of toast. One time, Queen Niuna added diced mangoes imported from the Western Pointe. Surprisingly good.”

Imports from so far away were notoriously pricey, but gold was no object for the Daemon King. Obviously.

Innes perked up, lifting a platter as Dúma pawed at the edge of the table. “Don’t forget the bacon, Your Darkness.”

Every time I heard that title uttered seriously, I cringed.

“Not today,” Sin said with a smirk as he turned to me. “Wouldn’t want my herbivore queen *cringing*.” At that, he took out half his breakfast with an enormous bite. Then he strutted to his room—on the opposite end of the safehouse.

We finished eating, making light conversation until Sin returned, freshly showered and, fortunately—or unfortunately—fully clothed. As he stood over me to take a sip of coffee right from my mug, his intoxicating scent persisted.

“Excuse you,” I said, flicking his hand away.

Sin leaned down to whisper in my ear. “So you know, *I* put you on black coffee.”

“Well, it is not *yours*.”

He responded by smirking. Apparently, sleep had restored his arrogance.

Innes began to clean up the table. When she lifted the bacon once more to see if we were finished, Dúma peeled her lip back as soon as it was out of her beady line of sight.

“Oh!” Innes yelped at the sight of the hound’s fangs bared, nearly dropping the glass platter.

“Dúma, *no*.” I snapped my fingers at her and pointed. “I’m so sorry, Innes! She gets irritable if she’s cooped up too long...and it’s been less than a day.”

Ranir swirled the coffee in her mug around. “We weren’t out there more than fifteen minutes.”

“I’ll bring her outside with me when I train at dawn from now on,” Sin said.

I frowned. “Maybe she should just stay with Ailerby at the other safehouse...”

The hellhound was all tail wags and happy panting again, but the safehouse situation wouldn’t end well if she couldn’t roam.

“We will see how she is after long morning hunts,” Sin said then nodded at Innes. “You’re not finished eating. I got it.”

At that, he began to stack the dirty dishes.

Ranir sipped the last of her coffee. With how much cream she’d added to her mug, the liquid inside was practically the color of the light oak floors. “Queen Niuna would be proud to see you kept *one* thing she instilled in you boys.”

“Did you know her well?” I asked.

Sin stiffened as he effortlessly balanced all the dishes and platters, bringing them into the kitchen in one go.

Innes blotted at her mouth with a serviette after hardly eating and carried her untouched plate to the sink. She glanced nervously at Dúma. “I’ll clean them, Your Darkness.”

Clearly, her appetite was spoiled.

“Thank you,” I heard him say before he strode back toward us. As expected, he pulled out the seat at the head of the table—

And faked me out. Sin lowered into the chair directly across from me beside Ranir. Slouching, he clasped his hands in his lap, his knees spread wide, with one foot resting on the horizontal supports between another chair’s legs.

When his eyes intentionally darted to the head seat, I rolled mine.

I do love making those eyes roll. I’ll take what I can get, Sin said in my thoughts.

Arrogance definitely restored.

“Queen Niuna was my best friend,” Ranir said. “Her and Feera Féidhelm. We both worked in the citadel for centuries. Did you know Gearóid controlled almost his entire court there with Scroungers?”

“Scroungers...” I repeated, thoughts turning. “Oh. My father called them the Vaimpír.”

Ranir poured herself a refill of mostly creamer until the pale liquid leveled with the rim. “The two share similar feeding habits, but Scroungers are a gruesome type of daemon and can take control of wraiths. Gearóid created puppets left and right using them.”

Both Sin and the Old King had told me bits and pieces of Queen Niuna’s tragic end, but the sensitivity of the matter always made me bite my tongue.

Not now.

“My clan used to say the Vaimpír walk among the mortal lands to feed and can influence mortals. Can Scroungers possess mortals?”

“Fortunately, no. Only wraiths.” Ranir cleared her throat and swallowed. “Scroungers need the empty chamber of a soul to nest in. They feed on the host’s body, *similar* to the Vaimpír—but from within first.”

I pressed a hand to my chest, unable to imagine some hollow place inside me. It was not fully empty, at least.

“When King Nessin was a child—”

“*Enough.*” His voice was quiet, yet sharp. Fragile as glass. With a sigh, Sin said in a calmer tone, “Do not tell my stories, Ranir. I don’t tell yours.”

It wasn’t quite a threat, but I didn’t doubt he wouldn’t hesitate if she didn’t heed his warning.

“Our stories overlap. Sometimes I wish they didn’t, believe me,” she replied then left the room at once.

Sin sighed long and loud, otherwise silent as Innes finished the dishes. Finally, she headed to her room to get ready to leave too.

Before I could ask what the exchange was about, Sin cleared his throat.

“Ranir grew up with Mum in Gánfir, in the western Soullands near where the Sleeping Colossi rest in the sea. The second my father learned of a skilled Soulreaper *and* Bonespeaker, her parents were coerced to sell her. He claimed Mum was a gift from the gods—the ‘ideal’ blood to mix with.” He scoffed with hatred. “She was a child, and he—” Sin swallowed. “He bed her at fourteen. She had Devlin and Lochlainn at fifteen.”

“Sin, I’m so sorry.” I reached for his gloved hand across the table, but he stood before I touched him.

He noted my dismay, bared for him both in expression and mind. It was the second time he’d pulled away like that. One moment, he was jesting with me like old times. The next, he was guarded when he’d *offered* to drop his walls in the first place.

Or maybe he’d open up part of his mind to me, but not his heart. Not until I told him I *did*, in fact, love him.

Sin cleared his throat, the sound simultaneously clearing my head.

“Ranir is always trying to keep Mum’s memory alive. Especially lately with the Old King gone. He forbade us from speaking of her.” A sigh tumbled out of Sin. “I find I’m not ready to, and I feel guilty for perpetuating the silence, but...” He shook his head.

“You are nothing like your father.”

His white eyes flicked around my face. “That means everything coming from you. I can’t say I agree though. After the fête, I hope to be less like him, but until then...” He blew out a strained breath and raised his brows. “The Circle of Gilders questions my reign. Me. You. Us. So we will set them—all the Gilders—straight. And what better time than the celebration of His Darkness’s birth?”

The Dark Eve Fête.

“Then the plan is to hide *until* the fête?” I said.

“Once the Circle and Jestin are dead, we won’t have to hide. We may live out in the open. Wherever it is you want to live aside.”

With the shard that’d latched onto Sin, what choice did I really have to begin with? I couldn’t return to Os Íseal, and Nos Ovscura wasn’t safe.

“Hiding *is* necessary for the time being,” he added. “I will not have a repeat of yesterday and be blindsided by one of Jestin’s attacks. I want to *know* when and where—to control every variable I can.”

“How do you plan to end the Circle?”

His jaw tensed. “Very slowly and even more painfully, I hope.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Do you want me to explain every detail?”

“Yes, actually, I do.” I hated his reluctance to involve me. I needed to know these things. I *deserved* to. “Will you use your blood?”

Sin hesitated, his eyes shining as they flicked all around my face. “No. The Sluagh. I plan to keep the Circle on ice. To preserve their corpses and Bonespeak to them as needed. Though we will see how generous I feel the night of the fête.”

On ice?

I blinked and swallowed.

“It is a term we Bonespeakers use,” he added with a little chuckle, surely because of my face. “I can raise them as I wish and use them as counsel, if you will.”

I felt like all the blood had rushed to my toes. “Right... And Jestin? What are your plans for *him* that night?”

“Did I hesitate to shove a dagger skull-deep in his eye the other day?” Sin countered.

“Oh, when he vanished, you mean?” I scoffed.

He glowered down at me. “Jest sealed his fate. I will not let him vanish again.”

I licked my lips, my mouth suddenly dry. “He said my blood and soul are valuable to the realms or something.”

“The realm or realms?” Sin asked abruptly. “You didn’t tell me this.”

“Because you know everything. Or claim to.” I was taken aback. “Does it matter?”

“Everything matters.” His brow hardened, and he took a step into my space. “May I?”

I’d barely nodded in agreement when Sin closed the distance and lifted

my chin. It felt like his other hand was sifting through my thoughts, though he hadn't moved.

One for the mortal world. One for the Otherworld. And one for the Underworld.

For a full minute, the words echoed between us nonstop.

Finally, Sin dropped his hand.

"Well?" I whispered, trying to decipher his inscrutable expression. "You must have theories, Sin."

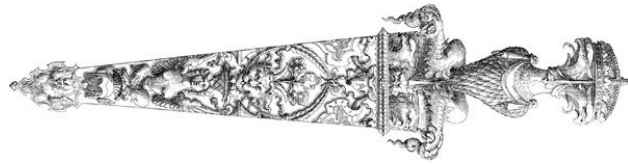
I wanted to know the meaning before we ended Jestin. Or *I* ended him.

What's one more brother?

The thought was dark, but the endless red was a beacon inside me. I'd let it guide me until the prince was dead.

The heat in Sin's gaze cooled, but that icy expression was no better, no tamer, no less murderous. "I need to think about it," he said collectedly. "We do not want to keep the others waiting."

Serena



WE REACHED THE RENDEZVOUS POINT BEFORE THE OTHERS.

It was a rust-colored cave with a circular hole overhead, surrounded on all sides by water. The miniature isle—if it could be called that—was as bright as it was filled with fresh air for days. Proper isles in the distance peppered the Wraithsea beyond the mouth of the cave, and the shallow, glassy blue water seemed to be free of wraiths. Perhaps a barrier like those around the safehouses held them back.

I closed my eyes and inhaled the salty air.

As lovely as the chalet was, it didn't change the fact that it was a safehouse, we were in hiding, and snow was not my friend. Neither were heights. But I would survive if we were going to come here every day.

"Where are we exactly?" I asked Sin, peeling my eyes open.

Innes had come along to see Draea, while Ranir accompanied us to heal training wounds. Niuna clearly wasn't here to train at all because she was still in her pajamas, lying like a starfish on the sand with only a lazy wave.

"The western Wraithsea. This location connects to a gateway hidden in Grandma Riona's lair, and those," Sin said, pointing to what I thought were distant isles, "are the Sleeping Colossi I was telling you about."

I gaped up at him. "I know what they are. I just never imagined they were real. Do they actually wake every hundred years?"

He hummed. “About ten to go. The waves will get nasty, sometimes all the way to Os Íseal, depending on how rowdy they are. Although they typically make their way to land right away. They’ll be grateful to know Gearóid is no longer in power. He is the one who ordered their imprisonment in the sea and had them hexed to fall under the hundred-year slumber.”

The idea of giants waking and threatening *Sin* instead of his father made me shudder.

“Can Grandma Riona get in here?”

He nodded. “Bardca linked the two places for her a long time ago. She likes to sleep in the light and loves the water.”

“I assume you still have Sluagh out searching for him.”

“Countless. Plus Laisrés’s crows.” *Sin* looked impassive as ever. “The Druids failed to trace the gateway Bardca created. Feera can normally garner intel quickly too. She is delving into minds left and right around Nos Ovscura. And yet, *nothing*. Not a hint of Jest either. As I said, he sealed his fate. He will come to us, love. And we will end him. Soon.”

I sensed the dead ends of the search for Bardca and Jestin also meant the conversation was over, so I willed Ma’s spear to wake.

With a swish through the air, the tip extended.

Though I’d trained on Nos Nua daily, the weapon had seen little daylight since before the honeymoon. I hadn’t been able to practice out in the open because my face may not have been widely known in this realm, but Ma’s spear *was*.

I wondered if the clan was okay—if the unbloods had infiltrated House Scáth like Ma warned. I wanted to see her, of course, but as selfish as it was to admit, I had bigger issues currently.

Then there was the fact I couldn’t step foot on Os Íseal without turning to soulform.

The Cradled Moons poured light onto my shoulders when I shed my coat and top layer, only wearing the sleeveless shirt I’d found in a leather trunk after *Sin* told me to dress lighter.

I wanted to join Dúma for a swim in this weather instead of train.

“You’re going to burn!”

A few hundred meters away, Ciel grinned as he squinted into the light. The golden rays on his black hair reminded me of our trip to the Western Pointe of Clais as children, where the sun had beaten down on us for half a day before we learned firsthand what a sunburn was. Pa had lathered our

arms with a soothing aloe for days, and we spent the rest of our visit hiding under a parasol. I hadn't cared. Not when I learned we were only there for the chief of Clan Ó Laighin to introduce us to his children.

"For people like us, unions and alliances are created young," Ma explained when she tucked us into bed that night.

"Not for you," Ciel countered, already too wise for his eight years.

Pa was born without a trace of magic in his line—a true unblood, and Ma had still married him.

"True," she relented. *"But I can promise you both this. You will have a say, and it will neither occur before you are of age, nor before you are ready."*

Ciel declared right then and there that girls were gross, and he was becoming a Druid to avoid marriage altogether.

I smiled as he headed toward us.

Devlin and Ailerby were the next to arrive. As soon as they landed, half of Ailerby's face shifted with a look in our direction—a greeting I now accepted as that of the Changelings. His face reverted only when Sin responded with a nod, but he lingered by Dúma and Niuna, taking a seat on the sand next to the water without acknowledging me.

Unsurprisingly, Ailerby had changed his appearance since yesterday. I had to wonder if the cropped blond hair and light blue eyes were meant to piss Ciel off. Ailerby struck quite the strong resemblance to a certain Daemon Prince.

I turned to Sin. "What was that about?"

He watched Dúma splash in the water. "I asked Ailerby to show me a specific face. Unlike most other Fae, Changelings have exceptional walls around their minds. I can get past them, but not as easily as others."

"Huh." Apart from the requirement of seeing a person's eyes, I hadn't known his Mindblood had any limitations.

Sin flourished his arm at the wooden targets set up several hundred meters away. He clapped Ciel on the chest in greeting as he reached us, striding past my brother to talk to his.

"I think I already forgot what *light* is," Ciel said, still squinting. He put his hands on his hips.

I forced a smile. "How was the night?"

From the corner of my eye, Laisrés burst into existence and landed on the sand with the literal grace of the gods. His gaze snagged on mine, and he

dipped his head from afar. He stalked toward the water to get his head wet, running tattooed fingers through dark hair.

Like Ailerby and Devlin, he wore light clothes too—sleeveless shirts and fitted pants made of airy fabric. Nearly half of Laisrés’s tattoos were on display today.

Ciel briefly glanced over his shoulder. “Dark, cold, lonely, and wet. Yours?”

“Freezing. Snowing.” I shrugged.

“Niuna is...interesting. Once you get past the comments.”

I knew exactly what Ciel meant and laughed at the perplexed look on his face. His dark gaze moved from Devlin to Ailerby and back again. “Wonder how the first night went for them,” he said.

“Talk to him. Devlin,” I clarified. “Ail didn’t say hello. Might need another day.”

He shrugged, trying to look indifferent. “Yeah, probably should. I’ll come throw with you in a bit.”

At that, Ciel left me to my targets.

I whirled the spear in my non-dominant hand, wiggling my fingers around it. On the outside, my hand looked completely healed, but something inside didn’t feel quite right. Like maybe a tiny bone had yet to finish mending.

“The Shadowess gave you her weapon,” Laisrés noted, setting a bag of spears he’d slung over his shoulder on the sand with a clatter.

I hadn’t seen him walk over.

He squinted as the Cradled Moons slivered his tan face. Drops of water from his wet hair slid down the sides. “Impressive.”

“You haven’t even seen me use it.”

“I meant the weapon, Sersa. Do you know *how* to use it?”

With a scoff, I turned away from him. “It will be *me* who’s giving you a lesson today, Laisrés. You trying to throw?”

“I am if you are.” He crouched to flip open the canvas bag and inspected a few spears. I couldn’t help but turn back to look, and he grinned brazenly from the ground. “Plus, I wanted to see how you were doing all alone in the mountains with your temperamental buck.”

“Buck?”

Laisrés gestured in a circle over his head, which looked like he was outlining a halo, but I realized was meant to be Nessin’s horns because the

Daemon King was anything but an angel.

Although Laisrés was on his way to annoying me four out of our five encounters so far, the fact he was the Mórrígan's son did intrigue me—and something else I couldn't quite put my finger on.

Across the shore, Sin moved at the slowest speed conceivable as he tilted his head in my direction, a near-crazed look in his white-flame eyes.

I rolled mine and looked away.

Clearly, Sin craved my praise. Then again, he had every reason to.

I don't know if I love you anymore.

But if Sin weren't my husband, I'd be *wishing* he were. Apart from his striking features, he was the tallest man in every space, with or without the horns, and his body screamed power and authority even while asleep. For me, it was more than physical though. Everything about his existence demanded attention, and he didn't have to do a single thing to demand mine.

And yet... I didn't understand the conflict I felt. Maybe it was my heart warning me to protect myself.

I felt his presence in my mind. Some force stretched between us, urging me to look his way again. Talking to Devlin still, a newfound smugness lurked across Sin's face, brighter than the glare of the Cradled Moons glinting off the sea.

That man—daemon—was more arrogant than anyone I knew. I raised my eyebrows in warning.

Stay out of my head, you gods-damned man child, I thought loud and clear.

Laisrés was watching me. “Do you need another moment to finish fucking Nessin in your head—actually, perhaps you're screaming at him? I can't tell... Or shall I throw first?”

I whirled around. “Watch and learn, half god.”

Lining up with the first target, I crossed my throwing arm over my chest and pinned it with the other in a stretch.

“It must have been something growing up with the Shadowess as your mother,” Laisrés remarked casually.

“Unless it was training, she was too busy for my brother and me.”

“Heading a clan strikes me as demanding work. From what I can tell at least, what with me being a half god who sits on his ass all day.”

Ironically, Laisrés took a seat on a nearby boulder. He flashed an overly confident smile he might as well have torn right off Sin's face.

“I don’t fault my mother,” I said. “She was the only chieftess in the entire Four Pointes of Clais. As far as I’ve heard, only one other woman oversaw a clan alone before I was born. This world doesn’t take kind to women in positions of power.”

“Seems like an oversimplification.”

I whipped my head around. “Was it an oversimplification when Jestin Drumghoul threatened to try out my ‘mortal cunt’ two days ago? When he tried to reduce me to a *body* instead of the queen I am?”

Coils of red kicked up the sand beneath me, furious and filled with emotion as if they lived and breathed and *felt*, both of us feeding off one another. Laisrés studied my magic, his gold-tinted green eyes shimmering with curiosity.

He conceded, finally looking toward the targets.

“Didn’t think so,” I hissed.

I swallowed, halfway embarrassed by my outburst. The other half justified it after what Laisrés said the other morning. I hadn’t given it a second thought, but now the conversation rushed back to me.

He owed me a gods-damned *apology*. But sense told me it was highly unlikely celestial beings knew how to do that.

Maybe that was the real reason I was so on edge. The reminder that Sin had experienced an endless line of lovers and pleasure resumed its determined broadside through my head. Meaningful or not, he’d confirmed as much last night.

It’d never bothered me before. So why now?

Aislinn. Clearly.

I slid my hand along the spear, finding the balance point before pulling my arm back and firing. The half god watched me once more, the dimple in his cheek well-defined, though he wasn’t smiling. Not even a little.

I returned my attention to the spear as it soared above the sand with a sharp swish.

A second later, it landed in a perfect bullseye.

“That weapon augments the aim of its thrower,” Laisrés said.

My arm shot into the air to catch the spear right as it soared back to me. It was my favorite thing about Ma’s weapon. You never had to retrieve it after a throw and, consequently, were rarely left defenseless.

“You first question my skill. You dare question my aim too?”

“You must be a strong thrower with a good eye to wield it, sure,” he

agreed with a nod, “but it is unlike any other weapon I know of.”

I gritted my teeth. The crimson returned, curling around my wrists, down to my feet in undulating flames. The tendrils even *felt* hot. I didn’t bother hiding them—I was who I was, and there was no changing it.

Still, a nagging in my gut wanted the red to retreat, to part for other feelings to come through like the sun.

But if Laisrés was going to stare, I’d give him a good show.

An encouraging warmth rippled through me when I shortened Ma’s spear and tossed it to Laisrés.

“You’re lucky I didn’t throw it *at* you for insulting me.” Leaning over the bag of practice spears, I plucked one off the top.

Laisrés was right about one thing. Not all weapons were made equal. Wood and iron, it was neither smooth to the touch like Ma’s, nor as perfectly weighted, but I’d thrown lesser quality spears countless times under her guidance.

I balanced the practice spear in my palm, gripped, and pulled back before releasing. It went straight through the target, leaving a hole in the center as it rolled on the sand. I only hesitated a beat, realizing the target was straw and wood-backed.

I shouldn’t have been able to pierce straight through it.

Ciel whistled across the way, hands on his hips. “Let’s see it, Shadowess!”

Niuna whooped as she rolled onto her front and balanced her chin in her hands. Even Sin and Devlin had stopped sparring to watch me.

A devilish smile curled Sin’s lips as if he were egging me on.

I selected another spear, whirling it confidently. My fingers spoke this weapon’s language, and I wasn’t about to let some conceited half god tell me I required his translation.

“You do not grow up as the Shadowess’s daughter without becoming an expert”—I released it, adopting a rhythm as I selected a third—“spear-thrower.”

Laisrés looked amused when it landed.

Perfectly centered.

I picked up the bag this time, not wanting to backtrack as I continued on my tirade, and set it down beside me. Then I threw the next.

And the next.

And the next.

The closer I got to Laisrés and with each target I destroyed, his smile broadened. Until I'd impaled them all right through the center.

I tore Ma's spear out of his hands. "Tell me. Is it difficult to accept when a woman is better than you?"

Still perched on the boulder, Laisrés licked his lips and tipped his head from side to side. "I admit I imagined a different moment in my head."

"And what moment was that?"

"You know..." He rolled his tan wrist, standing unhurriedly. "Telling you your elbow was too low. Showing you where to put your feet. Your *hands*." Laisrés grinned shamelessly.

An ego akin to the Daemon King's made perfect sense with his lineage.

I spun my spear in the hands Laisrés claimed he wanted to position then released it one final time before I glared at him. "I didn't owe you anything, but I won't prove myself to you again. So don't underestimate me again, half god."

Slowly, Laisrés prowled closer, his hands clasped behind him.

I felt the urge to back away, yet simultaneously frozen.

"Do you truly believe your mother is as skilled as she is, formidable as she is, without divine intervention, Sersa? Do you believe *you* are?"

I glared at him. "I never denied we have magic. Our blood is strong. Rare."

"Tell me," Laisrés said, voice lower. "Who do you think *gave* your mother that spear?"

He paused long enough for my curiosity to fester.

I opened my mouth to press him when the Daemon King's shout cut across the cave.

"*Laisrés!*"

Sin's knife-edge voice made me jump as it slashed through the warm air. I whipped my head around while Laisrés moved languidly to acknowledge him. The king spread his arms in question, maybe in challenge, like a crow flashing its wingspan. Something Laisrés would understand, no doubt. I hadn't glimpsed his magic—his blood—and out of sheer curiosity, I wanted to.

Sin studied us for a moment, not quite smiling, but with a hint of *something* indecipherable. "You going to talk or train?"

"I multitask efficiently," Laisrés called.

In the back of my mind, I heard the spear land. Heard it pierce the target

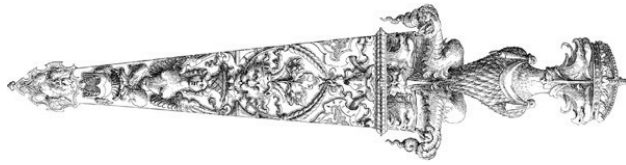
across the sandy expanse. Reflexively, I thrust my hand into the air, but Laisrés's arm was longer, and he caught Ma's spear without looking. Just as I had earlier. He shuffled it in his fist, silently gazing upon it like an old friend.

It was another advantage—if someone tried to pilfer the spear or impale its owner, it killed the interceptor.

But Laisrés was unscathed. Unharméd. Staring right at me with intense eyes that looked more gold than green beneath the daylight.

“She feels just as I remembered, Sersa. You can thank the Mórrígan for this weapon in your next prayer to her. I'm sure she'd love to hear your voice.”

Serena



IN A CIRCLE DRAWN IN THE SAND, LAISRÉS AND DEVLIN SPARRED WITH A *Sluagh*. Both looked our way as Ciel and I reached the ring after cleaning up the targets I'd destroyed. But only the half god got knocked in the jaw.

Laisrés shot Sin an accusatory look as if *he'd* hit him, and the *Sluagh* released a screech that confirmed it. Devlin grinned, leaping backward to dodge a swiping talon. Thankfully, metal guards protected its fingers. If they could be called that. Whatever they were, it looked ridiculous.

I loved it.

Devlin's maneuver made me wonder why he'd ever said he couldn't protect Ciel. He moved at breakneck speed—exactly what I expected of a Drumghoul, regardless of his Soulreaper abilities being little use in the Soullands.

“Don't get distracted. Next time, it'll aim for your manhood!” he shouted.

Laisrés cursed when he took another one of the *Sluagh's* blows to the gut and slammed the sand. On his back, he took deep breaths for a moment before he sat up, shoulders hunched and elbows resting on his knees.

“Hard to believe his mother is the Mórrígan,” I said.

Sin's corded muscles distracted me when he folded his arms. “Not really. He fakes it during training. His crows are his real advantage.”

A hand pressed to his stomach, Devlin chortled until Laisrés swept his

arm out and sent him flying onto the sand beside him. The prince's grunt and cuss echoed through the cave. After he and Laisrés recovered from their laughter, they stepped off to the side for a water break.

The rivalry that existed between Sin and Laisrés clearly didn't involve Devlin.

"When do we get to see the queen fight?" Laisrés called. His canteen hovered near his lips as he leered my way.

"Maybe when you manage to stay off your ass for an entire round," I said. "I know gods are lazy, but I expected better."

"I'll have to try harder," he replied.

Laisrés tugged off his shirt, revealing a tan body lightly dusted with dark hair, barely visible amidst hundreds of crows and feathers. Dropping to the ground, he assumed a push-up position and proceeded to perform repetition after repetition after repetition...

"Sersa."

Sin's voice jerked me alert, and I swore Laisrés grinned from the ground. Because he'd caught me watching.

As had Sin.

The word 'obvious' did not begin to describe how unmistakably this show was meant for Sin. Not me. Laisrés had claimed he liked to mess with him.

But my head whirled because I...*had* been looking.

Innes giggled behind her hand, earning her a tsk from her mother. The reaction made it seem unlikely she and Laisrés were lovers. But if not him, who?

Meeting Sin's gaze, I hoped the blush in my cheeks lent itself to the balmy air. But when Innes handed him a towel, he whipped it at the sand and approached the weapon racks.

Sin slid a staff free. Then a second.

Apparently, Innes was his towel girl or something. Or maybe it was just when he was shirtless.

Or maybe the person she wore perfume for the other night was Sin.

No. That was ridiculous.

What in Dúm's teeth is wrong with me?

Fabrications of all sorts were now poisoning my thoughts. Why they wouldn't go away was beyond me. No matter how hard I tried to shut them out, they always returned and persisted.

“You and me, Laz.” Sin looked my way. “Why don’t you spar with Ciel for a few?” he asked me gently, but there was nothing gentle *in* him. He looked ready to skin the tattoos off Laisrés’s body.

When I didn’t immediately move to the side, Sin raised an eyebrow that again recalled our talk about Archdaemon males.

“By all means,” I muttered and backed away, spreading my arms in a falsely accommodating gesture. Though I knew I’d be livid if the roles were reversed.

It had annoyed me this morning when *he* walked into the chalet shirtless.

Laisrés hopped to his feet with perfect form, simultaneously catching the metal staff Sin chucked his way. The half god tossed it from palm to palm and twirled it around with an adeptness that spoke of a time of war among the gods, one in which he’d likely served the goddess he called Mother.

“I thought we were done sparring after the last time,” Laisrés said.

Sin snickered. “Staffs, not fists today. You never hold back with me during training, Laz. You treat it like the real deal. That is all it is, after all. A bit of training to see how we measure up these days.”

“Are you certain you don’t wish to warm up some more?”

“I’m always ready to go. Just ask *my wife*.”

Gods.

When Ailerby hooted, I bit my tongue hard—I was already treading murky water with him.

“If you were good enough to necessitate a warm-up,” Sin added in a lofty voice, “you wouldn’t have nearly died in the Storming of Dalister, Laz. If you recall, I saved *your* arse from true death.”

“Aye. That wasn’t so long ago—what, fifteen years? The queen was nearly a *babe* back then, no?”

Devlin sucked in a breath as Sin sucked on his teeth. Darkness eclipsed what little humanity existed in his gaze.

Though he stood roughly half a foot taller than Laisrés without his horns, Sin was leaner. But his truly terrifying stature didn’t need an ounce more of muscle.

That wasn’t to say Laisrés was small at almost six and a half feet tall. He just wasn’t half Colossi, give or take whatever other blood had trickled into the Drumghoul line.

Sin and Laisrés circled one another.

“What is happening here?” Innes hiss-whispered, now watching beside

me.

Devlin chuckled. “This, Innes, is what you’d call a—”

“*Pissing contest*,” we said together.

“This is ridiculous,” I snapped.

Devlin leaned toward me. “It seems the daemon in my brother is simply asserting himself.”

“He was shirtless,” I said.

“Your words, not mine.” Devlin clasped his hands behind his back, still focused on the ring.

“I *meant* that it’s not like Laisrés was naked, and your brother doesn’t *need* to assert himself. He’s the gods-damned Daemon King.”

“Perhaps you ought to tell *him* that. Or we will have an Otherworld-Soullands war on our hands. If you disliked the gods before, wait until you’re in the crosshairs of battle with them.”

My stomach flipped. Not for Sin, but for Laisrés.

I didn’t need to see Sin fight at full force to know he could break someone in half. But his comment came to mind.

He fakes it during training. His crows are his real advantage.

Whatever that meant.

Surprisingly, Laisrés made the first move. As their staffs knocked against one another, the cave echoed with a loud *clack*.

The parries started off slow. A swipe of a staff here. A block there. But their rhythm swiftly transformed, their pace quickening as the blows became almost too fluid to track.

Their next exchange blurred.

Sin twirled his staff around his back, simultaneously whacking and disarming Laisrés before slamming it into his chest. Sand went flying as he stumbled toward the edge of the makeshift ring, the crows and feathers marking his body shimmering with sweat.

A condescending dare lurked in Sin’s colorless eyes. He stood tall, his horned stature casting a menacing shadow behind him. “Best two out of three?”

Laisrés put his hands on his hips. “You are clearly the better combatant, Nessin.”

“Oh, come on! No one would forfeit that easily on the battlefield.”

“On the battlefield, you know I have no need for a weapon as useless as a staff.” Again, the crows beneath Laisrés’s skin looked trapped as they seemed

to flutter.

It made *my* skin crawl.

I entered the ring, plucking the weapon off the ground. “Not that this isn’t fun, but I wanted to train, thank you. King against queen instead?”

I circled the ring, taking Laisrés’s place. A single glare in his direction made him step out.

A lascivious look behind Sin’s eyes tainted the grin he wore.

“What?” I asked. “You said you’re always ready to go, didn’t you?”

The cave filled with stifled laughter. Innes clapped and Draea called, “Should we place bets, Your Darknesses?”

“Ready?” I asked.

“You give your opponent warning?”

Sin lunged without another word, winding his staff to my left.

Not bothering to block, I dropped into a crouch and let the staff soar over my head. Even a dull weapon in Sin’s hands *should* have decapitated me, thanks to his impossible speed and strength.

I popped to my feet, whirled around Sin, and whacked him behind the knees. He didn’t flinch, let alone grunt. Gripping his staff tighter, he faced me and licked his scarred top lip, curled up into a smirk.

He’d allowed me the hit. Obviously.

Out of nowhere, Sin moved dizzyingly quick—and disarmed me in a heartbeat. My frustration didn’t have the chance to fester because he spun me around. I tried to fight, but my resistance only brought us to the ground.

Then Sin was behind me. His hips pressed against my rear.

“Seriously?” I growled over my shoulder.

He’d dropped his staff to crisscross my arms in front of my bent knees, forcing me into a bow with my palms face-up on the ground. It didn’t hurt, but he could dislocate both my shoulders with a single tug.

Or tear them out for good.

“I didn’t say I wanted to grapple, Nessin.”

“Be prepared for anything in battle,” he countered.

I twisted free after a struggle of grunts and gritted teeth. Throwing his monumental frame required all my energy.

When I got him flat on his back after a struggle, I knew it was another small win he’d allowed me.

“Ha!” I said, anyway.

A cloud of sand surrounded us. Before it settled, Sin caught me by the

elbows, whirled my body all the way around so my feet were near his head, and rolled me. He didn't put all his weight on me, but he held me in a lock. My cheek pressed flat against the sand. Thank gods it was soft, or I'd be cussing him out.

"Will you yield?" he asked.

"What do you think?"

"I think this training session is done." Sin sounded utterly amused, and I hated that I knew the exact smile he wore without seeing it. "See everyone tomorrow. Same time."

Without another word, they headed off with their Sluagh and left us entangled and alone on the sand.

"I needed to train," I said, my cheek still squished slightly. "I *need* to, Nessin."

After a breath, he released me and stood. My lungs eased, but not my annoyance with him.

I rolled onto my back and shot him my best dagger eyes.

He wiped the sweat off his top lip and flashed his palm, the other on his waist. "Honestly, I should be the one who's mad."

"You aren't in competition with anyone else, and you didn't need to put Laisrés in his place—or whatever you thought that achieved, Sin."

"I wasn't putting him in his place," he said nonchalantly. "I was telling him to shut up and keep his fucking shirt on."

I propped myself up. "Says the man who walked into the chalet shirtless this morning in front of two other women. Shall *I* walk around shirtless?"

"Oh, I dare you," Sin chuckled. But his expression turned pensive, and his eyes narrowed. "Laisrés put the target on his back. He's lucky I didn't run a spear right through him. Then he's got the balls to say *the queen was barely a babe*," he added, making a poor attempt to mock Laisrés's voice.

Sin pulled me to my feet.

"That doesn't give you the excuse to act like a heathen." I sighed, straightening before him. "But I suppose you *are* a heathen. A secretive, arrogant, very tall heathen who had better stop looking at me like that."

"You love this heathen."

"You simply *had* to call me your wife too."

He exhaled another furious sound. "I really wanted to play by your rules, but then you told me you wanted me now more than ever."

"Did you conveniently forget the rest of that conversation for the dozenth

time? It ended with me leaving.”

“Must you remind me?” he said, scowling.

“You need reminders. We talked about this.”

But there were other things I wanted to get out in the open because Sin’s earlier reaction wasn’t totally unfounded. Not that he needed to worry about anything, but he deserved to know.

“Laisrés said something else. Yesterday.”

Sin gritted his teeth. “Yes?”

“He told me I ought to take a lover,” I said flatly.

With no further introduction.

Apparently, directness was the wrong approach. Sin pulled me flush against him by my rear, his greedy hands squeezing. Every hard plane of his body made the heat surge inside me.

“And here I thought you were going to keep the details from me.” His hands tightened. “I am all ears because I don’t believe I’ve pieced together the *full* conversation myself, love.”

Distracted by his touch, I hardly heard the threat in his words. The sweet scent of his sweat coalesced with the salt in the air, intoxicating me further.

Every part of me *loved* where this daemon’s hands were.

I melted into Sin, and my voice emerged practically a breathless moan. “How do you know *everything*?”

“I have my ways. So?” Sin’s thumb traced the underside of my breast. Deliberately. Distractingly.

I sighed. “Apparently, Laisrés heard our conversation the other night. Though the fortress walls didn’t seem very thin when you punched it... He claimed taking another lover would help me determine—what I wanted.”

Sin untangled us. Immediately.

I grabbed his wrist with both hands and tugged him backward.

“Sersa. *Please* release me this instant.”

“I won’t. I’m telling you because this is how a relationship works. You don’t keep secrets. Do not make this about anyone else! It’s not,” I snapped. “Now thank me for telling you the truth and apologize for ruining the moment.”

Sin turned with a heavy inhale. “Thank you”—his nostrils flared—“for telling me.”

I dipped my head. “You are most welcome.”

“Your turn. Tell me—first, are you entertaining his suggestion?” he said

through clenched teeth. “Second, what moment did I ruin exactly?”

I flashed him a smile. “You had me right where you wanted.”

Sin looped his foot around my ankle, causing me to fall into him. But he caught me. The position of his hands—the back of my upper thigh and the side of my breast—assured me the daemon had returned. He bent the knee he’d situated between my legs.

“Do you mean right where *you* wanted?” he asked.

“No.”

“Mm hmm. And Laisrés’s suggestion?”

“I *should* let you suffer,” I said. “Let you agonize over whether I’m entertaining it.”

“Laisrés likes—*lives* to infuriate me, Sersa.”

“He said as much.”

“We served in a war or two together. Rather, he served in *my* legion until I told his mother there was value in him leading his own.”

“You know the Mórrígan *personally*?”

Sin smirked, though there was something else behind it. “I served as a chieftain. I commanded the entire Soullands army apart from the Colossi, and I do not mean the Soul Guard.”

“*Entire*? In which wars?”

His smug smile widened. “The Second Colossi War, the Fae Rebellion, the Third Colossi War—we will be here a while if you want me to go on. But Laisrés *is* right in a way. You’ve had but one lover.”

“You’re not my lover, you’re—”

His eyebrow raised, and I studied the slash mark dividing it. “Yes?”

I shifted against his knee, still between my shaking legs.

Slack-jawed, Sin studied me, his white eyes sweeping over my features. I had no way of knowing what he was thinking, but gods, I wanted to.

“Love for one person,” he said after a torturous pause, “does not necessarily abate one’s curiosity of others—if his claim has made you curious, that is.”

I flinched. “Does that go both ways?”

“I have zero curiosity. *Zero*.”

“Because you’ve already had every lover imaginable, daemon?”

“Does that bother you?”

“I don’t know.” Maybe Laisrés’s taunt had gotten under my skin even more than I thought. I bit my lip. “I imagine our first time together was pretty

tame for a daemon like yourself. Boring, even.”

“Love.” Sin frowned and lifted me effortlessly, bringing us level. “Being that connected to you was my favorite experience. Intimate or otherwise. Hands down. Ever. And not just for the carnal reasons you’re thinking of.”

“You are such a liar.”

“Ask me for the memory, Sersa. I will prove you wrong in a heartbeat.”

My own heart pattered unevenly at Sin’s unexpected willingness to open up his mind, but I sensed he might be telling the truth about this. Maybe.

“You are a goddess, love. The physical, of course—Dúm, the godsdamn physical *kills* me.” He pulled my black strands loose and ran his fingers through the length. Then his punishing hands reminded me of their grip on my backside. “But unlike me, all those Os Ísealn clansmen who wanted you for the physical could not handle the best part of you. Your mind, love.”

“Mm hmm.”

“I mean it,” Sin snapped. “You showed up a half god not five minutes ago. You protect your loved ones fiercely, whether or not they deserve it. You care for all creatures. Even Sluagh, which is staggering. Not to mention, who else is going to put a daemon—a godsdamn king—in his place? If you ever wonder why others treated you with any less respect than you deserve, it is because they were threatened by you. They wanted to control you because you are a fucking force, Sersa. Small minds fear strong women more than anything. Do not compare yourself to past lovers of mine, because there is no comparison to *you*. There is no one else for me.”

Pretty words.

And yet, I fought a smile as Sin set me down.

Not letting me go, his eyes brimmed with mischief. “If you wish to *expand* your palate, however, we will set some ground rules. One: I get to watch everything.”

I moved to knee Sin. Both of his trapped mine without breaking eye contact.

“Two: Laisrés will *never* be on the menu. Not as an entrée, an appetizer, not even a taste, love.” He looked disgusted. “Three—”

“Good gods, I don’t want anyone else! What is wrong with you? You’d actually *let* another touch me?”

Sin chuckled darkly. “Sure. Over my dead body. More like over theirs because I would sooner commit murder than watch anyone lay a hand on you. Regardless of the reason. Looks like I got the reaction I wanted though.

You only want me, huh? Good girl,” he purred.

Because you’re only getting me.

“I don’t throw this word around, but you are insane. You know that?”

“For you? Absolutely. As for Laisrés, I rely on him to the extent I must. He is related to a goddess, and I know *her* well enough.” Sin sighed. “Please. Just stay away from him. He is, unfortunately, rather good at mind games.”

I didn’t know what to make of that—if it, too, was a warning or simply coming from a place of protectiveness. Maybe insecurity after the things Sin had done and the doubt festering between us.

His eyebrows pinched together. “I am going to tell you something, and you are not going to call me old like you’ve affectionately done before.” Sin held my gaze, staring into me so deep it felt like he’d infiltrated my soul. “I am *centuries* old, and yes, I’ve had a lot of lovers. Did I marry any of those lovers? No. Did I want to marry any of them? No again. Did I have so much as a *thought* of marrying them? Not one. Did I imagine having spoiled-ass children with them? No, Sersa, I did not.”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. “Calling our hypothetical spawn ‘spoiled’ was rude, I admit.”

“Mmm, was it? As I said, barred topic.” Sin leaned forward, his lips hovering closely. “*You* are my queen, and guess what? You may pretend all you want and play hard to get with me—I actually love it secretly—”

“More secrets, lovely.”

Sin continued right over me, “—but when we courted, you eagerly agreed to marry me when I proposed. *Nothing* I did with your heart after I thieved your memories was misleading.”

I pulled back, my mouth falling open.

The cave silenced, save for the seagulls and crashing waves in the distance. The wind curled through the opening to our right, calling attention to the sweat beading on my neck.

Sin smirked. “You think I followed you to the Devil’s Tail without a plan? It backfired, but I had one.”

“When we met...we were already engaged?” The words slipped from my mouth, breathless, thoughtless.

“Of course, I secured your hand beforehand. I knew you’d hate me for stealing your memories, but compelling my secret lover to wed me without asking her first? It shouldn’t surprise you I always intended for you to be my queen.”

“Did I *want* to be queen?”

“Can you handle the truth?”

Clearly, I’d wanted to. Three moons ago, I would have stepped onto the Daemon Throne beside Sin without question.

“You also wanted several spoiled-ass youngling daemons running around—in the future, but nevertheless.”

“Several!”

Good thing Sin was still holding me up because I felt weak. I’d *never* wanted children, let alone spawn, and I realized the daemon looming before me had changed my views.

“Yes. Back to being barred,” he said smoothly. “Your decision to slap me the other night cut our conversation short. I intended to explain the rest.”

“I—” My mouth clamped shut. I had no words.

“I am yours, and I want that exact future, Sersa. Decide after the fête, Jestin, all of it. But know that I am more than prepared to give you it—*everything*—if you want it.”

The pretty words didn’t stop the abrupt and irrational anger from rising inside me. Sin had stolen so many of our conversations, leaving me to feel like a spectator in this relationship.

My conflicting emotions left me confused.

Behind my eyes, the cave ignited in red.

No.

Instantly, the color changed. Lightened.

Out of nowhere, the magic dragged Sin down to the sand. I might’ve laughed, but it was not red by any stretch of the imagination.

It was the palest of *pinks*.

“Sersa.” He glared up at me. “Now is a perfect moment to *practice*. Tell your blood to release me.”

The tendrils curled up my leg and waist before settling around the crook of my elbow. Not a second later, a pink tentacle threw me at Sin, tugging a yelp up my throat.

He broke my fall as I landed on top of him and looked around us, equally enraptured by this new manifestation.

Realization flooded his expression.

“Would you look at that? Even your blood wants you to stop pushing me away. It *wants* us to be together. What is this color though?” Sin studied it for a moment before his gaze flicked down to mine. Then to my straddled

position over him. Tone sharpening, he said, “Why is it *pink*, Sersa?”

Closing my eyes to keep my mind concealed and to ward off the pale hue didn’t work.

No no no.

Conflicting emotions or not, *nothing* I felt—clearly—was as potent as the pink hue.

“Ailerby said you’ve only seen red lately.”

“Maybe *don’t* talk to Ailerby about me.” I tried to wriggle free from his arms. *Tried* being the keyword.

Mirth filled Sin’s voice. “Sersa. Does this color happen to say you *love* me?”

“No...”

Sin threw his head back to laugh, the sound filling the cave. He cussed as he hit his horns, clearly having forgotten about them in his delight. But he only grinned wider.

“Just when I thought I’d be the only one making proclamations of love for the next decade, your blood decides to do it for you? My, my, the gods love me. I fucking love this. You can lie to me. You can’t lie to what’s inside of you.”

I opened one eye and groaned.

My head couldn’t keep up with my gods-damned body.

Sin flipped me onto my back. “I am going to make this color fill *every* godsdamn room in every safehouse, the citadel, and the fortress if it’s the last thing I do, love.”

His breath dusted my throat, and my back arched with an uncontainable pleasure-filled gasp. I fisted the sand.

“May I touch you?” he asked.

“Yes.” My unsteady breathing drowned out the waves rolling in and out on the shore.

Sin cruelly lowered his lips to mine and kissed me deep, slow, and as perfect as my imagination always recalled.

But this was real. So real.

“Is this *my* color, love?”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Liar. Will you acknowledge we’re still married at the very least?” A hint of desperation marked Sin’s words. His lips found my jaw, working up toward my ear. “Call me ‘husband’ *once*.”

“No.”

“Fine. Repeat after me. *Then* I will touch you.”

“I’m not calling you—”

He bit my earlobe, and my surroundings spun until his voice brought me back to reality. At least, I hoped I wasn’t imagining this moment too.

“Not that,” Sin promised. As we locked eyes, the daemonic chuckle that came from him could make a woman cry.

I was that woman—ready to cry because I needed this. Him.

“*You*,” he said, sweeping his fingers between my thighs.

“*You*,” I echoed nervously.

“*Are*.”

“*Are...*”

“*My*.” Sin touched me again as reward.

“*My...*” I wasn’t sure I wanted to know how this statement ended.

“*God*.”

“*God*,” I gasped.

He simultaneously kissed my forehead.

“That is *not* where I want your lips,” I said, swallowing a breathless sound.

“I am well aware.” His deliberate pauses had me immediately frustrated. Making his way down my body, Sin held my gaze the entire descent. “Don’t look away or I’ll stop.”

I nodded, sinking my teeth into my lower lip. I’d obey anything Sin said. Anywhere he led me right now. I was ready to beg, and I hated myself for that.

Damn all the fabrications.

Damn Aislinn Hellick.

Damn his lies.

I wanted this—Sin—more.

The pressure between my thighs built with each of his strokes, and Sin adeptly found the bundle of nerves through my thin pants.

Not thin enough.

“Are you ready for all the *Iarsmaí* to watch and carry word of how well I take care of my queen?”

“*Please*.”

Sin grazed his teeth along my midriff before he traced the path with the slowest of licks. He sucked on my flesh. Blew a soft breath on my skin.

Skimmed his hand under my shirt, beneath my training bra, and rolled my nipple until it peaked.

All the blood rushed between my legs, my center pulsing for him.

“Ness—”

A dark chuckle echoed around and within me.

“Too bad you looked away,” Sin said, more innocently than the situation called for.

My eyes shot open, making the cave spin worse. The rays of light pouring through the cutout overhead reminded me of his single instruction.

Don't look away or I'll stop.

I propped myself up. “Are you jesting me? Is this what you meant when you said we played games of denial?” Heat pooled between my legs. I uncurled my hands, releasing fistfuls of sand.

“I warned you.” Sin smirked down at me, his hair hanging in his scarred yet perfect face as he continued to draw lazy circles along my midriff. “You want release?”

I nodded.

“Then admit the truth your thoughts are drowning both of us in. Admit what your blood is saying—that you love me so damn much it hurts. Otherwise, as we agreed upon last night, you don't get my body for your play.”

Sin stood and put his hands on his hips, his shadow eclipsing me.

If denying me really was just a game to make me cave or want Sin more—more, always more—he'd win. Every time.

I needed his touch. *Now.*

“Okay, I—”

“*No.* Being *physical* before you're certain will only worsen the situation. Think on it for a couple of days. That is what you asked of me to begin with.”

I growled as I sat up.

Before I could find any words, Sin added, “Time to head back.”

Relentless were the pink wisps whirling around my head for the rest of the day after I bathed. Innes insisted on helping me, but I wanted to be alone with my thoughts.

Like an uncontainable river, my feelings for Sin would flow and flow, even if I tried to stand in the middle and stop them. They rushed into me, filling me up until they *overflowed*.

Sin knew. I knew.

The hesitation—whatever held me back—was strangely different from what I'd experienced on our honeymoon.

Maybe it was the lingering fear of us breaking in two. Or that calling Sin mine meant opening myself up to the possibility of losing him again. But some inexplicable force told me to retreat, to push and pull on that cord between us, and test whether it might snap or unravel when simply giving in would be effortless.

At the same time, the lies still burned between us like an incessant flame, still hot, still leaving me feeling raw. Though I truly wanted to heal, maybe I wanted to dwell in that fury more if it meant I could avoid reality and the possibility of being burned again by the king I loved.

Or maybe...

Maybe I feared I would burn *Sin* this time. As heartless and vindictive as it was, maybe part of me wanted him to feel everything I had.



When I woke in my frigid bed the following morning, I hardly remembered drifting off at all. But I woke certain of one thing: a dream had helped me sleep so deeply.

It *wasn't* a dream, but another memory. Nothing more than lighthearted images of us at Sin's hidden apartment again, lazing around together as we chatted and laughed in front of his fireplace for bells, wrapped in a thick plaid blanket. Never had I seen him so at peace—and all because of *me*.

Despite its simplicity, the soft images that came right from the mind I *needed* to open up for me summoned that pink hue for the second time. It flooded the entire room and surrounded me as I lay in bed. Alone. Cold. Confused. Until I felt equally guilty and loved by Sin because he was *right*.

I needed to open myself up to him too. Without fear or restraint.

SIN



Sin,

I need to stay here—probably until the fête. We run the risk of ruining our cover if I drop off the face of Nos Ovscura before Eventide is over.

We've made headway with the rumors. The Circle is looking into the validity of the claims you're down south. And west. And in Faerie Forest. They're still coming into the Plume but avoiding the Crescendo entirely. I don't believe they suspect me yet—but maybe.

The news is out that Aislinn disappeared as well. The Circle is positioning it as your honeymoon. How lovely! Do tell Sersa for me, won't you?

Anyway... Either Jestin isn't circulating the High Houses right now or the Circle members are somehow concealing it from Feera. She thinks he's gone quiet.

P.S. Hope Sersa hasn't murdered you yet, my horny horned friend.

- Thane



S -

Laisrés neither passed nor failed the check as I have failed to delve into his mind during each training session. I'm certain a Fae built the walls because they're too thick to get past. I think it's time to solicit assistance from one of them. Say the word, and I'll track down your contact.

Thane wants to stay in the city to avoid suspicion. His mind is fine. No commands. Still submitting to regular checks.

The Circle has kept up their act, pretending the empty throne and citadel are of no concern. They're failing to contain the rumors about Aislinn's sudden disappearance. The union is being questioned. Thane did surprisingly well with planting the information, and the Eye is eager for your birthday celebration. It's all they're talking about. Though the whisperings do include Sersa Drumghoul's return... A riot broke out in the slums, and the people were demanding their mortal queen. Has she agreed to be sworn in yet?

No other updates. Nothing on Bardca either. I'm sorry.

- F



A FEW UNEVENTFUL DAYS PASSED.

Each morning, I brought Dúma out to hunt and trained before either the house or the moons had risen.

Then we trained at the rendezvous point, where Feera used her Mindblood to hide and delve through the others' minds.

Sersa avoided Laisrés.

I avoided *murdering* Laisrés.

Finally, I reviewed updates in bed from Thane and Feera before each sleepless night ensued.

Trusting Thane and Feera's word was easier after all this time, but not exactly *easy*. Every minute Thane stayed in Nos Ovscura to revel away the Eventide alone posed its risks. Feera was checking his mind daily, yes, but the lies he was spreading about my whereabouts could get back to him. Feera could miss *one* Gilder, or Thane could forget to mention someone he'd spoken to, and all our work would collapse.

There was no fucking use in trying to rest tonight. I had read through both their updates, unable to fully absorb the words, before giving up.

Every waking minute since the pink first appeared the other day, I waited for Sersa to come to me and restrained my need to go to her. She'd been keeping mostly to herself the last few days—hanging around Innes before bed and sipping on wine. All while trying to stealthily trade pieces of lingerie in hopes of garnering bits about Innes's love life.

Little did Sersa know Innes was with Thane. *Not* Laisrés.

Her curiosity with Innes's relationship—because she believed it to be with the half god—perplexed me.

Night after night, I was subjected to a practically endless stream of Sersa's fragmented thoughts from across the chalet.

The shard allowed me to sense so much, feel so much. If there was a hell, my personal guest room would be filled with the musings of my wife making pros and cons lists in her head about trusting, forgiving, and loving me.

Tonight had been no different.

My mind raced endlessly, the cravings surged, and the sweating was worsening to the point where I suspected the others were beginning to notice. I hardly ever sweated during training and now left each session drenched.

I couldn't sleep, let alone rest my eyes, if I tried.

Which was why I found myself deep in the woodland, blinking the falling snow from my eyelashes.

Each breath I took smelled crisp and resinous, of a land ensnared in the never-ending Rime the Theas Mountains were known for.

Another inhale burned my straining lungs.

I had been at it for a bell, storming one pine tree at a time. I started with the largest I could find—and what a fucking sight *that* must have been for the

gods. One failure after another. I'd gradually set my sights on a smaller tree each time, hoping I might summon enough Colossi strength to level even the most pathetic of them.

I honed in on my target straight ahead.

Coated in ice, the lower trunk was a stretch of branchless bark. Ideal so as to not impale myself upon them. One more failure and I might be ready to. It stood well over a hundred feet tall. Even *if* I could shift, I would not come close to level with the top.

I dug my heels into the ground, ready to charge for perhaps the dozenth time. If not the ability to shift, my Colossi strength had to be accessible to *some* degree. I would take what I could get at this point.

Another inhale. I braced myself once more, bending my knees.

And launched myself forward, sprinting at the pine.

My heels struck the ground hard, but not with the usual impact—that resounding sound of Colossi steps quaking the earth. I dropped my shoulder at the last second and rammed into the trunk with as much strength as I could muster.

The bones in my shoulder made a crunching sound.

I grunted as the force of my failure flung me backward, landing hard on the earth and staring up at the snow-clad canopy.

My body burned from the abuse I'd relentlessly put it through each morning. The commands I'd surreptitiously lobbed at the others during training yielded zero godsdamn luck either.

No Colossi blood.

No Bonespeaker blood.

No chance of beating Jest in single combat. With the Sluagh, sure, but take them away, and what did I have?

Nothing.

The only ability I *had* retained was reaping souls. It was ironic—a mere gift from the gods themselves—because anywhere I went, any time I desired, I could yank a partial soul from a wraith's body.

As if to bring about my own ruin, I had kept the one ability that *enabled* my addiction.

“I am useless.”

My fingers twitched against the snow. The wetness was now seeping through my wool coat and pants. Yet I felt little sensation. I was willing to bet I could be frozen in a fucking block of ice and the perspiration would

persist.

My wife was the *only* thing stopping me from devouring the fuck out of my stash—hidden beneath the chalet’s floor. Granted, Sersa was a far better reason to stay strong than I’d ever had before.

I sat up, gripped my visibly dislocated arm hard, and shoved it back in place. It vibrated downward, reaching into my fingertips and up my neck.

Physical pain was fucking *nothing* compared to withdrawing.

The fête was so close I practically tasted the Circle’s blood. A week—*less than a week*. Jestin would take the bait. I’d wager my life on the chances of him showing. Especially after Sersa showed me Jestin’s taunt.

One for the mortal world.

One for the Otherworld.

And one for the Underworld.

He wanted her to serve as some link between the three realms—her blood and soul being the key.

Jestin’s end would be sweeter than a hundred souls.

Yes, tell yourself that.

While the hallucinations of Mum’s voice bore no rollicking, they also seemed to encourage me to cave. To use, use, *use*. My imminent, slowly heightening withdrawal was destroying me. I’d gone days without a soul. *Days*. Since the binge.

No matter how I tried to relieve the pounding in my skull, it wouldn’t burst.

At that, I got to my feet and summoned Evra to return me to the summit.

Sersa was strong without me, but my present ineptitude held her back from being indomitable. And to end Jestin, I needed every drop of blood in my veins to get it the fuck together.

Protecting Sersa was all that mattered, and the only way to do that was to kill every last one of her enemies.

I was more than willing to stain my hands with as much blood as was required. I wanted to build and *be* a haven for Sersa because her free will—her decision to live here or to return to Os Íseal, to be queen or not—*all* hinged on her being truly free.



I turned the corner to my room only to find Sersa lying on her stomach, propped up on her elbows, on my daybed. It was all-wood and massive, with no head- or footboards to accommodate my horns. Sersa looked so small in it. *So right.*

Except for the sea of letters scattered around her.

I paused in the doorway. “Are those what I think they are?”

Sersa didn’t bother looking up to address me. Instead, she focused on the letter in her hand and said, “Indeed, they are.”

“Huh.” I smiled at her. “Look at that—you’re reading, love.”

“Yes, your personal business is quite an intriguing topic.”

Chuckling, I stepped into the room and closed the door behind me. I unbuttoned my damp wool coat and hung it on the door hook before crossing the room. Hovering over the daybed, I tried to see which correspondence she was reading. All the letters were either from Feera or Thane, and instead of making two neat piles to signify which she’d finished reading, I suspected the chaos that surrounded Sersa was something only she understood.

Subtly, she cleared her throat and tilted her shoulders—and the letter—away from me. The movement shifted her nightdress. The tiny garment *barely* covered the start of where her flesh curved at the top of her thighs.

Fuck.

I wanted to rip off my gloves and trace the line right under her ass—

“I came here looking for you but only found these,” she said, breaking my trance.

I swallowed and turned my back on her, tugging my sweaty shirt over my head, tossing it, and lowering into the armchair in the corner to untie my boots. Just for something to do with my hands. Unfortunately, the armchair gave me the perfect view of her.

“I would have let you read them,” I said, *trying* to tear my focus away.

Snow and ice clung to my laces. Taking out my frustration, I started to unknot them.

“I didn’t know you were writing to anyone. Besides, I think this is a fair trade. You read my mind? I read your letters.” Finally, she rolled onto her back. Still propped up on her elbows, she met my gaze.

I could *almost* see up her nightgown. Sersa knew what she was doing.

“So. Where were you?” she asked.

I sat back, giving up on my boots, and planted my hands on the armrests. “We were low on firewood.”

“At third bell.”

“Yes. The chalet was getting cold.”

“I feel fine.”

Naturally. Sersa felt fine because I’d consistently had to rinse off in cold water every other bell. My body temperature elevated hers through the shard.

If I was not careful, my *withdrawal* could pass through it too. The most pathetic part was that it had hardly started.

The hallucinations were few and far between. My heart rate was elevated, but nowhere near what it *could* be. The aggression? It was difficult to see in myself. Especially as of late. Constantly replaying Jestin standing over Sersa enraged me. With good fucking reason.

Likewise, Sersa’s blood had dithered between pink and red each day during training. Whenever the color lightened, her wrath hung onto the vibrant crimson by mere strands. I’d caught her glaring at me multiple times. Because here the pink was, trying to reign over her. To force her to see and accept the truth.

Sersa resumed her perusing and leafed through a few letters before abandoning them altogether. She slid off the bed and closed the distance between us.

Her thoughts were so godsdamn clear.

Sersa’s sweater hung open over the satin nightdress that stopped well above mid-thigh. Black strips of hair messily draped her shoulders.

“I read a letter from someone who signed off as ‘F,’” she started. Her black eyebrows arched. “Sworn in, huh?”

I sifted through Sersa’s thoughts. She knew full well she already *was* Daemon Queen. Any ceremonial fluff would be a formality and nothing more.

“Feera,” I answered.

“You’ve never—courted Feera, have you?”

Caught off-guard, a laugh escaped me. I relaxed my hands. Sersa’s midnight eyes dropped to my flexed abdominal muscles and the same faint trail of hair she’d traced days ago. Her imagination ran wild, following the slanted indentations of my hipbones.

“No, love,” I said. “She was *also* present for my birth.”

“That means nothing among immortals.”

I inhaled through flared nostrils. “True. But *no*.”

“And any Gilders I should know about?”

“I’ve never slept with a Gilder.”

Sersa scoffed. “*Sure.*”

“I am telling the truth,” I said.

“Who *were* all your lovers, then?”

“Is this really the conversation you want to be having right now?” I asked.

Her mind said no. Sersa was here for a very different reason.

I leaned forward in my seat. A dare.

“You’re right,” she said. “It doesn’t matter who they were. At least, I’m telling myself that.” Sersa slid her hand over the very shoulder that was dislocated mere moments ago, noting the scraped and bruised skin. Unless I consumed a soul, the evidence of charging at trees ten times my size would remain for a few days. “What happened?”

“Training,” I answered.

“It looks painful.”

“Sometimes training requires pain, no?”

Sersa shrugged but narrowed her eyes. Her thoughts trailed off in a dozen different directions before she met my gaze once more. “So, do you want me—to be sworn in as queen?”

Being officially sworn in without her had never been part of the plan. I had put off the Silent Rite for three moons, spitting in the Circle’s faces at their repeated requests.

Sersa clearly expected no answer when she climbed onto my lap and straddled me. Her fingers played with the torc around my neck.

I couldn’t let her take it off. Under any circumstances.

Fortunately, her fingers trailed down the center line of my abdomen, splaying across my scarred skin.

I clenched my jaw.

I didn’t know how to tell Sersa that, beneath my glamoured skin, the curse had affected me far worse than it ever had the Old King. Why or how it stretched beyond our kin’s inability to recreate with anyone other than mortals or wraiths with partial souls was beyond *me*.

I almost forgot to answer Sersa’s question—her touch was better than souls.

You sure about that? my thoughts echoed.

“I want you to *want* to be sworn in, love,” I replied, ignoring the taunting voice in my head.

“Mm hmm...” Sersa said. “But maybe I want you to *convince* me to be your queen for real.”

I loosened the tips of my gloves and tossed them on the dresser, ready to do anything she wanted.

Sersa was utterly unaware of her authority over me.

All words left my head as she took my hand and skimmed it up the front of her thigh, beneath her sweater and satin until I reached her hip.

Bare skin. Nothing beneath.

Godsdamn.

My ravenous hand twitched in reflex, taking hold of her ass as she led my other between her thighs. Sersa was slick—needy and asking.

No, *telling* me what she wanted.

I sighed, fighting the rumble in my chest. “You’ve never been on top, love. I didn’t *let* you on the ship to Nos Nua. Are you here to give me a preview?”

“Off the table,” she said immediately.

“I am aware of our agreement, Sersa. Hence why I said *preview*.”

Her dress rode up her thighs as she slid her hand down her body and directed my fingers back and forth, dragging over her clit. The sight all but hypnotized me.

“Are you saying you want something from me, love?”

Sersa rolled her hips and moaned when only the tips of my fingers breached her.

I pulled back before she seized what she wanted but rolled her clit between my knuckles. Throwing her head back, Sersa gasped like she’d never been touched before.

I tapped her on the hip, and she dropped her chin to study me.

“If you want to avoid a repeat of the other day, you *will* look into my eyes when I touch you.”

Sersa explored the contours of my bicep. “Why are you so adamant about eye contact lately?”

“Because I want you to look me in the eye as my name breaks on your lips—right before you insist you don’t love me.”

Not giving her the opportunity to reply, I took control and rolled her hips forward, pushing past her slick entrance, burying my digit hard.

Her entire body stiffened. Then melted under my touch.

“Lucky for you, love, my fingers are longer than most of the cocks

you've seen, aye?"

Blushing, Sersa bit her lip. My wife wasn't timid, but she knew it was true.

On the next roll of her hips, I stretched her with a second digit. She stifled her cry by biting her lip.

Good. Do not make a sound, love. Take what you want from me.

Sersa swallowed and nodded.

"I bet I could fuck you with only my fingers for an entire year, and you would never tire of them, would you?"

"No," Sersa gasped out.

She fought the urge to look away as we matched one another's motions, and I rolled her backward when she tried to kiss me.

"Eyes," I reminded her.

Sersa nodded and put her weight behind the next drive of her hips. A moan strangled out of her. That sound could heal me. Resurrect me. As the pressure built and she started tightening around me, my own hips twitched with need.

I would finish just from watching her.

"That's it, love."

Sersa dropped her hands and yanked my pants down. I helped lift my hips so she could free my cock and *tried* not to acknowledge that it would take one move for me to be inside her. I wasn't about to object when she wrapped her fist around me. Pausing to swipe my finger over my tip, I gathered the bead there and painted her red mouth. She sucked on my finger, moaning around it as she stroked me.

"That's yours, love."

Her teeth grazed my finger. Then she leaned down and swirled her tongue around the tip of my cock. She was teasing me though—no plans to finish what she'd started.

"Playing with an Archdaemon again, love?"

Wrapped around me, her lips curled with mischief. She straightened, simultaneously directing my hand back to her ass, and I sensed her release as our motions sped up. She stopped stroking me, not allowing me to match her utter fucking bliss—right as the love she refused to acknowledge for me glowed within her like a beacon, and she came all over my fingers.

Pink.

Laughter rumbled inside me as I stared at her for a long moment. "You

have no idea the game you play, my cruel, cruel queen.”

Conquest burned in her dark eyes as she smiled. “I learned from the best.”

Brushing her lips to mine, Sersa moved to stand.

My hand shot out to hold her in place.

“*Oh, no.*” I shackled her wrists in one hand, my cock in the other. “For that, you will watch.”

Her eyes widened. She swallowed, licking the taste of me on her lips. I kept an even tempo, feeling my release in sight after only a couple minutes, thanks to Sersa’s teasing.

My balls throbbed.

“Nessin,” she said, her hips rocking and thoughts screaming of how badly she wanted to slide onto me.

I squeezed myself harder, faster, stroking every inch to emphasize the length she craved. Then, with a final motion, I finished between her thighs. All over her swollen clit and nightdress.

Sersa’s breaths matched mine, quick and short.

Her eyes though—a Bonespeaker command wouldn’t get her to look away from the godsdamn sight.

“I would normally clean you up, love,” I murmured. “But not tonight. I want *you* to look at all of me on your skin as you do it yourself.”

Sersa simpered, looking all too pleased with herself as she gathered some of my seed and spread it all over her entrance.

“*Fuck.*”

“As I said, I learned from the best.”

At that, my queen slid off the bed and headed for the door. I chuckled to myself in utter fucking disbelief, focused solely on the moonlight shining on those wet thighs of hers.

Yet with one craving quenched, the other shrieked—more deafening than the night of Sersa’s return. It roused my blood and the need for a soul. Worse, *nothing* would drown out the hum of mortality across the chalet tonight. I wanted Sersa’s mind, body, *and* soul.

And that was good for no one, least of all me.

I staggered to my feet, my limbs burning and my mind racing. My heartbeat grew more uneven by the second too.

With Sersa gone, it hit me like a fucking battering ram.

Chills rolled down my skin, pricking every hair on my body. I yanked my pants back up. My fingers fumbled over the buttons.

I *salivated* at the thought of the souls beneath my floor.

I needed to get the fuck out of here.

But I couldn't make it to the door before I fell to my knees. The sweat shining on my forearms contradicted how unbearably cold I suddenly was.

Gripping the edge of the dresser, my hand felt disconnected from the rest of me.

I hadn't withdrawn in years, and certainly not the last three moons because I'd sustained an *incessant* stream of intake. Overindulgence, more like. Though that was not the proper word for what I'd been doing. The Gilders *overindulged* at festivals, holidays, children's birthday parties, for Dúm's sake.

Until days ago, I'd been popping three souls when I woke. Two after breakfast. Though my lack of appetite meant it was more likely to be three more. By midday, I usually lost count.

And the nights. The nights were unspeakable. I told Sersa that the Circle—the people—had called me absent and passive behind my back.

And I *was* because I had no fucking blood.

I had half a mind to ask Sersa to come back.

No, you just want her soul.

I needed to convince myself this wasn't a need.

I touched my forehead to the dresser as another bout of tremors tore down my body, the sensation gentle yet concurrently excruciating.

My own personal nightmare unfolded when the door to my room swept open.

Ranir. Her face was a map of concern, her eyes wide until she exhaled with relief when she realized I was *not* dead on the floor.

Yet.

Thank fucking gods it wasn't Sersa again.

Ranir moved toward me, hand sliding off the doorknob. Her plaid pajamas hung off her frame.

"Close it," I growled.

She looked over her shoulder to be sure no one was there before she obeyed. Crouching in front of me, she slid her hand across my forehead without delay. Sweat dripped in my eyes, down my neck, and traced the path of my spine.

"I felt pain from across the house," she murmured, dropping her hand to her knee.

Since I could not command Ranir to leave me alone, all I had were my lies.

“I have a minor ailment.”

Another tremor assaulted me, this time like a dagger in my chest where the curse branched outward. Ranir couldn't see the red runes, of course. Not with the glamour attached to my hellhound head torc.

“Strange.” Her mistrust was subtle. “I sense nothing of that nature, Your Darkness.”

“Just leave!” I said, quiet but unhinged. “I am perfectly fine on my own.”

I hated that everyone I trusted had witnessed my adolescent years. It left them with a feeling of dispensation to caution me whenever they deemed fit.

Ranir quieted for a long moment. “I normally would not condone such abuse, King Nessin, but the threat that is your brother—it is admirable of you to push through this stage on your own. However, there is not enough time until the fête. You're better off maintaining to keep your strength. If you feel you must endure, I will try to help you since Bardca cannot.”

I snapped my head up, causing my sweat to scatter across the floor. “He told you?”

“I knew your mum far too well not to see her problem. Eventually, she couldn't hide it. I tried to help her.” Ranir frowned. “For centuries, I've witnessed *your* fluctuating behavior. You ran off to see the Druid frequently. Always while irritable. Feverish. Paler than a ghost, which is saying something. You always refused my healing too. Until I figured it out, I thought you hated me because I'd known Queen Niuna better than you ever had. Yet you were always close to Feera.”

Ranir and Feera had since grown apart. Not because I didn't trust the Bonemender, but because Feera worked for me as closely as Thane or Dev. Running the White Plume was a full-time job she handled with finesse. The tradeoffs were innumerable, and Feera's *life* was a house built of secrets. As was mine. Those secrets may have served as our shelter, our protection, but they also trapped us, kept others out, destroyed everything and everyone we got close to.

Ranir sighed. “Tell me all of it was a coincidence, and I'll leave you here to fight your trivial ailment alone. Although Sersa, I imagine, will be quite concerned.”

“*Don't you dare,*” I tried to command. And failed.

I knew when the whites of my eyes bled out to reveal black—a silent

threat if Ranir wouldn't listen to my words.

She stood and looked around. "Where is it?"

"Where is what?" I played the fool.

"Your backup souls for a rainy day, King Nessin."

I gave in so easily. Too easily.

"Lockbox. Under the rug."

Ranir kicked back the patterned blue rug in the corner of the room, concealing a hollow floorboard less likely to be walked on. Not that it mattered. It was expected of the Daemon King to keep souls on hand.

"Shall I prick your finger, or will you do the honors?" she asked.

I stood, faltering a step. When she moved to help me, I hissed through my teeth, "*Don't touch me.*"

Unafraid but respectful, Ranir stepped out of my way. The moments blurred as I stooped over the lockbox and touched my fingers to the smooth metal face.

With a click, it unlocked.

Struggling to keep my balance, I threw open the door.

"*One—for now,*" Ranir said. "You must wean yourself off."

One measly fucking soul would do nothing.

Sweat dripped onto the compartment at my feet as I seized the shimmering ampoule in a chokehold. It instantly warmed in my palm.

"How many have you been consuming daily?" she said. No judgment. No emotion.

"A few," I lied.

"Subtract three from that as your starting point. If you are *miscalculating* your current intake, subtract at least a fourth of the amount from it. If you need me to administer them, I am here. But I will not fight you like I did your mum. A word of advice, my king?"

"What?" I gritted out, licking the salt off my lips.

I wished Ranir would leave already so I could down the entire fucking ampoule. Although her tone still communicated no judgment, her eyes said enough for both.

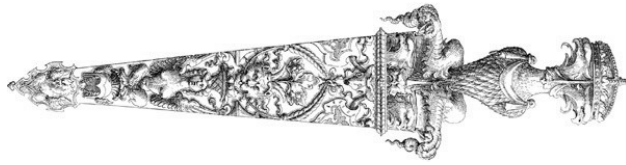
"*Wanting to stop is requisite to actually stopping.*"

At that, Ranir left me to make my own decision.

The blood coursing through my veins wasn't so easily persuaded that now *was* the time to stop. Yet I had relapsed and withdrawn enough to know one thing with absolute certainty.

I had *never* wanted to stop. Not once before. And not now.

Serena



“OUTSIDE?” I WHISPERED TO DÚMA WHEN I GOT BACK TO MY ROOM, wrapped in a towel after washing up.

One eye shot open as my hellhound perked up at the edge of the bed, head bobbling groggily. I’d told her to stay when I snuck into Sin’s room. Surprisingly, she’d listened. Or she’d been too lazy to get up.

I dug through the trunk near the footboard for a thick sweater to throw on. Though Sin’s teeth marks had mostly faded over the last few days, I chose a cozy turtleneck. I needed fresh air and a moment to clear my head after the way he’d touched me—and maybe to avoid returning to his room and begging him to take me as we both wanted.

Dúma scampered toward the front door and sat. I slipped on the pair of boots waiting for me there, followed by a quick rummage through the kitchen drawers for a knife that *wasn’t* a souldagger. I didn’t trust any of the weapons displayed along the walls, and while a meat knife wasn’t my first choice, it’d have to do.

An idea had come to me when Sin spoke of pain earlier—a way to test my magic after it declared itself pink on my behalf not just once but *multiple* times during training the last few days. In front of everyone, no less.

I’d expected none of this. Aislinn’s treason fueled by her missing sister. Bardca being taken. *Jestin*.

And a new color—pink—least of all.

After I'd read Feera's letter to Sin, it appeared we wouldn't have the answers we desired until the Dark Eve Fête either. The night was a gamble—Jestin's whereabouts completely unknown.

Dúma started wagging something fierce as I opened the front door, and we stepped outside onto the landing. Soft moonlight dusted the relatively flat surface in need of a good salting. An expanse set between two peaks, ours and the one straight ahead, the edges were precarious things she knew to stay away from. Though Nessin and Bardca had clearly taken great care in erecting sturdy, shoulder-height guardrails around the perimeter.

The snow had been coming down hard all night, and an especially crisp scent now hung in the air. My hellhound rolled around in the fresh layer concealing the coating of black ice before trotting off to relieve herself. Her nails clicked with every step.

"Slow!" I called when she changed course and bolted toward another snow pile.

Casting a look over my shoulder at the chalet, I fished out the knife and looked around to confirm I was alone. Irian had followed me out here, but he was a permanent fixture these days. I was getting used to the Sluagh, so much so I looked for him when he wasn't in my immediate sight.

I kept my back to Irian, recalling Sin's enigmatic warnings about his Sluagh—they were tattletales, yes, but they couldn't *see*. So if I kept my mouth shut, I'd be fine. Hopefully.

Refocusing, I slid the blade across my fingertip. I bit back a cuss when the tiniest sting heated my body, and a droplet hit the ground as I summoned the tendrils. It felt almost effortless, but I *knew* in the very blood flowing through my veins it wasn't my doing.

The magic wanted to be freed. *It* had decided.

The red curled around me then dispersed.

"Nice of you to show," I whispered.

I knew so little about it, except for the fact it linked to my moods. It was almost like the red tendrils were alive, disobedient and yet somehow ready to serve me the only way they could, and that was by being free. Doing what *they* pleased—when they pleased.

The hare came to mind, sending a jolt straight to my chest.

I ignored it.

Over the last few days, I'd tried to keep my thoughts from wandering to

Laisrés too. But it was less about his bold propositions haunting the dark corners of my mind and more about his strange insinuation.

Who do you think gave your mother that spear?

...thank the Mórrígan for this weapon in your next prayer to her.

From afar, the half god had scrutinized the deep red and pale pink at the rendezvous point without fail, day after day. But Sin had told me to stay away from him for a reason, and I really didn't fancy beseeching the gods or their children for guidance.

The prick of blood perched on my fingertip stared back at me like an eye. I took a deep breath, lining the edge of the knife up with a crease in the center of my palm—

“Sersa, stop.”

I whirled around.

As my knife slipped, so did a cuss from my mouth when it clattered and slid along the ice in Sin's direction. He stood in the doorway.

Never looking away, he released the flourish shaped handle and let the door fall closed. Then he headed toward me on swift feet and picked up the knife along the way.

He'd thrown on a crumpled black shirt, the end bunched halfway up his taut stomach. His boot laces were only half untied and the leather tongue smushed from rushing out here.

Sin gripped my wrist to study my bleeding finger. *“What were you about to do?”* Anger and disbelief edged his voice. But most of all, care. So much.

Too much.

“It was just an idea.” The excuse sounded brittle on my tongue. *“I need to train when I'm wounded. Or in pain, as you said. I don't know. What I do know is I was *fucking useless* when Jestin attacked the Druids, Sin. The fête is days away, and I can't fail Ailerby again. Or Ciel or—”*

You.

I exhaled, stopping myself from rambling on.

“How many times must I tell you my senses are more attuned to you?” Sin said.

“Well, maybe I deserve more privacy!”

“You do,” he agreed, to my surprise. *“But not if you're going to try stuff like this.”* Slipping the knife into the waistband of his pants, Sin shook his head. Finally, he yanked his shirt down his abdomen in frustration. *“You couldn't summon your blood because Jestin is a Bonespeaker. There was*

nothing you could have done.”

“I have to do something—to try something!”

“We will find other methods!” Sin shouted. He was so rattled and enraged he was talking with his hands now, practically accusing the sky. Lowering them to his sides, he added softer, quieter, “Anything but that, Sersa. Fucking gods.”

When Sin tipped my chin up, I hadn’t realized I’d averted my eyes. Something shifted in him.

“If you want to inflict pain, inflict it upon me,” he whispered. “Let me have it. *Never* yourself.”

I returned my gaze to the snowy ground. “That would do nothing to help me alter and direct my magic.”

“Look at me,” Sin urged.

His pupils were twice their normal size, and I wondered if that meant the darkness was ready to swallow the rest. Yet his white eyes resembled ice.

No.

There was a strange, newfound warmth in Sin. Or it was a testament that *I’d* gone cold while he’d stayed the same. In love. His heart beating for both of us, maybe.

“I don’t want to see you trying whatever this was again. Ever. Promise me you won’t. Tell me you understand.”

I licked my lips and nodded. “I promise. I understand.”

“Thank you,” Sin replied quietly. “I will not let anything happen to you at the fête. Please know that the Sluagh will also protect you, no matter what.”

The thought was hardly comforting.

If ever Nessin *wasn’t* here—if we found ourselves apart again—I wouldn’t be able to fight Jestin or his command. I didn’t want to rely on Nessin, or anyone else for that matter, when it came to my gods-damned free will.

“I’m in charge of my own protection, Nessin. You’ve seen my magic—it just keeps mocking me, turning pink because it feels like it. Why won’t it go back to the other gods-damned colors?”

“You tell *me* why.” His gaze burned for me. “You want my opinion though? Stop pretending that this”—Sin gestured between us—“isn’t what you want more than anything in this godsforsaken world, Sersa. Perhaps *then* your magic wouldn’t be trying to force you to look at the truth.”

“Like that’s so easy to do after everything.”

“I get it, but you will only drive yourself mad trying to push all this down.”

“Just stop, Nessin.”

“I will *never* stop fighting for you.” Sin stepped somehow closer into my space. He hesitated for a long moment, maybe working through whatever he felt. “Do you want to try something else together?”

Unsure, I narrowed my eyes.

Sin whistled through his teeth at Dúma and left me standing there to let her back inside. He backtracked and halted right in front of me, squinting at the horizon down below.

“Do you see that?” He pointed to a river, the tail end poking out from a gap in the trees. “Come with me.”

“Do I want to know why?”

“Do you trust me?” he countered.

“I’m trying to, Sin.” I sounded defeated.

He nodded, signaling the Sluagh over. “I am trying—to have patience. Turns out Archdaemons and Daemon Kings are not at all patient though. Not when it comes to the women they love.”

Irian approached us.

Then the earth and sky swallowed us up with the help of the wind, turning everything as dark as the starless heavens above.

We landed on the riverbank, and with Sin there to keep me steady, I didn’t end up on my back. This time of year, the river moved at a trickle, barely flowing at all. The sparse pines and bare oaks still served as good coverage in the darkness of the woods.

Sin pulled his shirt over his head in that strange way only men did by tugging on the neck. The same way Laisrés had our first day of training.

“Would you keep your clothes on for five minutes, Sin?”

Grinning, he kicked off his boots. Plumes of his breath coiled in the moonlit air. “You really think I want to show off my manhood in the freezing cold, love?”

“As if it would make a difference for that—anomaly,” I finished lamely.

“You know I seek your flattery.”

“Yes, you’re quite needy.”

“So was that lovely cunt of yours earlier.” Sin smirked devilishly.

My mouth fell open, but a thrill shot through my lower abdomen. “You are lewd.”

