

THE BINDING CHRONICLES BOOK 3

IN A WORLD WHERE DARKNESS REIGNS, THE
COST OF LOVE IS ETERNAL

TREASURED

ELAYNA R. GALLEA

Treasured

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BOOK THREE

ELAYNA R. GALLEA

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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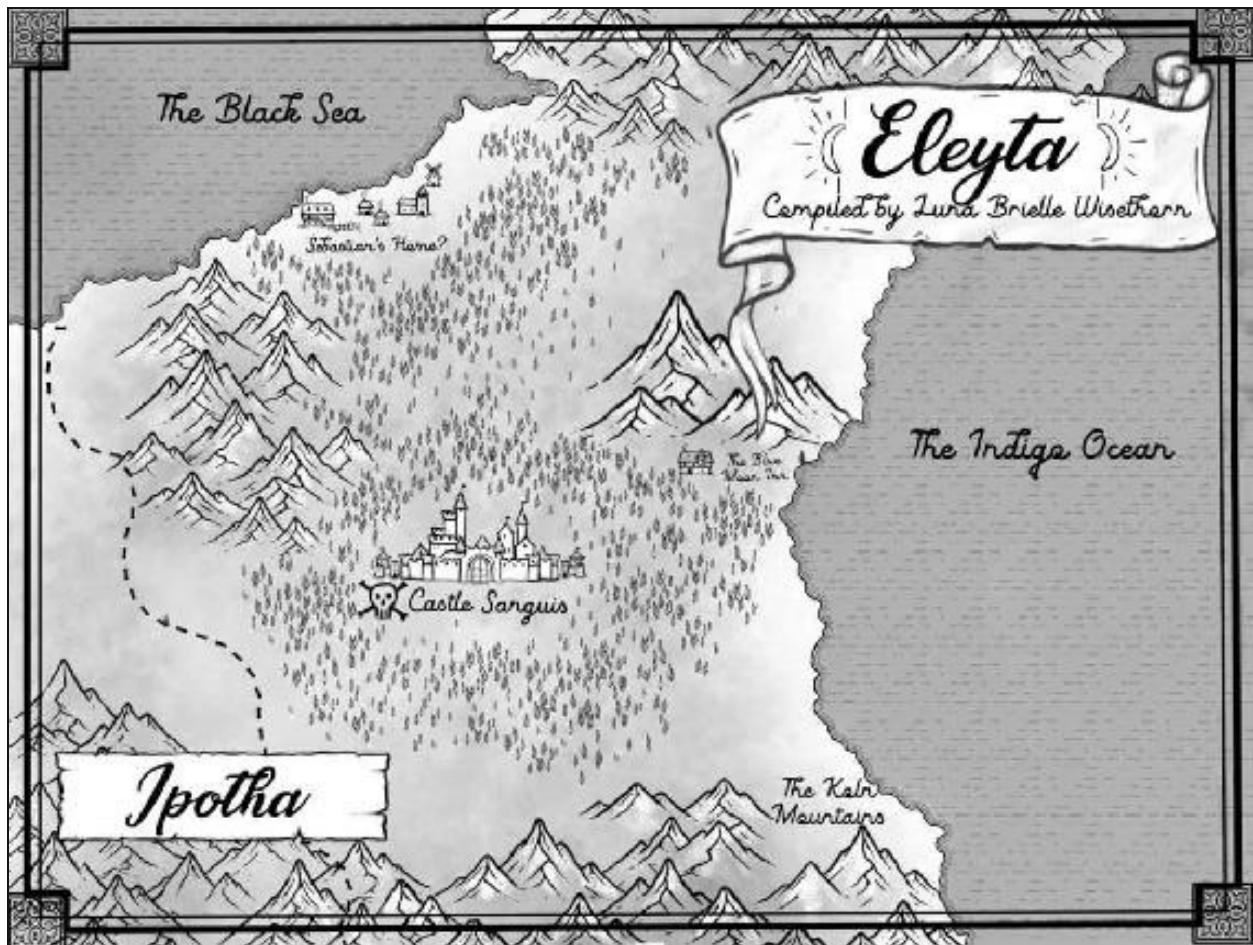
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To everyone who needs an escape and finds it in a morally gray vampire prince.

I've got you covered.

Map of Eleyta, as drawn by Luna

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Pronunciation Guide

Hello dear readers,

Welcome back to Eleyta! This is part of a fantasy world, and I have included this pronunciation guide in case you find it useful. (But as always, please feel free to ignore me and pronounce the words as you see fit.) After all, the beauty of reading is that we all create worlds in our minds.

Names:

Kinthani: Kin-tha-nee
Marguerite: Mar-grr-ee-te
Estrella: Es-trey-uh
Ciro: See-row
Montquartier: Mon-kar-tee-yay
Triboulet: Tree-boo-leh
Phyrra: Fie-rah
Brollet: Bro-leh
Zephyra: Ze-fie-ra
Koleta: Koh-leh-ta

Gods:

Kydona: Key-doh-na
Ithiar: Ih-thigh-ar
Isvana: Is-vah-nah

Places:

Ithenmyr: Ih-thin-meer

Ipotha: Ih-poh-tha

Eleyta: Ill-ee-tah

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Author's note

Treasured takes place in a high fantasy setting that contains violence in several different forms.

It also contains language, death, assault, sexism, blood, and mature situations.

Previously in the Binding Chronicles

Welcome back to Eleyta! I am so excited you decided to join Sebastian and Luna on the third and final part of their journey.

Before we begin, I thought it might be helpful to remind you of the events of Tormented (of course, feel free to skip this if you don't need the reminder). I promise you won't hurt my feelings.

We ended Tormented with Luna and Sebastian vowing to kill Queen Marguerite after she tried to murder our heroine. And honestly, good for them. She's quite horrid, isn't she?

Other points of note: Luna is the Sunwalker, and Marius is the harbinger. We will explore more of what this means in this book. Additionally, Marius is in a coma, and he's being cared for by the Second Order of Isvana's Chosen Ones.

During the tournament, Isvana visited Luna in a "dream" and gifted her a seed. That's probably going to be important, as well.

Well, let's get to it!

*Laughter Might Not Be the Best
Medicine*



LUNA

“**M**ust keep her safe,” Sebastian muttered gruffly in his sleep. He shivered, his shoulders were tense, and his breath came in short bursts. His fists grasped at the cold stone floor serving as our makeshift bed. He tossed his head back, moaning. Fear was a heavy mist hanging in the air.

“Shhh,” I whispered. Putting my hand on his shoulder, I rubbed gentle circles. Sebastian was lying beside me, stretched out on the ground. We’d found refuge in this cave just before the sun rose. We were near the back, away from any stray sunlight that might find its way in. “Go back to sleep. You need it.”

His eyes didn’t open. He didn’t argue with me. I kept rubbing, eventually moving from his shoulders to his back until his breathing evened out. He fell back asleep.

A sigh of relief escaped my lips in a whoosh. I leaned against the wall and drew my cloak around myself. Sebastian had insisted I wear the garment in case I got cold. His request was silly since vampires did not feel the temperature in the same way mortals did. Still, I brought it. I didn’t have it in my heart to deny him. Not after what we’d been through.

The weather was atrocious. The flakes were so numerous I could barely see more than a few feet from our resting place. Icicles the length of small children dripped down from the cave entrance, and an unnatural inky stain coated all the trees. Death and darkness had come to the Eleytan forests, and they weren’t leaving.

Leaning over, I brushed a lock of black hair from Sebastian’s temples. His eyelids fluttered, but he did not wake again. Good. It had taken me days

to convince him I would be alright if he rested. Even an older vampire like him couldn't forgo sleep entirely. I was practically mortal in that regard. Aches and pains haunted me when I worked my body too hard, and I still required regular rest.

Eight days had passed since Queen Marguerite's latest attempt to murder me. Eight exhausting days fleeing through the endless snowy woods, where we didn't stay in one place longer than a night. Eight days where I alternated between laughing, which was unpleasant, and crying, which I hated even more.

Several things in my life were unpleasant. Not only was I plagued by blood tears, but I also had the misfortune of hearing voices. Thank Isvana, the goddess of the moon, I didn't hear the voices all the time. Whenever I traveled through the Void—the dark shadows that allowed some vampires to move from one place to the next—they spoke to me.

The voices called me the Sunwalker, and they begged for my attention. I wasn't sure what they wanted, but they didn't leave me alone.

That was strange, too. I shouldn't have been able to walk in the sun. Usually, that glowing golden orb was deadly to my kind. It burned vampires from the inside out, reducing them to charred husks of themselves.

Not me. I'd tested my hypothesis, much to Sebastian's horror and dismay, and it was true. The sun did not hurt me. I had stood beneath its warming rays, and nothing had happened.

Needless to say, I was not a typical vampire.

I stretched out my legs, trying to find a comfortable seat. I'd give just about anything for a cushion right now. Although, a sore bottom was the least of my problems. I'd felt off since Sebastian and I had shared power through what the queen had called soul sharing.

My chest was abnormally tight, and every breath provided insufficient air. Even now, the queen's dark, murderous gaze was seared into my memory. Her snarl as she tried to rip out my throat, the utter violence that radiated off her as she tried to kill me, haunted me. Waking and sleeping, I couldn't shake the memories. I was in a state of perpetual unrest.

Sebastian snored, flinging his arm over me. I was glad he was sleeping—his wings had faltered last night during our flight, which frightened me and was the critical point in my argument when I convinced him to sleep. Unfortunately, now, I was bored.

This cave was empty, cold, and there wasn't a book in sight. I was not

built for the outside. None of this was particularly delightful—I preferred libraries over forests, books over people, and reading over hiking.

Our current situation meant finding literature was the least of our concerns. Sebastian and I hadn't even had the time to try soul sharing again, having focused all our energy on getting away from the queen. Shadowing was a good method of travel, but it didn't mean we could go anywhere. We were limited to places we'd already been. On top of that, much of the Four Kingdoms was experiencing significant upheaval thanks to the darkness, so our travel options were rather... limited.

Moving with extreme care so as not to wake my slumbering prince, I reached over him. The small clay pot I'd brought from the cabin was on the other side of Sebastian's rather impressive, muscular form. I lifted it gingerly, holding my breath as I brought it closer.

Sebastian murmured something unintelligible, his arm locking around me as he drew me tight against him. Putting my finger in the soil, I frowned. It was too dry... or at least, I thought it was.

When Isvana gave me the seed, she neglected to give me directions on how to care for it. To be fair, the entire dream-that-wasn't-a-dream had been strange in more ways than one.

Staring at the soil, I tried to decide what to do. I didn't want to drown the plant, but I couldn't let it die. I'd just have to be careful. Pursing my lips, I dug out a canteen of water from my bag. Unscrewing it, I held the lid in one hand and tipped the canteen over slowly. A few drops landed on the soil, which instantly darkened.

I added a few more and put the water away before examining the plant. It was small, barely more than a stem and a few leaves, but it perfectly matched Syndra's description. Four triangular leaves and tiny berries the same color as the sky. If only the witch hadn't sold us out to the People of the Night, perhaps she could have assisted us. But she was dead. My family was dead. Julieta was dead. So we had to figure this out on our own because there were no other options.

Everything surrounding the plant was shrouded in mystery. Marius, my little brother and only remaining family member, had been sick his entire life. The Wasting Illness struck him at birth, and no one had been able to help him. He was a halfling. His mother was a Fortune Elf, and our father was a human.

They were both dead now, too. His mother's blood should afford him a

long life... if he survived long enough to Mature. Usually, that took place around twenty-five years of age. Considering he was in a coma right now, that didn't seem likely.

On top of all that, Marius was also the harbinger. Of what, we didn't know. There was a prophecy, but in true prophetic nature, it was less than helpful.

Running my fingers over the little leaves, I repeated the priestess Zephyra's words as if doing so would help lift the shroud of mystery surrounding them.

"When the harbinger is born, the Sunwalker will rise. With a bond that spans blood and time, the two shall awaken, united in purpose and resolve. The red moon will rise..." I paused, groaning as I struggled to remember the rest of it. Why were prophecies so long? I was good at memorizing things, but even this was a stretch.

After a moment, I picked it back up. "On that day, they will join forces with the Wielder of Shadows to confront the Black Rose, whose deceptive radiance conceals her malevolence. Only by vanquishing the darkness can the new era rise, ushering in a brighter future for all."

I sighed. Hearing it out loud did not help. The prophecy was still just as cryptic as ever.

Why were all prophecies so confusing? For once, I'd appreciate it if someone sat me down and told me what would happen next. A little guidance wouldn't hurt anyone, would it?

A giggle rose in my throat, and I put the plant down before I accidentally hurt it.

Prophecies and vampires and a wicked queen.