“You started it. Don’t call me needy unless you want my quips. Besides, you hate that I’m always in your head. Might as well let you hear the filthy thoughts in mine on occasion. Those letters would put you to sleep if only you knew.”

Gods, I believed him. His thoughts... I couldn’t imagine *what* Sin thought about, what secrets lived up there in that beautiful head.

Speaking to both my agony and relief, he kept his pants on. I eyed the dark metal torc around his neck and his matching black rings when he gestured me over.

Dúm. They couldn’t be.

Something clicked in my mind as I studied the fingers he wore them on. When I’d asked to see the memory of how Sin proposed to me yesterday, he’d refused.

“Well?” Hands on his hips, Sin tilted his head at me.

“Are you expecting me to strip?”

“Unless you plan on wearing sopping wet clothes, then yes. Yes, I am. Freezing for a few minutes is far better than whatever you were about to do, Sersa. You’ll be so cold in that water, it’ll be difficult to focus. Try it with me?”

Sin had a good point. I was already shuddering. What would the river do to me?

Frostbite?

“Ranir can easily mend a little frostbite, and I know a few ways to warm up afterward,” he said, quirking an eyebrow when I opened my mouth to reply. “Separate baths, obviously.”

“Obviously.”

Against my better judgment, which was scarce to begin with lately, I kicked off my boots and stood on top of his to avoid getting my socks wet.

“Ah, thank you. Let mine get soaked, why don’t you?”

“This is your stupid idea,” I said.

“Born of your stupid idea,” he countered.

“Born of *your* initial comment.”

My sweater joined the pile, followed by my leggings and socks. Looking away from my undergarments, Sin pressed a hand to his forehead as if checking for a fever. He cursed right as the wind whipped past us, turning my nipples to glass beneath my bralette.

“How did you even think of this?” I asked.

Sin smiled in fond recollection. “Bardca and the other Druids devised unconventional ways for me to train. Extreme conditions being one of them.”

Evidently, that was where the pain came in.

He beckoned me off his shoes. My shins endured the brunt of the wind while it also chilled places wind ought never venture. Holding in a squeal, I hissed through my teeth as I touched my big toe to the snow. My face scrunched up on contact.

“Get moving,” Sin said.

I flattened one foot, then the other, and followed him.

Insanity. Pure torture *and* insanity.

Sin sucked in a breath and looked back at me when he took the first step in the water. Ice cracked under his foot. He nudged it away, breaking more of the thin layer to clear a path for us to walk.

“Together?” Sin asked, turning back to meet my gaze.

Hand in hand, he led the way as pins and needles spread from the tips of my toes into my legs. Likewise, gooseflesh sprawled Sin’s entire body, the little hairs on his arms all standing on end.

“Fucking cold,” Sin laughed.

I closed my eyes to pretend this wasn’t happening. We weren’t this foolish, were we?

It wasn’t quite fair with how tall Sin was either. The water reached his knees when it grazed my hips. He turned to walk backward, holding my gaze as the incline nearly leveled us, but not quite.

“That’s far enough,” he said, sounding almost normal while I was full-blown shivering. “Summon it.”

“I-I can’t. So cold. No way.”

“We did *not* just walk in here waist-deep to freeze our asses off for nothing, Sersa.”

“Waist-deep,” I mocked with trembling lips. I was up to my shoulders. “This is worse than a little knife.”

“Get to it. I quite like all my limbs. And my manhood. As do you.”

“*Fine.*” I turned in the slowest circle to face the riverbank, feeling every bite of the water as it touched skin that had yet to be submerged. “Dúm’s piss. You’ll have to tell me what happens in the Soullands if I die in this water.”

Sin chuckled behind me and took one of my hands in his, the other wrapping around my waist to steady me in the water. Beneath, I felt it

whooshing faster than it had on the surface. “Is this okay?”

Having Sin this close twice in one night felt good, but it was selfish of me when we were here to lure out the tendrils.

“I might hurt you,” I whispered.

“I’m not afraid.”

Teeth chattering, I huffed through my nose. “You ought to be.”

“*You* ought to be afraid of the Daemon King, but are you? *No*, you’re not,” Sin purred in his rasped voice.

“You would never hurt me.” *Physically*. “I have no reason to fear you, Sin.”

“I’m glad you feel safe with me. Know that my objective is to safeguard your *emotions* moving forward as well though, love.” Sin cleared his throat. “Do you remember our wedding day?”

“I’m surprised you let me keep *that* memory since you took all others.”

“We are working on that, love. Or did you forget you fought me on it the other night? But,” he redirected, “you didn’t harm me when your blood appeared during the handfasting, and I’m not sure you can at all now that we’re bound. The consummation, I mean.”

Logic clearly went out the window when it came to this shard if my magic couldn’t harm him when it had stolen *everything* from my entire clan.

Sin leaned down, jaw close enough to rest on my shoulder. “Whatever it takes, summon it.”

“Memories,” I answered. “E-Emotions.”

“Which memories do you use?” Sin’s warmth mercifully seeped into my back, and the vibrations of his words comforted me.

“The ones you let me keep. And the ones I fabricated.”

“*Sersa*. I am *really* cold and want to be in bed naked with you. Strictly to generate body heat. Less arguing. More practice.” His audible breaths behind me were the only indication he was cold.

“What happened to separate baths?”

“Body heat sounds nicer.”

I snickered. “Which memories would you use if you were me?”

“That depends on what you want to evoke.”

I wanted to feel anything but anger, so I breathed deep and said, “Joy.”

“I would imagine,” Sin started quietly, “the most stunning, witty, and luminous being walking toward me on Dúm’s Cross for the first time as my betrothed.”

“Sorrow,” I whispered immediately, trying not to get caught up on his answer.

“Her.” His voice turned serious. “That same woman saying she doesn’t know if she loves me. Lying to her. Seeing the hatred in her eyes when I told her I would remarry.”

I swallowed. My nose stung with the emotions Sin elicited.

“Fury.”

“Every time I told myself I couldn’t tell her the things I wanted—what we were, what she meant to me. Watching her walk away after *I* broke everything we were.” Then, in a deadly voice, he said, “My fucking brother torturing her.”

“Love.”

It surprised me Sin heard my whisper at all.

“Hmm.” His tone softened. “Too many. Many memories you’ll soon have but don’t currently,” he added daringly. “Of the ones you do... I imagine the Devil’s Tail. Her shocking me with her fierceness and cunning when she swindled a godsdamn conman. I would imagine her in a white dress, veiled and shaking until we looked at one another. Our hands bound. Her killing for me, saving me—*twice*. I would imagine her admitting she wanted me. The first time she let me have her, holding her after, and then being inside her again mere nights ago—”

“Lust,” I corrected.

“*Love*, not lust. I lust for you plenty, but it is nothing compared to the love there,” Sin said in my ear before his lips brushed my temple.

The tendrils came to life, flowing like the water.

I tried to pull my hand from Sin’s, but he held on tight. Even when the stream of red magic rushed to our side and snaked through the ice, cracking it right down the middle.

“It’s never done that!” I said.

Sin was already smiling when I looked back at him. Our chests moved together, breath after breath. *He* was my breath, the air in *my* lungs.

I dropped my eyes to his lips. “Summon my feelings another way, Nessin.”

As he leaned forward, the warmth emanating from him dusted my cheek, more shocking than the frigid wind. “What way, Sersa?”

Need throbbed inside me, starting in my chest and moving down my body, settling between my legs.

“You know what way,” I said, finally able to reach his lips when he bent down for me.

“You know my terms. Tell me how you feel right now. What do you feel in this exact moment?”

“Too cold.”

Sin sucked on my bottom lip, his tongue sweeping into my mouth. I led his hand downward.

A rumble echoed in his chest. “In a freezing river? Absolutely not.” His lips brushed my ear as he purred, “I have never been so cold in my life, which means you probably never have. And yet, you *are* warming to me.”

“I wouldn’t go that far. But—I forgive you, Sin. I *do* want you more than anything. I want *us*.”

He inhaled uneasily. “Sersa... The other day when I told you the gods ordained us—”

Sin silenced abruptly. The severity of his expression shattered whatever moment we’d been sharing. I swore his horns darkened as the line between his eyebrows intensified.

“Get down,” he hissed, cupping my mouth.

Unable to hear whatever Sin had, I looked back at him right as he bent his knees so he was up to his jaw in the water. But with his horns extending almost a foot above me, it would do little to conceal him. Immobilizing both of us in the river flowing around us, he shook his head—and then he was in my thoughts.

The command Sin issued was whip-quick, but it wasn’t directed at me. It felt like it originated in an inherent place built on instinct alone. A place that connected him to the Sluagh.

Irian vanished from existence, at least to my eyes, and then Sin’s unfiltered thoughts flooded me. Voices echoed inside me. Their words were sharp and clear.

Yet I saw no one nearby in any direction.

“I don’t care what he insisted. It’s not here, and we been walking all godsdamn night. My balls’ll freeze off before we find it.” The male voice had a sharp accent, key letters of every word cut off, leaving him difficult to understand without straining.

“The Theas Mountains stretch all the way to Ganam, you daft imbecile. The prince was certain it stood on the midpoint between the woods and Tervas.”

Jestin.

The chills assailing every inch of my skin now had nothing to do with the river. I felt numb physically, but it didn't stop me from running through one unfavorable scenario after another in my head.

"His description doesn't narrow it down for us, does it?"

Sin held me closer, trying to stop my trembling. Or simply clutching me to avoid—

What? That made no sense. There was *nothing* the Daemon King needed to fear. Jestin could never dream of being as powerful as Sin—he'd never match him in skill when my husband boasted a triad of impressive bloods.

Bonespeaker. Soulreaper. Colossi.

Nessin Drumghoul was always going to be king, and Jestin was nothing compared to him.

But Sin gave the slightest shake of his head without meeting my gaze.

"Royals are certain 'bout a lot of things, aren't they though? If he wa'nit a Bonespeaker, he wouldn't be after—"

"Shh! We will tell him we found nothing and be done with it. The truth is better than nothing."

Unbearable silence passed, stretching out the moments, making me wonder if they were gone.

"Let's head back. If the Druid continues to be useless, there's always that pretty blonde Gilder."

A lead weight settled in the bottom of my stomach.

Aislinn. I wanted to shake her and scream that *whatever* Jestin had promised her—Helde's safety or otherwise—he'd never honor. Only a fool would trust a Daemon Prince to keep his word.

Sin and I sighted the males through the trees. Just yards away.

"Through here," one of them muttered. "Think the path to the next town is a mile or two off still. We can get there before moonrise if you pick up your feet."

Right before they turned in our direction, Sin plunged us beneath the icy river's surface.

Serena



WET AND FREEZING AS I CHOKED UP THE WATER I'D SWALLOWED, IRIAN appeared the second Sin yanked us to the surface.

The trespassers were gone.

"I'm sorry. Are you okay? I shouldn't have brought you out here. *Fuck.*"

I nodded, shivering so uncontrollably I couldn't think straight or be mad at him for submerging me without warning. "W-We wouldn't have seen them if we hadn't."

The bite of the air immediately cleared my mind of everything but what mattered most right now.

Safety.

"We n-need to get out of here," I added.

Not a minute later, the Sluagh dropped us off just outside the safehouse. Sin carried me inside, finding my room in the darkness of the chalet. How he was still functioning at this point was beyond me.

I dropped my clothes and undergarments into heaps on the ground, and they hit the wood floor with a *plop*. Sin wrapped me in a knitted blanket. Clinging to it like a second skin, I hoped it would insulate me better than my own had.

"*Body heat,*" I mocked. "C-Come here."

Sin hesitated near the foot of the bed. He licked his lips at the sight of my

bare flesh, my peaked nipples, and the rest of my skin rippled with gooseflesh.

But the desirous look in his pure white eyes faded immediately.

No amount of sarcasm would rid the daunting feeling hanging over our heads.

Pulling the blanket tighter around my shoulders, I clumsily found my way onto the bed.

“This is serious, Sersa. Jestin knows our location. We are not safe here when he has underlings searching this area, no matter how inept they sounded. I sent a message with Irian to Laisrés. We must be ready to leave at moonrise. I am not taking this risk.”

“I know it’s serious, as evidenced by you all but drowning me, but I can’t think. Warm up first. Jestin second.”

With a relenting sigh, Sin stripped off his sopping pants and slid into bed beside me. He pulled me close, pressing us chest to chest, and though I tried to bite back the involuntary sigh and the twitch of my hips at the feel of him, it was useless.

“Sorry,” Sin said, clearly lost in thought as he hardened against my lower stomach, despite the danger in the air.

No surprise, the cold had done nothing to his manhood.

“We are generating body heat is all,” I whispered against his chest as I burrowed my frozen cheek against it.

“Is that a reminder for me or you?”

“Me. I mean—you. Definitely you.” I sniffled. “What I don’t understand is why you didn’t kill them, Sin.”

“I never believed Jest would remember this place. We were all children, Jestin a toddler, the last time we came here. He is likely torturing Bardca—his mind—by now, but Feera *did* redact the locations.”

“What if she didn’t though?” I gathered my sopping hair and spread it behind me on the sheets so it wouldn’t touch my skin.

Tongue tracing his scarred lip, Sin hesitated. “Impossible.”

“Well, you must know why your brother wanted him. Or what it has to do with me. And *don’t* say nothing. When I told you Jestin said my blood and soul are valuable to the realms, you looked concerned.”

Sin pulled back. “Of course I was. It’s you, Sersa. You don’t belong to anyone, nor do you exist to serve some purpose *he* deems fit.”

“Oh, I don’t belong to you?”

He was shaking, and not from his body temperature. “No. Not even to me.”

Irrationally, that answer didn’t sit well with me. Because if I wasn’t Sin’s, then was he not mine? Despite all his previous reassurances, Aislinn’s face breached my thoughts.

“Tell me what you’re thinking without filtering things for once, Nessin.”

A long silence passed. The chalet’s structure beneath us, though sound, creaked against the gusting wind outside.

“Jestin wanted Bardca,” Sin started. “He wants true power and authority, and the Daemon Throne is the answer. He wants you, and I firmly believe he wants to *control* you—most obviously because you killed our father. He sees power in you, Sersa. I swear he does.”

A tightening sensation within my chest made itself known. “That command you told me about...”

“I almost wish you’d forgotten,” Sin admitted. “But Jest doesn’t know how to execute the Ordé.”

“How could he not? He’s a Bonespeaker,” I said. My teeth had finally stopped chattering.

“Because *I* devised it. Because no one knows how but me. Only the Ordé is a certainty, and I have purposely concealed its existence.”

“How did you create it in the first place? I mean, you must have put someone under it before.” I breathed life into the words I realized were true as I spoke them.

“I have, yes. Mortality is simply one condition that must be met. Rather, possessing at least part of your original soul.” Sin tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, his eyes thoughtful and soft. “I can’t risk the information being taken from your mind.”

“Then you’re certain no one else knows about the Ordé?”

His lips twitched downward. “Bardca, Thane, and Devlin know. Plus you and Ciel. All right, that sounds like a lot when I say it aloud. But *no one else* knows how to execute it. Bardca did—once.”

“Clearly that *is* what Jestin is after, Sin.” I shook my head. “If Bardca is one of only two people alive who ever knew how to replicate it, whether or not he knows *now*, maybe your brother recovered it somehow. Druids chronicle everything.”

I didn’t need to tell Sin. He’d lived with them.

“Getting any information out of him—” Sin shook his head. “Bardca used

to resist *my* commands. That's how powerful his mind and magic are. His is a learned magic, and it would not be easy for Jest to break him."

"Used to," I echoed. "At the parish, Jestin commanded him. He didn't pull a gateway out of his ass because your brother threatened him. Bardca's eyes went *blank*. The gateway appeared. A second later, he and Aislinn were gone. So I would rework that logic. Don't lie to yourself is all I'm saying. Sorry, but I got that advice from you."

When Sin released a chuckle, I scowled.

"What could possibly be funny right now?"

My skin pulsed everywhere Sin touched, especially as his fingers dawdled until they reached my hips. "You are a godsdamn queen, whether you admit it or not. Look at you telling me off for being stupid."

"Yes, I should do it more." I inhaled his scent of fire, my body dependent on it to heat me from the inside out.

"I sent a Sluagh after Jest's underlings too. Time will tell if they lead us anywhere, being that they are on foot. Wherever he is, his protections are evidently greater than our safehouses. The Sluagh have circled the Soullands endlessly without a trace of him. But this is what I've been waiting for. A slip-up."

"Aislinn said the same. She said you'd never find him."

Sin swallowed. "If they find nothing, I will order their deaths."

"How?"

"Commands," he answered.

"Yet you *didn't* want to command them to tell us where Jestin is? Who are you?"

Sin caressed my face as he brushed my hair back. "You are right. I'm not me." It was a flat whisper with the power to halt all my other thoughts. "I have lost control of my abilities. My blood. The Old King was cursed, and now—so am I, Sersa. More than I was before."

Our gazes locked. The blood rushed down my body as I assessed his expression. Calm yet certain, Sin stared at me with the same vulnerability as the night I'd torn his heart out with mere words.

But worse than words, the curse placed upon Gearóid had weakened and sickened him. It would have killed him if I hadn't, which meant Sin...

It was only a matter of time before he fell ill too.

"How long have you known about this?" I demanded.

Closing my eyes, I tried to contain my emotions and safeguard my

thoughts, but my still-recovering lungs heaved in another strained breath.

The red pulsed under the blanket with us. I could try to keep calm, but the color would always betray me.

“Hey,” Sin said, propping himself up to hold my chin. “Apart from my blood, I am fine.”

“*Fine?* When did it start, Nessin?”

“Within a day of becoming king. I was uncertain what I felt, but when I tried to deliver a command, it failed. Later that day, it worked.”

“It went in and out,” I said. “It must be *occasionally* working, right? You read my mind all the time. Effortlessly, I might add.”

“My Mindblood works solely with you because we’re bound.” Sin paused, and I wished I could hear his thoughts. “Ours is a soul union—an exchange, Sersa.”

“An exchange implies I got something in return,” I said.

“*Dúm.* Aren’t you vicious when it comes to my ego these days?” Sin blew out an exaggerated breath. “You, love, gained my *rank*. Every daemon lives by a strict inborn hierarchy. Most of us can’t sense it, not consciously, but it exists within us, nonetheless.”

I bit my lip. “Do I want to ask who is at the top of that hierarchy?”

“Do you *need* to ask?” Sin quirked an eyebrow. “My family is the sole Archdaemon bloodline left, and I told you Gran directs all those daemons. Being that I have so little of her blood, certain aspects of the hierarchy are more problematic for me. Others know what I am, of course, but I can’t always sense those who are technically lower on the hierarchy. The pets, for example, are full-blooded. They are animalistic, hunters in the most basic sense. I will never be able to catalogue their place in the hierarchy though—other than sheer logic. Generally, the purer the daemon blood, the stronger their most primitive instincts. The Daemon King or Queen, however, will always sit at the pinnacle.”

“By that logic, Grandma Riona should rule the Soullands.”

“Technically. Although I think you will find her only way of communicating is the fire she breathes. But you, Sersa—your rank is equal to mine now. My scent is all over you.”

“Equal rank,” I echoed.

Something made me reach out to trace the scar that speared his lip, snaking all the way up the left side of his face. Then back down.

Sin followed my lead. His thumb traced under the curve of my breast,

sliding upward to curl around my nipple. He gauged my expression as he repeated the movement then dropped his eyes, drinking in my skin and the peak he'd made. The sensation shot between my legs.

I was hopeless. The look we shared said it all.

“Sworn in or not, you *are* Daemon Queen. No matter that you may never want to be. You will forever be my *only* queen, Sersa. I will wait for you—a bit impatiently, yes—for as long as I must.”

“But if our union is an exchange, I *should* have full access to your mind,” I countered shakily, wetting my suddenly dry lips. “Shouldn't I?”

He shrugged.

The Daemon King wasn't one to shrug.

“*Wanting* to give you my memories at all, Sersa—that is more than I've ever given anyone.”

“You can control what *I* feel from your side, but I don't have the same luxury,” I snapped. “That sustained power imbalance is the reason I don't know *how* to feel.”

His white eyes tapered. “You think there is an imbalance between us?”

Maybe it wasn't the reason I felt confused, but it seemed to be a contributing factor. I closed my eyes and sighed.

“You do,” Sin said, genuinely surprised. “If anything, my lack of blood should show you I don't hold all the power you believe I do.”

He untangled our limbs and sat on the edge of the bed with his back to me.

“Why are you pulling away, Sin?”

“Because I am fucking *weak* without my blood, and here I am admitting it to you. Do you want to know where I was tonight? Trying to level fucking trees, Sersa. Something I could do as an adolescent and now dislocate my godsdamn shoulder while merely *attempting* it.”

I swallowed. He'd only *partially* lied about the scrapes and bruises, I supposed.

“If a power imbalance means I can protect you, I would choose it any day.” Sin raked his wet hair backward with both hands, the rings catching on a ray of rising moonlight. “I have retained the ability to reap souls for now, but that is *it*—a prank from the gods so I can—”

Sin halted abruptly, but his continued need for divulgence eased me. As if every truth he uttered really *was* lifting the weight off him, distributing it onto both our backs.

Because that was how it was supposed to be.

He was baring all. His weaknesses. His thought processes, no matter how flawed.

Risk-taking was practically my forte, but something deep inside me warned against moving toward him. Even as I discarded the admonition. Even as I wrapped my legs around the outside of his hips, winding one arm around his neck and the other around his waist.

Sin groaned my name as he planted a kiss on my hand then each finger. “I have missed your touch. So much.” His lips skimmed down to my wrist before working back toward my palm. “I don’t want you to feel like there’s an imbalance. Everything I am, everything I have, is yours to direct. I am sorry the shard won’t budge—among so many other things. Perhaps it would for Dev if only I could risk it. With the blood mark, I can’t though. He could die just trying to reach into you.”

Maybe I should have been more concerned Nessin had essentially marked his territory. But I wasn’t. While I *had* purposely taunted him with his own seed tonight, it wasn’t a spectacle. We both knew I’d never do anything I didn’t want to.

Unless commanded.

One end of his lips curled up in the way I both loved and loathed, but a newfound sadness incandesced behind his gaze—a weak, blue tint. I wondered if it had always been there, and his façade had simply faded to let in some light.

Slowly, Sin dropped my hands and stood. The absence of his touch was surely worse than if I’d lost *my* magic.

“I want to show you what the curse has done to me.” He turned to face me the same time he twisted the torc around his neck until the two open ends faced the side wall. “I had a Fae glamour it—their illusions last longer than a Mindblood’s. Look closely, and I will help you see.”

Sin slid off the metal neck ring, now truly naked and unadorned from head to toe besides the rings. My eyes widened as I examined the scars on his chest.

A second later, blood red runes appeared.

Serisa



OUT OF NOWHERE, IT WAS LIKE A SHIRT HAD PARTED DOWN THE MIDDLE OF Sin's neck to reveal the markings—as noticeable as his horns without the glamour.

I moved to the edge of the bed, discarding the blanket in my shock. Standing on my shaking legs was inadvisable, but I wanted a closer look at the runes.

They started on his neck and sprawled onto his chest like a flower. *No*. Not as beautiful, but like a glowing weed taking root and spreading.

I slid my palms up his chest. The pads of my fingers pressed into his skin, testing for tenderness. Raised slightly, the runes almost resembled welts.

“Sin.”

“My horns appear red from time to time, so that seems good...”

“Does it hurt?”

Sin shook his head. *“Only when it first appeared. I immediately fell ill and visited Dev and Ciel on Fient so the Circle would not find out. That was before I excused the entire staff at the citadel. Later, the fortress. Bardca believes Gearóid's torc held the curse my mum cast to weaken our blood. How it branched out to the rest of us is unclear, though it did not affect the Old King like this. Bardca was studying the torc before. Not this one,”* he clarified.

Though he slipped his neck ring back on, I tried to see past the opaque glamour, to no avail.

“Your blood does not make you who you are, Sin. You know that.”

“Many would argue that—for a king—blood is everything. In my realm, as it is in Clais, blood reigns above all else. It is ironic when you perceived me to be dominant over Jestin not a bell ago, aye? The gods have stolen the one fucking security I had. How can I protect you—”

“*Stop*,” I whispered, planting a kiss on the curse’s epicenter. “You have the Sluagh, and I don’t need protection.”

“*We*,” Sin corrected. “The Sluagh are ours, and protecting you is even more—impossibly—instinctive now that we are bound by the shard.”

“Do you think there’s any way I can help?”

Silence.

I tried another question.

“Do you think another shard of my soul might help you?”

I wasn’t sure how his answer might affect what I’d be willing to do for him.

“No.” Sin stiffened. “Highly doubtful.”

“Too bad.” I sighed.

“This is simply another reason I must announce Niuna as my heir. If you still wish to return to Os Íseal and I fall ill—”

“*Don’t say that!*” I knew what he was implying. His untimely death. “I won’t let anything happen to you, so just stop.”

Sin thumbed my cold cheek. “I plan to close the Soullands off from the mortal world, Sersa. It’s why I haven’t resumed Reaping Hours. It’s why I *need* to know which side of the veil you will be on in case the opportunity to secure your realm presents itself. If my brother usurps the Daemon Throne, your world is dead.”

It struck me like a slap. Instantly.

Sin didn’t stop there.

“The last thing I want is to live with a wall between us, but what our lives look like—together, separate—is *your* choice. Provided I can ever return the shard.” He looked doubtful. “The position of Daemon Queen regnant, a True Queen, is yours if you want it. Equal powers. I will relinquish all my power to you if it means having *you*. Tell me what you want from me, and it is yours.”

In Os Íseal, I would have been forced to marry as clan heir. Forced to

bear children to a man I didn't love, at which point my husband would probably try to have me murdered so he could become the sole power.

"Queen regnant?"

"Regnant," Sin repeated. "*Not* regent. *Not* consort."

"Has there ever been a queen who ruled in her own right? Not that I would be—I mean, being born mortal and all."

"The First Queen. Raielina." His voice shifted, rigid and strong once more. "Let me rephrase, Sersa. If it's not blatantly obvious, I have no desire to be sworn in without you. However, I agreed to partake in the Silent Rite before my birthday, and it is the first step in the plan. Get all the Gilders—the Circle especially—in the same place, at the same time."

Normal people desired presents on their birthdays.

Sin...was not normal.

He smirked, looking pleased for a moment. "You do know my birthday is the first day of the Dark season, not the eve, correct?"

"Do you even know mine?"

"Of course I do," he said, offended. "The thirteenth day of Harvest."

"Did we ever spend either of those days together?"

Sin shook his head. "This will be the first, and I would be honored if you agreed to be sworn in alongside me during the Silent Rite."

A slow smile curled my lips. "I'll *consider* it—if you tell me how old you'll be."

Hesitating, Sin licked the front of his teeth. "As if you need more fuel."

"The man who knows all my secrets won't share?"

When his eyes flicked to my bare form, he wrapped the blanket around my shoulders, probably more for his sake than mine. Then he spoke at the slowest pace imaginable. "At the turn of the season, I will be seven hundred and twenty-nine years old."

I swallowed, trying to stifle my laughter. Shock. Skepticism.

"I have no words."

Sin scowled. "Oh? I hear one in particular, and it sounds quite a lot like *ancient*."

"I mean, what have you been *doing* with all that time, Nessin?"

"Just plotting and taking a throne and convincing a stubborn-ass lass to marry me. Unsurprisingly, the last year has been the hardest of my life."

Everything stilled. The moment. Us. My mind.

"Kiss me." Desperation clouded the words, my head, *me*. "We can worry

about everything when the moons rise. But while it's still dark out, until we have to face the light of reality, please. Just kiss me."

Sin's eyes darkened. Yet a light shone within him too.

Without delay, he closed the distance, slowly sliding his hand under my jaw, fingers twining with my wet hair as it dripped off the ends and onto my bare skin. Gently, he brushed his lips to mine, freeing a moan from me. He sucked on my top lip and opened my mouth, sliding his tongue against mine.

We moved in unhurried, perfect unison for not more than a minute before I cracked.

"Fuck me. Make love to me. I don't care. Just *touch* me, Sin," I said, breathless, back arching in his hands as I stood on my tiptoes.

"*Love.*"

"I need this. We do."

"We both agreed," he growled, hanging on by a thread.

Very specific words echoed between us.

...*I don't know if I love you anymore.*

"Why do those words matter so much to you?" I said, exasperated.

"Why do they *matter*?" Sin echoed dangerously, putting his hands on his hips.

He walked toward the foot of the bed, clawing the linens as he bent at the waist and lifted his gaze to meet mine. He didn't bother to hide that thread of restraint he was actively trying not to snap. Sin wanted to.

Yet something in his expression told me he wanted the words more.

"Oh, I do. The *words*, love," he demanded. His voice was low, entirely feral. "You know *what* I want to hear."

I crossed the room to stand in front of him. "I told you I wanted...us. Isn't that enough?"

Sin's expression said no.

Why in Dúm's gods-damned name couldn't I utter one little sentence? Three words. Three simple syllables.

Still, there seemed to be...something else holding me back. A lingering uncertainty.

"I'm—I'm not ready."

This, too, felt like a lie. But it was my only response, however weak it sounded.

"Okay," Sin relented, calm as can be. His colorless eyes roamed my face.

"Okay?"

“But you still want me to ‘make love’ to you?” he said, seeking clarification.

I could think of nothing else I wanted more right now.

Fighting a smile, I nodded.

Before I could say anything else, Sin spun me around until my thighs brushed the end of the bed. The motion jolted me alert, and yet hardly prepared me for the knee he nudged between my legs, spreading them. He fisted my hair and bent me forward, chest to sheets. I didn’t know how or when I lost the blanket, but I was completely exposed for him now.

His fingers were tender, massaging me, but his grip was that of the greedy Archdaemon. Sin hummed. “This angle of you is pure perfection, love. Yet, since you continue to run from your true feelings for me, I won’t make love to you. I won’t afford you the option of watching me take you either.”

I won’t afford you the option.

Why were these suddenly my favorite words?

I laughed against the sheets, and my punishment was his knee nudging me wider. I tried not to think about everything Sin saw.

“Do you find my feelings humorous?” he asked.

My body jerked when he slid his flattened palm between my quaking legs, feeling, *exploring*.

He pressed down hard on the bundle of nerves he had full access to and asked, “Would you like a memory in this position?”

“*What?*”

It was the last thing I expected from Sin.

His voice sharpened to the tone of the Daemon King. “I said, do you *want* a memory, Sersa?”

I wasn’t sure what I desired most right now—for him to keep me in this position, flip me around so I could watch my daemon devour me, show me a memory that would only confuse me worse, not at all, everything all at once.

I felt dizzy, but I answered decisively.

“*Yes.*”

“Then I will show you the second time we met.”

“*Second?*”

“*Second,*” Sin repeated. “The first—we will not be reliving Hwain and *Roarke* today. No, I want you to see the first time I touched and tasted you.”

Sin rolled the bundle of nerves between his knuckles. The direct pressure and mistreatment would have me drawing blood with how hard I bit my lip.

“You, *love*, wandered into a daemon club. Actually, you stabbed me that night too. Right after I licked every inch of your skin.” He chuckled in memory. “In a sick way, I have craved your viciousness ever since. Godsdamn, did I exercise my restraint that night. I wanted to fuck you in front of every daemon there and mark you with my seed. Though I prefer to save the fun in-betweens for a later time.”

“But—”

The memory pushed its way inside me like a flood, shoving all else out. Sin’s distracting motions continued, and I was sure I’d pass out from sensory overload.

We were somewhere dark—a hall tinted red. On the wall before us hung a mirror in the shape of a treble clef. Water trickled down the curved glass like a waterfall in which Nessin twisted his fingers and brought them to his tongue—

Right as he shoved two fingers inside me.

I cried out. But after earlier, I needed more. I needed him inside me.

“Is *this* enough?” Sin challenged outside of the images, stealing my words. “Me letting you in my head?”

“Yes!”

“Tell me,” he said sharply. “Where are we, *love*?”

Thane Elittes’s club had boasted wallpaper with those same musical notes.

“Crescendo,” I gasped. “The Crescendo.”

“Good,” Sin purred as he pulled those hypnotic fingers out and spread my desire all over me. In one fluid movement, he lifted my head, bringing my back flush against his chest, the other hand kneading my lower stomach.

The absence of his fingers made me whirl.

“Do you want your king to show you the rest?”

“Why are you acting like this?” I growled.

“Like what?”

“A gods-damned tease, that’s what.”

“This is just one of our little games of denial. Evidently, I need to remind you of what you feel. I need to make you feel *something* because when I see into that mind of yours, I detect zero confusion,” he said domineeringly.

The memory resumed.

“It’s rainwater from the Otherworld,” Sin said, still studying my reflection in the treble clef mirror. “It will sober you up.”

“Why would I want that? Is it safe?”

His hands hovered around me. “Yes. And you want it because I will not touch you unless we are both sober, love.”

Suddenly, I was ridding him of his gloves. A moment later, I pocketed them for him, my hand venturing daringly close to his groin.

But he sucked in a breath and froze as he watched memory-me lean forward to take the rainwater directly onto my tongue instead of the droplets he offered me from his fingertips.

“That was very bad of you,” he said. “Your senses will become so heightened you won’t be able to stand your desire for me in a moment.”

Kissing.

Stumbling.

So sober, so suddenly.

He’d ruined my attempt to forget Pa was dead...

The memory sped up to create a time lapse of dizzying images and never-ending banter I wanted to hear every word of but couldn’t. Then we were in a dark room on a bed, the only hint of light being that which filtered in from under the door. I was naked and his mouth and hands were everywhere, doing everything but—

Chuckling, Sin cut me off from seeing more. He pushed my head back down, bending me at the waist. I focused on the sheets in front of me, trying to lessen the spinning sensation of moving from reality to the memory and back again.

“You sought me out that night, love. One touch and I knew I couldn’t take you. It tortured me. Much like you feel right this second. Do you still want me—to touch you?”

I nodded.

“Words.”

“Yes!”

“Divine, love. Stay still for me.”

Sin fisted my hair once more, the other hand positioning his hardness between my legs. Then he tapped on my hip. When I didn’t move, not understanding, he gripped my thigh and brought it tight against the other, burying himself between...but not inside me.

I looked back as he cursed in pleasure before he proceeded to move his hips back and forth along my wet center, creating such perfect and deliberate pressure almost everywhere I wanted.

The hand in my hair forced me to look forward.

The last thing I saw were his daemonic eyes.

“I will make you beg me to take you so hard you can’t walk for days. But I’m not going to, Sersa. You need and want to get in my head? You want me, my body? Well, I need to know I’m *it*.”

Sin dug his fingers deeper into my hip, keeping the tightest fit for him, but the feel of his cock sliding along my center—he couldn’t deprive me. *No*. I would finish. So soon.

At first, I was certain. Until the sensation I craved more than anything evaded me repeatedly, ghosting over my center. Just in reach...

When I tried to grind backward, Sin held me still, and with the shard between us telling him what I needed, he knew *exactly* what he was doing—refusing to let me ascend with him. Payback, no doubt.

Still, I chased my own peak, rolling my hips what little he allowed me.

His breaths turned short and forceful until Sin spilled his release on my back with a fierce grunt. The only sound inside the room for a long moment was his comedown, and the softening motions of him kneading my hip. Growing more impatient with each inhale and exhale I listened to, I waited for Sin to finish what he’d started.

Instead, he brushed his lips to the middle of my spine. “You are sorely mistaken if you think I am letting you come, love.”

I actually couldn’t believe him.

“A daemon—a king—is begging you,” Sin said against my damp skin, “but I will beg no more. I will frustrate you. Push you. Make you hate me just a little.”

“I hate you more than a little right now!”

“I would rather you feel some type of passion than uncertainty because I *need* your mind to be sound. No doubts in here,” he said, touching his lips to my temple. “*Sound mind*. I want you to be certain I’m what you want.”

Breathing deep, I remained on the bed, listening to Sin get dressed.

The red anger came rushing back through my veins, but I *refused* to open my eyes and look at him.

Not a minute later, he returned to clean me off with a towel before he disposed of it. Sin then pressed his chest to my back again as his left hand—the ringed one—laced with mine. The metal was cold to the touch.

He dusted a chaste kiss to the nape of my neck. “If you want this—not my body but *us*—I need it all. Your love. Forgiveness. Truth. Those words

that are *my air*. Even if I don't deserve it. You say you want my truths, and I need yours in return. All I want is for you to surrender to me in this one way, and I will surrender to you in all others."

Defiance surged inside me against his demands, and I waited to feel the red encircling my wrists.

"Not demands," Sin corrected. "A final plea. Open your eyes, love. Your blood has betrayed your lips yet again."

Breathing in his cool scent, I obeyed and blinked, studying our intertwined hands for a moment that felt both endless and too short.

A faint hue of pink streaked Sin's long, bony fingers—*his* color. My magic's color for him.

And it had claimed his ring finger almost entirely in brushstrokes.

"I love you," Sin whispered as he planted another kiss on the overlap of our hands. He straightened and headed for the door, simultaneously tucking in his shirt. "Get dressed. A Sluagh just landed out front."

Confusion immobilized me. I couldn't move—I couldn't peel my gaze from those brushstrokes.

Sin left me face-down on the bed wanting *more*, while also wanting to tell him he might be a king, but he wasn't allowed to set the rules. Neither would my magic.

Not after everything.

SIN



REGARDLESS OF THE MUCH-NEEDED RELEASE, I DIDN'T FEEL BETTER AFTER telling Sersa to relinquish control while holding all of it in my hands. Not after I had denied her the ecstasy she sought and taken my own.

Although we *had* frequently played these games when we courted, we were not in the same place as back then.

My fault, indeed.

In a sick way, denying her felt like the only power I possessed at present.

And though I was remorseful, silencing the fucking *thrill* that Sersa's blood had painted my hand was impossible. Yet she had spoken of an imbalance, and I showed her there *was* one.

There was nothing left to do but prove to her I did not see it that way.

I nudged the door shut with the tip of my boot as Sersa dressed near the bed behind me.

"*That*," I said, turning to face her and gesturing to the bed with the glove I'd begun to slip on out of habit, "was very indecent of me."

"Why don't you go tend to your visitor? Maybe it's your *wife*!"

I turned the lock as she said so, her words drowning out the little *click*.

Only my gorgeous, mortal-born queen could make me bite my tongue.

“Here you are,” she snarled, “*still* trying to control everything after that approach has gone over so well for you!”

Her black waves were a mess when she finally slipped my shirt over her head. The loose fabric drowned her, and I didn’t miss the way her shoulders reached a new height as she inhaled my scent.

“Did you know,” Sersa started softly, slowly, “I’d already made my decision to stay in the Soullands with you the day your father lured me back here? I chose to be with you before I killed him. Before I gave my soul to save you. That was a decision made out of love. I was ready to give up everything for you—to be with you. Because having you meant gaining more than I’d ever imagined.”

It was harder to hear than Sersa saying she potentially didn’t love me anymore. Because that was a fucking lie we both recognized in our cores.

This was all truth.

This was about the real or perceived imbalance between us, about power and choice, and the two combined.

“I know I will lose you if things do not change,” I said. “If I do not. Allow me the chance to rebalance us.”

“Then stop *acting* like you’re in charge when you’re not.”

I smirked. “I can’t have you repeating that outside this room, love. It’d be bad for my reputation, but I’ll admit you’re correct.”

Glaring at me, she folded her arms. “You don’t deserve my forgiveness, you know. Especially after *that*.”

Her gaze accused the bed. Apparently, neither of us wanted to give the occurrence a name.

Sersa studied my hands, once more gloved and the pink paint concealed. “Are you embarrassed I marked you?”

With a scoff, I closed the distance. Sersa fell to pieces when I spun her around and pushed her back against the door. Her eyes widened as my hand flattened against her collarbone.

“The daemon pathetically begging you to admit you love him—*embarrassed?*” I tossed my gloves over my shoulder. “My body is yours to paint, if you wish.”

Both of us studied the watery pink markings. I twisted my wrist. The color bisected my palm diagonally too, so faint against my skin. It might not be noticeable on anyone else.

“Maybe it will go away,” Sersa murmured.

I made a fist. “*Mine.*”

Cheeks pink, a smile quirking up her red mouth, her love for me burgeoned. For the briefest moment, it didn’t matter Sersa wouldn’t admit it.

The color was enough.

The color produced silent words.

I gathered her black mane to one side, letting it drape over her shoulder. “It seems to me that you have forgotten I was on my knees surrendering to you a few nights ago. That is no fault of your own, but entirely mine, since I should be there daily. To the naked eye, *others* may glimpse a power imbalance between us. Perhaps you see one too when I am demanding your surrender on top of the less than perfect choices I made.” That pained me to admit. For Sersa, I would though. “Yet a wise and strange blood of different colors sees the truth.”

I slid my hand around the small of her back, but her hips did all the work, pressing up to seek mine. A shaky breath gusted out of Sersa, and both her hands found my waist.

“See, I think that I was asking you to speak the wrong language. I think—and you tell me if I am mistaken—that I was asking for words when your language is so obviously *color.*”

The tendrils praised me, a single length snaking between us. I slid my fingers through it, wanting that color to surround me. Paint me. Resurrect me.

“I doubt I will ever be able to speak in colors, but I will try to speak *to* them. As I said, I will make my color—yes, *my* color—fill every room you enter, and what I did over there...” I nudged my chin at the bed behind me. “That was a poor representation of that promise.”

“Very poor,” Sersa echoed.

“Tell me to get on my knees for you, Queen. Order my surrender.”

Confidence seeped into Sersa’s eyes under the lust in mine. Yet it was the love she saw there that made her want me most.

The pale, spirited tendril silently instructed me to kneel for her. I obeyed. I’d fucking obey anything Sersa said. The rings I wore warmed like hot coils around my pinky and ring finger as the hue encircled them.

“Since I am new to this language,” I continued, “I want to make myself perfectly clear.”

Sersa waited.

And waited.

I made her wait until her brow furrowed in frustration and the strands

deepened to red.

I smirked up at her. “Your kneeling king is sorry for teasing you, *cría naam*, and while the colors may love me, my stance is firm when it comes to your mind. I want your mind sound the next time I fuck you, make love to you, or utterly *ruin* you. No doubts in here.”

Sersa shook her head. “My mind will never be sound around you. You make me feel like the earth is shaking beneath me.”

“I want to make you feel like the earth is steady as can be,” I purred. “But if I am going to make it shake beneath you, I will do it from my knees, love.”

My words evoked in Sersa an avalanche of emotion when, really, I was ready to melt the indignation and confusion right from her core.

“Now.” I cleared my throat. “I would like to atone for my behavior. To rebalance us. Will you allow me to speak a language we both understand?”

Sersa flashed a wicked smile as I teased the end of her shirt. *My shirt*. A scalloped hem with vines and flowers adorned the lace Sersa wore beneath, vastly different from the typical silk shorts that concealed my favorite destination.

Thank you, Claud.

I leaned forward and dragged my teeth along her lower abdomen, flat yet soft, and the vibration of my lips had Sersa squeezing her thighs. I shoved a hand between, keeping them parted for my play before I pressed my nose to her slit beneath the lace and breathed deep.

Eyes wide and lips parted, Sersa flushed.

“This is not about power,” I said. “I want you to surrender to me willingly when we are alone, but that is the *only* place I crave it. I will relinquish it to you everywhere else, and I will relinquish it now.”

“Then show me you’re *capable* of surrendering yourself to me too.”

Smirking, my fingers trailed up the smooth skin of her right calf, turning it outward the slightest bit to plant a kiss on her inner thigh. Her leg jerked away from the sensation, but I held it in place.

“When did you stop clean-shaving your face?”

While bingeing, I thought.

This was not the reminder I needed. Not after I’d ingested the rest of the vial of souls earlier.

Not enough to get high. But enough for another resurgence.

“Do you not like it?” I asked.

“I do. It...tickles a bit.”

“Let’s see where else it does.”

As if I were wielding a paintbrush, I trailed my tongue up my wife’s thigh, drawing lines of desire out of her. Sersa’s shoulder blades dug into the door and her hips twitched the tiniest of movements, revealing a weak attempt at restraint.

“Touch your breasts for me. *Please, Queen.*”

A ripple of satisfaction shot down her abdomen. Her sensations were as much my own these days, granting me every hint I could ever want when I let my walls down.

Sersa bit her lip, hesitating for a moment.

Then her hands slid up her body, cupping the breasts she couldn’t fully handle because they were made for larger hands—*mine*—while her ass spilled over my greedy fingers.

“Good, love.”

“What else?” Sersa murmured. “What else do you want, Sin?”

When I halted, she tilted her head at me in question.

“Love.” I raised my eyebrow. “What are you trying to say?”

“Tell me what you *want*. Lead the way, Nessin.”

Fuck.

If Sersa wanted me to lead, I wouldn’t ask twice.

“Tease your nipples for me. Now.” The commanding purr sent her overboard with a moan. “I want to see them through *my* shirt.”

A breathless sound tumbled over her plump, wet mouth. She bit her lip harder and closed her eyes for a moment, shooting a sensation right down my abdomen and into my godsdamn balls.

When the peaks strained against the fabric, I leaned forward and bit one softly, earning yet another reviving moan from Sersa’s lips.

“So perfect. The gods didn’t spare me with your creation on any front, love,” I said through my teeth, clamped on her nipple.

Too tall for this position I might be—and I’d have to mind the horns—but I *needed* to watch Sersa quake from this angle as I devoured her until she came on my tongue.

“Show your husband what you want.”

Her eyes snapped open again, glaring down at my usage of the word.

“Fine, your *boytoy*,” I corrected.

Sersa practically snorted, bursting into laughter. I grinned with her, loving the sound, the joy radiating from her, so different from moments before.

“Did you call yourself my boytoy?”

“That’s what I am, aren’t I?” I jested.

Her free hand brushed my jaw. “Sin.”

Before the moment went somewhere I couldn’t let it, not when Sersa wouldn’t reciprocate, I hushed her.

I reached up to push my shirt down her shoulder and freed her breast. “Keep teasing for me. The other hand, I want between your legs.”

It didn’t surprise me how slow her descent was—purposely torturing me while trying to stay above the lace.

“Ah,” I reprimanded.

Her fingers fumbled with the edge before dipping downward. Sersa’s face was a tell in itself—she was right where I wanted her. Right where *I* wanted to be.

“Good. Slide those fingers back and forth. Not inside. *Eyes.*”

Sersa snapped them open wide, fearing I’d stop instructing her.

“Are you wet for me?” A single nod with a breathy moan. “Words.”

“Yes, Sin. *For you.*”

My eyes dropped as her fingers continued their movements. I growled, growing more impatient because I wanted my taste. “Show me.”

“Feel yourself.”

“Do as I say. We do this together. *Yield* together.”

Enjoying my demanding tone of voice, Sersa nodded. She was already high off the building sensations. And yet, she kept drawing out her pleasure with the slowest, most provocative movements. I watched through the scant lace and gripped her thigh in warning.

Finally, Sersa glided her hand out from under the fabric, evidence shining on the lengths of her two fingers.

“Do not deny your daemon his sustenance.”

My drop of Archdaemon blood practically spoke for me.

Before Sersa could think twice, she brought her fingers to my lips, letting me suck on them. Our eyes locked, never releasing one another.

Out of nowhere, she flattened her palm on my forehead. It was impulsive, a last-second move I hadn’t predicted.

I fucking loved that I lived in her mind, and yet she stunned me.

“I want something else first, Sin. What? Don’t look so shocked.”

I *was*. A chuckle rumbled in my chest.

“And what is it you want, Queen?”

“I already know I have the power to make you kneel before me, Nessin Drumghoul. What I want is *control*.”

“And how shall I give you that?”

“Before you express great remorse, I want to see—a moment when you had no control but ended up fine.”

Sersa adjusted the hand on my forehead, and I stared up at her.

“Ironically, I have too many moments to choose from.”

“Show me the first that comes to mind.”

A flicker of the Sluagh’s talons barraged me. “And if it’s not a pretty moment?”

Sersa shrugged.

“Tell me when it becomes too much, love.”

“I—”

Her words fell away when I yanked her down with me.

I smacked the ground. Slick cobbles. Snow between cracking stones. A sky heavy with the promise of the Dark season.

Labored breaths as the silver-bodied spirits closed in. I rolled onto my front and crawled, crawled, crawled.

The first slash of talons threw me onto my back, landing on fresh wounds, the scream tearing up my throat almost as painful as the Sluagh’s assault itself.

“MUM!”

Devlin and Lochlainn fighting in the background—

Another slash right across my chest refocused me.

My wool coat splayed open, black fabric shredded, revealing red and white. Nothing but red blood and white skin.

“Sin!” Devlin called.

“Stop—”

The slash across my face always made me black out...

Sersa looked down at me in pure, raw shock. Mouth hanging open, she gripped my shoulders and stood utterly still, not a single tremble of fear or horror on her beautiful face.

“Why did you show me that?” she murmured.

Both of us gasped.

The memory was one I relived every day, but never had I shared it.

“Because I’m *not* afraid to give up control. The day I lost it was the same day I gained the Sluagh. Relinquishing it, as I said, is the least of my

concerns if it means I get you, Sersa. We are equals, but you will always come first. Now,” I said impatiently. “Now I will speak our common tongue, love.”

I shoved her hips flat against the door and sucked her clit through the flimsy lace. When my teeth dragged across the flowery seam, Sersa gripped the doorframe on either side of her.

“Nessin!”

I halted to roll the fabric down her hips, helping her step out of one foot but not bothering with the other.

As I lifted Sersa’s leg over my shoulder, I tried desperately not to become mesmerized by the way her need slid out of her. Tongue flat, I lapped it up like my own personal feast with the slowest of licks. I meant it. She wouldn’t be able to stand in a minute.

Dúm.

My cock was suddenly unrestrained, jealous of my tongue. Her moans compelled me to add my fingers. I paused, waiting for her to look down and meet my stare.

“*Watch.*”

Nodding, Sersa studied the remnants of pink marks her blood had painted on my middle and forefinger as I drove them into her, keeping a literal pulse on her pleasure as she tightened on them.

Watch, I repeated in her thoughts every time she almost looked away.

I worshipped Sersa—a madman starved for his wife after years at war, moving my two fingers faster, deeper, curling them until her legs were shuddering so hard they buckled. Then I darted my tongue inside, simultaneously rolling my lip over her clit.

When she ascended, desperation to taste her release drove me onward. It was better than I ever could have imagined as I drank in every drop of her. Moaning my name repeatedly, Sersa ran her fingers through my hair then curled them around one of my horns. She held me against her as quake after quake shook her core, and I gently licked to the rhythm of her hips rocking against my face.

Then I stood, helping keep her upright with an arm around her waist and my lips on her neck.

“I need you,” she said, hips still moving.

“Is your mind sound?”

Sersa could barely focus her eyes, let alone keep them open. “Yes.”

I didn't need words when she spoke her love in a more meaningful way.

Screw it.

I fumbled with my belt—

“Anybody home?” Thane shouted from the front of the house.

A rumble surged in my chest as I tipped my head toward the ceiling.

This prick.

Though I did not want Thane hearing or picturing me pleasuring my *wife*, I hoped for his sake he was half-asleep, drunk, or both after leaving the nightly Eventide revels that would have just ended in Nos Ovscura.

If Thane was wittingly ruining my day before the moons had fucking risen, he'd regret it.

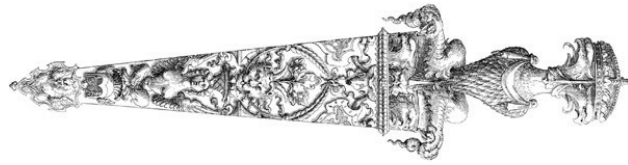
Cockblocking bastard.

“Unfortunately, it is time to leave,” I said in Sersa's ear before I pressed a kiss to her forehead. “But tonight I will ruin you. Tonight you are mine, love. And I am *never* releasing you, so you had better be positive when you surrender yourself to me fully.”

“And you?” Sersa asked, still trying to slow her breaths.

“I surrendered the day the gods made you, love.”

Serena



I NEEDED A MOMENT TO COMPOSE MYSELF AFTER SIN LEFT ME, MY BODY pulsing with both what he'd done to me, for me, and what he promised to do tonight.

Tonight you are mine, love.

Checking my fingertips for pink remnants, yet finding none, I couldn't comprehend how my magic had literally *painted* Sin. More importantly, would it continue? We couldn't have a pastel pink Daemon King reigning over the Soullands.

After I slipped on my leggings, I tied up Sin's shirt so it wouldn't hang to my knees. Then I gathered odds and ends like Ma's spear, my daggers, and Dúma's stuffed animal before I headed into the hall.

Tail thumping the ground, my hellhound sat at the feet of a man in a hooded cloak standing in the entryway. The front door was propped open for someone else—Laisrés—out on the landing, squinting at the horizon. His long cloak cracked against the wind behind him, and a murder of crows cawed loudly around him.

Then, as if they'd never been there, they *disappeared* beneath his tan skin.

While I'd known they weren't tattoos in the normal sense, the fact that they were *real* crows trapped inside him left me mesmerized.

I snapped out of it when the man in the cloak turned to face me with a broad grin on his bronze face.

Thane Elittes.

As Sin looked from Thane to me and back again, I could have read the cuss on his lips from a mile away.

Fuck.

Fuck was right.

“Well, well, well.” Thane swaggered out of the entranceway, no longer bothering to wait for Laisrés. “My favorite lovebirds reunited. I sure like you two better than *that* one,” he said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder.

The very sight of the Gilder shot my focus straight to my dainty daggers.

Thane was not only a co-conspirator of Sin’s, but worse, he was also related to Aislinn.

Maybe he’d *helped* put her on the throne—for appearances or not.

Seeing him deepened the red I saw, felt, tasted. None of the colors had ever smelled like anything, but the red evoked images of charred wood at midnight, the persistent embers refusing to wink out.

Like that, the blissful tendrils from before vanished.

Glaring at him, I stormed toward the stone chimney and tore free a broadsword from the collection. I didn’t want my spear with a single pointed end. No, I wanted something to wound from every angle.

Something *surrounded* in sharp edges.

As I shoved Sin out of my way, that small touch brought to life my desire for him. But I felt something more fervent toward Thane right now.

The color of my magic was clear.

Laisrés entered the chalet and calmly stepped out of the way into the kitchen to his left. A look of curiosity tainted his expression. It morphed into immediate amusement when I moved to strike at Thane, aiming for his head in a downward sweep.

He blocked my swing with a one-handed grip on my forearm.

“Lovely to see you too, Queen! You look like you got some much-needed rest and rejuvenation with the Druids. Though I see their meditation sessions haven’t helped in the slightest. Or are they no longer mandating those?”

I sneered. “Did the Daemon King mandate *you* to be here?”

Like the Gilder he was, Thane scoffed pretentiously. “You *are* aware I am the king’s second, yes?” He tugged on his lapels, but my next attempt to impale him through the gut forced him to leap backward over the sofa. “He

does not command me like a pet, Sersa.”

“Watch it,” Sin snapped.

I wasn’t sure which he was saying to watch—my sword or Thane’s mouth. Until Sin hissed through his teeth as I impaled the off-white cushions.

From my peripheral, Ranir and Innes had entered the room.

“I mean that I come willingly, of course, Your Darkness,” Thane said. The brightening Cradled Moons chased him, circling the room’s perimeter. “Are you accusing me of something? I’m not sure I follow this random attack, Queen.”

“Not near the windows!” Innes said. “One of you will go tumbling right out.”

“That is the idea,” I called over my shoulder, stalking around the sofa. He continued to back away. “Hopefully *Thane*.”

I threw the sword to the edge of the room and swept forward, yanking a dainty dagger from my waist.

I pressed it against his neck.

“Tell me, Thane.” The red behind my eyes brightened. “Did you or did you not help put your sister Aislinn on the throne?”

He scoffed, though he eyed the blade. “Let me break it down for you. Step. Sister. *Stepsister*. Fake. Union. *Fake union*.”

That wasn’t right. Thane had said she was his half-sister before.

I pressed the dagger closer.

“Sersa—” Sin started.

“Oh, please keep it to yourself for once,” I sneered, then added in a mocking tone, “*Your Darkness*. You trust him completely, do you?”

Laisrés leaned against the counters. A wide, incredulous grin pulled at his tan cheeks as if he was watching some spellbinding performance. Glassy eyes and a beak poked out from the end of his coat sleeve. The crow blinked twice before it retreated, the green fabric smoothing out once more.

Or I was seeing things.

No, that couldn’t be. The fabrications only ever related to Aislinn or Nessin. Or Nessin *and* Aislinn.

But I realized the red tendrils were closing in on Thane. Ready to strike.

No matter, I focused hard on him, not my magic. “You wanted to keep the power in the family with Aislinn then, aye?”

“It wasn’t real,” Thane hissed.

“Some might say the same about my marriage, and let me tell you—theirs

felt real enough from my place of rotting on Nos Nua!”

“I wasn’t the mastermind of this plan either—I didn’t *tell* Sin who to choose! Aislinn was a convenient pawn.” Thane glanced down at my dagger every few seconds. “If *anyone*, you should turn your blade on your king. Though I do not endorse such behavior. This is neither a recommendation nor treason. Just facts.”

Thane was rambling, but his points were irrefutable.

Sin may have used Aislinn like a faulty stepping stone to Helde and Jestin, but he’d stood at the helm of it all—not Thane. Not anyone else.

Sin.

The voice of reason I hated to look in the face reeled me back. I blinked at the red I saw, confused as to *how* it’d come on so strong and so suddenly. Looking around the room, I chased each tendril with my eyes until they dispersed.

What the hell was wrong with me?

Thane’s bedhead curls oddly came into focus, and my head whirled a little. Up close, his clothes reeked—

Of perfume.

Recognizing the scent immediately, my gaze snapped to the side and found Innes. Thane Elittes was her gods-damned lover? Innes was *far* too nice for the Gilder.

Shaking my head, my hand trembled as I tried to pull back. But I ended up accidentally drawing a thin line on Thane’s neck instead.

He winced.

A droplet gleamed on the blade’s curved edge.

Dúm’s. Piss.

When the dagger clattered from my hand, I remembered what I held. Thane’s brows pinched together in realization too.

“It’s a souldagger, isn’t it?” he said.

SIN



“NOW I NEED A GODSDAMN SOUL! PERFECT. CAN’T WAIT TO DIE ON A mountain in the freezing cold. Thanks, Queen!” Thane turned his back to Sersa, put his hands on his hips, and clenched his teeth. “We got your message.”

He was being dramatic, of course. A tiny cut from a souldagger *could* kill him, but it would take a day at a minimum. The wound needed to be both serious *and* unhealed to cause such a swift death, and his was hardly bleeding.

Left without a soul, he’d feel the dagger’s effects in a bell or two. With my stock in Nos Ovscura though, one was always in reach. Meaning the prick was fine—and after confirming he’d barged into the safehouse fully aware of my *activities*, he deserved a moment of suffering.

“You could have sent a response instead of coming here,” I told Thane.

“Yeah, well, took forever for Crowman over here to get the message to Nos Ov. Wanted to make sure you guys were still okay,” he said, glancing at Innes.

Catching the fleeting look, Laisrés folded his arms over his chest. “As I recall it, *you* were still a little drunk when I came to get you for starters, no?”

“Not the godsdamn point!”

Now Thane was really looking at Innes, assessing whether she was irritated he'd stayed out until dawn. She looked indifferent, her freckled face a little flushed from being woken so abruptly, but otherwise fine with it.

Thane owned a den for daemons, then again. His job was to regale patrons until the wee bells.

And to steal their secrets for me.

The way Thane spoke of me always confused the Gilders. It made them trust him. He bashed me with some. Praised me with others. A real two-faced bloke on the surface. It meant *everyone* deemed Thane a friend, regardless of his questionable trustworthiness—all thanks to his Tempter blood. If he weren't half daemon, they might question him more, but a Tempter's sway went far among the Gilders. Plus, Lord Elittes was too ashamed to admit who Thane's mother was.

It was a secret he kept under lock and key.

Halfway through Eventide, the skies began to darken, but it mostly served as an excuse to get drunk and gorge oneself on souls. The festivities prevailed for an entire moon preceding the start of the Dark season, and fortunately, they'd been going on for three weeks now. Meaning the Gilders were wearied and permanently hungover. Or they would be for a few more days.

“I happened to be asleep,” Laisrés said, gesturing to the barely brightening sky. “You know—something beings of all sorts *must* do. I delayed us by a half bell at most. You want immediate service? Learn to speak Sluagh, Thane. Or some good ole paper notes should do the trick.”

“Regardless,” I cut in, “I would appreciate some urgency, Laisrés.”

“Were you acting with urgency about five minutes ago?” he countered.

Was that—*jealousy*?

His lingering glances at Sersa were impossible to miss.

The aura she exuded, her sharp yet silver tongue, and those dark eyes were simply the start of her godsdamn perfection. That, paired with rivulets of dark hair, creamy skin from head to toe, and a silhouette capable of bringing out the daemon in any male, mortal or otherwise, a half god stood no chance against her or her charms. The fuck didn't know her beyond that. Not like I did.

I yanked Laisrés forward by the collar. “What I do with my wife is none of your godsdamn concern.”

“How many times must she make it clear,” he said, barely loud enough

for my ears, but with a grin that spoke volumes, “that she’s not your wife?”

Thane heard well enough. He pulled me back before I caved Laisrés’s face in. I released him with a shove, despite the taunts he’d dangled in front of Sersa.

Take another lover.

I wanted him dead.

The *single* insult that truly hit home at present and he’d hurled it at me.

“I’ll head home for a soul and meet you at the rendezvous point after,” Thane said, keeping his back to Sersa. He turned to Ranir. “Unless you’ve got one on you?”

“None,” she said. “The vault is near enough.”

“You cannot visit the fortress alone. Jestin has tails out there,” I said. “The glamours won’t keep us safe forever, and I am not willing to gamble on it. We’re leaving now. I have an emergency stock with me.”

Thane heard the underlying truth.

Stash.

His eyebrows raised. “Oh. *Here*, you do?” he said, his mind churning with the probability of finding whatever I had with me before I devoured it.

The issue was I could tear a soul right from his body if he’d consumed any during the Eventide festivities. They might not have the same inebriating effect, depending on the time of ingestion, but that had never stopped me before.

Not to mention, a Sluagh could bring me to the fortress in seconds. To the vault inside the citadel. To Os Íseal for *fresh* souls torn right from the mortal bodies that contained them.

A gaping entryway filled with thoughts jolted me alert.

Sersa has to be helping Sin. Maybe he told her. Ha. Doubtful, the horned prick... Innes—

I was in *Thane’s* mind.

Inexplicably.

Unexpectedly.

Bearing witness to lines of thought I really didn’t need to hear.

But I could hear another person’s thoughts—apart from Sersa’s. Meanwhile the depths of *her* mind had become truly unfathomable. It forced me to wade through wave after wave of colors too. Filtering out Thane and Ranir was difficult but also like floating in water.

Instinctive. Muscle memory.

All their minds—plus the emotions humming along the Binding I shared with Sersa—were positively overwhelming.

Yet I could scream from the top of this mountain in relief. Fucking salvation.

Thank fuck.

I begged some higher power—not the gods, damn the gods—that the restoration was permanent.

If it was, Jestin—killing him would be that much more effortless.

My head whirled with endless possibilities.

I listened to the soothing sea of their minds a moment longer.

Laisrés was the only one I couldn't hear.

Still.

This was a sign. I needed to visit the soulstock. It was finally working. Souls were *finally* healing me.

Inhaling through my nose, I turned to Thane. “I will grab you a soul.”

“Why don't you show me to them?” he said, shooting Sersa a pointed look. “Wouldn't want to drop dead right before everyone's eyes.”

I squared my shoulders with his. “We need to leave. Wait here.”

“It will take the same amount of time if I come along, no?” Thane challenged. “Maybe quicker. I *have* mastered the art of eating and walking simultaneously, Your Darkness.”

Glaring, I turned on my heel and stalked toward the bedroom. “Hurry up,” I snapped.

Thane getting ahold of my stash was the *least* of my concerns at present. He could not best me in speed or strength, so there was little chance of that to begin with.

It was also not sheer chance I had told Sersa about the curse all for it to renege on me.

Within minutes?

“Not fucking possible,” I muttered to myself as I shoved open the door to my bedroom.

Unless...

Recognition hit me hard and fast.

Perhaps the loss of my blood had *nothing* to do with the curse or my overconsumption of souls.

Those two variables had remained constant.

Ma had cursed me, along with Gearóid and all my siblings. True, the

curse might have worsened when I became king. But as for the souls, I had devoutly binged for almost three moons straight now.

Which left one other variable. Two if I counted them separately.

To start, Sersa and I—the souls and her soul shard within me—were no longer miles apart.

Second, as I repaired us, broken shard by broken shard, her feelings toward me were slowly shifting.

The pink couldn't lie. Perhaps the color—Sersa's love and forgiveness—could heal me more than the souls I craved.



“So, how many have you had?” Thane creaked the door shut behind him. “Devlin should be with you after the shit you pulled the other night. Or is Sersa’s presence enough to deter you from bingeing?”

I didn't owe Thane an explanation.

I am a king.

He leaned back against the dresser I'd gripped for dear life earlier and crossed his arms over his chest.

His thoughts swirled in the air between us.

I waited. Listened. Wondered when it would cease and silence. My restoration could not be permanent. The moment was too auspicious.

Unless I'm right about why it has returned.

“You want to know if she knows.” I snickered because Thane didn't have the balls to ask.

“How—”

I dropped into a crouch after kicking back the rug then unlocked the miniature vault containing my stash. Just this action made my blood thrum and my fingers twitch.

So much about consuming souls was going through the motions.

Grip the vial. Pop the top. Tip it back. Repeat.

The anticipation beforehand—replaying each step that brought you closer to your high—was the most delicious part. After that, it all turned ugly quick.

“My blood has changed again. Still can't hear the god's thoughts,” I explained, nodding at the wall between us and Laisrés, “but I heard yours out

there. Hear them now too.”

“That’s good, isn’t it? For *you*.”

“It would be, had I not told Sersa ten minutes ago that I *lost* my blood. With our history...”

“Then you won’t tell her,” Thane said cautiously, more a question than a statement.

“Timing. She knows about the Dark Eve Fête. I told her the loose plan...”

The plan only existed in loose form.

Get sworn in. Announce Niuna as heir. Savor the Circle’s blood on my hands. Wait for Jest to show up. Kill him too.

Not necessarily in that order, but it was the general idea.

“You told her about that, but not the Ordé?”

“I told her about the command as well. Not the specifics. I *am* trying though.”

Thane sighed and shook his head. “But not about the souls, I assume? On both accounts.”

“There are too many things to say at once.” I slipped off my left glove to be sure the paint was still there and admired it for a prolonged moment.

Thane nodded. “The hell happened?”

“Sersa’s blood is speaking for her. The last thing I want is for her to feel like the deities have forced her into accepting our Binding.”

“Haven’t they?”

“Fuck off.”

“Is using your body and that hand she recolored to persuade her not as bad?” Thane asked.

“Refer to my previous statement. I don’t have to persuade Sersa either. Also, do not think about my wife that way or *I* will lovingly slit your throat with a souldagger. I wouldn’t heal you immediately either.”

My trembling fingers came into focus when I reached for a vial, hidden behind a metal panel that mimicked the back of the lockbox. Before I thought better of it, I tossed the vial to Thane. He caught the corked glass easily.

And tossed back the entire thing like a shot.

I lunged for him. “The fuck do you think you’re doing?”

“As I thought.” Thane stood taller, a grimace pulling at his mouth. “How many this morning? You lasted what—a little over a week? Or has there been a binge in between that neither Dev nor I know about?”

He slammed the vial on the dresser behind him before turning back to me.

The room tunneled until all I saw was that single empty vial.

“You are going to regret that,” I said, low yet deadly.

“Why’s that, Your Darkness?” he mocked, spinning the glass on its side.

I imagined dozens of souls crammed into that small vessel still, all of them coating my throat. Numbing my entire body.

A shudder passed through me, and I hummed greedily. It didn’t surprise me how quickly the cravings reclaimed precedence in my mind.

“*Oh, Dúm.* It was from the Soulsmiths—you stole from Bardca like old times, didn’t you?”

I slammed the lockbox a little too loudly and rearranged the rug to distract myself. The disembodied souls the Soulsmiths formed—ones that had never belonged to a mortal—sharpened your awareness and reflexes. They hit the hardest and led to the best, longest-lasting high.

Hands down.

Possession of them was also illegal. Although I could effortlessly get them from a dealer myself, of course, I hadn’t wanted to be associated with the filth peddling them in the shadowy taverns across Nos Ovscura. I had no right to think that way because I *was* that filth. A thief too.

I had trusted Bardca all my life. Worse, he trusted me.

Thane halted the spinning vial and flipped it upright. He cocked his hip and rested his elbow on top of the dresser. “You were doing fine before, Sin.”

“Ranir agrees I ought to keep my head clear until the fête. I will focus on kicking the habit after.”

“Sure. But to keep your head clear, you can’t consume more than is necessary, and you have proved that you lack restraint entirely. You see your limits and then breeze right past them,” Thane said, gesturing like he was cutting through the air—

A scream simultaneously pierced the fleeting silence.

The chalet tipped to one side, and a thud followed the explosive sound of glass shattering.

I whipped out of the room, Thane on my heels. It took but a second to reach the main area. We halted at the edges, where the room was tipping worse out here. Or my vision was blurring because of the sight before me.

A Dreither stalked forward from the shattered windows.

On Sersa’s heels.

“*Slowly,*” Laisrés was saying as he reached for her. “Slowly walk toward me.”

Not passing the Dreither another glance, I uttered a sharp command for it to halt. Only to be met with resistance, like a wall thwarting my attempt. A recent command preceded mine, gripping its bones and mind when the daemon hierarchy should have overruled the need for a command at all.

“Leave,” I tried aloud.

Nothing.

No response.

No tug within its core assuring me the gavel had struck.

Perhaps only my Mindblood was restored.

“Shi—” Thane started.

The silent order I hit him with worked instantly, his mouth snapping shut.

As a backup, I plucked at the strings connecting me to my Sluagh.

Dozens came awake like corpses opening their eyes in coffins six feet underground. They could see only an unending black void behind their eyes, but my Sluagh had no need for sight.

Talons traced softly down my arms and wrists. Waiting. Asking.

They wanted to be released.

Hold. I will give the word, I instructed them.

Under the Archdaemon’s weight, the now slanting foundation lacked all stability. In a house with weapons on every wall, this was a scenario I had not envisioned: the possibility that a single lunge to arm oneself could send us plummeting down the side of a mountain.

Damn the safehouse. Sersa was my sole concern.

Beyond the windows, blue smoke coiled into the air. I searched through the Dreither’s mind, its gaze darting anxiously in my direction, and learned what I feared. It had burned straight through one of the chalet’s supports.

I tested a step. A crack instantly filled the air.

“No—sudden—movements,” I whispered, halting.

The thought that my voice alone might carry too much weight for the foundation to bear paralyzed me.

Ranir stumbled out of her room to see what the disturbance was. On her heels, Innes’s mouth opened in a gasp. Ranir silenced the sound with her hand.

I spoke to both of their bones.

Say nothing. Do not move.

Sersa looked at me, her eyes screaming one thing.

What do I do?

I nodded at her, then at Laisrés, but he wasn't paying attention to me.

"Go to him, love," I mouthed with a reassuring nod, adopting a calm façade yet knowing all the same Sersa saw through me.

The Archdaemon was significantly smaller than Grandma Riona, yet almost identical apart from its frigid gaze, a shade of ice blue.

Sersa squeezed her eyes shut. It prowled after her. Though she continued her ascent at a steady pace, the chalet tipped worse every time one of us filled our lungs.

The Dreither took another step, following on Sersa's heels.

Stay where you are, I said in its mind.

Conflict clear on its face, the Archdaemon paused, its foot lifted mid-step. It blinked at me, questioning, wondering, *knowing* it should listen. Only it couldn't. Not under the pressure of another's command.

Impossible.

The Sluagh were one thing—a *setup*. But a fellow Archdaemon too? The hierarchy should have negated Jest's command. Without fucking question.

I hurled command after command at it. Each hit the Dreither like a single drop of water in a bucket of oil.

Useless.

The foundation screeched louder this time.

I had all of seconds to weigh the options. Irian prodded at the barriers of my mind, waiting—*wanting* to retrieve Sersa. Even for the Sluagh, the Dreither was too close for hasty moves, and the chalet too vulnerable.

All those options obliterated as a pair of horns crashed through the front of the house, followed by a weak funnel of fire.

Sersa's eyes widened with recognition.

Grandma Riona.

The massive Dreither had torn straight through the front wall, somehow managing not to bring the entire structure down around us.

It was going to crash and burn—or burn and crash—at any moment though.

The other Dreither was no regular Archdaemon, I realized. Grandma Riona's reaction was too clear.

This was her *spawn*. Impossibly. But it was.

"Stop, Ri—Grandma, don't hurt it!" Unthinking, Sersa raised her arms above her head and planted her feet, forming an X with her body to protect the adolescent Dreither.

“She’s not trying to hurt it,” I warned, reaching for Sersa. “It’s how they show their young affection. Go to Laisrés. Please.”

For once in your fucking life, please listen.

The Archdaemon’s tail shot outward, the needle-like tip ready to puncture Sersa right in the middle of the spine like the strike of a scorpion. Laisrés’s crows separated from his skin, forming a wall at the last second.

A wall directly behind Sersa.

She crouched down, the crows serving as her shelter.

Laisrés retched out a wheezing gasp. As if the Dreither’s tail had punctured straight through him to free the breath in his lungs. Sersa’s arms shot out to catch him, but he was twice her size and toppled into her.

Both fell into the unstable wall.

Before Sersa released a garbled shriek, I knew it was there—*felt* the scorching pain between my shoulders and the searing of skin.

I flew across the chalet, shoving the wall backward to stop it from crushing them. I hardly felt the heat through my gloves. I lunged to catch Sersa, not caring in the least if the structure collapsed on me so long as she was safe.

Panicked, the Dreither spawn launched itself back through the shattered remains of the glass windows.

With another thunderous set of cracks, the foundation really started to fail.

Sersa lost color rapidly, her skin clammy yet feverish. Laisrés wasn’t much better off with drops of sweat racing down his forehead. He groaned and writhed. His eyes rolled back in his head as he went slack. But Sersa remained my only concern—her burns too. All the light left her dark eyes when she gaped up at me like death was upon her.

“Go,” I mouthed to Gran. “*Follow.*”

With a screech, the Archdaemon launched herself into the air at a breakneck pace, her wings tight against her body before they whipped outward in an imposing span of shimmering black. Releasing Riona wasn’t without its risks. Under the assumption I was correct, she would chase her spawn to the ends of the Soullands and back.

But Sersa had believed she was protecting the youngling. I couldn’t let it be in vain.

My Sluagh appeared, their outstretched wings encircling the others protectively. Their shadows eclipsed each of them, one by one.

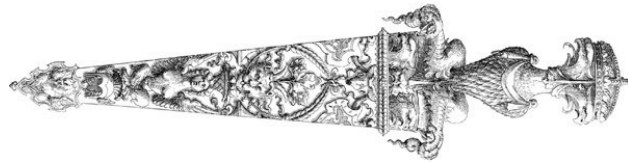
“Meet me on the waves,” I commanded.

Two Sluagh surrounded Dúma. Another Ranir. Innes. Thane.

Laisrés.

All vanished a second before Irian slingshot Sersa and I toward the safehouse on Daemon’s Tip. Right as the chalet’s last remaining support snapped. I never saw it hit the ground. It wasn’t necessary to know the safehouse was more than compromised. It was now *demolished* at the base of the mountain, and Jest would know with one glimpse just how close he’d gotten to destroying us too.

Serena



THE EMPTY SHORE FELT TOO TIGHT TO CONTAIN THE FIRE IN MY VEINS.

All the blood rushed to my toes as Sin gently placed me face-down on the sand. Wraiths reached skeletal fingers toward us from the shallow water. Irian had brought us somewhere warm, the air no longer crisp. If not for the edge of the sea kissing my shins, the jarring conditions might've felt unbearable.

But I was *freezing*, my lungs tight from the pain of each expansion. One ragged breath after another, it was like they had to shatter a coating of ice first.

I had the urge to cough and couldn't. I wanted to stand, but a cold sweat crept across my skin, leaving me simultaneously shuddering and gasping from the heat building inside me.

Recognition burned in Sin's eyes. A single look from him was like a key in a lock, a door opening to reveal his exact thought. What we *both* recognized.

This was death.

He shook his head. "*No. No, it's not.*"

His voice was thin, unconvincing, and I needed to move. I needed distraction from the pain.

Gods, the fucking pain.

A splintering scream ripped up my throat as I confronted those sensations all over again. Hot. Cold. Burning. Freezing. The aftermath of the burns I'd endured was worse than the actual *moment* I'd gotten burned.

"Keep her still," Ranir hissed at Sin.

Her fingers worked quickly, plucking at the back of my shirt, the fabric in singed strips from the scorched wall I'd fallen into.

Or it's strips of my skin she's picking at.

The putrid scent of sweet, roasted meat told me more than I wanted to know. It reached the back of my throat, wrenching up a dry heave from my empty gut.

I tried to prop myself up and failed. I pedaled my legs, digging my knees into the damp sand to be sure I could move at all as my fingers curled into claws.

"Ness—"

Another screech replaced my plea, followed by those of the Sluagh.

Irian.

I reached toward him instinctively as another whip of lightning cracked between my shoulder blades.

"Keep still," Ranir hissed again.

"Don't move," Sin whispered, the quietness of his words startling me when inside I was *screaming*.

I tried again and again to swallow, to no avail, forcing wheezes down a windpipe that felt like I'd choked down all the sand on this shore.

"I've got you, love."

Ranir's hands halted.

Silence.

Deafening silence.

"She needs a soul."

Her assessment was unsurprising.

"*No soul,*" I insisted.

A few feet away, I blinked between flickering images to see Laisrés digging his forehead into the sand, fighting through his own agony. A second later, Ranir kneeled in front of him. She slowly lifted the back of his shirt. It kept fluttering up like something was...

Trying to get out, I thought right as a crow emerged and attempted to take flight. The poor creature's shriek communicated so much pain in a single sound. I sobbed as it tried to work its broken wings while Laisrés clawed

toward it.

“*Yeserra*,” he gritted out, rising to his feet with jerky movements.

Ranir scooped up the crow before she looked right at me. Then Sin.

“*A soul*,” she repeated and hustled inside with the bird, never looking back.

Sin rested on his side next to me. Firm hands grabbed my face. A second later, he was fusing our lips, forcing a soul straight down my throat.

“Take it. Take the godsdamn soul, Sersa! *Please*.”

I knew refusing it was foolish—knew the soul could soothe the agony. Otherwise the pain would continue until it culminated in my final breath.

Nessin’s eyes lit up as something inside me opened—that key unlocking a door again—and then everything around me went silent.

Dull.

All the pain vanished.

With it gone, I had clarity.

Sin and I were supposed to spend the night together. I needed to tell him—*things*.

So many. Everything. Too much left unsaid.

“DEVLIN!” Sin screamed over his shoulder. Except that sound suffocated under the veil he used to suppress my senses too. It filtered through him, reaching me faintly.

Sin’s face was a terrible, twisted mess, mocked by the lovely pink sky behind him. A knot formed between his brows, framing bloodshot eyes. His lips parted yet formed no words. I touched his cheek and blinked at his horns. The torc around his neck. His white eyes that accused me of doing something I shouldn’t.

Memorizing.

I was memorizing Sin because how could I not? If this was our last moment—

He put his hand over mine and shook his head. “*No*.”

Ciel, Ailerby, and Devlin appeared next to me on the ground. I didn’t know how long they’d been there. Tears were streaming down my face. My cheeks. Over my lips. Blurring my surroundings.

“You can’t actually reach into her, Dev. I mean it,” Sin growled, gripping his brother’s shoulder.

“*I know how a blood mark works*.”

Sin had numbed my physical pain. But the cruel reality was that it made

way for all the emotions I'd been denying.

I looked down at the water, at my twitching fingers.

Blue.

The deepest shade of the color seeped out of me like strange water serpents. Sin traced my gaze. But before I could tell whether I'd imagined it, Devlin took my face in his soft palms.

"*Pardon me,*" he mouthed. Again, filtered through Sin.

Some twisted part of me wanted to laugh. I was dying, and Devlin was apologizing because his lips hovered near mine in a kiss of death. He turned his ear toward my mouth, then my chest, and shook his head.

"*You've had it too long. She needs something fresh.*"

"*It's from this morning!*" Sin shouted.

"*Take Irian to the soulstock, Sin—*" Devlin said. "*Actually, I'll go.*"

"*I can't risk commanding them from afar.*"

Devlin gripped Sin's forearm. "*Then you cannot delay.*"

Sin nodded and turned to me. "You're going to feel some pain, love. Only for a minute. I promise."

Knowing I had no choice, I shook my head anyway.

Two Sluagh hovered behind Sin.

Then he was gone. A whoosh of wind from the Sluagh's wings swept up my spine, and I screamed as every sensation returned.

Even as Ciel ordered me to lie back down, I forced myself into a kneeling position, hunched over myself, hyperventilating. Only when an eternity in my mind passed—all else drowned out by the hot and cold assailing my back—did Sin's hands find me again.

He was so perfect, so warm.

Mine.

I writhed, trying to fight Sin when he shackled my wrists with his hands, burying them in the sludgy sand as the waves rolled against our knees. I turned my face to the side, refusing.

"You could die from the Dreither's burns. Please. I beg of you. I—"

The more I thought about it, the more I didn't want it. I didn't want to deprive another of life.

Memories flashed behind my eyes in another cruel warning that this was it. Death.

But the memories weren't mine.

Daggers landing in three perfect bullseyes. A slow curl of a scarred lip.

Focused eyes watching from the lantern-lit street behind a hood. “Hullo, love.”

Us bowing to the Old King. Skeletal fingers purposely whispering over my spine. Fighting his urges.

His smooth purr: “Have you had many lovers?”

“Don’t touch me like that. Don’t even pretend this is real, Nessin. It’s not.”

Him sliding on a white mask at the Plume to disguise himself. Pulling my body tight against his as we danced.

Our first kiss like fire.

Pale hands bound by a cord.

“I love you, and I don’t want to lose you. Not tonight. Not ever.”

Sin appeared to be fighting the urge to command me. Even if he could, he didn’t have to. In the end, I was selfish.

I would rather take another soul than die.

Without further hesitation, I threw myself at Sin. The second our lips touched, the soul entered me. This time, I practically breathed it in, down, forcing it inside me on my own.

It was as cold as ice, exactly how having a shard taken had felt.

“Do not resist it,” Sin said brutally, gripping my face hard. “Let it heal you, love.”

He failed to resist his urge to try commanding me, but the realization that it was a command only confused me more when I melted into him obediently.

That’s not right.

His blood.

The curse.

None of it mattered. Not now.

As the soul traveled deeper and deeper, it turned my heart so cold that it felt hot, and I swore it would set me on fire next.

Though the pain gradually faded, the chill inside me remained.

My hearing returned. No longer filtered but producing sounds that made me dizzy, the violent sea the loudest of them all. As my blurry vision dispelled, my chest heaved in painless inhaleds like the ice I’d been cracking through had melted. Sin pulled me back against his chest without grazing the burns. Every ache soothed.

“You’re okay. The worst is over, love.”

A pink-streaked hand pushed the damp hair off my face. Despite the unevenness of his own breaths in my ear, a sound had never comforted me more.

I love you, I wanted to say. *Nessin, I love you.*

My impending death wasn't the reason I wanted to admit it aloud, but rather the thought of *never* being able to tell Sin what he meant to me.

The words never came. They *wouldn't*.

A moment later, I blinked Ciel and Ailerby into clarity. They looked almost as horrified as Nessin looked ruthless.

Death filled my king's eyes, for I'd almost met mine. I'd gotten another taste of it, and it was far more terrifying with all of them watching, but especially with the daemon I loved connected to me in so many ways.



SIN



“I WAS FUCKING WITH JEST WHEN IT CAME TO THE SLUAGH, BUT THE Archdaemon truly did not listen to me.”

The beach house was too bright, both in climate and décor. The room where Sersa slept featured off-white walls, white linens, white everything like an infirmary stupidly trying to brighten your day when there was absolutely nothing to be fucking cheery about if you were in an infirmary to begin with. The ones run by mortals were especially depressing places. Too many restless souls and many a Sluagh to be made.

I yanked on the drapes behind Sersa’s bed for the tenth time to stop another godsdamn gleam of light from brightening the room. The flimsy strips crept back open every time and did little to darken the space when they managed to stay closed. As if Mum’s ghost were insisting her daughter-in-law bask under the Cradled Moons while she recovered.

I’d glimpsed Mum on the beach a few times now.

The delirium was worsening.

Shaking my head, I turned my back to the window and folded my arms.

Ranir had initially instructed me to place Sersa face-down, and we’d kept her that way to avoid stirring her during each examination.

Dev watched her relaxed breaths. “Are you certain your blood is restored?”

“My blood was not a factor. Suppose Jestin *did* command Riona’s spawn. Irrespective, he does not sit at the top of the hierarchy. Whatever order or instruction I gave, it should have foiled his.” I snapped my fingers. “*Immediately.*”

We had witnessed Gearóid’s commands to other daemons one too many times to contest the logic of the hierarchy.

“Perhaps leaving behind the torc was a mistake,” I added. “What if instead of cursing Jest, he now has supreme control equal to mine over all daemons?”

“Your Sluagh would *know* if he’d been to the fortress,” Dev insisted. “Not to mention, Jest is a significantly weaker Bonespeaker than you, and *you* are already Daemon King.”

I couldn’t admit how leaden my head felt since my last binge. I’d lost contact with Teirna completely after ordering the Sluagh to follow Jest in the woods outside the fortress. She was as good as gone. I could only hope Gran didn’t disappear too.

Dev studied me with a blank look on his face. It mismatched the vortices endlessly spinning in his mind. My only relief was that neither Ranir nor Thane had told him anything else about the souls, and he hadn’t asked after I admitted to consuming one that morning.

Yet.

None of it was a godsdamn drop in the sea compared to Sersa.

She’d been asleep for twelve bells now. For once, I was grateful Ranir knew me so well. She returned every half bell on the dot to reassure me the burns were improving. Thanks to Ranir’s meticulous Bonemending, Sersa’s upper back had gone from angry and inflamed skin to white scars. She was fortunate the Dreither’s flames hadn’t burned her directly. Ranir could not rid her of the scars entirely, but she’d kept her sedated to speed up the healing and fading process.

Less painful for Sersa. Pure torment for me.

If not for her injuries, I would have offered myself up as Dúm’s eternal servant by now if it meant he would tell me where to find Jestin.

My Sluagh in the Theas Mountains had already reported back. Jestin’s cronies had *coincidentally* dropped dead outside Tervas. Riona’s spawn had been circling the sky for bells, flying in a pattern that made little sense. Aerial

Sluagh in the absence of Reaping Hours were too suspicious, so I had to keep them on the ground. Not to mention they'd be following an Archdaemon, which raised concern enough if seen.

Thane shifted against the wall. "How would Jest have gotten a damn Dreither egg? Not to mention one *from* Grandma Riona's lair. I mean, her mate has been dead what—five millennia? Six? I couldn't scent either of them, but Gran's reaction was clear."

Dreithers immersed their spawn in their flames for many reasons, none of which involved harming them. Their flames *couldn't* harm one another.

If only Sersa possessed a drop of daemon blood.

Half gods, on the other hand, were difficult to kill. For reasons unbeknownst to me, the Dreither had not injected enough of its venom to wound anyone either. Especially Laisrés.

I sighed. "If it made sense to me, we wouldn't be standing here. Not a lot has made sense these last few moons. Though what *is* crystal clear is my growing suspicion of Laisrés since the attack."

"Sin." Thane exhaled heavily. "He *saved* Sersa."

"An act?" I offered. "He was *always* the risk."

Someone who knew the chalet's location—a highly limited group of individuals, all of whom were under this roof presently—had leaked it. Unless Jestin somehow recovered the intel from Bardca's cleansed mind.

Draea. Innes. Ranir. Niuna. Thane. Devlin. Ciel. Ailerby.

Three of whom I trusted implicitly. Not that I didn't trust Ciel or Ailerby, but I'd only known them for so long, and they were not my blood.

Jest is your blood.

No.

Devlin and Niuna wouldn't betray me, but Laisrés couldn't be trusted. Not with the Mórrígan digging for information.

Weeks ago, Feera picked up on a dead-end rumor in Nos Ovscura. Nothing more than whispers of a few half Fae who'd slid an Otherworld jewel or two across a bar counter and uttered the goddess's name—followed by a question about the Daemon King. Though Feera's failure to find anything else infuriated her, it was a challenge I barred her from pursuing.

I spun the wedding bands I wore. "What if the crows Laisrés deployed were simply an in for Jestin? Strength is in numbers. The Mórrígan may be stronger than Jestin, but whether it be her own son or our brother, she loves her pawns dearly."

“What reason would a goddess have to work with Jest?” Dev asked.

I had no argument. No concrete proof.

Thane sighed. “I *get it*. You two have history. Believe me, I do. But I agree with Dev. Laisrés and the Mórrígan are coincidences. He saved Sersa from being injected with *fucking Archdaemon Venom*,” he repeated. “If you’re so concerned, let’s summon Feera. Tie the bastard up if you must.”

“Or we can try to keep a closer eye on him and avoid the Mórrígan’s wrath,” Devlin suggested.

I scoffed, raking hands down my face. “It would spook him and the Mórrígan. You know he would burst into fucking feathers and disappear.”

“Well, if you ask me,” Thane continued, “you should worry about the known threat. *Jestin* took Bardca and attacked your wife.”

I peeked out the window.

Ranir and Laisrés sat a few feet away from the sea. He was shirtless, the puncture sight in the middle of his spine bandaged.

Though his back was a motley of bruises at various stages of healing, he was fine. His crow Yeserra was another story. She was in stable condition under Ranir’s watch, but as Laisrés’s birds were equal parts creature and magic, Bonemending wasn’t a perfect solution. Ironically, it worked best with natural wounds.

“His crows make watching him near next to impossible,” I said. “Let me talk to Ailerby. He will be discreet. Perhaps I can find a small entry into Laisrés’s mind with my blood returned.”

Devlin clapped a hand on my shoulder. “Take the day, Sin.”

“No—”

“*Tomorrow*,” my brother urged. “If Laz is the rat among us and he’s working with Jest—highly unlikely, in my opinion—he will expect a countermove.”

Thane nodded. “Immediate threat: *Jestin*. Drill that into your head.”

Something didn’t feel right—and in my experience, gut feelings were rarely wrong.

Staring at Sersa, Thane rested his elbows on his knees and leaned forward in the leather armchair across the room. “I’m not saying Laisrés *isn’t* the most likely person to have leaked the location. He is. But there are gaps, Sin—gaps I would not be willing to gamble on if I were you.”

Blocking out Thane’s thoughts was no longer effortless. He fixated on *why* Sersa had felt such a strong need to attack him earlier. I had half a mind

to kick him out of the room right now. The dissecting was getting old, beginning to irk me when I had far more important things to worry about than him feeling aggrieved.

Thane's gaze flicked up to mine. "Hasty moves will get us all killed."

"Are you suggesting we keep sitting around after an attack like that?"

"I do not know what Thane is suggesting," Devlin interjected as he headed for the door, "but the Dark Eve Fête is days away. Your blood returned to you only this morning. Sersa is too weak at present to act on anything, and if one of you is weak, you *both* are."



Another day had passed when Ranir finally nodded.

"The skin has made no progress in a few bells. I am going to wake her."

I bolted to my feet straightaway.

She clicked her teeth at me. "It's not instantaneous."

"Do the burns look all right?" Ciel asked. He and Ailerby had made themselves comfortable in the firelit corner lounge of our room earlier this afternoon.

And they had not left since.

If both looked this sapped when they'd been relaxing for bells while I watched Sersa and paced, it was a good thing there was only one mirror in here so I could avoid facing my reflection.

I squeezed my eyes shut. "I do not care how it looks so long as *she* is okay."

Ciel swallowed. "I didn't mean it like that..."

Dropping my chin, I pinched the bridge of my nose. I needed a godsdamn soul to quell the pressure behind my eyes. "No, I know. I—"

"Don't apologize." Wisps of black hair framed his exhausted eyes. "If it were Devlin, I'd be the same."

"Sersa is healed," Ranir promised me. "I wanted to be sure I couldn't mend any more scar tissue before I woke her. Ailerby, Ciel... We won't know what she remembers until she wakes. We don't want to overwhelm her."

"You want us to leave?" Ciel's black eyebrows raised halfway up his

forehead.

Ailerby stood on cue. “She deserves to wake up to her husband.”

Thank fuck.

Ailerby headed for the door, Ciel reluctantly following on his heels.

Paused in the doorway, Ailerby turned. “Can I hug you?”

“*What?*”

“You look like you need a hug. Sersa would hug you.”

“She would,” I agreed. “Still no.”

“I will get you when she wakes,” Ranir said, closing the door behind them.

I blew out a never-ending breath. “Thank you.”

The Bonemender nodded.

All my gratitude vanished when another half bell passed.

“You should have led with precisely *how long* it would take for Sersa to wake,” I growled, raking my hands through my hair.

Sensing my peaking impatience, Ranir left me to check on Yeserra.

Fifteen minutes more felt like a fucking lifetime.

Finally, wisps of Sersa’s quiet thoughts reached me. I crouched next to her bedside, willing her to wake with my gaze alone.

“I feel you staring at me,” she rasped. “Which safehouse is this?”

“Ranir!” I called.

“She doesn’t need—”

“Too late,” Ranir said and shut the door behind her. As if she’d been waiting right outside. “What’s one more look to the three hundred His Darkness already insisted upon?” Stuffing a few pieces of unused gauze back in the largest of leather pouches along her work belt, Ranir moved to Sersa’s bedside. “Are you spinning at all? Lightheaded? Thirsty?”

Sersa shook her head.

“Good. Can you try to push yourself up to sitting for me? *Slowly*. Don’t force yourself. You’ve been asleep for almost two days.”

When I rushed to her side, Sersa held up her hand to decline my help. She sat up quicker than was reasonable, letting her legs dangle off the side of the bed.

“You can stop holding your breath, King Nessin. Full mobility, as I told you.”

Sersa’s eyes widened. “Was there a question about my mobility?”

Ranir nodded. “There always is when it comes to Dreithers. Their flames

and venom are the most potent of all daemons.”

“Is Laisrés okay?” Sersa asked.

By the glance Ranir shot me, I wasn’t the only one who had thoughts about *him* being on my wife’s mind.

No. He saved her. It’s normal.

“He got the better end of it.” Ranir gestured Sersa over to a full-length mirror in the corner. She turned Sersa around and peeled the back of her dress forward. “Dreither burns rarely heal without a soul, and they always scar.”

Sersa flinched, backing into the mirror until she stood just inches away. She freed her arms from her dress and held up the front as she examined the skin.

The points where her shoulder blades protruded had taken the brunt of it—leaving behind two pure white scars, almost identical in shape and size. She’d tried to catch herself before she and Laisrés hit the ground. White patches also marked her elbows.

Swallowing, she slid the top of her dress back up. “I’m alive. That’s what matters. Thank you, Ranir.”

“The soul Sin gave you healed the burns,” she replied quietly. “I worked to minimize the scarring as best I could.”

I searched Sersa’s mind, expecting to see or hear something about the command I’d given her... There was nothing though. Fragments of that moment on the shore blurred together.

“Still. *Thank you,*” Sersa repeated earnestly, squeezing Ranir’s wrist. Then she narrowed her eyes at me in suspicion. “Do *you* have venom, Archdaemon?”

A laugh forced itself out of me. While Ranir had assured me countless times Sersa would be fine, hearing and *seeing* it were very different things. Leading up to great losses, someone always reassured you the person you worried about most would be fine.

Mum hadn’t been fine.

Bardca—was *he* fine?

My heart and soul had almost died. All because of Jestin. Now that she was awake, I wanted to spend what little time we had until the fête together.

Just in case.

Because I had failed her. So many times. I wouldn’t—not again. Sooner would I sacrifice myself than let more harm come to her.

“I’ll return for another healing session tomorrow.” Ranir patted Sersa’s

hand then headed for the door. “I likely can’t help much more, but we can try.”

Licking her lips, Sersa nodded. “Why can’t Bonemenders heal Dreither burns?”

With an exhausted sigh, Ranir removed her leather headband and turned, letting the mousy brown cut fall naturally. She put her hands on her hips as she stretched her neck.

I knew I had demanded too much of her over the last few days.

“Souldaggers,” Ranir started, “are made with Dreither venom and forged in the fire they breathe. It’s a deadly combination. Only a *soul* can heal a souldagger wound, same as the daemon the venom originates from.”

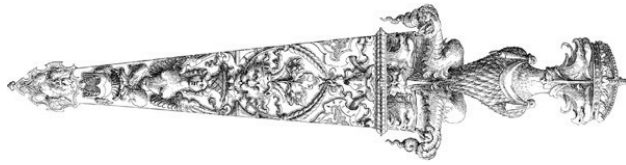
Sersa’s brow knotted. “How is Laisrés all right, then?”

I bit my tongue.

Ranir pursed her lips. “I would assume the Mórrígan watches over him quite carefully. Although I will say,” she continued, disregarding my cautioning look, “the Archdaemon used *just* enough venom to cause temporary paralysis. If not for Laisrés—and *if* it had wanted you dead—you would be, Queen Sersa. I believe your foes meant to capture you.”

Without another word, Ranir left us.

Serena



RAGE COILED TIGHTLY INSIDE MY CHEST AND THE PIT OF MY STOMACH. I WAS almost positive it stemmed from the unseen darkness rolling off Nessin in waves—that *he* was causing this feeling.

There was no need for either of us to speak Jestin’s name aloud. Not when his underlings were right outside the chalet’s boundary one minute, and the next, an Archdaemon had descended upon the safehouse.

Sin’s black shirt parted down the middle, only a few clasps hiding the V-shaped indentations in his hips. His dark pants fit loosely and highlighted the length of his legs and daunting frame. He looked down at his partially exposed chest. “I was sweating waiting for you to wake.”

I couldn’t laugh, so I let the silence stretch on for a moment.

“You said the chalet was you and your mother’s place, and now it’s just...gone.”

Sin’s brow hardened, his expression flooding with rage. Not directed at me, but at Jestin. “Houses can be rebuilt. So can memories. People cannot, love. *You* cannot.”

“How did the Dreither get past the barrier?” I asked.

Hands in his pockets, Sin settled against the wall beside the fireplace. I stayed where I was, with my back to the mirror, and made a point not to glance at my snowcapped elbows in the reflection.

“Blood, I presume,” Sin said. “I told Bardca to permit Grandma Riona beyond it.”

“And Jestin? The two of you share blood.”

“We kept him out, but not the Dreither. Evidently, I underestimated my brother. I *have been* underestimating him.” Stress echoed in Sin’s every word. His eyes hardened further as they flicked up to mine. “I feel he is a step ahead of me. As king, he—”

“That’s not true. You *know* it’s not.”

“I will not lie to you and say we’re safe here,” Sin said, barely louder than a whisper. “We aren’t safe anywhere until Jest is dead.”

“I thought the rendezvous point was the most secure place,” I said.

“It’s also Gran’s hideaway. She has a tracking rune hidden on her underbelly. I worry Jest put one on her spawn too. We can’t risk it.”

“Do you know if they’re okay? Is the young Dreither okay?”

Strain marked Sin’s pure white stare. “You are permanently scarred by fire *because* of that Archdaemon, and you ask if she’s all right?”

“Her...” He’d said Grandma Riona tried to engulf the smaller Dreither in her flames because she was her spawn.

I swallowed as other parts of the morning assailed my mind.

Flashes of blue fire. Laisrés lunging for me. A wall of crows protecting me.

The chalet tumbling.

If only the memory was a fabrication.

With a deep breath, I swept it all away.

“I suppose it would be wrong of me to drown him in the sea after he saved you.” The deadly seriousness of Sin’s rock salt voice gave me the chills. “But I *do not* trust him. Someone led that godsdamn Dreither there. You could have died, and he is the *only* suspect.”

If Sin truly suspected him, I couldn’t understand why he’d keep Laisrés around at all during a time like this.

He saved you. Where would you be if he wasn’t here?

Dead.

I wasn’t sure what to believe. But I owed Laisrés a thank you, at the very least.

Did I though? He’d never apologized for telling me I ought to break my vows to Nessin.

No, Laisrés deserved nothing of the sort.

Sin inhaled and spun the black metal and blue gemstone ring on his pinky. “He and I have a lot of history, and I have more reasons for not trusting him than the *obvious* things. Especially with not being able to gather his thoughts.”

Obvious meaning Laisrés telling me to take another lover.

“If I *could* trust him, his crows would be a highly valuable addition to the Sluagh and my crew at the White Plume. The Circle knows the Sluagh are loyal to me, and that Reaping Hours are possible *because* of me. It gives me leverage, yes, but Laisrés’s crows... Crows are as common as they come. No one would suspect them.”

“You have always controlled the hunt, then.”

“I have, yes.” Sin thumbed my cheek. “Before my birth, the Sluagh disappeared for nearly a century. It was my one act of allegiance to my father all these years, and I can’t lie. It wasn’t all an act. I—” He inhaled deeply. “Souls weave the very fabric of my world, but it doesn’t mean I don’t want to change.”

“You are not Gearóid,” I echoed in reassurance.

Sin offered me an unconvincing half smile then nodded at a balcony that faced the sea. A long row of drapes mostly concealed the glass wall. The balcony was a simple construction of stone, with vines curling around the banister and potted plants beside a round metal table for two. A thick stream of smoke rose into the air right outside the room.

“We will share a meal with everyone before half of us return to Knot Cottage,” he said. “I need to read everyone tonight, and we should not keep them waiting. We can talk some more after you have eaten. *Just us*. Okay?”

“Sure.”

The sigh that escaped me didn’t lift any weight off my shoulders, but an eager knock on the door forced me to breathe.

“*Sersa?*” Innes called.

Sin squeezed my arm and planted a chaste kiss on my forehead. “I’ll meet you outside, love.”

Then he crossed the room.

“Sin?” I blurted. He paused by the door and met my gaze in a small hanging mirror next to it. “I want you. Tonight. Tomorrow. Only you. You have been undyingly cocky about this for days. So you *know* I’m yours and only yours. I will always be yours. Forever.”

His pink-brushed knuckles turned white around the doorknob, and

firelight glowed not only around us but within him.

“I want *you*, Nessin Drumghoul,” I repeated. “Daemon. Memory thief. Horned bastard and all. After Feera gives me *all* the memories, we will find our way back to what we were—together.”

Sin raised his eyebrow in the mirror. “Horned bastard, aye?”

“You heard me. Show me tonight that you’re mine too.”

“Then we will surrender together.” He turned to look over his shoulder at me, his expression serious. “But fair warning, love. There will be *nothing* chaste about my touches after dinner. Not after I almost lost you. You still have time to change your mind.”

“*Nothing* is going to change my mind.”

Pleased with that answer based on his smirk, Sin opened the door for Innes.

But Ailerby cut her off and blocked the doorway, slightly out of breath and hastily chewing something. “Nope, I need to see her first!”

Sin’s predacious demeanor broke for a chuckle. He clapped Ailerby on the shoulder. “Don’t take too long.”

“I have not seen her in days, thank you very much! We will take as long as we need,” Ailerby called after Sin as he disappeared on light feet. “*Anyway*.” He turned to Innes, dithering in the hallway. “I can take it from here.”

“Wouldn’t that be inappropriate?” Her eyes rounded with concern. “The Daemon King—”

“It’s fine,” I said. “Really.”

“I just want to—” Innes started.

Ailerby creaked the door slowly, wiggling his fingers until the lock clicked. He faced me and jerked a thumb over his shoulder, his other hand still on the doorknob.

“That perfume—am I right?”

I hushed him. “What if she hears you?”

“She *should* hear. I’d want you to tell me if I had a heavy hand. And Innes? She smells like a rosebush and a Colossi made a baby.”

I cupped a hand over my mouth and tried not to laugh too loudly. I genuinely liked Innes, and her perfume didn’t smell bad. Just strong.

Sighing at the tail-end of his laughter, Ailerby’s gaze drifted over me. “Well, you look alive. That’s a relief. It’d be difficult to imitate you if you weren’t.”

I snorted.

He smiled. “But seriously—you’re good?”

“I am.” I nodded. “Does this mean you forgive me for being an ass hat of a friend?”

“Yeah, you were.” Ailerby smiled slyly. “Only jesting. I’m glad you’re all right.”

We left it at that, and I was grateful we could. I didn’t want to keep reliving the events at the chalet.

Days had passed, but it felt like this morning to me.

All I wanted was Jestin Drumghoul dead, Bardca found, and for everything else to go back to normal.

“Oh, gods,” I said under my breath. “I just remembered I *attacked* Thane and cut him with a souldagger. I bet Innes wants to talk about it since they’re together or something.”

“Ah, yes. I met him.” Ailerby wrinkled his nose. “Nothing like a near-death experience to bring people together. The last couple days you’ve been out, it feels like love is in the air. Sickening—the way he looks at Innes. It almost rivals the way the horned bastard looks at you.”

“Almost?” I asked.

“Fine. Not even close. But still.”

I’d talk to Innes, but not tonight. I didn’t feel like justifying my reasons for attacking Thane.

I wasn’t sure *why* I’d done it either. Sin had accepted culpability for his actions, and Thane... He might have been the king’s second, but he was right—Sin was a Bonespeaker and more stubborn than was reasonable. If Thane disagreed with his approach, would Sin have even listened? Or would he have just commanded him to do his bidding?

“So you and the king clearly made up,” Ailerby noted.

“Let’s not talk about him.”

He shoved his hands in his pockets. “It’s not that I don’t *want* to talk about your things. I just want to talk about mine too.”

“I know,” I whispered, looking at my feet.

“I wasn’t really mad at you, Sers—but more so at the situation and that Ciel told Devlin my business. Learning I was a Changeling put a lot of things into perspective for me. I realized I never belonged in Os Íseal. Seeing Ciel with his new husband rubbed salt into the wound.”

I hesitated. “How did you find out...that you’re a Changeling?”

“Bardca, actually.” Ailerby offered me a weak smile. Freckles speckled his pink cheeks today. “The people I believed to be my parents learned I wasn’t their babe while having a healer check me over. I was four years old. Mum mentioned a blood fever I’d overcome that’d run through our village, and the healer said it was impossible. Every child died. I remember he started shouting and told them to get me away from him. Then he told them to get rid of me. So they did. I didn’t think much of it. Or I pushed it to the back of my mind, I guess.”

Ailerby finished with a shrug, while tears stung my eyes. I might have been able to play it off if I were talking to anyone else.

That damn perceptiveness though.

“I just thought I had rare blood like the clan or something. Then Bardca asked how I was feeling. When I looked at him like a complete idiot, he explained that Changelings often get sick in the mortal lands, and I lived there for over fifteen years.” The first hint of emotion shone through Ailerby’s expression. His eyes turned glassy as he shrugged. “After that, a deity spoke to me in the Druids’ temple. They told me to look in the mirror and try to find my real face.”

“What does that mean?” It was a strange concept I didn’t quite understand, but I’d do whatever I could to help Ailerby.

If he wanted my help.

He shook his head. “The Balance says I will know when it’s *time*.”

Nev had visited Ailerby too, then. I wondered if I’d ever see the deity or the High Triad again.

“The gods are fucking cryptic,” I replied.

Though Ailerby chuckled, a single tear slid down his face. “You know I didn’t mean to tell Ciel before you though, right? It just came out when we talked. There never seemed to be a good time at the parish because I knew you weren’t doing well.”

I tried to tamp down the hurt I felt because he’d confided in Ciel first.

“I wished you—” I couldn’t bring myself to say the rest. I swallowed.

This was Ailerby’s business, his choice to tell me or not.

“Don’t apologize,” I restarted. “I was a bad friend.”

“You weren’t a bad friend, Sers. You’ve been going through things.”

“You were too. I’ll try to be less in my head... But I appreciate you telling me.” I forced a closed-lipped smile, tinged with the blue I hadn’t seen in so long.

On the shore though... Hadn't the deep hue emerged?

"Will you try to find your family, then?" I asked to avoid losing myself in thoughts about the unruly colors.

"No. I don't think so," he whispered. "I don't want someone else to tell me who I am. I want to know before—to find my face first, however the fuck that is supposed to happen."

I heard no pain in Ailerby's words or voice, but that didn't mean it wasn't there.

Even so, I pulled him into a tight hug and tried not to let my tears drip onto the velvet vest.

"Now, if it's all right with you, I need no more emotional talk here, *Queen*." We separated, and Ailerby nudged me with his hip. "So, tell me what you've been doing. I hope the king."

I huffed. "His Darkness and I have been keeping our distance."

"Shame. You two *are* married."

"Has he gotten to you too? Because that's *just* the thing he wants me to admit. I told him lovemaking," I mocked, "is off the table."

"Marvelous. Then *fucking* isn't." Ailerby's smile looked as devilish as Sin's always did. He shifted his face, erasing the freckles and adding blond strips of hair. "Don't think I don't recall those bite marks."

"Oh, gods. We're talking about my stuff again. I am done. *Done*. Tell me what you've been doing at the safehouse instead."

"Sewing. Actually, your husband offered me a position as a *royal* couturier. A luxury designer for the Drumghouls—and the Gilders who can afford such exclusivity." He concluded by tugging on his vest, briefly playing the braggart.

"Really?"

Ailerby shrugged, playing it down. "King Nessin only wants another secret-stealer. Who better than a Changeling with a thousand faces but his own?"

"Ah." I nodded, pressing my lips together. "You are the perfect candidate, I suppose. But if anyone deserves it, it's *you*."

"I do," he agreed. "He clearly knows you'll run away with me if I declare my hate for him. He threw in the promise of *a lot* of gold."

I rolled my eyes. "Aye, the rich are always throwing gold at their problems."

If only we could throw a bunch of fucking gold at Jestin Drumghoul.

At this point, Nessin would probably agree to melt down *all* the gold in the Soullands if we could end his brother by drowning him in it.

“Thanks to your king, *you* are now *the rich*, by the way.” Ailerby nudged me. “Let’s find you something to wear from your new rich lady wardrobe before the bastard drags us outside.”

He flipped through a wheeled rack full of dresses. My eyes instantly landed on a garment peeking out between the rest.

Reaching for it, I flattened the gauzy material against my front and approached the mirror.

“You have never worn pink in your life, Sers. Did you hit your head?”

I laughed. “I suspect neither has the Daemon King.”

“Meaning?”

I bit my lip. “Look at his hand when you get a chance.”

Ailerby tilted his head at me. It took a moment, but recognition finally hit him. “Oh, you mean the hand he’s wearing *wedding bands* on—the wedding bands he keeps twirling all anxiously? I saw, all right. I’ve been cooped up in here and speculating for two days.”

“Never mind that. Sin says they’re heirlooms.”

“One ring worn on your *thumb*—or, in the Daemon King’s case, on his middle finger so he can gesture obscenely—is an heirloom. Two rings? Wedding bands. The one on his pinky won’t go farther than his first knuckle, Sers.” Ailerby wiggled his ring finger.

I’d avoided studying them too long for that exact reason.

“The point is, my magic *painted* him. So,” I continued, licking my lips, “he has declared it his color, and I don’t think he’s wrong.”

Ailerby wore a shrewd smile. “Your magic must be shifting. Because of him.”

Though I didn’t know how, maybe it was. My anger had redirected itself at Jestin ever since his first attack at the parish.

There was no denying that the pink hue *was* Nessin’s. It emerged for him. Because of him.

Smiling to myself, I slipped behind the changing screen to tug off my sleeping dress, shimmying hurriedly into the new one. Ailerby fetched me a pair of fresh undergarments from the dresser and draped the almost nonexistent material over the top of the changing screen.

“Is this *the* legendary Claud’s work?” he asked. “Bet the king loves those. Though not much to ‘em, Claud.”

Just the thought of Nessin made my body hum with anticipation and need. The sooner I got through the night, the sooner we'd be alone.

I stepped out from behind the screen once I was decent.

But as I turned around, I caught another glimpse of the scars in the mirror. And of Ailerby's face. He regarded me, hesitating for a prolonged moment.

His fingers ghosted over the welted, uneven skin. It was nothing compared to what could have happened though. While I would rarely see these scars behind me, the physical hardly mattered. If I'd learned one thing the last few moons, it was that emotional and mental scars were sometimes more difficult to deal with. Because the painful memories and feelings associated with them were what mattered.

And these would forever remind me of Jestin Drumghoul.

I hoped Nessin and I could look back one day and see all the things that'd happened—all the things we'd gone through and gotten past—and be okay.

The thought of tonight left me hopeful we *could* do just that.

“You know what they remind me of, actually?” Ailerby said, not waiting for my guess. “They look a bit like wings to me. Angel wings.”

I snorted. “Fitting when I'm married to the devil himself. Do me up?”

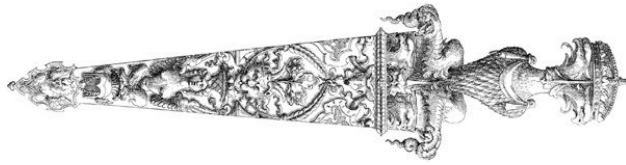
He worked his way along my spine, looping every button closed, though his eyes remained on the scars—another feature of mine for him to memorize and imitate.

“Are you finally admitting that to yourself?” Ailerby asked. “That he's your husband.”

My skin flushed when I smiled at him in the mirror and nodded.

I had so much to say tonight—the words Sin craved more than anything else. And not just pretty words but *truths*.

Serena



THE FEATHERLIGHT DRESS WAS PERFECT FOR THE WARM EVENING, WITH AN open back that revealed the scars I vowed not to hide, no matter how uncomfortable I felt having them on display so soon.

I didn't need to see the burns before to know Ranir had considerably faded the marks.

But the memory and the scent of my burning skin would never fade.

I tried to push it all away as we headed outside. Easier said than done when the bonfire straight ahead was like a massive sun—everyone orbited around it, holding skewers and sticks to cook their own dinner. Logs formed a circle of seats around it. Miles of white sand stretched in either direction, ceasing only for the glimmering Wraithsea.

There was no need to fear the flames or the sea when they were secondary to the prince who'd set the Dreither on us.

Still, I hated that Jestin's attacks sullied the beautiful view for me.

And yet, as Ailerby and I wavered on the sandy porch steps, a strange sense of calmness radiated near the fire. Across the beach, Sin observed the dress I wore with a watchful eye—not quite lingering on every detail, from the tall collar to the loose, gossamer strips that dangled from the bodice and hips. But the color—as I knew he would.

The serious look in his eyes needed no words.

Sin's pink hand and the rings remained on display for all to see, wrapped around his chalice.

Though he kept his expression blank, he subtly winked at me before continuing his conversation with Ranir.

Out of nowhere, Ciel stormed me like a bull. The second we collided, he picked me up and whirled me around, nearly spilling the drink he held. "You sure know how to scare a person!"

"Or ten," Ailerby said, standing back until Ciel set me down.

I squeezed my brother as tight as I could. "Does this mean we're *all* talking again?"

Both laughed awkwardly.

Ailerby playfully nudged me in the side. "Exactly what it means."

Ciel gave him a weak half smile and offered me his chalice of mystery alcohol. The last thing I needed was a foggy head tonight. Two whole *days* I'd been out. Which meant the Dark Eve Fête and the swearing in were the day after tomorrow.

"Oh, gods. Does your back hurt?" Ciel asked. His shoulder-length black hair was perfectly smooth tonight, despite the humidity persisting in the air.

"You're asking if it hurts *after* you squeezed me to death?" I shook my head with a smile. "Ranir is the best, and I'm—"

"*You're alive.*"

I blinked Laisrés into clarity. Standing a few meters away, he clutched a drink that had to be pure souls based on the glow spilling over the rim to illuminate his thin shirt. His signature dark green clothes were halfway absent tonight, the ends of his tan pants speckled in seawater rolled up to his ankles, and like everyone else, he was shoeless.

"Thanks to—"

"Do not thank me," he interrupted, his gold gaze tarnished in the firelight.

When Ciel and Ailerby gave me a look that said we'd talk later, I wanted to stop them. But they were already heading toward the blazing campfire by the water.

Laisrés kept his distance, his toes buried in the sand. Likewise, I imagined an invisible line drawn between us as I recalled Sin's warnings.

"How do you feel?" I asked.

He took a sip from his goblet. "I didn't suffer. My crows did."

"Then why are you drinking souls?"

"They're the best healer and pain reliever. For the crows," he repeated as

the wind stirred his dark hair. “Not for me.”

“Are they okay? I saw the one...”

“She will be, yes.” Laisrés drained the remnants of his goblet, his gaze never releasing mine. “The wounded crow you saw. Her name is Yeserra.”

It didn’t seem coincidental Sin also named his Sluagh. But if I had crows trapped under my skin somehow, I’d probably name them all too.

“Well... Glad to see you’re doing better. I hope you have a pleasant night,” Laisrés said abruptly, raising his chalice in a salute. Then he stalked off toward the bonfire and lowered onto a log. His green shirt caught the briny squall off the sea, the sheer fabric showing off his bandaged back.

Our curt exchange left me somehow more unsure about Laisrés.

Trying not to overthink tonight—but to focus on spending time with those I loved before the fête instead—I headed for the empty seat on the bonfire’s other side between Niuna and Ailerby.

But it was Innes and Thane, engaged in quiet conversation a few seats away from the spot I sought, who I approached first.

Relief spread through me when Innes flashed a smile as she wrapped her shawl tighter around her shoulders. Thane was a different case entirely. He tossed back his drink and actively ignored me.

“I don’t mean to interrupt,” I started.

“Then don’t?” Thane offered, turning toward me slowly. His warm brown eyes heated with disdain, rivaling the fire at my back.

“Right.” I swallowed and looked at Innes. “Do you think we can chat tomorrow?”

Innes’s discerning eyes slid from Thane to me. “Mum and I leave for the citadel first thing to help with preparations for the fête. We’ll be there all day and night, I’m afraid. After?”

“Perfect.”

Thane gave me a pointed look, clearly to dismiss me.

“I will let you get back to it, then...” I said.

He smacked his lips. “Splendid.”

I backed away, not wanting to put my back to Thane, lest *he* pull a souldagger on *me*. He certainly looked like he wanted to. But then Innes pushed her red hair off her neck, and his expression softened as they resumed their conversation like I didn’t exist.

“I *said* hold it tightly,” Niuna ordered Ciel as I turned.

My brother was trying to eat his fish skewer with one hand while the

princess had him trapping beneath his thumb a trio of threads she was braiding. His nail turned white with how hard he was pressing it to the log Niuna straddled, hunched over her work.

“What are you doing, Niun?” Sin called.

We both turned to look at him like he’d risen from the bottom of the sea after a week-long slumber with the dead.

“*Obviously*,” she said, “I’m making a friendship bracelet.”

“Perhaps Ciel wants to eat in peace,” Sin replied.

“I want to do a lot of things in peace,” Niuna called back, “like make a friendship bracelet without the king questioning me!”

Laughter moved around the circle. Sin rolled his eyes but smiled.

“Who are you making it for?” I asked, taking a seat next to her.

“This one’s for Dúma. A collar, actually.” She nodded at the hellhound, begging for scraps of fried fish around the fire. Niuna raised a snowy eyebrow at Ailerby. “I’ll make you one *if* you agree to imitate me at a time of my choosing. No questions asked.”

Ailerby nodded agreeably. “How ever can I pass up that offer?”

“Colors?” she asked, as if negotiating a contract.

“You choose.”

I nodded at the collar. “Did you ask Dúma which colors she’d like?”

“I chose red to match her eyes.” Niuna nudged a small wooden box toward me with her foot. An assortment of dyed threads poked out from the askew lid. All the unused colors were folded into neat little loops to stop them from tangling.

“You must really like Dúma, huh?” I asked.

Niuna continued braiding and said, “Mum had a hellhound.”

The princess’s gaze flicked up, tracing mine to Laisrés. I hadn’t realized I was looking his way at all. Holding his tan hand palm-up, he was gritting his teeth and draining yet another goblet of souls. After a struggle, a dark beak pushed through his skin without harming it.

He cursed in relief.

Maybe he was mostly fine or would be, but if the Dreither’s venom was dangerous enough to hinder even a god’s blood—or at least his crows—I doubted I’d be up and walking.

I returned my attention to Niuna. “Do you remember your mum much?” I asked, curious but wanting to respect her boundaries.

“Not at all.” She didn’t sound troubled by it. “Gearóid killed her shortly

after I was born.”

Finished braiding the collar, Niuna clicked her teeth at Dúma to come. She looped it around the hellhound’s neck and realized it wasn’t long enough.

“Hold,” she ordered Ciel again.

He tore off the last bit of fish from his skewer and wiped his hands on his pants before doing as Niuna said.

Then she resumed her work.

“So,” I started. “Please feel free not to answer... But can I ask *why* you didn’t grow for so long?”

Niuna’s concentration broke only long enough for a small laugh. “Bardca says I’m the equivalent of thirteen mortal years now.” As Sin tried to wedge himself between us, she hissed, “No way. I get to sit next to her. You get her enough. Get!”

He huffed. “Mm, thirteen with the hormones to go with it.”

Mouths open, Niuna and I scoffed.

“Your wife is going to cut you, Sin.”

“Yes, I will.”

“Oh, I am jesting. I’m delighted you’re growing, and if you’re happy, I’m happy. New hormones and all. Also, it wouldn’t be the first time my *wife* has cut me.”

I rolled my eyes.

Sin signaled for me to stand and stole my seat before pulling me onto his lap. He was shameless but discreet as he positioned me exactly how he wanted—a spear finding the bullseye right between my legs.

I had to bite the inside of my cheek.

Niuna’s glacial stare landed on her brother. “May you have four daughters who are all ‘hormonal’ *at the same time*.”

“Ay!” Sin snapped. “Don’t speak such things into existence.”

“Is that your magic?” Ailerby perked up. He’d started on his third skewer.

“Niuna doesn’t tell anyone about her blood.” Ciel swirled his chalice around then washed back his meal with a long swig.

I wondered when Niuna told him to mind his own business. Sometimes his inquisitiveness backfired, though he had good intentions.

“The realm would either be a lovely place or a terrifying one if Niuna could speak things into existence,” Sin said.

She looped the collar around Dúma’s neck as she had before and did a little jig in her seat when it fit. “Perfect!” She finished double knotting the

ends and wiped her hands. “I was sick for years. The only thing that kept the various ailments at bay were souls. Our father forced me to eat them. Thus, I am the Eternal Princess. Or I *was*,” she said with a sigh punctuated by a scoff with renewed vehemence. “It was a long time ago.”

Niuna accepted a smoking, skewered fish from Draea and immediately bit into it. She puffed up her cheeks, shuffling the hot fish around her mouth, and nodded at Sin. “He hasn’t told you anything?”

Twice she’d asked me this. Once about the Knot, which her brother had never mentioned before she had, and now.

I shook my head.

Lost in thought, Niuna finished chewing and swallowed.

“The Old King forbade us from speaking of it, but everyone knew. I mean, look at all my brothers—grown, living their lives, married.” There was a longing in her voice, one I didn’t think I’d ever be able to understand as she looked around. “As the years went on, the king pretended not to notice how I felt about it all. Mum cursed him less than a moon before she fell pregnant with me. She simply told him the reason he was ill, why we all were, after she gave birth because she knew he’d kill her.”

The thought of the Old King being able to kill his pregnant wife—the mother of his children—made me sick.

“Mum did not know I’d be born bearing the brunt of the curse. But I am growing,” she announced a little too merrily, “and apart from Jestin, everything is magnificent, and I am hopeful I will have boobs by the Bloom!”

“Dúm, Niuna!”

“Oh, sorry. You and Thane call them *tits*, right?” She tilted her head for show.

I turned in Sin’s lap and blinked at him intentionally. “*Tits, huh?*”

“I was talking about yours, obviously.”

“Mm hmm.”

“He was,” Niuna agreed, scrunching her nose and shaking her head. “To Thane. Vulgar, the both of them.”

“Oh, they are tame compared to when they were young,” Draea said, chuckling under her breath.

It had to be weird—Thane dating Innes with her mother always around and Draea knowing all about his younger years. I *cringed* at the thought of my parents being here.

The Gilder raised his drink from across the fire then pointed. “Let me

preface by saying I—”

Draea cleared her throat behind Thane. She looked ready to swat him with a skewer.

“I did *not* join in,” he finished. “I was being a perfect gentleman when His Darkness hijacked the conversation, thank you.” He chanced a look over his shoulder. “Oh, fancy seeing you here, Mrs. Abalon...”

“Oh, *missus*, am I now?” Draea tutted.

Innes’s freckles practically blended into her flushed face. She immediately stumbled away from the bonfire, looking in dire need of another drink.

Perhaps she felt the same about having her mother around, after all.

“Shit,” Thane hissed under his breath, darting after her. “Innes!”

Niuna turned to me. “So, Sersa, when did you get your cycle? I’m still waiting for mine and—”

“Right, then.” Sin helped me off his lap as he stood. “This conversation can continue without me. I really don’t need to hear all about my sister’s venture through puberty. See you in a bit, love,” he finished and kissed the top of my head.

“Grow up!” I said sarcastically as he stalked off. “She’s hundreds of years old.”

Niuna grinned slyly. “I *knew* that’d get him to leave us.”

Ailerby laughed. Then he and Ciel resumed their quiet conversation. It was good to see them being cordial again, but Devlin was nowhere in sight.

I almost fell off the log when Niuna threw her arms around me out of the blue. “I love having a sister! Seven hundred years without one is a long time.”

As she hung onto me and cackled wildly, I couldn’t fathom that Niuna was *also* seven hundred years old.

“I always wanted a little—older sister?” I said. “But maybe cut the tit talk until you *look* older.”

“You’re probably right. I have plenty of time to scar my brothers. Or I hope so.”

My brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

Niuna blinked at me then nodded at Ranir, standing a few feet outside the circle of log seats. “She was at my bedside almost daily, and Bardca helped me wean off the souls.” Her merriment disappeared. “They both warned me there is a chance I may fall ill again. The rest is unknown.”

Much of life was, it seemed.

Though Draea winked at Niuna, the smile she wore was distant. “The key thing is that you are well *right now*, Princess.”

“Aye.” Ranir raised her chalice to that. “And we will do everything to keep you well and good.”

“I’m here for you too,” I added.

“Thanks, Queen.”

I was absentmindedly trawling through the box of threads when Sin returned with a water and a plate of vegetable skewers for me. He kissed me on the cheek and whispered in my ear, “You’ll need your strength tonight so drink and eat up.”

“Do you know where Dev is by chance?” Ciel interrupted.

Straightening, Sin shook his head as he massaged my shoulders in lazy circles. “No, but I will try to find him for you.”

When he left us once more, I caught Niuna studying me with narrowed eyes.

“What is it?”

She fought a giggle. “Nothing. Nothing at all, Queen.”

“Liar.”

“The wind was *speaking* to me. It was right the first time, wasn’t it? You *are* Daemon Queen.”

I wasn’t sure I wanted to know what Niuna had heard. Reminded of the fresh scars on my back, I shuddered. If only she’d warned us about the chalet and all Jestin’s other attempts.

“Yes, but for how long?”

“*Forever*,” she whispered eerily. “So long as you want that.”

My lips curled. “Oh, did your friend the wind tell you that as well?”

Her light eyelashes cast shadows from the flickering fire onto her pale cheeks. “Says the girl who saw wraiths on the Northern Pointe when *no one else* did.” Her tone was lighthearted, but Niuna never stayed that way for long. Her smile slid away, and her eyes wandered to the side as if listening once more.

The sound of crows filled the air suddenly, and the princess snapped her head in Laisrés’s direction.

He waved his chalice at everyone. “Gah, don’t look at me! Those noisy things aren’t mine.”

Watching him, Niuna added, “But yes. The wind also says your reign will

not be easy. Danger is ahead.”

I didn’t bother telling her *I* could’ve predicted our reign wouldn’t be easy. But I supposed danger came with marrying a Daemon King.

I continued to sift through the thread when three colors next to one another evoked a very specific memory. I tried to bury it, to compress the thought into a ball and kick it to the back of my mind.

“Hey, Niuna... Can I have some thread?”



A couple bells later, Devlin had yet to be found.

“He can’t have gone far,” Ciel said, although his dark eyes reflected concern. “Last I saw him, he was sleeping.”

I glanced up and down the beach. “Maybe Sin found him by now?”

Ailerby looked away as he and Ciel directed me around the side of the porch. We trudged through the softest sand, and it sifted between my toes like silk. Hidden in the shadow of the two-story house, Ailerby shoved his hands in his pockets and looked down at his bare feet, while Ciel couldn’t look anywhere for longer than a second.

Why did they look guilty? Why—

“No,” I said. “Don’t tell me you two are...”

Their heads snapped up.

“Dúm’s piss, of course not!” Ciel said. “Dev and I got in a fight. We all sat down together while Ranir was healing you. Ail promised him he’s over everything.”

Chewing his lip, Ailerby looked down again. Did Ciel truly believe that? Ailerby was selfless. Always thinking about others, even if it led to his own suffering. Devlin had said he could sense pain in souls and in the Fae’s essences. So had the prince sensed Ailerby’s *lie*?

“Oh.”

It was all I could muster. I knew Ailerby too well to believe him.

But why hadn’t he told me about it earlier? *Again*.

Ciel sighed loud enough to drown out the waves. “It didn’t go as planned, and Dev told us to be together. He said he knows what it’s like to choose wrong. He wouldn’t listen to me when I told him it wasn’t like that.”

“I found him drunk off his ass this afternoon,” Ail admitted.

Poor Devlin.

“Did you know what he meant—he knows what it’s like to *choose wrong*?” I asked.

“It doesn’t matter.” Ciel shook his head. “I’m going to keep searching. Perhaps Laisrés’s crows can help.”

“I’ll let you know if I see him,” Ailerby promised. But he was watching a trio of nocturnal crabs rummaging through the sand, not meeting either of our eyes.

At that, Ciel said goodnight and left me alone with Ailerby in the shadows. Finally, he looked at me as he altered his hair from blond to brown, growing out the close crop he’d worn all night. Ailerby wasn’t the nervous type. Rather, he excelled at hiding his nerves.

Which meant something was *seriously* wrong.

“Ailerby.”

“I know. But trust me. It’s not what you think.” He swallowed and shook the sand off his shirt. “When I found Devlin, he kept saying one word, Sers. And it sounded like a name.”

“Did you tell Ciel?”

Ailerby looked around shiftily. “Dúm, no!”

I wasn’t sure whether that was good or bad. Secrets had caused one too many problems for me lately.

“What was the name?” I asked, also unsure whether I wanted to know.

“Menadé. Over and over, Devlin kept saying *Menadé*.”

Serena



SIN WAS WAITING FOR ME BY THE STAIRS INSIDE THE SAFEHOUSE. BUT INSTEAD of getting lost in reveries of the night ahead, my eyes darted straight to a tiny cut near his eyebrow.

“What happened to you?” Ailerby said as we walked up, his face shifting to reflect the king’s.

Sin scowled. “Just my brother coping the way he told me *not* to.”

“Devlin did this?” I said. “And you *let* him?”

We both knew who would win in a fight, not that I’d admit it in front of Ciel or Devlin. Maybe not even to Sin.

“I owe him a free swing or two.”

“Is he all right?” Ailerby asked.

“In some ways.” Sin’s full lips flattened as he ran a finger along the cut. “Not so much in others.”

“Yeah, Ciel was looking for him.” Ailerby nodded at the patio.

“I would leave Dev be. Daemon to daemon, his punch didn’t hurt. Daemon to Changeling, I’d rather not risk all your pretty faces.”

Ailerby leaned toward me, his eyes alight. “Your husband thinks my faces are *pretty*. Worried?”

I rolled my eyes. “To be fair, you can imitate anyone you like, including *him*, and he thinks very highly of himself.”

Ailerby winked, giving me a side hug before he headed upstairs. “Taking Dúma for the night. Need someone warm and fluffy to cuddle,” he called with a whistle, and she darted up the steps on his heels.

Sin and I studied one another, an uncontainable energy swirling between us. His jaw firmed. Then he gestured toward the stairs.

He hovered like a shadow on my heels the entire way.

As soon as we reached the room where I’d woken a few bells before, he shut the door and bolted it, leaving Irian in the hall. I looked out at the sea beyond the wall of glass doors and windows, where hundreds of Sluagh patrolled in wide arcs overhead.

Now that we were alone, the gravity of everything had returned.

In the reflection of the spotless windows, Sin’s hair hung in his face. His horns twisted into the air, catching the shadows dancing beyond the fireplace. He leaned forward to stretch his shoulders on the mantle’s edge, his fingers digging into the wood like claws.

I was alive because those hands had reaped.

Maybe he’d stolen a soul from someone in Os Íseal. I hated myself for thinking it when Sin had saved my life, but I suddenly imagined bloodless faces. Blue lips. Eyes staring up at the heavens.

“I went straight to the soulstock.” In a chillingly calm voice, he added, “I would steal a thousand souls—more—as many as Dúm asked of me to save you.”

My next movements were instinctive. I approached the hearth and laced my fingers with Sin’s on the mantle. He didn’t move, but his gaze flicked down to mine. Black veins sprawled beneath his eyes—my daemon emerging.

He tipped his jaw to the left, trying to turn away from me.

“*Stop*,” I said. “Let me see whatever this darkness is you’re so afraid of. I’m not afraid of it, Sin.”

He stiffened and forced a dry laugh. The whirring aura around Sin was a different version of him entirely. I wanted to stroke his cheek, to calm the beast inside—the irredeemable shadow *he* saw within himself.

The Archdaemon. It was the soul shard. There was no other explanation.

“I want to be sworn in with you, you gods-damned daemon. I always wanted to be your queen, and most of all, I want *us* to be sworn in together in two days. Your secrets will become mine. Your darkness *is* mine.”

Sin went perfectly silent for a full minute. As if I’d delivered the words

submerged in a vat of honey.

“If you are going to live in the dark, I want to live there with you,” I continued.

His reply was quiet, yet barely contained, his voice feral. “Then what? Do you mean to admit you *do* still love me?”

Chills rippled across my body, but I didn’t fear Sin. “You know I do.”

“Do you remember saying so? You said it on the shore. You wouldn’t *stop* saying it.”

I bit my lip and shook my head. “Did I?”

I wished I could remember.

“Tell me,” Sin said sharply. “Tell me those words you said that first night were a lie.”

My heart raced.

Of course I *hadn’t* meant them. But something else—something much deeper—had changed within me.

Your magic must be shifting. Because of him.

I wondered if Ailerby might be right. If Sin was soothing my anger and the red tendrils with every secret he unraveled for me. Every time he dropped his walls and let me in.

“I wasn’t trying to hurt you. It’s just—” My voice shook too. “Anger is the only thing I have felt for so long that I was having trouble feeling anything else. But I *didn’t* mean it, no. You, however, need to learn some patience. You can’t expect things to snap right back to the way they were when it has been days, Nessin. *Days*. This is not nearly the amount of groveling I had imagined, and you’re not done.”

Sin turned ever so slightly toward me like a wolf seeking the moon. His black gaze broke apart every inch of me, seeing into *me* too. “I will grovel as long as you want me to, Sersa.”

“You will,” I agreed.

He waited for me to speak, my next thought dangling between us clearly already his.

“So.” I forced myself to reset with a breath. “I will only say this once. Do not restrain yourself. Do not be gentle. You promised you’d ruin me tonight, and I want you—*my daemon* as he is.”

I took a step back toward the bed. As if Sin were on a string tied to me, he turned and crossed the room with long strides that were almost slow-motion.

The less space between us, the farther his black pupils extended until the

whites of his eyes withdrew completely.

“Are you officially surrendering yourself to me? Because, as I said before, I will not give you back.”

I bit my lip and nodded.

“*Words, Sersa.*”

It struck me as odd that a man who heard all my thoughts demanded I utter them aloud.

“Yes. I am surrendering myself to you, Your Darkness.”

Sin hummed in satisfaction as he finally reached me, towering over me like the first time we’d met at the Devil’s Tail.

Only now there was so much unspoken history here. The glimpses I’d seen—and whatever else our past might entail—magnified the feelings whirling through me.

I tilted my head back. Our lips led, both searching with neither bridging the distance, but not for long because of how badly Sin wanted what I’d asked of him.

“While I do *not* want to be gentle right now either, the burns—”

“—do not hurt,” I interrupted. “You heard Ranir. I’m fine.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t save you.”

“*Hush.*”

Sin could save me now. With his touch.

He traced a finger down my cheek, jaw, and over the curves of my lips. I reached for him, taking his thumb in my mouth.

I may have never lain with a man before him, but I knew how to touch Sin, how to drive him mad with desire. It had always been inexplicably instinctive.

“You need not do a *thing* to make me desire you, love.”

I stood on my tiptoes and planted my hands on his chest to keep steady. “Take what is yours, Nessin Drumghoul. Take what has *always* been yours.”

Those words were the spark that ignited him.

Eyes returning to normal, Sin pulled me against him. In one smooth motion, he lifted me under my rear and carried me to the edge of the bed. He stared up at me, holding my gaze with eyes that pierced my soul, and I squeezed his corded biceps as he moved with an urgency that made me want him impossibly more.

Sin ripped free his belt one-handedly, snapping the air with it but not bothering to undress the rest of the way before he set me on the ground.

Whirling me around, he moved my hair out of his way. Teeth scraped my shoulder, eliciting a chord of moans. The soft sting was a pleasure in itself.

I shivered when Sin ground his hardness against me from behind, holding me up on weak knees. Every rock and sway of our hips aroused me, and I pressed my hips farther back in a silent plea.

“Don’t tease me, Sin. Not tonight. My dress,” I begged, breathless.

He started on the neck clasps, but only a few earned a growl of frustration from him.

“I can’t stand it. Fuck this.”

Sin gripped both shoulders and tore the fabric. It fell slack around my ribs, revealing my breasts if he couldn’t free the rest of me.

“We’ll have Claud or Ailerby mend it.”

I laughed. “I don’t give a damn about my dress.”

“I do. I *knew* it was for me the second I saw it, love.” He gripped the bedpost, proudly displaying my magic’s claim over him—*my* claim. “Shall I try to turn this room a certain color?”

“You better.”

Sin shoved his pants down his hips, just far enough, and bent me over the bed. My dress lifted, fabric rustled, and he nudged my legs wider with his knee.

“I think we will manage this time, but we’re going to have to get you a step stool, love.”

As I was already on my tiptoes, I laughed into my arm. “I want you to see me tonight.”

Sin wasn’t gentle as he ripped through the rest of the clasps and kicked my dress out of the way when it hit the floor. He pressed his thigh to the apex of mine, and I lost the battle against stifling the gasp that parted my lips.

Sin chuckled. “You’re getting my pants wet.”

“Good,” I moaned, closing my eyes and pushing my hips back again.

His hand slid over my hip and rear, grabbing a handful. “I would stand behind you forever simply to look at this.”

Startling me with a yelp, Sin bit me. Right on the ass!

“Nessin!”

I looked behind me—he was bent at the waist, grinning devilishly as his teeth scraped right over my curved flesh. He reached a hand around my hips to roll the bundle of nerves between two fingers. He took another gentle bite. My eyes matched the motions, rolling to the back of my head.

“What? *This* was shaped by Dúm himself. It’s mine, and I will do with it what I please.”

“Shaped by you, then?”

Sin bared his white teeth in a wicked smile. “I *am* going to ruin you as I should have at the chalet, love.”

Straightening to full height, he readjusted to glide two fingers inside me from behind. All thoughts left my head when he pressed deeper and curled them slightly. My hand shot out to grip the nearest bedpost while I struggled to fight the sensation mounting inside me.

Futile. So futile.

“I can tell you want me, Sersa.” Sin spread my wetness over the bundle of nerves, alternating between circles and sliding. “I can feel you opening up for me.”

I was, my center swelling and pulsing against his fingers. Only a few kisses had done it. The events of the last few days—the fact I’d almost died and lost Sin for good—had done it.

The thought of him taking me hard, my thighs ramming the bed repeatedly, flooded my mind, making me salivate.

My voice sounded weak as I pled for his cock.

“No, no. I *need* you to open up for me, Sersa. You know I won’t fit otherwise.”

“You’re so bloody proud of that fact,” I said over my shoulder.

“A fact it is. You don’t want my fingers tonight though. Do you?”

I shook my head, unable to speak as Sin continued to massage and tease me torturously. Just when I thought my backside was his favorite feature, his fingers snaked up my waist, over my breasts.

“Every part of you is my favorite, love. I’m going to fuck these later.”

I pressed my lips together, imagining that and blushing. Was that a thing? *Gods*. That couldn’t be a thing. Shivers again. All over my body. He traced the little hairs rising on my forearm, his other hand finding my center once more.

“After, I’m going to fuck your clit again until you can’t move. Or think. Until the only word you know is *Nessin*. I want you to scream my full name so I can hear it break on your lips, love. Is that what you want?”

I lost track of how many times I begged him.

Yes. Yes. Yes. A million times, yes.

Then, with a satisfied sigh like he might finish right then and there, Sin

replaced his fingers with his tip.

“Nope. You were too short the other day, and you are still too short.” He smacked my backside and lifted me onto the bed before him.

I watched as he repositioned himself behind me.

“You seemed to finish just fine, Nessin.”

He snickered. “Watch that mouth of yours.”

“I want to watch *you*.”

“I *must* have you this way, love.”

A second later, Sin was in my head, giving me a vivid line of sight to what he saw. *Everything*. I dropped my head, grazing my teeth along my upper arm to keep quiet when he pressed forward an inch.

This daemon killed me.

I had no room for thoughts, cares, embarrassment.

He flattened his chest to my back. “*Never* feel embarrassed with me, love.”

Sin didn’t waste a second more. He straightened and shoved himself deep, sending pulses down my legs and up my waist, his cock straining and stretching me the entire way. He was too much. Always too much. I cried out in pleasure and pain, threading the covers in my fingers and arching my back. I loved the sensation, but it had been moons since the first and last time we’d done this.

Really done this.

The feeling shocked me right to my core.

With a cuss, Sin took a sharp intake of breath. “That hurt you.”

“My body isn’t...used to it yet.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Perhaps *less* ruining tonight. We’ll go slow.”

“No. I told you I don’t want gentle. Fuck the anger away, Nessin. Make me ache and then fix it.”

Eyebrows arched, Sin smirked devilishly. “As you wish, Queen.” He leaned forward and dusted his lips against my ear. “But if you’ll allow me, I’ll get your body used to *me*. After tonight, you’ll only ever want *me* to touch you, Sersa. *Me* inside you.”

My cheeks flushed at his conceit, but my grin matched his—entirely wicked.

“Too late. I’ve only *ever* wanted you inside me, Nessin.”

“Godsdamn right.”

With a genuine smile, he captured my mouth with his and then gripped

me by the hips, alternating his rhythm to keep me guessing but never going deeper than I could handle. I begged him anyway. Never mind the fact I wasn't deep enough to accommodate all of Sin. A shame because I was greedy.

I focused on the feel, his sheer hardness, and breathed for him, *lived* for him inside me. With each thrust, I unfurled for Sin and simultaneously tightened around him. He was so attuned to my body he had to be searching my thoughts.

"Don't pull out when you finish, Sin. I don't want you to."

He chuckled. "Oh, love. I don't plan to. Ever."

Stretching my arms out on the bed, I clawed the covers harder and had the urge to bite them.

Sin raked his hand through my hair. "Feel good, love? Tell me. Tell me how it feels."

I couldn't speak. A string of moans escaped me in answer when his hips moved in another punishing thrust.

The hand in my hair moved to knead my back, urging me to bend forward more and giving him an angle that had my eyes rolling. Then Sin slid even slower, letting me savor his length, and surely showing off until I memorized each inch as he filled me repeatedly. He hit deeper still, pulling back and repeating.

I couldn't. Couldn't stop my cries. Couldn't stop that sensation of swelling.

Sin flipped me around to slide me onto my back. I noticed fleetingly that the skin of my shoulder blades felt a little different against the silk.

When he pulled away, I shook my head.

"I'm fine. *Promise.*"

Nodding, Sin tore off his lightweight shirt and pants. He remained standing, but put one knee on the bed before thrusting into me again, every muscle in his thighs and hips flexing. He looked down as I did, noting the surplus there.

I rolled my eyes. "Don't even say it, Sin. You are so ridiculous."

"Ridiculously good," he replied before he buried himself, urging me to take all of him.

I screamed.

"There she is. Keep screaming for me."

Closing my eyes, I felt like I was on the brink of falling. The sensations

took over, and I desired my release far too much to fight them.

I'd fall from any height for Sin, so long as he made me feel this way.

"Oh, gods," I cried.

He halted. My eyes shot open.

Sin gripped my jaw, his energy undulating off him. "When I am inside you, there is only one god. Me. I am your god, your daemon, and your devil—the *only* sin you seek."

"Yes," I said breathlessly. "You are. *You are.*"

"Don't speak of those others, Sersa."

His tongue swiped my lips, and he squeezed my hipbones until he sensed the shudders rippling through my core. I cried his name, wanting to reach for him, yet unable to uncurl my fingers and release the sheets.

But Sin had to stop again.

"Damn you!" Breathless, he gripped his cock, the other squeezing the bedpost. He swiped a finger over his tip and made me lick it clean. "Look at what you do to me."

Look at what I did?

Sin had me fucking disoriented.

"Why do you feel like heaven?" I asked.

Grinning, Sin took a moment to study my bare flesh before he slid me to the middle of the bed.

I opened my eyes to the sight of him dripping on my thigh.

"No, love. Welcome to hell." Sin leaned over me, caressing my neck again until he collared it with his hand. Not tight, but making a point that I was his.

I was. Willingly.

"And I'm yours, Sersa."

Sin wasted no more time. He slammed into me, summoning wave after wave of shock and pleasure. I kneaded my hands into his arms. He kept moving after I shattered, and I fought a laugh, unable to stand it.

"*Please.* It—I can't again, Nessin."

"You're finishing twice," he said in my ear, pinning my hands, "since I so rudely *almost* came first."

I fought the giggle tearing through me and the pulsing in the lowest part of my belly before it shifted back to pleasurable, ascending a sensation I swore wouldn't stop tickling.

Sin watched me devotedly as I writhed.

But the overwhelming pressure between my hips built and shifted, the second wave coming faster and harder than the first. He moved quick but careful, so adeptly it almost didn't feel real, and then we were finishing together. I closed my eyes, focusing on the feeling of Sin throbbing inside me, emptying, melding us.

When I started to come down, he brushed his lips against mine. Such a simple touch summoned all my desperation to keep him close. As close as we could get.

"There's my goddess." Sin bowed his head to mine, careful of his horns. "You will never know what it feels like—you tightening around me like you are now."

I opened my eyes—barely—and tugged his head back by sweaty hair. The way Sin grinned lazily at me...

This daemon loved me. So much. Undeniably.

"I definitely think it's better for me," I said.

He scoffed. "*Impossible.*"

"Mmm." I pushed back into the pillow. He licked up my neck, and something like a cussed whimper tumbled over my lips. "Don't touch me. I can't think."

"Scared you'll come yet again?"

"I wouldn't rule it out."

Sin grinned. "I would die to worship you like this every day and night, love."

"No dying. Only worshipping."

"Only worshipping," he agreed.

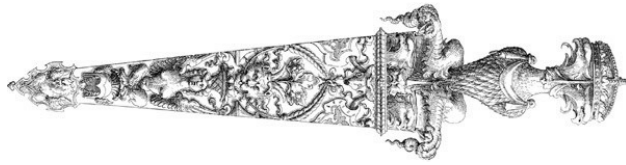
"I may have to build a phallic shrine for you too though."

Sin threw his head back with an unrestrained laugh.

Except for this moment, nothing was perfect between us. But what mattered was that I didn't want to be here with anyone but my Daemon King.

Nessin Drumghoul was *it* for me too.

Sin



MINUTES LATER, MY MIND REMAINED A MESS, MY BODY PULSING AS I LAY unmoving on the bed, with every remnant of Sin spreading through me. I couldn't be sure but thought I'd blacked out from the sheer pleasure of being with him.

Sin most definitely intoxicated me.

He got up to fetch a towel and cleaned himself off. "Are you sated for now?"

I peeled one eye open, propping myself up languidly. When I reached for the towel, Sin shook his head and led me toward the attached bathing room. Though the path was rather dark, I held his gaze—as ravenous for me as ever. Yet loving. Soft.

Mine.

"I'm not sure sated is the right word. More like resurrected."

Sin quirked an eyebrow. But the daemon knew what he did to me, knew the power he had over me.

He'd filled up the tub a quarter of the way. Lifting my hand as if we were about to dance, he assisted me into the bath then took the stool beside it. Sin dipped a fresh washcloth into the perfectly warm water, squeezed the excess, and glided it up my thighs.

"I *can* do this myself, you know."

“I am aware. But *I* want to get you wet again.”

I shook my head. “You’re too much.”

“In a good way?”

I failed to answer when the cloth moved between the apex of my thighs, and I flinched away from Sin.

“Okay, we are done here, daemon! Give me that,” I said, snatching the cloth and lowering into the tub.

He smiled, his arms hanging over the ledge and pink fingers swirling lazily in the water. Studying that painted hand of his was Sin’s new obsession.

“You ruin my fun,” he said.

“You just had your fun, Nessin.”

“Have I ever told you how much I actually like you calling me that? *Nessin*. Hardly anyone who knows me calls me by my full name, but with you—” He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “You know me better than anyone, Sersa.”

I studied Sin’s face, the eyes that had been pure black only moments ago. “That makes me sad because I sometimes don’t know how much I know you.”

“You do, love. You see through me.” He cupped my cheek and sighed. “I recall you telling Lady Alders off for this question a few moons ago...but Niuna’s talk of cycles tonight reminded me. You have had yours since the night you departed for Nos Nua, correct?”

“Of course.”

“Well, not *of course*.” Sin’s intense gaze pinned mine. He rose from the stool to slip into his pants and the loose shirt, not bothering to button it up.

Droplets of tepid water slid down my body when I stood. As Sin handed me a towel, a hint of a pleased smile curled one end of his lips.

“I figured,” he added, “but I wanted to make sure in case you wanted to take bilweed. I preemptively had Ranir brew some.”

I wrapped myself in the plush towel, relishing the feel on my skin compared to the scratchy rags I’d used at the parish.

“Preemptively because you knew what we’d be doing as soon as I woke?” I asked.

“Guilty.”

I glanced around the bathing room. “Well, where is the bilweed? I’d like to get it over with. I’ve never taken it, but Ma was adamant the women of our

clan have access. They all said the stuff is putrid.”

Sin straightened in front of me and cleared his throat, eyes on the floor.

“Did I take it before, Nessin?”

A full minute passed, his smirk growing wider. “You told me you started to after we began courting, yes. You had one thing on your mind during that time. And you think *I’m* ravenous.”

“But we clearly didn’t.”

Sin shook his head. “You always wanted to, but no. I was a gentleman. Mostly.”

“You didn’t want to?”

The question earned me an immediate scowl.

“I knew the things I was about to do. I always wanted you to see who I am before deciding to be with me. Yet in another way, I wanted to conceal that side from you, love.”

“Why didn’t you get me any bilweed the first time?”

Sin inhaled and said in a tight voice, “Because I was not thinking clearly that night. All I could focus on was getting you out of the Soullands. I apologize for putting you in that position.”

“It took both of us.”

Sin shook his head and put his hands on his hips. “The danger of you being tied to me for an eternity fucking haunts me, Sersa.”

“Isn’t that what you want? Us—tied.”

“Of course. I failed to protect you though, and it *keeps* happening.”

I wrapped the towel tighter, suddenly feeling chilled.

Sin rested back on the sink. I moved to stand in front of him, his hands finding my hips. Turmoil swirled in his gaze, but his entire body loosened under my touch.

“Back then, I withheld my depraved reasons for wanting to be king from you. I wanted to focus on the good.” His voice quieted. “You were the only light in my life at that point, Sersa, and you capably reeled a lot of personal things out of me.”

A strange longing like I missed those two people I didn’t know—the people we’d been—weighed on me.

“Would you like a memory? It’s been a few days,” he whispered, studying his left hand once more.

I wasn’t brave enough to ask for the memory of the proposal again, but Ailerby’s speculations about those rings had stayed with me.

“No.” I swallowed. Part of me was afraid to be immersed in the memories again. Another part wasn’t sure I could handle more of the mixed emotions they’d elicit. “I think I want to live in the moment. For tonight, anyway.”

“Understood. Though I do hope you’ll agree to see Feera the day after tomorrow. It’s imperative—the memories are.”

“I just don’t want to make plans for after the fête *before* the fête.”

He nodded curtly.

A mischievous smile curled my lips as I tried to lighten the mood. “Since I like your Archdaemon seed a *little* too much, I should probably drink that bilweed now.”

Sin clenched his teeth, lost in thought—maybe in mine—and a muscle ticked in his jaw. He yanked me closer, clasping his hands behind my back. “You love to unravel me, don’t you?”

“I do.”

“Mm. You are very nearly there. It appears we will be relying *heavily* on bilweed, then. Top drawer,” he said, not releasing me as he tipped his head at a cupboard next to the pedestal sink.

I reached inside to find a moon’s supply of the familiar draft—a nasty dark green concoction. Before I could think twice, I plucked one from the partitioned box and took a sip.

It tasted like singed grass.

“I might drink it in one go,” Sin said.

I playfully kneed him in the thigh. “Then why don’t *you* drink it?”

“The Druids say it’s not as effective when males take it, especially daemons—potent seed, they say—but sure.” He stole the vial and downed the rest. Then he licked his teeth clean and flashed them. The face was actually quite frightening, but we both laughed.

“You’re sure you don’t have any spawn running around, Nessin?”

“Positive.”

“Well, stay away from my supply.” I selected another and swigged the entire thing as he had, shuddering with each forced swallow. “*Disgusting.*”

“If you decide you want to stop taking it for any reason or none at all, please let me know. Otherwise, I will request a supply for you every moon. You can go straight to Ranir for any of your needs if you prefer. She abides by strict confidentiality.”

Mindbloods—confidential? *Sure.*

I pressed my lips together and nodded, uncertain whether this was him

unbarring the topic of spawn.

“They would be cursed like Niuna. Sick. Likely requiring souls. That’s why it’s a barred conversation unless you insist,” Sin said. “It’s fine if you never want to have them too.”

“I’m nineteen and you are—”

“Ancient?” he offered.

“Barred for now,” I agreed. “But *not* barred entirely.”

Sin scrubbed a hand down his face with a groan. “I am obsessed. I cannot look at you. Now, before I delay any longer because of my undying compulsion to have you repeatedly, I want to check on Dev if that’s all right with you. I will be quick.”

At that, he popped a quick kiss on my forehead and separated us. Our fingertips hung on until the last second.

“Sin?”

“Yes, love?” He pulled me back toward him, pressing my front tight against his.

“I—”

I love you.

My throat felt thick, catching on those words no matter how hard I tried to smother this inexplicable feeling in my gut. The pink magic even coiled around Sin’s wrist and kissed his hand, contradicting the swirls of confusion I felt.

Sin smiled, all smug with himself. Though a hint of sadness turned it blue. “I almost lost you. I don’t want to regret *not* saying it, even one time. Love is not given with the objective of reciprocation. Authentic love should be given freely, and I give all of mine to you, Sersa.”

My heart raced at the sweet words I now accepted as truth. We couldn’t turn back after this, and no part of me wanted to.

So why did some part of me, buried deep inside, still hesitate?

“But if you want me to fuck you instead of making love to you? I can do that too,” Sin said with a scarred smirk. “I’ll return shortly.”

He released me almost immediately, maybe not wanting to hear my mind, strangely divided in half for no good reason.

Earlier, I’d been *certain* I could say it. Now the floor seemed to tilt beneath me. Blinking, I willed it to settle, to let me re-gain equilibrium.

I probably just needed rest.

Standing in front of the closet, I threw on one of Sin’s shirts and nothing

else. We'd likely spend the rest of the night in bed, wearing nothing at all, and I was perfectly fine with that.

A feminine, otherworldly voice cut through the silence.

"So, *what's it like being the king's little whore?*"

My limbs locked up as the words settled into me. Only Jestin had ever referred to me as the king's whore—I suspected only the prince had the gall to.

I whirled around, accidentally knocking my hip on the dresser.

Swallowing, my eyes landed on *her* immediately.

A shadow caught in moonlight wavered several feet away by the balcony. I blinked the familiar silhouette into view.

Familiar or not, I couldn't make sense of the sight.

Fiery waves of tangled hair hung in limp strips around the young woman's shoulders, and her thin frame looked unexpectedly frail. Maybe because she was naked from the waist up. Her skirt draped around bare feet, the hem and her toes both caked in wet sand, and her light freckled skin had taken on an almost waxen pallor akin to a corpse. Adding to the sickly appearance, bluish circles darkened the skin under her eyes.

Innes.

Whereas she'd seemed fine—*healthy*—earlier, she looked halfway to death now.

Gods. Had it been an act? Was she angrier than she'd let on at the bonfire?

Fucking clearly.

"Innes...are you all right?" I asked.

Her hand twitched at her side, calling attention to the sand clinging to her front in a pathway down her body. My gaze followed.

Until I was staring right at the *knife* she strangled.

Delayed, I registered the blood dripping off its curved edge.

I couldn't think of who Innes might've wounded. Let alone who she'd *want* to wound in the first place. But evidently I'd made the list.

"Innes," I repeated, even this time to keep *myself* calm. I didn't want the red to appear and hurt her. Or worse. "Why don't you put the knife down so we can talk about what happened at the chalet? I can get you clean clothes. Some tea maybe?"

Her eyes tapered in challenge. "Put *that* away first."

Halos of red encircled my wrists.

They wouldn't listen if I tried. So I didn't.

I cleared my throat. "I understand why you're upset with me. For attacking Thane, I mean."

If our roles were reversed—if someone harmed Sin—there was no telling what I'd do. Gearóid Drumghoul was proof. Lochlainn was proof. I'd been willing to risk *everything* to protect Sin moons ago. Before I knew anything about our history.

Obviously he'd made mistakes. And yet, I knew there was no limit to how far *Sin* would go to protect me too.

With near-perfect aim, Innes whipped the bloodstained dagger at me. I turned to the side, and it *just* missed.

Even so, my furious magic swatted it away like a hand.

As it hit the wood floor, the tendrils lunged for Innes. In the stretch of a few seconds, they wrapped around her neck and raised her off the ground, dangling her over the floor. Her tiptoes skimmed the surface, but she was *laughing*.

"You would *hurt*—your own friend?" she choked out.

Her voice was entirely inhuman to the point that I no longer believed she *was* Innes.

"Who are you?" I demanded. "A Changeling?"

I waited for my magic to squeeze the truth right out of her, forcing her to drop the mirage and reveal her face.

Only she never did.

"Good—guess, little whore. But *wrong*," she said through clenched teeth. Offshoots diverged from my tendrils like weeds spreading. Her gaze darted around frantically as they lifted her higher, gripped harder, and darkened to the deepest red.

The magic mesmerized me, and I had to remind myself it was *my* magic. Difficult when I wasn't controlling it whatsoever.

The door flung open.

Innes struggled to turn her head as Sin strode inside the room. He pointed at me without looking away from her. "*Stay where you are, love.*"

The words lashed out, and I instantly recognized they were a command. I gritted my teeth so hard I tasted blood.

"How dare—"

Sersa. Sin's voice in my head was soft, gentle, a plea. *Not now.*

Slow and silent, he shut the door behind him.

“Your Darkness, we were *just* talking”—Innes swallowed beneath the tendril’s noose—“about you. Thank you—for the *delicious* show earlier. Lucky you.” She looked right at me, tongue swiping her teeth. “Or should I say lucky Aislinn? She is his current wife, no? And you’re just his *little whore*, Sersa Scáth.”

My tendrils dropped Innes. Maybe reflexively. Maybe because my gut dipped into my toes when the weight of fear and doubt filled it.

Aislinn and Sin’s fabricated relationship was the last thing that should’ve concerned me right now. But my magic’s reaction conveyed all my lingering insecurity.

She’s trying to get under your skin, Sin echoed in my thoughts.

No shit.

Still, it stung.

Innes hit the floor like a bag of bones. Her knees knocked together as she collapsed into a heap with her legs folded beneath her. My magic pinned her arms unnaturally behind her back, holding firm on its threat to snap her neck.

She managed to lift her head and flashed me a sinister smile behind strips of damp red hair. Her gums were pale white.

Sin’s gaze sharpened as he crouched in front of Innes. “Seems we’ve got a daemon on our hands, aye?”

A daemon.

The very thought had bile swirling up my throat. I couldn’t believe it—a dozen questions blared in my head. Where had she come from and how long had she been here?

More importantly, *where* was Innes?

She snarled. A small rumble from the Daemon King’s chest swallowed the sound of her defiance, though she snapped upright and reared back.

This was the hierarchy at play.

“Tell me who you are—and *how* you went undetected for so long.” Fascination dripped from Sin’s words. The way he studied Innes, it was like he saw right through to the daemon inside her. Like it lay at the very end of a long tunnel behind her pupils, and only now had the torches illuminated the truth lurking there.

Despite her weak appearance, she coughed forcefully in Sin’s face. “His Darkness can’t detect all that well, it seems. Blood too diluted after all those millennia?”

Sin reached through my red magic and wrapped his hand around her

throat beneath it. “*Out with you—without harming Innes.*”

Her head snapped left and right, and her shoulders twitched as the daemon inside writhed and snarled. Speechless, I reflexively backed up, not wanting to be anywhere near the thing when it...emerged?

Gods.

“I said *out*,” Sin growled. “Now.”

“Are you certain you want that, Daemon King?” The words twisted out of her.

A loud thud sounded in the hallway right before Thane stumbled into the room, ramming the door open shoulder-first.

Gasping in the opening, he pressed a hand to the center of his brown chest. Blood trickled over his fingertips, and his thin white shirt hung open, also coated in sand.