How was this my life?

Soon, the giggle gave way to full-on laughter. It bubbled out of me like fizzy Faerie Wine that had been shaken too hard. Despite my efforts to stop it, my mirth filled the cave and echoed off the walls.

Within moments, Sebastian shifted.

"What's so funny, Princess?" His voice was groggy, and my stomach twisted in shame. I woke him up.

Sebastian rolled over, his hand landing protectively on my hip.

That was also a new development.

Ever since we tapped into the Tether and soul shared, Sebastian was always reaching for me and touching me. Even while flying, his hands

brushed against mine constantly as though he needed to reassure himself that I was there.

Not that I minded.

Every time his fingers danced across my skin, and his lips brushed mine, sparks ignited between us. He lit a fire in me, and I couldn't imagine my life without him. He completed me in every way.

"I was just considering our... situation." I shrugged.

He studied me for a moment before pushing himself up and drawing me against him in a giant hug. As his arms wrapped around me, I relaxed.

This was my favorite place in the entire world. It was here that I felt safe, warm, and loved. As long as we were together, it would be okay.

I was his, and he was mine.

The gentle, slow *lub-dub* of Sebastian's heart was a peaceful backdrop to the companionable silence stretching between us.

Eventually, he said, "I will kill the queen for forcing us into this."

"I know."

His murderous declarations always delighted a deep, dark part of me. Knowing he would do anything for me brought me an immense sense of peace and no small amount of joy.

There was definitely something wrong with me.

The queen had to die. There was no other way out of this. Her actions had made it abundantly clear that it was us or her. Drawing my bottom lip through my fangs, I shifted in his arms until I could see his face. "We should reach the Second Order of Isvana's Chosen tomorrow, right?"

We were flying, so our movements were somewhat weather-dependent. Shadowing wasn't an option, as neither of us had been to our destination before. We were traveling over snow-covered forests and across mountains, working off an old map of Sebastian's that he'd taken from his cabin before our hasty retreat into the wilderness.

Hopefully, it was accurate. If not...

Well, I didn't want to think about that.

It just had to be right.

Sebastian's hands slipped beneath my cloak, and he drew circles on my back. "Yes. If all goes to plan, we'll arrive before dawn."

If all goes to plan.

I didn't have much faith in that.

"When do things ever go to plan?" I asked.

He chuckled, his hands slipping from my cloak to unclasp it from around my neck.

“Not often, Princess.” Sebastian pulled me onto his lap. I straddled him, and he exposed his throat. “Drink. We’ll leave once the sun sets.”

I eyed him. I wasn’t the only hungry vampire here. “I will if you do, too.”

The last thing we needed was for either of us to lose strength. As a Fledgling vampire, I needed more blood than him. Still, I didn’t want Sebastian to go hungry. One of the gifts of the Tether was that our blood sustained the other. Isvana ensured that Tethered partners could supply each other with whatever they needed as long as they remained close.

His eyes glimmered. “You’re getting bossy, darling.”

I smirked. “Only for you. Will you?”

He considered me for another moment before nodding. “Yes.”

Warmth settled in my core as we shifted, positioning ourselves for easy access. We could drink from our wrists, but why would we when this was so much more... pleasant?

His fangs pierced my flesh moments after I bit him, and his blood’s smoky, cinnamon flavor entered me.

As we drank, I couldn’t shake the feeling that something would go wrong tonight. I hoped I was being ridiculous, that my fears were for nothing, but a knot formed in my stomach.

What was waiting for us out in the snow?

UNFORTUNATELY, I was right.

Everything went to hell a few hours after we left the cave. We were flying through a blizzard when it began.

A piercing, shooting pain started behind my temples as though someone was repeatedly stabbing me in the eyes. That quickly bloomed into agony, which spread through me like a searing, scorching fire.

My wings faltered, and my back muscles quivered. My lungs tightened. My head pounded.

I cried out, the pain growing exponentially worse by the second.

I shook my head, which was a mistake of epic proportions. My brain slammed against my skull. My shadows pulsed and writhed in warning.

Something was terribly, horribly wrong.

At the exact same moment, Sebastian cried out. The deep, anguished sound shook me to my core, and alarm raced through me. I looked for him in front of me, but he was gone.

The sky was empty. Clouds dotted the expansive night, but Sebastian was nowhere to be seen. My heart thrummed a frantic beat in my chest.

I looked all around, but I didn't see him.

Then I looked *down*.

A strangled scream ripped from my throat.

Wrong.

This was so wrong.

That knot in my stomach was so large, it dragged me down like a millstone.

Sebastian's wings should have kept him in the air, but they had failed him. He wasn't flying. He wasn't even falling.

He was *careening* to the ground.

Too fast.

My shadows pulsed in frantic alarm, and my entire body shook. Terror rushed through the Binding Mark like water through a broken dam, and my blood chilled. It was as though I'd been thrown into a lake of ice.

This couldn't be happening.

"Sebastian!" I screamed.

Agony poured through the connection keeping us together. Fire ran through me. The headache's painful march persisted. My lungs struggled to draw breath.

Sebastian fell faster and faster, approaching the snowy pines at breakneck speeds. He wasn't slowing down.

The Tether twinged in warning, and I snapped my wings together, descending as quickly as I could. My own safety did not matter. My husband was in danger.

I called his name over and over again, desperation filling my voice. The wind stole my words, carrying them far from his ears.

Still, I did not give up.

I would never give up.

Sebastian fell head over heels, his wings barely flapping at all. Why wasn't he flying?

Tears pricked at my eyes. *Faster*, I urged myself.

Shadows slipped from my hands, spiraling to the ground in an effort to cushion his fall.

They weren't fast enough.

Sebastian slammed into the ground. A sickening *boom* echoed through the forest. A white cloud billowed up around him.

He didn't move.

My heart pounded in my chest, a warning in every beat. *Hurry.*

I *dove* toward the ground. Again and again, I called his name. Red bloomed around his body, like ink splatter on a pristine sheet of paper.

Agony filled me.

Still, he didn't move.

No, no, no, no, no, *no.*

My shadows pulsed. My head throbbed. None of it compared to the stabbing pain within my heart. I was being burned up from the inside out.

"Sebastian!" I screamed again.

He was my heart, my soul, my other half, my reason for being.

I needed him, and he was bleeding everywhere.

He was... dying?

No. I squashed the thought the moment it entered my mind.

This couldn't be it. We didn't run from the queen just to die in the wilderness. If this were fate's ending for us, I would take their quill and rewrite their story a thousand times if necessary.

I needed him.

The Binding Mark burned with the intensity of a thousand flames, reminding me of its presence. It was still there. We were still Bound. He was still alive, which meant there was still time.

I landed on the snow beside Sebastian, my knees bending on impact. A hoarse scream clawed out of my throat as I took in the full extent of the damage.

His legs were at weird angles, and blood seeped out of him, turning the snow as red as the queen's ruby. His wings looked strange, as though someone had held them in one hand and snapped them in half.

That piercing, throbbing pain hounded me relentlessly, but I shoved it away.

This was more important.

He was more important.

Dropping the bag with the plant beside me, I fell to my knees. "No, no,

no," I sobbed. "Sebastian!"

He didn't move. He didn't speak. He didn't do anything at all.

I shook his shoulders as red tears streamed down my face. "Wake up, wake up, wake up."

The laughter was nothing but a distant memory now.

Seconds became minutes, but still, he did not move.

Lifting my head, I roared at the snowy heavens. My headache worsened, but I didn't care. We were Bound and Tethered, and I could still feel our connection, but this was... he was... his body looked broken.

How could he be this injured and still be alive?

Focus, a voice in the back of my head urged me. He needed me. I couldn't panic. Not right now. I had to be strong for us both.

He wasn't dead yet.

I lifted my wrist and bit. The moment my fangs broke through my flesh, I moved my still-bleeding arm to Sebastian's mouth.

"Drink," I urged him.

I didn't know what I would do if he didn't wake up. I didn't even know where we were. Who would I get for help? One of the only good things about our Tether was that our blood sustained the other.

Hopefully, if the gods cared about us at all, it would be enough.

My blood dripped into his mouth. One drop. Two. Five.

"Please," I whispered.

At first, he did not move. Every second was an eternity as I waited for that first pull of his lips against my flesh. When it finally came, I sobbed.

He drank slowly, color returning to his face. His legs straightened, and his wings righted themselves before disappearing into a cloud of shadows.

"Wake up, please," I begged him.

His eyes were still shut.

Hot tears slipped down my cheek. "If you wake up, I'll try to curb my tongue."

Nothing. He just drank.

"I won't argue with you as much," I offered, hiccuping as I tried to stop crying.

Still no response.

"I'll even check with you before Sunwalking." Giving up on stopping the tears, I wept freely. "Please, just wake up. I need you."

A long, agonizing minute went by before his finger twitched. Hope

rushed through me, but I didn't dare remove my wrist from his mouth. He drank, and I stared at him.

When his eyes opened and that obsidian gaze met mine, I cried out.

Sebastian's lips twitched, and he pulled his mouth away from my wrist. "I am awake, darling."

Happiness flooded through me at the sound of his voice. He was awake. He would be okay.

He was...

In pain.

Mere seconds after waking, Sebastian's face crumpled. He groaned, pressing a hand against his temple. "Damn it all."

At the same time, my headache worsened. "What's happening to us?" I asked.

He grimaced, sweat forming on his forehead as he pushed himself to unsteady feet. He rubbed his head, and his shoulders bent.

"The queen... she's..." He paused, drawing in a shaky breath. "She's summoning me back to Castle Sanguis."

A Painful Summons
❧

SEBASTIAN

Queen Marguerite's summons was a pounding, throbbing, never-ending demand as it pulsed in my mind.

Come, come, come, it called me. It was an incessant drum, its unwanted rhythm growing louder by the second.

Every moment I ignored my Maker's call, a dagger stabbed into my skull. Each one struck the same spot until agony was all I knew.

My breath came in ragged bursts. Stumbling on the snow, I groaned and slammed my fists into a nearby blackened tree. The bark was rough, and my knuckles split.

I did it again, and the pain of the summons eased momentarily before returning with a vengeance. Roaring, I punched the tree again and again and again.

"Sebastian!" Luna called my name, but I couldn't look at her.

I couldn't stop. If I did, I would remember the Tether and that she felt the summons, too. And if I did that, if I remembered she was hurting because of me, I might break.

So, instead, I kept going. Pain of a different kind ran through me. The summons quieted down. The trunk was soon red with blood. My knuckles were a mess of broken skin filled with hundreds of splinters. Each was a tiny stake in my hand. Blood poured from the wound, and my shadows throbbed and writhed.

Anguish was my entire existence. I'd never hurt like this before.

Come back, the summons called, their song never-ending. *Come, come, come*.

I tried to bury the call, but the more I pushed against it, the louder it

became.

I groaned, slamming my hands against the tree. When I stumbled back, two bloody prints remained.

“Sebastian,” Luna whispered. Her hand, so much smaller than mine, landed on my shoulder. “Let me see.”

She pulled me back, and I let her turn me around. Mutely, I presented my injured appendages in all their damaged glory.

Luna gasped. She ran her fingers over my broken flesh and shook her head. “Why did you do that?”

“The call...” I grit my teeth, breathing through my nose. “It hurts.”

“I know.”

Her admission was a silver-tipped dagger piercing my heart.

She reached up, carefully removing a long pin from her hair. Using it like a pair of tweezers, she pulled out the first splinter. I cursed, unable to hold it in.

“You ridiculous vampire,” she said softly, studying my damaged hands. “You shouldn’t have done this to yourself.”

Another stabbing pain, another dagger in my head. I didn’t speak.

One by one, the bloody shards fell to the ground. I focused on Luna’s steady movements as much as possible. Her fingers moved with precision as she methodically cleaned my knuckles.

When the last splinter was out, my skin tingled and stitched itself back together.

Come!

The queen’s summons returned as a shrill cry.

Luna winced. She pressed one hand against her temple, and the other gripped mine tightly.

Another strike to my heart. I caused this. She was in pain because of me.

She gritted through clenched teeth, “There must be some way to stop this.”

The Binding Mark connected us in many ways, including this. She could feel the summons, although I hoped it wasn’t nearly as bad for her as it was for me. If the gods were merciful, they would allow me to bear the brunt of this pain.

Another stab.

Come, Queen Marguerite urged.

Squeezing my eyes shut against the pain, I focused on the feeling of my

wife's fingers against mine.

"Summons are... special," I said slowly.

"I remember." She spoke softly, as though she knew I couldn't handle loud noises right now. "How can we stop it?"

Another dagger to my head.

"Usually, one would... obey the call." For obvious reasons, disobeying the summons was rarely done.

She snorted. "That's not an option."

No, it wasn't. Not only had the queen—my Maker—tried to kill my wife, but we weren't strong enough to face her. Not yet.

I'd vowed to kill Queen Marguerite Coraline Amélie Montquartier for what she'd done to Luna—trussing her up like an animal and placing her in a bird cage—but we needed time to prepare. We would only have one shot to kill her, so we had to time it properly.

Luna let go of my hand. Opening my eyes, I dropped to the ground. Letting my head fall back, I tried—and failed—to ignore the throbbing summons.

"There has to be another way." Luna bent, picking up some fresh snow and wiping it under her eyes to clear the tracks of her blood tears. "We can't go back."

"No," I agreed.

Dropping the snow, she paced in front of me. Her mouth moved, but no words came out as she thought. I'd already learned the best way to work with Luna while she was thinking was to let her be. She'd share her thoughts eventually.

Minutes slipped by.

Every so often, when the queen's call was especially persistent, Luna pressed a hand against her temple and winced. All in all, she was taking this a lot better than me. Black spots edged at my vision as the pain edged on being too much.

I was a warrior, a master of the shadows, and a renowned killer. I should have been able to handle this, yet a simple summons from my Maker was taking me down.

Hatred for the queen boiled in me. I had never pushed the summons this far. In the past, when the queen called, I obeyed. I was her weapon, and she Made me to do her bidding, not to ask questions.

But that was before Luna. Before I knew what it meant to experience true,

all-encompassing love. Before, my existence was gray and black. Now, I saw everything in color.

Luna was everything. I was meant to protect her, and here I was, incapacitated while she marched in front of me.

A black wisp slipped from her hands, wrapping around her arm like a bracelet. The cloak I'd made her wear billowed around her, and she tapped her hand against her thigh.

Several more minutes passed before Luna turned around. "We're a few hours from the Second Order, right?"

Another shooting pain. "I think so." I clenched my fists and winced, hating the next words that came out of my mouth. "But I can't fly."

It physically pained me to admit such a weakness, but with the agony of the summons, I was moments away from exploding. There was a very real chance I would fall from the sky. My next landing probably wouldn't be as clean as this one was.

Luna chewed on her lip. "I'd go get help, but..." She glanced at her wrist. "The Tether," I said.

It always came back to that. Ciro, the priest who had married us, had tied us together unbeknownst to either of us. For the most part, Luna and I were used to how the Tether worked. It was our life now, and we adapted.

The curse reared its ugly head and complicated matters every so often.

Like it was right now.

Luna stared at me for a long moment before she bent, picking up her bag from where she'd discarded it earlier. Slinging it over one shoulder, she offered me her hand. "Well then, Sebastian, it sounds like we only have one hope. We'll have to run."

Why did those words sound like a death sentence?

ON A GOOD DAY, I enjoyed running. I found solace in it, even. Not as much as flying—that was my favorite activity. But usually, I liked it.

Right now, I despised it with every fiber of my being. This exercise was infinitely more difficult with a pounding, shooting, pulsing pain running through one's head.

Every time my feet met the snow-covered forest floor, a responding

burning ache came from the summons. It took everything I had to focus on moving one foot in front of the other. My lungs tightened, my heart raced, and my muscles protested every movement.

This wasn't normal. This wasn't *me*. I was the strong one. The one who pushed through everything. The rock.

Now, I was the one holding us back.

I'd promised Luna I would keep her safe. I'd vowed to protect her from the dangers of this world, but now *I* was endangering her. I was the reason we were here, in the wilds, instead of flying. It wasn't safe.

The land was eerily silent, without the occasional bird's call or wolf's howl. Something was wrong. I felt it in my bones. Over three hundred years, I roamed these lands of snow and ice. Until now, I had never encountered something like this.

The queen's Fortune Elves were right: darkness had fallen on Eleyta.

I had no idea where it came from, but it was dangerous. The whisper of my shadows was darker than ever, and a heaviness fell upon me. I'd never been one to put much stock in Fortune Elves, but that would change.

Come back to me, the summons called once again.

I darted around a thorny black bush, shaking my head to clear the pain.

Something was very, very wrong in Eleyta.

Another dagger to my head. This one was stronger than the last. I cried out, stumbling over a blackened root.

Worry pounded through the Binding Mark. Luna slowed to a jog until we were side-by-side. She reached out, putting her hand on my arm. "Are you okay, Sebastian?"

I breathed in through my mouth. "Fine," I lied.

No mind reading was necessary to know Luna didn't believe me. Her brows came together, and she glanced sideways at me, her mouth pinching in a firm line.

Still, I wouldn't be the reason we stopped. Not here, where the monsters roaming these woods could stumble upon us.

I was the damned prince of this realm. Shadows bowed to me. People quaked when they heard I was near. Death was my calling. They called me the Prince of Darkness for a reason. A summons would not take me down, especially not when my wife's safety was on the line.

I couldn't forget what Phyrra, my spymaster, had told me before the fight. Someone was causing chaos in Eleyta by Making Fledglings and releasing

them in the wild. Perhaps some of the People of the Night hadn't been in the temple that night, or maybe someone else was the root of this trouble. Either way, whoever was doing it needed to be stopped. Few things were more dangerous than a newly Made vampire who lost control.

Keeping that in mind, I remained alert. Every cracking branch, every gust of wind, and every crunch of snow made my ears prick as I listened to the forest. It didn't matter how much pain I was in; I would never stop fighting to keep Luna safe.

Even if it was the last thing I ever did.

THE MAP we were following was incredibly unhelpful. What should have been a few hours in the air took far longer on foot. By the time the first streaks of dawn painted the sky, we had slowed to a steady, brisk walk, moving around black, fallen trees and leaping over frozen, dried-up river beds.

"Damn," I swore. I had other, more choice words, but they didn't seem conducive to the situation.

In the distance, the white stone of our destination was barely visible through the trees. We were close. It was an hour or two away at best. But the sky was changing. The night slowly gave way to day, the moon slipping away.

If there was ever a moment for the sun not to rise, to cede its place to the moon just for one day, this was it. We were so close. If I closed my eyes and concentrated, I could hear the faint whispers from the abbey. It screamed safety. I wanted that for Luna. After being on the run for over a week, I needed to know she was okay, especially with the never-ending summons pulsing a painful beat in my head.

Part of me knew it didn't matter where we were; we'd never truly be safe until the queen died. She was the reason we were in danger, after all. But putting a roof over Luna's head felt important. I wanted to give that to her.

Luna might have miraculously been able to walk in the sun, thank Isvana for that blessing, but I was not gifted in the same way. The sun was not kind to me. It burned. It killed. I could not travel during the day.

My decision was made easier when Luna yawned.

I stopped, my eyes sweeping through the forest, seeking shelter. There weren't any caves nearby, but I'd find something.

There.

"This way, darling." Giving Luna a gentle tug, I led her toward an enormous fallen tree as tall as me. It was hollow, and even from here, the cave-like qualities of the rotting wood were visible. It wasn't my cabin, but the log would provide adequate shelter while the sun was up.

Luna followed me without argument, which only confirmed her exhaustion. She would have told me off if she had any qualms about this. A quiet, docile wife, she was not. I adored that about her. She saw my exterior appearance and wasn't put off, wasn't afraid.

Layers of snow and ice sat atop the blackened log, and frost dusted the inside, but it was out of the sun. I entered, dropping to the ground and pulling Luna with me. She rested her head on my shoulder and gingerly withdrew the clay pot from her bag.

The plant, if it could be called that when it was little more than a stem and a few leaves sticking out of the soil, was still alive. That seemed almost miraculous, considering the events of the past few hours.

Come! the summons shrieked, and I winced. Cold sweat beaded on the back of my neck. It was getting worse.

Luna grimaced, burrowing her face against my tunic. "This is going to be a long day," she predicted.

Very long.

"Try to get some rest, love." I brushed her hair away from her face and kissed her softly.

She nodded sleepily, her eyes already growing heavy. "I'll do my best."

I wrapped my arms around her. "I'll watch over you." The constant, pulsing pain of the queen's call would not let me rest, even if I wanted to. It was designed to continue to summon the vampire until they had no choice but to respond. "Sleep."

She did.

It Was Not Easy Being Queen
❧

MARGUERITE

My shadows sang a never-ending song of death and destruction as they pulsed through my veins. Usually, they brought me a sense of peace. Not anymore.

Peace was long gone. How could I feel anything akin to that when my world was falling apart?

Curling my fingers around the nearest vase, I pulled back my arm and threw the painted porcelain against the wall.

It shattered into a thousand blue pieces that scattered all over the floor.

I turned to the two Favorites standing against the wall. Their faces were pale, and they trembled like the cowardly mortals they were.

“Clean it up!” I shrieked, gesturing to the mess.

They hurried forward, the red silk they wore doing nothing to conceal their bodies underneath. They bent, picking up the shards one by one and placing them in a nearby bin.

The sight of my compliant pets did nothing to ease the fury pounding through me.

“Faster!” I ordered.

They obeyed, picking up piece after piece. After a few minutes, blood poured freely down their hands, making a red mess of things, but they kept working.

My Favorites always obeyed me. They understood who I was and what my power meant. Each of them had chosen to serve me. To be fair, it was that or death.

But they’d chosen. They understood my power. They knew who was in charge in Eleyta.

Unlike *him*.

Anger was a thick soup in my veins, bubbling, frothing, burning. Every time I summoned my son, and he did not obey my call, the anger grew hotter and hotter until it threatened to consume me from the inside out.

I threw another vase. A third. A fourth.

The ground was a mosaic of shattered art. Blue, green, yellow, pink, and red. A perverted version of the rainbow. I hated that, too. These days, I hated everything.

“Pick them all up! Every last piece!”

More Favorites hurried into the room to help the others. Soon, all twelve of them were on their knees. Not a single hand remained uncut as they cleaned up the mess.

Their delicious human scent filled the air, and I breathed in deeply. My stomach rumbled, and I picked up the faint, tantalizing scent of fear beneath their pain.

I would feed soon. Not yet, though.

Technically, I didn't need blood at all. I couldn't remember the last time I slept, the last time mortal aches and pains ran through me.

But I loved blood. I craved it. Desired it, even. Blood and power were all I cared about.

My fingers crawled to the ruby around my throat. “Keep going,” I commanded the Favorites.

They did not talk back.

Dropping into a red velvet settee, I gripped the jewel in one hand. Reaching for my magic, I summoned my wayward son. There was no response. Where was he? I'd sent soldiers to his cabin, but he and that barely-Made female were long gone by the time my guards arrived.

I had no idea where Sebastian had gone. Even more frustratingly, he wasn't the only one who'd vanished. The castle was mysteriously empty of the soldiers who favored my son. Guards had disappeared overnight after the fight to the death, the blonde mind reader was nowhere to be found, and that spymaster of his was gone.

My lips twisted into a sneer. If Sebastian thought he could hide from me, he was wrong. I'd given him eight days to return with his tail between his legs, but my grace had run out.

I would keep summoning him until he had no choice but to respond.

It was that *female* he married. She poisoned his mind and turned him

against me. Before she came into the picture, Sebastian was the perfect weapon. He was everything I ever needed in a son. He did what he was told, killed when I told him to kill, and listened when I gave him orders.

He was *perfect*.

And then *Ciro* had to go and Tether my son to that... that.... *human*.

But she wasn't human anymore.

No, Sebastian *Made* her in secret. Had I known, I would have killed her on sight.

Now, they wanted my throne.

My shadows were restless serpents writhing in me. I refused to give in to their call, though. I was better than the shadows. Better than primal vampiric urges. I was the best. All of this was below me. I should have been enjoying my reign as queen, but instead, I was fretting like a simpleton over my missing son.

This was all her fault. I clenched my fists, my nails biting into the tender flesh of my palms. I would destroy that once-human bitch, just like her family and the people of Rivin before her. I'd never been so sure of anything in my entire life.

One of the Favorites cried out, her distress pulling me out of my thoughts. Marianne's brows were furrowed, and a cut that was several inches long ran across her wrist.

I tilted my head. "Oh, dear."

Blood poured like a river from the wound, streaming onto the ground. The Favorite swayed. "My Queen?"

"That looks like it hurts."

Marianne's gaze dropped to her wrist. "It does."

"Hmm." I stared at her dispassionately. "Pity."

The other eleven kept working, not daring to stop. Marianne paled. "Q-q-queen Marguerite—"

Her next words never came. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and she collapsed on the floor. Within moments, her once-brown hair was red and matted with blood.

Weak. Mortals were so, so weak. That's why *Isvana* and *Ithiar* put vampires in charge.

I sighed. "Guard!"

A vampire shadowed into the room. "Yes, Your Majesty?"