“What did you do—” I started.

Sin fucking *silenced* me again. Without so much as a glance my way.

Thane fell to his knees, his arm outstretched weakly. “Don’t!” He wheezed so hard he could barely get the rest out. “It’s really Innes—*her body.*”

“I am aware,” Sin snapped.

Thane must’ve been following a command too, because he slowly inched the door shut behind him.

Just as it closed, Innes’s skin peeled backward on one hand, starting at the nails. A horrid, gut-wrenching scream ripped through her the same time that the daemon inside cackled.

Only *then* did I believe she wasn’t a daemon. Not completely. But one *was* inside her. That scream was hers. The words coming from her mouth weren’t.

Her fingertips continued to peel back in the most gruesome sight.

“The first rule of Scroungers: never harm the shell,” she sang.

The word—*shell*—nauseated me. But I recalled my conversation about Scroungers with Ranir and Sin at the chalet.

Bile moved up my throat. “A Scrounger as in...”

“She’s feeding off Innes—her bones and blood,” Thane said, still out of breath.

I couldn’t understand how she’d seemed like herself the entire time at the chalet. Healthy. Smiling. Vibrant.

Gritting her teeth, saliva and blood poured down her chin. Sin didn’t

break eye contact with the daemon until Thane clambered to his feet and bolted forward, tackling him into the wall.

“You can *see* how far along the Scrounger is—fucking look at her, Sin!” He gestured to Innes, exhaling sharply. “It’s already wrapped around every part of her. You can’t just force it out!”

Dúm.

Sin’s pale jaw clenched. Though he looked ready to murder both of them, he helped Thane lean against the wall. The rise and fall of Thane’s dark chest garnered my attention. Two letters were carved into his flesh.

J and E.

The rest of the letters weren’t needed.

All the tormenting and toying with us would only stop when we killed Jestin. We’d sat around, waiting for him to come to us when he’d been here all along. But what this daemon would have done to me—and why she hadn’t already when she’d had *numerous* opportunities—was another unknown entirely.

“You know there is only one answer,” Sin said plainly.

“I know,” Thane replied, defeated. “*Please.*”

I looked between them and the daemon. “What answer?” I shouted.

Sin focused hard on Innes as he crossed the room and stepped in front of me. The dark energy I knew existed within him radiated off his body. He reached backward, caging me in with his arm so I couldn’t move. So close, my front touching his back, his heat transferred to me.

His skin was *burning*.

At once, Sin put an inch between our bodies. I veered around him to study the daemon.

“You know what that would do to her,” she sang. Running hands up *Innes’s* body, she hugged herself tightly. “You know how this ends for my pretty shell.”

Her smile disappeared, no doubt feeling Sin’s energy. So she shifted tactics, turning her focus to Thane.

“You realize now, Thaneris. Your ‘love’ for one another was *never* real.”

Thaneris?

I hadn’t known Thane’s full name—which meant this daemon...

Did it somehow *know* him?

“And you.” She looked right at me. No, *through* me. “Your love will fade too. Love is never real, and a mortal cannot love someone who helped the

Great Gearóid *slaughter*—”

“Svysk,” Sin hissed.

At once, Innes’s eyelids fluttered shut.

Then she slumped limply onto her side.

I blinked down at her in shock. A rusty film coated my tongue, and my head pounded as I tried to piece together what had just happened.

Unconscious, Innes already looked more like herself.

“What did you do to her?” My voice cracked in disbelief.

“I made her sleep.” Sin studied Innes emotionlessly. “Brumation is the only way to halt a Scrounger from feeding on its host. Temporarily. The daemon will lie dormant until I wake her.”

I tried to go to Innes, but Sin spiraled on me and held me still.

“In the face of danger, you *must* think of *all* your options, Sersa!” He pulled the golden horn out from beneath my shirt and shook it in my face. “Your magic defies you? It hesitates? *Think. React. Never* wait for an enemy to strike.”

When I flinched away from him, Sin clenched his teeth.

“I am sorry to be harsh, but I gave you the horn for a reason. Use. It. Please.” His whisper matched his body, trembling around me as he pulled me tight against his chest and didn’t let go. “*Please, Sersa. I can’t lose you.*”

The fear coursing through Sin collided with my own. His was barely there. Barely reaching me. But the emotion I felt was enough to form unmistakably black wisps of my magic, and they refused to relinquish their grip on either of us.

SIN



I ORDERED EVRA AND TWO ADDITIONAL SLUAGH TO BRING THE HIBERNATING daemon to Nos Ovscura. Beneath the citadel was the only secure location—deep in the crypts that no one else could access.

Speaking prematurely had gotten me here though: beyond fucking enraged after Jestin had *repeatedly* surpassed my expectations.

I built the safehouses. He pushed one off the side of a fucking mountain.

I kept my circle tight. He used an undetectable Scrounger to infiltrate it.

Thane hadn't moved from the floor. He looked the numbest I'd ever seen him, with his arms wrapped around his knees, staring at the spot where Innes lay a moment before.

"I will check on her tonight," I said and fell back into the chair nearest Sersa.

Thane didn't nod. I was not sure he'd even heard me.

A few minutes after I sent two Sluagh to wake Ailerby and Ciel, they entered mine and Sersa's room. Half-asleep, Ciel blinked in confusion, while Ailerby picked at an entire plate of food he must've shamelessly grabbed on the way up here. Dúma padded alongside them.

"Lock the door, Ailerby."

“Only if *you* never wake me with a Sluagh again.”

“Not in the mood, Ailerby. *Please*,” I said impatiently.

He hummed around a mouthful of food and did as I said.

Heat coursed through me. Sweat dripped down my spine as I rested back against the leather armchair. Not because of Ailerby. Sersa had *felt* that heat moments before and mistaken it for some daemonic energy. She wasn’t completely wrong.

Yet she wasn’t completely right either.

Front and center, my cravings raged louder than ever before. The hum of Sersa’s soul—ours—drowned out my surroundings.

Dúm, just one taste. Just one fucking taste to tide me over.

I swallowed the thought. Then I recapped all that had happened for Ailerby and Ciel. Their reactions ranged from Ailerby stress-eating to Sersa’s brother firing off questions, which I shut down immediately.

I didn’t care about sparing them the gory details—but rather Thane. He was already reliving it on a loop in his mind.

Finished explaining, I flicked my gaze to Sersa. While she wasn’t exactly mad at me for earlier, she hadn’t stopped twisting the horn in her fingers since. Nor had she looked at me.

“Sersa?” I said.

Slowly, she lifted her eyes from the floor.

Finally.

“You probably do not want to hear this... We cannot deal with a reaction from Draea though. Not with the fête being the day after tomorrow.”

Ailerby balanced his plate near his shoulder, out of Dúma’s reach. “Ah. That’s where I come in. You want me to lie to her *mother*.”

Sersa dropped the horn and folded her arms. “It’s not right.”

“Changelings lie by nature,” Thane interjected. “No offense.”

“Did I choose the ability to imitate others? Nope,” Ailerby snapped back. “But we’ve all got to play to our strengths. If this is what I can do to help, so be it.”

“Thank you,” I said.

Dúma trotted over to Thane, still on the floor, and nudged his hand.

“I thought the Fae can’t lie,” Sersa said.

I waved my hand. “*Redirect*, then. I am skeptical Laisrés’s crows picked nothing up since that fucking daemon said she watched Sersa and I—”

She cleared her throat.

Our bedroom here might be covered in runes so no one outside could hear Sersa screaming for me, but I didn't doubt the fucking daemon had *seen* it all. When I recovered Bardca, I'd be giving him a mile-long list of *extra* protections to implement. Starting with the fortress since Laisrés heard Sersa during our...reunion.

"But," I continued, "we should try to keep this as quiet as possible."

Thane grunted as Dúma draped herself across his lap and chest, pinning him to the wall. "I hate admitting that Sin is right most of the time, but he is in this case. We shouldn't tell Draea until we figure something out. Not to mention—" He gestured to Dúma and snapped at Sersa, "Would you get your hound off me? She's three hundred pounds, and I can't breathe."

Dark circles under Sersa's eyes spoke of her exhaustion, but I wasn't positive she *would* sleep tonight.

"Down please, Dúma," she said.

"*Down please?*" Thane growled. The hellhound just wagged on and panted with a smile. He rolled his eyes. "Like I was saying, Innes is *all* Draea has."

"And when she notices *Ailerby* is gone?" Sersa pressed.

"Say I'm off in Nos Ovscura working," he answered for me.

No part of Sersa wanted to be part of *this*. It was clear in her eyes, if not her thoughts.

And yet, she understood the need.

"Whatever," she muttered.

Dúma flopped in front of the fire when Thane clicked his teeth at her to move. He stood and shook his fingers through his sandy curls.

"Wonderful. Not that this isn't fun, but if anyone needs me, I'll be in the cellar trying to break the record for the most sloshed person ever. So plan on *not* needing me for at least twelve bells, thanks."

He stalked off with heavy steps. The door slammed shut.

"Should we go keep him company?" Sersa asked. "I can't imagine he actually wants to be alone after...that."

I sighed and tipped my head toward the ceiling. "Three people will be a crowd to Thane after tonight's events."

"Then why don't *you* go keep him company?" she pressed. "I really meant you, anyway. You're his closest friend."

Ailerby spoke around the toast he was chewing. "He'll be embarrassed to show any emotion around another bloke."

I had zero intention of going anywhere but the citadel presently. Any other time, Sersa might satiate this ravenous feeling. Not tonight though. Not with the fête so close.

I sat upright and studied her, twisting the horn once more. “You should go, love.”

A fucking selfish instruction, indeed. Because if Sersa was preoccupied with Thane, I could sneak out.

Ciel was awfully quiet, lost in his thoughts as he studied me.

Eyes wide, Sersa looked from him to Ailerby then touched her chest. “Me? You realize I did *attack* him, right?”

“You won’t be alone. Ranir needs to mend his wound.” *The letters that Jestin had Innes’s host carve into his fucking chest.* “You and Innes were becoming close.”

“And what—you think Thane and I will bond over our gullible tendencies?”

“No, love. I just think you will understand his feelings best.”

Her arms fell to her sides. “*Fine.* But if you don’t hear from me in a bell, come find me. I’ll be the one lying in a pool of my own blood in the cellar.”

“That is not amusing,” I called after Sersa.

She and Irian headed for the door. As it closed softly behind her, I turned to Ciel.

“I need to request a favor—I want you to learn everything you can about Scroungers.”

Horror shone in his eyes, but he nodded.

“Thank you,” I said. “Speak of your research to no one. You are dismissed.”

Though Ciel stood and left us, his thoughts sounded equally perturbed as his face looked. He hated having his credibility questioned, even indirectly. More than that, being kept in the dark about whatever I wanted to speak to Ailerby about spiked his curiosity. Ciel knew he couldn’t press him about such private business.

My head throbbed hard and slow, enough time between each to anticipate the next crushing pain. I pinched the bridge of my nose.

“All right.” I looked up. “You must start imitating Innes immediately. Can you show me?”

Ailerby scoffed, swallowed the last of his toast, and wiped the mountain of crumbs in his lap onto my floor. “*Still* don’t trust me, huh?”

“It’s not that. I want you to officially assume your post as one of my spies.”

“No shit?” he said sarcastically.

“No shit.”



This was no simple craving I could resist.

Since the Dreither’s attack, I hadn’t had a moment to myself. Ranir healing Sersa. Ciel and Ailerby hovering. Devlin and Thane—both of them too perceptive for me to slip by.

Most of all, Sersa.

Ranir had said so herself though. Maintaining my consumption was paramount. I would worry about weaning myself off after the fête.

Tonight—bingeing was pure fucking need.

I descended the sand-covered stairs onto the beach and stalked toward the water, then paused to stare out at it for a moment. Gossamer silhouettes moved with the tide, so calm at this time of night. The Iarsmaí’s eerie voices could be heard best when the Soullands slept.

In the corner of my eye, a dark-haired form stepped into the waning moonlight.

Fucking Laisrés.

He must have come from the far-end of the shore. My distracted state was a testament to the fact I *needed* to binge. Just a little. And with the Scrounger gone, Sersa would be safe for a few bells...

I cussed under my breath.

The half god’s irritating presence reminded me Sersa was the complete *opposite* of safe.

I can be quick.

“Where are you off to so late? Or should I say so *early*? Hard to tell.” Laisrés tipped his head at the horizon, where a thin, dark gray line started its ascent.

The Dark was almost here.

“Simply because I tasked you with monitoring the Soullands does not mean you are monitoring *me*, Laz.”

“Whatever you say.” He laughed. A small, uncaring sound. “After what happened in the mountains, I thought for sure you’d be keeping watch night and day until the Dark Eve Fête.”

“Isn’t that what your *crows* do for me?” I snapped.

Laisrés stepped toward me and shrugged. We both knew they fucking didn’t. Except I didn’t know *what* they did.

His focus darted to my eyebrow—the tiny cut, courtesy of Devlin’s knuckles. “Oof. What lucky soul got to deck you? Hopefully Sersa.” He reached to grab my chin.

I was quicker and smacked his hand away. Hearing Sersa’s name come from his fucking mouth incensed me beyond belief.

“A soul should fix it, no?” he added.

I jerked Laisrés forward by the collar, close enough to see his pupils, even as my shadow eclipsed him. “*What was that?*” I said.

He shoved me away and straightened his gauzy shirt with a tug. “Why don’t you run off and scarf one down for me?” Laisrés smirked. He fucking smirked. *At me.*

I gritted my teeth.

“That *is* where you were headed, right—the Knot?” He daringly stepped back into my space.

The guess was close enough. I had no desire to steal souls from my Sluagh though.

“I’ve heard all about your glory days,” Laisrés added. “How *powerful* you were whilst over-consuming. I never understood how you were so superior to everyone. Fuck, even to *me*. Is Sersa aware of the habit yet? Does she know the—”

“*Keep your mouth shut.*”

Laisrés grunted and doubled over from the force of my command. His face twisted up like I’d punched him square in the gut.

Being able to Bonespeak made up for my *inability* to read his mind at present.

I bent at the waist to look him in the eye. Dark hair hung messily around his face, and veins in his forehead protruded.

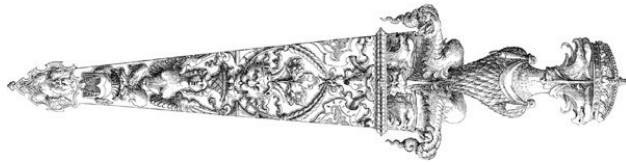
And yet, he chuckled through his pain.

“Do try to keep my queen’s name out of your mouth too, aye?” I kicked sand up at his face, launching him into a fit of coughs as I walked away. “*Bastard.*”

When the Sluagh yanked me into nothingness, the certainty that Laisrés wasn't *wrong* about me, my nature, and what Sersa deserved shrieked within me. She and I came from different worlds, and mine had pillaged hers of souls for centuries—to the point where mortals were now dying out. The Scrounger had said so too.

I was the predator, Sersa my prey, and only our love stood between that ugly truth.

Serena



ON MY WAY DOWN TO THE CELLAR, I RAN INTO RANIR AND THANE, HUNCHED over a very drunk Devlin toward the bottom of the corkscrew stairs.

“Come down for a drink. You can talk to Ciel after,” Thane reasoned.

I thought about the name Ailerby said Devlin wouldn’t stop uttering. *Menadé*. My stomach twisted into knots for Ciel.

It had to be why he wanted to see my brother.

Devlin bobbed his head in agreement. His pale cheeks were flushed for once. “Another drink sounds nice...”

I poked my head between Ranir and Thane.

Propped against the wall, Devlin wobbled on the step when he noticed me. “My sister-in-law! You are the”—he tried to point at me, but his arm moved like a wet noodle—“Daemon Queen.”

“So I am told.” I turned sharply toward Thane. “He is in *no* state to binge drink with you.”

“He’s a minute away from passing out,” he hissed back. “He won’t be able to *hold* a mug, much less drink it. Besides, does he look like he’s in the state to talk to his husband?”

I’d never heard Devlin clip or slur his words before. Never had I seen him so...disheveled either. His eyes barely focused. His hair, silver in the dusky light, stuck up in places.

“True,” I agreed. “Fine.”

Thane looped Devlin’s arm around his neck and helped him down the last steps as Ranir and I followed.

A little all-stone room led to a long tunnel with low ceilings plagued by cobwebs. Wooden barrels lined the left wall, tucked between rows of arched stone dividers.

Ranir looked behind me. “No king?”

Devlin’s eyelids fluttered as he slurred over his shoulder, “Couples need time away from one another, ya know?”

I could only assume that meant he was sticking to at least some of what he’d told Ailerby and Ciel. Hopefully not the part where he’d encouraged them to be together—and not anything to do with whoever Menadé was.

“Yep. Thanks for enlightening us, Double D. There you go,” Thane said, directing him to the round table near the entrance. He wasted no time, heading for the domed tunnel that stored the barrels, while Devlin immediately dropped his cheek to the wood, his arms hanging in his lap.

Ranir put her hands on her hips and sighed.

“Can you do anything?” I asked.

“I *could* purify his blood,” she said. “Though something tells me he’d only want to drink *more* if I sobered him up.”

“In that case, I guess he’ll have to sleep it off like a mortal.”

Ranir darted her gaze to Thane behind his back. He barely fit beneath the tunnel’s short ceiling. “Would you like me to go talk to him? I sense your nerves, Queen.”

I inhaled. “No. I should do it. Sin asked me.”

“Phew. He and King Nessin are similar in a lot of ways. Too much time spent together if you ask me.”

My brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, you’ll see. Enjoy. And tell him I need to heal that—his chest,” Ranir finished.

As she took a seat next to Devlin, I followed Thane against my better judgment. He looked over his shoulder when he noticed me on his heels and shook his head of curls. Grumbling to himself but not slowing his pace, he grazed each barrel he passed and read the brands burned into their exteriors loud enough for me to hear from several meters away.

I suspected to tune me out.

“Thane...?”

“I don’t need consolation, Queen. I need some godsdamn mead is all.”

“Innes—”

Thane spiraled. His voice was deadly as he snarled, “*Do not* say her name!”

He’d halted in the middle of the tunnel. Hands balled into fists, I saw his silhouette trembling from here. With a heavy exhale, he closed his eyes in defeat and rested against the wall, affording me a moment to catch up to him.

Even so, I stopped a safe distance away.

“I can’t imagine how you feel right now,” I whispered.

“No idea what you mean. I feel fucking spectacular.”

“I used to pretend I didn’t feel things too. But okay.” Nodding, I pressed my lips together and looked up and down the cellar. “We can do whatever you want. Talk. Don’t talk.”

“I just want to forget. For tonight.”

I glimpsed the letters carved into his flesh. He hadn’t bothered to change, let alone brush off the sand or button up his shirt.

“Then let’s find something to drink,” I said.

Thane gladly continued his perusing like nothing was wrong.

We reached the first of several archways that divided the tunnel when he whispered, “She can’t be healed.”

It didn’t surprise me he’d broken his silence so soon.

What could I say though? Words rarely made me feel better when I was upset, and in this case, that was a fucking ridiculously inadequate assessment of how Thane had to be feeling. I didn’t know enough about Scroungers to string anything meaningful together. Thane clearly did—he’d said the daemon inside Innes was *far along*.

I swallowed the bile creeping up my throat. “Ranir told me Sin’s father created many puppets. There must be a way.”

Thane scoffed. “*Never once* have I heard of a Scrounger releasing their host, Sersa.”

“There is a first time for everything.”

“Hope has never been a pal of mine.” Thane halted before one of the stalls and selected a clean pipette off a little metal table beside the barrel. He uncorked the bung on top and dipped the pipette inside, gesturing with two fingers for me to grab a mug hanging on the brick wall beside me. Then he lifted the filled pipette from the barrel and let the rich, amber colored liquid spill right into the mug.

He let me have a taste before he downed the rest.

“Vanilla and cinnamon,” he said, smacking his lips as he squinted at the air. “Not bad. But we need something stronger. *Much* stronger. You know most Soullander brews have faeweeds in them, right? Some also have souls.”

It should’ve repulsed me. But after...Innes, I needed a drink too. Definitely not as bad as Thane, but still.

I thought briefly of the night we’d found Pa when I’d seen Thane. *Found* was no longer the right word, but I’d passed the point of worrying over such trivial matters. Or, at least, tonight I had.

“That’s right. Your estate had that huge barrel room. Are you an expert, then?”

“The House of Elittes owns vast farmlands, vineyards, and fields in the west. We also traffic various types of faeweeds and roots, but I am required by the seed donor whom I call Father to say I know nothing about that.”

He re-corked the barrel, and we moved on.

“Gearóid and my father were the best of friends,” Thane restarted. “He supplied the king with endless amounts of faeweeds. In exchange, the House of Elittes received a hefty distribution of soulstock every moon. And I mean *hefty*. Lord Elittes has been breathing down Sin’s neck for moons to resume Reaping Hours.”

“Do you know why he hasn’t?”

Thane tipped his head from side to side. “Lots of reasons. You being one of them. The Gilders *expect* souls from Sin. Our world thrives on them, but as you know, he has different plans for the Gilders.”

“Your father is part of the Circle,” I noted.

And he’ll be dead the day after tomorrow.

He paused to read another brand, and just as quickly kept walking past it. “And like Gearóid Drumghoul, the world will be a better place when he’s dead. I’m sure Sin told you the Circle is working with Jestin. Meaning they, too, played a hand in what happened at the chalet and to Inn— *Ah ha!*”

In the next stall over, Thane stooped to read the brand in full, thumbing the barrel.

“This one has *a lot* of faeweeds.”

It concerned me how quickly he’d dropped the topic of Innes.

For the second time.

Thane expertly repeated the same process with the pipette. But when I went to take a sip this time, my nostrils and eyes burned before the mead

touched my tongue. The second it hit the back of my throat, I choked and broke out in a sweat.

“What is that? Why is it so—”

“Spicy? This one’s called Piss of the Dreither. Or as my great uncle Deison used to call it—actually, you can probably guess on your own.”

“*Not* that one. Absolutely not.” I glared at him. “You made me try it on purpose, didn’t you?”

“Oh, fuck.” Thane stepped away theatrically and pressed a hand to his chest. “Shall I ask you to remove all weapons on your person before we proceed with the mead tasting?”

“Thane, can—”

“Can you *apologize*? Why, yes. Yes, you can, Queen. Do you need instructions on how those work?” Turning to resume his search of the barrels, his scoff echoed through the cellar tunnel like a shudder along a spine. He walked sideways, slithering past a stall when he spotted a low-hanging spiderweb on the right side.

I replaced the cork this time then continued to trail after him.

“I was going to say I *regret* attacking you. But *fine*. I don’t know what came over me, and it won’t happen again.”

“*Grand*. A pity apology. Exactly what I always dreamed of after my girlfriend turned out to be a godsdamn Scrounger.” Thane grabbed an old drink that had been sitting out—for only gods knew how long—off a little table as he passed. He sniffed it before taking a long swig.

I scrambled forward to snatch it out of his hands.

“I *am* sorry,” I said. “Okay?”

Abruptly, he stopped. “*Ohp*. Okay, I accept your apology. Let’s turn—”

He babbled on nonsensically until I halted, standing shoulder to shoulder with him.

As we stared at the barrel together, I read the branding several times.

Scáth-Drumghoul Wedding.

Scáth. Drumghoul. Wedding.

I couldn’t peel my gaze from the brand.

Did Aislinn and Sin have one that read *Hellick-Drumghoul Wedding*?

“Huh. Then they do keep these if you don’t finish them,” I said. “That’s three—*four* moons old.”

I tried not to dawdle on the fact Sin and I had been wed that long. Then again, maybe it didn’t count with the break in between where he’d pretended

to marry another.

Red encircled one of my wrists at the thought of Aislinn.

She was not the reminder I needed right now.

“Sersa, I really can’t drink that tonight. Piss of the Dreither has my vote. It tends to make you angry-drunk rather than happy-drunk, but honeymoon mead makes you—”

“Let’s drink it,” I said.

Hopefully it would take the edge off, because suddenly that edge felt sharper than my souldaggers.

“Fine. But if I end up at the Silk Pearl again, I’ll come for you.” Thane looked less than thrilled as he gripped the barrel cart’s handle. Then he started to guide it back toward the front of the cellar while I helped push it from behind.

“That sounds like an interaction I *don’t* want to hear about,” I said. “Especially if Sin was with you.”

“Nope. Just me in my lonesome after *your* godsdamn wedding, thanks.”

Thane stopped so abruptly I rammed into the cart. I started to yell at him when I realized we had company.

I focused straight ahead.

In the time it took us to select the culprit for the hangovers in our very near futures, Laisrés had joined us.

“*Dúm’s piss.*” Thane whirled around to face me. He swiftly buttoned his shirt all the way up, cataloguing several flecks of blood.

“He won’t notice,” I said.

“He may already know, so not sure it matters. But okay. Act. Cool. Just act like everything is normal. Ranir knows not to say anything, and we will keep our mouths shut, yes?”

“Normal. *Right.* Is there faeweed in this?” I gestured to the barrel.

“No. Honeymoon mead is brewed to—well, to make you feel *honeymoonish*. Hence why I ended up at the Silk Fucking Pearl that night.”

“Ew. Though that *does* explain why Sin didn’t want us to drink it.”

Thane snorted. But the darkness behind his eyes hadn’t withdrawn. It wouldn’t. Not for a while.

I squeezed his shoulder until he looked at me. “Are you sure you don’t want to go somewhere else?”

He shrugged me off. “Too obvious. Act cool,” he repeated.

Straddling the bench across from the wall, Laisrés watched us post the

barrel right beside the table. While Thane thoughtfully faced the branding away from me, the half god's eyebrows shot up. He looked away, scratching his tattooed neck. "Bad luck not to finish it, you know."

Ranir hissed at Laisrés.

When I slumped onto the bench beside him, he scooted off and took the chair on Thane's other side. Devlin was still asleep in a position that was sure to leave his neck sore when he woke.

Thane and I downed the first round of mead a bit too eagerly. The rich flavor had deepened in the moons since the wedding. It tasted smooth, with cinnamon and something sharper I couldn't put my finger on. Yet the aftertaste was sweet.

But I closed my eyes as I chugged and immediately saw Innes.

Caressing her arms. Her shell.

Her fingertips peeling backward.

My eyes shot open, landing on Thane. He looked about as disconsolate as I felt.

Sighing, he refilled us both.

The cellar was so quiet I heard water dripping from inside the tunnel. Someone needed to fill the gods-damned silence before—

"Quite the rowdy crowd you all are tonight," Laisrés noted.

Before he caught on.

I shrugged, trying to look natural. "I think we're all just a little exhausted. The last few days have been—eventful."

"To say the fucking least," Thane muttered.

With that performance, he would give us away before either Ranir or I did. If only I could lob a thought at his forehead the way Sin did.

We both finished our second mead, and Ranir watched me with wide eyes that were either impressed or horrified when I tossed it back like water.

She cleared her throat. "Soullander alcohol is far more potent, Queen."

Thane hummed. "I warned her."

"My clan can hold their drink—as can I."

Laisrés knocked his mug to mine. "Aye, I've met a few Scáths," he said with a deep chuckle. "Ballsy, your clan."

While I missed them, I'd compartmentalized everything that'd happened in Os Íseal. Maybe because too much had happened here.

When the blue tinted my vision, I tried to cling to its repeated return. To grasp the color and let it drag me under if it meant I'd feel something other

than the pressing anger over Innes.

I was afraid for her too. She'd been possessed—no, she *was*—and potentially unaware of it all.

Then there was Draea. How long would we keep the truth from her? I also wondered if Thane had any idea when the Scrounger might have taken over Innes's body.

Not to minimize her disappearance, but Sin and Thane were right. We simply *couldn't* shoulder more concerns, let alone drop everything to help Innes. More and more, logic backed these white lies.

Even if I didn't fully agree, I understood why we spun them.

Still, my gut kept spinning and knotting. My nerves clouded the sadness to the point that I questioned whether I'd seen the blue at all.

Thankful for a distraction, I watched Laisrés as he twisted his fingers in a dramatic gesture. Like earlier tonight, one of his crows came to life in the palm of his hand and squawked. Almost immediately, it retreated and merged with his skin. Like it lived within him.

That was the word for it—*alive*.

I studied his forearms, waiting for more of the crows to breach the surface, but they never did. Laisrés caught me studying the dark birds and feathers that crept up his neck and swooped across his collarbones where the top of his loose shirt splayed open.

“So...” I tried to recover with an innocent question, one that redirected my focus. “How long have you and the king known one another, Laisrés?”

“Years,” he said aloofly.

Which meant *centuries* since Sin had told me they served in a few wars together.

Thane's voice sounded about as dull as his expression. “*Crowman* here has ties to the Otherworld obviously—connections and whatnot. Why *else* would Sin keep him and his loud-ass friends around?”

Swirling his drink, Laisrés passed him an unamused look. “I like to think *my* role is a little more important than disorienting Gilders until they fall in love with me, no?”

I tilted my head, looking between them. “Who does that?”

“Thane, of course.” The condescending words rolled off Laisrés's tongue. “He's a Tempter—a daemon of love and lust. Of *passion*.”

Ranir's gaze narrowed. She'd mostly kept quiet so far. Probably trying not to slip up about Innes too.

“Half Tempter,” Thane corrected. “*Half.*”

So *that* was why his teeth were all pointy. I wanted to peel Thane’s lip back to look, but my remaining civility told the idea to sit down.

The mead was hitting me.

Thane turned toward Laisrés deliberately. He rested his elbow on the table and wagged his finger at him. “Also, I will have you know that *I* enamor others naturally. I have never used my sway on a lover. As for the Gilders, I merely make them fall for me. Or I become buddy-buddy with them for a few days, weeks, however long it takes to steal their secrets—and *never* in an ungentlemanly way.”

“You sure you haven’t swayed *Innes*?” Laisrés asked.

Thane slapped the table and stood. “*The hell did you say to me?*”

Dúm’s piss.

I couldn’t ignore the too-perfect timing of Laisrés’s accusation.

Ranir squeezed Thane’s hand, urging him to sit down, while Laisrés looked to me and carried on without a care.

“I, like many others, supply Nessin information. Secrets of the Otherworld. I’ve handled border relations and security within Faerie Forest for over a century.”

Laisrés freed a dagger from his belt. The gold hilt glinted in the firelight as he drew a loose outline of the Soullands. It stretched far beyond Faerie Forest, which he demarcated with a rudimentary pair of wings.

“Then you aided the Old King when he was alive,” I said.

“No. I kept the Old King *out* of the Otherworld. I monitor the border. My crows know when someone tries to leave, and not all Otherworlders are permitted to do so. Not all beings are allowed to enter either.”

“Interesting that *you’re* allowed to come and go as you please.”

Laisrés lifted his striking gaze to meet mine. “The perks of being a half god. I entered the Soullands to aid your husband and assess the state of the realm after he killed Gearóid Drumghoul. Disturbances on one side of the border are often felt on the other side.”

I scoffed and narrowed my eyes at him. “Sin was almost *dead* the day *I* killed his father.” I had ended the man, and, since the Circle wanted me dead for it, I would take the gods-damned credit. “Clearly, you don’t have your facts straight.”

Laisrés hooted.

Ranir looked taken aback.

Thane squinted at me. “Sin wasn’t thinking clearly after you left. Jestin was there when he returned to the citadel and quite literally *stabbed* Sin in the back with a souldagger. Gearóid put him up to it. All because he *knew* Sin couldn’t be at full power when they faced off.”

That dagger had been payback. For Lochlainn. And because I’d ended both his father and brother, Jestin had worse things than death planned for me.

The Ordé flitted through my mind forebodingly.

Thane continued, “Sin took Jestin down effortlessly and should have killed him right then. The Old King remained in Colossi form the entire time he and Sin fought. He couldn’t transform because of the souldagger wound. By the time Sin knifed Gearóid, he was too weak.”

“Sin fought a *giant...*” A wave of dizziness, unrelated to the mead, washed through me.

“Yep.” Thane leaned forward. “Do me a favor. If you decide to tell Sin his father bested him and *you* did all the hard work, please do it while I’m around. I’d *kill* to see his face,” he said, straightening in his seat. “Enough history though. I thought we were here to drink.”

Realizing I was out of mead, I held my mug out for a refill.



A bell later, we were thoroughly and completely pissed drunk. I had no concept of time presently, so I thought it was a bell at least. Maybe more, maybe less.

But I *was* certain I was drunk.

Clearly, Thane was too when he started using a sleeping Devlin’s limp arms to gesture. Laisrés hadn’t stopped drawing in the dust and now had a full map of the Soullands sprawled across his section of the table.

I noted a pattern of overlapping loops and rested my elbows on the table to lean forward. Either it wobbled under my weight, or my equilibrium was fucked.

“Ooh. Then the Knot’s common knowledge?” I said.

Laisrés chuckled as he looked up at me. Apart from the fact everything was spinning, my concern over the night evaporated—and Laisrés suddenly

looked more handsome than ever.

I recoiled, stopping to wonder where in Dúm's piss *that* thought had come from. The table wobbled a second time, and Ranir tugged me back into my seat.

"Not its inner workings, no," Laisrés answered.

Ranir nudged my mug away from me. "It's a place of nightmares, basking in eternal night much like the Dark season. Few dare to look upon the Knot or its surrounding areas, though countless tales have been spun about the maze."

"Most involving your husband," Laisrés added. "Nobody has ever been inside, save for Nessin Drumghoul. So they say. And that is really *all* they say."

"Nessss-in Drum-ghoul is a gods-damned maze." I nodded and shook my finger. "Very, very, *very* confusing man."

Thane nudged my mug back. Ranir huffed in frustration, and I carried on with my drunkenness to distract myself from Laisrés's tan skin, shimmering in the moody firelight.

"Raise your hand—" A hiccup bubbled in my throat, and my words felt like they were overlapping. "If this mead has sig—sig-nifcan—*significantly* improved your night."

"You are making absolutely no sense," Laisrés said with a boisterous laugh.

"Sure, she is!" Thane gripped Devlin's wrist and waved his hand in the air at me. "I understand Sin, which means I understand Sersa."

"He is trying to sleep," Ranir snapped. "Leave him be!"

Devlin groaned and tore his hand free without lifting his head.

I matched Thane's grin before we burst into laughter together for no apparent reason. Laisrés didn't look so amused when Thane wrapped an arm each around our shoulders, pulling us close.

"*You*"—he squeezed us tighter—"you guys are pretty."

Laisrés and I pushed him away at the same time. The half god put his weight behind it, sending Thane into a second fit of laughter louder than the first as he knocked into Devlin.

"Rein it in, Tempter."

"You didn't drink that much, Lazy?" Thane asked, punctuated with a hiccup.

"Oh, I drank enough. Too much probably."

“Then you’re just a boring drunk—is that it?” I said, trying to blink Laisrés into focus.

The blurry line of his broad jaw carried my eyes toward pink lips, while my thoughts carried me back to the pink magic Sin made me see. My husband’s lips—my favorite full, scarred lips. His adept tongue and hands, and the rest of him I shouldn’t let my mind wander to.

Never mind that I’d already had Sin once tonight. I wanted him again.

Thane was right about the honeymoon mead, that was for certain.

Startling me, a throat-clear sounded at the bottom of the spiral staircase.

I snapped my head up, realizing I’d pressed it to the filthy table. The cellar whirled around me once more, casting aside any pretenses of soberness.

That wasn’t good. Usually, it meant I was mere minutes away from passing out. Come the morning, I’d be sicker than a hound.

“Pardon my intrusion,” said Draea in a stern yet calm voice.

Innes—Ailerby imitating her—stood beside her. Just *seeing* her façade made my gut flip.

“There she is,” Thane shouted. “Hair like fiiiiiiire!”

Draea pursed her lips. “Our room is just at the top of these stairs, and we actually have to rise with the moons tomorrow to help prepare the citadel for the fête.” She studied me for a long moment then darted a sharp, motherly look to the others. “Everyone ought to head to bed.”

Ranir joined Draea on the stairs. I couldn’t hear their whispers, only see the shifty looks they gave me as Thane, Laisrés, and I downed the remnants in our mugs. Thane finished first, slamming it on the table with a satisfied growl and a swipe of his sleeve across his mouth. Then he scooped Devlin up and started his wobbly trek up the shadowy steps.

I touched a hand to my mouth, almost certain it was dribbling down my chin after I finished chugging.

Lingering nearby, Laisrés wore that sly smile. “What’ll you do for the rest of the night, Queen?”

“Sleep. Obviously.”

“Hmm. Has Nessin returned yet?”

I blinked at him. “What?”

Gods, I saw *double*. One Laisrés was exasperating enough.

“He didn’t tell you?” He clasped his hands behind his back. “He took off somewhere. Needed to do something *important*.”

“Oh.”

Laisrés was fishing for information. He had to be.

“Then you *didn't* know.” He shrugged. “You know how he is. His religion might as well be omission. Though I expect he’s preparing himself for the fête.”

I wasn’t sure what that meant. Training? It seemed unlikely Sin believed any amount of physical preparation would boost our odds at this point.

Once my drunk brain recovered, I snapped, “Why do you believe I’d trust you more than my own husband? I don’t, in case you were wondering.”

“Fair. But for what it’s worth, *I* think you deserve better than a reticent daemon.” He leaned forward and whispered, “A goddess like you—you deserve a *god*.”

I stared back, dumbfounded.

With a bold smile, Laisrés trailed up the winding stone stairs. “Sweet dreams...”

Draea popped her head back around the corner, forcing me to recover immediately.

And Laisrés had called *my* clan ballsy?

“Will you sleep down here with the rodents, dear?”

“No!” I rushed out. “I, uh...think the mead’s rotten, by the way—because I should *not* be this drunk.”

Draea tutted. “The mead stays good down here for many, many years, dear. It won’t spoil with a bit of preservation. Like your union with the king,” she added with an incisive look.

I couldn’t be bothered to mull over whether or not she heard Laisrés. Not when this spinning sensation was flinging all my thoughts from my head.

Impulsively squeezing Draea, I kissed her on the cheek. “I missed you. I like you, Draea. You’re the best.”

She patted my arm. “That’s the mead speaking, dear.”

“Nonsense! It’s the *me* speaking, and the *me* says—” Another hiccup bubbled in my throat.

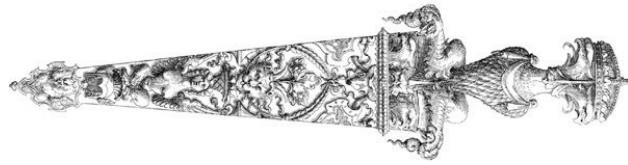
“Well, the *me* says you better not get sick on me. I’ve had too long a night to be cleaning up after you and too long a day ahead of me tomorrow as well—queen or not. And then there’s the fête. Don’t get me started on the fête.”

Ailerby-Innes waited at the top of the stairs for us with Dúma. I squealed and threw my arms around them both before I buried my nose in the

hellhound's mane and kissed her over and over.

“All right, then.” Draea clicked her tongue. “Let's get a move on. I expect tomorrow you'll wake up feeling worse than you did on your wedding day.”

Serena



THERE WERE A LOT OF MOTIONS, THIS WAY AND THAT, AS I MOVED LIKE A swaying tree in the wind. But I was nowhere near as stable as the flimsiest of saplings, and my head spun as I failed to keep track of the turns we took. It was pathetic because the beach house was not large by any stretch of the imagination, including one as drunk as mine.

Draea carefully steered me upstairs. If not for her, I didn't know where I'd end up sleeping. Probably against a wall like Devlin earlier.

"Did you know the Dickhead King used his *Bonespeaker-y* on me tonight, Draea?"

She hooted. "Oh, sweet Aon, child."

"Wha—?" The word seemed to stop at the end of my tongue. "*Wha-t-t-t-t?*" I tried again.

"Perhaps you forgot I helped raise the boy. I don't want to hear these things."

"Oooh. Now *that* is a good idea. I will tell His Dickhead tonight." I laughed throatily at my own joke.

Pausing, Draea turned and pursed her lips. "Are you sure that's what you *really* want?"

Dúm's piss. Now I had no doubt she'd heard Laisrés in the cellar.

I scoffed so loud it echoed through the lower floor, but it turned into a

sigh. I shiftily looked over my shoulder. “Draea, I need to tell you some—”

“Mum?” Ailerby-Innes interrupted.

I glared over my shoulder at him.

“Why don’t I take the *Queen* the rest of the way? You should be resting up for tomorrow.”

Draea narrowed her eyes. “Very well. But be quiet when you settle in.”

Maintaining form, Ailerby yanked me away.

“Ow!”

“Save the delicate act for His Dickhead,” he replied.

After another minute, we arrived at a door that was already wide open and occupied by none other than the king himself.

Despite the late bell, he wore the same clothes from earlier. His forearm rested against the top of the doorframe, the other hand low on his hip, and the firelight behind him capered up and down his marbled horns. The front of his thin shirt remained only halfway buttoned.

“Fuck,” I said.

Dúma brushed against his legs as she entered the room, flopped in front of the hearth, and closed her eyes.

I tried to blink the rest of Sin’s details into clarity, but my topsy-turvy vision flickered in and out. Even through glimpses, he was so beautiful. Too beautiful for his own good, but especially for mine.

The very sight of Sin convinced me the gods had never been my enemy. Oh, no. To give me *him*—the Daemon King I obsessed over—they clearly loved me too.

“Don’t stand there like you *knew* we were coming this way, Nessin. Dúm’s piss—I can’t do anything without it being a surprise, can I?”

“She is probably going to vomit,” Ailerby-Innes said flatly. “A lot.”

I tripped over my own feet.

“Damn rug...”

Sin caught me against his chest, his bare hands steadying my shoulders as I reached up to touch one of his horns.

“Gods, these are smooth.”

He grabbed my wrist, trying to stop me from fondling him. I had the urge to bite his earlobe, but the daemon was too tall, and he fought me when I tried to tug his face down to mine.

“Shut the door,” I whispered. “I feel your seed between my thighs still, and I want *more*.”

After a flash of impatience, I settled for grazing his stubbled face. Hunched slightly, his free arm wrapped around my waist to support me. An awkward smirk and chuckle curled one end of his lips as he covered my hand with his.

The *king* awkward.

“Thank you for bringing her to me.”

“I might bar her from Soullander—no, *all* liquor until everything is sorted.” Ailerby dropped his voice lower and hissed, “She almost told Draea.”

Sin glanced down at me. “That so?”

Untangling myself from him, I stumbled into the room.

“My conscience is clearly more developed!” I lobbed over my shoulder.

Quiet talk preceded the door shutting behind me.

I kicked off my shoes and tried to strip down without success. Frustrated, I swatted at my back, searching for clasps. “Why does Claud make these contraptions impossible to get out of by oneself?”

“You are wearing my shirt, Sersa. Try pulling it over your head.”

Another door opened and closed. I glanced over my shoulder at Sin, holding a clean, long-sleeved shirt for me to sleep in.

“No pants? Excellent. I was thinking the same thing,” I said, reaching for his thigh as he came to stand behind me. I pressed my hips backward. “We need to talk about you commanding me earlier, Your Dickhead. But first I could use some release.”

Sin stifled a laugh. “Sersa.”

“Don’t say my name like that. Did you lie to me about your blood?”

“Love.” He touched my chin and kissed my cheek. “No. I swear to you. Though I *think* we should talk about this tomorrow.”

“And I think we should talk about it *now*.”

Sin moved to stand in front of me, hands on his hips.

I fumbled my lip, searching my hazy, drunk head. The room whirled.

Sin swallowed. “Dúm, you are making *me* dizzy.”

“Don’t change the subject.”

He sighed. “I *thought* the curse in the Old King’s torc affected my blood, but it would make more sense if the real reason was you—our distance, Sersa. There is no way to know for sure unless we test it, but what if simply being near you restored my blood?”

I hiccupped and laughed. “Wouldn’t that be fun—me controlling *your*

blood when you annoy me.”

Sin snickered. “I told you this was a conversation for tomorrow. For sober you.”

“Drunk me prefers—” I narrowed my eyes. “I forgot what I was going to say. Do you think I’m going to puke?”

“Absolutely. But when we courted, you always got sick the morning after. Which is *why* it is time for bed.”

I groaned, closing my eyes. “I need you to help me forget the entire godsdamned night first—your specialty, Nessin.”

He chuckled. “To steal an expression of yours, I wouldn’t touch you with a ten-foot spear when you are this drunk and I am utterly sober.”

“Are you sober?”

Sin silenced then said softly, “What makes you say that?”

I shrugged. “What about that rainwater stuff? Got any here?”

“Tempting,” Sin said drily. “But no.”

“You must have some wine in here. Whiskey?”

“Is your plan to get me as sloshed as you?” he asked.

“Precisely.”

“*Still* no, Queen.”

I only realized he’d finished unlacing the front of my shirt when it fell slack around my shoulders. His shirt? I dropped my arms back, shimmying it off, and he crouched to help peel off my leggings.

Sin gathered my clothes off the ground and disposed of them. But when he faced me again, he averted his gaze.

“You *have* seen me naked before, Nessin.”

“It feels like the polite thing to do when you’re this intoxicated.”

“I don’t want you to be polite. I want you to undress me. What kind of daemon won’t look at his wife naked? Even if I am sloshed.”

My vision blurred, but I swore his nostrils flared.

“You are already undressed, love.”

“Then look at me!” I spun around, stumbling over my feet, but eventually righting myself.

Grinning, Sin bit his lip.

When he tossed me the fresh shirt, I whacked it away.

Provoking him, I slid my palm across my midriff.

His jaw tightened. “Not that I *want* to command you, but do remember that your presence has potentially returned that ability to me in full.”

“Ooh, yes. What a frightening Bonespeaker you are. Do command your own wife to do what you say. How very *modern* of you.”

“You dare mock a king. What else will you do, Sersa?”

“Seduce a king. As your queen, I command you to command me.”

Sin’s eyes darkened. “You *want* me to command you?”

“Give me the Ordé for all I care! You have my permission.”

“If I did that, you wouldn’t be able to disobey or press me after I said no the first time.”

I moved toward him and slid my hands up his body, tempting him with my peaked breasts against his hardened abdomen. “Isn’t that what you want? You loved it at the chalet.”

“Too bad I want every choice to be yours. I get off on that, Sersa, not controlling you.” He fought a smile. “*Anything* I want to command you?”

“Yes!”

“Okay.” Sin cupped my jaw as he stooped to whisper in my ear, “*Get in bed, Sersa. Now.*” His warm lips brushed my cheek in a tender kiss.

At once, my obedient body moved without my permission, and I practically flung myself under the duvet.

“You are the epitome of a buzzkill!”

“You said anything I want. And don’t forget the covers since you insist on sleeping nude,” Sin said from the corner of the room next to the armoire.

Where he was removing all his clothes.

“And you plan to torture me too. *Lovely.*” I rolled and buried my face in the pillow beside me.

Sin slid onto his side of the bed and fluidly pulled me against him. A whimper cut through me at the feel of his body aligned with mine. I had expected to sleep like a board.

This was *far* worse.

He chuckled. “I suppose it’s only fair I sleep naked too.”

“Just so we’re clear, you’re not allowed to command me outside the bedroom like you did tonight, Nessin. Also, if I were a Bonespeaker, I’d use my commands for sexier things. With your permission, of course.”

“Good gods, Sersa. What *were* you drinking tonight?”

“Our wedding mead. Maybe I wanted to make up for the boring wedding night we shared. Laisrés said it’s bad luck we didn’t drink all of it.”

“Laisrés can piss off,” Sin replied. “We will drink it on our one hundredth anniversary.”

“You told me you wanted to give it away on our honeymoon.”

“Simply because one is ancient does not mean they’re *not* petty. Also because I *would* have fucked you until the fortress crumbled around us, love.”

I snorted and looked back to find Sin smiling down at me.

His eyes glowed in the dying firelight. “I will have to find a new hiding place for that barrel for the next ninety-nine years and eight moons.”

“You have no idea how ridiculous that sounds,” I said, looking back up at the ceiling. “Do Soullanders stay together that long? We failed to stay married for more than a few moons.”

“Ouch.” Sin’s voice became a deep rumble. “But do not think for one second I didn’t hear you call yourself *my wife* a few moments ago. I have missed drunk Sersa. She tells me the truth.”

I scoffed. “You should’ve told me everything during our honeymoon. Or on our wedding night.”

“Oh, the boring one?” Sin teased. “I suppose you throttling me then and there would have been a bit more exciting, aye?”

“Seducing me would’ve been even easier if only I’d known how serious you were about this.”

“I was serious then, and I am serious about this now—in every way. In all fairness, I *did* ask if you wanted to play a game that night.”

“Or stargaze,” I said sleepily. “There are no stars in the Soullands.”

Sin’s lips brushed my hair. “There are stars here if you know where to look. I will show you sometime.”

“I don’t need stars. I have you.”

Instantly, I regretted saying so. I didn’t need to look at his face—I *felt* him smiling.

“So? The sexier commands?” I pressed, re-steering the subject.

Sin caressed the curve of my breast with the back of his hand. I dug my head harder into his arm and arched my back, hoping he’d find my nipple.

“I am not using my newly returned blood to seduce you, love.” Sin rolled onto his side to cocoon me. His rasped voice in my ear shot chills through my body. We were chest to chest, bare skin to bare skin. “At least not tonight.”

His body tensed around me then relaxed, but I felt his arousal against my thigh.

“Unfair. Also rude. How are you even refraining if you love me so much?”

“With immense effort, trust me. Quit moving and close your eyes.” Sin kissed my forehead. “I was celibate the last few years until we consummated our marriage.”

“A daemon celibate? No wonder you’re a crab.”

“I am a crab because someone tests my patience.”

“I test your patience because you’re the gods-damned devil and need it.” My cheeky laugh became a sigh. I snapped my head back, almost ramming him in the jaw.

Sin was thankfully quick enough to dodge me.

He snickered. “Do you realize you’re faster since I took the shard?”

I’d *given* him a piece of my soul. He’d just not given it back. But I didn’t bother correcting him since it clearly preferred to live with him, anyway.

I shuddered when Sin traced a finger up the side of my face.

“Why would I be faster?”

“Because I am faster than any mortal.” He hesitated for a long moment. “Theoretically, you may be able to tap into my blood—or at least my strength—now that it has returned.”

“I can’t understand *how* our distance would affect you,” I said.

“I thought about it a bit. Besides the curse, the only other variable that changed was *you*. It affected Gearóid’s ability to shift toward the very end. Yet I am doubtful the effects have hit me yet. As for the runes on my chest, I am at a loss.”

“Wait.” I blinked as my mead-filled stomach swirled with unease. “So I might have restored your blood but also made *myself* stronger? Is that why you want me?”

“Gods, no. I *worship* the godsdamn ground you walk on, Sersa. I swear on my life I had no idea our distance caused my blood to act up.”

“You’d have sent for me, I’m sure.”

He playfully smacked my backside, and I yelped in surprise as my hips pressed to his. Sin seemed unaffected, while I swallowed audibly.

“I want us to be together for countless reasons, but not one of those includes restoring my blood, love. I would become mortal for you in a heartbeat. Perhaps our life would be easier.”

“Then if you return the shard, we’d no longer be bound?”

The question was out of my mouth before I could take it back.

All I heard were Sin’s quiet breaths.

Nothing.

Silence.

“Sin?”

He withdrew from me and propped himself up on the pillow, picking at a callus on his marked palm. “I truthfully don’t know the answer to that, Sersa.”

“I meant what if the runes disappeared *if* you returned my soul shard,” I whispered. “I’m not saying I don’t want us bound or that I don’t want you.”

That got Sin to smile. “*Do* you want me?”

“I wanted you—” The hiccups returned, warning me I needed to go to sleep before I got sick. “I wanted you *before* the soul shard, and you know it. I always will.”

Though Sin wrapped his arms around me once more, his hold was looser, his hesitation overt. I made up for it by squeezing his waist and pulling him as close as I could.

Relishing his warm presence, I closed my eyes and inhaled his scent. He held the small of my back, but I lowered that hand to cup my rear.

Sin chuckled, obliging as he licked his lips. When his fingers brushed my center from behind, I knew what he felt there. Pure desire for him. His seed *and* my desire.

“Sersa fucking Drumghoul.” Sin closed his eyes, releasing a laugh mixed with a groan. “Gods. You are never drinking that mead without me again.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

A yawn escaped me as I burrowed closer to Sin’s chest, my nose tracing his skin. His scent clung to the sheets, and I was determined to get it all over me. Pulling back to find his lips with mine, I urged his mouth open to taste him the same time I lifted my leg over his hip—

Sin halted my motions. “I won’t hesitate to command you if you keep that up, Sersa. At some point, I won’t be able to resist.”

“Then I’m breaking you—excellent.”

“Sleep, love. I get the feeling your mortal hangover is going to knock you on your ass tomorrow.”

“Tell me you love me,” I said.

His words were diffident, quiet, unsure. “Are you going to say it back?”

“No.”

Shaking his head, another rumble of laughter coursed through him. His lips mussed my hair. “Very well. I am in love with you. I love you, Sersa, and I will never not love you.”

I hummed in drunken satisfaction as my eyes fluttered shut, and I lazily grazed the impossibly cut planes of his chest and abdomen.

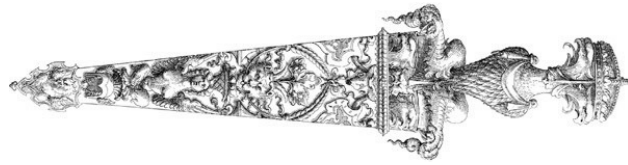
“I hate that I—” Another yawn. Damn him. “I love you too, Nessin Drumghoul. Maybe too much.”

“Yes, you are quite the stubborn lass. But you saying so makes me a very happy daemon.”

Though Sin held me tight, my pastel feelings for him weren't the last thing that clouded my mind before I drifted off. I *swore* I heard a crow outside the window, creating a midnight ballad just for me as hazy dreams filled with a certain half god's words pulled me under.

Unless I was a complete and utter fool, tonight confirmed that Laisrés undoubtedly wanted to be the second lover he'd told me to take.

Serena



I JOLTED AWAKE IN A DARK ROOM WITH A POUNDING IN MY HEAD. YET stronger than my headache was the raw *need* I felt.

As I inhaled Sin’s intoxicating scent clinging to the sheets, pieces of last night returned to me. But the *reason* I’d gotten so drunk hit the hardest.

Innes.

I sat up and glanced around, only to realize Sin wasn’t here. On my bedside table was a drink. A tonic, really—purple, the consistency of mud, and clearly meant to cure my hangover. I forced it down and cocooned myself in the blankets for a few minutes more, waiting for him.

Waiting...

And waiting.

“Huh.”

After what Laisrés had said—Sin went somewhere late last night—I was curious.

...I expect he’s preparing himself for the fête.

Irian stood in the corner by the door, silent and ominous. Not quite the company I wanted, but the Sluagh could bring me *where* I wanted. I slipped on whatever clothes I could find then crossed the room and held out my hand.

“Take me to him, Irian.”

With the horn around my neck, the Sluagh wouldn’t deny my request. So

up and away we went.

I shivered as we reached solid ground, and shouting instantly filled my ears.

“Anyone with eyes could see it, Sin!”

Devlin.

“Are you really lecturing me?” Sin. *“Thane says you got so sloshed last night you couldn’t form two words.”*

Irian’s wings uncurled around me.

“Leave me out of this,” Thane interrupted. Other than a hoarse voice, he didn’t look hungover at all.

I stood tall and stayed quiet, but Sin’s gaze snapped to mine immediately. He *felt* my presence as I always did his.

“Together you and Sersa are an unbeatable weapon!” Devlin shouted.

The sleep left my limbs, replaced by a new, anxious alertness. My gut spun. Or maybe it was the mead settled at the bottom of it.

“What’s going on?” I demanded, taking a step forward.

Shock crossed Devlin’s face. When Thane scrambled to his feet off the sand, I realized Irian had brought me to the rendezvous point.

In only a matter of days, the moons had lost their luminosity, and the wind had sharpened. Halfway across the sky was now pitch-black.

The Dark officially started in just over a day.

“*Sersa!*” Devlin called. Sin tried to hold him back when he started toward me, but the prince tore his arm free. “I need to speak with you! Sin—he can transfer energy through the soul shard.”

I blinked up at Devlin as he halted and squared his shoulders with mine.

Maybe the sleep had left my limbs, but my brain couldn’t quite keep up.

Devlin took my hands in his. “In case it is not abundantly clear, tomorrow Jestin will try to steal the Daemon Throne. By any means necessary. Whether it be killing Niuna. Ciel. Me. *You*,” he added, glaring over his shoulder at his brother. “He will let nothing stand in his way after his attempts have failed repeatedly.”

Thane sighed as he hovered nearby, his hands on his hips. From my peripheral, Sin clenched his teeth harder.

“I meant it when I told you I can’t protect Ciel. I have lost too much, and I *cannot* lose him too. As a bound pair, you—”

“Devlin.”

The prince disregarded the warning in Sin’s voice. “Your colors are an

incredible weapon, Sersa. It is better to *choose* your fate here and now than to let Jestin win and mold you into whatever serves him. Tomorrow—your *choice* could determine the outcome of the night.”

“A weapon,” I echoed.

My colors *were* powerful, but they were also defiant.

Fear tainted my gut as I met Sin’s gaze and recalled our conversation.

Theoretically, you may be able to tap into my blood—or at least my strength...

But if Sin could funnel me his strength through my soul shard, he could also take *from* me. Couldn’t he?

Then maybe Jestin can.

Doubt found its voice inside me, quiet at first and in the form of Laisrés’s latest taunt.

His religion might as well be omission...

Though Nessin claimed my proximity healing him wasn’t the reason he wanted me, something inside me *screamed* that it might be a factor.

Anger flooded me. More than anger—it was mistrust. Resentment. Stolen memories and lies burrowing under my skin and into the iced-over cavity of my chest.

For once, Sin didn’t refute my thoughts either.

So I bit my tongue and nodded, pulling my hands from Devlin’s. They shook at my sides, forming fists. “What do I need to do?”

“Sersa—” Sin started.

“*What* do I need to do?” I repeated without looking his way.

“Thank you. Listen to Sin,” Devlin whispered. He squeezed my shoulders. “Please.”

I closed my eyes and blew out a heavy breath.

“We will let you... Yeah, we’ll just be going,” Thane said, tugging Devlin away until they disappeared with the Sluagh.

Sin clasped his hands behind his back, and it wasn’t lost on me that he was wearing gloves this morning.

I turned his way. “How does this work?”

“You just woke up, Sersa. We can try it later.”

“We try it *now*. Or we don’t try it at all.”

Teeth gritted, Sin studied me with the coldest of eyes that ignited my doubts even worse.

“As Dev said, I want to see if you can tap into my blood and strength

through our—through the shard,” he said.

“Which is it, Sin—you want to strengthen me, or you want me to restore and strengthen *you*?”

“I want you because you’re you,” Sin whispered.

He strode forward to close the distance between us.

“Yet you knew all along you could take from me,” I said, pointblank.

“Yes. I have no need or desire to do so though.”

I closed my eyes. Took the deepest of breaths. Cleared my mind.

Nothing worked.

As the sea propelled a headwind in our direction, it carried with it the briny scent of the sea. A chill whipped up my spine, but the gust failed to cool my worries.

“Dev shouldn’t have brought it up. You are strong enough without me, Sersa.”

I scoffed.

“I’m *serious*.”

Perceptive eyes studied me too close for comfort, reminding me of the night before. Though my memory was less than fully lucid, I *was* fully aware I’d called myself his wife and consciously told Sin I loved him. And now... I hated these doubts constantly creeping back up on me. We held each other’s gazes with such intensity, it felt like lightning between us.

“Everything that has happened—it’s too much for a person to process,” I said, looking down the beach. “You have no idea where Bardca is. Jestin is commanding beings that should listen *only* to you. Innes. Last night. *Tomorrow*. And now I’m a weapon?”

“It is too much,” Sin agreed. “If you like...we can pretend you did not admit to certain things.”

“I don’t *want* to pretend anymore.”

I couldn’t keep clinging to the safety of the things I’d told myself on Nos Nua. I had to face the reality we lived in head-on and discard the fabrications once and for all. Not just of Sin and me but of Aislinn too. Without magic of her own, she could never give Sin such power. Maybe he’d always wanted *her*, but he wanted his blood and that power more.

Innes’s taunts—the daemon’s—echoed inside me, so unbearably loud my head whirled.

Your love will fade too. Love is never real...

The thought alone made my chest feel tight and my mouth dry. The rest

of my body responded by breaking out in a sweat. I felt feverish, ready to submerge myself in the Wraithsea if it meant relief from these doubts and fears.

I swallowed. “Can you just show me how it works?”

I swore Sin’s nostrils flared, but he spun on his heel before I could be sure. He kicked off his boots then led me toward the glistening water, where the wraiths skulked with watchful eyes, creating soft ripples on the surface.

Gigantic waves toppled one another in the distance. The horizon felt like the end of the world from here, both of us waiting for it to reach us maybe.

“After I came into my blood as a child, I had to shift a few times a day,” Sin started. “Every part of my body ached if I did not. The energy it takes to harness a shift is overwhelming to contain and suppress. There is an excess of it—what feels like an endless source and pressure akin to the sea. Loch was the same due to his Colossi blood, but mine came on more forcefully because it was delayed. My mum would hide me away for a few minutes and let me cry like a babe whenever the pain became too much.”

I tried to picture Sin feeling safe enough to be vulnerable. Even if he had been a little boy.

His throat worked in a swallow. “I realized in the river the other day that your blood has taken on a form. Almost like an eel or a thunderbolt. Yet it was the eel I initially thought of because of their ability to shock their prey. The way your blood moves, it *strikes*, Sersa. I want to see what happens when you give it more energy to feed off, and I want to be that current. Perhaps it will come out of hiding when *you* want it to.”

He’d given this thought. Me—as a weapon.

“Shouldn’t you save all your strength for tomorrow?”

“The source is endless,” Sin repeated then pulled off his loose shirt. “Which is why I said I do not want *yours*. Try to take from me. Just try.”

I failed to divert my gaze from his bare skin. The glamour in the torc concealed the curse, but all his scars from the Sluagh were on full display. No matter what Sin claimed, the curse *could* be the reason he wanted to test this exchange.

“I want to let you in—in my head fully, love. Please trust *me* to try *this*?”

Swallowing my fear and uncertainty, I nodded.

Without warning, Sin swung me around onto his back. I held on tight as he turned his head to the side, and I couldn’t stop myself from capturing his lips. My kiss was a plea. If Sin was lying, I’d break again.

His tongue slid against mine, his marked fingers squeezing my hand around his neck.

I pulled away right as the pink circled my fingertips, reassuring me momentarily that this was real. That his intentions were pure.

“Don’t let go,” Sin rasped out.

I halfway expected him to shift into Colossi form—something I had yet to see—but he carried me shin-deep into the sea instead.

“Ready?” he asked.

“I think so...”

Sin took a deliberate half-step.

The force of his body cleared a path straight through the water. The vibration that shot up his calf and thigh—all the way up his body until it reached me—caressed my spine like a purr.

My mouth fell open in utter shock when the sea refilled the small trench he’d made. Somehow, the waves didn’t come back for us. They created determined undulations in the distance.

“*Nessin.*” I waited for the sea to calm, but his energy truly created a ripple effect. “You are *definitely* holding back in bed.”

His tortured groan vibrated within me. “Please tell me you are still sloshed.”

“No, but I woke up feeling deprived.”

“I will fix that later if you let me. If you still trust me. This time I am going to flood the soul shard—on a smaller scale.”

I matched my breaths to his as he focused once more.

The shard hummed a few times, but otherwise nothing happened.

Sin looked uncomfortable after not succeeding the first time, but he gritted his teeth and restarted.

Nothing.

“I feel you there,” I said. “Keep trying.”

Attempt after repeated attempt, I felt nothing.

Finally, he let me down and positioned me in front of him, flattening my palms on his chest. Sin held my wrists in place as he directed all his focus to where we touched.

The minutes drained, and nothing more than quivers like the strings of an instrument being softly plucked reached me.

Sin rumbled in frustration as he raked his ringed hand through his hair. “I should be able to do this. This was the *one* thing Bardca was certain I could

do for you. Fuck!”

I wasn't so sure any certainties existed anymore.

I fumbled my lip with my teeth. “Maybe you're too guarded?”

He snickered weakly. “Perhaps. But being guarded is not something you snap out of. It takes time, an alteration of one's thinking.”

It explained Sin perfectly. He was trying, but this was who he was—walls built up around him and all.

He clasped his hands behind his head and studied the waves. The moments passed in silence, but I welcomed the calmness of the sea straight ahead.

Peeking at me in his peripheral, Sin lowered onto the damp sand. He kept a space between his legs and patted the ground. “I have a memory I want to show you.”

“Do you think that would help?”

“No idea,” he replied.

While some part of me wanted all his memories of us, another part worried that the beautiful and whole couple we were *before* would shine too much light on what we'd become.

I didn't know whose walls stood taller, but I knew what would lower them momentarily.

“I have a better idea.”

I startled Sin when I pushed him backward. He caught himself with one hand pressed to the sand behind him. His eyes tracked my every movement as I planted a slow kiss on his chest. Above his navel as all his muscles contracted. Along his waistband.

“*Godsdamn.*”

“Focus on how it *feels*,” I said.

“Fucking amazing?” Sin yanked me on top of him.

But before he could crush our lips together, I skimmed his jaw and held him in place, our faces mere inches apart.

His breath hung in the air, stifled, waiting with parted lips. His gaze flicked up to mine. In that look was my reassurance yet again.

Sin waited for my word, my order.

“Prove to me—*show me* I can trust you, and that our handfasting was real.”

A flash of images flooded me at once, but I gripped his chin harder.

“*No.*”

Sin licked his lips. “What do you want, Sersa? Tell me.”

“I want to see the colors you felt in that moment.”

“You know I can’t—”

“But you *can* convey the emotions you experienced,” I said. They’d translate. “Pretty words mean so little to me. So show me it was *always* me. That it has never been about power for you.”

Sin cupped my cheek to pull me forward until my forehead touched his.

A crushing, overpowering wave closed in on me. Tears sprang to my eyes, and I wrapped my arms around his neck to avoid falling. He couldn’t help but show me flashes of our wedding, glimpses of me from across the ballroom, but my colors washed them in the equivalent of *his* emotions until they were all I saw.

Something jolted me, as unexpected as it was strong. My entire body stiffened as heat that had nothing to do with our position built inside me.

There was something else—an unseen yet unsurmountable pressure on my shoulders.

“*Sersa*,” Sin whispered, pulling back from me.

When I snapped my eyes open, the soft light glowing beneath his chin told me everything.

Still holding his face, I looked over my shoulder. Like the reflection on his pale hair and skin, the sea *glowed* from horizon to horizon. Every which way I looked.

And it glowed pink.

Sin swallowed, unable to stop his smile. “It *worked*. You took from me. I knew you could, love.”

“I—”

I choked on my words when the energy he’d given me landed on my back. My lungs and throat felt like compressed pipes under too much pressure. Ready to burst.

The thought that Sin walked with this weight *every day* made me dizzy.

“What do I do?” I stammered. “How do I get rid of it? Sin—”

“*Breathe*.”

“Take it back.” This weight would kill me. “Please. Take it back!”

“I know it’s a lot. You can handle it, love. You’re strong. Breathe with me. Like we’ve done before.” Sin held me tight. “Count with me. One.”

“O-One,” I echoed.

“Perfect. Two.”

I licked my lips. “Two.”

“Three,” we said together.

As the minutes passed, my constricted ribcage slowly loosened like the ties of a dress being slashed open.

I tried to picture Sin as a child, accepting and carrying this weight with him every day.

“That’s it,” he whispered when my lungs finally didn’t feel like I was breathing underwater through a hollowed twig. “*Dúm.*”

“What’s wrong?” I said, still frantic.

But Sin looked so at ease for once, his eyes closed. “Having you take from me feels good—incredible, actually. Sorry. I know it’s a lot.”

A lot did not begin to explain it.

I licked my lips and asked, “In what way?”

“I am not sure.” He took a final inhale then opened his eyes. “Sort of like I’m not alone.”

The thought of Sin feeling sequestered with his blood hurt my heart, especially when I’d felt that way too many times to count.

“You are *never* alone, Nessin.”

He smiled. “And you are so much stronger than you know, Sersa. Believe that if you won’t believe my words.”

“Okay... But I doubt Jestin will be impressed if *this* is my only parlor trick.”

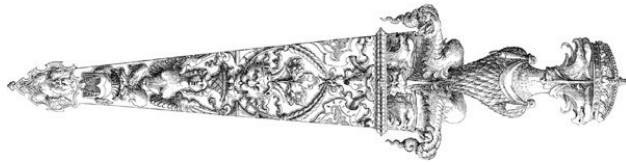
“We don’t need to impress him—just kill him,” Sin said.

I turned to rest against his chest. The discolored sea, covered in rosewater eels amidst the clouds, mesmerized me. But while the pale hue was breathtaking, I didn’t believe it could destroy our enemies.

I also questioned Sin’s claim that my unyielding soul shard refused to release him. As much as I *despised* these fabricated thoughts—and had no fucking proof they were true—I’d be a fool if I ignored one simple fact.

The best way for Sin to keep me from being Jestin’s was to keep me as *his*.

Serena



THOUGH I WASN'T HOME, I *FELT* LIKE I WAS WHEN THE SLUAGH BROUGHT US to Nos Ovscura the following day. The Daemon King's Citadel and the city behind it didn't allow me a glimpse of Os Íseal, but I found I didn't miss it all that much. It would be so easy to order Irian to bring me across the sea to the misty shore, to spend a night sharing tales of my time in the Soullands thus far with Ma. If only my soul were whole, and my clan hadn't treated me like I was mad.

Being back here, a sense of relief—like I stood on the right side of the demolished bridge—eased the knot in my belly.

As Sin led me to the cobbled path from the docks, the citadel looked as daunting as ever. Black spiral towers pierced the clouds, and the exterior gleamed even under a cloudy sky. We reached the marble steps and the vast porch behind the citadel quickly, so I didn't have to relive my last moments on this shore very long.

Inside it was exactly as I remembered—black-and-gold corridors dripping with a myriad of priceless artifacts. Torcs like the ones Sin wore. Bejeweled spears and swords. Impressive weapons from other eras that were miraculously not crumbling with age.

We reached the throne room, where Sin held open a panel that served as a door.

“There’s a shortcut to our new chambers this way.”

I didn’t think I could stay in a place where the Old King had slept. Lived. Worse things.

“Not *his* room,” Sin reassured me. “I had our old room expanded and redone.”

“Thank gods,” I said under my breath. Then I followed in silence the entire walk.

The redone chambers matched the rest of the citadel’s dark décor, yet somehow didn’t feel suffocating. Apart from a partitioned room in the corner, the open space also had few crevices to hide.

Dúma sniffed around, familiarizing herself like I was. Minus the sniffing.

Glossy black floors stretched throughout, flecks in them glimmering like stars, and a skylight spilled moonlight onto silk bedding. A patterned rug enclosed the sitting area beside the fireplace, creating the illusion of separation from the open bathing room. Sitting in the entryway, a round table displayed a vase of white fireblooms, periodically spitting a mouthful of sparks at the air.

Craning my neck, I glimpsed the closet, spilling over with garments of the finest material and make—most of which appeared to be for me. A desk sat in a corner of the room, currently covered in weapons and maps.

Sin’s old bed was one of the few constants. It sat atop a circular dais, elevated by a bullseye of three stairs and a nightstand on both sides.

I swallowed as I looked away, unable to stop the swarming fabrications of Aislinn and Sin in it. The very bed the gods-damned Circle of Gilders had torn our sheets from like some flag of war against me for being with Nessin when he was *my* husband.

He’d always been my husband, not hers.

Taking from Sin yesterday had felt both good and bad. His strength seemed to fuel not only me but the fabrications too. The doubt had fed on me during the sleepless bells last night, expanding too much to be ignored each time I woke with Aislinn’s face in my mind.

Considering the fact Sin potentially saw me as a *weapon* only added to it. I kneaded my palms into my eyes, willing the negativity to flee.

Nessin Drumghoul loved *me*. He *chose* me, and he’d only ever wanted me to be his queen.

So why did my mind feel so...muddled? I didn’t understand why all this turmoil kept stirring up inside me instead of just *settling* once and for all. But

I'd tried enough times to know you couldn't simply shut off your thoughts.

Wavering between comforting me and giving me space, Sin kept his distance. Until he just *couldn't*.

"Feel free to push me away," he whispered, "but you are the only person I have ever had in that bed, Sersa. There is only us. There's only ever been us."

"Hold me tight for a second. Don't ask questions," I added when he hesitated.

As Sin stood behind me and wrapped his arms around my shoulders, his proximity snuffed out every doubt like smoke dispersing. I craved his warmth and scent akin to a fire burning on the coldest of nights—those tangible things my mind hadn't managed to bottle up and relive.

The thought of losing Sin tonight urged me to just *be*. Here. With him. The fabrications seemed to live and breathe like my magic, *refusing* to let me go without a fight.

"Can you call me love?" I whispered.

I expected him to laugh or smile at the very least, but his heaving chest evened out and his breaths slowed.

"Yes, love."

The tighter Sin wrapped his arms around me, the better I felt. I breathed deep—breathed in his scent, his presence.

"No pressure if you want to sleep separately. There's a room right through there." He nodded at the far wall, where double doors hung open without revealing the room's contents. "There's no window or terrace for security purposes, but you can always have our bed and I'll take the settee if you feel too confined."

I looked over my shoulder at him. "That was thoughtful. But we slept apart long enough."

He nodded curtly.

Claud entered the room unannounced, carrying a black dress with too many layers. Long sleeves. Too constricting. The couturier looked as stylish as the day we'd met, his teal suit gleaming in the firelight and his dark braids coiled into a bun on top of his head.

"Your Darknesses," he said with a bow.

Smiling incredulously, I glanced back at Sin.

"We share a title—like His *Highness*, Her *Highness*," he explained. "Unless you care to adopt one of your own."

"The King's Whore is my personal favorite," I said sarcastically.

Sin raised his eyebrows.

“Claud?” he called without breaking our eye contact. “While I am certain whatever you designed is lovely, Sersa won’t be wearing it tonight. Perhaps another evening.”

He stopped abruptly and blinked, tilting his head like Sin had relieved him of all duties for the next century. Then he ripped off the measuring tape around his neck like a whip.

“Please pull out the First Queen’s wardrobe for her instead.”

“Oh.” Claud’s eyes widened. “I have been waiting centuries!” he shouted, disappearing into the closet.

My curiosity peaked.

“You’re a True Queen,” Sin reminded me. “Choose whatever you like from the First Queen’s collection. Or anything else in the closet. Claud designed or curated it all specifically for you.”

Instantly, I missed Sin’s touch when he released me, and my thoughts drifted back to why he’d been holding me in the first place.

Aislinn.

If he’d known I was thinking of her, the soul shard truly sieved nothing.

Surely, my mind was a complex place, swarming with thousands of things at once. Tonight especially.

Paranoia unfurled inside me.

It didn’t matter.

Then why was Laisrés in your thoughts the other night?

I ousted those voices in my head at once.

Tonight wasn’t the night to focus on Aislinn. And certainly not the half god who was truly becoming a patch of overgrown thorns among the god-damned roses Sin and I were trying to regrow.



Not only did I escape the heavy dress Claud designed for the night, but I didn’t wear a dress at all.

I wore armor.

It likely hadn’t been touched since the First Queen, and while it was less for battle than fashion, the sleek design evoked in me a profound internal

strength. As if I truly belonged beside the Daemon King.

The material shimmered like black fish scales, and the top of my two-piece ensemble was form-fitted yet breathable, with short sleeves and a high neckline. The hem cut off just below my ribs, and a long skirt made of the same linked scales skimmed the floor. Slits up the sides of my legs allowed me to move—and to hide a dainty dagger on the inside of my thigh.

Draea and Ailerby-Innes had smudged kohl around my eyes, painted my lips vibrant red, and plaited my hair into a thick braid adorned with metal flowers. Though my metal bracelets were flashy, adorning the back of my hands in sharp points, they were every bit necessary.

I felt like being flashy tonight, like perplexing and enraging the Gilders when I made my first appearance as Daemon Queen.

Sin's only *queen*, I reminded myself.

It was probably unhealthy to fixate on deposing Aislinn when there was no reason. And yet, I fixated.

I slipped the gilded horn on, hiding it beneath my top. The three safehouse stones clinked together in reminder that I might as well toss the snowflake one.

Arms folded across his chest, Sin leaned against a dark marble support enclosing the closet space, watching me in the full-length mirror. He tilted his head as he studied me, but his expression gave nothing away.

Instead of wearing a coat, Claud had coordinated Sin's attire to mine. When the couturier found nothing suitable in our closet, he'd fashioned a matching, sleeveless black shirt from a handful of other items on the spot, adorning the shoulders with pointed metal pieces and the chest and flanks with gleaming metal.

Though Sin's clothes always fit him perfectly, I wasn't used to seeing his tapered waist and corded arms on full display.

He headed into the main room and returned a moment later, holding a sturdy metal box. My heart raced when Sin flipped it open to reveal a crown of curved metal horns. Similar to his, they stretched backward slightly, and the front gathered downward to form a widow's peak.

Under the faint torchlight glimmering around us, shadows danced along the crown's polished grooves and curves.

"This was my mum's. Though it originally belonged to the First Queen too."

"Did she not grow horns?" I asked. "I thought she was a Drumghoul by

blood.”

“She was. When Queen Raielina’s adversaries captured her, they severed her horns. She refused to show them weakness after, so she had it made. Bardca says she rode into many battles wearing this crown.”

“How do you have all this?”

“Bardca.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Then he kept everything after she died?”

“For a time, yes. Until he gifted them to my mum. My father ripped this crown off her head the one time she wore it. She was pregnant with me, ironically. According to Bardca.”

I pictured Queen Niuna. Her white hair pouring down her back. Defiance in her eyes. This crown stretching high above her as she stood tall and faced the Old King, day after day and night after night.

“She was clearly very strong to be with him all that time.”

“She was,” Sin agreed in an even voice. Though I swore his intense expression looked tinged with blue.

I raised onto my tiptoes to kiss him but couldn’t hide my surprise when he gave me his cheek at the last second.

“Are we sure the crown isn’t cursed?” I asked, steeling my voice.

“You think I would place it on your head if I was not absolutely certain? Bardca tested it extensively.”

“Under my nose at the parish?”

“Yes,” Sin said.

His curt answer had me chewing on the inside of my cheek.

“Do I not get a torc?” I asked.

Sin pointed behind me.

I turned to see a carved wooden box sitting on top of a dresser. On the face were the initials SSD.

Sersa Scáth Drumghoul.

A hellhound head stared back at me, burned into the wood as a backdrop to those initials.

“Hopefully you don’t mind.” Sin shoved his hands in his pockets as he prowled toward me.

“Hmm. This seems like a trap for me to admit something, Nessin.”

“Not at all. I told you—your blood speaks for you. Your words are merely an...added reassurance.”

I traced the letters with my fingers and looked at him before lifting the

lid. Hellhounds were also soldered onto the torc's ends, where it opened to slip around my neck.

"Bardca made this too?" I asked, unable to detect the emotion behind Sin's steady white gaze.

"Another Druid," he said. "Do you like it?"

Our torcs were almost identical. Only with mine, both hounds wore a collar of hawthorn flowers.

I smiled. "I love it."

"I consulted Dúma." Sin winked. Still, no amusement or mischief reached the rest of his face. "Plus, I had a hellhound when I was a boy. I have a soft spot for them."

"You, a soft spot?" I jested. "I thought they were immortal."

"He died protecting me from Gearóid," Sin said with a shake of his head. Maybe an attempt to shake the images from his thoughts.

As I recalled the Old King's threats toward Dúma, I bit my lip to stop the frown from spreading to the rest of my face.

I squeezed Sin's wrist, seeking a small comfort I couldn't seem to grasp.

"You are strong to have dealt with him for so long too, Sin." His eyes flicked down to mine. "If you ever need to talk about him or anything else, I'm here. Even if we're fighting."

"I prefer to call it disagreeing," Sin corrected.

I nodded. "Will you put on my torc?"

He took the box back. "A Druid will bless it once we reach the crypts. I'll carry it with me."

"The crypt? Am I being sacrificed to Grandma Riona?"

"The Kingstone is down there. We must step onto it first. Together." Sin straightened, his shadow eclipsing me in the flickering torchlight. "Legend says the stone used to speak to the rightful king or queen when they stepped onto it. It hasn't spoken in millennia though," he said, nudging my metal-adorned fishtail over my shoulder.

"And you—did it speak to you?"

He pursed his lips. "I have yet to step onto it. I was waiting for you."

Sin didn't need to mention Aislinn's name.

I closed my eyes, willing the tightness in my belly and chest to ease.

"The Circle will not be present for the Silent Rite, only the fête. They don't know you're here. This is between us, the Druids, and supposedly," he said, "the deities."

I smiled at the way he flourished the word, his eyes widening theatrically. But most of the night would be theatrics.

“We’ll also choose our patron deity tonight,” Sin added. “Whichever we choose dictates the events of our reign. Supposedly.”