It was a shame. Marianne was beautiful for a mortal, and she was pleasant

in bed. She'd been a Favorite for over five years, which was practically a record.

Now, she was dying and of no use to me. So much for that.

"Get rid of her." I pointed to the fallen human.

"Of course." The guard took Marianne's arm and shadowed her out of the room.

The others didn't even blink.

For a long moment, the clinking of porcelain was the only sound.

I counted my pets.

"Damn," I muttered.

Eleven. Gods, I hated uneven numbers almost as much as I hated humans. What was I going to do? I could kill another just to level things out, but that would leave me missing two Favorites. Unacceptable.

I'd have to find a suitable replacement.

I sighed.

Just another problem on my plate that would have to be dealt with.

Sending out another summons, I waited for a response. It never came. My gods-damned prince was ignoring me.

How dare he?

I hissed and red tinged my vision. It was the *Tether*. It all came down to that cursed magic rope.

My fingers tightened on the ruby until the hard edges dug into my skin. Did *Ciro* know what he was doing when he spoke the *Tether* into existence? Did he know about soul sharing, or was he trying to be an ass?

It didn't matter.

Ciro was dead, and *Sebastian* and *Luna* were *Tethered*.

Only one path would truly save my throne and set me free from this route I'd been placed on against my will. "I'm going to kill them both," I proclaimed.

Eleven lifeless pairs of eyes lifted and met mine. None of them said a thing.

I yelled, "Continue!"

Soundlessly, they went back to work, picking up endless shards of porcelain with their bloody hands.

Sebastian used to be the perfect weapon, but now he was useless. Less than useless. He was a problem, and I *despised* problems.

The next weapon forged from my blood would learn early on what would

happen if they went against their queen.

Death was the only punishment for that crime.

I had a massive list of tasks. Problems that needed to be solved. Lessons that needed to be taught. People that needed to be killed.

It was not easy being queen.

After Sebastian and the Fledgling escaped, I'd sent everyone home. The fae who'd come for my birthday, the witches who did not live here, even most of the vampires. Castle Sanguis was far emptier than normal, but the quiet did nothing for my mood.

Nothing would help until my daughter-in-law was dead.

Eventually, the Favorites were done. They stood in a line, waiting for my next command. All had cuts, their blood joining Marianne's on the floor. Those crimson drops, that proof of their mortality, sent trills of delight through me.

I eyed my precious pets. Some, like Marianne, had been with me for years. That was a long time for a Favorite. My pets so often got... dull. Lifeless. Their bodies shut down after they became mine, and they were usually useless after a few months. A special brand of Persuasion, my magic kept the Favorites entirely tied to me in every way.

Not all my pets were old, though. A few of them, like the girl from the hunt, were new additions to my collection.

They were my only solace in this difficult time—my only peace while I sorted out the mess that was my kingdom. Dealing with the darkness was one thing, but an errant son was another.

To say my plate was full was putting it lightly. I was busy every hour of every day. And now, on top of everything else, I needed to find a new Favorite.

What was a queen to do?

*Frigid, Frozen Woods, and Staked
Vampires*
❧

LUNA

The pounding, pulsing pain of the queen's call was never-ending. It was the last thing I remembered as I fell asleep and the first one that greeted me when I clawed my way out of my nightmare and into reality.

Groaning, I rubbed my throbbing temples. It didn't help.

It was only then I noticed how incredibly cold I was. Strange. I hadn't felt like this since before I was Made. I thought vampires were impermeable to the cold. I had witnessed several making dubious fashion choices in this snowy land. I was arguably overdressed for the weather, at least by vampiric standards, but I was freezing.

"Luna." Sebastian's voice was rough and insistent as he brushed a hand over my temples.

My teeth chattered, my fangs making awkward work of the action, and I attempted to form words. "W-w-what's going on?"

I opened my eyes. My vision adjusted to the darkness, and I took in my vampire's concerned face as he peered at me.

"It's snowing," he said.

It was always snowing here. I pushed myself up, and my eyes widened. When I had fallen asleep, snow had dusted the ground. Now, the entrance to the log was more than half covered in the white substance.

"T-t-that looks like more than just a l-l-little snow. There m-m-must be at least three f-f-feet."

At least the cold was distracting me from the pounding headache of the summons. Would the queen never stop beckoning us to return?

Sebastian pressed a hand against his forehead and grimaced. "There was a blizzard."

“I c-c-can see that.”

He gathered me in his arms. “The snow has stopped, but the temperature —”

“D-d-dropped,” I interrupted, finishing his sentence for him.

Why didn’t he seem to feel the cold as much as I did? It probably had something to do with everything else that was not quite normal about me. Or maybe he was just better at hiding it. If I was this cold now as a vampire, I couldn’t imagine how this would have felt as a human. I probably would have frozen to death. I scowled at the thought. At the same moment, a shooting pain ran through my head.

This time, even I could hear the faint, *Come*, that accompanied the call.

Sebastian swore, and sweat beaded on his forehead.

“We need to move.” He pressed his hand against his head, wincing. “The snow is going to make things difficult.”

Of course, it would. That didn’t surprise me in the least. So much for arriving at the abbey in an hour. At this point, it seemed like we’d never make it.

Sebastian handed me my bag. “I watered your plant before putting it away.”

My lips tilted up in a frozen semblance of a smile. “T-t-thank you.”

His mouth pinched into a frown, and his eyes searched mine. “You need to eat, Luna. It’ll warm you.”

I shook my head. “I d-d-don’t want to. It’ll weaken you f-f-further.”

Fighting the summons was exhausting me. It must have taken all his strength.

“I’m slightly insulted by your belief that it’ll be too much for me.” He smiled, but the expression was strained. When I didn’t respond, he added, “You forget, Luna, I am much older than you. I fed yesterday.”

We both did.

“I’ll be f-f-fine,” I lied. My body temperature was dropping. Was I dying? Could vampires freeze to death? I wasn’t sure, but I didn’t want to be the test subject. I was endeavoring to keep my research out of the realm of life and death experiences.

Sebastian drew me towards him. “You won’t hurt me—your blood runs through my veins, strengthening me far more than anything else. Please, drink.”

How could I say no to him? Especially when his crisp scent flooded my

nostrils, and my core tightened despite the cold running through me.

“Fine,” I whispered, giving in. “Will you drink too?”

His eyes searched mine for a moment longer before he nodded.

“G-g-good.” I ran my tongue over the tip of my fangs, extending my arm before biting his wrist.

Sebastian groaned, letting me drink first before he pierced my skin with his fangs. It didn’t matter how many times we did this. Every single time he bit me, I melted in his arms.

I would never admit it, but he was right. His smoky, cinnamon blood warmed me far faster than any fire ever had. Strength ran through me, and the sharp, bitter edge to the air was gone by the time I finished drinking. He lifted his mouth from me, his eyes still closed and his chest heaving as the aftereffects of our feeding ran through him.

“Better?” he asked after a moment, opening his eyes.

I nodded. “Yes, thank you.”

Another pulsing wave came through my head. Sebastian cursed, slamming his fist into the side of the log.

I frowned, cupping his face. “Can I help?”

“No, love. We can’t do anything.” His eyes were heavy. “She won’t stop calling for me, and I won’t go to her. Let’s get to the abbey.”

“Maybe they’ll be able to help?”

“Maybe,” he replied.

But I could see in his eyes he didn’t think so.

The pounding, pulsing pain put a damper on our spirits, and we left the shelter in silence. My bag rhythmically tapped against my hip, the weight of the plant welcomed as we trudged through the snow. There would be no running tonight—the powder was far too high for that, and the throbbing summons were agonizing.

Instead, we moved slowly and methodically. We stuck as close to the trees as possible, where the snow wasn’t as high. Both of us were in agreement. We couldn’t get to the abbey fast enough.

OUR DESTINATION WAS close when the hairs on my neck prickled. An awareness that had nothing to do with the queen’s painful summons crawled

up my spine. My shadows pulsed an urgent beat, warning me of the presence of another, and I shivered.

Noticing my sudden alertness, Sebastian tensed. Worry came through the Binding Mark, mirroring my own, and he squeezed my fingers. “What is it?” he asked in a low, urgent voice, his head swiveling as he searched the forest for a threat.

I loved that he didn’t doubt something was wrong. He just trusted my instincts.

Turning my head slowly, I scanned the area around us. With their inky bark, the trees were unsettling, but nothing seemed unusual. This was the state of Eleyta now—murky, dark, and gloomy. Everything seemed to be on the brink of death.

Still, something was wrong.

“I don’t know.” I shook my head, running my tongue over my fangs. “I just... I feel like something is watching us.”

Sebastian’s eyes widened, and he released my hand, pulling shadows from his palms. They formed a corporeal sword, the weapon ominously large in his hands. This wasn’t the first time I’d seen him do this—he’d used similar weapons when battling Bertrand during the queen’s fight to the death—but the sight was not as reassuring as I’d hoped it would be. If he felt protection was necessary, we were in more danger than I had originally thought.

“Stay close to me, Luna.” He tugged me forward, but another pulsing summons burst through my mind. He groaned, stumbling once, before straightening. “We’re almost there.”

This journey couldn’t be over soon enough.

We resumed our slow trek. The snow almost reached my waist, making everything slower. Despite his pain, Sebastian’s back was straight, and his sword was high as he plowed a path ahead of me.

Once, when I’d spent days studying for a particularly difficult test, I came down with a migraine. That constant, aching, never-ending pain made me want to lie down and remain still until it stopped. This was worse than that.

I would never take a headache-less day for granted again.

The feeling of being watched grew stronger until the sensation of eyes on us was the only thing I could feel. The hairs on my arms stood on end, and my shadows pulsed a steady thrum, urging me forward. We were so close to the abbey that the massive bell tower was visible through the curtain of

falling snow.

Sebastian wasn't speaking, but every so often, he grunted as the queen's call intensified.

Then it happened.

A branch cracked. A shrill bird's cry filled the air. I sucked in a breath and paused. That was wrong. We hadn't seen any birds. The woods were empty shells of what they used to be.

I turned to the side just as Sebastian swore and dropped my hand. He shoved me back, and I fell into the snow. My heart raced. A strangled cry left my lips. A blur ran at my husband.

No. Not a blur. A vampire. A very wild, very scary-looking vampire.

She screeched, the sound shrill and ear-piercingly loud. Her words were an incoherent blather in an unrecognizable language. A wildness swam in her black eyes that made my chest tighten. She snarled, gnashing her teeth as she lunged at Sebastian.

Despite the snow, he was quick on his feet, darting around her and slashing his weapon through the air. The shadow sword ripped through the vampire's flank, but it didn't stop her assault. She shrieked in anger as blood poured from her wound. She lashed out with her claw-like nails and ran them down Sebastian's face.

He grabbed her arm and twisted. A horrible *snap* echoed through the night, and bile rose in my throat.

The vampire screeched like a bat, but she did not stop advancing. Her movements were rough and jerky, like a marionette.

I'd never seen a child of the moon like this before. So wild, so rabid, so... frighteningly animalistic. This was the kind of vampire that parents would tell their children about at night to keep them in bed after the sun set.

The feral vampire kicked Sebastian, and he went flying through the air.

"No!" I yelled, struggling to my feet.

Sebastian landed against a tree with a roar. Anger pounded through the Binding Mark, and he stood.

The vampire glanced at him before turning to me. She seemed to decide I was the weaker, easier prey.

Shit.

She snarled like a ravenous beast. Her eyes filled with hunger and rage. There was no life in her expression, though. No real intelligence at all.

When my wings burst from my back through the special slits in my cloak,

the vampire didn't stop her advance. Instead, she growled.

"Stop!" I yelled, gathering shadows in my palms. I didn't want to hurt her. I didn't want to hurt anyone.

Sebastian shook his head, his own wings fanning out behind him. "She's a Fledgling!" he yelled. "She's lost in bloodlust."

I gulped. Suddenly, Sebastian's fear when I almost killed the maid, Dorothea, came to mind. I had nearly fallen into bloodlust then. Would this have happened to me? Would I have been so lost in the need for blood that I would have become like this? An animalistic monster whose desire to feed ruled all their actions?

It was now that I noticed the layers of blood on her clothes. Some were dry, but many of them were fresh.

Then I remembered the other thing Sebastian had taught me. Fledglings were far stronger than other vampires because of the human blood still in their veins.

A thousand curses ran through me, several slipping from my tongue in rapid succession.

Spittle left the vampire's mouth, and she charged at me through the moonlit snow. My heart raced, and I stumbled back, landing against a tree. My hand grappled with the branches. The Fledgling came at me at full speed.

My shadows pulsed and writhed, and the darkness in me seemed almost gleeful at the situation we found ourselves in. It enjoyed the danger, the blood, the possible death.

I did not.

Forcing myself to pay attention, I drew in one deep breath after another. I might not have been the all-powerful Prince of Darkness, but I had some skill.

At the very least, I had a survival instinct that had gotten me this far.

I had to fight back.

My fingers closed around a thick branch, and I snapped it in half.

"Luna!" Sebastian yelled, his wings flapping as he launched into the air. He was a winged warrior, bearing his shadow sword, but he wouldn't get here soon enough.

I couldn't reply. There wasn't any time.

I clamped my hand down on the branch. Shadows streamed from Sebastian and me, adding darkness to the murky night. The Fledgling snarled viciously. She jumped in the air, lunging at me. I thrust out my hand, hoping

to hit her heart.

My aim was true.

The makeshift stake pierced her flesh, and her nails, inches from my face, fell. Her eyes widened, and her mouth opened, giving me the perfect view of her fangs.

I shoved the stake in further.

A strangled cry escaped the Fledgling as black spider webs crawled from the point of impact. The sound shook me to my core, and my hands trembled. Still, I did not let go. Not when the veins crawled up the Fledgling's neck. Not when her eyes bulged, and she looked me in the eyes. She *saw* me. For a moment, I could have sworn I saw a flicker of life. A recognition of what was happening.

Of what I was doing to her.

Oh gods.

One final shriek left the Fledgling's lips as she stared at me. Her legs gave out, and she dropped to the ground. Her skin turned a sickening dark gray, and her entire body shrunk until nothing but a horrible corpse was left behind.

Only then did I release the stake. I stumbled back a few feet, my stomach churning. Giving into its call, I bent in half and threw up.

I had just taken a life.

Murderer.

The word echoed in my mind. Tears pricked behind my eyes. I heaved, taking shuddering breaths.

I was a murderer. A killer. The very person I had always vowed I would never become. It didn't matter then that the Fledgling had been trying to kill us. It didn't matter that she'd attacked us first.

All I knew, all that mattered, was that I'd been the one holding the stake that was now lodged in her heart. I was the one who'd looked her in the eyes as she died. And I was the one who had stolen her life.

My stomach heaved, and I threw up until nothing was left.

Still, my shoulders shook.

Murderer, murderer, murderer.

The shadows inside me, the pulsing in my brain, and even the ache in my heart echoed the word until it was all I heard.

My breath came in short bursts, and my head spun. I lifted my trembling hands and stared at them. Smaller than Sebastian's, they were the hands of an

academic. A scientist. They had studied life—and now, they had taken it.

I just killed someone.

“Luna.”

My eyes closed at the soft sound of Sebastian’s voice. Would he see me differently now that I’d killed someone? Would he hate me? A new fear ran through me. I couldn’t lose him. He was the steady force in my life. I needed him.

What would I do if he hated me?

He called my name again, but I couldn’t answer. Not yet.

When I didn’t reply, he wrapped his arms around me and held me close. I clung to him, burying my face against his tunic. My lungs struggled to draw breath as the implications of what I’d done settled into me. No matter how much I tried, I couldn’t stop the trembling.

His fingers ran over my shoulders, my arms, and my torso as though he was checking for injuries. “Are you okay?”

My eyes stung. I didn’t even try to stop the tears this time. Those damned blood tears streaked down my cheeks.

No.

I was not okay.

Not at all.

Every fiber of my being screamed at me for what I had just done.

I was a killer.

“Luna?” he asked again, his voice even softer.

“I-I killed her,” I whispered, looking at him through a river of tears. “I killed her.” Hearing it did not help anything. It did not make things better. If anything, now, it was worse. Now, it was really *real*. An undeniable truth. “I’m a murderer.”

“No.” Sebastian pulled back, grasping my arms and forcing me to look at him. “You’re not.”

“I am,” I argued. “She’s dead by my hand, and now you probably hate me.”

His eyes widened. “You saved yourself, Luna. You picked yourself, and you made the right choice. I would never hate you for that.” He pressed his forehead against mine. “Darling, hating you would be like hating myself.”

“Maybe we could have saved her,” I said.

“No. She was lost to bloodlust. You did the right thing.”

I stole a look at the corpse in the snow. Broken. Dead. My fault.

“I don’t know,” I eventually said.

His fingers landed on my jaw, making me look away from the dead Fledgling. “I do,” he said seriously. “There is nothing wrong with choosing life.” He brushed his lips over mine. “You always choose life, Luna. No matter what.”

To say it was one thing. To live it was another.

“I just...” My words trailed off as I got a good look at Sebastian. I’d been so caught in my thoughts about murder that I had barely looked at him.

What a horrible, horrible wife I was turning out to be.

My eyes widened, and I raised a hand as though to touch his cheek before thinking better of it.

Red claw marks ran down Sebastian’s face, but they weren’t healing as they should have. Instead, they oozed a black liquid tinged with red.

“She scratched you,” I snarled. The viciousness of my voice surprised me. “She *hurt* you.” Suddenly, it didn’t matter that she was dead because that Fledgling had dared inflict injury upon my prince. “Why isn’t it healing?”

Sebastian touched the wounds and winced. He drew his hand away, staring at the mess on his fingers. “I don’t know.” He frowned. “I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

“Fine, like, ‘I’ll actually be fine,’ or ‘I’m hiding things from you, Luna, so you don’t worry about me?’”

He grimaced, leading me to believe it was the second option. “Just... fine.”

I glared at him. “Sebastian—”

Wiping his hand on the snow, he stood and pulled me away from the body. “Come on, Luna. Let’s go.”

Should I fight him on this? Should I push? I didn’t know. In the end, I decided that getting to our destination was our best bet.

“Should we bury her?” I asked, glancing back at the body. I felt so bad leaving her here.

“We can’t,” he said. “The ground is frozen. It would take hours that we don’t have.”

The truth of his words settled in.

“I’m sorry,” I said to the nameless, dead vampire as I adjusted my satchel on my shoulder. “So sorry.”

The words were wholly inadequate, but Sebastian was right. We couldn’t stay here.

Who knew what else roamed these woods?

Sanctuary
❧

SEBASTIAN

Tall, imposing iron gates and a looming white wall protected the abbey from intruders. We were so close.

Every single step hurt. There were so many points of pain radiating through me I didn't know which one was worse. The aching, searing scratch on my face almost overshadowed the constant throbbing, piercing of the queen's call. The Fledgling's nails must have had poison in them.

I'd heard of this phenomenon, of Fledglings going so rabid that their entire body became a weapon against humans and vampires alike, but I'd never had the displeasure of witnessing it firsthand.

Fire burned in the cut, and flames coursed through my body.

Everything was fuzzy. I could barely lift my feet, let alone summon my shadows or wings. With each step, I berated myself for not hearing the Fledgling approach until she was practically on top of us. The pain in my head was so bad I could barely hear anything at all. It was my fault the vampire had surprised us, my fault Luna was attacked, and my fault that Luna now bore the weight of taking a life on her soul.

Anger was a raging fire of blame, burning me from the inside out. I was failing her.

She didn't know how much pain I was in. At least I was protecting her from that truth. I hid it as best I could, forcing the deep, throbbing pain of the summons to remain within me. She trudged silently beside me, and I didn't tell her I was on the verge of passing out.

Everything I had was focused on getting us to safety. Once I got Luna inside those abbey walls, we could rest.

The Second Order of Isvana's Chosen Ones were a mix of vampires and

witches who lived in eastern Eleyta, near the Indigo Ocean. Of the remaining orders—the First, Second, and Third—they were the most isolated. I’d never been here, but if Phyrra trusted them enough to leave Marius, Luna’s sickly half-brother, with them, it was safe enough. My spymaster’s trust was almost as hard-won as my own.

We could fly over the walls, but politeness seemed like a prudent course of action since we sought sanctuary. Especially since Luna’s brother was here.

Come! The queen’s call was a shrill, piercing screech.

The intensity caught me off guard, and I stumbled forward. My heart pounded, and my head ached. My legs trembled, and I nearly collapsed. This one was worse than the last one, and I failed to hide my grimace of pain.

Luna grabbed my arm. “Can you walk?”

Honestly, I wasn’t entirely sure I could. But I needed to get her to safety. “I’ll be fine,” I insisted as we finally reached the gates. “Let’s get inside.”

Concern pulsed through the Binding Mark, but before Luna could ask one of the many questions I was certain were waiting on the tip of her tongue, I reached for the bell hanging on the gate. I tugged it three times. A ringing echoed through the courtyard, cutting through the silence of the night.

For a moment, nothing occurred. Not even the wind blew.

Luna glanced at me, raising a brow. “Do you think you should do it again?”

I shrugged. “Sure.”

At this point, I would do anything to get her to safety. I went to ring the bell once more when a blur appeared on the other side of the gates. A lock turned. The click of a key never gave me as much relief as it did at that moment. The ancient gates creaked open, revealing a regal, lithe priestess on the other side. Her hair was so light it was almost as white as her robe. Lined with silver, the garment had meter-long sleeves that brushed the snow as she moved.

The priestess looked from me to Luna and back again, her gaze lingering on my cheek. The wound burned under her gaze, and I fought the urge to touch it. Instead, I moved in front of Luna.

“Priestess.” I dipped my head in respect. “We require sanctuary.”

Her eyes widened, and she opened her mouth as though to speak. Her words never registered. I didn’t hear anything except a sharp, unyielding noise like a discordant note on a piano played at its highest volume.

Come!

This summons was different. It went on and on. It was an endless battering ram slamming against my will.

I roared.

Black spots filled my vision, my legs gave out, and I collapsed.

RED-HOT FLAMES BURNED in my head and licked at my insides. This searing agony was unending. Even exposure to the sun's deadly rays did not compare to this. My skull was being ripped apart. I couldn't move. I couldn't even open my eyes.

My shadows twisted in my veins, and my dark magic pounded. My wrist burned, and my connection to Luna was the only thing keeping me alive.

It was barely enough.

The only thing I could do was scream.

And so, I did.

A hoarse, guttural, never-ending cry left my lips, echoing all around me. I screamed for seconds, minutes, hours, days. Time had no meaning. Not anymore.

Mercifully, my voice grew hoarse, and everything went dark again.

SOMETHING SOFT WAS UNDERNEATH ME. The smooth sheets were like the coarsest wool against my skin, irritating the flames licking my entire body. I was burning alive.

Where was I?

I opened my mouth to speak, but all that came out was a strangled groan. My throat was scratchy, as though I'd been screaming for days.

"He needs help!" Luna said.

I would recognize her voice anywhere. It was like a soothing balm to the fire in me. A hush, and then a cool cloth dabbed my forehead.

"The prince is hallucinating..." a feminine voice replied.

A stabbing, fiery pain ran through my head. I yelled.

Luna cried out. "Help him!"

“The summons...” The other voice faded in and out. I was having trouble hearing. Everything was too much. “Can you...”

I moaned and thrashed on the bed.

“No,” was my wife’s reply. “We won’t do that.”

“But...”

More fire. More pain.

“There has to be another option,” Luna insisted, her voice breaking.

The cool cloth came off my forehead. A sound of despair, wholly unbecoming of the prince I was, left my lips. The flames came back worse than before.

This was what dying felt like.

“Help him!” Luna said. “Anything is better than this.”

A murmured reply, then a door closed. More agony. I writhed. Minutes passed. The door opened. Hushed whispers.

Someone pried my mouth open. “Drink, Sebastian.” Luna’s voice was soft but firm as a cloyingly sweet citrus liquid was poured down my throat.

It was thick, and I coughed and sputtered against the medicinal onslaught.

“You have to drink it, Sebastian.” More liquid was poured down my throat. “It’ll help.”

Blackness rose all around me. I was drowning in it. My shadows were choking out my life. Flames licked my skin, my face, my insides.

Then, I fell into blessed darkness.

THREE MORE TIMES, I woke.

Each time, the piercing, screeching sound echoed through my mind. I roared, thrashing about blindly until Luna forced more citrus liquid down my throat. Each time, the call of the summons dimmed, bringing me back into the darkness.

The fourth time I woke, something was different.

Off.

My mind was quiet, something I had never appreciated until now, but I still felt... wrong. My shadows were unmoving, and the dark magic in me sat as though it was waiting for something.

I opened my eyes, but darkness was all around. It was both oppressive

and comforting. I was on a bed, a soft fabric covering my bottom half.

“Luna?” I called her name, my voice hoarse.

No reply. No hint of lilac shampoo. But the Binding Mark did not burn, and the Tether was not twinging.

Where was she?

Luna was more than just my wife. More than my Bound Partner. She was my life. I needed her more than air, more than blood.

I repeated her name. Quietly at first and then louder and louder.

Nothing.

My heart raced in my chest, and panic settled deep within me.