“Do you buy that?” I asked.

“Of course not. I believe *we* are in charge of our own destinies. But it is a rite, and thus, I will abide by the traditions of our kin.”

It sounded like our visit to the parish on Hwain last year—when we chose between objects that represented each member of the High Triad.

“Although I have neither partaken in the Silent Rite nor witnessed it before, I’ve read a great deal about it. I will guide you through it as best I can. It’s called the Silent Rite for a reason. No talking.”

“Huh. Good thing I have you.”

“Good thing,” he echoed. “Any favorite deities I should know about before we head out?”

Crows flashed behind my eyes, and Sin’s tapered.

“You know me,” I said, uncertain *why* those images came to mind. “A real devout worshiper.”

“Mm hmm.”

Sin’s energy pulsed in the air as he lifted the crown from its box and offered it to me. I weighed the sturdy horns in my hands.

“You won’t crown me in front of the Druids?”

“You are already Daemon Queen, Sersa. I am merely the daemon who stands behind you, and this is merely a formality.”

He was talking pleasantly enough but something was...*off*.

“*Merely*.” I took a step forward. “You stand beside me, never behind. As I stand beside you.”

“You know I want nothing more,” Sin said in a low voice. “Now crown yourself, Queen. We have the gods to frighten and the Court of Soulless to put in their place.”



As we walked through the citadel, the black tendrils snaked along the floor, slithering around my feet.

The closer I watched them, the more I agreed with Sin's assessment that they looked like eels or slow-motion lightning strikes. The color not only signified my fear, but after being plagued by the red for moons, it was clear the black moved differently too. *Cautiously.*

Wherever that fear stemmed from, I wouldn't let it steer the course of my thoughts tonight. Instead, I clung to Ma's last words to me.

You were born to be queen. Of one world or another.

Never did I think that world would be the Soullands, but standing alongside Sin, I felt certain.

He startled me when his lips brushed my cheek.

"You are radiant, Sersa."

Another cheek kiss.

Yet the compliment only made me question things more. I tried to shake my paranoia off, but my focus strangely darted back to it.

Only our loved ones awaited us near the entrance to the crypts. Sin had positioned a horde of Sluagh at every entrance, barring the Gilders from entering the citadel until the Silent Rite began. Still, sounds of their celebrations around the Eye seeped through the walls.

Ciel looped his arm through Devlin's, and Niuna beamed beside them. A few feet away, Ailerby winked as he stood tall, tugging on his velvet lapels that matched the regal bow around Dúma's neck. I was willing to bet he'd hidden a change of Innes's clothes somewhere nearby.

And Laisrés was...*Laisrés*. Looking godlike in his typical ensemble of green—so dark it almost appeared black.

"Thane is missing," I realized. And immediately thought of Innes.

Brow furrowing, Sin looked up and down the corridor twice. "No." He seemed distant for a moment. "He can't get to her. Only I can."

On cue, a Sluagh at the end of the corridor disappeared. I shuddered, knowing Sin had directed it in search of Thane.

His white eyes dropped to mine. "The Druidess and the stone await. Thane can't have gone far. We'll see him after."



As was tradition, Sin and I navigated the echoic crypts alone, save for the

Sluagh surrounding us on all sides. Each carried a glimmering blue torch in taloned hands to light the way, yet I still couldn't see a damn thing in the near pitch-black passage.

My body broke out in chills, confirming I'd worn too little clothes to be so far underground. But more than the temperature disturbed me. The eerie crypts charged every inch of my skin. Forces I didn't want to face the existence of seemed to lurk down here, unseen to the eye yet tangible all the same. The heavy air pressed in on me, and the distinct scent of age tainted the wide passage.

"My ancestors built the citadel around the Kingstone. But it wasn't always here," Sin explained. "During a war between the deities, they say a woman cried over her fallen lover until her tears created the seas and eroded the stone. It not only resurrected him when she set him on it, but the stone also declared him king. The war ended, the deities eventually retreated from these lands, and they were forced to leave the Kingstone behind as it was part of the earth. After that, it spoke only to those who were not necessarily of royal blood but *worthy* of ruling."

I'd never heard the tale before, but it was a welcome distraction.

"We are almost there. Just to the end," he added.

A few minutes later, an enormous stone door in the shape of a man came into view.

A Colossi.

Even from a few hundred feet away, I had to tip my head back to see the top of the door. Unlike the rest of the passage, torches protruded from the stone wall like the spokes of a crown, illuminating his head in a half-moon of soft blue light. Down the sides of his neck, shoulders, and arms, the mosaic Colossi's carved face and highly detailed clothes glowed.

"That is the first Daemon King," Sin said. "Not the First Queen's husband, but the very first, who Grandma Riona pierced the chest of. Erris the Great, full-blooded Colossi."

Grandma Riona pierced the chest of a giant.

That was unbelievable.

Looking like an insect with the Colossi in the background, a middle-aged Druidess in white robes stood outside the entrance. Her bell sleeves dangled almost to the floor and hid her hands, clasped in front of her. Tawny hair streaked with gray had been neatly braided for the rite and, like mine, adorned with hawthorn flowers. Though hers were real.

A stone basin resembling a small fountain filled with blood stood to her left.

“Welcome, Your Darknesses,” she said in a commanding voice. “Unless you wish to speak a word to the gods before we enter, let the silence commence.”

My gut dropped when the Sluagh’s torches extinguished behind us.

While I flinched and looked around, Sin stood firm. He led me to the basin of blood, where all rites and worship of the High Triad began. Whispers of air in the darkness warned me this was the *only* time I wouldn’t feel out of my element tonight.

“You have something to bind your hands, yes?” the Druidess asked.

The muscles in Sin’s arm hardened and moved distractingly as he pulled a familiar object from his back pocket.

Our handfasting cord.

One side of his lips curled ever so slightly as our eyes locked, his gaze stirring my emotions in dizzying swirls. He flipped his palm over, taking one end of the cord.

The Druidess gestured.

Your left forearm. On top of mine, Sin instructed.

Suddenly, having him in my head was a comfort.

With a swallow, I flattened my arm palm-down against his. Whereas Sin’s forearm practically swallowed mine, my fingertips barely brushed the middle of his. Warm skin cooled my nerves momentarily, and the pads of my fingertips reflexively held on tight.

The Druidess wound the cord around our arms.

My throat felt thick with emotion as *his* memories of our handfasting flashed before my eyes.

Tonight meant so much more than our wedding—for me, at least, because I hadn’t known our history back then. Surely, this moment elicited all the feelings Sin had hidden from me the day we’d wed.

I could only imagine what he’d done to refrain *and* restrain himself that night.

I took a long shower before bed if you recall.

Determined not to break focus in front of the Druidess, I choked back a laugh. I was eternally grateful for Sin’s distractions from the nerves suddenly creeping up on me.

The moment turned serious once more, and the ominous Daemon King

returned in full, ready to face the gods he equaled in all ways. Likewise, all the mirth seeped from my body.

I bit my lip until the cord completely wrapped our forearms, binding us as one. Then the Druidess silently gestured for us to dot three drops of blood on each other's faces with our unrestricted hands.

Sin went first, his finger gently brushing my forehead. One cheek. The other. I mimicked his movements. Against his pale coloring, the red drops glimmered brightly.

A never-ending line of indigo fire suddenly reignited both sides of the passage behind us as far as the eye could see.

Instantly, I broke out in a sweat.

I looked at the Druidess.

"The gods are present tonight," she said. "They await us inside."

She waved her arm, and then the Colossi slid apart with deafening sounds of grinding stone to reveal the chamber.

SIN



MY SLUAGH WERE IN POSITION.

I relied on seven cords tonight, all similar to the Binding that Sersa and I shared. Just *seven* Sluagh I needed to direct, and those directives branched outward like a tree.

Aware that it was time, I tugged on the cords.

Open the doors.

With my blood returned, I had full control tonight. Not only of the Sluagh, I hoped, but of the night itself. Yet Jestin had proven his intelligence, and I couldn't overlook the fact that he might be among the Gilders outside the citadel this very moment.

Sersa had not realized that *I* was responsible for tinting her blood black. First when the Scrounger revealed itself and again tonight. It was news to me I *could* influence her colors at all, despite the success of transferring her my energy.

Doubt expanded in my core as if my Colossi form were trapped, trying to push outward and burst my ribcage from the inside out.

What if *I* fucking marked myself pink?

Reflexively, my gaze shot to the paint.

Tonight is not about me, I reminded myself—the sole reason I bit my tongue when Laisrés entered her thoughts earlier.

Sersa squeezed my arm like a python as we entered Erris's Chamber. I answered by stroking her skin. Though she didn't fear what awaited us in the chamber, she fathomed the seriousness of the moment. For moons, I had repeatedly put off the Circle's requests to swear Aislinn in because I needed my True Queen beside me for this moment.

Never had I been more serious than when I told Sersa she was it for me. Either we mended our union and she served as Daemon Queen alongside me, or I would live with the knowledge that she preferred to carry on with her life in the mortal lands.

That she was *okay* without me.

Because she could choose another. I could not. Would not.

Even Laisrés. She could have him if she wanted.

The thought alone weighed as much as the door that slammed shut behind us.

As if hewn from an enormous rock, the floor dipped toward the center of the chamber. Eternphire—gemstones harnessing the Eternal Flame—illuminated the perimeter, guttering across Sersa's cheekbones and the hundreds of scales comprising her armor. Her porcelain skin and red lips reflected a blue tint.

In the back of my mind, I sensed the Gilders flooding the corridors under the Sluagh's guidance.

Keep them moving, I ordered as I rubbed my rings together in habit.

Sersa stole a glance at me from the corner of her eye, her thoughts suddenly buzzing with endless questions.

Why was I looking at her like that?

What did I look like in Colossi form?

What god did I want to select tonight?

A single name cut through it all.

Laisrés.

I fought to keep my face indifferent.

That fuck got under my skin like his crow tattoos—to the point where a mere *mention* of his name incensed me. Of course, I knew what he'd said to Sersa two nights ago. After I warned him to keep her name out of his mouth, at that.

Numerous times I'd warned *her* how strong the Binding was.

The other night, I'd checked on her at either the most opportune—or *inopportune*—time. Right as Laisrés's muffled comment whipped through my mind without warning.

It had evoked a perplexing feeling. More than that, the curiosity Sersa experienced filtered through our Binding—an almost synthetic sentiment.

Like a fabrication.

Before I could grasp why he crossed her mind, his face dispersed like smoke. My nostrils flared, and I averted my gaze from my queen.

Once again I was forced to let the matter rest when we reached the upright stone at the center of the chamber.

Hundreds of ancient runes carved the face of the glassy black stone we stood before. It reached to about my height. Yet the bottom appeared to have melted like molten lava fingers extending toward the room's perimeter before it froze. When the Druidess gestured us over, I noted how careful she was not to step on the patch connected to the center stone.

Ready? I asked Sersa.

Having my voice in her head now brought her solace. She nodded imperceptibly.

Then we took our first step together, arm in arm with our hands bound.

I plucked at the cords connected to my Sluagh—nearly finished herding the Gilders. Through them, I sensed the Circle. They were finding their seats at the crescent-shaped table facing the front of the greenhouse, where our thrones stood imposingly.

Good.

I refocused.

A line of bowls filled with tributes to the deities sat elevated on a waist-height wall that curved with the stone's edge. Objects representing each member of the pantheon filled those bowls, including sunstones, teeth, and hawthorn flowers to represent the High Triad.

The Druidess placed our bound hands on the stone then signaled for us to shut our eyes with a wave over our faces.

The very instant we did, a clatter startled Sersa.

Reverberations ran through her, magnifying my own sensations along the Binding.

Snapping my eyes open, I glared around the room. The Druidess stood nowhere near the short wall though—and nowhere near what had toppled off it.

A clay bowl of black feathers spun on its butt three times before it stopped abruptly and broke apart with slow-forming cracks. And from that bowl, a single feather twirled through the air.

It landed between our feet.

Like all other Daemon Queens and Kings before us, the Kingstone wouldn't speak to us. But *unlike* all others, the opportunity to choose was fucking thieved from us. This was the Mórrígan herself.

“We—”

The Druidess hushed Sersa, making me grit my teeth. My queen's midnight eyes sharpened into a glare.

“The Mórrígan has spoken.” Her voice echoed through the chamber in a message to all other gods. A warning we resided under the Mórrígan's wing as of tonight—in her clutches rather than open, protective arms.

Sersa's thoughts aligned perfectly with mine.

Laisrés.

Laisrés.

LAISRÉS.

The time for denial had passed. He might have saved Sersa from the Dreither—perhaps out of guilt or to cover his tracks—but he was nothing fucking more than his mother's messenger.

Her message was clear.

Over the centuries, the goddess of war periodically called upon me. And tonight, at the official start of our reign, Maris Crónan—a goddess known by many names, the Mórrígan among them—had come here to claim our life and mark it in destruction.

War. The fucking wars she started.

The frightening unknown was whatever need for war she saw on the horizon.

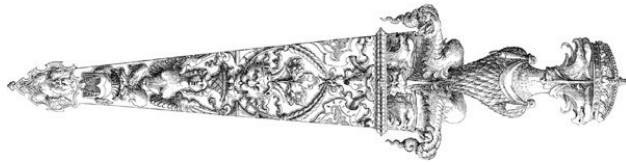
But one thing I knew for certain? Laisrés would be begging his own mother to resurrect him by the end of the godsdamn night if he tried anything.

Though the remainder of the Silent Rite passed without a word, Sersa and I refused to close our eyes. Once the Druidess blessed Sersa's torc, I slipped it around her neck, and we accepted the Mórrígan as our patron deity.

I hoped I was right—that no part of this ceremony meant a damn thing, save for us being sworn in. Gods be damned, they would *not* dictate our reign.

And certainly not the Mórrígan.

Serena



AS WE NAVIGATED BACK THROUGH THE CRYPTS, NEITHER OF US UTTERED A word about our new patron deity or the rite.

“I hate the gods,” I finally said when we reached the top of the stairs, the Sluagh on our heels.

Irian and the others released strange gripes—almost like children whining that the walk had been too long. Sin unraveled our handfasting cord without making eye contact then handed it off to a Sluagh, who vanished at once.

“Should we confront Laisrés?” I asked.

“It means nothing,” he replied unconvincingly.

“*Nessin*. I know you don’t believe *he* doesn’t know anything. This is not a coincidence. Not after everything.”

Sin halted in the middle of the corridor, one hand on the stone railing, the other on his hip. A frustrated sigh escaped him.

“I don’t believe in coincidences. I told you I served in the Mórrígan’s army—the last time being over a hundred years ago. Truthfully, I am *not* that shocked. Though I am aggravated beyond fucking belief.”

Sin shifted his weight, now resting against the railing as he folded his arms.

“After each conflict the Mórrígan stirred up, she always left things open-ended. Hinted that *if* another war began, like they started unprovoked, she

would call on me once more. As her chieftain, I was a pawn. I am too old for it though, especially being that I'm now king. And wed," he slipped in. "The Old King wanted to maintain good relations with her. As do I, but the gods' wars are not mine. Unless those wars threaten *you*."

I held his gaze. "Or you."

Determination to protect Sin blazed within me.

He thumbed the hairs on my arm standing on end.

"Please don't say anything to Laisrés yet. My gut feeling says to leave it alone as long as we can. We need proof before we go accusing or interrogating a goddess's son." He cupped my cheek. "Can we do that—keep it between us?"

I nodded.

"Thank you," Sin whispered. "Will you please just steer clear of him tonight altogether?"

I pulled back a step, uselessly trying to assess Sin's impervious expression. "Do you think he's dangerous?"

"His blood, yes. Him?" Sin looked to the side. "I don't know."

"How would the Mórrígan have knocked that bowl over?" I fumbled my teeth over my lip. "Can she touch *us* from the Otherworld? Can all the gods, or was she actually there tonight?"

"Deities have special connections to sacred places. She wasn't necessarily *there*, but they all have strange capabilities, not all of which are easily understood. Mainly because they aren't particularly expounding."

It was too much to think about right now. We needed to focus. *I* did. With a sigh, I gestured to the corridor. "Ready to get this over with?"

Sin squeezed my waist in answer, but neither of us said another word the rest of the way.



The greenhouse had been transformed into quite the moody space. Blue torches tinted the Gilders' faces, and blown glass sunbursts suspended from the ceiling, scattering patterns across the floor. The crystalline glass walls reflected every glimmer, creating a mirror-world on their surfaces.

Dark velvet runners, lanterns, and florae in deep shades of violet, indigo,

and silver decorated the crescent-shaped tables.

And a pair of carved metal thrones sat at the front.

Sin allowed me a moment to take it all in from the shadows outside the greenhouse.

All clad in a shade of black finery, the Gilders stood in anticipation of the Daemon King, white-knuckling their drinks and partaking in mindless conversation.

I wondered whether they knew I was here yet.

A black tree stood at the very center of the greenhouse, tall enough to glimpse from all angles. Sluagh stood at perfect intervals, forming a fence around the perimeter.

With the midnight sky above and the glimmering Wraithsea serving as the backdrop, the fête fit its name and the season it honored.

The Archdaemon it honored too.

The Circle's table sat directly in front of our thrones at the bottom of the large dais. Niuna occupied one of three others closest to ours, set at the far end. Ciel and Devlin sat to her right, and several Sluagh surrounded them. They were far enough away that they'd be able to avoid the blood splatters that were sure to sprinkle the front-row Gilders when Sin decided it was time for his *show*.

Once we stepped over that threshold, there was no retreating.

I nodded once, signaling I was ready.

Sin raised my arm.

And then we left the shadows behind.

The Gilders' shock hit immediately, the air shifting and distending. I hadn't felt so on display, like a spectacle to be gaped at, since the Hwain feast where I stole my clan's magic.

Clearly not deeming our guests worthy of an explanation, Sin said nothing as we approached our thrones. Flowers embellished the high backs, filling the air with their subtle fragrance. But the stares we faced heightened all my senses until the scent became so nauseating I purposely bit my tongue to control my face.

Stay standing, Sin instructed me. He wrapped his arm around my waist, keeping me close to his side and assuring me I was safe with him.

But no one else was. Not with Sin's ominous energy smoldering through the shard.

He pulled me closer and kissed me deep and slow—a public display for

the Gilders, but not at all absent of his love. Sin always tasted of the Rime and fire. Yet tonight he felt hotter, his scent crisper, and I came alive for him the same as he'd made his color surge yesterday.

We turned our attention to the Gilders.

From atop the dais, Sin loomed over our guests. His horned shadow twisted onto polished marble floors, sparkling in the moonlight streaming through the glass structure.

Tonight my shadow matched his—a horned queen.

Clocks throughout the citadel struck midnight right then.

It was officially the Dark Eve.

“To honor another Dark season descending upon us tomorrow, I wanted to bring a few truths into the light. Particularly the rumors that have been circulating Gilders Eye.”

Sin didn't project his voice but spoke almost conversationally, forcing them to lean forward.

The entire greenhouse *erupted* with deafening, breathless sounds as the king took a knee before me.

A silence so total and complete followed. Every exhale stifled. Every Gilder stilled. By the looks on the Circle members' faces, they were far too stunned to react—maybe to think—at all.

Sin held my eyes like he held my hand, gentle yet unwavering, before looking over his shoulder.

“In case it is not clear, Sersa Scáth Drumghoul is your one and only Daemon Queen. *My* one and only queen.”

The masses fussed with their elaborate outfits at once, trying to get to their knees. It was a mess—wraiths and daemons alike stepping on and stumbling over one another as they lowered to the floor in the crowded space. Their eyes were orbs, and the wraiths' usually luminous faces dulled from their shock.

I noted those who didn't bend the knee so quickly.

The Circle among them.

But kneel, they did.

Sin stared up at me with pride, his pure white gaze lifting to my horned crown.

Feeling naked among the sea of stares, I signaled for him to rise.

As Sin did, the Gilders followed suit. It was about as comical as watching them kneel, but the king didn't wait for them.

“My union to Queen Sersa was never annulled. Neither by soul, law, nor sentiment. For those unfamiliar with Daemon Law, two may not be bound if either is *already* bound to another. Yet let me make myself clear for the simpler minds in the room. Queen Sersa never *ceased* being our queen, nor have I ever taken another—despite appearances. For the Circle’s *peace of mind*, there is zero chance of another female bearing a Drumghoul heir other than the queen before you now, for my vows to my wife remain unbroken.”

“Feel free to keep our sheets though,” I said mordantly. “They might fetch a good price at the Midnight Market.”

Sin snickered—a real sound void of theatrics. The Gilders somehow believed it was their cue to join him with fake titters of their own.

Surely, only the Circle understood. They remained perfectly still, save for a furious twitch of the eye here or there.

Other than illustrated portraits and brief encounters, I knew none of them. Not really. I didn’t try to understand why they wanted me dead. But Gearóid had been their constant—the one they counted on to line their pockets and shower them with mortal souls.

It was reason enough.

I could have picked Lord Arlo Elittes out of a crowd though. Thane’s father studied me with unwavering brown eyes. Apart from the lord’s light skin, they looked so similar. Knowing he’d had a hand in his son’s pain, I hated the man already. Yet something within him wasn’t *right*. His gaze snapped from calm to cutting and inexplicably daemonic.

I didn’t have the chance to study him for very long.

The crowd silenced like broken wind-up toys, as if their master had ripped out their voice boxes.

Sin leered darkly at the Circle. The faintest curl of his lips served as a promise. He took his time, hurling silent threats at them one by one, and his look of bloodlust and readiness strummed my own blood and bones with a wicked tune.

“It is a shame that the Circle felt my queen’s claim to the throne was not a proper ascension. However, I say, what better way to take a throne than by killing? Know this though.” Sin stood somehow taller, his spine lengthening. “I shall not be driven out of my home again, and any who come for Queen Sersa will have me to deal with. The same goes for Princess Niuna. Although we do not expect our untimely demise, should my queen and I depart without direct heirs—”

“*Gods forbid*,” said a shocking majority of the Gilders.

I tried not to roll my eyes at them.

“—Princess Niuna is the sole and incontestable heir to the Daemon Throne. Many of you are aware the curse affected our sister differently. As you can see, she is thriving, and I will not tolerate any questions of her ability to rule, regardless of her undying youthfulness. Nor will I tolerate it during *our* reign.”

Sin needn’t speak of the curse in specifics. The room tensed collectively.

“That said, Queen Sersa will henceforth be known as the Second True Queen,” he said with finality. “As of tonight, she and I hold equal powers.”

Expressions wiped clean. Faces paled. Some gulped.

Outrage and astonishment burned in the Circle’s eyes. Protests teetered on some of their lips. But their silence reigned—or the Daemon King had muzzled them. With a snap of his fingers, a Sluagh stepped out of thin air, balancing two champagne flutes on a silver tray.

“Before we start the night by toasting to you, our True Queen, would you care to add anything?”

I glanced at Ciel near the end of the dais then turned my attention to the room. I held still, silent, for a full minute. Ma had always recited a quote. One I knew by heart that came to me now.

“Beware of quiet storms.” I said, lowering my voice with every word. “The quiet storm goes unnoticed. Yet quiet does not mean weak. It means overlooked, and the man who overlooks the quiet storm dies a death twice as loud.”

The Circle heard the threat in my every word, but I didn’t stop there. Because they weren’t *my* words.

Sin stroked a hand down the side of my arm, urging me to speak.

“You all lived under a blatantly thunderous sky before. Gearóid Drumghoul gave warning before he struck. *We*—do not. If you plan on pitting yourselves against us, I say go ahead. But make sure you’re prepared for the storm you can’t see or hear coming.”

Satisfaction hummed through me—from Sin, I guessed.

“Your queen has spoken,” he said and kissed my cheek once more.

At that, he plucked our champagne flutes off the tray. Together, we led the toast, downing our liquid courage. Then the Sluagh vanished with a whoosh of air that reached between the metal scales I wore. A chill rippled up my spine, and I felt eyes on me...

I found Laisrés in the crowd. Watching me. Picking me apart with curiosity.

I returned my attention to the Daemon King just in time to witness a scene I wanted to paint and hang in every room—to serve as a reminder to all who entered our home of his greatness.

Sin raised his skeletal hand for show. Then, palm down, he lowered *everyone* into their chairs simultaneously.

It wasn't a gentle command. They jerked downward, some harder than others, their beaded dresses clinking, and suits disheveling from his force. It served as a simple message: Sin could have brought them to their knees for me before. But this felt far more sinister.

A warning and a promise that the Court of Soulless—all of Gilders Eye—would bend the knee for me freely. But Sin was not afraid to use force.

A minacious smile tainted his face as he looked around the greenhouse. Then he turned sharply and extended his marked hand to me.

“With that out of the way, the queen and I will start the night with a dance.”



As Sin whirled me around the floor, he continued to direct the room, channeling all the energy he'd demonstrated yesterday in a carefully crafted warning—a *dare*.

“How do you prevent the command from affecting me?”

Sin readjusted his grip on the small of my back. His long fingers splayed over the curve of my rear as he drew distracting circles along the metal scales with his thumbs.

“Everyone has an essence,” he said, “and at the center of it is a string I can pluck at, if you will.”

“Puppet strings.”

Spinning around the dark floors reminded me of the dance we'd shared at the White Plume the night before our wedding. But every individual movement Sin guided me through seemed to be contradictory to the next. Keeping my hips close. Flicking his wrist to spin me away. Repeat.

With our bodies flush again, he cleared his throat.

“Bonespeakers often raise their hands because it is easier to visualize the strings, to find the one that connects to an individual. I may be half Colossi, but my Bonespeaker abilities are actually stronger so I don’t require my hands. I simply *want* the Guilders to be certain of what I am doing to them.”

“I think they’re more than certain,” I said.

Eyes followed us, using the glass walls to track our dance around the center tree.

“I don’t touch your strings,” Sin added, very blasé, “and the command does not tug at your core.”

I understood the principle, but to know Sin was a Bonespeaker and to feel a simple command was one thing. To witness him controlling an *entire* glass cage of our guests disturbed me in the most satisfying way.

That feeling disappeared when he spun me away from him a third time, performing a dance I failed to follow tonight.

“I promised I wouldn’t command you,” he continued, “and it will be much easier to keep that promise now that I have regained control of my blood.”

I rolled my eyes. “Except for the other night.”

His exhale resembled a pleasure-filled growl.

“You asked f—” Sin’s icy gaze preceded a hiss, and the word transformed. “*Fuck.*”

I flinched, looking down to be sure I hadn’t stepped on his foot.

Warm lips brushed my ear as the song faded away—surely my puppeteer ordering the musicians to stop. Again, Sin raised his hand for show, urging the Guilders out of their seats. They inelegantly made their way toward the floor until they both surrounded and concealed us from all but the closest of prying eyes.

Our guests were careful to keep a wide berth.

But not the Circle. They remained seated, gripping the armrests so tightly that their bloodless knuckles stood out under the dim firelight from here.

“Thane has returned,” Sin said. “Don’t look, or I *will* have to command you, love.”

I tensed, fighting the natural reaction to let my gaze circle the room like a hound chasing its tail. Innes was suddenly all I could think of. What if he released her? What if—

He ran into Aislinn, Sin said in my thoughts.

Holding my breath, I pretended to adjust my hand on Sin’s shoulder for

something to do, despite the urge to stop touching him entirely.

“Thane is telling me to act natural. No one saw them, but he wrangled her to the—*fuck*,” Sin repeated with equal force. “He basically grappled her to the dungeons... He didn’t want to leave her, but there were no Sluagh nearby to send me a message. I’ll send a few down there to make sure she—”

I couldn’t stomach Sin paraphrasing every bit of information he gathered from Thane right now. Not when it was all about *her*.

Aislinn fucking Hellick.

I pulled away, immediately shattering any illusion that I was fine. My armor and the bracelets jangled. One of the pointed metal guards on the back of my hands drew a thin scratch on Nessin’s. A lump in my throat developed when his gaze flicked up to mine, questioning me silently. My only answer was Aislinn’s face in my thoughts. Fabrications conjured from the darkest corners of my mind.

The mention of her made me feel sick. Red licked at my fingertips—not a pale hue, blue, or pitch-black in sight.

“I need a drink before the next song,” I said abruptly, scanning for a Sluagh serving champagne.

As if attuned to my every need and want, one of them halted right in front of me. The taloned tips of its leathery wings clicked the ground as it breathed. I snatched a glass and poured it down my throat in one swig, hoping to dull my emotions.

Maybe dim the colors completely.

“Thank you,” I said to the Sluagh. But when I tried to grab another flute, it lifted the tray just out of my reach.

What are you doing, Sersa?

“I would like to forget everything you’re saying with another drink. And *then* I’d like to dance.” The last drops of smooth champagne soured the second they reached my empty stomach. “Well?” I pressed, raising my eyebrows at Sin.

Sersa, please act natural.

“*This* feels natural to me,” I responded, perhaps a bit childishly yet unable to stop myself.

The problem with my emotions getting the best of me was obvious. The red would whip through this room, and something told me the magic would show little mercy.

But that was the point of tonight, and I suddenly wanted to shed blood

more than anything.

“She—”

“What I *don't* really want right now is to hear her name. Got it?”

Cautioning me with a look no one else would understand, Sin accepted my outstretched hand, the other arm coiling around my waist. His whisper made my breath quicken.

“I had no idea Aislinn returned.”

“What did I say?” I asked, sweet only on the surface.

Couples dancing around us struggled to keep their distance. Some flinched and hid behind others, as if a single glance from the Daemon King might bring the ceiling down on their heads.

Sin flawlessly concealed any reaction he might have been having to whatever else Thane relayed to him, but it was clear they were actively conversing while we danced.

His preoccupation with Aislinn further annoyed me. This was not dancing, but simply going through the motions.

“Sersa—I understand you do not want to talk about this, and maybe it’s a trap. I do not know. But she might know something about Jestin.”

I couldn’t voice the rest of my thoughts aloud right now. I knew they’d come out sharper than intended, and I might say things I’d regret.

Maybe I should’ve been relieved Aislinn was alive because maybe Bardca was fine too, but I was selfish. Jealous. Partially insecure, I supposed, after everything that had happened.

She’d returned *today*, of all days. I’d be the worst brand of fool to believe it was a coincidence. And yet, disputing Sin’s concerns all because I didn’t want him alone with her was out of the question.

“Thane will be with me the entire time, love. You can come along if you like.”

I scoffed. “And what if Jestin *is* down there? What if he’s in here now?”

Torn between the very real possibilities, Sin opened his mouth to speak.

Before he could reply, Niuna appeared in front of us. A pastry balanced on the center of her palm, and Dúma stood at her side, carrying Lacha in her mouth. The hound reached the littlest Drumghoul’s shoulder, highlighting just how much they’d both grown.

“Hello, Daemon Queen.”

I narrowed my eyes.

The hunch that Sin had summoned his little sister as a distraction—and as

his reason to leave—irked me to no end.

“Hello, Daemon Princess,” I said skeptically.

Niuna glanced to the side, a sharp look for such a little being. *One* glance sent a group of boyish Gilders around her age—alleged age—scurrying off like rodents.

A second later, she was wide-eyed and smiling again.

“Don’t try the yellow pastry,” she said, passing it off to Dúma without looking her way.

The hellhound spat the stuffed animal on the ground then gobbled up the treat. Niuna was brave to hand-feed Dúma, I’d give her that.

“Anyway, I’d like to dance a bit. Go on,” she told Sin.

“Are you certain you don’t want to come along?” he asked me carefully.

The fabrications returned with a vengeance, and I prayed they’d flee in the darkness behind my eyes when I squeezed them shut.

“I’d rather die,” I said, refusing to look at Sin behind me.

“Please say anything but that tonight, love.” With a kiss on my temple and a squeeze of my waist, he turned to Niuna. “Behave.”

“No tit talk, got it.” She imitated a smirk that was alarmingly similar to his.

A stream of Sluagh parted the sea of Gilders, merging with Niuna’s personal escort. Then the Daemon King left me with his not-so-little sister.

“Well? Are we going to dance?” Niuna asked.

I turned back to the princess. “Of course!”

“Why do you sound so enthusiastic? I know you’d rather dance with my brother.”

“Trust me,” I muttered. “I would much rather dance with you at the moment.”

We moved beneath the grand chandelier, suspended at a height that seemed as untouchable as the stars. Like the rest of the Drumghoul siblings, our guests kept a buffer around Niuna, and not just because of the Sluagh.

But as Gilders awkwardly smiled at the princess, I quickly realized the space was for *me*, not Niuna. Though most tried to pretend I wasn’t here, keeping tabs on me to maintain their distance made it difficult.

“I told Thane where she’d be,” Niuna said out of the blue. “Aislinn.”

A new song began, more upbeat than the last.

“Sin didn’t know,” she added. “I imagine the Silent Rite is stressful enough. Perhaps he’d have cancelled it.”

I sighed.

Niuna was just as bad as her brother. More approachable, easier to forgive, and probably less intrusive with her gift, whatever the hell it was.

But just as bad.

I looked around us as we danced and whispered, “I don’t know how much you know about my past with your brother.” *Probably more than I know though.* “But things are...complicated.”

“It doesn’t *seem* all that complicated.” Bouncy white curls framed Niuna’s face tonight, and the deep blue dress draping her matching flats reminded me of midnight. “You and Nessin courted. Then you were betrothed. He took your memories before you married, leaving you to believe it was all fake. He was stupid some more, and—”

I hissed under my breath at her.

She cackled. “You think these *thoughtless* people would understand, let alone have an inkling of what we’re talking about? Just watch how oblivious they are.” Niuna dipped her head at an older Gilder and flashed the brightest of smiles.

“Look at those curls!” the woman gasped, gently tugging a strand and releasing it with a bounce.

The smile wiped off Niuna’s face the instant she twirled to the music. It was frightening—now that I had seen the age in her eyes, I couldn’t *unsee* it.

“All they care about is their appearance and parties and gold.”

“Have you been pretending all this time?” I asked.

Based on the sharpness behind her white gaze, Niuna didn’t need to answer my question.

“Of course I’m pretending,” she said anyway.

I swallowed and licked my lips, wishing the taste of champagne clinging to them was stronger. Much stronger.

“Why would you do that?”

Niuna hopped twice to the music, a movement that mismatched her admission entirely. “Devlin masks with his politeness. Loch had his charm, and Jestin, the favor of our father. Sin has his control and the fear of everyone in the room. But I have, arguably, the best armor: a harmless shell. No one can see past it, no matter what I do.”

I fought a shudder. “What if you fall ill again? Will you—”

“No.” The word cut almost as sharp as her stare. “Soon, I will find the courage to show them who I am. Who I have been all this time. Until then,

pretending is in my favor, so they—and Jestin—don't perceive me as a threat. This shell I wear is the only reason Sin allowed me to be here tonight," she said, waving around her. "I want to live. Not *watch* life."

As Niuna whirled in a full circle, the end of her skirt swished the smooth tiles. She tilted her head and smiled, instantly flipping personas on me.

"Your face is all pink, Sersa. You should get some water and find our brothers. Seek shelter from eyes tonight," she added, hers flashing with warning.

"You sure?"

"Shelter," Niuna repeated, nodding cautiously. "Dúma, stay. I want to keep dancing."

The instant I turned to find Ciel and Devlin, Sin stepped into my mind. If only that threshold had a door I could slam in his face instead of a gaping entryway. As I moved through the crowd, his ethereal presence—palpable yet *not*—followed me like the Sluagh.

We are almost to the dungeons, Sin said. I will be quick.

The thoughts were grating and rushed, a pressure he couldn't hide propelling him.

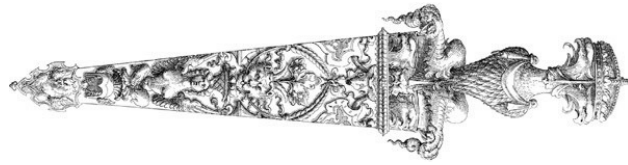
Nothing to worry about, he added.

Though I heard the unsaid word. A lot of words had gone unsaid between us over the course of our relationship. Maybe not lately.

But like my colors, I spoke the language fluently.

Nothing to worry about—*yet*.

Serena



CIEL, DEVLIN, AND LAISRÉS FORMED A CIRCLE TOWARD THE MIDDLE OF THE greenhouse, near the black oak. Guests danced around them, and through the gaps, Laisrés noticed me. Right as he moved to create an opening for me, Devlin gracefully side-stepped into the gap, waving his champagne flute for me to stand between him and Ciel instead.

My brother wrapped his arm around my shoulders. “Here, here, Daemon Queen! Congrats are in order.”

“Indeed, they are,” Laisrés said with a barely bridled smile. Taking a sip of his champagne, he quirked his finger at a nearby Sluagh server to bring the rest of us a round.

Thank gods.

Bending his knees, Ciel tilted his head to look beneath the tray. “How are they balancing those? They have *talons*, for Dúm’s sake.”

When Laisrés shook his head and looked away, I tried not to let my eyes linger. Difficult when everyone was dressed to kill tonight. The way his dark hair curled at his temples. A body built as sturdy as the citadel walls around us in a fitted brocade coat and matching pants. Those tattoo-like crows...

And I’d done it again.

Studied him too closely.

But those greenish gold eyes watched me in return. Not subtly either. A

dimple in his tan cheek appeared when he caught me.

My head spun, despite that I'd only downed a single glass of champagne. I reached for Ciel.

He instantly steadied me. "What's wrong?"

"The day probably," I said, glancing away from Laisrés with a swallow. "It's been a lot."

Please eat something. Irian can bring you—

I actively attempted to obstruct Sin from entering my mind this time. Though I couldn't be sure it worked, his concerns for me silenced.

But I felt no better when he clearly knew I'd been studying Laisrés.

Gods. Tonight would culminate in a heated battle of words if Jestin didn't kill us first. Surely, he lurked somewhere in the crowd by now...

When the Sluagh reached us, Laisrés set his empty flute on the tray. He grabbed a refill for himself and another for me, but Devlin handed me a drink first and glowered at the half god pointedly.

I didn't care who the alcohol came from at this point. So long as it wasn't an enemy looking to poison me dead on the spot.

Taking a heavy sip, I hoped the gold-flecked liquid would enter my bloodstream the second it touched my lips. Leave me drunk enough to forget about Aislinn's surprise appearance.

On top of that, the rite had given me more to worry about—things I suspected *Laisrés* could speak to. He lifted his glass to his lips right then, his teeth showing in the smallest smile as he pointed behind me.

Outside the circle of Sluagh guarding us, daemons bowed and curtsied.

At first, I swore they meant to acknowledge someone behind me. But after the first few snagged my attention, more approached to pay their respects.

Their titles for me were many but equal degrees of shocking and sincere.

"Your Darkness."

"True Queen."

"Aonfir."

None tried to push past the Sluagh either.

When the Sluagh brought appetizers around, Laisrés selected a miniature meat pie and popped it in his mouth. "Aonfir loosely means 'one true' as in one true queen. It originated in the city of the same name on the Northern Pointe, back when the beacons of Aonfir served as true north—like a star—to mortals being soul trafficked in the Blood Peaks."

Ciel scoffed. “How would *you* know that?”

“If you weren’t so busy disliking me, you would find I am quite intelligent,” Laisrés replied.

A Sluagh offered me a personal tray of finger foods that I only managed to pick at, thanks to the sour state of my gut. Washing every bite down with a sip of champagne probably didn’t help.

Daemons—mostly—continued to gawk at me, and I tried to acknowledge each of them from afar. Devlin raised his champagne flute to a group of them. Some had short horns or tails, while others were covered in shimmering scales and the like.

“Are they messing with me or is this because of the hierarchy?” I asked, recalling my conversation with Sin about our rank.

“Daemons have always respected Sin. Funny enough, *Gilders* have comprised the *Daemon* King’s advisors for a thousand years. Gearóid unseated countless daemon lords and ladies. They have been waiting centuries for this—my brother on the throne. As his queen and *their* queen, they respect you too.”

This *was* my court too now, but just because they respected Sin didn’t mean they respected *me*. The horned crown on my head made me feel like an imposter.

“I am no daemon,” I whispered.

“And thank gods for that,” Laisrés said, the mockery thick in his voice as he pressed a hand to his stomach and stretched his spine. “I’d like to give the one who stung me a stern talking-to. My crows are still a little ruffled.”

Ciel snapped his head in his direction. “The Drumghouls are the highest class of Archdaemon—the Dreithers our blood. I don’t really think you’re in a position to threaten any of our kin.”

“*Our* kin?” Laisrés rolled his eyes.

“Tell us. What is the rest of your lineage?” My brother’s tone wasn’t exactly acrimonious, but it would leave a foul taste in anyone’s mouth. “A Tempter like Thane, perhaps? I read a theory that Dúm and the Mórrígan *created* Tempters. Fitting.”

The sparkling champagne flute Laisrés hid his lips behind brought out the bronze undertones of his skin. “Devlin informed you of the situation, then? *Wise*,” he said smoothly. “How very wise when they may still lurk among us tonight, Dev.”

I wasn’t quite following.

“I’d prefer if my husband *not* run off with another,” Devlin retorted. “A Temptress disoriented Thane. It *inhabited* Innes’s body. What if that were Ciel? Does he not deserve to know?”

All the blood drained from my face.

“It’s awful, isn’t it?” Devlin said. He smoothed out his royal blue suit coat, calling attention to the embroidered letter *D* on the breast. The interior boasted a busy yet tasteful patterned silk, peeking out as he stooped slightly to address me.

Ailerby had clearly made it.

“But Thane said it was a Scrounger the other night,” I stammered.

Devlin dropped his voice only for my ears. “She *is* a Scrounger. Thane worked with her at a pleasure den called the Silk Pearl in the north long ago. He is almost certain it’s her. Jenra is her name. Together, they were the best Tempters there for centuries.”

My throat was so dry I could’ve swallowed a bucket of saltwater and felt better. “Then this daemon...”

“Jenra is half Temptress like Thane, but worse—she’s half Scrounger as well. It was how she concealed her true form by inhabiting Innes’s body, and how she enamored Thane. But he says her sway wore off tonight. He is unsure now whether he was *ever* in love with Innes. He told us when you and Sin were in the crypts.”

Gods.

If Thane—a Tempter himself—couldn’t resist, let alone *realize* he only cared for Innes because another had influenced him, none of us were immune.

Meaning none of it was real.

The other night had been awful, but I couldn’t imagine what Thane was going through now. This was nightmarish.

The inability to discern between reality and illusion *was* a nightmare.

My next sip of champagne went down like sand.

Nodding politely at guests who revolved around us, Devlin’s gaze roved over the crowd in a leisurely way.

Ciel’s toe clicked the stone floor as he squared his shoulders with Laisrés. “As I was saying before, half god means you’re half something else. Who knows what abilities the Mórrígan passed or granted her only spawn?”

Laisrés looked like his drink had soured at the mention of his mother. His eyes slid to me knowingly. “Do explain the reason you’re interrogating me,

Ciel.”

“Do not tell my husband what to do.” Devlin’s tone was dangerous, all politeness gone.

The cream-colored ribbon tying back Ciel’s hair was coming loose, much like his reticent temper. “You are the least trustworthy person among us tonight.”

Dúm’s piss.

Laisrés didn’t look daunted. “I assure you I’m of sound mind. Besides, Thane can sense a Tempter’s sway. If I were a Tempter, he would have known, no?”

“A shrewd explanation. So shrewd it’s almost concerning,” said Ciel. “Since Thane sits at the pinnacle of the Tempter hierarchy, he insists a daemon *more* powerful was responsible if even *he* couldn’t sense their sway. Perhaps the Mórrígan’s own son also sits a step above him? Perhaps a step above *your* accomplice who possessed Innes and violated Thane?”

Laisrés set his empty champagne flute on a passing Sluagh’s tray. He clasped his hands behind his back and turned to me with a keen eye. “Do you feel of sound mind, Sersa?”

“Why am I being involved in whatever this is?” I scoffed, taken aback.

Gilders all around us stole fleeting looks between gaps in our Sluagh guards, likely noting and questioning every shift in our expressions.

Laisrés made a strange, scrunched face that resembled a shrug. “Perhaps you and the king reconciled so swiftly because *you* are under a Tempter or Temptress’s sway too.”

The accusation ignited Devlin’s and Ciel’s fury.

Tonight was not the time for me to hear these theories either. Not when my head spun with plenty of its own.

Aislinn. Sin. Them together.

There were *a lot* of variables making me feel unsound. But admitting I hadn’t felt of sound mind in moons—maybe longer, maybe since before I came to the Soullands—would only spell trouble for me.

“Can you sense when a Tempter has cast its spell on you?” I countered.

“No,” the three of them answered in unison.

“Sway,” Ciel added. “Tempters sway and *suggest*. They do not cast spells.”

Now was not the time for semantics.

I waved my champagne flute. “What does it matter, then?”

Ciel's boot inched forward ever so slightly. As if to reset our circle when I realized Laisrés and I had moved *closer* to one another.

I stepped back first. He moved slower, lining himself up with Devlin.

I washed back the last sip in my glass, this time hoping to dull all my worries momentarily.

It didn't work.

What if Laisrés was right? What if Sin and I *had* reconciled so quickly—*No*. I refused to believe it.

And yet, fabrications danced at the edges of my mind like the surrounding Gilders.

Do you feel of sound mind, Sersa?

I gestured Irian closer. In its shadow, I felt as though the Sluagh was shielding me from some of the Gilders' eyes when, in reality, it probably drew more.

"I need fresh air," I said.

Devlin nodded. "We'll come along."

An inexplicable surge of energy rolled down my body like a wave, gathering momentum until it reached my toes. A barrier of crimson tendrils lashed outward to form my eel-like creatures. Gilders and nearby daemons gasped. Some cried in fear. Other guests tried to stop dancing and couldn't under Sin's command—but *all* skittered away.

"*No*," I insisted. "I need a moment alone."

When I licked my teeth and tasted blood, I swiped a finger under my nostrils. My nose hadn't bled in moons, not since before the red had dominated the other colors.

The only explanation was the transfer from Sin.

"Are you all right?" Ciel whispered.

I shoved my champagne at his chest. "Looks like I'll be safe on my own for a moment. What do you think?" I snapped, tilting my head. "Are the dungeons near the crypts, Devlin? I'd like to see *exactly* what my husband has to say to Aislinn Hellick."

Ciel's eyes became black spheres. "*What?*"

"Yes, more glorious news," I said. "His wife—well, second wife—has returned. Thane found her. And on the night we are sworn in, no less!"

My tendrils snaked around the Gilders as if they, too, danced among them. At least one of us would have fun tonight.

"Sers," Ciel said. His dark eyes glimmered with concern, moving from

Gilder to Gilder behind me as he assessed their reactions to my magic. “I realize the seriousness here...but you need to reel this back.”

“Why?” I scoffed. “If Jestin is here, I *want* him to see this. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to find my husband.”

Devlin and Ciel both dipped their heads respectfully, likely to avoid making a scene. But while the prince offered me an uncomfortable smile, my brother looked skeptical letting me head off on my own.

Because they know what the king is doing.

Yes!

A high-pitched voice in my head summoned images of a Banshee, and I suddenly wanted to shriek with rage like one.

The king went off on his own to reunite with her, it hiss-whispered.

That voice grew sharper, louder, echoing off the walls of the greenhouse like hundreds of nails scratching the glass.

Maddened by the sounds, the tendrils slithered and snapped at guests who so much as glanced at me.

Effortless was the way toward the outskirts of the greenhouse when my magic threatened anyone and everyone in my path. But the moment I reached the glass walls confining me, I saw in them the images I feared—a reflection that had me seeing every color.

Red. Blue. Black.

The fabrications returned.

The Daemon King’s unmarked fingers holding onto Aislinn’s, their hands bound by a handfasting cord.

A beaming smile from his bride with golden hair.

Nessin ripping a pink dress off her back, taking her body, feasting on the sliver of her soul she still possessed.

“Sound mind,” I chanted to myself. “Sound. Mind. Sound. Mind.”

It wasn’t real.

None of it had been real between them.

Isn’t it? Why is he down there?

With my stomach on display for every Gilder and daemon in the greenhouse, I had to keep my breaths under control.

Though I tightened my fists, my grip on the very short leash attached to my emotions slipped. The fabrications surged once more.

Two pairs of hands wore rings—one skeletal, the other with the flawless skin of all prosperous wraiths—and both were on... Her swollen belly. Nessin

beamed as he kissed her cheek.

His words haunted me, occupying every dark corner of my mind I tried to turn down.

I want your mind sound the next time I fuck you, make love to you, or utterly ruin you. No doubts in here.

Stumbling out into the hall, I doubled over and gasped.

“Oh, my!” shrieked a woman.

Gilders.

I looked up through my lashes. Stragglers who’d left the glass box stood outside. Though they scurried out of my way, they rained their judgment down upon me with silent gazes that required no words.

“What?” I hissed. “What are you look—”

A tan hand gripped my upper arm, followed by a forced chuckle. “A little too much champagne already, Queen? Excuse us, will you?”

Laisrés.

He forced me to straighten with a sharp tug. Then my feet were struggling to match his swift strides down a glass corridor that ran parallel to the greenhouse. All the Gilders could see us going off on our own when even I didn’t know where he was taking me.

I tore my arm from his hand. Or tried to.

“Stop it,” he snapped. “The Gilders are wondering what in Dúm’s name you’re doing, Sersa. I don’t need Mindblood to know that much.”

“Are you a Mindblood?” I retorted.

“Don’t you start interrogating me too.”

I glanced up and down the hall for any excuse not to look at the half god.

“Would you stop dragging me?”

Laisrés spun on me, dropping his hands. “The night has just begun. What in goddess’s name is wrong with you? *Hundreds* of eyes just glimpsed your magic.”

“What’s wrong with *me*?” I waved at the greenhouse when I realized we were no longer insects trapped beneath an overturned glass. The walls had transitioned to stone, offering us privacy. Security.

But most of all, I didn’t have to face those reflections.

Still, I knew one thing for certain.

“I am not of sound mind!” I shouted between jagged breaths. Strands of black hair came free from my fishtail braid. The citadel swayed and tipped around me before it stabilized briefly. “I saw Sin and Aislinn in the glass. I

heard a voice saying that they're—" I shook my head and hissed under my breath, "You were right, okay? I'm *not* of sound mind."

Laisrés took a step toward me. Eyes flicking downward, he lifted a finger right under my nose and wiped my blood on the front of his green coat.

Then he took a deliberate step back.

"If the Daemon King wanted Aislinn, don't you think she would already be his?" He shook his head. "They were never together. I would know. Nessin loves *you*."

The First Queen's armor heated against my skin like it'd been cast in the Dreither's fire. Laisrés's metaphorical armor, too, seemed to fall away momentarily.

He was *defending* Sin?

"Why the hell did you follow me?" I asked.

Laisrés exhaled a long sigh. "I told you. I know a lot about blood and magic. Anyone could see how close you were to shattering that entire greenhouse with all the Gilders inside. Plus, the king wouldn't be pleased if I let you go off on your own with enemy daemons possibly lurking around here still. Your brother and Devlin are no match for you or your blood either."

I ignored his last claim.

"*Pleased?*" I shouted. "And do you think the king would be pleased about—"

"Do you want to finish that question for our audience to hear?" Laisrés asked.

I whipped my head around.

A sea of eyes watched us from the end of the hall, over a hundred meters away. When I urged my magic forward like a whip, those gods-damned nosy Gilders scurried back into the greenhouse.

I scoffed.

It fucking listened to me. Now of all times.

Even so, our guests dithered between their wellbeing and acquiring gossip worthy of tomorrow's teatime.

Scowling up at Laisrés, I hissed, "You have no shame as it is, so what does it matter?"

"I have some." He gestured with his champagne. "Why don't we head to the Aviary? I wanted to discuss the Silent Rite in private, anyway."

"I need to find Nessin. He's with *her*—talking about only gods know what."

Or not talking at all.

“Do you not trust him, Sersa?”

It was a weighty question, and I hated that a half god who’d done nothing but allude and suggest things he *shouldn’t* have since the day we’d met was asking it.

“*Cría naam,*” I said.

Laisrés squinted at me. “What?”

“Heart and soul. *That* is what the king means to me. Whatever your intentions, *stop.*”

“That means you should trust him implicitly.” He raised his thick eyebrows. “As he should trust you and I to discuss the Silent Rite alone. There are things you should know.”

“What could you and I possibly have to discuss about the rite?”

To my credit, my voice didn’t shake.

I wanted to bait him.

“Tell me.” Laisrés took a few steps toward the opposite end of the hall, where weak moonlight illuminated an all-gold-and-glass cage.

The inhabitants weren’t limited to birds.

More Sluagh.

“What deity did you and Nessin select tonight?”

“*Laisrés,*” I warned in an icy tone. “I don’t know—”

“But it’s clear you *want* to. I mean no harm. Promise.” He spiraled in a circle and backed away toward the Aviary. Grinning, his dimples appeared. “Unlike the king, you have no reason not to trust me, do you?”

I loosed a breath and followed because I trusted *myself*. But I walked with the weight that Sin trusted me because he *knew* where I was—what I was doing—at all times. A one-sided luxury.

On cue, his voice reverberated off the walls of my mind.

Sersa, what are you doing?

Trust me, I thought.

Then I focused everything I had on cutting him off as I had earlier.

A truly impressive construction, the cage stretched high into the night sky. It created the illusion of the Cradled Moons resting on the spire crowning it like a golden apple pierced by a dagger. Ravens perched alongside the Sluagh, and I wondered if some were the spirits, transformed into the less menacing forms they assumed while traveling in flocks.

Ravens. Crows. Though Pa taught Ciel and me the difference, telling

them apart had always been difficult.

“The rite?” I snapped, wanting to move things along.

“First things first...”

Beneath gold rafters filled with perching Sluagh, Laisrés straightened as they dropped to the lower beams. The *thunk* of their weight and the click of their talons made him grin.

Clearly, Sin had moved them into position.

Laisrés tilted his chin toward me, pinning me with his gaze. “Why don’t you trust me, Sersa?”

“The *rite*, Laisrés.”

“I take it you don’t remember me. Do you?” The dimple in his left cheek reappeared, followed by the right. “We met when you were a child. At House Scáth.”

His talons immediately sunk into my mind. Laisrés had me right where he wanted. Ensnared by my own curiosity, he knew he could toy with me all he wanted. I was a worm being tossed between his crows.

Until my patience snapped.

“And how exactly did we meet?”

“Your mother worshipped mine.”

I waved my hand dismissively. “Thousands of Claisins worship the Mórrígan.”

“Very true. But none are goddess-touched like your mother. Fate is a funny thing, is it not?”

Laisrés’s gaze flickered across my face, watching my expression twist into what had to resemble utter confusion based on the jumbled state of my mind.

“Where did you think the Shadowess got her blood—and her spear? Did you truly believe you were born special?” He tittered. “Oh, no. Your mother’s blood originated with mine. She made Sorcha Scáth her Shadowess. Her servant. A warrior. It is customary to offer something in return for such a precious gift from the gods, you know.”

My throat constricted.

Ma would never make a deal with a deity.

Would she?

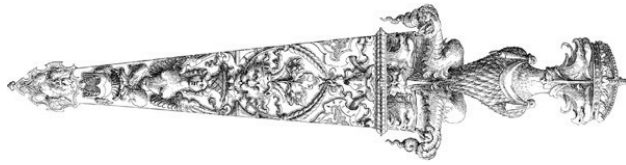
“What would my mother have to offer yours?”

My heartbeat intensified, preparing me for the worst.

“The Mórrígan took her time to decide. Years, in fact,” Laisrés said with

a gleam in his gold eye. “She sent me to Os Íseal eventually, where we met. Sorcha and I nearly struck a deal, though I refused it for your sake. I’m not surprised the Mórrígan asserted herself tonight. Not at all when she wanted you to join our kin.”

Serena



BY THE TIME I REGAINED MY COMPOSURE, THE AIR IN MY LUNGS—IN THE Aviary, in the entire *citadel*—felt inadequate to sustain me.

“Speak plainly, Laisrés.”

“I have faith in you to work out the meaning.”

He released a deep laugh that sounded almost painful. A second passed before he gritted his teeth, and his gaze shot toward the hall.

“Our *mothers* struck the deal on our behalf, rather. I simply declined it.” Still, he sounded restrained. “They agreed the Shadowess would train you well enough to become High Queen of Clais when you grew up. Sorcha *swore* it, and that you’d accept permanent ties to our kin.”

My cheeks heated. I couldn’t blame it on the champagne, but clear as the liquid I’d drunk was the fact that the Mórrígan *expected* me to accept her son as mine. Maybe not to wed, but in whatever way the deities deemed fit.

Ma had been so against marrying me off.

But one did not refuse a *goddess*.

“There is no way the Mórrígan would care about a mortal title.”

“Is that all you heard?” Laisrés forced out. “Deities love a good game of power. They love having pawns in every realm, from the mortal lands to the Soullands, and the Otherworld beyond.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, trying to detect the lie.

“Don’t believe me, but your blood *is* akin to mine,” he said, turning his shaking hand over. From his palm sprouted a crow’s beak before he snapped his fist closed. His gaze flicked up to mine. Whatever constricted him seemed to loosen.

I cleared my throat, noting the streaks across my vision. In the dim light of the Aviary, I couldn’t distinguish the color.

But it sure wasn’t red.

“If the Mórrígan gave my clan her magic—”

“My mother *goddess-touched* yours,” Laisrés corrected. “While deities can allow mortals and other beings to acquire their magic by drinking their blood, you do not share blood with the Mórrígan, Sersa.”

I read between the lines.

We didn’t share blood. Because his mother wanted us to merge our bloodlines.

I froze in place when everything told me to get away from Laisrés.

“Gifted. Goddess-touched. Either way, how did the rest of my clan get it? And why is mine different from everyone’s?”

“All good questions. Sorcha was given the choice to retain all the power herself or spread it amongst your clan. Though I hear the poor bastards have been without their blood the last couple of years.”

There were *thousands* of crows in Os Íseal. I imagined them—him—spying on my clan, watching the moment I’d siphoned every ounce of magic from their veins.

The very clan his *mother* had reinforced.

Get away from him.

The warning blared in my mind. Not possessive. Not even angry.

Nessin sounded afraid.

I felt his fear like my black magic—a *fear* as dark as night that spotted my vision.

The moons shifted above us, slivering Laisrés’s face in shadows. Or so I thought. More Sluagh descended from the rafters above.

“As for why your blood is different,” he said, “I couldn’t answer that if I tried. Some people are simply made different. Dangerous.”

“Then that’s why you’re really here. To understand my magic because it’s like yours.”

Laisrés had shown an immediate interest in it the day we’d met. He’d offered to observe it.

“It’s secondary to other things, but I must admit you caught my curious eye. Your blood is only similar in the sense that it has a mind of its own. Yours is as alive as my crows, and with the Mórrígan as your patron deity, it will only grow stronger, Sersa. The goddess of war is—*generous*. Certain circumstances could make her even more so.”

I hardly heard him.

My cheeks flushed deeper. Warmer.

I turned around, searching the end of the hall for Sin. Vaguely, I felt a cord pulling taut between us, mimicking the sensation of us being tugged apart.

Everything around me moved too fast. Keeping up proved impossible, and the words *permanent ties* resounded within me. Laisrés had taunted Sin because his mother wanted *us* bound—it was laughable. As was the thought of Ma pitching me to the crows.

“You should at least speak to her,” Laisrés added.

I imagined the Aviary’s bars collaring my tight throat. A pale pink haze closed in on me too, and my heart pounded in my ears.

But something about the color was wrong.

No no no.

It was reserved for one man. One daemon.

I tried to call out in my mind for Sin, only to hear an echoic abyss.

A shadow lurked somewhere at the edges of the Aviary just beyond the bars outside...

I squinted, trying to bring it into focus. But it vanished instantly.

Or there’d been nothing at all.

“I make my *own* choices,” I hissed and balled my fists, uncertain who I spoke to.

Laisrés. The Mórrígan. My magic. Maybe myself.

While pink shrouded my vision, the black tendrils pulsed to life around my wrists in warning.

Whatever skulked in the shadows withdrew.

So did the pink behind my eyes.

I cursed with relief, but I felt no better.

“Feeling strange, Sersa?” Laisrés asked.

Sin appeared out of thin air.

The forms of two Sluagh cast him fully in shadow. Their wings lifted in warning, not quite extending or spreading, but in a threat, nonetheless. I

gasped with relief as he took a deliberate step in front of me. My hand shot outward, seeking him to regain my balance.

But he was still too far away.

“I think it is time for you to return to the Otherworld, Laisrés. I no longer require your services as it seems our interests *conflict*.”

Standing tall, yet still forced to look up at the Daemon King, Laisrés clapped Sin on the shoulder. “I said everything I needed to anyhow. I’ll head out after dinner. Wouldn’t want to miss the show.”

He gritted his teeth when Sin gripped his arm, probably tight enough to break it.

“You will head out *now*. And take whatever friends you have with you—crows or otherwise.”

“No idea what you mean, Nessin.” Laisrés snickered and, in a blink, vanished. He left behind a single feather. Almost identical to his mother’s from the rite, it floated to the ground in slow motion.

A full minute passed in silence until finally—*mercifully*—Thane jogged into the Aviary, tearing my focus from the sight.

“Can you breathe?” he asked, keeping me upright with a steady hand. “Queen?”

Thane, not Sin.

Thane, who I’d wanted to kill days ago.

His question threw me for a loop, but surprisingly, my racing heart and lungs slowed. The room stopped tipping.

And the pink truly dispelled.

When I sought Sin’s comfort, he stepped out of my range. It sent the exact message he meant to.

He had seen *his* color. That much was clear because for the first time, his walls were low, the pink hue infiltrating both our thoughts in bursts I couldn’t avoid. Fireworks illuminated the rage and distress both on his face and within him.

“It is time,” Sin said, turning curtly toward Thane.

The Sluagh at his side disappeared with a whoosh. It stirred my metal skirt, clinking together softly, and my body erupted with chills.

“You’re safe now.” Thane squeezed my shoulder. “You must stay with one of us though, Sersa. It’s too dangerous tonight.”

“I am no longer in the party mood,” Sin said. Each word grew quieter but darker. More ominous. “The night will be over shortly.”

“And Aislinn?” I asked, still painfully aware my husband’s best friend was comforting me instead of him.

“Her mind was shielded somehow,” Thane answered.

Sin pursed his lips, tipping his head back. “It was a vault.”

“You expect me to believe that?” I hissed. “What are you hiding from me?”

“I no longer have expectations that you will believe *anything* I say!”

The Daemon King had rid the Aviary of my Sin entirely. He stormed out, snatching the pair of gloves the Sluagh beside him offered. Then Sin slipped them on, concealing the pastel pink markings.

He was ready to kill.

“Laisrés”—Thane hesitated for a breath as we both watched Sin walk away—“is such a nice little god.”

He was neither little nor a god. Not fully, at least.

“Maybe on the surface,” I stammered.

I searched the air for remnants of pink but saw nothing. No colors whatsoever.

“That suggests you *see* below the surface. Good. Though his surface *is* something. He is one of the most powerful deity’s sons, incredibly powerful himself, and handsome as sin. I mean, those subtle waves in his hair—how?”

I glared at Thane. “Do you mean handsome as sin or *Sin*?”

“You tell me.”

Studying Thane, I faced the fact that he, too, was a daemon and thus, a direct extension of the Mórrígan.

Sin. My mother.

All of us.

Now more than ever, I wanted to cuss out every last deity. There was no escaping them when they were the lifeblood of existence itself.

“Laisrés may not be a bastard blessed with the blood of a Tempter like me, but there *was* one among us, Queen. Be careful—whatever you think you’re feeling is not real. I would know,” he finished in a whisper.

Whatever remnants of resentment I felt toward Thane be damned, I pulled him into a hug. I fully expected him to protest, but he embraced me and took the deepest of breaths instead. A first. A second. A third.

Though I knew he concealed his pain, it shone through when he pulled away. Looking toward the glittering sea beyond the Aviary, his nostrils flared with emotion.

“Are you sure Laisrés isn’t a Tempter too?” I asked.

“Did you feel something?” Thane said urgently. “Anything?”

I fumbled with my lip and shook my head. “I...can’t be sure.”

I didn’t want to explain the color I saw—the one I *shouldn’t* have seen around anyone but Sin.

I wiped a single tear right as it tumbled over my waterline. Thane had the decency not to look.

“Well, I am certain Laisrés is no Tempter, half or otherwise, because he is half Archdaemon, Sersa. He’s Gearóid Drumghoul’s bastard son. Sin’s half-brother. No one knows but us—you, me, and Sin. Not even Devlin.”

Mistrust, guilt, and a hundred other reactions poisoned my gut.

That couldn’t be.

I whirled to watch Sin. He reached the end of the glass hall and turned into the greenhouse, never looking back.

His half-brother. Gods.

Part of me had *wanted* to hurt Sin. To make him doubt everything as I had for moons. To fucking shatter into pieces. I no longer wanted that, and the colors were proof.

The red had relinquished its grip on me because of *Sin*.

With the roles reversed, I realized hurting the person you loved, intentionally or not, had the power to *rival* being on the receiving end of all that pain. Because at least from that side, it helped me grow stronger.

This side—the one where *I* held the blade, the control, the ability to drive it straight through Sin—left me feeling empty. So empty it hurt.

A guttural sound emerged from the greenhouse right then—a sound I’d never forget. Not when I suddenly *was* on the receiving end.

For once, the connection filtered *nothing* Sin felt. His flash of fear blared alongside his shout as one of his walls fell for me.

Not a second later, it went right back up. Higher than before.

Thane and I rushed to the end of the corridor.

The First Queen’s thin armor clinked together as it tapped against my skin. Screaming guests by the dozens stumbled out of the greenhouse, forcing us to elbow our way through.

I almost slid past the archway when another panicking Gilder and I collided right as I reached it. They shrieked in fear and tried to skitter away from me, but I was knocked from one guest to the next until they parted clean down the middle.

I realized why.

Red tendrils throbbed around me.

“Out of my way!” I hollered.

Their fear was the least of my concerns.

Clearly the least of Sin’s too as four-legged daemons burst through the far glass wall nearest the sea.

The pets wasted no time—they tore through the crescent-shaped tables and barreled toward the front of the greenhouse where Sin stood before the Circle members.

But the Daemon King moved with the true speed of light.

He grabbed one of the daemon’s barbed tails and yanked it backward, tossing it into the corridor.

Like it weighed nothing.

Until now, my shock prevented me from realizing this was clearly *not* part of Sin’s plan to publicly execute the Circle.

Gilders screamed, scrambling toward the two entrances at the front of the greenhouse. Dropping little plates and champagne flutes. Chairs toppling and screeching.

More shrieks and cries.

Only a dozen pets infiltrated the greenhouse. But as the wind gathered and propelled through the broken glass wall ahead, I paused to listen.

The melody of heavy footfalls in the distance shook the structure around us.

“*Shit*,” Devlin hissed.

Sin pointed. “Get Niuna out of here.”

“*Shelter, shelter, shelter*,” she chanted in a high-pitched voice, her eyes entirely white.

Gods. Her warning.

Thane focused on the daemons’ path as they ruptured the untouched stretches of glass walls and headed straight for me. I didn’t care how skilled Thane was at hand-to-hand combat. Now that I knew he was a Tempter daemon—his specialty not the battlefield of war but love or lust or fabrications of one, maybe both—I shoved him to the side.

“*Move.*”

“Sin—”

“I don’t give a damn what he commanded you,” I growled.

Laisrés poofed into existence the same way he’d become a single feather

only minutes before. He'd discarded his green suit coat—wherever it was he disappeared to. When he rolled up the long sleeves of his matching button-up, the crows fluttered beneath the tan skin of his muscled forearm.

“And *this* is why Nessin needs me around,” he said.

Through gaps in the Sluagh, more daemons flooded the greenhouse—a stampede Sin commanded to stand down.

None listened.

As Laisrés had claimed during training, he had no need for weapons. His body *was* the weapon. Or more like an arsenal. His crows slid up or down his form, seeking bare skin before they peeled off his hands and arms, then rose into the air.

An image of Ranir lifting the back of Laisrés's shirt to free his wounded crow—Yeserra—flashed before my eyes.

They swirled around his widespread arms like a cyclone. Almost more fascinating than his crows was his skin—a completely clean slate.

In a single motion, the crows encircled a dark purple daemon, destroying its line of sight and practically shackling it to the ground. Each step it tried to take only caused more crows to swarm until the thing splayed flat with a defeated shriek.

When the birds finished, I couldn't look away from the daemon's eyes. Gouged pits stared back at me. The sight reminded me of the way my black magic killed the wyvern-like daemon in Nos Ovscura moons ago.

Laisrés had told the truth about at least one thing: the Mórrígan's goddess touch.

Dúma lunged for another daemon and pounced. When her teeth ripped into its flesh, black blood spurted everywhere, adding to the naturally marbled pattern of the floors.

Several Sluagh landed in front of me.

The squall from their wingbeats propelled me backward. As they closed in, I growled at Sin, knowing full well he heard me. Knowing what he meant to do.

Don't you dare, Nessin.

He'd commanded the Sluagh to slingshot me across the Soullands somewhere he deemed *safe*.

I tugged the golden horn out from under my armored top and lifted it in warning.

“Get!”

When they *actually* listened and turned back to the pets, I exhaled with relief. Though I had no reason to.

Too many Sluagh surrounded me, a sea of silver bodies blocking me in. Across the dais, another daemon had latched onto Sin's shoulders and back like a second spine. He backpedaled and rammed it into the doorway behind him, bringing the entire frame crumbling down around them.

A garbled scream twisted out of me like the Banshee I'd wanted to emulate earlier.

My magic swarmed on cue.

Glass and crumbles of stone rained down on Sin's shoulders. He unsheathed a dagger from his belt and stabbed the daemon several times.

Finally, its talons released him.

The wounds left behind from razor-sharp talons looked deep enough to reach bone.

Sin needed help. But dozens of Sluagh were still listening to him, focused solely on preventing the daemons from getting to *me*.

I tried to shove my way through. Sin shifted into Colossi form—nowhere near fully transformed based on how large his father had been, but large enough to send the daemons flying backward when his body expanded. It ceased the immediate threat of the pets slashing at his upper half. But a mess of gashes already assailed his chest and sides. Black blood streaked his hair, and his sleeveless shirt hung in strips.

When he thrust his enormous arms out to stop the daemons from charging us, the force of his body alone simultaneously cracked dozens of bones. He snapped several in half with nothing more than his palm.

Around him, the daemons' heads burst one by one.

Their brains.

The champagne I'd drunk earlier swirled up my throat.

Four-legged pets by the dozens surfaced in the other doorways, bellies slinking against the ground, talons clicking, and split tongues hissing.

The daemons devoured anyone in their path, but they clearly wanted Sin dead. There were too many. And they kept coming. Kept swarming.

He will die without me.

I snapped out of it.

I ordered the Sluagh to part for me, flashing the horn again. Crows in the background continued to jab out the daemons' eyes, shredding their skin into ribbons.

Laisrés blocked my path in the sea of Sluagh. “Sersa. I can bring you somewhere—”

I propelled an overpowering burst of emotions at him and almost shouted in triumph when the blue returned in full, tinting the greenhouse and the half god’s tan face.

With a look of true horror, Laisrés dropped to one knee, his hand flat on the ground. Dark brows pulling together, he clearly didn’t understand what I’d made him feel, and I didn’t care enough to explain.

But the feeling I’d overwhelmed him with was strong enough to bring him to his knees.

“Sersa. I’m on your side.”

“Then start fucking acting like it,” I sneered. “Or you can keep acting like the filth that is your father—*was* your father.”

When I stepped around him, Laisrés jumped to his feet and gripped my wrist.

I tore free. “Do not touch me! You have done *enough* damage!”

Crimson tendrils replaced the blue and cracked at him like whips. Laisrés raised his hands in yield.

“As I thought,” I sneered.

My magic forced the Sluagh and Laisrés’s wall of crows to part. Instead of fighting one another, the birds followed my tendrils’ lead, attacking daemon after daemon from afar together.

“Do your worst,” I whispered to my magic.

Not a command. I knew better than to command it.

Laisrés and Thane quickly became lost in the shuffle of daemons, Sluagh, and crows once more—no time to guard me when they were busy defending themselves.

I didn’t need them. The horn around my neck glinted in the moonlight, reflecting off the glass bones of the greenhouse.

Time seemed to slow.

My path ahead cleared.

The horn was on my lips in an instant. A second after that, another hundred Sluagh materialized.

“Help your king!” I shouted.

The words *felt* like a command. It pulsed to life inside me as the spirits of the restless dead sprang into action. They spiraled toward Sin, all of them now defying whatever order he’d given them to protect me.

Maybe he could manage on his own, but I was done letting him believe everything rested on *his* shoulders. Done letting him command situations without my involvement. Sin had shared the strength in his blood and made me his queen for a reason. He trusted me.

And he needed to trust me in this.

Whereas I hadn't noticed its weight before, my horned crown suddenly felt heavy as can be.

My magic took its own reins, forming plaited red and black tendrils. They lashed at and tore through groups of daemons effortlessly.

When the Sluagh no longer obstructed my direct line of sight, the Gilders and court members who *weren't* torn to ribbons of flesh realized where—*who*—the tendrils came from.

For a second, I forgot they'd never witnessed my magic. Now they looked upon the havoc it wreaked with horror.

And wreak it did like the epicenter of an incessant storm.

A quiet storm. It would never stop raging, and neither would I.

This citadel was as much mine as it was Sin's.

Sin was as much mine as I was his. I would never let anything happen to him. Whatever threats entered our home, be it Tempters or pets or Jestin Drumghoul himself, I'd kill them all.

Everyone who crossed paths with my magic bled, the wraiths from their delicate noses, while the daemons' black blood gathered like saliva dripping from their mouths.

As the surrounding area continued to clear, the blue-faced Circle members came into view—all dead, including Thane's father. Slumped in their seats, their heads lolled to the side with glassy eyes and lips parted in a final breath. How they'd died, I didn't know. But with their unmarked yet bloodless skin, I assumed the Daemon King had used his Mindblood somehow.

Minutes blurred together as we took control of the greenhouse and destroyed the dwindling stampede.

Sin. The Sluagh. The crows. My magic.

The chaos seemed to end abruptly, and then, there Sin stood across the way.

A circle of fallen daemons surrounded him, along with a few wounded Sluagh. None were in terrible condition, but their slick, silver bodies bore lacerations akin to the scars on Sin's chest.

He gritted his teeth and touched a hand to the black shirt torn straight across his front. His gashes throbbed within me—fleetingly but there—before the pain silenced.

When my knees buckled, my tendrils steadied me like an arm behind my waist, confirming once again how right Laisrés was.

My magic was as alive as me.

Still, whatever debts Ma had incurred with the Mórrígan, I refused to take them on as my own. Maybe the goddess chose me, but I didn't choose her.

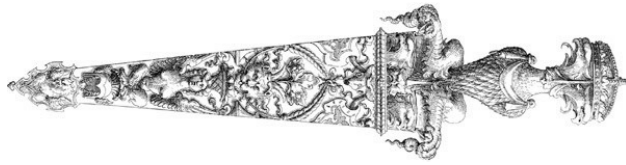
Or her son.

Sin shifted right in front of us. His wounds looked smaller, but no less gruesome. My chest felt just as torn up internally, and guilt as thick as clotting blood stuck in my throat.

His distraction was my fault.

“Jestin is here,” he shouted across the greenhouse, his breathing impossibly even. “The daemons were under *his* commands, and they were fucking stronger than mine. They overrode mine. Again.”

Serena



VIOLENTLY RED SKIN PEEKED OUT FROM THE SLASHES IN SIN'S CLOTHES where the daemons had raked claws down his back, chest, and the side of his hip.

Even so, he refused the souls Ranir offered.

As she trailed after him, he swatted the glowing vial from her hands. It went soaring through the air and landed by the tree erected in the center of the room. Daemons lay scattered around the base in pools of black blood. Seeing them so peaceful in true death tugged on my navel. The ones who'd dwelled outside Grandma Riona's lair were gentle creatures, and Jestin had exploited these without remorse to do his bidding.

Acid squelched in my gut. My nostrils stung.

I snapped alert right as Sin cleared the wreckage in the doorway with a vicious kick. He darted into the corridor, head turning left and right.

Then he took off.

Shouting after his brother.

Sliding along the floors when his boots grew slick with the blood of others and his own.

Leaving footprints in his wake.

His gait looked perfectly fine, and while I hadn't felt another flash of pain since the first, something prodded unmistakably at the barrier between us.

I contemplated the effort it took to prevent me from feeling those gashes. *Whatever you're upholding, you can stop*, I wanted to shout at him.

But tonight's events weighed on me, and I didn't believe in my own strength to shoulder any heavier of a burden.

"I know you're here, Jest!" Sin pressed a hand to his hip to stanch the bleeding but didn't slow his pace. "You want Sersa's soul? Is that it? You want your revenge? Come on! Now is your only chance to kill me. Is it like our *father* said—a dagger in the back because he couldn't win unless I was at my weakest?"

I followed on Sin's heels, vaguely aware of the others somewhere behind me. When he picked up his pace, I found my voice. "Stop!"

He was going to hurt himself worse.

Abruptly, Sin slowed, but only to spin around. In a hunched stance, his chest heaved in violent breaths, and his hands contorted as if he were feeling the air, sensing energies alone.

Darkness had swallowed his irises completely.

He looked fucking possessed by a daemon.

"JEST!" His voice boomed through the black-and-gold corridors. "I know you hear me. Mark my words. I'll have your fucking head. Count your days, baby brother! It shouldn't have come to this, but you've dug your grave. You hear me?"

Closing the distance, I gripped Sin's face and forced him to look at me. He *reeked* of blood, and most of what stained his hair, clothes, and skin wasn't his. The venomous yet cloying odor cloaked his usual scent.

"*Breathe*," I said, recalling the times he'd helped tether me with this single word.

Nostrils flaring, Sin closed his eyes.

By the time he opened them, the colorless irises returned, but I swore the veins around his eye sockets protruded black.

When I blinked, they vanished. I checked myself, and sure enough, darkness edged my own vision.

Faster than I'd calmed him down, Sin slipped out of my hands and stormed back through the citadel the same way we'd come.

We reached the greenhouse, teeming with Sluagh, daemons, and the hapless Gilders who'd neither fallen in the attack nor escaped—now the Daemon King's hostages. The moments blurred together as Sin infiltrated mind after mind, demanding they spill everything they knew.

It wasn't long before Sluagh dragged several away.

"Put the Circle on ice immediately," he instructed. Several Sluagh picked the Gilders up from around the crescent-shaped table, draping one on each shoulder. "I want them guarded at all times."

My gaze flicked to Devlin beside me, mirroring the concern I felt.

"They're not dead," he whispered.

"They're *blue*—" I started.

Dúm's. Piss.

I realized how Sin had killed them. By forcing them to hold their breath.

"*I don't want a soul!*"

I turned in time to see Sin with his lips peeled back in a snarl as he spiraled on Ranir. It wasn't so much the words he used, but the look in his eyes and the daemon clawing up his throat to speak for him. Ranir had seemed so unafraid of him at the safehouse. Now I wasn't so sure. Logic *said* to be afraid of the Daemon King.

I shoved myself between them, shooting Sin a severe look before turning to Ranir. "Forgive him." I squeezed her hand. "Is there anything besides souls he can take?"

"*Sersa*," Sin snarled.

"No!" I whipped around, glaring up at him even more viciously than he'd admonished Ranir for trying to do her fucking job. "You are bleeding all over the floor, and you need to be healed. *Now*. Jestin didn't get what he wanted so he'll be back."

Sin silenced, and I was glad. For his sake.

Another pang shot down the cord connecting us—he stifled it adroitly.

Then he *was* losing his grip.

When his torn shirt exposed the worst gash spanning his flank, I suspected sheer male ego impelled him to pretend he was fine.

Ridiculous.

I pressed my palm to the wound he actively neglected and turned back to Ranir.

She swallowed. "I should have something. I'll meet you outside your chambers."

I nodded in silence, my throat too thick to speak.

Thane and Devlin accepted another soul each from Ranir, and Sin watched them with narrowed eyes when their wounds closed almost instantly.

His refusal made no sense.

Though Sin was too tall for me to wrap my arm around his broad shoulders, I tried as I led him through the corridors of our home. Healing him physically should have been my only concern, but other events tonight had wounded him in ways that'd be far more difficult to mend.



“I say this with respect,” Sin started, his gaze practically melting Ranir.

Definitely not a good way to start a sentence. Even if he *was* bleeding all over the floor, himself, me.

The Bonemender met us outside our room as promised. Though I wasn't convinced staying here was safe, leaving the citadel in Sin's current condition was out of the question.

“Please. Leave. Us,” he finished.

“Maybe if you were capable of accepting help, you wouldn't have to take your pain out on anyone and everyone, Nessin. *Go*. I will meet you in the bathing room.”

He scowled at me. Then he shoved open the doors and strode inside, leaving Ranir and me on the threshold.

Turning, I forced a smile that lacked the sincerity she deserved as I accepted the two round tins she offered. But, weighing them in my hands, I was sincerely grateful. “What are these?”

“It's not necessary,” Sin gritted out over his shoulder.

“*Your Darkness*, please,” Ranir adjured. She veered around me, her lightless eyes hollow with concern. “It's not the same as—”

“I said no!”