How did this keep happening? One would think that being Tethered meant I’d never find myself in a situation where I lost my wife, but apparently not.

Gold flecks shimmered in the blackness, sparkling like shards of sunlight before disappearing.

Did I imagine them?

No. Something was different. The darkness was thicker to my right. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled. Someone was there.

I couldn’t see them. Why couldn’t I see them? My vision was far better than any mortal’s, but this darkness was unnatural. Like a black shroud, it made sight impossible.

“Who’s there? Who are you?” I asked, my hands clutching the side of the bed.

A raven’s caw echoed through the space.

I sat up, the sheet slipping to my waist.

Silver moonlight glowed, ripping the darkness in two. A curvy female stepped out of the shining light. She wore a black strapless silk dress that did little to hide what was underneath, her hair of the same color falling past her waist.

“You know who I am,” she said in an eternal, lilting voice.

Another call from the raven. It descended, landing on her bare shoulder.

My eyes widened, and my heart thundered. “You... this isn’t...”

“It’s real,” she replied.

Was it, though? This did not feel real. Part of me still felt strange.

The female continued, “Your wife had trouble believing me, too.”

Luna’s dream-that-wasn’t-a-dream.

Understanding clicked into place, and a frisson of fear ran through me.

“Isvana?” I croaked disbelievingly.

Admittedly, my religiosity had been lukewarm at best throughout my long life. I believed in the gods but didn’t care much for them. After Athena’s death, I retreated into a hole of darkness. What kind of gods could let someone innocent be torn apart limb by limb by “accident?” Especially someone like Athena. My first love did not deserve to die like that.

The goddess dipped her head, her black hair falling like a curtain around her face. “Very good, Prince Sebastian.”

I pinched my thigh, and pain radiated through my body. This was no dream. And yet, how could this be real? Confusion warred inside me.

Isvana looked as real as anyone else I’d ever met. She glowed with light from the unseen moon like an angel of the night, and the depths of her eyes were filled with life.

I hadn’t doubted Luna—the seed had been tangible proof of her visit with the goddess—but this was more than I had ever expected. “Where are we?” I asked, adjusting the sheet around my waist to ensure I was covered.

Isvana stepped forward, the moonlight glow of her skin brightening until it was nearly blinding. “This place has many names and serves many functions. To some, it holds the silver planes of the future.”

Fortune Elves. I’d heard them talk of the place they went to See what was to come.

The goddess continued, “I believe you know this place for another one of its facets: the Void.”

My eyes bulged. *This* was the Void? The area we traveled through, moving rapidly from one place to another? The one where voices spoke to Luna? Suddenly, those made a lot more sense. If I was here, in this place, maybe people were trapped in the Void. Or souls? But how did they get there? More importantly, what did they want with my wife?

There were no voices here today. There was nothing except the moonlight radiating from Isvana and the bed I was on.

I curled my fingers into fists, staring at the goddess. “Why am I here?”

She stepped forward, and the raven on her shoulder eyed me carefully. “Your Maker is calling you.”

My heart made a concerted effort to escape my chest. Was Queen Marguerite in the Void? My lungs tightened, and fear froze me. If she was here, Luna was in grave danger. I needed to get out of here. I couldn’t waste time talking to Isvana. Luna needed my protection, my shadows, my presence

so I could—

“Be calm, son of the moon.” Isvana’s hand landed on my forehead. Instantly, calm, soothing peace ran through me. My blood chilled, returning to its normal temperature, and my heart slowed.

“You misunderstood me, child of my blood,” Isvana said softly. “Yes, the Black Rose, also known as the Queen of Shadows, is calling you, but she is not here.”

I exhaled, my shoulders loosening. “So why am I here?”

Worry flickered over Isvana’s face. “You are in danger,” she said quietly. “Your bond to your Maker is going to destroy you.”

“I can’t let that happen,” I said. “Luna needs me.”

The goddess nodded. “She does. You are a pair. Not only are you Bound and Tethered, but the hands of fate brought you together.”

“What do I have to do?”

“You must free yourself from the queen. Untie the bond linking you together.”

My mind emptied. I’d never heard of anyone breaking that bond. I didn’t even know it could be done.

“How can I do that?” I asked.

Isvana canted her head. “There is a key.”

It sounded so simple, but I knew better. “Where is it?” I asked warily.

The goddess of the moon raised a brow. “My Chosen Ones know,” she said cryptically. “They will be able to guide you in the right direction.”

That was about as unhelpful as I expected. I barely held in a groan. “How will I know what it looks like?”

Her lips tilted up, and her radiant light shone brighter. “You will know, Sebastian. Fate has woven this task into your life. You must follow the path of light.”

“I will do that,” I assured her.

Luna was the path of light. She was the brightness in my life, having pulled me from the darkness. From the moment we’d met, she banished the night in my soul.

“That is not all.” Isvana’s voice deepened, echoing with ancient power. “When the land is dying, the red moon will rise. On that night, light and dark come to a head. Two paths collide, but only one will survive.”

I narrowed my eyes. Fate? I said, “I don’t believe in fate.”

Isvana tilted her head. “And yet, you believe in gods?”

“I... tolerate gods.” It seemed they were an inevitable part of my life.

“I see. Whether or not you believe in fate, Prince of Darkness, it exists. The darkness is no longer coming. It has arrived.” Golden ribbons mixed with the moonlight, and both swirled around Isvana. “Find the key. Break the bonds. Free Eleyta from the Wearer of the Blood Ruby.”

Isvana disintegrated into darkness, taking the moonlight with her. Just before disappearing, she shouted, “You must follow the path of light, or all will be lost.”

He Was My Future
❧

“**Y**ou should prepare yourself for the reality that he might not wake, Princess.”

Dropping Sebastian’s hand, I stood and turned, meeting Genevieve’s gaze. The priestess had looked after Sebastian and me since we first arrived at the abbey.

“What?” I asked.

She shook her head, her long hair escaping its braid. Pity danced in her black eyes. Pity for me. For Sebastian. For our situation. I hated it.

“He may not wake,” she repeated.

“He has to.” I paced the length of this too-small room. Three and a half steps in each direction. After being here for a few days, I memorized this path. I couldn’t sit still for long. Not while Sebastian was in this long sleep. “There’s no other option. He must wake. I can’t... if he doesn’t... he must wake up.”

The painful headaches were finally gone, having stopped a few hours after Genevieve had administered a healing tonic to Sebastian. It would mute the queen’s call temporarily, the priestess explained, but he needed to ingest it daily for it to work properly.

Thank the gods, the Second Order was willing to help us. I still didn’t trust them fully—I wasn’t sure I would trust anyone at all, after what had been done to us—but from the bits and pieces of conversations I was able to have, it seemed they weren’t exactly pleased with the way Queen Marguerite was running things in Eleyta.

Genevieve had indicated she would help us as much as possible. After so much time being alone in Castle Sanguis with little to no help, having a

potential ally seemed almost too good to be true. Isvana only knew we needed all the help we could get.

But ally or not, I needed Sebastian to wake.

I leaned against the wall, suddenly exhausted. When had I last slept? The hours had slipped into days, and it was all a gray fog.

“I need him,” I told the priestess. “He’s my entire world.” I couldn’t even imagine living without him. He was my other half. Living without him would be like trying to breathe underwater. Impossible.

“Princess...”

“I’ll pray again,” I said firmly. “No matter how many times it takes, I’ll keep doing it.”

Someone had to hear those prayers, right? I’d met Isvana. She was real. She would bring him back to me.

How could he stay asleep? Our love was too deep for that. Too vast. He needed to wake up so we could experience life together.

That pity flashed in Genevieve’s eyes again, and she drew her lip through her teeth. “He should have woken already—”

A groan came from the bed. I turned, my slow-beating heart momentarily stopping in my chest, and my eyes landed on Sebastian.

That first day, while the priestesses gathered the ingredients needed for the tonic, he had screamed, thrashed, and yelled for twenty-four hours. I’d taken off his tunic after it got drenched in sweat. He lost his voice, yet he still hadn’t stopped crying out. The rough, coarse sound of his rasping cries would haunt me for years.

Only once the tonic took effect was Genevieve able to clean the cut on his cheek. She’d used strong alcohol to wash out whatever poison had been on the Fledgling’s nails. To my deep relief, it had healed. Mostly. Even now, faint red lines remained from where the vampire had ripped into Sebastian’s face.

But that groan...

Please let him wake, I prayed.

I stared at him. The *lub-dub* of my heart was loud as I waited. And waited.

Then, his bare arm shifted where it rested on his chest. Hope fluttered to life in my chest.

His lips moved, his tongue darting out and wetting them, and he coughed. “Find the key and break the bond,” he whispered.

The moment he spoke, my knees shook. Relief ran through me, and his words barely registered.

He was awake.

I prayed like never before, thanking Isvana for her blessings, and darted to Sebastian's side. Dropping to my knees in front of the cot, I took his hand in mine. "Can you hear me?"

A long, never-ending minute passed before his eyes blinked open.

I had never been happier to see his gaze than I was right then. His lips twitched upwards, and he looked at me.

"Luna," he breathed, sounding even more relieved than I was if that was possible. His voice was little more than a whisper, but it was music to my ears. Already, I felt more like myself than I had since he first collapsed.

"Hi," I murmured, my voice cracking.

His hand rose, and he gently brushed back a lock of hair from my face. I leaned into his touch, and we remained like that, reveling in each other's presence.

A footstep sounded. I looked over my shoulder at Genevieve. She smiled, her long white hair fluttering in the breeze from the open window as she nodded. "I'll give you two some privacy."

"Thank you."

The door slipped shut behind her.

I squeezed Sebastian's hand, kissing each of his knuckles. I'd kiss him everywhere until the end of time if I could.

"You're here," he said, almost in disbelief.

My brows furrowed. "Of course. You needed me."

I hadn't left his side. Not for a single moment since he collapsed. There was a small, attached bathing room, and the priestesses had brought me a steady flow of coffee.

I stayed, not because of the Binding, but because I couldn't lose him.

I hadn't even seen Marius yet. The priestesses had confirmed he was here, offering to take me to him, but for obvious reasons, I'd declined. The Tether wasn't exactly news we wanted to spread.

Now that Sebastian was awake, we would see my brother. Together.

"I always need you," he replied, his voice still scratchy from sleep. "Come here."

I'd waited so long to hear his voice again. Tears came to my eyes, but I held them at bay and leaned in. He met me halfway, our lips uniting in a soft,

tender kiss filled with the overwhelming love that bound our souls together. With every passing moment, a rightness filled me. This was more than a simple embrace. It was a promise that whatever the future held, we'd face it together.

Eventually, we broke apart. Sebastian shifted, leaning against the wall, and I sat on the edge of the bed.

"How are you feeling?" I asked, running my thumb over the back of his hand.

He frowned. "Weak," he said after a moment, seeming pained even to admit such a thing. "How long was I asleep?"

I glanced at the clock on the wall.

"Fifty-six hours have passed since we first arrived." I pressed a kiss to his Binding Mark. "They were the longest hours of my entire life."

Every single one had felt like an eternity.

Sebastian's brows came together, and he kneaded his temples. "Why has the summons quieted?"

"The priestesses gave you a tonic. It took some time to kick in and completely dull the queen's call."

"I see."

I squeezed his hand. "You must take it every day. If not, the summons will return. It's a temporary solution, nothing more."

For a long time, all we did was hold each other.

Eventually, Sebastian pulled away and tugged on my sleeve. "What are you wearing?"

Raising a brow, I glanced down. I'd almost forgotten about that. "The priestesses lent me one of their robes." I raised an arm, letting the white sleeve fall. "They didn't have anything else, and my clothes were dirty. The robe's like... a wearable, billowing cloud? It's very strange but oddly comfortable." I picked at a stray loose thread and frowned. "Do you mind? I know it's a far cry from your favorite color."

Sebastian only ever wore black. It should have been tedious, but he made the color work. It matched his personality—or at least the one he showed everyone else. I knew him to be sweet and kind when it mattered most.

He shook his head. "Darling, you could be wearing a sack, and I'd still find you attractive." My cheeks flushed, and he pulled me in for a kiss. "I don't care about your clothes."

I smirked. "So you'd be alright if I decided to forgo them altogether?"

A growl rumbled through his chest. “Absolutely not.” His hand found my bottom, and he squeezed. “If you did that, you’d be signing the death warrant of anyone unfortunate enough to look upon you. You’re mine.”

My chest warmed at the declaration, and I kissed him. “I suppose it’s good that I don’t have a penchant for nudity, then.”

“A very good thing.”

This banter felt good. Normal, even. The queen’s summons might have been trying to destroy us, but this was proof that she couldn’t.