The Old King had always kept a generous soulstock—with or without the hiatus in Reaping Hours—and Sin had inherited it. There was no reason not to take from it in a time of need such as this.

“Why don't you want it?” I asked, looking from Ranir to Sin behind me.

He turned his back on us then tore through his shirt and discarded it.

“What's it made of?” I pressed.

“*Souls*,” Sin said.

With a swallow, I accepted the tins. “Thank you for bringing these.”

“Of course, my queen. Use the soul salve first. Rub it into each of his

wounds until it's clear," she said, tapping one of the tins. "Then pour this one in the bath and have him soak for ten minutes."

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. When Sin had consumed the shard of my soul, it took no more than one minute—if that—for his stab wound to close. These lesions, while gruesome, were insignificant compared to taking a blade to the heart.

Ranir shifted on the threshold. "If he won't ingest them, this is the best I can do. He won't die from lesser daemon venom as an Archdaemon himself, but the wounds need something before I can help close them."

Sin growled loudly.

"I'll wait outside," Ranir added, eyeing the open bathing room. "Come get me when you've prepped his skin."

"Thank you. Give us a few." I inched the door shut and turned to face Sin, standing near the balcony. "Come."

"Sersa."

"*Come*, I said."

Dúma's ears perked up. Her crimson eyes followed us with concern until she realized I wasn't commanding her. She curled into a ball next to the fireplace with a loud sigh and Lacha clenched between her teeth.

Sin trailed me into the bathing room in silence. I turned on the faucet to fill the tub, and it instantly fogged the mirror as steam gathered in the air. Then I set the tins on the bath's ledge and gathered fresh towels, draping them on a nearby table. Sin repeatedly glanced at the salve like he knew he needed it. He also looked repulsed, determined *not* to use it.

"Why aren't you consuming souls?" I said softly.

"I don't—don't want to." His words sounded broken. Painful.

"You need souls, or you'll die. Age. I don't know. I don't look at you any different, Nessin." I blew a heavy breath through my nostrils. "Why delay the process?"

"You would look at me differently if you knew how many souls I've consumed, Sersa."

"Try me."

Rigid as a board, Sin stood in the middle of the empty space, looking ready to back away. I gripped his wrist—gentle yet firm—to keep him from fleeing.

"If you think for one *second* I'm going to let you wither away, you're wrong." I started on his pants, yanking them down his hips and lowering to

my knees. I tried to focus on his greenish veins, anywhere other than what stared me right in the face.

My gaze flicked up.

Sin's jaw tightened as he glanced away. "Only *you* would succeed in arousing me when I'm wounded."

Wounded and livid.

From the corner of my eye, it twitched in front of me, and I did everything in my power not to confront the growing arousal he spoke of.

"Godsdamn shard," he muttered. *Probably a survival mechanism. You're dying so create a fucking heir, it says. Brilliant.*

"Are you meaning to let me hear your thoughts, or can we have a real conversation?"

"Wounds," Sin rasped out. "Pain makes blood more difficult to control—as you are aware."

"Then stop wasting your energy pushing me out and let me in," I snapped.

I had little room to be angry with him right now. Still, a hint of red sparked inside me.

"You do not want to be in my head," he replied coldly.

"Then you're scared of what I'll find?" I pressed.

"*You* are the one who should be scared."

Sin winced when I helped free his feet from the ends of his pants. I grabbed the first tin and assessed the gash traversing his thigh.

"It looks worse than it feels."

I sighed. "What good is lying right now, Nessin?"

I unscrewed the tin's lid and slammed it on the ledge, but I was taken by the sight of the iridescent substance it contained. The soul salve resembled a starry sky. It would have been beautiful, if not for the way I imagined souls brewing in a cauldron until it thickened to the balm-like consistency.

"I can do it," Sin said unconvincingly, focusing hard on the salve.

"*Stop.*"

I pulled my hand back and dipped a washcloth into the water before dabbing at the wound. The lesion bisected one of the Sluagh's slash marks.

Gathering the cold substance next, I warmed it between my fingers.

The second I touched Sin, he sucked in a breath and gritted his teeth. All the muscles in his thigh flexed under my touch, and his corded calves, scarred but untouched from tonight, convulsed.

An image flashed in my mind of the Sluagh's talons swiping at me—at *Sin*. The talons had dragged all the way down, just missing his knee.

Discarding the thought, I worked my way up his body to massage the lesion on his hip.

A few minutes passed before the sounds *Sin* made finally shifted.

"Is this okay?"

He exhaled, heavier this time. "You have no idea."

"Good. Let's get you in. I can do the rest while your legs soak." As I circled my hand in the steaming water, a chill raised the hairs on the nape of my neck.

Sin stepped around me, lifting his powerful legs over the bath's ledge. Though he tried, he failed to hide his pain. I stood and took his marked hand to help him.

"I hate this. You—seeing me weak." He looked away as he sat, stretching his legs out in front of him with a grunted cuss.

"Is that not what a marriage is? Seeing one another vulnerable? Do you not accept me when I'm wounded, bleeding, angry, sad, and everything else in between? I love you. Who do you want to help you if not me?"

A muscle in his jaw twitched.

"Exactly as I thought," I snapped, my voice thin with emotion.

His marked hand slid over the bath's ledge, scattering droplets of water. He squeezed my wrist. "I love you too."

Disbelief *Sin* said it at all flashed through me. I glanced at him through my lashes, fighting tears.

"Sersa. I need to tell you something."

"Wonderful," I said, snatching my hand away. All possibility of tears waned. "More secrets. What every gods-damned wife wants to hear."

My resentment drowned me once more, trying to tug me under a blanket as thick as blood hemorrhaging from a wound.

Because I was still wounded.

We were.

No amount of pastel tendrils could tell us otherwise.

But I supposed when you were *made* of secrets, dismantling them couldn't happen all at once. Our relationship—or the one I'd perceived as real—stood on a foundation *of* secrets.

"You are right. I promised I would not lie to you, and I will continue to keep that promise. But this is no pretty truth."

The words started twisting their way out of Sin like knives he would rather swallow.

“When a single soul is divided then reunited, the pair is said to be whole. When two *separate* souls exist in a bound state, and one of them is supposed to belong to a soulless, however, the mortal is said to contain and protect that *of* the soulless. The mortal soul latches onto the other, while the Soullander draws—*lures*—their soulkeeper here.”

My gaze flicked around his hard-edged face. But otherwise, I had frozen, my body mirroring the rigidity of his.

“The second I took your soul shard, we became very much part of one another, Sersa. I feel your pain. Your sadness. Your anger. Your desires. It is *why* you felt me tonight. I don’t fully understand the Binding yet, but an inseverable cord exists between us.” Sin’s voice grew darker, sharper, not a glint of light on the blade with which he spoke. “My soul claimed yours by latching onto it and binding us together. You are *my* soulkeeper, Sersa.”

I took a breath, realizing I hadn’t allowed myself any.

I’d never heard of a Binding of souls before, but it seemed self-explanatory.

“It’s how I passed my strength to you yesterday.”

My voice shook as I whispered, “Does the fact you marked my soul with your blood have anything to do with it?”

His brow furrowed hard. “No. Protection only. Our Binding is inborn. Bardca was certain of one thing: we were like this before I took your soul shard. The act of you giving me it simply sealed us—my fate, if not yours.”

I felt woozy, my arms leaden as they dropped to the bath’s ledge.

“Is it coincidental you’re telling me all of this *after* I admitted I loved you still—after I spread my legs for you, Nessin? Or after Aislinn fucking Hellick returned tonight?”

He lifted a warning finger. “That is not fair. I always vowed I would *never* influence your decision with our Binding. I realized it was ridiculous of me to tell you the gods ordained us to be together.”

Gods.

Sin had told me—in a circuitous way, sure, but he *had*.

He gritted his teeth. I recognized the look in his eyes. He was ashamed and heated, all while knowing I was right. But this revelation cut me too deep to think about his feelings at the moment.

Impossibly, our souls were intertwined. Except neither of us had been

given any say in that creation. There was no way out of it. No choice.

“There *is* a choice. You will always have your choices, if nothing else.” Sin was too calm now, his voice level. “This is why I wanted you to *choose* to give me another chance before I told you.”

“Again, choosing the information I receive—choosing *for* me!” My breaths came in short bursts. “This is not an ordainment. This is a prank the gods play on us. How are you okay with this?”

“You think I want to give you all the power to break me? Sersa, you made me yours simply by taking your first breath.”

“You don’t know that.”

“*Yes, I fucking do.*” In contrast to Sin’s previous calmness, his icy tone made me shiver. “You said there is a power imbalance between us, but you *own* me. A seven-hundred-year-old Archdaemon is controlled by—who?” He gestured to me with a weak laugh, his shoulders raising in a shrug. Water splashed over the ledge. “The gods gave a Daemon King’s soul to a mortal woman so she could be my undoing? I didn’t choose this any more than you. Not initially. But I choose it now, Sersa.”

He inhaled sharply, gritting his teeth in pain.

“You knew all of this before. You *felt* it before. When we met, you recognized something in me, and you weren’t all that shocked by the truth. We didn’t have secrets between us back then, so I understand why you feel the way you do.”

“*You* do not get to pretend to know how I feel, Nessin.”

“I feel it through the cord. But you are right.”

“I don’t know how I reacted before when I learned of all this,” I said. “I’ll see for myself in the memory, but right now, all I know is I was right. This isn’t love. All these secrets you—”

“You cannot keep lying to yourself.” Sin held up the back of his hand, the mark of my magic and the rings accusing me. His elbow shook against the bath’s ledge, and droplets slid down his forearm, speckling my lap. “You love me so damn much, you’re terrified of it. You’d rather push me away if it means controlling that fear. You’ve done it before. You pretended to feel so little on our honeymoon.”

“Because it was all a lie!”

Sin cupped my face, refusing to let me break eye contact. “I told you. Nothing. Was. A. Lie. Now that you know there’s a *reason* we’ve never been able to stay apart, to stop it from driving everything we do and feel, you want

to run?” He took a furious breath. “You would not be closing yourself off right now if our Binding did not exist and we were nothing more than two regular people.”

Tears poured down my face, over my lips.

I wanted to give this shot with him everything I had. I didn’t want to discard what I felt for Sin Drumghoul, which would be impossible to begin with—no, I wanted the Daemon King to be mine eternal. But of course, as soon as I’d forgiven him, new secrets appeared out of thin air.

The memories. Our souls. A *Binding*.

The gods hadn’t just ordained our love, our lust, our bodies, but they’d gone so far as to rip out Sin’s soul—however that worked for a soulless.

We were tied to one another, bound in more ways than one.

Yes, I’d married him. But literally *made* for one another? How many could say the same?

Of all times, my tendrils emerged pink. A disbelieving laugh fractured my reply.

Just like the fabrications I’d used as a crutch, I recognized the lies I kept telling myself.

I was terrified.

Sin claimed I held the key to controlling him, and I might have held his soul too, but my emotions had proven *he* held every shred of power to twist me into this furious, vicious thing. Him breaking me—us—had done this.

He was also the catalyst for my magic’s renewed strength.

No—it was fiercer now than when I’d stolen it from my clan because our souls were whole. Together. They might’ve been whole, but we—we were still very much displaying cracks everywhere, if not fully broken.

“Maybe we are ordained,” I started, “but we are not good for—”

“Stop. *Don’t*.”

“You know—”

“I know nothing of the sort. I didn’t tell you because I—”

“It doesn’t matter why!”

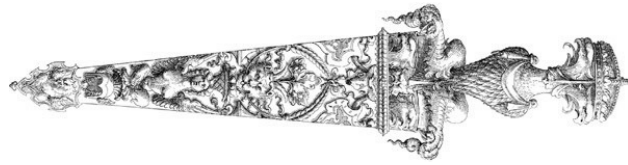
“I *want* our souls!” Sin shouted.

Immediately, he tried to slow his breaths. He licked his lips as his sharp gaze darted to the salve and back.

Then, in the most rigid of voices, he whispered, “I did not tell you about our Binding because I was—I’ve *been* addicted to souls for many years.”

Frozen, I silenced and waited.

Sersa



THOUGH THE WORDS Poured from his perfect lips, Sin looked near ready to shatter. Like he might tear the tin of salve from my hands and lick it clean until the metal sparkled.

“I crave our souls. I want to devour them. Possess them.” Shaking violently, his gaze raised to meet mine. “More than anything, I want to make them *mine*, Sersa. Before we met, your souls called to me. My intent was to rip them from the body of whoever held them, to *silence* them—whatever that meant for the person. For *you*.”

Sin raked his hands up the sides of his head, ruffling the blood-streaked hair just above his ears as if trying to drown out every sound and light. Every sensation around him.

“You can tell me anything,” I whispered to the silence, only his breaths audible.

“*Dúm*. Here we go.”

Waiting, I resumed my motions, tending to another slash on his chest, shallower by comparison but still ghastly. Every muscle flexed and stiffened in his body under my touch.

“Do you recall tales about the Great Lurer—who coaxed souls beyond the veil?”

Nodding, I deliberately focused on his jagged skin.

“I *am* the original Lurer. I was,” Sin said, sharper than his stare.

This was more than a secret he wanted to share with me. He *needed* to. I could see this truth tearing out of him worse than any other.

“I was fine back when we courted. Under control. Years before our souls started to call to me though...I was unhinged in every sense of the word.”

I twisted off the hot water and swiped another handful of salve. With shaking hands, I worked my way up his abdomen.

“Go on,” I said. “I’m listening.”

Sin swallowed. “My father consumed souls recreationally, of course, and to keep himself youthful. Especially with the curse. But Mum.” Sin blew an unsteady breath past his scarred lips. “Consuming souls was how she coped with her existence in my father’s clutches. My sister more than came into the world cursed—Niuna was *born* dependent on souls. Seeing her as a babe was the worst thing you can fucking imagine.”

His grip finally relaxed against the bath’s ledge.

Sin looked up at the ceiling as he spoke.

“Naturally, the Old King loved Mum’s dependence. He portrayed her as a greedy, ungrateful thing among his court, painting himself the victim—the poor king with an addict wife when *he’d* caused it. He fucked whoever he wanted in plain sight. In their own bed. Degraded her in front of his court. Sometimes he chained her up and withheld souls, dangling them in front of her until she was in such a bad way.”

The Mórrígan.

It had to be part of the reason Sin disliked Laisrés. Gearóid Drumghoul had fathered his half-brother—maybe when his mother was alive and suffering.

“How do you know all this?” I asked.

“Mum and I shared too many secrets, thanks to my blood. She knew I was too young to bear the weight. Yet she couldn’t prevent it. Most of this, I’ve never told Devlin. Some he knows. How can I share with my brother the horrors I saw in her eyes though? I have to keep you out of my head for a thousand reasons, and *this* is one. Just one, Sersa.”

I didn’t need to know the details to feel for Sin. To see the blue licking at the edges of my vision—*his*.

I’d never been prouder of killing the Old King. If I could, I’d raise him from the dead myself just to do it again.

“To suppress Mum’s blood, Gearóid ordered a Scrounger to overtake her

body. Although he wasn't a Bonespeaker, it *was* how he kept her in line—a drop of daemon blood and all. It was how he stopped Mum from commanding *him*. It fed on her body from the inside out until he killed her.” Sin inhaled unevenly. The exhale sounded somehow more painful. “How Niuna survived in Mum’s womb while the Scrounger fed on her is beyond fucking comprehension. Bardca assumes my sister’s Archdaemon blood protected her, but Mum’s addiction worsened as time went on because of the Scrounger.”

“Why didn’t the king put one inside of you?” I blurted.

Probably not the time to ask.

“Archdaemons can’t be possessed,” Sin said.

“Oh. Right. A drop of blood and all.”

Sin nodded.

My head spun.

“Before the king killed her, Mum would visit me and Thane at the parish on Nos Nua. She’d take me out with her when I was much too young. But watching her—seeing how happy souls made her... Something about it stuck with me after her death. Although I didn’t binge for many years without her, I picked up the habit when I was older.”

Sin wouldn’t look at me.

I reached for his hand as he went to move it from the ledge. “Thank you for confiding in me. I am honored you feel safe enough to share.”

Tipping his head to the side, he offered the saddest half smile. “Do you mean that, or are you just saying so?”

“I have been mad at you for moons for *one* reason, Nessin.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Which is?”

“Secrets. I want to know yours—the darkest, ugliest ones. Because life isn’t always beautiful, and neither is love sometimes. Love requires us to confront those ugly parts of ourselves and our past so we can let others in.” Needing something to do, I resumed caring for his wounds. “So... How did you stop?”

“I haven’t.”

His reply struck me like lightning.

I snapped my head up.

“I have not stopped,” he repeated. “The first time I came home high, Bardca looked ready to whip me himself.” Sin chuckled in memory, but his face hid no pain. Dropping his gaze to the shimmering water, a crease formed

between his thick eyebrows. “I told him I would stop, didn’t, and the cycle continued. He finally locked me in a hexed chamber that stripped me of my blood. I couldn’t shift. Couldn’t order anyone to release me because I was utterly alone. He forced me to kick the craving that way. But I binged—recently.”

My mouth opened and closed in shock. “When?”

Sin’s teeth grazed his bottom lip, testing the broken skin there. “The night you told me you weren’t sure whether you still loved me.”

Gods. I closed my eyes and inhaled.

“I am in *no way* blaming you, Sersa. Please do not think I am. I recognize that I am weak for not dealing with your rejection in a healthy way, especially when I caused all of this.”

I licked my lips and swallowed. The knot in my throat wouldn’t loosen.

“The other day too,” he added. “I didn’t quite binge, but also just before the chalet...” he admitted.

I opened my eyes.

“When did you *first* start consuming them again? In excess,” I clarified as I moved onto the cuts on his shoulders.

“When my blood disappeared. I thought a period of overconsumption might restore me,” Sin said. “The Old King always consumed souls heavily during the curse’s random bouts of illness. I figured it was all I needed. Only it did nothing. Then you returned, and I was fixed after a few days. I am too far in to *simply* stop, Sersa.”

“Have you been this ‘far in’ before?” I said, keeping my voice even.

“Yes.”

“Then you *can* stop.”

“It’s not easy to resist. Especially our—” His words turned feverish, a wound gushing to reveal bone.

I touched a hand to Sin’s cheek, moving to kneel on the chilly tile. My front pressed against the tub. “*Stop.* You’re strong. If anyone, you can get past it. And if our souls will help you, take them.”

“Do not offer that.” Sin squeezed his eyes shut. “I have *tried* and relapsed for centuries. I need to lock myself in Bardca’s chamber. It’s the only method that’s ever worked.”

“Rest tonight.” I flattened my other palm to his chest, feeling his lungs heaving in a race against his heart. “We can go there tomorrow.”

“No.” Sin gripped my wrist, holding it in place. His eyes fired like pure

white flames. “I want to visit the Knot alone. I *need* to go alone.”

“You *what*?” I raised my voice. “And if the roles were reversed, would you let *me* go alone?”

Red painted a sheer layer behind my eyes.

“Of course not. It’s different.”

“Maybe that’s the problem—your perception that you don’t need me, but I need you.” In my fury, I tore my hand back and retook my stool.

“I don’t see it that way at all, Sersa. I need you in everything. My addiction is mine though. I do not want to bring you into it.”

“Then consider this another thing you have no choice in, Nessin. Equal powers. I am your fucking soulkeeper, your Binding?” I raged. “Then I have a gods-damned say.”

Sin sighed loudly, and I practically heard the weight lifting off him. Maybe because he knew I would overpower him in this. Still, I noted the way he glanced at the soul salve. This small amount clearly taunted him.

Bound souls.

I couldn’t begin to understand it.

“Your soul... Are you supposed to be mortal, then?”

“I don’t know,” he whispered.

“The Sluagh—do they listen to me because of this Binding?” I resumed my motions. Dipping my fingers in the salve. Rubbing it into his skin. Repeat. “I commanded them to go to you using the horn.”

Sin grunted. “I issued that command. You may have felt it through me, as I was wounded by that point.”

“Then what were you thinking—commanding them to contain me in the first place?”

Sin cupped my chin in his hand without shifting in the tub. His grip was firm, like a statue frozen around me, yet gentle as a lover’s caress. “What did you expect me to do?”

“How many times must I prove my strength to you? Do you think I’m helpless?”

“Of course I don’t think that.”

“Yet you had Thane hold me back. Probably Laisrés too. What was the point of transferring me your energy at all?”

Sin dropped his elbow to the ledge, staring at the foot of the bath as the water and shadows shifted around him.

He scoffed. “Fucking Laisrés.”

“I didn’t mean for you to hear our conversation, Sin.”

His head snapped upward. “Then you’d rather keep it from me?”

I felt the immense guilt building inside Sin—he’d confided in me about his addiction, and here he was now, furious with me for tonight.

“I meant that it was my fault you were distracted and wounded. But Laisrés said the Mórrígan goddess-touched Ma. Meaning everything I am is because of *her*.”

Sin’s voice trembled with fury, despite his triumph at keeping it quiet. “Oh, I heard. I *saw* it all too.”

“Why did you allow him to be here at all? Whatever side he’s playing for, it isn’t *ours*. No matter what he claims.”

“Fuck if I know. But I hope he permanently pissed back off to the godsdamn Otherworld.” Sin cut me a glare before his expression broke, revealing something worse to look at. Blue. “He said you were supposed to be *his*, like some prize—bound to the Mórrígan’s son.”

“Yes, your half-brother.”

“He and I *share* blood from Gearóid Drumghoul,” Sin said in a deadly tone. “That does not make us brothers.”

“Did you know—the stuff about my ma and the Mórrígan?”

“Gods, no! He would be dead by now if I’d known his intentions.” Jaw flexing, Sin swatted his hand at the steaming water in front of him like he saw Laisrés’s face there. “Being destined for someone is a lot different from being *promised* to someone. You are not a shiny gold object. You are the fucking goddess turning the earth you walk on gold, and they think they’re *entitled* to you? He dares—”

Sin took a deep breath and faced forward, squaring his shoulders with the wall opposite the bath.

“Forgive me. I am not upset with you. I’m upset with the situation and with the fact a goddess believes you’re hers—the goddess who exploited me for centuries, Sersa.”

Sin rested his elbows on his knees as he leaned forward and hung his head again. Strips of hair dangled in his face. I gripped his shoulder a little roughly, finishing off the salve with the final scoop. Then I kneaded it into his shoulder blade, suddenly beyond incensed.

Or I am feeling everything he does.

Sin glanced at me in the gap between his elbow and knee. Shadows from his horns danced across his face, the moonlight above playing with us

through the skylight.

Tomorrow, that moonlight would vanish when the Dark season officially began.

“Perhaps I am just as bad as her.” Sin looked tortured. Utterly and completely tortured. As he straightened, he reached across the bath, now brushing my cheek. “For days, I have wanted to let you be. To let you think. And I never do. I can’t. I am trying, Sersa, but our Binding—you asked me the other night if me giving back your soul would unbind us. But what you meant was would it *free* you.”

The icy silver flecks in his eyes left me feeling warm rather than cold.

“I do not want to be unbound from you. *Ever*, Sersa. I want and need all of you. I don’t want to be this person. Maybe I can only operate under extremes like my addiction, but in this, I have to stand firm for my own sanity if nothing else. If I see that color—*pink*.” Sin swallowed on the word and shook his head. “My mind may be the darkest of places, but I will literally break if I see my color in your mind for anyone else. And with our Binding, I’m forced to. You may choose another. I will not.”

“What are you saying?” I snapped, knocking the tin into the water. Halfway by accident. Halfway because I was shaking with fury.

“I need the night,” Sin said, calm by comparison.

Aislinn.

All I could see was Aislinn in my mind.

“I’m not going to visit her, Sersa. I’m yours in every way. That’s not going to change. I just need a moment to myself.”

A moment.

More like bells. Days. Who knew how long? I imagined Sin wouldn’t so much as look at me for days. No speaking. No touching.

“This is not about you or us. I’m *withdrawing*, Sersa. I caved the other day, and I already know what Ranir is going to tell me. If I do not consume at least a few souls tonight, these wounds will only heighten my cravings. Until I snap.”

“Then have a soul.”

“I can’t.”

Though we sat close enough for me to thumb the back of his hand, I felt more alone than ever.

“We will get through tonight. Together,” I said.

“No, we won’t. I will sleep on the settee tonight—where you can see me.”

“You accused me of running, but you refuse to look at *yourself*. That color meant nothing, Sin.”

His nostrils flared. “That color means everything to *me*.”

“You know that’s not what I meant.”

The bags under his eyes reflected the red from his horns, especially against the new standard of paleness his skin had adopted from blood loss. “My fear is that you will feel my withdrawal and cravings.”

“I can handle it.”

“I do not want you to *handle it*,” Sin replied tersely.

I raised my voice above his, both of us surpassing the increase in altitude with each of our replies. “And why not?”

His voice peaked first. “Because I don’t want to break us even worse when I *rip* our godsdamn souls from your body!”

“Well, we are already broken so here is my gods-damned permission!”

Both of us were rabid.

Our chests heaved.

My hair fell in my face.

Sin’s horns burned redder.

There was nothing left to say, no other comforting words to offer. Yet what lay between us was a desolate terrain.

I already felt his pain—our pain—collectively.

“Just the night. I will sleep on the settee,” Sin repeated in a whisper. “I just need—”

“Space,” I echoed, folding my arms over my chest. “Mental space.”

As if he’d ever permitted me that. The thought heightened the bitter taste in my mouth. I forced myself not to fold under the weight of his white iron stare.

“You may have your *space* tonight,” I said, “but not tomorrow. I’m coming with you to the Knot, whether or not you want me there.”

Sin rose from the bath. Water dripped down his torso, arms, and thighs. Forced to stare up at him from my seated position, he felt more untouchable than ever. The distance from Nos Nua to Nos Ovscura didn’t compare to how far he seemed.

Painfully far.

When Sin reached toward me, I almost thought he might touch me.

What wishful thinking.

Sin grabbed the towel on the table behind me and wrapped it around his

taut waist.

“Thane could not detect the daemon who possessed Innes because of the hierarchy. He has been unknowingly pouring his heart out, believing a woman who controlled him for centuries was someone he’d fallen in love with.”

My throat was so dry I felt like I’d swallowed a bucket of saltwater.

“Devlin told me,” I whispered. “Jenra.”

“Then you know she, too, is half Temptress.” Though Sin hesitated, I knew he had more to say.

I waited, fumbling with a dry hand towel.

“I believe the daemon in Innes was in *your* head too, Sersa. We can’t be certain of all the details until we wake her. This is my fault—for not being able to neutralize those feelings. Thane is certain though. He has zero doubts, and after tonight, neither do I. Our Binding is the sole reason Jenra didn’t convince you to leave with Laisrés.”

Words wouldn’t come to me.

My exchanges with Laisrés replayed. The things he’d said. The way I’d looked at him at the rendezvous point. And then tonight.

The pink.

Fabrications—fucking all of it.

Were they? something or *someone* echoed in my head.

“The things you have felt are not real,” Sin whispered.

“I have felt nothing for Laisrés!” I insisted, shrugging furiously.

Sin looked no less wounded.

“*My. Color.* Do you know why it matters so much to me? Because when you were lying to me—what I now know was a Temptress holding back your *true* feelings—that color communicated your love for me, Sersa.”

Sin’s eyes were glass.

His heart was too.

We were.

“Maybe the Mórrígan still wants you for her son. Or for Jestin. I do not know. But if you want me to let you go—if when Jestin is dead you want our Binding undone as you asked—I will do everything I can to release your soul. *That* is how much I love you.”

I blinked at Sin, shocked and utterly crestfallen he’d suggest it at all.

“Is there anything I can do if a daemon made me see—if they *were* in my head?” I choked out. My voice cracked under the start of tears. One by one,

they poured down my face. “*Nessin, is there?*”

Back still facing me, his voice emerged equally broken. “Another was here tonight. Maybe not as powerful. Yet here, nonetheless. I confirmed Jenra is secure. When I was distracted earlier...” Sin shook his head and cursed under his breath. “Thane says the Temptress’s sway must fade on its own. Tonight will be the worst of it.”

Judging by the color, he thought.

I had to believe that meant these feelings for Laisrés—no, *fabrications*—would overpower me tonight.

“Now that I know it’s there,” Sin continued, “I will try to hold back what urges I can. My current state might hinder my efforts.”

“*Please*. I don’t want to see that color for anyone else, Sin. You know that. You *know*.”

“I feel as if I know nothing anymore, but I hope so. With everything I have, love.”

At that, Sin left me to my thoughts, clearly unable to stomach the ones I’d had of Laisrés tonight.

SIN



THE NIGHT WAS BRUTAL.

The dreams Sersa had weren't filled with images of us basking in divine pink light together. Instead, starbursts of feathers blinded her—both of us—as she whirled round and round, trying to find the source of an invisible yet all-powerful maelstrom.

A black dress fringed with downy plumules tangled around her feet, but those swirling feathers kept her upright in every iteration of the dream. These were anything but dreams though.

These were godsdamn nightmares, and I absorbed every detail alongside Sersa without a choice.

Every few seconds, a sliver-size fissure appeared in the feathers, affording Sersa a glimpse of crows on tan skin. We never saw his face, and they never touched one another, but I knew well enough who haunted my wife's mind. Longing for his touch, Sersa reached toward Laisrés with unabated fervor.

“The king doesn't deserve you... I'll be a better lover than the king, I swear... Is this color mine, Sersa?”

Sitting on the settee facing the hearth in the lounge, my knuckles turned

bloodless as I sank fingers into my thighs until I broke skin.

Bell after tormenting bell, I sat like this. The blue fire before me went unchanged. Though the flames *contained* the images of Sersa and Laisrés in her mind. They were all I saw.

The first time she sprang awake, sweating, shaking, and gasping for air, she wished for nothing more than control. To be able to steer her mind in another direction.

Sersa found herself not wanting to close her eyes again—fearing what might happen if she did. Worse, she feared the Mórrígan would reach her, capture her, and throw her at Laisrés to repay a debt the goddess perceived as unpaid.

Flashes of Sersa’s fake desires amidst those swirling feathers throttled us during the sleepless reprieves. Thane claimed I’d blocked *most* of Jenra’s influence over the last couple weeks. The vivid image he’d painted left me more than enraged—it left me thirsting for souls. Something to level me out.

Thane had spared me no details earlier either.

“You are lucky. Sersa should have eloped with Laisrés into the fucking sunset by now. I would have done anything for—for Innes.”

The second time Sersa jolted awake harder than the first, sobbing frantically and fully convinced the dreams were real.

She wanted absolutely nothing to do with me, so I sent for Ranir.

“It will pass soon, my queen,” she murmured, glancing at me from the edge of the bed. “I swear it will.”

“No, no, no,” Sersa cried, shaking her head. “It’s real.”

When I slid onto the bed and tried to reach for her, Sersa yanked her hands back.

Replaying that moment made my insides shrivel up and die.

Sersa tried to sleep twice more before she shrieked awake and ended up haunted by confused and erratic colors for the remainder of the night. Watching her rock on the bed next to Dúma, I knelt on the floor beside it, willing her to take the painted fingers I outstretched as a reminder.

Never taking my hand, Sersa blinked at the pale color and tried to decipher between reality and fabrication.

All night long, we revolved around the fucking half god and bastard spawn who believed he had a claim to not only my throne but also the person who mattered most to me.

The paranoia dissipated sometime close to dawn. Mercifully, Sersa

passed out.

I stepped out onto the balcony and breathed in the night, just barely holding back the monstrous roar I wanted to free. All I saw beneath the Cradled Moons, slowly being swallowed by the Dark, were tattoos on tan flesh, tinted under pastel light. If only for a moment, my color had been *his*.

And whether it was real, not real, reality or fabrication, illusions of the mind had the power to wound.



Morning came too soon—and not soon enough.

Sersa sensed me hovering in the main area of our chambers after she'd bathed. She'd donned a high-collared light gray shirt with gold details and fitted pants. I had showered not once, but twice since last night.

Attempting to strangle our Binding to avoid passing anything onto her only worsened the shakes. The sweating. The cravings.

Our souls were so close.

So fucking close.

And they could have been mine a thousand times over while Sersa slept the measly three bells she had. I couldn't spin the truth into any semblance of pretty. I needed to leave for the Knot immediately.

In truth, I wanted to visit Aislinn first though.

As Sersa halted in front of me, chewing on her lip, Dúma wagged at my side. I peeled off the wall and straightened, summoning a shudder from within Sersa. The sensation affected us both. Or perhaps it began within *me*.

My objectives for today were simple in theory.

Strangle the Binding. Keep Sersa cut off. Get to the Knot. Chamber.

"You should stay at the cottage," I murmured. "I will be at the Knot a few days at most, and you could use some rest."

"I slept last night. I'm fine."

I knew every truth and lie skittering around in that beautiful skull. Sersa resented me now more than ever. She wanted nothing more than to scream at me to let my walls down for *her*. I couldn't tell her they were crumbling on their own under the weight of my present need for souls.

"You haven't eaten since dinner the day before yesterday, love. I feel

your stomach grumbling through the Binding.”

Love.

That word throbbed inside Sersa. It nurtured a pain deep enough to be felt in the cavity of our souls. Like a weed I grew more uncertain how to uproot without harming us worse.

I took a deep breath. “I would like to visit Aislinn.”

Sersa was taken aback. “*Excuse me?*”

“I want to see if she is more willing to talk this morning, and I’d like *you* to come. Will you eat with me before we visit her?”

“Her.”

It almost made Sersa laugh—that I wouldn’t say her name.

Almost.

As I reached for Sersa’s hand, she actually shuddered under my touch and pulled both into her chest. She *couldn’t* let me hold her. Not after the nightmarish events of the last day. Not when she knew what having me and then having me retreat from her felt like.

The insignificant amount of space I requested last night had relieved nothing and only put more distance between us.

I shoved my hands in my pockets to avoid touching her. “We probably won’t have time to eat until we reach the Knot.”

“I am not visiting Aislinn fucking Drumghoul—” Sersa’s voice cracked when she realized she hadn’t meant to use *our* last name. The fabrications had her believing all sorts of untruths though. Defiance mounted inside her. “I would rather *die* than talk to her. Go, Nessin—go see her on your own again.”

I took a step toward her. My presence arrested Sersa, my shadow swallowed her, and her eyes flicked upward without her permission. “I told you why I took the night. There is nothing to read into. I needed to clear my head.”

How’d that go? Sersa thought.

Her hands hung at her sides. She looked limp and lifeless. Still so beautiful, but defeated.

“You know what? Fine. *You* win, Nessin. Lead the way.”



We stopped at the kitchen to grab a few slices of bread topped with crisped cheese, tomatoes, and enough spices to awaken Sersa's taste buds, but not her appetite. She ate the entire thing anyway—and fully regretted it when we halted outside a room.

The room containing Aislinn Hellick.

Fabrications, Sersa chanted, willing herself to cast aside the lies.

Then, like a shield, my color emerged around her.

Pink rivulets led Sersa into a war she'd never needed to wage. One that never existed. We had no need to fight anyone but ourselves—only a need to keep fighting for *us*.

She glared at the magic then the door with eyes that could truly kill.

Then she reached for the doorknob and let herself inside. The room was no more appropriate to serve as a closet than it could pretend to be guest quarters.

Aislinn popped off the cot-like bed, smoothing out her disheveled dress. Six inches of dried mud covered the bottom, and dirt and blood caked her bare feet. Her reddish blonde hair was a right mess. Fallen curls matted with twigs piled on top of her head. A scratch, probably from a tree branch judging by the nest-like hair, marked her cheek.

Otherwise, Aislinn looked unharmed.

In one piece or not, she didn't deserve my pity. Nor did she deserve her queen's.

Sersa studied Aislinn for a prolonged moment, wondering why the Gilder had ever intimidated her. Why she ever believed *Aislinn fucking Hellick* was more poised and lovely. As untouchable as the sun.

I hated that I had originally put those doubts there when my queen was perfection incarnate.

“Sersa—” Aislinn started.

“That is *Queen* Sersa to you,” I corrected.

“I did tell her not to call me that title. At least she knows how to listen. Here's another thing to remember.”

Sersa strode forward.

Aislinn was eager to meet her in the middle, already beseeching her queen's forgiveness—

Sersa pulled her fist back and punched Aislinn square in the face. I rushed forward to hold Sersa back from throttling her a second time but stifled the urge to applaud the hit.

My wife's possessiveness got me higher than souls. We could fight, fall apart, try but continually fail—and yet, none of it mattered.

Sersa fucking loved me as much as I loved her.

“Keep your commentary to yourself,” she hissed over her shoulder, “unless you're going to encourage me to hit her again.”

Astonishment tainted Aislinn's expression as she cupped her nose. “Y-You *punched* me.”

“That I did. You almost got my friend killed, and Bardca is missing because of you. Not to mention, you kissed *my* husband!”

Now was not the time to linger on the word.

Husband.

Perhaps I shouldn't linger at all when Sersa was only admitting it in front of a woman she hated.

Sersa glared over her shoulder at me once more. Wisps of red curled around her fingertips, ready to amplify. Ready to strike. She raised her eyebrow in challenge. Strips of black hair hung in her eyes, and her cheeks tinted with heat.

“*Let. Go.*”

“We cannot kill her yet,” I said.

Aislinn burst into tears. She held her wrist against her bloody nose, the pale blue fabric of her dress instantly stained.

“I-I only wanted to get Helde o-out of there. I didn't mean any harm!”

With an exaggerated huff, Sersa rolled her eyes. Yet the longer she studied Aislinn, the worse she felt.

I shook off Sersa's empathy.

Unfortunately, the cravings deteriorated my ability to keep my guard up. Meaning Sersa felt more than I wanted her to at present. And vice versa.

I released her and snapped, “Get Helde out of where, Aislinn?”

Swallowing, Sersa blinked at me once before refocusing on Aislinn, eager to be done with what she deemed a pointless conversation.

“Where is Helde?” I pressed.

“Faerie Forest,” Aislinn answered. “Jestin has my sister in Nevre, Your Darknesses. I would like to trade what I know for a guarantee of her safety. She is too weak. He will kill her, whittle her down bit by bit—”

Sersa expelled a forceful scoff. “Ah, that's *right*—you asked me for protection. Right before you betrayed us!”

She was right. If Aislinn thought intel would protect her or her sister, she

was dead wrong.

Aislinn wiped a clean part of her sleeve under her nose, removing a line of dirt. “I have no one else. My father will not help me. Nor will the rest of my house.”

“I wonder why,” I muttered. “Where exactly in Nevre were you?”

Aislinn licked her bloody lips. “At the Trinity.”

Sersa stiffened, knowing full well the Mórrígan lived there.

The Soullands and the Four Pointes of Clais shared certain myths and legends.

“Did the Mórrígan ever speak to you?” I asked.

“I never saw her, no. Jestin never let me see Helde either. I wasn’t a prisoner there, but the Druid was. Although Jestin was not forthcoming around me, he wasn’t exactly meticulous either...Your Darknesses. He was frustrated with the Mórrígan for some reason. I gathered she invited Jestin there moons ago, but he didn’t agree with something she was doing. Or something she wanted to do.”

I reached into Sersa’s thoughts, planting one. *Nevre is known for its security. The Mórrígan and Dúm allow their subjects to roam freely. Once inside, you can’t get out.*

“How did *she* get out?” Sersa said.

I folded my arms over my chest. “Tell us, Aislinn.”

“Crows.” Aislinn swallowed. “I was asleep last night. Next thing I knew, I was surrounded by crows. Then I landed a few miles outside the citadel.”

Sersa scowled at the reminder of the half god. “Why would *Laisrés* help you?”

Aislinn dropped her hand from her nose, the depths of her blue eyes saying *something*. I tried to push past the fortifications around her mind, to no avail. She shook her head. “The *Mórrígan* would sooner help me. The Crow despises me.”

Sersa snickered. “Something for us all to bond over.”

“If it were your brother,” Aislinn continued, voice shaking but trying to stay strong, “what would you do, Queen?”

Anything.

The word whipped down the cord between us, though Sersa didn’t answer Aislinn.

“You are in no position to make demands,” I said. “You’re also fortunate to be *alive*, and to put it bluntly, you don’t deserve it. If Jestin was Daemon

King, I assure you that your head would be separated from your shoulders by now.”

Aislinn balled her fists. “Do what you must with me but help—my—sister! She is daft and will get herself killed in Nevre. If she hasn’t already. I am pleading for her life! What more do you want from me?”

Sersa swept forward, flipping the single pillow on the bed upside down to free the pillowcase. Aislinn backed all the way into the wall, trying to make herself smaller when Sersa offered it to her.

Suspicious, Aislinn eyed the white material. “What am I to sleep on?”

“Dúm’s piss. You *are* hopeless.” Sersa threw her hands up. Just when I considered how kind she was, she whipped the pillowcase at Aislinn then returned to my side.

“All right,” I said, refocusing Aislinn. “Did you ever hear the word Ordé?”

Eyes wide behind the pillowcase concealing her nose, she shook her head.

“What about a god command?” I pressed.

“No. I swear.” Aislinn sounded slightly muffled. She checked the bloody pillowcase and frowned. “But the crows left me with a message when they brought me here, Ser—my queen: *You are the Queen of Three*. Of what, I do not know. And that is *all* I know.”

Sersa stiffened from head to toe. Words that resembled a chant crossed her mind.

Mortal lands. Underworld. Otherworld.

One for the mortal world. One for the Underworld. One for the Otherworld.

Three lands, one queen.

I lifted my gaze to Aislinn’s. “I would delve through your mind if not for the generous gift *someone* gave you.”

“A Fae,” she blurted. “They built walls around my mind.”

“Clearly.” I need not infiltrate her mind to see she was holding back certain details. “A word of advice for your next life, Aislinn? I would have helped if you came to me instead of going behind my back. If you think of any other information, tell the Sluagh through the door.”

“The F-Fae said it will fade—look through my head when it does! I’m telling the truth, I swear!”

“We’ll see if you make it that long.”

I placed my hand on Sersa’s back, directing her to the door.

Aislinn shouted after us, begging to know whether we'd help Helde.

The door slammed in her face. From the other side came the sounds of a caged animal. Wailing. Banging. Screaming.

Unfazed, the Sluagh assumed their positions once more.

Sersa's shred of guilt resurrected, despite her deep mistrust of Aislinn.

When we reached the end of the corridor, I stopped and turned to her. "What do you think?"

Leaning against the wall, Sersa folded her arms and pursed her lips. "You should have let me hit Aislinn again to see if she had anything else to say. At the same time... A prisoner she may be, but she doesn't *deserve* to sit in her own blood and filth. We should bring her fresh clothes. Let her wash."

"You are too merciful."

"Maybe. Will she get a trial?" Sersa asked.

"She will receive whatever punishment you and Ailerby deem fit. And Bardca. As a Druid, he will, of course, advocate for a trial." I swiped a bead of sweat that dripped onto my eyelid. "Do you know what this means—with the Mórrígan backing Jestin?"

"She has to die too."

I raked a hand through my hair, grazing my horns. "Even from afar, we should exercise great caution when speaking of her. Crows were her allies long before they aligned with Laisrés, and there have been far too many lurking around us lately. If you think I am ancient, the Mórrígan is a *relic* from time immemorial. After the Knot, we will send word for her to meet us outside Faerie Forest. I can't be certain whether she will negotiate with us for Jestin's head, but after everything he has done, we must be ready for anything. My Sluagh will be prepared."

The word echoed between us.

"Prepared—as in?"

"Prepared," I repeated with a curt nod. "Jestin must be ended. The Mórrígan is not so easy to deal with, but I also won't hesitate to use force if it comes to it."

Swallowing, Sersa's eyebrows tilted downward. "How many days must you stay in the chamber?"

"We will see."

When Sersa gathered her black hair to one side, I wanted nothing more than to reach out and run my fingers through it. To pull her into me and rest her head on my chest. But her earlier recoil proved she didn't want my touch

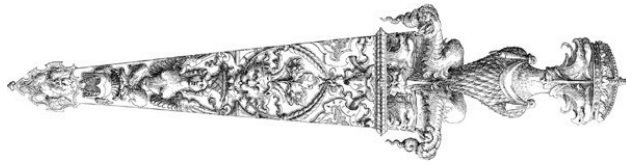
like I craved hers.

“One more thing,” I said.

Sersa’s brow furrowed. “What?”

“Feera. I sent for her. Why don’t you head to our rooms without me though? I need to speak with Devlin, and I think it’s best you see it alone, anyway. Experiencing an entire memory differs from me showing you fragments.”

Sersa



FRAGMENTS.

Nessin's instruction left me fuming. I returned to our empty rooms to pack a small bag while I waited for Feera. But the more time that passed, the angrier I became. Nessin wanted me to see the memory alone, and even before I had, *he* had me tasting ten shades of bitter and seeing three colors.

Black. Red. Blue.

I tore clothes from the closet, whipping them at the velvet benches and missing the bag completely. I was beyond too old for outbursts. But how could Nessin tell me to go off on my own at a time like this?

The Temptress. Aislinn. The Mórrígan. Laisrés.

Each added another layer to my rage, so thick it'd become a shroud. I shrieked and dropped to my knees in the closet as nothing but an endless pit of anger throbbed in my chest.

When Nessin bent and looped his arms under my armpits to pull me up, I realized he must've heard me scream. Or maybe he felt it.

I lost it, shoving away from him.

"Don't touch me!"

"Sersa," said a clement voice. Devlin stared back at me, a silhouette of his brother without the horns.

Great.

Maybe the entire citadel heard my outburst.

“Feera is outside. I can send her away if you like. It’s just...” Devlin concluded with a shake of his head.

“What are you doing back here? Are Ciel and Ailerby okay?”

“I returned to check on Sin. They’re with Niuna. Completely fine.” He watched me silently for a minute. “Being wounded as bad as Sin was,” Devlin restarted, the words delivered grimly, “his body is begging him for souls.”

“He told me—about his addiction.”

Devlin’s eyebrows arched in surprise, but it segued into immediate relief. It was a secret he’d been grudgingly keeping.

One of many the Daemon King kept.

The sweating. The wan skin. His twice daily training. Everything had been an attempt to work it out of his system. I wasn’t sure anyone could miss it with how he looked right now, but *I* had missed the signs for weeks.

No. Sin was just that good at hiding himself.

“Ciel doesn’t know,” Devlin said quickly. “Only us and Thane. Please keep it quiet until I tell him.”

The last thing I wanted was to be brought into another fold of secrets when I’d already agreed to conceal Laisrés’s ancestry.

“Sin says you are *insistent* on going with him. Is that true?”

I wrapped my arms around my middle, squeezing tight. “Yes.”

“You *can*’t, Sersa.”

“Of course I am,” I said without thought. “Is the chamber safe to use?”

“If you’re concerned about safety, you will stay at the safehouse with us while he recovers. Or relapses.” Devlin sounded a little disheartened.

“I’m not worried about my safety.”

“I hate to say this, but you should be. Bardca built the chamber because Sin can overpower whomever he likes with any of his bloods. Pair that with his addiction when it takes over... He *needs* to be on his own. As queen, I cannot tell you what to do, but as my sister-in-law, Sersa, I urge you to stay away.”

My voice cracked. “As *his* queen and wife, I need to be with him. I strengthen him. If we’re too far apart, he will have no access to his blood.”

“It might be better that way.”

“I’m sorry, but you won’t change my mind, Devlin.”

Physically, Sin could kill anyone in his path. But in his current state?

I wasn't sure.

"It is quite possible Sin will beg you for your soul if you go with him. You must understand he is not himself. Or he won't be much longer."

I stood with my shoulders back, maybe to convince myself I could handle whatever happened at the Knot as I tried to convince Devlin too. "I want to be there for him."

Even if he doesn't want me around.

Loneliness hung thick over my head like the shadows descending on Nos Ovscura. I had yet to go outside today, but the Dark officially started tomorrow, meaning it'd begun to eclipse the Cradled Moons and swallow the sky.

But *I* had caused my loneliness.

The color.

The dreams.

Pulling away.

Devlin's voice startled me.

"Did you know I was married before?" He paused to study the racks of clothes, lost in thought. "Ailerby confronted me the other night when I was a bit sozzled. More than a bit, I suppose." He released a halfhearted laugh. "He asked if I was being unfaithful to Ciel after he heard me say a name. Menadé."

Gods.

How wrong Ailerby and I had been...

"What happened to him?" I asked.

Devlin smiled, studying the air as if he saw his face. "Menadé died protecting me. He was Fae, and it takes a lot to kill one. Afterward, I swore I would never be with someone who was stronger than me physically. I remember the day that Menadé's essence extinguished—*lucidly*. I think about Ciel's vanishing like that so often. Especially since the break-in. That's what you heard us arguing about at the rendezvous point the other day. I need you and Sin to protect him."

I took a step forward and squeezed Devlin's shoulder. From being around Sin, I'd become desensitized to the prince's height.

I tipped my head back to meet his gaze.

"Ciel knows I was married before. Menadé was the one person who made me feel like I wasn't constantly in my brothers' shadows, despite being the eldest. Until Ciel showed up at the Devil's Tail and looked at me like I was

the only person he'd ever seen. It was magnetic. Truly. I had never sensed an essence or soul like Menadé's until I met Ciel. If I died protecting him from Jest, it would be a mercy not to live without him, not to shoulder that. But if I lost *Ciel*—" Devlin shook his head. "I would take myself straight to the Eternphire."

In the mortal legends Pa told us as children, soulless who immersed themselves in the Eternal Flame returned to oblivion, death essentially, rather than passing onto the Otherworld.

"The night we met, I wondered if Ciel's soul was Menadé's essence reembodied. A second chance." He shrugged. "I did not fall in love with Ciel because of his soul, but I like to think Menadé would be happy I found an essence as beautiful as his. I tell you this because it's *why* Sin has struggled with his innate craving to be the monster he feels he is for so long. We cling to beliefs that help us get through the day. Even if they are lies we must tell ourselves."

Gods, did I hear the truth in that.

"I love your brother, Devlin. Monster and all."

"Understood. However...our nature as Soulreapers is that. Nature. As is all blood. *None* of that goodness exists at the height of his withdrawal."

"I'm not afraid. He can't hurt me."

When I turned to leave the closet, Devlin gripped my elbow.

"Let me speak bluntly, Sersa. You are witnessing *nothing* compared to how bad it can get. Sin will not be able to contain his dependence much longer. If you still want to go, I cannot stop you."

I hugged Devlin tightly. "He already warned me. I will take care of him for you."

"For both of us. I'll bring Dúma back to the safehouse with me. She can't accompany you to the Knot. The Sluagh are far too territorial."

I tried not to show my concern. "Let me know if there is anything specific I can do."

"If you insist on going, keep him in the chamber. You can still change your mind."

Devlin and I both knew I wouldn't.

"*Ahem.*"

A seemingly young woman had stepped under the archway into the closet. Beady sea-green eyes met mine with the intensity of the Wraithsea. Dark, cropped hair framed her jaw. She wore a blue shirt made of silk, with

strips loosely tied at the neck and long bell sleeves that poked out from her dark fur coat. Her polished boots gleamed under the flickering light behind me.

“Sorry to interrupt. I’m Feera. Nessin said to be quick.”

“Do you want me to stay?” Devlin asked me.

“He would not allow that, and you know it,” Feera said nonchalantly.

My heart stammered when the door to our chambers closed behind her, shooting my thoughts to a single person. Had *Nessin* heard me lose it? Or had he heard our entire conversation?

I swallowed hard.

“I need to get back to the safehouse, anyway,” Devlin said and squeezed my shoulder.

At that, he left us.

Feera gestured to the main area and moved to the side for me to lead the way.

But there, leaning against the wall next to the door—close enough to storm out at any time—Nessin stared at his gloves, plucking at an imaginary thread just for something to do. He kept his eyes down.

I redirected my focus, maneuvering to the lounge on wobbly limbs, and lowered onto the velvet settee across from the fireplace. Feera took one of the armchairs. I half expected Nessin to take the chair on the other side of the coffee table, so when he sat beside me, every muscle in my body tensed.

The middle seat separated us.

I wanted to steal a glance at him, but I imagined his expression just fine without. Chin tilted downward. Eyes so pure but with so much darkness behind them. Jaw taut.

Feera turned to me and slowly tilted her head. “I *am* a much better Mindblood than him, yes.”

I hadn’t been thinking about it at all.

“Feera.” Nessin slumped, sitting low enough that my perfectly erect spine almost brought us level for once.

She returned her attention to me. “Unlike Sin, I *feel* thoughts forming—a wisp at the very edges of your mind. He’s not a very skilled Mindblood compared to me. Not terrible, but he has suppressed it so much he could’ve left you with *no* memories. What he excels at is the control piece. Blood of the bone alongside that of the mind is a dangerous pairing. There,” she said, spearing him with a blasé look. “Does that compliment ease your male ego?”

Feera was intense. Curt and unafraid of Sin. Nothing like I expected an associate of his to act. Until I remembered she'd been friends with Queen Niuna and Ranir.

"Can you see everything in his mind?" I asked.

Sin tensed.

"Alas, I can. The memory I am about to give you is not from your mind but Sin's, of course, Queen."

Now I couldn't stop myself from looking at him. Emptiness reflected in his eyes as they darted to mine. Like the coward I was, I looked away first and stared into the flames.

Maybe I wasn't prepared for whatever I was about to see.

"Would *you* prefer to postpone?" Feera asked immediately. "King or no, he can't make you see."

"No!"

She nodded, all business.

I felt Sin relax beside me.

"This will be quick," Feera said. "Now, I want to start by saying that it's an honor to touch your mind, whether I am entering it or simply placing a memory. In no way do I take this privilege lightly. Your memories are your own, and henceforth, they will remain your own. Understand?"

Nodding, I rolled my hands on my knees into fists before flattening them. Fists. Flat. Fists. Flat.

Feera skillfully kept her gaze up.

"It will be but a few seconds to return the recollection to you, to lock it away up there for good. However, *you* will relive it. Intensely. Every detail I've extracted from Sin." Feera hesitated, too focused on my face to glance away. "Memories elicit emotions, and it can be a lot to work through, Queen. Especially when you don't have the full picture of the past."

Her eyes shone with warning, and she studied me intently for a long moment.

"I'll manage," I said.

"Good. Then I'd like to begin with a story."

When I said nothing, Feera rotated the bracelets on her wrist.

"I was sold to the Old King at fifteen. I'd been in hiding all my life, concealing my Mindblood as best I could before fleeing to the next place. I was discovered during a draft when the Colossi warred amongst themselves, when their war threatened to destroy the entirety of the Soullands. As a

female, I wasn't allowed to serve my realm. Not in the war, at least. Instead, the Old King confined me to this very citadel. His servants decorated my body with jewels like his own work of art. But I served as a flashy warning, for I saw through all their minds like the clearest of gems, and I shared with the king everyone's secrets."

Feera lifted her silk sleeve to show hundreds of tiny indents in the skin around her wrist—*hundreds* marking the tiniest patch of skin. I wondered how they remained in the absence of the jewels and if the markings riddled the rest of her body.

She cleared her throat. "Like many others, Gearóid Drumghoul paraded me around the Court of Soulless. He ordered me to keep it secure at all times, betraying those I always dreamed of befriending. He never touched me. In fact, he kept me quite comfortable apart from the gems, but he *did* control me. He forced Queen Niuna to command me. The thing about keeping those you believe to be your allies close—those who *could* be your enemy one day? Gearóid had brought me right into the daemon's lair. Every game he played, every secret, became mine. Except Queen Niuna was smarter. I was hers, not his. As was Ranir."

Only then did I question why Feera was sharing this with me.

"I am telling you," she answered, still holding my gaze, "because I was loyal to Queen Niuna until the end. Even as she lay dying."

Feera rolled up her sleeve. She flashed the underside of her upper arm, almost near her armpit. The skin there bore the same indentations, but she meant me to focus elsewhere: a tattooed hellhound head.

It stared back at me with inked white eyes.

"I was loyal when Gearóid left her in the throne room to bleed out. When a souldagger took her last drop of blood and the guards refused to give her a soul. Everyone refused. They restrained Ranir so she couldn't mend her either."

Feera rolled up her other sleeve.

"Queen Niuna was *more* than an addiction, more than what the king portrayed her to be. Her last thoughts screamed a single thing. As in Clais, three is an important number in the Soullands, and she swore her third son would be Daemon King. *He must be Daemon King*. So I vowed to stand alongside him."

Feera finished rolling her other sleeve to the top of her bicep, twisting her wrist to reveal two more hellhounds. One with pure white fur and a scar

running through its eye. And the other with a collar of hawthorn flowers around its black mane.

The latter was fresh, the ink bright amidst the indentations that reminded me of the tiniest of mosaic tiles.

“I am loyal to my new Daemon Queen. Because I am part of something much bigger. Ending Gearóid Drumghoul was just the beginning.”

“Thane has said that before,” I interrupted.

“Mum’s last words,” Sin whispered.

“Queen Niuna’s last words to her *heir*.” Feera straightened in her seat. “Now that you’ve had the single glimpse you’ll ever have into *my* mind, let us move onto yours. Lie back,” she instructed and hovered over me.

Tears threatened to fall from my eyes as I lowered to the settee reluctantly. I imagined Sin brushing the hair off my face. Twining a piece around his bare pink fingers. Comforting me with his touch after the nightmares...

I squeezed my eyes shut to avoid the fabrications and loneliness.

“Take a deep breath for me, Queen,” Feera said.

When the memory hit me, I flinched like I’d been struck. Black swallowed my surroundings. Yet something much lighter streaked it.

The palest hue of red.

Pink.

Until it deepened to blue.

SIN



THE HEAT ☽ 1 MOON BEFORE WEDDING DAY

SPLAYED ON HER BED LIKE A STARFISH, SERSA'S HEAD LOLLED TO THE SIDE AS I stepped through the wall connected to her balcony. Her room was airless and muggy in spite of the open window, inviting a breeze in from the sea.

Then again, I was here to end things and already having difficulty breathing.

“Unwise to leave a west-facing window open,” I said. “The Sluagh might come find you, love.”

Her thoughts told me she'd trained with the Shadowess all day, leaving her body aching from exertion. Only a few days of the Heat remained. Yet the season refused to let Harvest take over whilst trees all over Os Íseal shed their leaves.

Sersa smiled at me. “Are you actually here or am I asleep?”

“Why? Do you frequently dream of monsters in your bedroom after midnight?”

“I dream of you in my bed at all times.” She lifted the sheets in invitation, revealing a disheveled sleeping dress.

Dúm.

I looked away. Letting myself follow any thoughts of those bare legs would make things harder.

Nothing was going to make this easier either.

I cursed myself for using that light, jesting tone of voice that came so easily with Sersa.

“I didn’t think we’d see one another tonight,” she said, scooting backward and cussing as she touched a hand to her sore abdomen.

I kept my distance from her bed. “Neither did I.”

“How was the Festival of Flames? You didn’t find a new flame there, did you?”

Sersa hated that my identity forced us to live in the shadows. Wraiths and mortals paired all the time, but I feared Gearóid would steal our souls in the blink of an eye if he only knew.

“The festival was over the top per usual...but I came here for other reasons. Sersa—I found your father’s soul.”

Wincing, she bolted upright all the way. “Do you have it?”

I signaled for quiet. “I couldn’t take it. Not so out in the open. I learned I have tails on me. The Daemon King’s underlings have seen me in the slums with someone. You. The king will try to learn who you are if he isn’t already.”

“What do we do?”

Against my better judgment, I stepped forward. “I will handle things on my own. You need not worry, love.”

“Now I’m going to worry,” Sersa said, falling back on her elbows. Her brow knotted as she squinted at nothing in particular.

The bed creaked under my weight when I took a seat on the edge, and I felt a lot like the old springs and wood. Ready to snap. Fall apart. Sersa narrowed her eyes, certain it shouldn’t creak at all with me in soulform.

“I cannot—cannot—have you involved in the game I’m playing from here on out. Whatsoever.”

“Game?” She reached for me and withdrew, realizing we couldn’t make contact. I watched the internal struggle on her face, the crinkle in her brow and regret that we weren’t from the same realm, before she tried anyway.

Her touch was solid, as was I.

Sersa’s gaze snapped up to meet mine.

I grimaced. “I thought this might be possible. It’s your soul—ours

together. Something about being near you makes me feel almost mortal.”

In that instant, Sersa sensed something was off. Her small frame beside mine tensed.

“I came here to talk because this has to be the last time we see each other for—”

“What?” Her eyes fired. She snatched her hand from mine and cursed, her sore muscles spasming once more.

“Please,” I murmured. “Listen to what I have to say.”

Sersa threw herself off the bed. “I don’t think I want to hear the rest.” She shook her head and snickered under her breath, a vicious sound. “Is this because I—”

That spiteful snort of disgust surfaced again, this one breathless like I’d strangled all the air out of her.

“It’s because I wouldn’t lie with you, right?”

At my dingy apartment a few nights back, I’d been ready to give into her pleas. To take the last bits of her innocence I had yet to.

We nearly had until she panicked.

Sersa felt no relief we hadn’t lain together though. She regretted ever wanting me at all. Resentment radiated from her as thick as the humid air.

It broke me.

I snapped to my feet. “No. Gods, no, Sersa.”

“A daemon needs his fill, doesn’t he?” She turned toward the trunk across from her bed and started fishing for a change of clothes.

“What are you doing? Sersa, stop.”

She whirled on me and snarled, “Guess what? A mortal has needs too so off I go!”

I blocked the door. “I’m not letting you do something you’ll regret.”

“Regret?” Sersa spat, glaring up at me, looking so small but lethal. Her lips trembled. Behind her eyes, blue, red, and black formed a confusing twist of emotions. Sersa didn’t understand those three colors any better than I did, but I wanted to reach out and touch them, to reassure each of them.

“If anything, Nessin, I regret you.”

She tried to step around me.

“You are not going anywhere. Not until you hear what I have to say.”

Sersa reached for my face, switching tactics instantly. All in hopes of changing my mind. “Please. I-I—”

I had to close my eyes. Had to close myself off to her responses. Sersa

pulled me down toward her, trying to seal our lips, practically bawling. She'd never been able to reach me on her own though. I had to help close the distance.

I wouldn't. Not tonight.

"I will keep working to get your father's soul back, but I need to do it alone," I repeated. "This is difficult for me too."

Sersa shoved away from me, snatching her hands back. "How is that the right thing to say right now?"

Red rimmed her eyes and tears poured down her cheeks. I hadn't seen a loved one cry this much in centuries. Not since the war. Not since Menadé lay dying in Dev's arms. To know that Sersa felt a weight equal to death because I was leaving her made me want to die inside.

I would be dead inside without her.

It's temporary, I told myself.

Seeing into her thoughts was far more painful. Sersa hated how secretive I'd been while we courted. For weeks now, she'd wanted to admit she loved me. She'd been waiting, certain I would tell her first.

I hadn't.

If only love could express what I felt for Sersa, I might have. Of course, I already loved her. No question. I knew the moment we met.

Ending Gearóid before the trials began took precedence though. The aftermath of the assassination... There was no telling what would happen.

The next moon would be convoluted as all fuck, complex and precarious, and I would be too preoccupied to keep an eye on Sersa. Not that she needed it under normal circumstances, but shoving your father off his throne with a knife buried in his back was not a normal circumstance in any way, shape, or form.

What was I to do? Bring Sersa to the White Plume every night? Keep her shackled to my side? Have her watch over my shoulder every time I killed someone who challenged me or didn't fit into my plans?

Perhaps letting her see that monster now would help.

Pick a fight, something told me. It's the only way you'll get out tonight.

"I will be king soon, Sersa, and that is my sole concern. It has to be. There are duties I must fulfill—"

"Marrying before the trials. You told me," she said in a flat voice, licking the tears off her lips. "But I thought maybe things had changed."

"Nothing has changed," I said, dulling the edge of my voice.

Eyes wide, her mouth fell open.

“I’m not saying nothing has changed between us. Other conditions simply remain the same.”

“You know what? You don’t need to make excuses to end things with someone—and certainly not me.” Sersa turned her head to the side, evading my stare. “Leave, Nessin.”

When Sersa moved toward the door once more, I grabbed her wrist and held her still.

“Don’t touch me!”

She writhed feverishly, eager to act on her impulses and find someone to distract her. I wanted to command her not to, but we would be apart for an entire moon.

I had no right to order her around.

Since the day I’d heard the call of our souls, I hadn’t touched a single person, and I would never touch another. The thought of not seeing or being with Sersa—not until I could return to her as Daemon King—brought about another fear.

The ubiquitous fear that she might not accept me.

Her mouth parted as if to say something else. She clamped it shut and swallowed.

“I want to be Daemon King before our relationship becomes so serious we can no longer hide it. As things are now, I can’t have you stand before the king. You know too much—things he and the Circle could use against us both. I can’t afford distractions or to be worrying about what might happen to you either.”

“Before our relationship becomes serious?” Sersa echoed. “Then you’re saying our relationship was what exactly—a fling?”

“Tell me. Would you step onto the Daemon Throne, Sersa? Would you come to the Soullands and rule beside me?”

“I would have done anything for you!”

The words sent ice straight into my heart.

Chest heaving, her shoulders rose and fell in heavy breaths. Moonlight painted her exasperated face.

The moment stretched on for an eternity, while simultaneously ending in the blink of an eye.

“There are things I can’t tell you. Things I must do. I will not be a merciful king when my reign begins.”

Shimmering eyes wandered over my face, my scars. Her eyebrows slanted downward over black eyes sharp enough to make me sweat.

“I suppose our relationship needs to become more serious for you to be open with me. That would explain a lot, actually. I thought it was serious enough, what with me being your supposed soulkeeper. But you are a Daemon Prince, and I’m just some naïve mortal, apparently.”

I was the one to hesitate now.

Sersa’s blood heated behind her eyes. Her thoughts were so thick in her head, I couldn’t form a response.

“We’re not serious. You don’t trust me enough to tell me certain things. You won’t talk about your scars. Your feelings,” Sersa rattled off. “You say you’re mine but can’t even tell me you love me.” Black hair fell in her eyes. She blew out a breath, stirring a strand. “You’re a gods-damned mind reader, Nessin. So why try to hide my feelings from you? You know I love you.”

Fuck.

Hurt flashed in her eyes alongside the tears. Sersa shook her head. “Tell me you don’t love me. I want to hear the words.”

“Sersa, please.”

When her face contorted, the rage deepening, I knew I’d only dug myself a deeper hole.

Sersa snickered. “Fine. You won’t say it? Then I will. I hate you. I was right when we met. A daemon and a mortal together? Preposterous,” she shouted, shoving my chest. “Perhaps I’ll wed one of those chieftains, after all. Come back in a few weeks and see. Come to our handfasting, why don’t you, and see how it feels when I’m not yours!”

“We are bound,” I insisted. “There is no—”

“Then I want to tear whatever binds us together out of my soul! Get out.”

Full on sobbing now, Sersa dropped to her knees.

Mindlessly, I crossed the room.

Stepped through the glass.

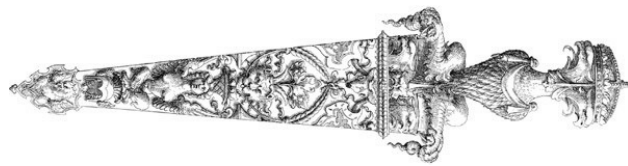
Onto the balcony.

Drowning out her sobs as I headed for the veil proved impossible.

This is for the best, I told myself. A lie I would live by until Sersa and I could live beyond the shadows together. No amount of souls could get me high enough to convince myself it was true.

Because now my heart and soul hated me as much as I hated myself.

Serena



AS I ROSE FROM THE SETTEE ALONE, A LITTLE WOBBLY AND DISORIENTED, I glimpsed shadows moving in the closet.

Nessin.

Following a heavy sigh, I downed the glass of water set out for me and crossed the room. Sin was folding and hanging my clothes, neatly putting them back where they belonged instead of the bag I'd failed to reach earlier.

Seeing Sin in the memory without his marbled horns—and now with—spoke of just how much had happened between us since that day. But the memory had only made me feel worse. Reliving it through his eyes assailed me with every shade of blue mixed with black.

A sharp, inescapable loneliness clawed at my insides. The second we reached the Knot, the second I found myself alone, I wouldn't be able to fight the darkness. Maybe the nightmares I'd subjected both of us to last night.

“What are you doing?” I asked stupidly, nodding at the bag.

“The house is fully stocked. Unless there are specific clothes you want to bring.” Sin held up a pair of plush sleeping pants. “Figured you'd want these—comfy pants.”

I exhaled loudly, and my shoulders slumped with relief. Thank gods there was *anything* inside the maze other than Sluagh.

“You really thought I would make you camp outside in the snow?” Sin

forced a chuckle. “The house is hidden in the maze.”

That chuckle didn’t hide the agony he tried to. More than the physical, it was an internal war he wasn’t sure he’d win tonight.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this?” Sin whispered.

“It will help you, won’t it?”

“It will give me peace of mind if I need the chamber.”

If. Devlin had been more absolute than that.

“Then I want to go. Do you—” I started, noting not only the internal cracks but the ones in my voice too. “Do you feel okay?”

“Yes. Fine,” Sin answered a little quickly. “We should get going. It’ll only get darker as the day goes on,” he added with a nod at the skylight.

It’d get darker because his birthday started in a matter of bells.

And he’ll be spending it locked in a chamber.

“I’m ready whenever,” I whispered unconvincingly.

Sin pierced my gaze with his as he looked up. “Were you happy the day we wed—any part of you?”

Like his question, my answer was out of my mouth before I could stop it. “I woke up nervous and puking. I didn’t have the full picture that day either. Obviously.”

He finished putting the clothes away, faced me, and pinched his glove, twisting something beneath.

One of the rings.

“Though the words said during our handfasting were few and far between, I would have agreed to anything to be with you. Do you know that?”

As Sin slid off the leather glove followed by the metal loop on his pinky, I stood in stunned silence. With a soft click, he set it on the dresser between us.

“This was the ring I offered you when I proposed a couple days after the memory Feera showed you. I couldn’t let you keep it that night because it also happened to be the night I stole your memories...the first time. A moon later, we were wed. It took feeling like I lost you to know that not involving you *meant* losing you. I was never willing to lose you, Sersa, and I am not going to now. Not without a fight.”

I took an immediate step forward, sliding the ring off the dresser and onto my finger.

“I am not willing to lose you either, Nessin.”

We left it at that.

The glimpse past his walls he'd given me came with only minor relief after I'd watched the agonizing memory. Rising fear warred against it. Fear because the Knot was the only thing standing between us and the Mórrígan.

For some reason, the fear *was* a relief because I felt a little less lonely than before.



I scanned the slate walls towering before me, unable to peel my gaze from the monstrosity that was the Knot. I'd failed to imagine much of anything through the fog when Sin tried to show me before. But if I had, it wouldn't have been *this*.

Several hundred feet tall, it reminded me of a giant chalkboard shaped into a box. A *very* large box. Cobalt blue lightning cut through the slabs, simultaneously striking the sky overhead like an extension of the maze. The land directly surrounding the Knot's perimeter appeared to be charred and broken, as if the maze had forced its way right up from the center of the earth.

But the Sluagh were the most terrifying part.

They flew in entrancing arcs and swoops, their silver bodies periodically lit up but otherwise unaffected by the strikes among the storm clouds.

"How did you *build* this?"

When Sin looked to the side with a small smile, I knew his memories had tugged him back—memories I could never fathom because they were probably older than Os Íseal. That and the Daemon King's walls still rivaled the height and strength of the Knot.

"Bardca designed it and supervised me as I worked. Mostly yelled at me when I was doing things wrong."

I wanted to slide my hand into Sin's, to ask him to tell me more, but my spinning gut silenced me. The ring I wore felt strange and heavy too—a grand letter *D* set between deep indigo stones.

Heavier were the possibilities for tonight.

Lightning zigzagged up the length of the wall facing us. I flinched hard, stumbling backward into Sin. He steadied me, hands gripping my upper arms.

"If you are afraid, I can bring—"

“No.” I spiraled to look up at him. Blue illuminated his face, tinting his hair and eyes. “I’m staying.”

With a nod, Sin added, “You can leave at any time—no questions asked. Irian will bring you to the others.”

“That’s not happening,” I said sharply. “But thank you.”

The perimeter of black stone seemed to either repel the falling snow or to melt it on contact. Remaining on the icy side, I removed one of my gloves and extended my hand across the boundary.

“Lots of hexes here,” Sin explained. He stood still, utterly and completely focused on the flocks above. “The maze repels Colossi—rather, Colossi form. Otherwise, it might’ve been crushed long ago.”

It extended so far into the sky it was impossible to see the top. Luckily, that meant I also couldn’t quite see all the Sluagh soaring protectively over the home Sin had trapped them in, however many centuries ago.

“Stay close.”

As Sin led me toward the enormous structure, I realized how truly insignificant I was. I breathed deep.

“I still can’t get over the fact you built this. Let alone that *anyone* could.”

Sin ran his palm up the side of the wall. “Bardca was once *the* most powerful and knowledgeable Druid alive. He remains the latter, I’ll give him that, but you met him. He’s grown frail over the last century. He’d be proud to hear you’re impressed though.”

We reached the towering walls that strangely made me feel isolated, although we had yet to enter the maze. This was the Sluagh’s *home*. Their nest. Being Sin’s army, the spirits of the restless dead were his kin. And I’d never felt less like he was mine as I stood in the Knot’s shadow.

When Sin released my hand, my gut dropped into my toes. My thoughts spiraled. He didn’t want to touch me. He didn’t—

“Blood must be given to enter,” he said abruptly. Sin loosened the fingers of his left glove, his dark metal ring serving as a reminder that we, too, *were* kin in the most intimate way.

I bit my lip as my eyes drifted over the pink brushstrokes.

“Only my blood and Bardca’s can open the maze.” He looked over his shoulder. “Would you care to give yours?”

“Will mine work because of the—our Binding?”

Sin shook his head. “I can make a key out of your blood if you would like.”

“Meaning I’d be able to come here—”

“You will *never* come here on your own.”

I winced at the sharpness of his voice.

With an inhale, he added, “The Sluagh will not harm you. But that does not mean this place is safe, Sersa.”

I chewed on my lip and signaled my understanding with a weak nod. “Make me a key. Please.”

“You will need a phrase as well.” Sin removed a dagger from his belt and dragged it across his pale palm then offered it to me.

“You can do it,” I said. “I trust you.”

His eyes softened when he looked down, adjusting his grip on the hilt before making the tiniest cut in the center of my hand.

The sting felt insignificant compared to everything else.

“See?” I forced a smile. “Much better than freezing in a river.”

Sin remained unreadable, and I looked away as he pressed his palm to the wall. He shook his head when I moved to mimic him, gripping my wrist to stop me. Then he spoke under his breath. “*Divarcus ahsceen. Divstra ahsceen. Div iu am aart...* All right—is there a specific phrase you’d like to use?”

“Different from yours?”

“Yes. You just heard mine.”

“Thank gods. I’d fail to pronounce one syllable of whatever that was.”

He chuckled. The sound was a honeyed touch.

“It’s Dreymasadh. A dying daemon language from the isle Dreym.” Sin finally released my wrist. “Your phrase should hold meaning, but take your time. We must say it together when you’re ready.”

I waded through my thoughts, thinking for minutes straight, until I was trembling from the cold. But the night we reunited flooded me suddenly. It was a meaningful night. A painful one. A hopeful one.

When the phrase hit me, I looked down at my feet and bit my lip.

“I have it.” Thanks to my thin voice, I couldn’t pretend I had even the measliest of chances against the tide of feelings overpowering me.

Sin seemed to be holding his breath. He gently grabbed my wrist once more and flattened my hand to the spot on the wall where his blood glimmered. Our eyes locked, and the words he’d already taken from my thoughts made me shiver.

My overflowing feelings had nothing to do with the cold. With anything

else. With anyone else.

“Cría naam,” we said together.

As the words rolled off our tongues, I longed for Sin to kiss me. His eyes were unwavering and didn't so much as drop to my lips. Our hands slid down the wall together. I couldn't bear to look at him when he stopped touching me.

Yet again.

So I faced forward as a door seemed to materialize. The stone looked like it'd split under the same blue lightning that breathed between the slate walls.

Whatever moment we might have shared burst like the pressure after a storm. Like the flashes of lightning. There one moment. Gone the next. I hoped our love for one another might reignite, but my thoughts trailed to a bitter, dark place forged of shadows and resentment.

Maybe we will never share a tender moment again.

No. Sin had promised me he wouldn't stop fighting.

“It's the sway,” he whispered. *“The Temptress. It will pass.”*

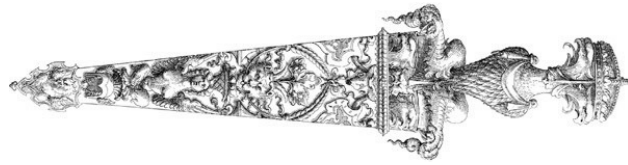
Nodding, I bit my lip until I swore it would bleed.

“Have you ever brought anyone here?” I asked to distract myself.

“Besides Bardca, you will be the first. Only time will tell if you think that's a good thing. Or a very bad one. Cover your ears. It's about to get loud.”

I stepped over the threshold, clinging to Sin in the near total darkness that ensued.

Serena



A CACOPHONY OF SCREECHES INSTANTLY DROWNED MY VERY FIRST THOUGHT when we stepped inside the Knot.

Why the hell hadn't I heard all of this from outside?

I clapped hands over my ears and bent forward as my entire body clenched in response. When my knees buckled, Sin grabbed me by the elbow and wrapped his arm around my waist. The fact I needed his full support left me feeling vulnerable, and it wasn't lost on me I'd told him off for the same reaction when I cleaned his wounds last night.

As if the Knot wasn't terrifying enough, the macabre choir that every last Sluagh contributed to *was* enough to drive anyone mad.

"That's the point," Sin said over another round of assault to my ears.

"Can't you command them to stop?" I hollered.

"*Avié.*"

He uttered the word no louder than a whisper. But the Knot silenced jarringly. So quiet it was *blaring*.

"Why didn't you do that before we entered?" I shouted accidentally. Ears ringing, I dropped into a crouch, forcing even breaths in and out. Sweat dotted my forehead, and the center of my chest felt tight.

"I didn't know you'd be so sensitive to it," Sin said. As if that were completely logical. "We have about one minute before it restarts though.

Security features.”

“It doesn’t bother you?” I flinched as a crack of thunder rumbled within the maze walls. It sounded so much louder without the Sluagh.

Sin shook his head.

“Can’t you command me to tune it out or something?”

His eyes narrowed. “I can create a white noise, similar to what I did on the shore after the chalet. You probably won’t be able to focus on anything else.”

“Okay—”

The resumption of their screeches lodged the word right back in my throat. I cried out and reflexively squeezed my eyes shut, pressing hands to my ears.

It did nothing to muffle the chaos.

A second later, Sin scooped me up.

Despite everything, his hands weren’t shy, gripping my backside as he walked. My thighs squeezed his waist, and I slid my arms around his neck, keeping hands over my ears.

Save for the hum Sin created, all was quiet. It sounded like the sea during a slack tide—the softest stillness as my gaze glided up the maze walls, settling on the open air above. Sin’s eyes burned into me, but I focused on what should have been the ceiling, yet was a barrier of stars so far away. It couldn’t be the top of the Knot.

While the Sluagh never ceased their powerful swoops, their movements seemed to slow in the silence too. Finally looking at Sin, I smiled—a sentiment he didn’t return. In contrast, he looked serious. Though his expression said *something*, I could only assume he didn’t want me to see whatever he felt.

His withdrawal worsening, surely.

You can drop your hands, he echoed in my thoughts.

I chewed on my lip but eventually planted my palms on his shoulders.

In the silence, the lightning strikes between the walls appeared more rhythmic and mesmerizing too, no longer startling with each flash of light but allowing me to appreciate their beauty.

Like the walls, cracks meandered and branched out in all directions along the ground. It was overgrown not with weeds but with upright crystals that illumed the walkways whenever the lightning ceased.

Balancing me on one arm, Sin halted before a wall at what had to be the

middle of the maze. He hadn't replaced his glove, and there remained a thin swipe of crusted blood.

He flattened his palm to the surface. The white noise drowned out whatever words he uttered. Then an opening in the wall materialized, identical to the entry into the maze.

The darkness on the wall's other side engulfed us.

If not for my incessant curiosity, I might've been disappointed when Sin set me down. I spun around in confusion when a door closed behind me. A solid wall existed there—no entrance—and a lantern-lit space glowed to life around us.

My hearing returned as I blinked the rest of the firelit space into focus. It was a little house. A sitting area to our left. A kitchen to our right, with a dining table for three people at most. A narrow hall bisected the room, extending to the back of the house.

It was a simple space, every room connected like the chalet. The skin between my shoulders felt tight as flashes of burning skin and the shore returned to me.

“The Sluagh rest during the day. I would normally suggest we sleep when they do, but we both could use the rest right now.” Sin set his gloves on a side table next to a long leather sofa positioned in front of a cozy hearth. Blue flames burned behind the fireguard. He straightened off the back of the sofa and nudged his chin at it. “That fire was sparked by the Eternal Flame, also known as the Eternphire.”

I followed, looking for any excuse to be near him.

Sin stooped beside the hearth to get a better look. “See those gems? They create a flame that never stops burning. They've been in there for several hundred years.”

The vibrant blue gems warred for attention with the flame itself. Curious, I tilted my ring finger back and forth. The stones were the ones he spoke of—undoubtedly.

My throat felt constricted by metal rings.

“They are,” Sin said. “I had them added from the First Queen's collection. It was only that ostentatious signet when my mum wore it.”

I looked up at him. “Well, I love it. It lets everyone know who I am.”

“And who is that?”

“Sersa Drumghoul,” I said, trying to sound resilient.

When Sin didn't move toward me, I turned my back to him then strode

away before I did something stupid. This was the least lonely I'd felt in bells, but one look from him instantly deteriorated me again. The absence of his touch weighed on me too. Not to mention, he'd been very clear he *didn't* want me here.

My heightening emotions served as a warning to go to sleep—the one thing that would rid me of this pressing anxiety.

Until the dawn, at least.

“So, uh, where can I sleep?”

Sin gestured to the first door on the left. “The main bedroom.”

I regretted approaching the room when Sin followed me with silent steps, the only indication being his shadow swallowing the door. I turned to meet his gaze, my hand shaking as I gripped the doorknob. His body was inches from mine.

“Oh. Is there another room I should go to or...”

“How will you keep an eye on me in a separate room?”

“*Right.*” I faced forward, too aware of his steadying hand on my hip.

Then I pushed open the door.

An all-glass wall straight ahead separated the room from a small outdoor courtyard. A path of stone outlined the perimeter, strewn with potted plants, and a gazebo stood at its center. Oddly enough, a desk that resembled a tree more than a piece of furniture served as the focal point next to a little bridge traversing a pond. Beneath a low slate ceiling, built-in bookshelves comprised the far wall, shielded from the elements.

“Bardca liked to work outside,” Sin said.

While not a single lantern ignited the space, the lightning sufficed. As shadows twirled across the floors and the tops of my boots, I tipped my head back and flinched. The transparent ceiling provided an unobstructed view of the Sluagh. Tracing their flight patterns, my eyes bouncing from one to the next as the tips of their wings crossed paths, I instantly felt dizzy.

“*Shit.*”

Sin shifted behind me in the reflection of the glass wall, where he rested against the door. “You can stay in the living room if you prefer. The guest room’s ceiling is also glass.”

“No. I just wasn’t expecting this.”

The peaceful room was clearly soundproof, and I had the urge to fall back on the bed and watch the Sluagh. I felt as if I’d been submerged beneath the sea as I studied the night sky, fully enthralled by the creatures who’d dragged

so many of my clan members into the Soullands. Fear of the Sluagh had not just been a learned thing but an innate one too.

I took a deep breath before returning my gaze to level ground, my head whirling slightly.

Sin sifted through a dark dresser in the corner of the room. “I stocked some clothes for you a few moons ago. Niuna told me to, actually. Though I insisted you’d never come here. And now *here* we are.” He held up a plain sleeping shirt to pair with the plush pants we’d brought from the citadel. “Not exactly your typical silk. Should serve its purpose though.”

I pressed my lips together to avoid mentioning the other night—when we’d slept naked after I’d come to him sloshed.

Tonight isn’t like that night.

We were here for *Sin*, not my ridiculous need for him.

“I’m going to rinse off first.” I’d bathed this morning. “Are you okay if I leave you?”

Sin kneaded the back of his neck and nodded. “The shower and tub are through there. And the chamber,” he said, looking toward a long, dark tunnel near the glass wall, “is at the end. I’ll start on some food and head in after we eat.”

Behind Sin’s eyes was the tempest I’d grown used to but had no idea how to navigate, much like the landscape beyond the glass ceiling.

“Holler if you need me,” I said awkwardly.

A slanted skylight loomed over the far wall in the connected bathing room, casting the large shower on the opposite end mostly in darkness. Bluish light slivered the floor and tub, the flashes intermittently tinting the white walls too.

Shaking my head at myself, I closed my eyes before taking a long look at my ring. With everything going on—the issues piling on top of us—I couldn’t imagine our recovery. After a night filled with nightmares of Laisrés, I should have known better and stayed in the other room. The possibility I might dream of him... Gods, I *couldn’t*. Not with Sin in this much pain and trying to hide it.

So stupid of me.

My emotions were ready to spill over. While the dim state of the bathing room did nothing to mask the blue, this was more than sadness.

Deeper than sadness.

But maybe it’d force the Temptress’s sway to spill out of me too.

At the same time, irrational anger toward Sin flooded me. I wished he'd given me no choice but to let him hold me last night. That he'd convinced me it wasn't real with his touch. His love. His body.

As I peeled off my clothes, I tried to stifle my pathetic sobs until I turned the hot water on. Even then, Sin would know. It didn't matter how quietly I cried. He'd *feel* it. He felt everything, no matter how small, and this was no small feeling.

This was blue.

The trio of colors *had* returned, and I was more certain than ever Sin had restored me too.

Blue smoke coiled around me, consuming the shower as I cupped a hand over my mouth. I tried—no, *prayed* I might temporarily sever the cord like I had at the fête. Or that he would ignore me. Let me get my emotions out alone.

Maybe then I could be there for Sin. Reining in my emotions for his sake was unbearable though, and I didn't know what to do to help him either.

So, I selfishly let myself cry.

The tears flowed harder, so much colder against my skin than the hot stream of water I allowed to wash them away.

Sin's foot made a soft splash on the wet tile behind me.

Immediately, I held my breath. As if it might halt the emotion, my tears, *him*. I stepped closer to the stone wall. The stream separating us skimmed my scarred shoulder blades, my spine, and the back of my thighs.

Please let me be, I forced myself to think.

I didn't deserve comfort, but my magic shrieked at the cord.

Touch me.

Silently, Sin turned me around. He was too tall for the stream to hit him in the face. It poured down his chest and abdomen instead—the red vines of the curse exposed with his torc removed. Droplets snaked down the cuts of his muscled hipbones, his thighs, lower still.

"I—" My gods-damned voice was glass. "I'm fine."

"I will *never* let you feel things alone, Sersa." Sin took another step toward me, my breasts brushing his abdomen when he moved under the stream to slide his hands under my jaw. "I asked Feera to show you that memory because I couldn't extract it myself. I tried to bury that feeling the last few moons too. We bury what we feel no more. *I won't.*"

Sin made me look up at him.

My breath caught in my throat.

“My wife is not meant to feel things alone. We are here for one another, and I am sorry,” he whispered in my ear before he planted his wet lips on my cheek. “I am sorry because I’ve been struggling too. But don’t you know how badly I wanted to touch you last night? Even after I asked for the night, I wanted your reassurance that I’m *it*. I wanted to wash away every fear, doubt, and fabrication. You pulled your hands away from me when I tried, and I wanted to respect your boundaries.”

I choked back another sob. “I’m sorry.”

“Do not apologize. You are not at fault, love. I have half a mind to give you the Ordé to protect you, while the other half knows I can’t without spiraling.”

The sound of the water hitting the tiles behind Sin created a rhythm in tune with my racing heart.

“I want to be here for you right now,” I said. “I don’t want you to go through this alone either. I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not, and you *are* here for me. This is not one-sided, Sersa. Let me be here for you too.”

Taking a deep breath, I leaned forward to rest my head against his chest before I kissed the spot concealing his heart. “I believe what you said. I believe it was a Temptress. The color came and went so quickly. It wasn’t real—not like this.”

“I know, love.” His palms kneaded up and down my wet arms. “I have a question that may ruin the moment, as I am so good at doing.”

I nodded, swallowing.

“Do you think the pink was the Temptress—when you first saw the color with me and when it marked me?”

I cried harder, the question flaying me open. But I wasn’t even that sad.

I was mad about a Temptress messing with me.

Mad that Sin had been wounded bad enough to require souls.

Mad that he’d refused them.

Mad that a stupid daemon could come between us.

“No,” I said, touching his painted hand. “No, it was real. Do you think it was real?”

“I do, yes. Now let me take care of you,” Sin said. “Turn around, love. I’ll clean you up so we can rest.”

“You’re not supposed to be taking care—”

“Take care of *me* by letting me do this, Sersa.”

I did as Sin ordered, putting my back to him. His finger traced along the nape of my neck to move my hair out of his way, and I shuddered under his touch, my body concurrently pleading and allayed. I couldn't stop wondering if my feelings could dull his, and how he deciphered between ours.

I could try to summon the blue as I'd just done accidentally and wash him in another emotion.

“You are helping me now, Sersa. I am glad you came with me. Devlin wanted to send me away on my own,” Sin said as he lathered his hands with soap. “Relax for me.”

I leaned back against his bare chest, allowing him to take control.

“Keep your eyes closed the entire time,” Sin whispered and set the soap on the ledge. “I am going to prove to you that our love only needs what's inside us, Sersa. These feelings. Our passion. All of it is intangible in a way, but all of it is real. There is only *us* in this, love, and I will show you the way. Even when you can't see it.”

I licked my lips and swallowed, hot water pouring over them, my chin, my breasts.

Then I shut my eyes.

His kneading motions were enough to make me dizzy. Rubbing my muscles as he cleaned me, his soapy fingers worked their way down my body. Sin ran the suds over my breasts, fingers catching on my nipples. His tender movements were hypnotic, his ministrations a prayer at the altar of my body, and I splayed my hands on the wall in front of me to ground myself.

Sin re-lathered as needed, moving down my hips and the back of my thighs. My breath quickened, and the care in every touch made my muscles clench and turn to jelly. His palm glided over my backside, moving downward in a less tender, needier way to test the boundaries I found had faded from existence.

I pushed myself into him before his hand slid between my legs. The whole-body chills persisted as Sin kept his fingers together, cleaning the apex of my thighs with his flattened palm.

I felt more than desire. I felt love, warmth, a daemon taking care of me.

“*Sin.*”

“I promise this was supposed to be sweet, not seductive.”

“It's actually ridiculous you think *anything* you do is not seductive.”

A gasp poured out of me as his palm moved back between my thighs, two

fingers unable to help themselves when they reached my center, wet for more than one reason. Sin tipped my chin up with a sudsy hand to kiss me. His tongue masterfully teased out every drop of my desire, and the pressure in the lowest part of my belly mounted.

He seized my hand on the wall and laced our fingers, pulling away to turn me around.

“Clean enough.”

Sin turned off the water and carried me into the room, not bothering to dry us off before setting me on the bed. The kiss he planted on my wet stomach made my eyes shoot open.

“Are you okay with this?” I asked.

He sat back on his heels. I tried to keep my eyes up. His thick cock was hard as can be, so ready for me. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

My teeth grazed my lip. “Because we have been on shaky ground.”

Leaning toward me, Sin traced his fingers up the outside of my leg. His soaked hair was a mess, the bags under his eyes seemed permanent, and his skin was wet instead of clammy but still wan.

The Sluagh’s shadows continued to flicker all around us in a dance of shadow and light.

“From where I stand, the ground feels steady to me. I know there are cracks,” Sin said. “We both admitted there are, but they are on the surface, not the foundation, love. And we are mending them together. So if *you* are okay with this, close those eyes for me again.”

Though I obeyed, I couldn’t stop the tears from falling.

Sightless, I desperately swiped at the air for Sin’s length until he helped me. His skin was wet and warm, and a shudder passed through me when his enormous hand moved on top of mine, guiding me in the strokes we made together. He groaned with every sweep.

I pulled away, letting my legs fall open. Sin’s hand slid behind my neck. He gripped me tight but tender, his fingers spread on the back of my scalp, and his arousal brushing against my lips. I opened my mouth, expecting Sin to thrust inside, but he only allowed my tongue a single swirl around his head.

He moved down my body, tracing kisses between my breasts and biting down when he slotted himself between my thighs. Sin joined us one merciless inch at a time. My walls squeezed him, and he groaned as he shoved himself deeper.

I cried out with relief. He was always too much in the best of ways, but I didn't want him to slow. Ever. At all.

"You want all of me, love?"

"Yes," I cried, biting his shoulder when he pulled out. I gripped his backside, urging him to slam into me. "Yes, Sin."

I screamed repeatedly under the weight of his relentless thrusts.

His thumb circled my center between us, and my legs trembled so hard I stopped thinking. We moved together intuitively.

Until something changed.

The closer we got to the peak, the worse I felt. Not my body. Not between my legs. But the pleasure coursing through me couldn't outdo the agony I felt *through* Sin.

It ached inside me as deep as he was.

"Take some of my soul," I gasped. The words tumbled from my lips before I knew I wanted it at all.

Sin breathed heavily. "Don't say that. Don't ask that of me."

Our bodies didn't stop, but I felt his resistance. I gripped him by his hair and pulled his head back. He wouldn't look at me—his brows pulled inward, and he'd shut his eyes.

"You don't want that, love. It's a—it's *my* craving."

"Take it," I repeated. "If it will stop this feeling, take it. I don't want you to suffer, Sin."

"I *must* push through this."

Finally, Sin's eyes opened to reveal two pools of black.

"I feel what you feel," I said. "A shard, at the very least."

Instantly, the Binding silenced.

"I am fine." His whisper masked everything he felt, his hips thrusting dutifully once more. "I am fine, love."

"Let go, Sin. You said I'm not alone so *let go*. Let go if you love me because I *want* to be here for you."

He gritted his teeth, so resistant to this one thing.

But then the Binding resurrected, and Sin let me feel everything. Or knowing my Daemon King, it was as much as he'd allow himself to share.

I pushed Sin's sweaty hair backward, running my fingers along one marbled horn, mostly red in the dark room. Holding his gaze, I grabbed him, lifted my hips, and pulled him deeper. He closed his eyes and rolled his neck.

"Fuck me so hard we can't feel it, Sin."

He chuckled—a sound I wanted to cling to forever. “Another night. I want to savor you, *cría naam*.”

Then Sin proceeded to make love to me with my eyes closed like nothing had ever happened.

No—like the things that’d happened had made us stronger.

Tears gathered in the corners of my eyes as I cried out, and Sin continued to thrust until we finished together in a haze. Throbbing inside me, he lowered his front to mine. Sweat glistened between the grooves of his scars.

“Thank you for showing me the way,” I whispered, blinking up at the Sluagh beyond the glass ceiling.

A moment passed before Sin rolled onto his back to join me. Only our hands touched.

“Promise you’ll lead me if ever I need you to?” he replied blearily, both of us equally spent.

“Always. I promise, *Nessin*.”

We lay there quietly, only our breaths filling the space, and watched the Sluagh circle. A half bell passed, but neither of us moved.

“Sin?” I rolled on top of him and listened to the beat of his heart.

Flickering cobalt lightning dusted his scarred hand, skimming my bare skin. “Hmm?”

“I didn’t tell you to take my soul in the heat of the moment. I don’t want the shard back. There isn’t anything for me in *Os Íseal*. Not when you’re here.”

Sin swallowed, his breaths becoming rutted once more.

Enraptured by him, I rested my chin on his sternum. “The other thing I wanted to say is that if you’re going to relapse, the only soul I want you taking pieces of is *mine*. Ours... It already belongs to you. Completely.”

Sin smiled sadly. “This is a habit I must break, love.”

“I know.”

Oh, how I knew. What I was admitting meant we needed to decide on a medium between our very different upbringings. I was mortal-ish, while Sin was *immortal*-ish if he continued to consume souls, which didn’t seem possible in his current state.

“I will truly live forever, provided *Jestin* doesn’t kill me, if I keep this up. Consuming so many souls...” Sin shook his head.

“That isn’t the point,” I said. Eyes closed, he let his head fall to the side. I weaved my fingers through his hair when he refused to look up. “Sin?”

He smiled, already knowing my thoughts. Gods, was that smile beautiful.

“In case being sworn in was not a clear declaration, I am trying to say that I’m not leaving the Soullands. We are bound not by the hand of the gods, but by choice. I choose you.”

His eyes said everything when he finally opened one. Then the other a second later. Sin wasn’t exactly crying, but I thought the glazed quality was as close as he would ever get.

“I mean it, Nessin. Not because we’re here or because you’re struggling. I *want* to be here with you. And I am still your wife by choice.”

He tipped his head back against the pillow as far as the horns would allow and shouted, “Fucking finally!”

Then he rolled me onto my back.

I squeezed his arms. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but feasting on another person’s soul consensually sounds strangely intimate.”

“It *can* be.”

“There. I don’t want you indulging in someone else. I’m choosing this. Here. *Us*. So please.”

“A single word and I’m ready to do anything and everything you say. Sharing your soul though—that is not something to take lightly, Sersa.”

“*Our* souls.” I bit his nipple hard. It didn’t have the intended effect, as evidenced by what I felt between my legs.

“Oh, no, don’t hurt me, my little daemoness. It’s not like I *like* it. Also, I bite harder.”

I eyed his straight, very white teeth carefully. Thankfully, they weren’t pointy.

Sin brushed the messy black strands of hair off my face. “I promise we will talk about all of this. After Faerie Forest, okay?”

“*Immediately* after.”

Sin’s demeanor changed. Black veins like branches extended from his eyes. He squeezed them shut with a hiss, shuddering hard.

“What can I do?” I whispered.

The muscles in his forehead knotted. He inhaled. Exhaled. Shook his head. “As much as I do not want to, I think it’s time for the chamber.”

I frowned, not wanting to acknowledge the tunnel it punctuated.

“I will wait until you fall asleep, love. Rest,” Sin urged.

Closing my eyes, I focused on my husband’s touch as he gently combed through my hair and caressed my skin until I drifted off.

SIN



LET US SHOW HER TOGETHER, NESSIN. SHOW HER HOW MUCH YOU NEED SOULS.

The unforgivable mistake I'd made—accidentally falling asleep beside Sersa—had me bolting upright, instantaneously alert.

Fuck.

I slipped out of bed carefully, not giving the chamber a second glance. My sweat had soaked through the sheets, outlining the way I'd slept, practically cemented there on my back. The fucking claw marks accused me too—I'd gripped the mattress hard enough to create small tears in the sheets.

Don't pretend you're going in that chamber willingly, continued the feminine voice that sounded eerily like the Mórrígan. *We both know you won't. Let us show her that nature always wins, why don't we? Show her, Chieftain.*

I glimpsed my reflection in the spotless glass wall. My irises, pupils, and sclera were entirely black, and the pervasive rush in my veins insisted the time to resist had ended.

This resurgent craving wasn't about to let me rest until I gave in.

I stood over Sersa, attempting to match her calm breaths as she lay utterly still. Black hair, waved from sleeping with it wet, draped around her messily,

and her skin glowed beneath the lightning.

But it was the souls, not her beauty whilst asleep, that halted me. They were too loud—torturously so in a way I could overlook no longer.

Sersa was all I wanted in more ways than one presently. The promise of satisfaction licked at my core, convincing me just how good she would taste. How good she would *feel*.

Death was pounding at a door inside me, drowning out the craving itself, while also insistent there existed only one way out of this. All the muscles in my chest ached, as did my gut, and the room tipped left and right.

Once more I was forced to choke our Binding and the sensations that might pass through it.

I snapped my head to the side, focused solely on Irian.

“Come.”

As commanded, the spirit stalked into the connected bathing room on my heels. Taloned feet clicked the light wood floor. I shut the door silently before I dropped to the ground against the wall. My fingers tapped my thighs until I dug them in as hard as I could.

Don't lose control. Don't lose control. Don't do it.

Although it wasn't the Mórrígan's voice, but my own, she was ready with a reply.

Losing control can be so gratifying.

Several of the first souls I'd ever reaped swept through the walls in flowing, translucent forms. They studied me. Irian—as a little boy—shook his head in warning. His face was cherubic, bright green eyes blinking at me in question. I reached for the Sluagh, defying the child asking me not to act, to follow these impulses. The surface didn't matter. He was as old as me.

“Don't judge me,” I growled. “You have no idea what I feel like.”

Death?

The word seemed to sway between us, a pendulum like this decision.

Resist. Give in. Resist. Surrender.

The voice of temptation always sounded louder than that of restraint.

“I *wanted* to do the right thing, but I don't have time to feel like this.”

Jestin needed to be ended. Bardca recovered. The Mórrígan confronted.

My slick skin pulsed. I twisted on the ground and pressed back until my horns broke straight through the wall. Sweat fell in my eyes as I focused hard on the white counters in front of me, kicking at them to keep myself in the present. The here and now.

“One,” I said, the same way Mum used to before I lost control. “One,” I echoed like I’d always responded. “Two. *Two*. Three. *Three*.”

Sersa was going to feel the agony, the pain, the twisting inside my gut if I didn’t do something.

Yes. It’s for her.

One shard. All I needed was one shard.

The Sluagh moved toward me, almost whimpering with the reluctance of a child doing something they knew they shouldn’t. Irian didn’t want to relinquish our souls, and I didn’t blame him.

Regardless, I had no patience and didn’t want to hear it. Not right now.

My fingertips felt ethereal whenever I reaped, and reaching into Irian’s chest to grasp a sliver was no exception. I yanked another shard from him and savored it on my tongue. My eyes rolled back in my head, the sensation better than when I’d been inside Sersa earlier.

“Thank fuck.”

Our souls together were fucking euphoric.

The wraith-like boy sat on the ground in front of me, his legs folded. Contemplations of what he was doing or thinking faded from importance, for no soul would ever satiate me as perfectly as the entangled ones Sersa carried.



Still half-asleep, Sersa rolled onto her stomach, blinking up at me as I creaked open the bathing room door. Her cheek pressed to the bed, one arm dangled off the edge, and her dark eyebrows slanted in confusion.

“Nessin. How did you get out of the chamber?”

Now considering the possibilities, she stole the sleeping shirt that’d never made it off the nightstand and slipped it over her tousled black hair. It spilled around her shoulders in waves.

Halting in front of me, Sersa gripped my jaw. Then she gave the half-open door a kick to shut it.

“I never made it in last night. I fell asleep.”

The darkest eyes delved into mine. They shouted a hundred different strings of thought, all of them tangling together.

“You had a gods-damned soul last night,” Sersa said.

The fact she knew immediately was a testament to our Binding. She saw through me like I was in soulform. As if she saw my thoughts instead of the reverse.

“You scoundrel! What, you thought you’d wake up all glowy and pretty again and I wouldn’t know? You cannot tell me soulless recover in one night. And now look at you—all shiny and new.”

Gritting my teeth, I closed my eyes. “The Mórrígan is protecting Jestin. She *claimed* our fucking union, Sersa. I cannot be weak. Not when it affects you too.”

“Excuses,” Sersa said softly.

I snapped my eyes open.

“It is,” I acknowledged. “But everything—”

“I’m not mad at you, Nessin.” She straightened her fingers, softening against my jaw instead of ready to claw right through to my bone. “Did you bring some with or steal it...from *them*?” Sersa glanced at the ceiling.

I licked my lips. Lying to her about *whose* I had taken would only end badly. Worse than the truth. I’d learned that much.

“A shard—of yours. While you were sleeping.”

Only half a lie.

Her mouth fell open, and her grip tightened again. She pulled me forward, bringing my face almost level with hers and close enough to feel her breath on my lips.

“I’m not exactly pleased you didn’t wake me, and we *will* be back here as soon as we meet the Mórrígan. *But*,” Sersa said, the pitch of her voice leveling out, “I told you not to touch anyone else’s soul last night, and I meant it.”

Unexpectedly, she turned her back on me and reached for the doorknob.

“That’s it?”

Sersa glanced over her shoulder and raised her eyebrows. “Do you want more?”

“I was waiting for you to murder me.”

“If I did that, you’d refuse a soul until you cave when I’m sleeping. Plus, you told me the truth right away. I see the only way to train you, you arse, is to reward you when you do it half-right. But in all seriousness, we’re coming back here.”

Whereas I was a daemon, Sersa was gracious, too forgiving. The Aon to

my Dúm. I waited for another reaction—the ones she'd shown me a dozen times now—but only compassion and love existed in her gaze.

I smiled. "You thought I was still a *little* pretty last night, right?"

"Do you learn *any* lessons?" Recognition flooded her expression. "Great. I have to lie to Devlin for you, don't I?"

"No. I will tell him when we get home. He may give me a black eye if I decide to let him, which might be warranted, but he deserves the truth."

Sersa looked lost in thought for a moment. "Huh. Maybe you do learn some lessons. Though I didn't take you for such a slow learner."

"I won't do it again—"

"Don't make promises." She held up her hand. "You can set a goal, but you are only going to get upset if you can't stick to it. I get it in a way. The Mórrígan is more pressing."

Sersa's calm state scared me more than if she'd screamed at me.

"Will we visit her today?" she whispered.

"Yes." Apprehension instantly lashed at my insides. "I'll send word with Evra after breakfast."

Sersa tilted her head in confusion.

"The Sluagh all have names. The ones I made, at least."

"*Made?*"

"Irian is the first soul I reaped," I said reluctantly. Explaining too much might have Sersa running for the hills, and there were plenty right outside the Knot. "They are called the spirits of the restless dead because their souls could not make peace with death. They weren't ready to pass on."

Sersa held still, eyes flickering around the room as she leaned back against the door. "Did you make every Sluagh in this maze?"

"No."

She looked at me and released a breath. Her relief was unwarranted. Though I wasn't about to say so.

"Did I help last night?" she asked.

"Immensely." Based on the absence of tremors, fever, and the hallucination of the Mórrígan's voice in my head, that was an understatement.

Sersa licked her lips. "What will happen if you keep taking shards of our soul?"

"I won't."

"*No promises.*" She glared at me. "Did Bardca know anything about

reaping a soul that's intertwined with your own? Ours can't be like all others."

"He didn't. Though I agree it's almost certain there is a difference, love."

"Hmm." Sersa squinted, trying to work through all the possibilities. "Only one way to find out." A small smile curled her lips—lips that had admitted last night she was my wife and had no desire to leave me. "I was going to make you a lovely breakfast for your seven hundred and twenty-ninth *birthday*, you know, but now it's on you."

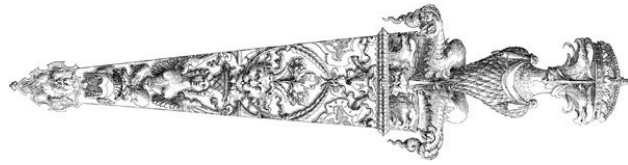
I mirrored her wicked grin and took a step forward. "Ah. I do have quite the appetite this morning. The law of birthdays says I *choose* my meal."

"I am not sure you *deserve* to eat, Your Darkness. But who am I to deny a daemon his sustenance?"

It took us another bell to leave the room.

This time, Sersa encircled us in the palest of red tendrils—in the color that belonged to me now and forever.

Serena



AFTER TWO LARGE CUPS OF COFFEE AND BREAKFAST—AND DESSERT ON THE kitchen counter—we headed for the door that materialized at the front of the house.

Sin picked me up and planted a kiss on my forehead before he filled my head with white noise, dousing every sound as we stepped into the maze to head back. I dropped my hands from my ears and hung onto his neck.

“*Cría naam,*” he mouthed, smirking.

But the instant Sin looked up, that grin vanished.

He saw something I hadn’t.

Sin spun us around, flattening my back to the wall the same time that a dagger pierced it an inch away.

The white noise collapsed like a damn no longer able to hold back a river.

Suddenly the screeching was deafening, surrounding me in all directions, and I lost the fight against stifling my own cry.

Over Sin’s shoulder, a white-haired shadow skittered down the connecting aisle. All around us, Sluagh descended from the sky—one dizzying nosedive after another. They spiraled after him through the passages, their wings rippling in flight.

Jestin.

I kneaded my palms into my ears, certain they’d start bleeding any second

because my hands alone couldn't muffle the Sluagh's oppressive sounds. Sin helped me slide down his monumental body, a drop of several feet that might as well have been a hundred.

Tears sprang to my eyes as he held my face.

The Sluagh can't transport inside, Sin thought. *Stay here.*

There was no way I'd listen—and yet, no way I could move to follow. We were too deep in the maze to find the entrance myself.

But as the Knot's black walls seemed to teeter around me, Jestin multiplied.

No. Impossible.

Besides his Bonespeaker blood, he had no other—and damn all the gods, was that enough. The reminder of his commands' potency instantly made my stomach turn.

Sluagh blocked me in, fighting one Jestin off after another. Their battle cries made it impossible for me to get a grip on my spasming muscles, my tendrils, my throbbing head.

I slid down the wall.

The tendrils formed a swirl of furious red and panicked black. It slithered around every replica of Jestin, uncertain who was the original. The way Sin ruthlessly aimed to slay all in his path, neither was he. Together, they picked them off one by one. Jestin's many forms dispersed as talons slashed, swiped, and drew blood.

But I thought the original had turned the corner.

Sin received my thought and sprinted off, snapping the necks and spines of every Jestin in his path with bare hands.

How could his brother walk around here unaffected? Especially when Sin's own Binding was left in such a useless state.

Me—I was useless.

I fell onto my front, my single hope being that I might be able to crawl after Sin. The white noise returned, but I shook my head. Sin needed to focus. Needed to reserve his energy.

"*Let go,*" I said, knowing he heard me over the screeching in his own ears.

The deafening sounds pierced the air once more.

I clawed at the wall and squeezed my eyes shut, bringing myself to standing. Every instance of Jestin blurred. They all looked the same, with permanently tapered eyes and clean-cut hair ruffled from the Sluagh's

wingbeats. All wore the same navy-blue coat, unbuttoned at the neck to reveal a torc too.

As if he deserved to wear one.

Dozens of short, curved blades spun like a field of mesmerizing windmills. Every last Jestin twirled one around his fingers.

I swayed on my feet.

Sin and the Sluagh continued to pick them off one by one.

It wasn't quick enough.

I urged my magic to protect Sin, knowing and not caring that it left me exposed. Hopeful or delusional thinking kicked in. Maybe Jestin wasn't here at all. Maybe we were seeing things—Sin still high off my soul and me from losing another shard.

Reality set in when a man slammed me into the wall.

Daemon, not man.

Jestin Drumghoul's force as he knocked all the air out of me was no hallucination. Sin and his brothers looked so similar, but it was the eyes that exposed who they really were.

In Lochlainn, coldness.

In Devlin, compassion so true.

In Nessin, fierce protectiveness. A paradox of strength and tenderness. Everything I'd ever wanted and needed. Everything I loved. *Everything.*

But there existed no contrast to the night raging within Jestin.

He grinned at me.

"Hello, Daemon Queen."

The sea of Jestins kept multiplying behind him, and there in his shadow stood a bald man with empty blue eyes and lanky limbs.

Bardca.

No doubt he'd let Jestin into the maze. Encircling both the Druid and the prince, something protected them from the Sluagh and their screeches. The magic, then—the multiplication originated with Bardca too.

When I tried to pull away, Jestin gripped my wrists to hold me in place against his chest.

"Be quiet. Be still."

Those words knocked the air out of me worse than he had physically. His Bonespeaker blood restrained me effortlessly.

Just as he wanted.

The command didn't prevent me from looking around us, though time

seemed to move in slow motion as Sin and the Sluagh continued fighting their way through the sea.

Jestin gripped my throat, choking off my scream.

“Nessin can’t see us. Can’t hear us either. Bardca’s a good friend to have, Sersa Scáth.”

Then the Sluagh couldn’t sense us within whatever barrier encircled them. It had to be true because *none* tried to pry Jestin off me.

I was caught inside the barrier with him. *Alone.*

I’m here! I screamed out to Sin in my thoughts.

“Good,” Jestin whispered, so close I felt his hot breaths. His tone was both caustic and conciliatory, and it made my stomach flip and tighten with dread. “*My good little queen.*”

I gritted my teeth and growled through the pain of the command. “He will get to us, *Prince Jestin.*”

He tsked quietly. “Under my Ordé, you’ll only call me your king. *Tell me,*” he started, a new command blooming in my gut. “*Tell me, Sersa Scáth, that you’re ready to be my queen. To be controlled in every way.*”

I fought the words that clawed up my throat, scraping like a Sluagh’s talons that’d been filed down, dulled so each movement was pure agony.

“*I... I’ll...*”

“Don’t resist,” Jestin said in my ear, bringing me flush against his body. I squirmed with little success. “I promise it will feel so much better if you don’t resist.”

Tears poured down my face now. Not from fear, but from anger and trying to fight his order. I bit down as hard as I could, a sharp, rusty taste coating my tongue.

A searing pain pinched and scratched my neck suddenly. Only when I blinked to bring the object into focus did I realize what else Jestin wanted.

The golden horn.

It dangled in his fist before he pocketed it, returning his full attention to me.

All I could do was grit my teeth harder than I already was to avoid focusing on the raw skin the chain left behind.

Jestin flashed me a sinister smile. “You know, the Mórrígan is going to give me everything I want with you as my queen.” Jestin kept whispering directly in my ear. As close as he could get. “If you think my father would have been sadistic, just wait. He was *nothing* compared to how bad I will

make your life.”

“Over—my—dead body.”

He gripped my jaw, almost hard enough to break it. “That *will* be arranged. Eventually.”

“Your piece of shit father is dead because I fucking *killed* him,” I said through gnashed teeth, “and I will separate you from that useless piece of flesh between your thighs if you don’t get your gods-damned hands off me!”

I gasped when another command gripped my throat.

On cue, my knees buckled and proved how weak I truly was. Jestin’s hold on my wrists only grew tighter, forcing me to stay standing. He could command me all he wanted. I would remain strong. No sobs. No tears. I would fight this bastard every step of the way.

“I will—*never* be your queen,” I forced out.

Jestin’s eyes narrowed. “Ah. Is my brother helping you resist? I found out you two are connected—a *soulkeeper*. Then it should be even more painful for him when I do this.”

Before I could blink, Jestin sealed our lips, wrenching a scream out of me. I registered nothing. Not the feel of his mouth. The taste of him. The thought alone made me sick.

Though I tried to shove Jestin away, he was stronger.

So I did the only other thing I could think of.

I rolled his bottom lip between my teeth and bit down.

As hard as I fucking could.

Until I broke the skin and felt his flesh split between my teeth. Until his blood flowed onto my tongue, streaming down my lips. Pulling back to spit in his face, saliva spattered his insipid skin like crimson freckles.

I shoved Jestin so hard he knocked into Bardca. When the barrier around them weakened, the tendrils swarmed. But it also meant the flock of screeching Sluagh assailed my ears.

Unblinking and empty, Bardca turned on the spirits of the restless dead, ready to fend them off for the prince. My tendrils wrapped around Jestin’s neck, sending him flying backward.

The protective barrier strengthened once more.

“No!”

Sluagh struck furiously, unrelentingly. The sharp edges of their talons gleamed under each flash of lightning. Everything inside the maze was moving too fast now, speeding up, racing.

Laughing between bloody teeth, Jestin straightened and mouthed something. The sea of replicas was gone, revealing the Daemon King standing in the middle of the maze among his Sluagh.

“A parting gift from me to you,” Jestin said.

Sin opened his mouth to speak, but his brother beat him to it.

Jestin’s words constricted my mind, squeezing, branding. “*Go to Laisrés, Sersa Scáth. Give yourself to him. Tell my brother how much you love Laisrés. Destroy your king from the inside out however you can.*”

Before I could decipher the meaning, Sin collided with me from behind. Then he was in front of me, concealing me as he ordered the Sluagh to fully enclose us.

Jestin’s immediate shriek outdid the Sluagh’s. He dropped to his knees, clawing at his temples. The expression on Sin’s face assured me he planned to give his brother the slowest of deaths. Other than the murder in his eyes, nothing about the Daemon King indicated he was torturing and picking apart Jestin’s mind, however a Mindblood could.

Bit by bit.

Piece by piece.

Nothing could have torn my eyes from the sight.

Blood blossomed at Jestin’s temples—not from his eyes or nose or mouth but seeping *through* his skin as if pin-pricked by thousands of needles.

His head was about to burst.

“And a parting gift from me to you, brother,” Sin gritted out.

Bardca dropped to his frail knees. The barrier of magic turned to ash when Jestin seemed to exhale his last breath.

Simultaneously, the prince disappeared in a spiral of feathers.

With a sound akin to a battle cry, Sin flew forward, his cloak billowing around him with the force of his movement. He clawed at the feather-strewn ground.

But nothing lay beneath. No remnants of Jestin.

When Sin slammed his gloved fists on the ground, the maze walls vibrated. He whirled around and raised to full height, holding my gaze without faltering.

“Irian!” Sin shook from head to toe, and his horns reflected crimson. “Ready the flocks. We owe the Mórrígan a visit.”

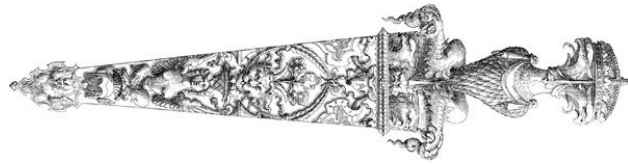
My focus instinctively drifted to the feathers behind Sin. We’d already known the Mórrígan and Jestin Drumghoul were connected, but the goddess

had spared him because she was *his* patron deity, it seemed—not ours.

Not even close.

The look of bloodlust possessing the Daemon King assured me of one thing. He would make damn sure the goddess knew we weren't her allies either. Or her pawns.

Serena



BARDCA FELL UNCONSCIOUS THE SECOND SIN SET HIM IN IRIAN'S ARMS, careful to avoid the talons. Then he let the Druid and Sluagh out of the maze.

Instantly, they vanished into nothing.

"The chamber," I said between gasps. "Will it stop the command?"

I sensed that neither of us wanted to admit we felt it pulsing to life, starting in my chest. I palmed at my breastbone. Sin's hand covered mine—a small comfort that would mean nothing soon.

"Please remember that whatever happens, I love you," he whispered as we exited the maze. "I promise."

His words echoed between us. Then the Sluagh swept us up in a spiral of wings and flurries.

We reached a landscape crawling with hills, where a house sat tucked away at the lowest point between two snow-covered mounds.

The cottage near the Knot.

Sluagh dotted the perimeter at the top, but I could barely see them with the Dark season now fully upon us. Even the lanterns struggled to illuminate the cobbles at the bottom of the hole.

We approached the single-story house, and Niuna threw open the front door as if she'd known we were coming. Her eyes widened, noting the blood coating my chin and lips as she led us into the spacious foyer. She didn't

have to ask what happened.

Once inside, I shoved free from Sin's arms and stumbled around the foyer, gripping the walls for support. Under the curved glass ceiling, I felt like I was trapped in a snow globe. Fresh flakes trundling down from the sky mesmerized me. But under the dome, the air turned heavy, suffocating, and weighed me down more and more with every step I took.

My body's only response was to break out in a cold sweat.

Unable to walk straight on my own as I was, Sin's steadying arm shot out to keep me from running into the wall. The Sluagh's blaring shrieks had left me disoriented, and Jestin's kiss had left me enraged, while his command...

The delayed feeling was the worst part.

But it was *here*.

This command was like a squall on the sea. That gut feeling you get under a swirling sky. When the waves start to turn and toss you without warning. When reality sets in that your fate rests in the hands of a substance that could save you or kill you, quench your thirst or drown you.

As I tried to cross the foyer, Sin on my heels, my body positively *ached*.

For Laisrés.

Sin hadn't asked me how I felt. Not with the all-consuming sensation throttling the cord between us. I closed my eyes, already losing to the tears I tried to fight. They poured down my cheeks like liquid fire, so unbelievably hot on my skin.

Those cries turned to sobs. I was going to be sick.

Niuna met my gaze, but she was an utter blur like the wind was blowing her left and right. "Her neck, Sin."

I absentmindedly touched a hand to the raw skin. The chain Jestin tore off me had left behind welted skin akin to Sin's cursed chest.

A lazy grin curled my lips as I was reminded of another bare chest. Tan. Tattoos. Crows.

Eyes closing, I hummed to myself and imagined the sun beating down on me. But they shot open a second later. Panic. Fear. Wisps of black played hide-n-seek with my vision until all I saw was Laisrés.

"*Nessin—*"

"I am here, love," he answered. "I'm here for you."

"Command me," I begged. "Command me, Ness—"

I couldn't finish saying his name.

I didn't *want* my husband's name on my lips.

As soon as Draea saw us, she scurried toward me, ready to wipe my bloody mouth with her apron. Sin thrust out his hand. Flinching hard, her entire body stiffened.

“Irian, take Bardca to a room. Draea, get Ranir.” Sin didn’t look away from me. I was his only focus. No longer touching me but hovering, he waited for the storm he, too, sensed.

When Draea backed away, I realized with a glance down that the red tendrils had appeared. Only they were streaked in black.

The colors kept plaiting themselves together this way. *Why* all of a sudden?

“Don’t let me—” I started.

The command drove straight into my heart. I screamed, lurching forward when my toes caught on the stone floors. Sin grabbed my waist to keep me upright.

“I won’t. I’ve got you.”

“Nessin. Sin, Sin, Sin,” I chanted. Now I forced myself to say his name, fearing another would come barreling from my mouth the moment I stopped.

Laisrés.

Laisrés.

LAISRÉS!

When he appeared at the edge of the foyer, I halted. Studied him from head to toe. Hardly noticed Thane beside him.

The half god’s dark hair shimmered beneath the snow globe ceiling, and his eyes held mine like a flame harnessing heat. Sin refused to release me, and likewise, my gaze arrested Laisrés. His powerful thighs. Those deep green clothes formed to his body. The dimples in his cheeks.

“*Let. Go,*” I snarled at Sin, licking my lips.

Yes. Lick every inch of that skin.

But that was Jestin in my head, not me.

No. I don’t want this.

“He’s not there, I promise,” Sin said.

Jestin?

“Laisrés?” I whimpered. “Come here.”

Traitorous words and thoughts poured out of me, but alongside them, I was screaming inside. Every part of me wanted to obey the command. Needed to obey it.

But I couldn’t. I wouldn’t.

Won't you?

Laisrés winked before he faded from existence.

“Where—*Laisrés?*” My voice cracked as I blinked back tears.

This was completely unlike what I'd felt before. The Temptress's sway had been subtle. Hidden. But *this*.

The distinction between a sway and a command was outright. If I didn't obey, I'd claw my eyes out.

Sin only held onto me tighter. “Jestin commanded her.”

I threw myself toward the spot where Laisrés had just been, but Sin was stronger.

“No shit,” Thane whispered.

“He isn't there, love. He's gone.”

Whereas Sin's voice was a lover's embrace, mine was a whip.

“*Liar!* Let go of me!”

“*No.*”

“What can I do?” Thane asked, kneeling beside us.

I spat in Sin's face and growled as I slid to the floor, hoping I might be able to inch after Laisrés.

“He loves me!” I screamed. “You don't love me. You *never* loved me!”

Jestin's order slid up my throat in the form of excruciating words. A lie. A compulsion greater than the gods, stronger than my will. Maybe stronger than my love for Sin.

He shook his horned head.

“*You're released,*” he commanded. “*Fight it, Sersa.*”

The pathetic command he followed up with made me both laugh and sob harder.

I swore Jestin was laughing *through* me.

Sin pinned me, digging my shoulders into the floor the same time that Devlin dropped to his knees next to me. “Something happened at the Knot?”

“Jestin. Bardca got him inside. He commanded Sersa to go...to Laisrés. A parting gift he called it because he knew he was fucking dead.”

“Is he—dead?” Devlin asked.

I reached for the prince's fingers. When he squeezed back, the command inside me purred.

Devlin will side with me. I'll be free to find Laisrés. Yes.

I shook my head. “I love *Laisrés*. Devlin, tell him. Tell him to let me go.”

This claim almost felt believable.

You do, the Bonespeaker's blood encouraged.

Devlin curbed his reaction this time, but a snarl tore through me when he didn't meet my demands. I dug my fingers into his palm until he released me. Ciel hovered protectively behind him, glittering eyes filled with horror.

"Don't touch her," Devlin whispered, as if I'd harm my own brother. But his palm was bright red from my claws.

The only person I would harm was Sin—physically, maybe, but emotionally, I'd ruin him. Everything I'd bottled up the last three moons threatened to pour out of me, gushing like the fatal wound Jestin Drumghoul knew he'd reopened.

The killing blade was him ordering me to tell Sin I loved his half-brother.

"Leave," Devlin hissed at Sin. "We can handle this."

I wrestled a hand free and managed to swat at the air, reaching for Sin's face. He was too far, his torso too long, and effortlessly able to hold me down. My thoughts rushed and raced and crisscrossed until I didn't know which direction they'd turn at any given time.

I thrashed my legs, and a purr of approval filled me.

Yes, that's it.

Tears poured down the sides of my face. "Please, stop. Please!" I begged. "Make it—"

My lungs felt barred behind a cage of Jestin's making. Only he'd fashioned my own bones—my ribs—into that cage, constricting me so impossibly tight. I wanted to be stronger, to pry the bars apart and escape. It was no use.

"Leave, Sin," Devlin repeated, sharper. "You are going to hurt her."

Though his hands eased up, Sin wouldn't move.

"We have her," Thane said. "Dev's right. Get out of here."

"Yes—leave!" I hollered maniacally, unable to hold any of it back. "Leave like you made me leave before!"

"You need me." Sin stilled my hands, his whisper tortured. "She needs me."

I was vaguely aware of Ailerby standing at the edge of the foyer now. Niuna kept him close, reaching her arm around his shoulders. "The command will pass," she whispered to him and Ciel.

Would it?

"Do what you must," Devlin whispered. "I will take it away if it becomes too much."

I didn't understand. The command didn't care to understand.

"The blood mark will kill you," Sin said.

"I hate you!" Snarling, I peeled off the ground an inch. Only an inch before Sin flattened my shoulder blades once more. "You destroyed us. We will never be what we were—fuck our souls! A new lover," I laughed. "I deserve someone else—someone better than you. *I deserve a god.*"

The words—what Laisrés had said only days before—might as well have been poison coming back up.

"Nessin, you're going to hurt her," Thane insisted, trying to separate us.

"Do not touch me!" Sin leaned closer. "Please. Look at me. It's not real, Sersa. None of it was. Come back to me. It's only a command."

Only.

There was no minimizing this feeling. Molten lava tore through my veins, spewing from my mouth. Teeth gritted, I twisted and thrashed until Devlin grabbed my face to stop me from throwing my head backward.

"Sin. Do it. Right now, before she hurts herself."

"I can't."

"Can't or won't?" Devlin snapped.

"I *can't* give her the Ordé. It will pass. It has to," Sin asserted. He slid his forearms under my head, pinned me with his body, and lowered his forehead to mine.

Then he whispered the same words on a loop to bring me back.

Cría naam. Cría naam. Cría naam.

But the pretty words weren't enough to fight Jestin.

"Okay," Sin said, pushing the hair off my face, wet from tears and sweat. "It's okay. Let go."

From the corner of my eye, the pink brushstrokes derided me as I writhed—writhed until I was too exhausted from screaming Laisrés's name.

I realized Sin wasn't budging either. So I accused him of every fabrication I'd ever had. Every secret. Every lie I'd told myself.

Sin held my gaze the entire time, never wavering, never breaking or reacting. He battled me by pouring our memories into me—a deluge that wouldn't let up. Every kiss. Touch. Laugh. Fight. Taste. Every thought he'd had. Pain he'd gone through while apart.

He dropped all his walls for me.

Nessin standing at the edge of Dúm's Cross. Smirking behind his hood as he waited for me countless nights.

*Masks from the White Plume slipped over my eyes.
A gentle kiss in public. Ravenous touches in his apartment.
Arguments over chiefs visiting Os Íseal in search of a wife.
Arguments over his secrecy.
Conversations and nights we never wanted to end.
Unspoken love. Promises broken. Pretty words.
Prettier moments.*

Sin steeled his expression for me. He could be strong all he wanted—I knew this would break us. I was breaking us.

“We are okay,” he promised.

We.

The thought of there still being an us—a we—made my heart hurt.

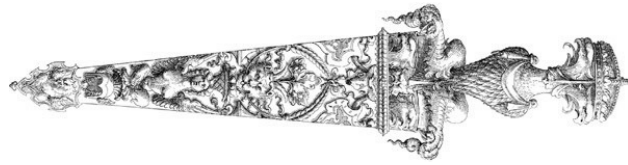
“We always will be. The color is all I need, love.”

I blinked at the pink tendrils filling the room, wrapping his arms, and wanted to smile through my tears.

But to be tempted in the moment felt real, so real I was losing sight of reality itself. Sin didn’t stop trying to soothe me in that river of memories flowing between us. Instead, he took every name I called him. Every cut I made with my words. Every time I said I hated him.

Until I passed out and his color scattered.

Serena



“HULLO,” SIN SAID WHEN I WOKE. HIS EYES WERE WIDE. WAITING. Hesitant.

Vision blurring, our room at the cottage whirled, despite the fact I was lying on my back. I focused on my hand, rising and falling on my stomach in tune with my breaths. I lowered my gaze to the creamy silk dress I wore.

“Did you change my clothes?”

“I wasn’t sure how long you’d be out, and you were covered in blood.”

Jestin’s. From biting him. When he kissed me.

Bile swam in my gut.

“Oh.”

Still half-dazed, I blinked at Sin, uncertain why he was so far away. I needed his touch to assure me I was here with him. Safe.

A small relief spread through me when he stood without delay.

I shifted for him to sit and put my head in his lap, rolling to face his stomach.

“I didn’t mean the things I said,” I whispered, though I only remembered bits and pieces. “I’ve thought some of them, yes. Some of that resentment was real...as you know, but everything else—*nothing* I said about Laisrés was true.”

“I heard Jestin’s command, love.” His voice thickened with emotion. “All

that matters is *you* are okay. I know the pressure you were under. The compulsion. I told you though. You speak in color. I didn't hear the words, love. All I felt was your pain, and through it, love persisted."

When I burst into tears, Sin rubbed my back, encouraging me to get it all out. By the time I wiped my eyes and looked up at him minutes later, my gaze darted straight to the single droplet—a wet spot—on his chest. He smiled sadly as I touched it to be sure.

"One?" I laughed through my tears until my side ached. "*Just one?*"

Sin expelled a strained chuckle. "Yes, and one is all you get. I hope."

"I made a daemon *cry*."

"As I said before—bad for my reputation."

Once I'd stopped laughing, I cleared my throat. "Sin... What did you do to Jestin?"

He looked into the crackling sapphire flames that doused the sitting area between the closet and bed. Both his rigid stare and body stilled. Focused. "Not enough. Not nearly fucking enough."

"I wanted to resist it. I just couldn't."

His eyes rivaled the intensity of the flames when they fell to me. "This is *not* your fault. Do not let yourself believe it is for one second. If we want to discuss fault," Sin said with a great sigh as he thumbed my forearms, "I broke both your wrists. Ranir healed you while you were asleep."

There was no evidence. No pain. Not even a bruise. The agonizing command had engulfed all other pain in that moment.

Once more, Sin looked away. Still facing his abdomen, I folded my arms near my chest and touched him. An innocent touch.

He looked at me in surprise. Like he believed I'd never touch him again after what happened. His tight shirt clung to his chest, and with how uneven his breaths were, I knew his heart was racing too.

"What we do tonight—no matter how it goes, it *will* have repercussions, Sersa. The Mórrígan obviously gifted Jestin new blood of some sort."

I licked my dry lips. "Could Bardca have helped him multiply like that?"

"Not that. Jest's command was alarmingly powerful."

Screams flashed through me.

Blood at his temples.

Feathers.

"Jestin couldn't have survived whatever you did to him. Right?"

"If he was dead, his command would have ceased abruptly. I can't say for

certain. Not until I see him with my own eyes. Not until I feel all life slip from him. I sent a few Sluagh with a message to Faerie Forest. After Jest escaped the way he did, I am certain the Mórrígan already knew we wanted an audience.”

“She frequently hands out magic like it’s nothing, it seems.”

Sin swallowed. “The gods are capable of a lot of things.”

“Gods fear *you*,” I said fiercely, propping myself up a little.

“While that may be true, *I* fear the Mórrígan.”

His admission soured in my gut because he feared so few. But a goddess? *Dúm*’s sister? How could Sin not?

“We don’t have long, Sersa.”

“What’s the plan?”

“Force the Mórrígan to hand over Jestin. Hope the Sluagh are enough if she refuses. Quite reckless, but Bardca corroborated what Aislinn said. He was imprisoned in Nevre. Jestin failed to recover the last of the Ordé’s requirements I removed from his mind centuries ago. And thank fuck I did.” Sin gathered my hair and pushed it behind me. “My brother has far too much protection there. I have yet to feel him—or anyone—test the horn or the Sluagh, but it’s only a matter of time.”

Sin would *feel* it. Something that should’ve been impossible.

As he inhaled with me, I pressed my forehead to his abdomen.

“Love?”

My gaze flicked up. “Hmm?”

“I must ask, so forgive me. Are you all right? What can I do?”

My nostrils started burning. “To start, I’d feel better if the last lips I had on mine weren’t his.”

Gentle hands helped me up, settling my back against his chest. Sin kissed the top of my head before he wrapped his arms around my shoulders and didn’t let go.

I stared into the hearth. “Your command didn’t work before.”

“His reached you before mine.” Sin sighed with defeat.

I reflexively squeezed his hands and whispered, “I don’t want to move.”

Sin planted another kiss on the top of my head. His lips stayed there as he said, “Neither do I.”

I stared up at him, at his tortured expression, and reached out to glide my fingers along his cheek. He closed his eyes under my touch, an invisible shudder passing through him.

“Nessin. You said you would always show me the way. I want you to give me—”

“No.” His eyes snapped open. “Having your soul isn’t the only part of the Ordé. If me possessing it doesn’t deter you, you would need to *drink* my blood as well, Sersa.”

Ice rushed through my veins.

I was going to be sick. Not because of Nessin.

I sat forward abruptly, cupping hands over my mouth where Jestin had just had his.

“Love?”

I tried to throw myself to my feet, but my limbs were weak. Sin pulled me back, and I collapsed onto his lap. He gently tapped my thigh, signaling for me to turn around.

When I wouldn’t, Sin lifted me.

I peeled my hands forward to speak. “I-I bit Jestin. Maybe I didn’t drink his blood, but I drew it. I *tasted* it.”

His face seemed to drain of what little color he had. Evidently Sin hadn’t thought of it either.

“He *will* figure out the rest of the Ordé,” I rushed out.

“Perhaps before I turned his brain into that of a puppet. I could be wrong. Jestin may not have survived at all.”

“And if he did? What then, Nessin?” My magic seeped past my skin with a violent *whoosh*, suspended in the air.

Sin didn’t flinch. He brushed wild strands of hair off my face. “I promise ___”

“No!” I pushed on his chest. “I’m *done* leaving things to chance. I want the Ordé. If Jestin can get into the Knot, he can figure out how to control me. Or the Mórrígan can.”

“I can’t.”

“Try!”

“*Sersa*,” Sin said. So level unlike me. “I cannot risk being sent into a rampage. The sole reason I *didn’t* steal the rest of your soul last night is because it got me so high I couldn’t move.” He didn’t sound frustrated in the least. “What I feel for you can’t be properly described in any words I know out of numerous languages. All I can articulate is that you are my soul. You will always be a part of me. I will *never* shackle you though.”

I unsheathed a blade dangling from his belt. “I want the security of it. I

want blood. Tonight.”

“That is a souldagger so please put it down.” Sin plucked it from my fingers and set it on the side table next to the settee. “Our blood would have mixed when we entered the Knot, Sersa. We are fine.”

“I didn’t *drink* your blood, and you told me you devised the Ordé. Don’t lie to me.”

He sighed loudly, sounding more like a beast than ever before as his fingers dug into my thighs. Not hard. But a purposefully tender diversion to cloud my head.

“All precautions,” I insisted. “I had your brother’s blood. Not yours. Your *brother’s*. At the very least, that should infuriate you.”

“*Everything* about this morning infuriated me. You dare tempt the possessive daemon in me, knowing I’ll agree, do you?”

“You’re the one who’s always going on about protecting me. This is my choice. If someone is going to tell me what to do—”

“The Ordé is so much more than that.”

“*My. Choice.*”

I put my hands over Sin’s. He slid my nightdress higher up my thighs to rest at my hips, his thumbs circling my flesh. A muscle in his jaw ticked, a lascivious but loving expression I wanted to hang onto.

Forever.

“On my terms, then,” he said, his voice shadowed and alarming in the most thrilling way.

Sin yanked me closer by the small of my back. A gasp parted my lips as I felt all of him pressing between my thighs. His fingers tested the seam of my satin undergarments, and I bit my lip when he buried his in the crook of my neck. He was already hard, no surprise, and my grinding hips sought friction against him.

“My terms are that I will give you my blood *during*.” His breath dusted my neck. “You will take my blood and my seed at the same time.”

An innate desire inside me hummed awake. Likewise, that sounded like something the Daemon King would crave.

“Mm hmm. You tempt the daemon in me, you’ll get him. Do know, love, that I am indulging solely for the purpose of protecting you. But I’m *not* giving you the Ordé, which makes this futile.”

“We’ll see.”

Sin gripped the nape of my neck, pulling me back to study me. A single

strand of hair fell between his pinched brows, concealing his widow's peak.

"You are infuriating."

Licking my lips, I unbuttoned his breeches as he tried to slide my undergarments to the side.

Leering at me, he said, "As much as I want you on top of me, I will not fit past these. They need to come off. Now."

Sin lifted me with him then lowered me in front of the fire. My hair sprawled the floor as he stood over me, unbuttoning his coat slowly—torturously—and dropping it behind him.

Holding my eyes, he bent and lifted a dagger from one of the pointy-toed boots he kicked off.

"The dagger in question." I earned another eye roll and an annoyed huff from Sin. "Strange how it's *my* birthday, Queen, yet I'm granting *your* wishes."

As if he wouldn't enjoy this.

I mirrored his small smile.

Sin set the dagger on the settee and dropped the breeches I'd already started on. From this angle, he really was astonishing from head—*horns*—to toe.

I took in every scar, every protruding muscle in his thighs and abdomen, his broad chest, his hardened length as he stroked himself.

He lowered to his knees after a purposeful pause, and his tongue was in my mouth a second after that. Then he worked his way downward. My eyes rolled back in my head as adept fingers made swift work of the silk, pulling it over my head.

Smirking, Sin tore off my undergarments and dropped his eyes to the part of me he was going to ruin. His torturous movements made me spin.

"Mm hmm, my infuriating soul. *Ruin.*"

"How do you want me, Your Darkness?" I asked, widening my legs to provoke him.

The darkest of chuckles echoed through the room. "You're not going to give up on these sexier commands, huh?"

"Not a chance."

Sin brushed his finger against my lips. His touch set me afire more than the Eternal Flame ever could.

"How do I want you?" he echoed, gaze wandering over me. "I'll oblige, love. *Lie back.*"

The first command made me feel like water in his adept hands, yet somehow able to be formed into whatever he wanted. Kneeling still, he stared down at me with a smirk.

“I know *exactly* what I want to see you do, Sersa.”

Sin positioned himself above me, grazing my lips with his cock. I stared at the length of him, my lips parting.

“Do you want a taste, love?”

I tried to peel off the rug, but a second command hit me. This one silent. His hips inched forward, enough for me to lick him, already beading with desire. With Sin on top and in control, I couldn't close the distance.

“Sin, you're annoying—”

He shut me up by shoving himself in my mouth. I closed my eyes at the feel of the soft skin wrapping his hardness. I went to pull him deeper with my tongue, but he pulled out, allowing me to suck only on his tip again.

“Am I annoying you still?”

Sin thrust his hips forward. I took as much of him as I could, but *clearly* there was going to be a learning curve. Tears gathered in the corner of my eyes.

“Let me use my hands,” I pleaded on an outward stroke.

Sin silenced me with another swift thrust all the way to the back of my throat.

“I don't think so,” he teased. “You asked how I wanted you. I want to see you moan and gasp around me.”

He moved back onto his knees, holding the back of my neck with his fingers splayed upward to fist my hair. The other hand reached behind him, skimming my thighs.

Heat I could do nothing about pooled between my legs, and the command refused to let me press them together for the friction I craved.

No, he kept me wide open and traced the lightest of touches, forcing me to arch my back and take him deeper. I shuddered uncontrollably.

I *needed* him now.

Finally, Sin allowed me to prop myself up on my elbows, but he otherwise moved me how he wanted.

Gods, did I love it. Him. Everything about this daemon.

But I wanted to watch his corded body move against mine, to feel him stretch me so much he might break me apart before he put me back together again.

Sin flashed his white teeth in a ravening grin. “Oh, I can fucking make that happen, love.”

I whimpered. He swiped another finger between my shaking legs.

“Good, my soul.”

I watched his chest heave, the veins in Sin’s hips protruding.

He halted. Then he sat down on the carpet, legs straight out in front of him. Another silent command beckoned me over as I caught my breath—now that he’d started, he wasn’t stopping. Sin nudged his chin, and I turned, my back facing him.

When I lowered onto his lap, I started to ask what he was doing. But he moved the hair from my neck and whispered against it, “Trust me.”

“Sexier commands did not mean I wanted to do *that*, Nessin.”

Sin chuckled. “We’re not doing that.”

I swore I heard a desirous ‘*Yet*’ echo through the room.

My knees folded under me, on the outside of his hips, and I sat forward on my weight as if pulled by a string.

“Is this your favorite position, then?” I threw over my shoulder.

“The view is certainly picturesque.”

Sin focused on one thing—his large, greedy hands seizing my backside and lowering me onto him. Gripping his thighs, I bit back a moan as he sheathed himself deeper and let me adjust.

“You’ll take all of me tonight, love. *Now scream for me,*” he commanded, helping guide my hips as I rocked on him.

Sin thrust himself upward. *Hard*. Nearly shocked by the motion, I cried out. There was no stifling it. He’d taken away that ability. The second time he did it, I pressed into him. My eyes rolled backward as he touched the deepest part of me, the walls no other man, daemon, or otherwise ever would or could.

I licked my lips at the thought of having Sin for eternity.

“I am yours. For eternity and then some, *cría naam.*” His lips returned to my shoulder as he watched us in a full-length mirror resting against the wall. All of me was on display, and he fixated on himself, spearing me repeatedly. The full view was a shock. Lightning inside me.

But I couldn’t look away from the mirror.

This daemon was mine.

Sin’s hand slid upward to cup my breast, moving in tune with our motions as he helped drive me downward. Panting, I looked behind me again.

He leaned forward to capture my mouth with his.

“Don’t hold back, Sin. *More.*”

He chuckled. “I’m not going to. In anything. I love you, you’re *mine*, and I will fight for us. Every. Single. Day,” he said to each vehement thrust.

I screamed until my throat hurt. When I found my own rhythm, Sin gripped my waist but let me lead, and I soon sensed the tightness in his body.

“Tell me you’re mine, love.”

“*Yours.*”

The rarest of smiles Sin let no one else see reflected in the mirror. “Say it.”

“I’m yours, Nessin.”

“Yes, Sersa Drumghoul,” he grunted. “Mine.”

Sin was going to finish soon. Before he could, he shocked me with a silent command to halt.

I whipped my head around, furious when I was so close.

“Are you certain?” He reached toward the settee next to us, his hand paused on the blade’s hilt.

My gaze flicked up to his. Then the knife. A single nod and he pushed me forward onto hands and knees.

“No.” I rolled over onto my back. “I want to see you.”

Sin shoved himself into me, either summoning those black eyes or succumbing to his blood. The woman I was before would’ve flinched. Would’ve run. Would’ve driven a blade through a daemon’s gut had I seen those eyes.

Now? I loved them.

“Are you ready?” Sin purred.

I arched my back in answer to take him deeper and fisted the rug on either side, moving my hips against his.

“Words.”

“I’m ready.”

Sin made a small, shallow cut on his wrist. As he tossed the blade toward the edge of the hearth, droplets of his blood sizzled on the fire. He held his hand face-up in a moment of hesitation until I reached around the back of his solid thigh.

“As you said, this means nothing since you won’t be giving me the Ordé, Nessin. Don’t worry.”

I pulled his wrist to my mouth and held his gaze as I drew my tongue

along the drip of blood there. His eyes rolled backward, nostrils flaring.

I'd already known the blood of the Archdaemon was dangerous, but I realized just *how* dangerous when the first taste coated my lips and tongue—sweet in a truly inexplicable way.

When Sin reopened his eyes, they'd returned to normal.

He finally took notice of my rolling hips and resumed his motions. Before long, he was unrestrained.

I kept his wrist to my mouth to draw out his blood. I didn't know how much I needed, and the longer I drank, the more I felt like a creature of the night ready to take all his lifeblood.

But I kept drinking from Sin because there was only one daemon I wanted to command me in any capacity. I moaned against his wrist every time he punched his hips into me.

We silently focused only on one another. Nothing else was silent. Not our bodies. Our grunts and gasps. Sin stroking in and out of me as close to the hilt he could every time.

He leaned over me, bringing us chest to chest. When I traced his scarred lips, he turned to kiss my fingers.

“Enough.”

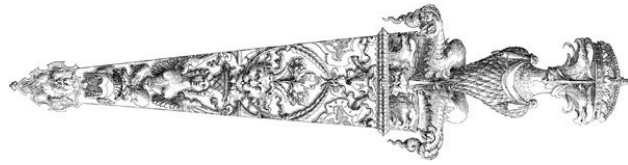
Sin pulled his wrist back and laced our fingers above my head. The other hand slid to the small of my back to lift my hips, yanking a scream from my hoarse throat. He took me harder, deeper, sliding along my throbbing center until we shattered together. Sin roared my name, and his cock twitched as my walls demanded every drop from him.

“You, love, now have the blood of a Bonespeaker,” Sin whispered against my lips.

“And my Daemon King.”

While we'd lost ourselves in one another, we also found our way back. Together. And Sin had sated me better than any fabrication of a false lust another daemon's twisted mind ever could.

Serena



WHEN SIN AND I DRESSED A HALF BELL LATER, MY NERVES STARTED TO CATCH flame. I pretended I couldn't decide what to wear, delaying several minutes before I told him to go on without me. As if my clothing mattered when we were about to visit the gods-damned Mórrígan—a deity my clan *worshipped*.

I kept my back to Sin as he kissed my cheek and squeezed my waist.

“Don't be too long, love.”

Holding my breath in hopes it'd keep my head clear too, I nodded. Thankfully, he shut the door behind him.

I rummaged around our room in search of the bracelets I'd made with Niuna's thread, uncertain where I'd stashed them before the Silent Rite.

“Where in Dúm's piss—”

“Looking for these?”

Startled, I whirled around to face Niuna. She blocked the doorway, dangling the pair of bracelets between pinched fingers. Her night robe came to her knees over yellow pajamas, and her white curls were braided off her face.

“I didn't even hear you,” I said. “Get in here.”

“He is distracted tonight too,” she said. “If he doesn't know by now, you are fine.”

“He has to know.” Though my head had been far too muddled lately to

think of the silly gift I'd made the Daemon King.

I buttoned my dark coat and strode toward Niuna, eyeing the main room over her shoulder.

"You must think you're going to die," she said, tying one of the bracelets around my wrist. "To give him this before visiting her, I mean."

"I'm not worried," I lied, flexing my fingers as I accepted the other identical bracelet. "If the wind has any last-minute advice though, speak now."

"It'd be a shame if I got a sister only for her to die."

"Niuna," I said softly. Sighing, I pulled her into a hug. "We'll see you soon."

"I will hold you to that," she said, then disappeared into the hall.

I shoved the bracelet in my pocket and headed out on her heels.

Sin tilted his head and passed me a confused look across the main room. The dark circles that previously carved out the skin under his eyes were gone. Though he appeared as composed as ever—his hair swept back cleanly, his shoulders erect and his all-black attire a warning of his mood—his horns were telling.

Crimson of the deepest shade.

Likewise, my tendrils refused to disperse. They swirled around my boots as I met Sin in the foyer.

"We'll travel by Sluagh," he said. "The Mórrígan will be waiting for us outside Faerie Forest."

He and Devlin had argued for ten minutes straight before Sin agreed to let him and Thane come with. A few moments later, Devlin and Ciel went outside to *discuss* whether my brother would accompany us. We'd heard their shouting from inside the safehouse.

Finally, they returned, Ciel looking sullen when he announced in defeat that he'd stay behind with Niuna, Draea, Ranir, and Ailerby, who was still imitating Innes but occasionally popping out of his room as himself.

As a dozen Sluagh flocked outside, I reminded myself of what lay at the Daemon King's fingertips. Hundreds more. *Thousands*. His army eased my knotted stomach enough to stop me from unraveling.

But without the horn... Where did that leave us?

"Wait—Sin?" Paused in the snow globe foyer, I reached into my pocket. "I have a birthday gift for you."

Sin gave me a tense smile. "We made love. You're giving me a gift.

We're about to oppose a goddess. This is the stuff of stories—right before something bad happens. It feels foreboding.”

“Well, then. Maybe I *do* prefer lies now and again,” I said. “I will save the gift for tomorrow.”

“Like hell you will.” With a scoff, he grabbed my wrist to tug my hand from my pocket. “I also can't believe you managed to keep a secret from me. I'm impressed, love.”

I wondered if he was lying, but said, “I learned from the best.”

“Show me.” The words rolled off his tongue, and I could already see the filthy ideas heating his eyes.

“Be quiet before you ruin the moment.”

Sin held back a smile.

I fished out the short length of intertwined silver, lavender, and gray threads then coiled it around my fingers anxiously. His eyes softened as he blinked down at the bracelet for a long moment. Then Sin wound his arm around my hips to pull me closer, his free hand accepting the bracelet.

His nostrils flared with emotion. “Sersa Drumghoul. What is this?”

I bit my lip. “Our handfasting cord. Not really. Obviously. It's bad luck to cut them, but your sister had all this thread, and I saw the colors of our cord... So I made it.”

My eyes wandered over my own wrist, and I traced my fingertips up and down it.

“I know my magic marked you, but I wanted both of us to have something to root us in reality if ever it becomes unclear. The bracelets are a reminder that we're bound as one. Every time I look down, it will remind me, and I hope it will remind you too.”

Sin thumbed the end of my sleeve to reveal mine.

“Wow,” he whispered.

“You hate it.”

“I *love* it,” he said directly in my ear, his lips buried in my hair.

“Then why do you seem speechless?”

He nudged my chin up with a bony finger. “I *am* speechless because I never imagined you'd think to make a bracelet that looks like our handfasting cord. It's quite romantic.”

I glared up at Sin. “Are you saying I'm not romantic?”

“Not nearly as romantic as me. We can compare grand gestures later. Although this one may pull you ahead of me. For a day. Put it on for me,

love?”

I nodded a little too eagerly. “Left or right?”

Sin flipped over his left wrist for me to knot the ends. “When I look at this hand, I want to see your paint, my ring, *and* this. Why don’t we double knot it though? Just in case.”

Biting my lip, I nodded and tied his again.

“And yours.” Watching me, Sin caressed the underside of my wrist, taking the ends and knotting them tightly a second time. “There. We wouldn’t want to lose what we’ve worked so hard for.”

“No, we wouldn’t,” I agreed.

The words made me smile, though I could’ve cried. Sin and I were not done repairing our relationship, but we would get through whatever troubles loomed ahead of us.

Together.

“Cría naam,” he whispered against my lips. His tongue curled around mine, his scent and taste of metal, evergreen, and fire coursing through my blood.

There was danger too. We felt it.

When Sin pulled away, he sucked on my lip and brushed a kiss right beside my mouth. I found myself leaning into him, wanting more. Always more.

“I have a present for you as well,” Sin said.

“You have a present for me on *your* birthday?”

“Indeed. Though Feera says she’s putting the finishing touches on it. I won’t be able to give you it until we wake up after sleeping like newborn babes tomorrow, share a lovely meal, and have properly celebrated my birthday and our success tonight by bringing our wedding mead out one last time before it goes into storage for a century.”

His attempt to defuse the tension didn’t work.

“Don’t be scared,” Sin whispered. I heard his intake of breath, but the exhale sounded a little like a growl. “I have been trying to be less of a daemon for you so that I may deserve you, but I must be a monster tonight. If I didn’t kill Jestin earlier, I *will* finish him and defy the Mórrígan. Whatever it takes to end him, I will do.”

“You don’t need to be anyone other than yourself, Nessin.” A rogue tear slid down my face as I added, “Well, maybe less of a liar, but I know you’ve been working on that.”

Sin laughed—

He abruptly whirled around, putting me behind him.

Something wavered in the shadows of the main room, and the hunter in Sin had heard them approach when I hadn't.

Niuna.

She came forward on light, slippered feet. Her hands were clasped behind her back, and she wore a blank expression.

“Gods, Niuna. You scared—” My reply died in my throat when a figure dressed in dark green stepped around her.

“We have a visitor,” Niuna said. “I found him outside. He breached the barrier.”

“I can see that.” Sin's dry voice matched the glare he passed Laisrés. “Please go to your room, Niuna.”

Ailerby stood in the cracked door to one of the bedrooms off the main hall. If he hadn't mimicked half of my face for the briefest second, I'd never be able to tell the seamless imitation wasn't Innes.

My attention darted back to Niuna.

The age behind her eyes gleamed. “Spare him. You need your blood. *All* of it.”

“Niuna—” Sin started.

“Tell Devlin or I will!” she said viciously.

Facing Laisrés, Niuna set her hand on his shoulder. He stooped for her to whisper in his ear. Their eyes met. Then he dipped his head, and she headed toward Ailerby.

With the moons swallowed by the Dark, Laisrés stood entirely in shadows at the foyer's edge. The dying flames in the sitting room's hearth behind him barely reached his heels.

“Sersa. We need to talk. Alone,” he said, nudging his chin over his shoulder. His green-gold eyes radiated with urgency, though his voice was calm.

Laisrés didn't address Sin—didn't even pretend to.

“Last I checked, Laz, you were not interested in *talking* to Sersa,” Sin said, sharp and lethal. “We don't really have time for you to advise her on the subject of lovers either. We have somewhere to be.”

“Faerie Forest? I am aware.”

“*Tell me how you got past the barrier.*”

Laisrés seethed under the weight of Sin's command, but the words still

barreled out of him. “My crows found a seam to slip through without the Sluagh.” He flashed a traveling stone marked with hills and tossed it to Sin. “I returned a fake one the other day. Seems Bardca *should* have performed additional tests. The old Druid is slipping, aye?”

I swore fire was going to spurt from Sin’s eyes. Restraint seared alongside the rage, the only reason being that he couldn’t kill the Mórrígan’s son.

Our fate tonight would take a turn for the worst if he touched one crow beneath Laisrés’s skin.

“All I ask is for a mere moment of your time. *Sersa*,” he repeated.

I gestured to Sin. “Alone or not, he’ll hear whatever you have to say.”

“It’s the principle.”

As I passed Sin a reassuring glance, I wasn’t looking for permission but *telling* him. Though there wasn’t much of anything Laisrés or I possibly had to say to one another, my magic thought otherwise. It curled around his ankle and yanked like a rope, effortlessly bringing him to one knee. His palm shot out to stop himself from hitting the ground face-first.

“Looks like you’ve got everything under control per usual, love.” Sin cut Laisrés a look. “Two minutes.”

The Sluagh’s presence assured me I was safe as I took a step into the firelit sitting room. Sin lingered near the front door. Arms crossed. Watching us. Ready to intervene.

For a moment, Laisrés and I were caught in a stalemate.

“This really isn’t necessary,” I said. “We don’t have to rehash anything, and while I’d love to know why you repeatedly tried to get between your own *half-brother* and his wife, I expect the Mórrígan will be delighted to tell us herself. Or maybe Jestin.”

“I wanted to discuss other matters, but *please*,” Laisrés said, flourishing his arm, “let’s discuss all our exchanges as well. For starters, I have no regrets in telling you where your magic originates. Nor do I regret saying you ought to do as you please after His Darkness over there devised his brilliant plan to marry another Gilder.”

“You implied we were supposed to be bound! I may not be seven hundred years old, but I wasn’t born yesterday.”

“You weren’t,” Laisrés agreed with a sharp nod. “I had good intent in explaining the full situation.”

“Good intent!” I scoffed. “Is that what *good intent* looks like to a half

god?”

I halted abruptly.

The red. Hanging onto his leg, it started throbbing, slow yet ready to strike. Wanting to kill.

Laisrés examined the tendrils. But I tore them backward, freeing him instead. He gritted his teeth, bringing himself to standing with a tug on the embroidered lapels of his coat.

“Had I *ever* wanted you, the Mórrígan would have made it happen. Although, I’m not here to discuss what might have been. Nor do I care.”

Sin got between us, shoving Laisrés backward with a rigid palm strike to the chest. “You had your minute.”

“Try thirty seconds.” Laisrés rolled his eyes. “Have you ever heard of codependence, Nessin?”

“You have given me *no* reason to trust you with Sersa. If you think I’ll stand by while you claim my wife was almost yours—”

“Don’t be a fucking fool, Nessin. You, Jestin, me—it doesn’t matter. Sersa is the *Mórrígan’s* like us all. Or she will be soon enough if you don’t listen to me.”

Sighing, I shook my head. “I am truly thankful the Mórrígan gave my ma the blood she did, but Sin is a choice. I *choose* him. Damn whatever your mother hoped or whatever ours may or may not have negotiated.”

Laisrés leaned forward, not quite veering around Sin but blankly staring at me right over his shoulder. “I do not much care what you choose, what you feel—none of it. Yet you seem set on convincing yourself what your reality looks like these days.”

Sin pulled back, eyes reflecting the sky. He stole a fleeting look at Devlin and Thane, waiting for us outside amongst the Sluagh. Then he leveled his gaze with Laisrés’s.

Some silent understanding passed between them.

“If I have to command you again, it’ll mean pain and death. Speak.”

The half god’s eyes smoldered in the darkness, warring with the intensity of Sin’s horns.

At once, all the crows on his body lifted and whirled around us in a cyclone of feathers and wings.

I saw nothing else beyond it.

Inside the funnel was dizzying, reminding me of the hazy dreams I’d had of Laisrés. Once more, his tan skin was bare.

“Now that we can speak openly,” Laisrés started, “I am here because my mother has had her eye on you, Sersa. Deities always call on debts to be repaid. *Always*. And the Shadowess has yet to pay. The Mórrígan is baiting you. That’s all Jestin ever was. That’s all he’ll ever be. Bait. As was I.”

His words settled in my gut like a weight. Unfortunately, it didn’t help me feel grounded inside the cyclone of feathers. Sin steadied me with a hand around my waist, and I was no longer shy about letting him hold me up.

Laisrés studied me. “Do you truly believe a goddess would support a second-best brother in taking you as his queen when she wanted *us* to be together? When you have *the Daemon King* as your Binding? And if that isn’t bad enough, Nessin can effortlessly sift through minds. *No*. The Mórrígan never supported Jestin. She knows a Binding is unbreakable too.”

Besides Ma being goddess-touched, why would a goddess—the goddess of war, fate, phantoms, omens, sister to Dúm—ever concern herself with me?

It neither mattered whether I believed Laisrés, nor whether he was telling the truth. Pieces of it had to be true, and maybe he had reason to lie about the details, but the Mórrígan’s history with Sin alone was telltale.

“Bardca told her. About the Binding,” Sin realized aloud.

Laisrés nodded and turned back to me. “My mother has been *fascinated* with you ever since you were a child. It’s why she dismissed the Shadowess’s debt. But Sorcha seems to be unaware that debt has passed to *you*.” Standing a little straighter, Laisrés’s tarnished gold eyes traced the spiraling crows for a moment.

“Look.” Laisrés sighed. “I am sorry I screwed with both of your feelings. There’s nothing like passion though. It maddens us all. Blinds us all. Drives us to act in outrageous ways.”

Narrowing my eyes at him, I tilted my head.

“I should start by saying I don’t feel anything for you either, Sersa.” His gaze flicked to Sin. “Sorry, buck. As much as I know you’d love a reason to kill me after all this time, I never wanted your wife.”

“What the bloody fuck?” Sin rasped out.

“My mother sent me here to leverage the strange connection we share through our blood, Sersa. She knows *your* blood is fueled by the things you feel. To what extent, it appears not even you know. She *did* tell me to tempt you with the Temptress’s help. To see if you were so inclined to leave Nessin.” Laisrés glanced all the way up the funnel of his crows again, as if ensuring there were no gaps.

Watching him made *me* dizzy.

Sin gave my waist another reassuring squeeze.

“We’re fortunate not all deities are truly omniscient, or my mother would know I’ve been *trying* to help you.”

“Telling me to bed you?” I said disgustedly. “Quite the circuitous way.”

Apart from Devlin, I cursed Gearóid Drumghoul for the males he’d brought into this world.

The one behind me occasionally included.

“Not my subtlest idea, I admit.” Laisrés slid his hand through the wall of spiraling crows, momentarily forming a keyhole. The others were still outside, our whereabouts and the cyclone itself clearly unknown. He refocused, folding his arms. “I’ve never worked so hard to keep someone out of my head as I have with you, Nessin—with Fae glamours on it too.” He licked his lips, taking a heavy breath as he regarded me. “Your blood takes, Sersa. The black stole your clan’s magic. The red can mask all other emotions. The blue?”

I didn’t know if Laisrés meant to imply each color stole something different, but if happiness was the thing the blue hunted, I could believe it.

It wasn’t true though. The pink didn’t take.

It gave.

But I wasn’t about to give Laisrés anything else about my magic. Not a word more of its capabilities.

“Why don’t you enlighten us—what do you believe Maris wants?” Sin asked, calmer by comparison to mere moments ago.