Sebastian and I were two halves of the same whole. Whatever challenges came our way, we would make it through.

He patted the spot next to him on the bed, up by the pillow. “Come here, darling. I need you.”

“You mean...” My words trailed off, but I gestured between us suggestively, wiggling my brows.

A laugh. “I’m impressed by your assumptions of my virility, but I want to hold you. There will be plenty of time for that later.”

I hoped so. Every time Sebastian and I came together was better than the last. Still, I would not give up the chance to be with him in any way, shape, or form.

Crawling onto the bed beside Sebastian, I snuggled up in front of him. I fit against him perfectly, his arm falling over me as he drew the blanket over us. Almost instantly, I was drowsy, my body happy to remind me how much I needed sleep.

The bed, like everything else in this small room, was tiny. It wasn’t meant for two people. None of this was. The space had a single chair, a small wardrobe, and a window looking over the mountains.

Despite its size, it was enough.

Books and riches and castles were nice, but they didn’t matter. Not really. All I needed in this world was the vampire behind me.

“I love you,” I whispered, my eyes slipping shut. I had questions about the key and the bond, but those would have to wait. Kinthani, the gods be with her soul, always said big conversations were best had when bellies were full and the sun was shining. The sun part couldn’t happen, but the rest was sound advice. We could wait until tomorrow.

He returned the sentiment, his hand landing protectively on my hip. “Sleep, darling,” he murmured. “We can deal with everything else tomorrow.”

I tried; I did.

Despite my exhaustion, sleep did not come easily to me. Low rumbles came from the snoring vampire behind me, but I couldn't quiet my mind.

There were too many thoughts and emotions. I could have been upset by this lack of rest, but instead, I focused on the good things. Sebastian had woken. The cuts on his cheek healed. The summons was quiet. And I was in his arms. Being in this place with him filled me with hope, even in the darkest times.

And times were dark.

If there was one thing I had learned over the past fifty-six hours, it was that the darkness had spread far and wide. From my position at Sebastian's bedside, I'd been in the perfect position to overhear the priestesses and witches as they walked down the hallway, unknowing or uncaring that I could hear them.

Death crawled over the Koln Mountains, choking out all the life in its wake. Creatures that had never before been seen were making their way into Eleyta from Ithenmyr. The weather was erratic, everything was colder, and no one was safe. The queen in Ithenmyr was said to be even worse than Marguerite—a feat, considering my mother-in-law's wickedness—and she was wreaking havoc over Ithenmyr and Drahan.

Everything they said only confirmed what I already suspected: the queen's Fortune Elves had been correct about the darkness.

It was here.

Now that Sebastian had returned to me, waking Marius was more urgent than ever.

The harbinger, the Sunwalker, and the Wielder of Shadows.

It sounded like the beginning of a bad joke.

But instead, it was my life.

Dread was a massive, swirling pit of despair in my stomach. I couldn't shake the thought that whatever was coming next would make the queen's tournament seem like child's play. That thought, more than anything else, chilled my blood.

When sleep finally pulled me into its embrace, I found myself in a realm of nightmares.

Death Followed Me
❧

Queen Marguerite's voice echoed all around me. "Where are you, daughter-in-law?"

I tried to open my eyes, but something was keeping me in place. My body was betraying me. It refused to obey my commands. I was frozen. No matter how much I urged myself to move, nothing happened.

This is a nightmare.

It had to be a nightmare.

And yet, it felt so real. The weight on my chest, the ache in my heart, and the burning of my Binding Mark all felt as real as Sebastian's arms when he held me close in bed.

"Open your eyes," the queen said. "Come bear witness to the present I have for you."

I didn't want any gift of hers. "Let me go," I begged.

"Look at me," she demanded, ignoring my request.

My eyes opened without my permission, and when they did, a strangled cry left my lips.

Silver chains were wrapped around Sebastian's bare torso and legs, tying him to a dying, black tree in the middle of a clearing. He was gagged, his eyes wide as he struggled against the bindings. Queen Marguerite stood in the shadows, her fingers toying with the ruby.

"I was going to kill you first, but this seemed more fitting." A malicious smile crept over her face. "I wonder who will scream more loudly? My son or the bitch he married?"

I sought my shadows, but they were gone. Not even a hint of them remained. Then I looked down. Silver and prohiberis bound me in the same

way as my husband, but blood oozed from hundreds of cuts covering my body.

The moment I acknowledged the injuries' existence, pain radiated through me.

That wasn't the worst, though.

Yellow rays of light dusted the sky. At another time, the sunrise would've been beautiful. At another time, it wouldn't have signified imminent death.

Pain and panic twisted together until they were indistinguishable from each other.

I thrashed and thrashed against my bindings. The silver cut into my body, and pain lanced through me, but I did not stop.

"Let us go!" I shouted.

"No, I don't think I will." Queen Marguerite grinned maliciously. "Enjoy the sunrise, children."

Then, she disappeared in a cloud of shadows. I struggled against the chains, trying and failing to find the Tether within me. Why wasn't it working? Why couldn't we soul share?

A piece of the puzzle was missing.

My movements became more and more frantic as time slipped on.

And then the first ray of sunlight touched Sebastian's skin.

His flesh sizzled. The scent of roasting meat filled my nose. He yelled.

And I screamed.

I JOLTED AWAKE. Icy beads of sweat gathered on my neck and forehead, my clothes stuck to me, and I gasped for air. Sebastian's arms were still wrapped around me, holding me tight against his chest, but the nightmare lingered. It was only the middle of the day, but there was no way I could go back to sleep.

The way he cried out as the sun burned him alive was seared into my mind. No amount of comfort would ever save me from the memories of the pain I caused him.

My fault.

This was all my fault. The queen only turned on Sebastian because of me. He only ran into the sun because of me.

Everyone died because of me.

The participants in the queen's games, my family, Julieta... even the nameless Fledgling who attacked us.

Death followed me wherever I went. It was my curse. Had it always been this way? Was I always a magnet for death?

My heart raced, and my lungs tightened. Pure panic descended upon me.

All of this was my fault.

Even now, I could feel death waiting in the wings for Sebastian and Marius.

They weren't safe with me.

No one was safe with me.

When they die, it will be because of you, a voice said in the back of my head.

Goosebumps prickled my flesh, and I shivered. No matter how I tried to shove the voice out of my head, it would not go.

This is your fault.

Again and again, the voice repeated its refrain until the words echoed through my entire body.

"I know," I whispered. "It's all my fault."

A blood-red tear slipped down my cheek. It was never just one, though. Not anymore. My chest ached, and hot tears rushed to my eyes, threatening to flood out of me.

Where was that hysterical laughter now? I would have preferred it to this.

Unfortunately for me, my body had different ideas. Soon, I failed. Crimson rivers flowed down my cheeks, and my shoulders shook.

My fault, my fault, my fault.

No matter how quiet I tried to be, I knew it was inevitable that my tears would wake Sebastian. I couldn't even let him sleep peacefully.

That just made me cry even harder.

I was such a bad wife, and I would get Sebastian killed.

Sure enough, he woke within minutes. "Luna?" His voice was groggy. "Why are you crying?"

I sniffled. "It's not a big deal."

He turned me around effortlessly, so I was facing him. "That's not true. Whatever it is, you can tell me."

Just because I could didn't mean I wanted to. This was my problem. My curse. And yet, what could I do? Sebastian wouldn't let this go. He was hard-

headed at times, especially when it came to me.

Deciding it was better to tell him the truth, I whispered, "It's all my fault."

Sebastian's brows knit together, and he sat up. "What?" The blanket slipped to his waist, revealing his bare chest. He drew me against him, his chin resting on my head. "What are you talking about, darling?"

Shaking my head, I closed my eyes and tried to push away the bad dream and the voice that came with it. Unfortunately, the guilt was consuming me from the inside out. "I had... It was a nightmare." I shivered, rubbing my arms. "A really bad one."

He sucked in a breath, and concern flooded the Binding Mark. "Tell me, Luna." His voice deepened, and he brushed a hand over my face. "You can tell me anything."

"I know." I leaned against him. It wasn't that I didn't want to tell him, but I was having trouble putting my innermost thoughts and fears into words. It was disconcerting, to say the least. Usually, I had a vast vocabulary, but constructing a proper sentence was difficult. In the end, I lifted a shoulder. "I'm... scared."

His arms tightened around me, and he kissed me softly. Then he asked, "Why are you scared?"

"I feel... helpless," I admitted to him. "Not knowing what is coming next... I don't like it. I feel like we're floundering from one problem to the next."

I liked making plans. They brought order to my life, giving me something to focus on. Order was nice. Lists were good. The more, the better, in my opinion.

We had none of those right now. All I knew was death was coming for us.

A few minutes went by, the ticking of the clock the only sound as Sebastian held me close. My tears finally slowed and then stopped.

"If you want a plan, Luna, let's make a plan." His fingers trailed up my arm, leaving sparks in his wake. "First, though, I need to tell you something."

The serious tone of his voice instantly put me on high alert. "Go on, I'm listening."

He adjusted me so I was sitting on his lap.

"Do you remember meeting Isvana?" Sebastian asked.

How could I forget? It wasn't every day one met a goddess and talked back to her before being gifted a seed.

Instead of saying all that, I responded dryly, “I remember.”

Sebastian chuckled. “I imagine it would be hard to forget.” His hand ran down my arm, drawing random shapes on my skin. “Before I woke, I met her.”

My mouth fell open, and once again, I had no words. Of all the things I’d expected him to say—and there were many—that was the last thing I thought I’d hear. “What?”

He nodded. “Luna, she was... glowing.”

“Just like when she met me,” I said. I’d never forget meeting her. It was forever engraved in my memory. The moonlight, the raven, the trees, the sunlight. “Did she meet you in a grove?”

Sebastian wove our fingers together. “No, the place where she brought me was strange.” His thumb slipped between our joined hands, rubbing slow circles. “She was radiant in moonlight, and...” He detailed his vision and the task set before him. Finding a key and breaking his bond with the queen.

Perhaps at another time, I would have been intimidated to be given yet another task to accomplish, but right now, I was relieved.

Finally, we had something actionable we could undertake. A list, even with only two items, was still a list.

This was good. We could finally plan. Settling back against Sebastian’s chest, I ran my tongue over my fangs and let out a long breath as we discussed what was coming next. We kept planning until my eyes grew heavy, and I could barely string two words together to form a sentence.

Only then did Sebastian lay me down, holding me close once more. “Rest, Luna,” he whispered.

This time, I slept peacefully.

WHEN I WOKE AGAIN, Sebastian was watching me. His gaze was deep, filled with so much affection that I could drown in it.

“Hey there, darling,” he whispered. “How did you sleep?”

“Much better the second time around.”

“Good.”

I rested my weight on my elbows, looking him over. “You look better,” I said. His skin was back to its normal pale shade, and life sparked in his eyes.

He kissed me. "I feel better." One of his brows raised. "Have you seen Marius yet?"

"No." I felt guilty about not seeing him but hoped he could feel me nearby.

"Let's try to do that tonight," Sebastian said.

Reaching over me and tucking me against his chest in one movement, Sebastian picked up the small vial of tonic Genevieve had prepared and left for him. He tipped it back and swallowed the orange liquid in one gulp, his throat bobbing as he drank.

Gods. Even in the shadows of the early night, Sebastian was beautiful. All vampires were, of course, but him especially. There was just something about him that made it nearly impossible to look away.

When the vial was empty, Sebastian put it down. He smirked, noticing my eyes on him, and flexed his arms before crossing them behind his head. He leaned back, his eyes twinkling. "Enjoying the view, Luna?"

"Yes," I said, unashamed. "There's a lot to see."

And every single inch of him was perfect. Isvana had surely spent extra time when she blessed him.

A deep laugh rumbled through Sebastian, his amusement shaking the small bed.

My lips tilted up, and I reached out, running a hand over the planes of his chest. "It's so good to hear the sound of your voice," I murmured. "Your laugh. For a while..."

My smile slipped.

He frowned. "What?"

I sucked in a breath. "I just... Genevieve thought you might not wake."

"I did, though."

"Yes, but... I can't live without you." My voice cracked. "Those hours... they were horrible. I don't ever want to experience that again."

"I'll never leave you, Luna." Sebastian drew me towards him, his eyes searching mine. "Never."

His thumb ran over my bottom lip, and then he kissed me. It was leisurely, his tongue sweeping into my mouth slowly. He tasted me like I was fine wine. The citrus aftertaste of the tonic remained in his mouth, flavoring our embrace.

I brushed my tongue against one of his fangs, and he pressed me harder against him. With someone else, I would have been afraid. I would have felt

manhandled and overwhelmed.

Not with Sebastian. He was the safe port in the storm that was my life, and I would never stop seeking refuge in him.