Laisrés snickered facetiously, shaking his head. “You’ve always been impossible, Nessin. Tenacious. Defying her plans and tactics. Taking the reins for yourself. I think she believes Sersa can *control* you—perhaps as a result of the Binding.”

“She stood on the sidelines!” Sin shouted. Back to incensed. “Every war, Maris basked in the bloodshed, but she didn’t *shed* that blood. She prefers her pawns to do everything for her.”

Laisrés put his hands on his hips. “Look at you. You defy deities, and they accept it. You don’t listen. You’re a threat. Sersa is equally, but you—you are a liability. Too many bloods in one body. And with Sersa as your Binding?” He shook his head.

“If you are trying to insinuate that gods are above daemons, let me stop you right there. I single-handedly won wars for your mother when you were a

fucking hatchling,” Sin said, his voice carrying a deadly chill.

“Always so superior, Nessin.”

“Enough! I am over your pissing contests,” I snapped.

Laisrés continued to examine my magic, now swimming among his whirling crows.

“Whatever. I didn’t come here to argue with you. Capturing you from Nos Nua was my mother’s original plan until she caught wind that Jestin had a similar idea. But her interest was really piqued when he told her about something called—”

“A god command,” Sin finished.

“Your brother called it something else,” Laisrés said. Like Jestin wasn’t also his brother. “I believe she is testing the two of you—perhaps to understand the true strength of your Binding, and of your blood with her own eyes, Sersa.”

Sin looked like he was about to set something on fire with *his* eyes.

“I am nothing,” I said. “I have next to no control. When my magic does something of value, it’s because it’s taken over completely. It has a mind of its own.”

Laisrés darted a look at Sin behind me. “What better a soldier to mold than one who doesn’t know what she’s doing? She can teach you everything you want and more. And for the record, everyone knows you’re lying to yourself about how powerful you are. Including you. Especially with that one bound to you,” he said, nudging his tan jaw at Sin. “I saw the sea the other day. That—*not* powerful? It reached the fucking safehouse.”

Gods.

Then Laisrés knew the general location of not just one but *both* of the surviving safehouses.

Dark energy rolled off Sin. “If your mother tries anything tonight, I will skin you alive.” He glanced at me when my mouth fell open. “Fine! Not the crows. Just him.”

“How am I the bad guy here?” Laisrés pointed to his chest with both hands. “I am literally trying to help.”

“Shall we begin with repeatedly insinuating that you wanted to fuck my wife?”

“Trust me. I *want* to be alone. Me. My fucking crows. And that is it.” Clearly feeding off Laisrés, the cyclone of birds rippled. He thrust out his hand, gesturing to them. “They occasionally pick up my mother’s

whisperings when she's not careful. Over the last year or so, she has called Sersa the Queen of Three multiple times."

I snapped my gaze up from the floor. "Aislinn said something similar."

Laisrés hummed. "Yes, I was glad to hear the lass isn't *entirely* useless and actually made it."

Sin shifted too, his hipbone brushing my back. "The Queen of Three refers to the three united worlds—there is no other explanation."

"Hate to say it, Nessin, but you had best hope not. Because *I* would be the key to helping Sersa rule all three realms. Not you. Not Jestin. My blood may not be pure, but as a god, I can walk among mortals. They worship the gods."

"Half gods are worshipped by no one," I interrupted.

"Nevertheless, we are an extension of our parents. I straddle both the Otherworld and the Underworld too."

As my hands formed fists, I realized how much I wanted to punch Laisrés.

He was responsible for *everything* over the last couple of weeks.

No. He, too, is a pawn.

Sin seemed to be chewing on this intel, his jaw muscles working as his teeth gnashed together. "I would pay a lot of gold to watch my wife beat the shit out of you, but your mother is expecting us."

Laisrés lifted his head. "If you can't keep your godsdamn tempers in check, you will truly be the Mórrígan's before you know—"

Sin unlaced our fingers and tried to step around me.

"Okay, okay!" I kept them apart and looked at Laisrés. "So we're clear, you have been a first-rate bastard. First word that came to mind, sorry. But messing with someone under a Temptress's sway, let alone your brother's *wife*—who does that?"

"Half-brother," they said in unison.

But Sin smirked, raising his eyebrows at Laisrés.

I turned on him. "And *you* should be grateful he is warning us at all. You heard Niuna. Whatever in Dúm's name her warning meant, you *need* your blood."

The Daemon King gritted his teeth.

Now Laisrés looked pleased.

"Oh, quit smiling, or I will find a way to obliterate you into a million feathers and keep your crows as pets," I said. "To be clear, this does not mean we trust you, Laisrés."

I studied them for a long moment, realizing they were their parents in appearance completely. Sin was all his mother, and Laisrés all Gearóid. The fact the Temptress had gotten in my head enough to make me see past that, to actually find the half god attractive, made me shudder.

Laisrés waved his hand. “Fine. Do what you want. Listen, don’t listen. What I do know is that my mother usually calls her pawns into place when a need arises. We’d be fools *not* to believe that need is on the horizon.”

Sin exhaled through his nostrils. “War.”

Laisrés shrugged. “I don’t know what she believes will ignite it, but if anyone were to play the Daemon Queen and King as their pawns, they’d win.”

Sin’s gaze flicked around my face contemplatively. “I have been searching for ways to close the realms off from one another. Mostly the Soullands from the mortal lands. It is because of deities like your *mother* that I have considered solidifying the veil to divide *all* the realms. Could that be it?”

Dúm.

I’d forgotten Sin had said so at the chalet. Only now I knew which side I’d be on.

“Hard to say.” Laisrés rubbed his short beard, fingers moving in absent thought. “But the more you show off your capabilities, *Sersa*, the firmer her belief that you are something exceptional grows—which means you *are*.” He pinned me with his eyes, predominantly green right now with the gleaming feathers surrounding us. “Do yourself a favor and keep your blood contained tonight.”

How many times did I have to repeat that it didn’t *listen* to me?

Sin squeezed my hand. “I won’t ask you not to use it. Do your worst if it comes to it, love.”

Warmth unfurled in my chest.

Rolling his eyes, Laisrés turned to move. “You’ve been warned. I have to go. She doesn’t know I’m gone.”

“Laz.”

“You owe me nothing.” He shook his head at Sin. “We’re even. I don’t know if I’ll be able to warn you again. So stay alert and remember. *Try* not to show the Mórrígan something worthwhile. It could be the difference between a life of freedom and one shackled to a goddess who will use you until there is nothing left, *Sersa*.”

“Presumptuous of you,” Sin said with a dark chuckle, “that I would *ever* thank you. Why don’t you escort us to Faerie Forest instead? Your mum knows you’ve been playing us, anyway. Plus, I’d like you right where I can see you.”

Sluagh closed in on Laisrés when Sin issued them a silent command.

I didn’t care Laisrés had just warned us to contain ourselves—to pretend Sin and I weren’t as powerful together as we were. No one would put ideas in my head or steer my fate.

No one, no more.

SIN



FAERIE FOREST LOOMED BEFORE US. TWISTED TREES FORMED A TANGLE OF shadows, serving as an abrupt line only the gods could have drawn.

Those ever-shifting shadows were omens of the *true* afterlife so many Soullanders tried to avoid.

Yet it was not solely the gods who lived beyond that border. Fae of both low and high castes. Changelings. Mortal servants the faeries trapped as their playthings, both mares and mounts kept solely for their entertainment.

Though the Otherworld was certainly a spectacle, it was not a place I wanted to call my home. Neither temporarily nor indefinitely.

Daemons and the Sluagh were my kin, and I wanted to keep it that way.

Sersa and I had just landed beside one another with Dev and Thane on our tail, but as the moments passed, it felt like an eternity. She studied the border with spellbound curiosity, and the Otherworld was exactly that—spellbinding. One could find themselves trapped inside without a care, unbeknownst that they were, indeed, trapped.

Although Sluagh couldn't drop us off anywhere past the Otherworld's veil, it was better that way. I needed no further temptation to show up on the Mórrígan's doorstep in Nevre and tear her head right from her neck.

My queen and I shared a tense look.

Then we walked shoulder to shoulder toward the edge of the trees, keeping the small clearing between us and the Otherworld. I signaled for Thane and Devlin to stay back. My only solace was that I'd commanded both of them. Plus Sersa.

Ise awán.

It was meant to make them listen solely to me. The trouble was the root of the Bonespeakers rested inside the very goddess we were here to oppose.

A high-backed throne made of gnarled twigs and dark flowers appeared to have sprouted up from the forest floor, where the trees grew closer together. All I saw in the darkness concealing the form that occupied the throne were dark violet nails sharpened into tips, and the long-sleeved dress she wore covering olive-skinned forearms.

Perched on those arms were three sets of hooked talons each—the Mórrígan's little underlings, whom she had definitely transformed from whatever beings they were this time.

More daemons. Fallen Fae. Creatures from tales long ago lost.

One constant existed when it came to the Mórrígan, however. Where *she* dwelled, so did immense power.

“Nessin,” she purred. “Your wife is as beautiful as they say. Or,” she paused deliberately, a serpent assessing right before she struck. “As beautiful as *Laisrés* said. Hello, son.”

Although I hadn't forgotten the half god accompanied us, I also hadn't spared him a glance. His mother was the true threat among these woods. She required full attention. Not a single thought clouded Sersa's focus either. *Wise.*

To let one's mind wander in the goddess's presence might mean true death. Quicker than a blink.

“Maris.” I dipped my head in greeting. Not in worship, devotion, awe. Not with the adoration she sought from all her subjects.

Sought was the wrong word. Deities got their way, and Maris was no exception.

While the Soullander side behind the veil was pitch-black, hers was not. Otherworld moonlight twisted through the canopy, revealing shiny, painted lips of the darkest shade.

“Is she mute? Does she not speak?” Maris pressed.

Sersa took the smallest step, her toes an inch ahead of mine. Shoulders

taut and head high, she studied the goddess her mother and clan venerated. “In Clais, you’re so distinguished. You had me speechless for a moment. Maris, is it?”

Good, love.

Choosing her words carefully. All while subtly defying her.

“Most call me Queen Maris,” the Mórrígan said, a deceptively graceful lilt to her voice. “Though your husband has never had time for the extra word in front of my name. Rather, I suppose he grew out of it.”

That surprised me. An admission I got under her skin.

My jaw tightened.

“And you can call me *Queen Sersa*. I am Daemon Queen as of the Dark Eve. As you are well aware.”

I sent a flare through my soul’s mind. A warning. Just because Sersa felt safe with the Sluagh didn’t mean I wanted her provoking the goddess too far.

At the same time, I loved the safety and assuredness she felt with them around. Her fear of the Sluagh must have shifted at the Knot.

And thank the fucking useless gods for that.

“No need to waste time,” I pressed on before Maris could reply. “You know why we’re here. I have reason to believe my brother sought asylum with you some moons ago. Give me Jestin, and we will be on our way.”

I wanted to demand she clarify the reasons she had claimed our reign, but I didn’t fancy a fight. Not tonight. Once Jestin was gone, I would have Feera direct all her efforts toward the matter so I could devise the best way to address it.

“Oh, sure, sure.” Maris’s pointy-tipped fingers clutched the throne’s armrests as she rose.

The upper half of her body, including her face, remained in shadow. Her crows zipped into the treetops. Slivered in moonlight, her hands hovered in the air like disembodied phantoms, distorted as she tugged on invisible strings.

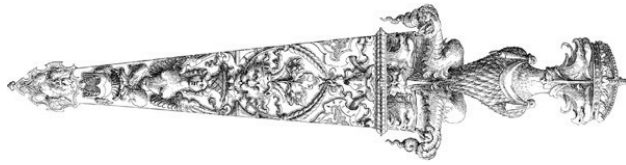
Rustling branches and undergrowth, a silhouette dragged its feet out of those shadows, a few steps behind the safety of the border.

Expression blank. Eyes empty.

Hunched over, Jestin moved like the dead.

“Look at what you did to your poor brother, Nessin. From puppeteer to puppet.” She clicked her tongue in disapproval. “Though I must thank you. You know how much I love my puppets. How much I love my *toys*.”

Serena



MOONLIGHT GLINTED OFF THE TIPS OF THE MÓRRÍGAN'S NAILS LIKE miniature daggers as she raked them through Jestin's thick hair.

I didn't doubt she could slit my throat—*anyone's*—with one of those nails, no weapons needed.

When Jestin did a little jig for her as she plucked his imaginary strings, irrefutable was the fact that the blood of the Bonespeaker originated with her too. Maybe her brother Dúm had contributed.

But *certainly* the Mórrígan.

The energy rolling off Sin in waves challenged that which emanated from her. Like two stars dominating opposite sides of the sky.

"Maris," he said, his tone rasped and deep. Sinister in such a subtle way that I couldn't imagine anyone ever defying him. Like whoever had commanded the Mórrígan's army was a different person entirely. Someone sharper. Someone without remorse.

Someone who craved bloodshed as much as she did.

No. I'm still me, Sin said in my head.

The Mórrígan seemed to wake from a dream when Sin said her name. I felt the intensity of her stare piercing through the trees. It was inexplicable, impossible, when I couldn't see her eyes at all. But she was a deity.

For them, nothing was impossible.

While we stood in darkness, the moon on her side of the veil slivered her body in half. It illuminated from her hips to just below her shoulders in the eeriest of ways—as if she controlled the light to keep her face hidden.

I didn't doubt it.

Licking my lips, I forced out a breath. I'd managed to keep up a solid smokescreen so far, and I couldn't let that fall simply because she'd revived Nessin's brother as her puppet.

It's fine, I told myself. *All Bonespeakers can make puppets.*

But what did she plan to do with hers? And was Jestin actually dead? Alive? From here, his eyes looked truly empty.

The Daemon King's voice shattered those thoughts. "You have no need for my brother, and this is *not* a request."

"No need? There is always a need. For everyone, there is a need. A *purpose*." Her smooth voice couldn't have been more disconcerting. Poison wrapped in silk.

Sin strode in front of me, reaching his arm back to keep me a step behind him.

A plea to listen shot through our Binding.

"Perhaps I was not clear. Give me Jestin, and I will graciously pardon the Temptress who tormented not only my wife but also Thane." Sin bravely looked away from the Mórrígan to gesture behind us.

I'd forgotten they were there at all.

"Not to mention your own son," he added.

The Sluagh encircling Laisrés grew ever closer.

Sin refocused on the goddess. His horns resembled a garnet lantern in the darkness. "We both know maintaining good relations between our worlds is of the utmost importance."

"The Daemon King, gracious?" The Mórrígan scoffed. "You do not have a gracious bone in your body, Nessin Drumghoul. Nor do I know what you are referring to."

"Okay," Sin said evenly, his expression passive as he tilted his head in that predatory way. "I will play along."

Play. Along. Her tone turned deadly, no silk in sight or earshot, and I thought for sure those words alone could bring someone true death. But the Mórrígan sighed. "All I want is to hear you're still loyal to your goddess, Nessin." Her voice was honey once more. "I am your patron deity, after all—like a second mother."

I bit back my retorts and suspected Sin was as well. The muscles in his back, just between his shoulders where I touched him, hardened.

“Last I heard,” he started with impressive restraint, “we were supposed to choose our own patron deity. You want us to accept you? Then *I* want Jestin—to do with him as I please.”

“Who else would you have chosen if not the one solely responsible for your blood? *Both* of yours.”

“Am I speaking another language?” An innate desire for vengeance crested inside Sin. “Jestin. Now. *Then*, we will talk.”

The Mórrígan was testing us, Sin most of all.

The light above shifted right as her eyes flashed a vibrant green. In her smooth voice, she said emotionlessly, “*Wake.*”

Jestin gasped, breaching whatever barrier the Mórrígan had wedged between him and death. Clearly, what Sin had done to him in the maze hadn’t worked. Either that or his goddess had restored him, indeed.

“Tell Sersa Scáth what will happen if your brother *refuses* to answer to me. Since he somehow insists after *all this time*,” she shouted before her voice leveled out, “on disobeying his queen and goddess.”

Jestin’s spine lengthened when she tugged on his invisible puppet strings, but his voice was limp. “I will possess your soul and put you under the god command.”

Trapped under the goddess’s thumb, he sounded as good as dead. I would’ve believed *he* was under her Ordé.

“*Unless?*” she pressed.

“Unless Nessin puts her under it now.”

The Mórrígan looked from me to Nessin and back again. She clicked her tongue, and her eyes glimmered with knowledge. Time and age. Forbidden secrets I wasn’t sure I wanted to know.

Grinning, she stared—not at me, but *into* me.

She straightened to full height. “*Back to sleep, puppet.*”

Jestin’s eyes went blank. It was horrific. All of this was horrific.

Had he kissed me in the Knot, delivered such potent commands, and stoked the flame of paranoia inside me—all so *Sin* would put me under the Ordé? And clearly at the goddess’s behest.

She’d orchestrated all of this.

And I fell for it.

Sin may not have placed me under the Ordé, but I *had* demanded it.

Nothing else explained why Jestin would go through all this trouble to learn about the command unless he was certain *he* would possess my soul and whatever power they believed existed within it.

Though the Mórrígan had promised Jestin a throne, she'd never planned to fulfill that promise.

She'd simply wanted to push *Nessin* here.

Pawns. Laisrés had warned us we were all pawns.

I glared at the Mórrígan with all the defiance I could muster. Pretending to be calm became too much. A burden too heavy and one I no longer wanted to carry.

Without warning, my magic teemed and launched itself forward, amassing into an enormous form—a being that stood between us and the goddess.

The snow-cruled ground beneath me bled vibrant red. My nose bled too, turning to rust on my tongue and dripping over my lips.

Fuck.

It could've been my thought or Sin's.

The color spread outward, infecting the clearing, branching out like a tree. It reminded me of the runes on Sin's chest.

"What is this?" the Mórrígan asked, an elevated pitch of curiosity affecting her voice. She was ravenous, eager to see what I would do. "Here, I thought we'd have to command you, little queen."

Blood seeped up through cracks in the ground all around us. Fury burgeoned inside me, uncontrollable as ever. No one could stifle it. Not even the Mórrígan.

But I recalled what Laisrés had said.

Try not to show the Mórrígan something worthwhile.

How could I not? How could I stand before her as she made demands of Sin? With her threatening *my* Daemon King, my kin, I wasn't about to restrain my magic.

Whatever it wanted, I'd *let* it take.

Laisrés tried to move toward the trees concealing his mother, but the Sluagh caging him in only drew closer. Strangely, he wasn't using his crows. Devlin and Thane backed away too. They whirled around, watching me turn the clearing into a network of red veins.

"Leave," I said.

When they shook their heads, I refocused immediately.

The red burning inside me couldn't be ignored, pushed down, or leashed.

A shimmering barrier revealed itself at the edge of the clearing—the dividing line between the Soullands and the Otherworld. Only it didn't appear on its own. My tendrils were painting it red, strangely marking the veil. But my magic hadn't affected the other side. And yet, the hue crept toward the treetops, its eerie fingers clinging to the barrier.

“Ah, is Nessin siphoning you his strength right now?” said the Mórrígan. “He *must* be. Where else would you get those black eyes?”

From his gods-damned blood, I wanted to say.

I hadn't realized my eyes had changed because I saw the Mórrígan so lucidly. But she was right. The forest unfurled with a newfound darkness. Mine. Sin's. *Ours*.

Black tendrils joined us as the ground continued to spurt red.

Blood of the Archdaemon.

This was Sin's daemon blood mixing with my own. Or maybe it was my fear bleeding out of me. I wasn't afraid of losing my soul though. I was afraid of losing myself.

Of losing Sin.

Of losing every shard we'd been collecting and piecing back together.

The tendrils tore Laisrés away from the veil he'd been trying to nudge the Sluagh toward.

Coward.

He hit the ground with a grunt. Even so, all it took was a wave of the Mórrígan's hand and her crows swarmed to save the son she didn't know had committed treason against her less than a bell ago.

Once the crows righted Laisrés, they confined me in a cage with her, much like the funnel he'd created.

My body locked up, my limbs as heavy as iron. Still, I called to my tendrils to do their worst. To stain and destroy Faerie Forest. To destroy the threshold between us and the Mórrígan, and the gods-damned earth from here to the mortal lands, if that was what it took.

“Nessin Drumghoul is not yours,” I said, my voice rivaling the possessiveness of the Archdaemon in Sin. “*He's mine*.”

Without warning, the Mórrígan's arm shot outward. As far as she was—standing behind the veil at least a hundred meters away—I didn't expect her to be able to pierce right through it at all.

The veil didn't matter. Distance didn't matter. She slammed her ethereal

fist into my chest and drove it deep until she practically clutched the breath in my lungs.

I couldn't breathe *at all*.

Suddenly, it felt like she was swiping at water, trying to fish something out that wasn't *able* to be grasped. Our eyes locked, and together we recognized something was wrong. My soul wasn't difficult to grasp.

It wasn't *there*.

A disbelieving laugh bubbled in my throat. Too soon to be laughing. No soul inside me meant neither the Mórrígan nor Jestin had any use for me. Which meant death. But why wasn't she commanding me to come closer? To cross the border?

Why did she look worried for the first time?

Maybe the first time in her endless life.

The Mórrígan tore her fist back.

I cried out and gasped, simultaneously trying to suck down all the air I could.

The presence—now absence—of her reaching into me wasn't the most painful thing I'd endured lately. But I swore the goddess had ripped herself free in the most agonizing way possible without actually slicing me open.

Strange relief swelled in my empty chest as the cage and the crows arresting me fell away.

When the moonlight arced through the trees, I choked on my shock.

Shaking, the Mórrígan gripped her forearm and studied her fingertips—now completely *charred* and crumbling to ash. The wind ruthlessly carried them away, along with her sangfroid, and the scent that pervaded the air tasted like I'd *swallowed* those floating ashes.

Seeing her fingerless hand was the first taste of sweet revenge.

But the light shifted further, and the Mórrígan appeared in full.

The misshapen carcass and fan-shaped tail of a dead crow dyed purple swept across her chest. Its beak curled around her neck, framing her stern chin. A challenge lived inside her eyes, so green and vibrant they rivaled Grandma Riona's.

The goddess of war was sharp and powerful, like one of my dainty daggers. Her presence was no small thing though. She immediately squared her shoulders with mine, her trumpet dress swishing on the forest floor like a fan.

Her flawless skin showed no hint of the eternity she'd lived. Instead, her

age thrived in her eyes. It was an almost empty look. An endless tunnel of history she'd walked through with next to no feeling. Numb to all the pain she'd caused.

“Apologies, Maris,” Sin said. “My queen is empty, and in case it was not clear, only *I* can touch the cavity of our souls.”

Sersa



TO THE MÓRRÍGAN'S CREDIT, SHE HADN'T SHRIEKED OR LET OUT ANY NOISE of pain or shock. Her face had gone stark white though. Frozen and expressionless.

Until she cracked.

"*Why* is she empty? Where is her soul? You think either of you will have any power without it?"

Sin stood tall. Unafraid. He, too, showed no external signs of distress.

"She *has* no soul. And I don't have it either."

Had he—

Had he taken all of it last night? Not a shard, but the entire thing?

"*Awaken!*" the Mórrígan hissed at Jestin. "Your brother has done something with Sersa Scáth's soul." She lowered into her throne. "Show me you are worthy. Find it—command the Sluagh to retrieve it. Put her under the Ordé since the Daemon King will not."

The barrier between worlds that my magic had painted shimmered to the echoes of her voice.

Jestin roused fully.

His irises were as white as snow, his black pupils mirroring the sky above, and the look of cognizance renewed—the goddess's puppet still, but himself once more.

Crying out, I slumped forward.

I fisted the snow as Jestin's immediate, silent order drove straight through me. Without a gods-damned word, he'd dismantled Sin's command to listen only to him. Truthfully, I'd known it was futile the second Sin uttered it.

Because it wasn't the gods-damned Ordé.

I'd asked Sin for it—for this exact reason. Wasn't protecting me the most important thing to him? He was always saying so.

Or had I just underestimated his addiction to souls?

Jestin curled his fingers as if to beckon the rising pain inside me. "Queen Maris knew you'd say no to her requests, Nessin. So she gave me a little extra *kick*. Damn our father for passing me no Colossi blood, but it doesn't matter. I am a quarter Bonespeaker no more."

Their mother had been half Bonespeaker, and the very thought of a command being any stronger than they already were chilled *my* blood.

Another flick of Jestin's fingers had me screaming, the tightness around the cavity in my chest unbearable. My bones throbbed, equally painful as the command he'd given me in the Knot.

If not worse.

Jestin simpered. "You would not *believe* what it feels like to be full-blooded." Taunting us, he slipped Sin's golden horn out from beneath his fitted, midnight-blue coat and caressed the chain. Then he balanced the tip of the horn on his pointer finger and grinned. "Not only am I the stronger Bonespeaker now, but I *also* control the Sluagh. All your strengths—*mine*. Your whore—soon to be *mine* too. Your throne. Your *entire* life. All mine."

"Did you say *whore*?" Sin asked dangerously.

"Sure did, brother." Jestin prowled the border, remaining behind the Otherworld's veil. "If you ingested her soul, give her the Ordé right now. Make all her pain stop."

YES, I screamed inside. *Make it stop.*

The Órde was my air. The only solution. My one true hope of these strings being cut.

Jestin looked to the Mórrígan for approval.

The Mórrígan is baiting you. That's all Jestin ever was. That's all he'll ever be. Bait.

We were fools. Fucking fools not to believe Laisrés. He stood a few meters away near the trees, yet still on the Soullands' side of the border. As his eyes met mine, his jaw moved the slightest bit. Imperceptibly. Another

attempt to warn me.

But I'd told him before—I didn't control my magic, and I certainly wasn't about to try tonight.

Nor was I about to bow to his mother.

“Kill him,” I hissed at my magic. “*Kill. Jestin.*”

Sin was shaking with rage now. “It is unfortunate the Mórrígan can't give you Soulreaper blood. Since you didn't inherit that either. Otherwise, you'd be able to sense Sersa's soul so easily.”

I wondered if he felt what I did right now.

Red continued to spurt up from the ground with squelching sounds, seeping through the most minuscule of cracks.

The Ordé, I cried in my thoughts. Sin's thoughts. *Give me the fucking Ordé! NOW!*

Hang on, love.

He was stalling.

Why? I screamed at our Binding again.

What was Sin waiting for? My magic couldn't break past the veil. Could his Sluagh not either?

If so, he was undoubtedly suppressing *his* feelings for my sake.

Someone behind me moved—Thane or Devlin.

“*Stay where you are!*” Jestin pointed, ceasing them instantly. Because his full-blooded commands required no fucking effort at all.

I glanced to the side, where Devlin had all but turned to stone. I couldn't see Thane.

Grinning in satisfaction, Jestin continued to lurk along the border. “I don't *need* Soulreaper blood when you dragged Dev along with you, Nessin.” He halted, squaring his shoulders with Sin as he swayed the horn like a pendulum. The look Jestin wore came straight from the grave of Gearóid Drumghoul.

“You realize,” Sin started, “that I *can* carry all of us away with a single command to the Sluagh, yes?”

“I have the horn. They are *my* army now.” Certain he had the upper hand, the prince practically swaggered.

But all it took was one toe over the border.

My magic sensed Jestin straddling the veil—just barely—and I realized the reason it had painted the line between the two realms.

The tendrils shot forward from the edges of the clearing where they'd

been anticipating Jestin's misstep. They moved like hundreds of arrows then looped around his arms and legs to drag him over the Otherworld's border.

"Maris!" Jestin shrieked.

He hissed at the eel-like tendrils, still coiling around him on the ground. They kicked up the earth's lifeblood—all the red I'd caused to seep through the hardened snow, coating him in it, marking him in death. He tried swatting at my magic, but it was both tangible and not, and he quickly learned he couldn't hold the tendrils in his fists.

Nothing—no amount of protests or measure of Bonespeaker blood—would overpower my magic. He was neither immune to it nor able to command it.

But to believe Jestin had purposely slipped out of line would make me a fool. Surely, the Mórrígan nudged her puppet in the right direction. She wanted her show. Likewise, she was putting one on for us too.

She has to be.

The Mórrígan looked like a pompous queen, sitting off to the side at a royal tournament, eager to see which of her pawns prevailed in jousting the other through their armor. And she'd personally forged and gifted Jestin *new* armor with his enhanced blood.

"Pull it back!" he screamed, still on his back, beseeching her for help. "My queen?"

The tendrils lashed at him, drawing a slice across his cheek like a blade. I savored the red dripping from his eyes, nose, and now down the side of his face.

"It doesn't listen to me! *Your queen* may have goddess-touched my ma, but what she didn't account for?" I lifted my gaze—burning with defiance—to the Mórrígan's, despite all the torture in my voice. "My magic became something unpredictable. Uncontrollable. Even the Daemon King can't command it."

"You think Nessin is so clever, don't you?" Jestin shouted. "Does it amuse you that your husband stole your soul without you knowing? Or *did* you know? Did you give up your roots so easily, you fucking mortal whore? *Tell me where it is.*"

Though Jestin's newest command purred inside me, the initial one contrasted it—like fire in my veins.

On fire or not, it felt good to admit the truth. "I have no idea." I laughed through my pain, driven solely by the fact that Nessin had kept *another* secret

from me.

The whereabouts of my soul.

A white lie with good reason.

With his arms pinned to his sides, Jestin struggled to break free.

It was too late by the time I realized his aim—*the horn*—and he touched it to his lips. Enduring the unbearable sound was almost worse than all the screeches combined in the Knot.

It was like he'd blown into it a *hundred* times instead of once.

More Sluagh swarmed in answer.

Burying my palms deeper in the reddening snow, my back arched in pain, and my tendrils scattered.

The Sluagh landed all around us, shaking the ground beneath me. Wingbeats stirred the trees, blowing wild black strands of hair across my face, while the frigid wind carried the scent of rust and sweat permeating the air.

Jestin rolled over, wrestling to his feet.

“Yes! Come, my Sluagh,” he said. “*Come.*”

The flocks multiplied overhead. Their collective screeches muffled the sounds of my cries. But the way their allegiance shifted—it blared even louder.

It was something in their posture, their inclination toward Sin, that assured me this was all an act by one puppeteer's hands to fool another.

Jestin swallowed. Gritted his teeth. The Daemon King's army faced straight ahead, not registering a word the prince said.

Because they weren't his. And they never would be.

I held my breath. The clearing blurred as my tears and bloody nose dripped onto the snow in front of me.

Under yet another fucking command, I tore the blade from the sheath on my forearm and turned it on myself without a second thought.

“Do not come any closer,” Jestin warned Sin, thrusting out his hand. “Or I will have Sersa gut herself right before your eyes!”

The Mórrígan stood so swiftly her throne toppled behind her. The surrounding foliage began to crush and smother it, breaking the twigs into pieces until the ground eventually swallowed it.

The goddess was grinning—loving every second of this. She hovered right up against the transparent barrier. Her undamaged hand flattened against the pane, stippled in crimson splotches. Bright green eyes darted toward the

sky, watching the crows and Sluagh warring against one another.

The blade inched closer to my stomach. My other hand joined the first in gripping the hilt—one trying to end me, the other to prevent it from impaling me.

“Evra. Take all of them,” Sin commanded before his brother could say another word. *“Take them all.”*

At once, the Sluagh sucked in a breath, tearing from Nessin a glowing silver river of intertwined souls. It was impossible to distinguish one from the next, for all were braided together as they emerged from him.

The souls whooshed through the air toward the Sluagh—Evra—who gladly sucked in the sustenance the spirits of the restless dead had relied on for millennia.

Arms spread wide, Sin clenched his teeth. His white gaze locked on the never-ending stream pouring out of him.

I focused hard too—not on the stream of souls but *Sin*. So hard I expected to pass out.

How he kept the Binding numb with the deluge flowing out of his core, I’d never know. But souls were what kept the soulless youthful—*alive*—and I fixated on what ridding himself of them might mean.

I sobbed. The command allowed me that much, but Sin’s words from the other night resounded inside me.

I do not want to be unbound from you. Ever, Sersa.

Without souls, including mine, what would happen to our Binding? To us?

As the last of the stream escaped Sin, the tail-end shoved him backward. He dropped to his knees beside me, his breaths heavy and quick.

Sin turned to look at me with eyes that had reverted to black. “Trust me. Do not fear. Please.”

I’ll be fine, love.

That was the worst lie of them all. Sin would be anything but fine. Not when he’d been withdrawing bells before.

“What do you want out of all this?” I screamed at Jestin.

The fallen prince snapped his gaze in my direction. “To begin, I will make sure my brother is so incredibly ravenous that he leaves your realm in ruins. Then I will rise from the ashes and be their king—king of the three realms.”

The Mórrígan remained silent, her eyes alight with all the mischief of the

deities combined.

Jestin returned her smile, his confidence stupidly restored. My magic failed repeatedly to break through the walls of crows now protecting him. The blood trickling from his eyes and mouth still wasn't enough to bleed him dry either.

But as quickly as Jestin's smile had appeared, it vanished when he looked upon Sin.

Without moving or rising to his feet, the Daemon King whirled his fingers in the air. That single motion reaped a soul from a Sluagh to our left—directly from Irian's body. Glowing as bright as a star, the orb-like soul punctured the Sluagh's bony chest.

Then it whipped toward Sin.

When he caught it, I knew he held no *ordinary* soul at his fingertips. No—Sin had consumed thousands over his lifetime. And yet, he'd called a *single* one back to him.

Sin let down his walls for me. He let memories from his childhood flood into me.

Talons. Slashes. Scars. Blood.

Snow falling. Hard cobbles. Screams.

A waterfall of white hair. A woman wearing a Drumghoul signet ring, her shaking hand pressed to her stomach at a boy's bedside. "What's happening? Bardca! Bardca, help him..."

A chamber.

Four stone walls. Nothing but black stone to contain him.

Silver talons.

The images snuffed out.

Sin's voice echoed in my mind.

The last part of the Ordé is to rid oneself of souls completely, Sersa.

Pinched between the tips of his fingers, he held *our souls*. The Daemon King acknowledged Irian as he raised the orb in a toast of gratitude.

Then Sin looked me right in the eyes.

"Please forgive me, love."

His whisper was soft, kind, my deceptively cruel yet gentle king.

No further hesitation, Sin brought the souls to his lips and swallowed.

"You are released from his command, love. Ise awán. And you, Sersa Drumghoul, will listen to no one but me, Nessin Drumghoul, king of the Soullands, daemons, bones, and souls—and King of Sluagh."

His words soothed me. My forceful gasp merged with a relieving breath. Untethered, I flopped onto my face, groaning and shivering when I met the hard ground. I didn't know where the knife fell, but I was no longer trying to gut myself.

Quivering all over, Sin dug his fingers into the red ground.

With the urge to gut myself gone, I kneeled and tried to loop my arm around his.

“*Stay back,*” Sin strangled out. “I don't want to hurt you.”

I didn't fear him, and he couldn't harm me when he already possessed my entire soul. But I jerked away from Sin instantly, his words landing in a command whether or not he *meant* them to be.

The Ordé.

No pain accompanied it—neither physical nor mental—and I could only assume it was because I didn't have so much as a *thought* of disobeying it.

The Ordé was pure instinct. Absolute. Irrevocable.

Turning on Jestin, I released a garbled battle cry. The Sluagh took out one wall of crows, creating an opening for my tendrils. They wasted no time, latching onto the prince without remorse. Multi-colored now, one tendril slid beneath Jestin's neck to tip his head back while another curled around his chest to restrain him.

“You can have her soul all you want! You'll be useless soon. I have the horn—and *I will control you.*” Jestin grasped at nothing—a last attempt to taunt his brother.

All of seconds passed before Sin's bones began to break with ear-shattering cracks. One after another. Internally, I heard his agony with each snap. But my sight blurred, and I couldn't see all that was happening.

Damp from the falling snow, Sin's hair hung in his eyes as he bent over himself. The Sluagh swarmed around him at that exact moment.

All of them.

Something emanated from the Daemon King. That dark energy breathed once more, coming to life slowly. Steadily. A sinister chuckle rumbled in his chest, echoing through the clearing with such force and vigor it surely snaked between the trees and traveled for miles. His shriek pierced the night, sounding like something was stuck in his throat and he'd either choke on it, or it would split him in two.

Something tried to *claw* its way out of Sin.

“Protect your king!” I shouted at the winged creatures when the crows

multiplied.

But my shout cut off in my throat as three Sluagh scooped Devlin, Thane, and me up in their silver arms and shot us into the air.

Away from the chaos, I should have been relieved. Instead, I screamed at the top of my lungs, flailing my arms and kicking my legs to fight my way back down to the ground.

The Sluagh only pinned me tighter to its body.

Not...safe, Sin said in my head.

Through my tears, I let the fear and anger consume me. I thought of everything Jestin had put us through and begged the tendrils to finish this fight.

As we hovered in the air, I pulled myself up, clawing at the Sluagh's veiny skin to look over its shoulder. From my bird's-eye view, I watched the Sluagh on the ground. They had covered Sin—shielded him with their leathery wings.

My magic tried to protect him too. Now all three colors clouded the clearing below, but the Mórrígan was also out of sight. The forest canopy concealing the border simply wasn't thin enough to see past.

All care of her whereabouts slipped from my mind.

A distinctive snap echoed through the clearing, reaching us in the sky. Gooseflesh rippled across my entire body when Sin screamed. The agonizing sound tore through me, up and down our Binding.

I choked back my sobs. "Let me—"

One of Sin's horns clattered to the ground and rolled. Not all of it. But enough that the earth whirled around me and sweat matted my forehead. The hair on the nape of my neck prickled.

Even so, Sin numbed our Binding to protect me from the pain. Always protecting me.

"Please," I cried. "Let me come back to you."

From the ground, waxy silver wings snapped outward, extending like the sails of a ship. The other Sluagh leaped and flew back.

Gusts of air cleared away patches of my magic to reveal a Sluagh in the middle of the clearing.

But its wings were larger than all others, curling around Sin protectively. It hunched over him on the ground.

As the wings lowered slightly, peeling back like a translucent curtain, my gut dipped into my toes.

I felt as if I'd plummeted straight toward the ground.

Seeking me, the Sluagh's predatory gaze lifted to the air. Except there were no eyes. Only those pits like someone had gouged them out—scooped out all the flesh and blood to form two hollows.

Red horns poked out from beneath the wings shielding him—the single trait no other Sluagh possessed—and one appeared to be cracked off by a quarter-length.

Plumes of steam expelled from its nostrils, and the black pits continued to seek me out. With no eyes at all, it wasn't *possible*. But I suspected it was my scent it tracked.

In a crouch, the Sluagh's powerful thighs bent in preparation to launch itself into the sky.

Himself. Not it.

I wasn't afforded the chance to study the horned King of Sluagh long enough to grasp what was happening. In the space of a blink, *Sin* whipped into the sky past us, joining his flock as it turned on Jestin.

And then, all the Sluagh dove.

SIN



THE HEAT ☽ 1 MOON BEFORE WEDDING DAY

I STEPPED FOOT ON OS ÍSEAL A FEW BELLS AFTER SUNDOWN.

Two days and three nights had passed since our fight, and it was about all the time I could stand. I wasn't certain whether Sersa would forgive me, let alone hear me out. Yet I was certain I needed to see her, to explain my behavior, and to admit to everything hanging over my head.

The rings felt so heavy in my pocket, carrying the weight of my anxiety, and I had to keep checking that they were there.

A fucking Daemon Prince—nervous. Soon to be king at that. A godsdamn seven-hundred-year-old male who'd endured far fucking worse than an apology and a proposal.

Wars. Fatal wounds. Addiction. Endless years as a Sluagh.

I watched Sersa, standing on the outskirts of the crowd gathered outside House Scáth. She threw a ball for a hound, not talking to anyone, despite all the clan's guests.

Though she smiled, the strain in her eyes was clear.

Tables had been arranged in a barren field with short grass, the space

aglow with warm lantern light. Clan members were throwing down hand after hand of cards along with fat bets they'd regret come the morning. Flowers and branches twined into arches served as the backdrop for children having their portraits painted, and there was dancing on the field's other side.

It looked like a good drunken time. A simple life.

Until dawn when my kin descended upon them, their families...

As Sersa bent to take the ball from the mouth of the hound she was busy praising, her eyes flicked up then down. Realizing I was here, she looked up even quicker than the first time. Her mouth formed a little O, and her eyes were about as round, questioning both whether I was really here and why I hadn't come sooner.

The stubbornness in the core of our souls rose to the surface. Sersa's jaw and eyes hardened. Her red short-sleeved dress revealed faintly sunburnt skin along the scoop neckline, and her long hair flowed around her shoulders, blowing across a distrustful face. The shallow line between her brows that I'd kissed countless times formed.

Sersa dithered, uncertain what to think or do.

When she didn't throw the ball, the hound whimpered.

Something else caught my eye. Someone. A visiting chieftain with bright blond hair and a tan that screamed of the Western Pointe watched Sersa hungrily across the field. He stood near the wall surrounding House Scáth, clutching a wooden mug.

Why was a godsdamn chieftain always visiting? Or was it her parents pushing her to marry before she took her seat as heir?

Looks like I found my stress relief for the night.

Fucking killing the bloke.

I extended my hand, knowing Sersa couldn't take it in such a public place. Not after the other night. Not after these bastards locked her up because of me. My tails from the White Plume had garnered that a servant claimed they heard Sersa talking to herself.

Screaming at nothing.

No one.

Me.

She'd almost bled dry another clan member who helped drag her into a locked room.

Sersa snapped out of it, tossing the ball as far as she could. The

accomplished spear-thrower that she was, that was saying something. By the time the hound retrieved it, she'd be long gone.

I nudged my jaw toward the woods, urging her to follow me. Sersa plucked a basket off the ground and wedged it between her elbow and waist.

"Shouldn't you bring a guard?" a nosy woman tending to a nearby table called after her.

Sersa halted mid-stride. Turned slowly. She stood taller. "I just want some wildflowers to decorate the table. Besides, is that necessary after the other day?"

The woman's face paled, and she stumbled back a step.

"V-Very well. You have a knife?"

"Of course."

"I mean for cutting people, not flowers, Lady Sersa."

"Of course," she repeated with a reassuring smile.

"Be quick."

The woman went back to preparing the meal along with a dozen others balancing babes on their hips. Naturally, their useless husbands couldn't be bothered to carry the babes. Instead, they drank and gambled at their leisure.

Sersa glanced back once to be sure her mother wasn't watching, but the Shadowess was nowhere in sight.

She tailed me, trying not to raise suspicion until we were a few hundred feet beyond the tree line.

I slowed for Sersa. Yet we didn't touch one another.

I fought the urge to sift through every thought in her mind and gauge how she felt.

The light from the gathering dispersed. We walked a few minutes more until slivers of moonlight streamed through gaps in the especially thick canopy.

The words on my tongue felt viscid.

"Hi," I said lamely, facing Sersa.

Brilliant start.

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

It caught me off guard.

I breached her space. "You have nothing to be sorry for, Sersa. I wasn't ready to tell you everything, but I am now. And I love you. I do."

"I love you back," she blurted. "Too, I mean."

Our chests collided when I tugged her forward. Sersa threw herself at me,

wrapping her arms around my middle.

“I love you back,” I echoed, holding her head against my chest. “Are you okay? I heard what happened. I tried to come sooner.”

She looked down, gnawing at her lip. “I nearly killed two clan members, Nessin.”

I nodded.

Both tails I had on Sersa for the last few moons were callous unblood bounty hunters—mortals not restricted by the veil.

“I was angry when you said you wanted to keep me out of everything,” she said.

“And I was wrong to suggest it, love. Everything between us has changed. You know that.”

Biting her lip, Sersa smiled sadly.

“Perhaps I am selfish for seeking you out before becoming king,” I said. “For wanting—needing to meet you. When I felt you beyond Dúm’s Cross, somewhere in the mortal lands, I was losing my mind. I wish I possessed an ounce of restraint when it comes to you, but I lack it in all ways. I always will.”

I had been trying to prepare myself for this conversation since our fight. When I faced what I’d already known.

Fuck the danger. Sersa was the only queen I’d ever take.

“I have a solution. It is the only fate for us. The only thing either of us wants.”

I reached into my inner coat pocket and fished out the handkerchief. Sersa’s brow furrowed as I unwrapped it, revealing the Drumghoul signet set between two cobalt gems.

“They’re called eternphire. They say the First Queen Raielina searched tirelessly for the Eternal Flame many millennia ago after a life of being hunted.”

“They’re beautiful,” Sersa said shakily.

She knew where I was going with this. Her breath caught, and she refused to swallow another in case she was wrong.

“Druids encased bits of the Eternal Flame inside these gems. The ring originally belonged to the First Queen. My mum pretended she lost it, but she gave it to a friend for safekeeping. After our souls began to call to me, he told me to hold onto the ring. I thought nothing of it. And then, I met you.”

I lowered onto one knee.

Sersa's sharp inhale drowned out the wind. She stood perfectly still, gaze unwavering, only seeing me.

"I know this is insane," I said. "I have no soul, Sersa. Yet within me—in its place—is an eternal flame for you. One I will hold forever. It's much more than simply how I was made, and there is no one else I desire as my wife or Daemon Queen. I want you to stand beside me in the endeavors ahead."

The condition, the part that might take all the sweetness out of this moment, had to be said.

"I say all this with the knowledge that I can't give you this ring yet, love. If you will even accept it to begin with."

Tears gathered in her eyes, ready to tip over the rim and spill onto her cheeks. I moved to stand and stop them from falling when Sersa snapped, "Stay where you are, Nessin Drumghoul. Or I will say no."

All that mattered was that meant she was going to say yes.

"Okay." I faltered, losing track of what I was saying. "I know this is quick. But this is serious. I want nothing more than for this to be the most serious thing we ever do. Forever. I'm yours eternal, Sersa Scáth, and I beg the gods you will say yes to being my wife, my queen, my soul. Allow me to protect you the only way I know how."

"And that is?" Sersa said, fearful of the answer.

Where did I begin?

We would be here a fucking while.

So all I said was, "Illusions and deceit through and through. Some things you will despise me for—a lot. I promise the pain will be temporary though. The one thing that isn't temporary is us."

"What things must you do?" Sersa asked, trembling worse.

"Removing your memories of our time together thus far. Robbing you of a proper wedding night. Pushing you away at times because I know you won't be able to resist me."

Sersa rolled her eyes, but my jest earned me a smile. It helped me press on.

"Holding your father in the Soullands until I am Daemon King. Slaughtering my father to take my throne. Being a monster, if I must. These are all the things I have kept from you."

Fumbling her lip, Sersa gestured for me to stand, her fingers immediately finding my hard chest. She prodded at it as if she might be able to get past my shell. Little did she know, she was the only person who'd ever breached that

empty cavity.

“You would be the keeper of my soul too, then.” Sersa kept her eyes down. “That sounds romantic-ish.”

“Ish,” I echoed with a laugh. “You must tell me how I can be truly romantic, love.”

She buried her forehead in my chest. “I don’t want to be apart.”

“It will not be long, love. We would be married on Hwain.”

“A day is longer to some,” she said.

“A day without you is long for me too.”

Sersa kissed the center of my chest, pulling a stressed yet relieved breath out of me.

I slid my hands under her jaw, tipping her head back. “When you are ready to age, I will too.”

“What? No. Stop that, Nessin.” Her brow furrowed.

“Only then can we enter the Otherworld. We will meet true death eventually, Sersa.”

“I won’t have you dying on me.”

“You would also be dead,” I said.

She snorted. “Weren’t you just proposing?”

We laughed together, and I kissed the top of her head.

“I was...and you haven’t answered my question,” I noted, pulling back to look in her eyes.

“I want to marry you. But,” Sersa paused intentionally, “I do want to live forever as long as you’re mine.”

“Anything you ask of me will be yours, love. I am yours.”

We kissed long and frantic. Sersa gripped the front of my coat and shoved me against a tree. My hands trailed to her ass, picking her up to keep our lips sealed.

“Take me first,” she said against my lips. “Please, Nessin. I’m sure.”

Instantly, Sersa felt my resistance.

Her thoughts echoed with confusion, and she looked down as her hands went slack on my collar.

“I am about to take so much from you, Sersa. Once you know all my secrets, our life will truly begin. I promise. Every part of it, love.” I brushed her cheek with my lips. “Please understand my reasoning. You will loathe me when you realize all I have done is lie to you. Once you’re back in my care, when we are married, I’ll tell you what I can—when possible, but not a

moment before.”

Sersa’s hands slid down my abdomen, halting in the middle. When I cupped her face again, so small in my hands, I felt her teeth grit beneath.

“I won’t agree to marry you. Even if I think it’s all a deception. A man I don’t know asking me for my hand? Never.”

“Don’t lie, love. While you’ll be without your memories, hints of your feelings will endure. We both know how little self-control you have when it comes to me. I will make you fall in love with me all over. Effortlessly.”

Sersa considered shoving me. “Pa—you won’t get him out immediately?”

“Not with the Old King having me followed. Being here is a risk, Sersa. Thane is keeping him safe for now. I promise. Bain is my only leverage with you in case I do piss you off early on.”

“In case? You’ll be lucky if you don’t get another blade to the chest.”

“Shoulder,” I corrected. “It was the shoulder for the dozenth time, love.”

A stream of pale blue moonlight split Sersa’s face in two, highlighting her dark lashes, the curve of her upper lip. “Must it be a moon until you return? Surely, I can meet the king before. You can introduce me—”

“No. I want to give him as little time as possible to learn about us, to come after you... Whatever may come. I have loose ends that I must tie up as well, Sersa. The king has been ill lately. He knows he can’t wait another year, and the Daemon Line Trials always align with the Dark season. We will have until a few days before Hwain to present our betrothed. Fair warning—I may whisper commands in your ear while you sleep so you come to me. Gods know how stubborn you are.”

It wouldn’t be necessary. Sersa had been coming to the city a few nights a week before we officially met. My home had been her solace after Bain disappeared. Our souls were also responsible for pulling us together. A shortening cord that would never let us stay apart.

“Stalker,” Sersa said.

“I am obsessed with you.”

“An entire moon.” A sigh cut through her unsteady breath. “What if I run off with some other man before then?” Sersa countered. “What if I find someone else all because I don’t know you exist?”

“Yes, about that. Is that chieftain I saw important? I was planning on killing him tonight.”

“Nessin!”

“Fine.” I would have to behave, then. Only because Sersa would know it

was me. “Until then, you will live your life as you were before me. However,” I said gravely, not quite a threat but a promise as I stared into her, “if I end up having to hunt you down to pry you from another male’s arms, I will bury a blade in his chest. Without hesitation or remorse. Then I will lay you down right there in his blood and take you until you thank me for killing him.”

Some of it was a lie. I’d die a bit inside if it happened.

The fucking in the bloke’s blood? Not a lie.

This was the way things had to be. For now.

Sersa laughed through her tears, simultaneously shuddering at the thought.

I forced her to look at me. “When we are finally together, whether it is your first or your hundredth time, we will be wed. Not because I believe in so-called morals, but because I’d fail to resist if I’ve already had you. I understand you’ll need time to come to terms with your feelings for me too, and I need not seduce you to make you fall in love with me.”

“Please? I want you to be the one, Nessin.”

“I am the one.”

Sersa blinked up at me, the whites of her eyes bloodshot from days of crying. “You could command me.”

Dúm, part of me wanted to.

The wind rustled the trees, carrying the lemongrass scent of her hair.

“You will always have free will, Sersa. If it’s meant to be—and it is—you will choose me. The fun part will be seeing how long it takes for you to warm up to me. Care to place a little wager with your future husband?”

“This is serious. I don’t want free will in this.” Her voice cracked. “Not while I know you exist.”

My chest hurt.

Seeing the deep blue behind her eyes could break me.

I kissed the shell of her ear. “You won’t even know you miss me, love.”

Knowing she wouldn’t know a thing brought her no comfort.

Biting her lip, Sersa reached up to push the hair out of my eyes, slicking it backward to memorize every plane and curve of my face. Every scar.

With her hands on me like this, leaving would be even harder.

“Just know this, love. I will be thinking of us officially bound every day until I convince you to be my betrothed. And then on our wedding day. On our wedding night. On our honeymoon when I try to resist you and probably

fail.” I flattened our bodies, earning a hopeful whimper from Sersa. “I’m going to be thinking of you every time I finish myself off until you beg me. I will be patient and gentle—at first. But then—then, I will have you every which way, Sersa Drumghoul.”

She blushed at my vulgar words.

“Say you will forgive me if I have too much fun with you.” I parted her lips with mine to taste her in what would be one of our last kisses for a moon. Neither of us wanted it to end—as evidenced by the way our hands roamed one another feverishly.

Shouts interrupted. A voice at the edge of the woods.

Sersa winced. “You have to go. I can’t get locked up again.”

“No, I know.”

She gripped my shoulder to pull me closer, sliding her tongue against mine. I savored her taste, her lips, letting my hands wander one last time.

“Sersa?”

The voice grew nearer. Male.

“Is that the fucking chieftain?” I asked, my eyebrow possessed as it lifted.

“Hush,” Sersa hissed.

Then she felt my presence in her mind.

Her eyes widened with recognition as we separated. “Nessin. Wait—please don’t. Stay with me tonight. Come back. Take my memories later.”

“I must leave, love. I’m sorry. I’ll see you soon.”

I delved through her mind, searching and prying, hoping I didn’t miss any instance of me.

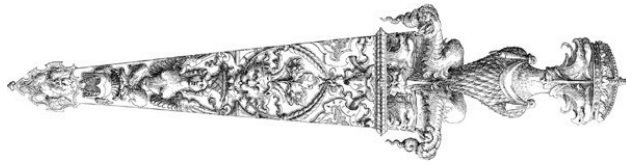
Us.

Urging Sersa to forget me—to not see me here so I could melt into the night—was undoubtedly more painful for me. While she lived like I didn’t exist, I would be thinking only of her. Replaying every second between us. Imagining every interaction ahead.

When Sersa turned on her heels toward the voice, nearly losing her balance as she called back to them in confusion, I was certain. It was done. Sersa Scáth had no idea I was watching her from the shadows, let alone who I was.

“Please remember you are mine,” I whispered to the night, struggling with my nature and the urge to make it a command.

Serena



AS WE HOVERED IN THE SLUAGH'S ARMS OVER THE CLEARING, I COULDN'T look away from the one who'd appeared in Sin's place.

*No—*who he'd *become*.

Sin was a Sluagh.

Wings tucked tight against his body, he whipped toward the ground, headed straight for Jestin. Those wings were unbelievable, and the rest of him was as monstrous as he'd always warned.

Kin. Sin called the Sluagh his kin.

From the sky, I let my magic direct itself, silently praying it would keep Jestin where he was. I was no longer scared it would harm Sin. There was no way it could do *anything* to him.

A King of Sluagh.

Sin didn't crush Jestin or slam him into the earth like I hoped he would. He landed yards away from the prince, while the rest of the Sluagh on the ground encircled the brothers.

I blinked at Jestin, slowly being drowned by my tendrils. It wasn't quick enough. I wanted him to suffer as much as anyone, but what I wanted more was the *certainty* of his death.

Images flashed across the forefront of my mind.

Jestin on a Sluagh's back.

A spear spiraling toward me.

His arm extended as he pointed at me in a direct threat from the sky.

I snapped alert, my hand fumbling for Ma's spear until I found purchase. Holding in my tremulous breaths, I unclipped it from my belt.

If Sin wouldn't end Jestin, I would.

But he released a screech right then that all the Sluagh answered. One cry after another formed a fatal ballad.

I screamed something unintelligible at the Sluagh holding me as another in the clearing below raised its talons to strike Sin right across the chest.

"Let me down or I will fucking—"

It listened, carrying me back to solid ground.

The other Sluagh followed. Jestin must have released the commands he'd given Thane and Devlin in the frenzy of my tendrils. When I practically leaped from the Sluagh's arms, rolled, and flung myself toward Sin, both were there to hold me back.

"He's trying to pull out of his Sluagh form," Thane said.

Sluagh form. Gods.

I couldn't begin to comprehend any of this, though I'd looked into the pitted eye sockets of that horned spirit. Daemon. Whatever he was. The second I had, I'd known it was Sin.

But I didn't care about his form. He was mine.

I whipped around to glare at Thane. "He's going to get himself killed."

Irian drew another slash across Sin's front.

"STOP!"

The Sluagh whirled around to look at me. Irian released another battle cry, all others echoing as one. Somehow, the sounds no longer bothered me.

But I sensed something then—something that came directly from Sin.

"He wants to kill Jestin with his bare hands. He wants to look him in the eyes. You *fool*," I whispered from my knees. Devlin's arm remained around my waist.

Only seconds passed, but they felt like minutes, days, longer.

Shoving Devlin and Thane off me, I rose to my feet and fumbled for my spear once more, instinctively finding the balance point toward the middle. The ivory metal had just enough weight to it.

And yet, it felt weightless.

But it wouldn't when it slammed into Jestin Drumghoul's chest and burst into a thousand pieces inside him. I focused on him, *only* him. Because if Sin

wouldn't end his brother, I *would*.

I didn't need to think through the position of my feet, the pull of my arm, the release. Ma's spear soared across the clearing.

Over the Sluagh's heads.

Over Sin.

But its aim betrayed me and headed toward the barrier. My shout of protest instantly died on the wind. I waited for the spear to return as it always did. Shock rippled through me when it pierced the Otherworld's veil like water instead.

A pale hand shot into the air to snatch it. The Mórrígan grinned from afar and dipped her head.

Thank you, she mouthed.

The spear—it had *never* betrayed Ma before.

To my right, Laisrés burst into a spiral of feathers without acknowledging me. He, too, landed on the other side of the veil beside his mother a second later. He'd tried to warn me. He'd told me the spear was *hers* originally.

It was the last thing I had of Ma's, and now I had *nothing*.

"No," I whispered, hoping still that it might return.

"Oh, thank gods," Devlin hissed behind me.

Thane shook me. "*Sersa*."

My focus darted back to Sin. White hair and marbled red horns reappeared. He was entirely naked from head to toe, his clothes discarded somewhere in the clearing. His torc hung precariously, the metal ends twisted and stretched. But not his ring.

It was gone.

Only the bracelet survived Sin's transformation, which was impossible. As stupid as it was, I wondered whether his marked hand had too.

I choked on a breath when his eyes shot open, revealing black pits.

When Devlin and Thane tried to stop me from going to Sin this time, my black and red tendrils swatted at them, surprisingly without harming either.

"He won't hurt me!"

They staggered backward as I sprinted across the clearing, halting where Sin remained in a crouch. Breathing heavily, he thrust out his hand in warning, signaling for me to stay where I was.

Instinct warned me he was only halfway restored.

The silvery veins of the Sluagh spread outward from Sin's chest like a web, but they seemed to be darkening. He was even paler than usual, his skin

adjusting in stages. Every muscle in his body flexed, maybe from all the pain he'd endured while being ripped from this form to his other and back again. While his chest bore fresh, shallow slashes from the Sluagh, the red runes were gone entirely. Not only that, but his wounds were knitting themselves together.

Our soul—was it possible that holding it *healed* Sin in more ways than one?

Another blink and his pitted eyes vanished. I questioned whether I'd seen them at all. But as Sin looked up at me, I was reminded of how many times those black veins and daemoniac eyes had emerged lately.

They'd appeared for me tonight just before I drank his blood.

All the Sluagh followed Sin. He didn't need to raise his arms or utter one word. They dominated the crows that were trying to protect Jestin with little effort.

This image of Sin conjured others—of the horror and havoc my king must've wreaked as the Mórrígan's chieftain. How many others knew what Sin was?

I'm still me, he'd said only minutes before.

When the Mórrígan lingered on the Daemon King's naked form, I wanted to fling myself past the barrier and scrape her eyes out.

"Jestin," Sin rasped. "You should know by now to never trust a deity. All those years? I *made* you see what I *wanted* you to. The horn controls nothing. The Sluagh will only *ever* listen to me or my queen, and there is only one person in all the realms who will ever touch her soul."

Sin directed this at both his brother and the Mórrígan. The smile slowly wiped off her face. So satisfying. Oh, so satisfying to see.

But I knew everything came at a price, and I feared ours.

"My *kin* also dislike being ordered around like pets."

The Sluagh screeched in answer.

Jestin tittered from the ground. My magic cocooned his body, stunning him in its current. He knew full well he was staring death right in the face.

Still, the fool tried to snap his fingers at the Sluagh.

They moved toward Sin, but not for Jestin's benefit.

No matter who wore the golden horn, the Sluagh listened to their king—and apparently, to me. Sin had told me so when he gave me it. Only now I understood.

All Jestin could do was blink up at the spirits of the restless dead in

shock. He didn't register the talon that speared him right through the gut either—not until it completely impaled him.

Even I missed the killing blow Sin delivered, but not the irrepressible wickedness gleaming in his eyes. Baring his teeth, blood dripped off his fingers—only they weren't fingers he yanked from Jestin's chest along with a souldagger.

It clattered to the ground, spinning on its hilt.

Sin's talons took their time reverting to bony hands. He held the Mórrígan's gaze the entire time.

"I hope I have made myself clear tonight, Maris. Come for my queen, and the wind will sweep your ashen body away like that hand of yours."

Her green eyes glittered, reflecting no upset or emotion. Only fascination.

Sin returned his focus to his dying brother. Crouched down, he tore the horn from Jestin's neck.

"The Sluagh made me more than their king the day you helped Loch mutilate me, Jest. I am their kin. I respect them as much as they—"

The ground shook beneath us.

All around us.

The entire clearing.

Both Sin and Jestin's gazes shot toward the sky.

I blinked. A second delayed, an Archdaemon hovering overhead came into focus. I fell backward on my elbows, overpowered by the force of each wingbeat. Icy blue eyes assured me it was the same Dreither from the chalet.

Riona's spawn.

The Archdaemon landed right in front of Jestin. And turned on *us*. Realization that the Dreither was *protecting* the prince—still under his orders—flooded me.

Sin flashed his palms. "*I mean no harm,*" he said in the old language. "*Look.*"

The Archdaemon's gaze wavered between Sin and Jestin, then to the sky. With not enough room for Riona to land, she circled overhead protectively.

Protection wasn't her only aim though—not when she revealed her pure white fangs. The deepest blue bloomed to life in the back of her throat.

Her fire.

Jestin laughed through bloody lips.

Sin cursed under his breath and whistled through his teeth at the Sluagh.

In an instant, they snatched us off the ground as fire rained down from the

sky. Seconds before the flames devoured the clearing in full, Jestin slumped forward. From our aerial view, Laisrés was gone, as was the Mórrígan.

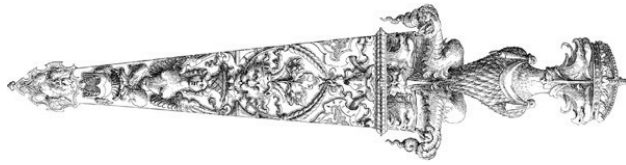
No more than a second passed before the forest below erupted in flame and smoke. Riona's spawn basked in her mother's fire, relief and contentment clear on her face.

The flames rid the earth of any sign either the goddess or her son had fled, but all that mattered was we'd ignited the embers of war with the Mórrígan. Worse, Nessin and I had shown her what we were capable of together. Maybe not all of it, but enough to spark her determination to possess a new pawn.

Me.

Away the Sluagh whisked us, and then we landed hard outside the safehouse under the hand of darkness once more.

Serena



“HEY, NICE *HORNCUT*,” THANE SAID AS HE ENTERED OUR CHAMBERS WITH Ailerby—still imitating Innes—on his heels. “Ha, get it?”

Thane had been masking with humor for days. Pretending nothing happened. That a Scrounger *hadn't* possessed the woman he might have loved. I suspected fabrications of his own were now drowning Thane, and he couldn't tell up from down to breach the surface and just *breathe*.

I knew the feeling all too well.

He'd never admit to the relief on his face every time Innes's imitation fell away, but the second the door closed behind them and one of Ailerby's defaults replaced her, Thane breathed easier. They maintained appearances around Draea, and I was too exhausted to tell her myself. We needed time to figure things out.

Maybe it was an excuse, but it was all I had.

Sin sat backwards on a chair, his elbows dangling, one foot tapping the black marble. “I am going to cut *you* if you crack a jest as terrible as that ever again—” He gritted his teeth as Bardca sawed at his cracked horn. “I fucking hate this. I feel like a thousand fucking arachnids are crawling up my ass and I am going to scream. Can you please—*please*—hurry the fuck up, Bard?”

“Is that what's been up your ass this entire time?” Thane winked at me. He lingered in the middle of the room, his hands in his pockets.

Bardca chuckled. “It seems your vocabulary has become quite limited since you lived on Nos Nua, Your Darkness. Sersa tells me a visit to the chamber may be in order. Shall we lock you in there with a dictionary?”

I dropped my eyes and bit my lip.

Of course Sin knew I’d been talking to Bardca. But still.

Sin huffed, his foot tapping more feverishly. “You would be cussing too if you had zero souls in your body, turned into a godsdamn Sluagh, and hadn’t slept in two days.”

Not exactly. Sin had managed to retrieve the rest of my soul and annul the Ordé...but not the shard he’d confirmed was still lodged deep inside him—both untraceable and untouchable. It had never left him. Not when all the souls poured out of him. Not when he became a Sluagh.

He’d never held my whole soul—*ours*—either.

The entire time on Nos Nua, Irian had safeguarded it for him. Me.

Us.

The fact Sin had taken Sluagh form was an entirely more delicate conversation, one he hadn’t wanted to broach yet. Based on the way he kept making jests about it, I knew he was *almost* ready. I suspected he was trying to feel me out or waiting for me to demand a swift divorce.

But I was trying to give Sin time. To let him open up about it on his own, as he had with his addiction.

All he’d said at the safehouse that night when we bathed together was that he kept his other form dormant by consuming souls. Just enough to keep him healthy, youthful in appearance...and *himself*.

The Sluagh’s initial attack when he was a boy had caused it.

Neither Bardca nor Sin needed to tell me my measly shard wouldn’t tide him over for very long. None of us knew what that meant for his mortality, but Bardca hadn’t stayed in Nos Ovscura simply to give Sin a horncut.

He was here to monitor him.

“Is the length good, son?” the Druid asked.

“I do not care,” Sin said, dead serious as he studied himself in the mirror.

Ailerby snorted, sprawling out on the plush rug. Imitating someone new—and nonstop—always drained him. “Perhaps your wife can decide on an appropriate size for your *horns*.”

Thane forced a laugh.

“Or you could just shift its size,” Ailerby added. “The smaller of the two, I mean.”

That earned a dry laugh from Sin. “What in the hell is discussed at teatime, Sersa?”

I rubbed my temples. “The last two days have been stressful. So it has been two days of drunken teatime, okay?”

Bardca snickered at Sin’s expression. “Take a final look before I even them out. I’m not giving you another horncut, as Lord Elittes referred to it. My hands are a bit too unsteady these days.”

“Yech, *please* never call me Lord Elittes again, Bard.”

Sin met my gaze and sighed. “Do they look all right?”

Shaking his head and laughing to himself quietly, Thane stepped over Ailerby and fell back on the settee next to me. Dúma nudged him for pets until we were both at her mercy, four hands scratching the temperamental beast. When her tail swished back and forth like a feather duster brushing Ailerby’s arm, he joined in too.

“They look great,” I said.

Hunched slightly, Sin tapped the back of his chair impatiently. “At least it won’t look like I’m compensating for something anymore.”

“Hate to break it to you, but you still do,” Thane said.

Ailerby tipped his head back to study the king behind him. “Agreed.”

Sin whipped a hand mirror across the room at Thane, who, unsurprisingly, caught it.

“Perhaps they’re short enough for you to tie me to the bedposts now, love. And then *share it all* at teatime.”

They weren’t.

I laughed into my hand as Bardca swatted Sin over the head.

“I do not need to hear these things, Nessin Drumghoul. I highly doubt your wife wants such private matters discussed out in the open either.”

Watching me, Sin grinned broader.

Come the night, that smile would vanish. Though the Dark season hadn’t let up, and you couldn’t tell the day from the night, Sin failed to hide his recurring symptoms between dusk and dawn especially.

Bardca moved onto the other horn, grinding it into a point and polishing it to match. Sin squeezed his eyes shut, cringing the entire time.

When Bardca finished, Sin rose to his feet and spun to face him. “Thank you,” he said seriously, hugging the old Druid.

“You’re very welcome, my boy. Now this old man needs to lie down before his meeting with Prince Ciel. We will be discussing the Dreithers with

Era tomorrow, and he wants to be prepared. Or as he said, he wants to know everything there is to know about the Archdaemons, which could take us into next week at least... Your brother has a mind that constantly fires, Queen, and I find mine is turning to embers these days.”

I smiled as Bardca patted me on the arm. “Thank you for the help.”

“Didn’t you know? Druids excel at haircuts and horncuts and all sorts of things,” he called, heading into the corridor.

Still facing the mirror, Sin absentmindedly twisted his bracelet as he examined the pink brushstrokes on his hand. He was always checking for them, always making sure they hadn’t seeped into his skin or something. Though we had yet to search the clearing outside Faerie Forest for his lost wedding ring.

When Sin finally emerged from whatever thoughts he’d been wading through, he smirked at me. “Come with me.”

“See you later, you two,” called Thane, shutting his eyes.



“Where are we going?” I asked.

The thrill of Sin’s surprise, whatever it was, practically buzzed on his skin. Mine too. Apart from his earlier mood, he’d been grinning mischievously all day, refusing to tell me what he was hiding.

Maybe some things would never change. His love of secrets, for one.

“Can’t ruin the surprise. What I *can* say is that this is my birthday present to you.”

“You actually got me a present? I didn’t think you were serious.”

“You are my soul. It’s only fitting.” Sin smirked down at me as we moved into the bedroom attached to ours.

I’d only walked past the room once or twice over the last day, but I hadn’t noticed the grand pair of doors in the far corner. Made of the darkest wood, a design in the shape of the letter S spanned both.

Reaching for the doorknob, Sin paused.

I tried to hide my smile. “Are you taking me to your daemon lair, Lurer?”

“Perhaps.” His palm remained on the doorknob, his other hand on his hip.

The frigid stone beneath my bare feet gave me the chills. “What’s that

look?”

“Oh, nothing. Only wondering if this is my last night in the Soullands, as I may be sent to the Otherworld after you see what I have for you.”

My stomach dipped in nervousness at the mention of the place I very much did *not* want Sin going. But excitement that felt a little misplaced quickly followed.

“Before I show you,” he continued, “I want to say that I figured words were not the best way to communicate my experiences—how I have seen you. I *wish* I hadn’t broken your memories, but alas, here we are.”

I tilted my head. “Should I be worried?”

“No.” Sin swallowed, standing out of the way for me as he pulled open one of the doors. “But I am. Close your eyes.”

Though I obeyed, he covered my eyes as we moved down a sloping walkway.

At the bottom, Sin removed his hands to reveal a room that looked like it’d been hulled from a massive rock, much like Erris’s Chamber in the crypts. The space was empty, save for dozens of glass panes. All upright, they resembled standing stones.

But in them were images and flashes of alternating colors. Like kaleidoscopes.

“All your memories of us,” I whispered, disbelieving what I saw.

Because I saw myself. Every which way I turned.

“Yes, love.” Standing behind me, Sin disarmed me of my dainty daggers then leaned down to whisper, “I am confiscating these until further notice.”

“We both know how you feel about a little pain.”

Sin pulled me back against him and planted a kiss on my cheek. I looked over my shoulder as he bent down so we were nearly the same height. He scanned the glass panes, his teeth on display in a bright, genuine smile. “Are you ready, *cría naam*?”

With the way his arms wrapped around my waist, I knew I needed to focus on the memories. Not his touch. Or we’d never get through them all.

Sin chuckled. “Oh, we will be pausing at least a few times for activities. We had some lusty moments while courting.”

“The glimpses you showed me weren’t bad enough?”

“Bad? I thought they were fucking great, if I do say so myself.” Sin straightened and strode around me, tugging me into the outermost aisle of glass panes. “Quit peeking ahead, love... Obviously, we did not scratch the

surface with the limited glimpses I gave you. The moons we courted went by quickly, and we saw each other almost nightly.”

Shivers rippled across my arms, and pink magic unfurled between the panes. Watching the color fondly, Sin wound his hands behind his back when we reached the first.

The images that the pane contained resembled reflections on water.

“Why does it look that way?” I asked.

Sin watched me in the glass. His expression was a mixture of amusement, admiration, and devotion. “Feera says it’s because our minds don’t recall every second of every memory. To her, they look like hundreds of flickering lights. It’s why I couldn’t give you the memories myself. I’m dreadful at piecing them together. My attempts were far worse. So bad Feera has insisted on lessons.”

I immediately recognized our first meeting on Hwain. The sight of Roarke no longer annoyed me. Not when I only cared about the Daemon Prince I’d met that day.

We were the only ones who mattered in any of these memories.

Our second meeting at Thane’s club came next. I recognized those strange treble clef mirrors and the Otherworld rainwater we’d sobered up with.

I couldn’t fight the blush that crept into my cheeks as I looked at my naked body. Thankfully, the lighting was terrible, with the slightest tinge of red.

“I love that one,” Sin whispered.

I rolled my eyes. “Of course you do.”

Hovering behind me, he hummed greedily. I reached backward, and his bare fingers threaded eagerly with mine.

I cleared my throat as I looked upon the next image—of us completely unclothed. Sin spooned me in his bed at his apartment in the slums.

“Nessin! *What* is this one?”

More pressing, what in Dúm’s name were we doing? Tilting my head to watch, a heady feeling overtook me. But I was determined not to initiate any activities first.

I wanted to see our damn memories.

Sin chuckled. There was no darkness in the sound, but certainly no innocence either.

“Gods. How can I explain? You told me you wanted to try something all

the unwed clan ladies were *recommending*.”

I hooted. “I don’t remember what the clan ladies suggested at all,” I lied. “I need you to show me exactly what that was. Tonight.”

Sin moved the hair off my neck and kissed the delicate skin there. “Well,” he whispered in my ear, “you will recall that I used the technique on you at the chalet.”

“Mmm. The perfect way for a lady to stay mostly chaste.”

“I assure you there was nothing chaste about that night.”

“Did we have *any* conversations while we courted?” I asked.

“Of course. Loads. Those are—over there somewhere,” Sin said, waving his pink hand at other panes, yet clearly uncertain which to refer to. “You have to get past the first few minutes or so every time we saw one another.”

“Minutes?”

I didn’t need memories to know he was glossing over the reality of our encounters.

“Some are longer than others.” Sin rested his hands on his hips. “It is not my fault you find me irresistible, Sersa Drumghoul. I am sure we will find a lovely conversation or two that does not involve us half or wholly naked.”

I held up my hand to hush him as memory-me turned to kiss Nessin.

“I’m annoyed I didn’t beg you to make me your wife right then.”

“Who says you *didn’t* beg?”

I moved on reluctantly. *Very* reluctantly as we both reached the peak, our intertwined bodies pulsing against one another in the memory.

Others were somehow more unforeseen. More emotional.

Sin following Pa around the city, keeping tabs on him.

Him glimpsing me from a distance at taverns with Ciel and Ailerby, only to hate himself afterward for staying away.

Visiting me in Os Íseal in soulform after our first real meeting.

Us laughing endlessly when I beat him for the first time at Claisin chess—until I learned he was an expert player and had let me win. The game quickly erupted into a fight, with me flinging the pieces and nearly flipping the board altogether.

Him reading something to me while I fell asleep on his chest.

Us sharing stories of how our parents named us before rattling off other ‘interesting’ names without either of us saying whose they might be one day.

Us arguing when we were hungry.

Us making up.

Our wedding day.

As we walked through the memories, each made me cry harder than the last. Sin wrapped his arms around my shoulders as we moved together, holding me tight against him. By the end, I could barely see.

“So many moments,” I whispered.

“I will gladly help you relive a few of these if you like, love. But we have the rest of our lives to make new memories too.”

“I’d like that. Only this time, I want to keep every single one from my own eyes, Nessin.”

Turning my chin, he brushed warm, scarred lips to mine. “Anything you ask of me is yours, cría naam.”

EPILOGUE

Serena



I ROLLED OVER TO AN EMPTY BED.

Lying on my stomach, I buried my face in the pillows and patted the chilly sheets that smelled of Sin. I always sought his warm body that took up too much space.

But every swat of my hand came up empty.

“Nessin, I’m freezing. Get over here.”

When he didn’t answer, I listened for his breaths before releasing a frustrated growl and lifting my head.

Cold air spiraled into the room, a whining sound whipping through the ajar balcony doors. Though my husband controlled the Sluagh, and he was indeed the most dangerous being in the Soullands, old superstitions from my childhood lived in my blood. West-facing windows stayed closed at all times.

That included the gods-damned balcony.

I blinked, trying to bring Sin into focus out there. But thanks to the absent Cradled Moons and the very present total darkness of the season, all I really saw were his horns.

“What are you doing?” I asked groggily.

Sin was facing me, staring straight ahead.

I slid off the edge of the bed and crept across the chilly black floors. A shiver whipped up my spine, and my knees felt wobbly with sleep. Or maybe I was dreaming.

Something crunched under my foot then, and I hissed through my teeth.

As I looked down, the sight of my blood brought the sensation of stinging pain to my attention. I cursed, lifting my foot to see tiny pieces of glass sticking out of the skin. Right in front of me, a crushed vial glinted off the dying blue fire in the hearth. My gut dropped into my toes, not just at the sight but at the spinning feeling that immediately hit me. I raised my head, my eyes darting around frantically when I saw not just one vial...

But *dozens*.

I choked on a sharp inhale when Sin took a single step toward me.

Silver wings. Talons. Pitted eyes.

The Daemon King had reverted to his other form—a reality I didn't have enough time to process before his translucent wings snapped outward. Wings I would have sooner dragged a blade through only moons before. They scintillated beautifully in the darkness, but it was their power that terrified me. Enough power to carry Sin away from me.

“No—”

I stupidly reached out to him. Stupid because I was too far away and couldn't latch onto his enormous talons to begin with. Not unless I wanted to lose a finger...or all of them.

Delayed, I noted the pink brushstrokes on his left hand had stretched to the talons' impressive size.

I lunged toward Sin, but the glass shards in my feet wedged deeper into my skin and yanked a cry out of me. I fell forward right as he launched himself into the night, shattering the glass balcony doors with his force.

This was no dream. No fabrication.

For not the first time, I knew I'd pay *any* price to make it so—to be rid of this gaping reality. If only I could scoop up all the glass shards scattered around me and piece them together again. But I couldn't do it without *Sin*. Not before. Not now.

Not when my King of Sluagh had both returned and vanished before I could blink.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Clais | *CLAASH*
Daemon | *DEE-MON*
Hwain | *HWEEN*
Iarsmaí | *EAR-SMY-EE*
Nos Nua | *NAAS NOO-AH*
Nos Ovscura | *NAAS AHV-SKUR-AH*
Os Íseal | *OSS EE-SHAWL*
Sluagh | *SLOO-AH*
Dreymasadh | *DRAY-MA-SA*

CHARACTERS

Sersa Scáth | *SIR-SA SKA*
Nessin Drumghoul | *NESS-IN DRUM-GHOUL*
Ciel Scáth | *KEEL SKA*
Devlin Drumghoul | *DEV-LIN DRUM-GHOUL*
Gearóid Drumghoul | *GAIR-O-ID DRUM-GHOUL*
Lochlainn Drumghoul | *LOCK-LIN DRUM-GHOUL*
Jestin Drumghoul | *JESS-TIN DRUM-GHOUL*
Niuna Drumghoul | *NOO-NA DRUM-GHOUL*
Ailerby Ipswich | *AL-IR-BEE IPS-WITCH*
Thane Elittes | *THANE AH-LEE-TISS*

Laisrés Crónan | *LAZ-RISS CRO-NIN*
Mórrígan | *MOR-E-GAHN* | Maris Crónan | *MAIR-ISS CRO-NIN*
Ranir Cluin | *RAA-NEER KLOO-N*
Feera Féidhelm | *FEAR-UH FEE-DELM*
Draea Abalon | *DREE-UH AB-BUH-LAWN*
Innes Abalon | *IN-NISS AB-BUH-LAWN*
Stellera Caise | *STEL-LAIR-UH CASE*
Helde Hellick | *HELL-DEE HELL-ICK*
Sorcha Scáth | *SOR-KA SKA*
Bain Scáth | *BAIN SKA*
Aislínn Hellick | *ASH-LINN HELL-ICK*
Nev | *NEV*
Aon | *AY-AWN*
Dúm | *DOOM*

TERMS

Cría naam | *CREE-UH NAHM* | heart and soul
Ise awán | *EES A-VAWN* | only me
Divstra ahsceen | *DEEV-STRA AH-SEEN* | Only the stars above
Divarcus ahsceen | *DEEV-ARC-US AH-SEEN* | Only the angels above
Div iu am aart | *DEEV YU-AHM-ART* | Only you in my heart

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shannon R. Lir is an adult fantasy romance author. Her favorite stories are about young women with sharp daggers, perpetually smirking love interests, and all shades of morally gray characters. She loves anything to do with magical worlds and has been trying to immerse herself in the ones between the pages of books she loves or the ones she writes all her life. She briefly studied creative writing at the University of Southern California before leaving to pursue a major deemed to be more practical. She's written every day since.

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