I whispered against his lips. "Promise?"

He pulled away. Resting his forehead against mine, he brushed the tip of his nose against mine. "Of course. Nothing could keep me away from you. Not the queen, the summons, or even death itself."

His words of reassurance banished my fear, and I exhaled. "I love you," I told him. "I know I don't always have the right words, and sometimes I get lost in my head, but you're my entire world, Sebastian."

No matter how often I told him I loved him, I'd never get sick of it. I could never adequately express just how deeply my affection for him ran. Each day we spent together, I fell increasingly in love with him. It was strange, this emotion. It didn't seem scientifically possible, but it evolved the more time we spent together. It was a bottomless ocean, an endless field, a sky with no limits.

Sebastian's eyes darkened. "Are you hungry, Luna?"

That now-familiar warmth coursed through me at what he was suggesting. I glanced back at the door, aware that we were no longer in Castle Sanguis within the privacy of our own wing. The door was locked, but the abbey was busy during all hours of the night and day.

He followed my gaze. "I'll set up a ward," he assured me. "No one will get close without me knowing."

"Do you feel strong enough?"

Instead of answering, his hand slipped behind my neck and pulled me towards him. Our lips met in a clashing kiss that was all strength and power. There wasn't even a hint of weakness in the way his tongue battled with mine.

"Yes," he said with conviction.

Running my tongue over my lip, I nodded. "Okay."

Sebastian pressed his palm against the stone wall, whispering under his breath as threads of shadows slipped from his palms.

Turning back to me, his dark eyes twinkled. "All set." He gently brushed the hair off my neck. "Now, where were we?"

BY THE TIME a knock came on the door an hour later, we were both sated, having fed before reacquainting ourselves with each other's bodies. It turned out the bed was much sturdier than it looked. Our clothes were piled on the floor, and I reached over, pulling the white robe back on as Sebastian drew the blanket over his lap, covering his nakedness.

Moving to the door, I opened it and smiled. "Good evening, Genevieve."

"I brought a change of clothes for you both." The priestess handed me a bundle of white fabric, glancing over my shoulder. Not that it was difficult since I was half a head shorter than her. "How is the patient feeling?"

"He feels fine," was Sebastian's reply from the bed.

My cheeks flushed, remembering just how fine he had been moments ago. "He's much improved."

"Good." Genevieve met Sebastian's gaze. "You'll have to be careful, Prince Sebastian. It might not feel like it, but the summons-suppressing tonic will drain you. You will require much more blood than normal to sustain you. Additionally, you may find that you are... weaker than before."

My brows knitted together, and I had some questions, but Sebastian nodded. "Alright, thank you."

He rose from the bed, deftly wrapping the blanket around his middle in one swift movement before coming to stand behind me. "Genevieve, is it?"

The priestess nodded. "It is."

Sebastian oozed princely charm. "We'd like to see my wife's brother tonight if possible. She's worried about him."

That was a bit of an understatement. I hadn't stopped worrying about Marius since I came to Eleyta. But I would concede that I was more worried than ever, considering my brother's current state.

"Of course, Your Highnesses," Genevieve said. "He's in the hospital wing of Lightriver Abbey. I can take you to him as soon as you're ready."

I'd never heard better words in my entire life. Genevieve promised to wait nearby while we changed. The garments were soft and cloud-like, the long fabric pooling at my feet. I belted mine, sliding on socks and shoes while Sebastian dressed.

When we were done, I stole a kiss.

He raised a brow. "What was that for?"

I shrugged. "You just look good in white."

Something about the billowing robe gave him a mysterious, rugged air. When he released his wings, the appendages slipping through the specially

designed slits in the back, he looked downright statuesque. A piece of art brought to life.

And he was *mine*.

Before we left the room, I opened the wardrobe and checked on my plant. In a surprisingly fortuitous turn of events, it had survived the Fledgling attack and our journey to the abbey.

“How does it look?” Sebastian asked, peering over my shoulder.

I lifted a shoulder. “It’s growing.” It had added an inch and a half since our arrival. Even so, other than the signature leaves and berries, it looked like any other plant I’d ever seen.

I hadn’t told the priestesses about it, hence the peculiar hiding spot, but maybe after we saw Marius, that would change.

Standing, I laced my hand through Sebastian’s. “Let’s go.”

Genevieve’s eyes widened at the sight of Sebastian’s wings as we left the room, but she didn’t say anything. She knew who we were. They all did. Most vampires didn’t have both wings and shadows. Some had none, but others, like Sebastian and me—and the queen—had both. They were two signs of Isvana’s blessings. We wouldn’t have hidden our identity for long, and truth be told, we were trusting the Second Order an awful lot. I hoped it was the right thing to do.

“This way, please.” Genevieve turned, her robe trailing behind her as she led us through the abbey.

Sebastian held me close as we traveled through the abbey. We passed several other priests and priestesses, along with a few witches, who hurried by with a nod or a curious glance. As we walked, I couldn’t help but think about how different this place was from Castle Sanguis or even Shadowmere Abbey.

It was still cold, of course, but the slightest hint of salt in the air spoke to our proximity to the Indigo Ocean. The halls were dim, and the cloying scent of incense was unmistakable. It masked the aroma of illness—blood and other things—but it did nothing to hide the fact that many humans were here. Far more than any other place I’d been in Eleyta.

Though I felt more secure than ever in managing my vampiric urges, I reminded myself to breathe and focus on other things. I would have to be careful. The last thing we needed was for me to lose control in a place full of humans.

Murderer.

That voice returned, reminding me of the Fledgling I'd killed. A chill ran up my spine, and I tightened my grip on Sebastian's hand. The nameless vampire had hurt my Bound Partner and tried to kill me. I acted in self-defense. Again and again, I'd remind myself of that fact until maybe I would start to believe it.

"Are you alright, darling?" Sebastian asked.

We rounded a corner, and I drew a deep breath before replying. "I'll be fine. Just... thinking."

He didn't say anything else, but he held me closer to him. Warmth came through the Binding Mark, and I knew he would always be here by my side.

A bitter, icy breeze blew through an open window, carrying the soft chanting of priests from somewhere in the distance. It was fair to assume there was a temple somewhere in Lightriver Abbey, just like Shadowmere, but I hadn't yet seen it.

Lightriver looked older than most buildings I'd been to in Eleyta, even Castle Sanguis. The hallways were narrow, and the stones were cracked and broken in some places. The center of the floor was smooth from centuries of wear and tear, and the atmosphere had an ancient feeling. How many lives had these stones witnessed?

We approached the hospital wing. Quiet moans and murmurs filtered through closed doors, and incense burned stronger.

Life and death filled Lightriver Abbey, intersecting in a way I had never thought possible. Despite not knowing much about the Second Order, I felt safe here.

Hopefully, my gut was right about this place.

Eventually, the three of us stopped in front of a wooden door marked with an XIII. The incense was stronger here, masking a deep aroma of sickness that made my stomach twist in knots.

"Your brother is in here." Genevieve grasped the metal doorknob, inhaling sharply. "Before we enter, Princess, you should prepare yourself."

Her words were ominous, and my stomach roiled. I gripped Sebastian's hand, unashamed of the way I was using him to ground myself. My heart raced, and wisps of shadows slipped from my palms.

"Prepare myself?" Marius's illness wasn't a surprise to me. He'd always been sick. Not only that, but Phyrre, Sebastian's spymaster, had told us he was in a long sleep. "What do you mean?"

Pity and concern flashed through the priestess' black eyes, and she shook

her head. “When Marius came to us... You must understand that he was not in good health.”

“I know,” I said. Sebastian’s hand left mine, going to my shoulder and squeezing tightly. “He’s always been sick.”

The priestess frowned, fiddling with the sleeve of her robe. “This is... more than that.”

“We need to see him,” Sebastian said, his voice infused with the kind of princely charm and authority that came from centuries of giving orders.

Sighing, the priestess turned the doorknob. “Very well, but please, brace yourselves.”

She pushed open the door. A miasma of illness slammed into me, nearly bowling me over. I took in a deep breath and followed Genevieve inside.

The moment my vision adjusted to the dim space, my slow-beating heart stopped entirely for one long, eternal moment. Tears rushed to my eyes, and I could barely breathe.

A cot, much like the one Sebastian had occupied these past few days, rested along one wall. Laying on it, his thin, frail body considerably smaller than it used to be, was Marius. My half-brother had been weak from his birth, but this...

I was going to be sick.

Marius was still a child, having only seen ten years come and go, but he looked like he was moments away from death. His face was gaunt and pale, his body skeletal. Heavy blankets covered him, but still, he shivered. The only other sign of life was the steady rise and fall of his chest, the raspy wheeze of his labored breaths barely audible even in this otherwise silent room.

I rubbed my chest, trying to ease the ache in my heart.

There was no way I could have been ready for this. I had no words. I had nothing at all.

Was this what heartbreak felt like?

A Burning, Raging, Eternal Flame
❧

SEBASTIAN

This was Luna's brother? Rarely in my three centuries had I seen someone so ill. I could snap Marius's body in half without a second thought. No wonder Phyrra had feared for his life when she found him.

If he made it to his second decade of life, he would be able to Mature. Right now, it didn't even look like he would still be breathing when the sun rose.

How could anyone live when they were so... broken? I'd seen sickness, of course. I was no stranger to illness and death. But this wasn't a random patient. This was my brother-in-law. He meant the world to Luna, so he meant the world to me.

Luna was unmoving beside me, her hand squeezing mine so tightly that her nails dug into my skin. I didn't pull away, instead taking a moment to study my brother-in-law further.

His hair was the same shade as Luna's, and their noses were similar, but that was where their similarities ended. Marius's ears were pointed beneath his curly brown hair, a mark of the Fortune Elf blood running through his veins, and he was frail.

Luna had never been like that. She was short, but even before I Made her, she had an inherent strength. From that first night when she came to Eleyta and stood before a crowd of vampires, I knew she was far stronger than she believed herself to be.

This sickly halfling had none of that. He was nothing but nearly-translucent skin and bones.

I held Luna close, wrapping my arm around her. "Darling, maybe we should—"

“No.” As if she had divined the direction of my thoughts, Luna tugged out of my grasp and ran to the bedside. She fell to her knees, taking Marius’s frail fingers in hers. “I won’t leave him.”

Pure agony pulsed through the Binding Mark as Luna made no effort to hide her sorrow. She had no reason to. I would be there for her, in both happiness and heartbreak.

Why couldn’t this have been a happy reunion?

Crimson tears ran freely down Luna’s cheeks as she pressed her face against her brother’s skeletal hands.

Genevieve inhaled sharply. “Blood tears.”

My spine stiffened, and alarm ran through me as I turned towards the priestess. “You can’t tell anyone,” I said. Violence echoed in my voice.

She gulped. “I won’t, Prince. You have my word.” She pressed her hand upon her heart. “Your wife is... special.”

“Very.” Wanting to move the topic of conversation away from Luna, I asked, “What can be done for him?”

“He hasn’t woken, Prince Sebastian,” Genevieve said quietly. “When that happens... It’s not a good sign.”

Luna’s entire body shook as she clung to her brother’s hand. Her tears looked even more out of place, the red streaking down Marius’s pale skin.

Touching Genevieve’s elbow, I gestured to the hall. “Can we...”

“Of course.” More loudly, she said, “We’ll just be outside, Princess.”

Luna didn’t even look up from where she knelt at her brother’s bedside. “Okay.”

She knew I wouldn’t leave her.

The door slipped shut behind us. Once I ensured the hallways were empty, I erected a privacy ward and crossed my arms over my chest. “How bad is it?” I asked bluntly.

“The truth?”

I nodded briskly. “I need to know.” For Luna. I couldn’t protect her if I didn’t understand what was happening.

Genevieve’s mouth pinched together before she shook her head. “You must understand, Prince Sebastian, we have recently worked with hundreds of cases of this illness. As such, we know the path it takes...”

“You don’t need to mince your words with me.” There wasn’t time for that.

She wrung her hands together. “When humans contract the illness and fall

into a deep sleep, they never wake.”

“You mean...”

“Sometimes they sleep for days, others for weeks, but the Wasting Illness inevitably ends in death.”

My fists curled at my sides as her words echoed in my soul.

That wasn't an option. Luna loved her brother. She needed him.

“So there's nothing you can do?”

She frowned. “We will continue to care for him, but you should know there is no hope.”

This was not the news I wanted to hear. Not at all. Doubt flitted through me. Would Luna's plan even help?

I didn't want to deliver this news to her. And yet, who else would? In the end, I knew it would be me. I was her partner in every way.

I rubbed the back of my neck. An update on Marius's condition wasn't the only reason I'd asked to speak to Genevieve. I eyed the priestess. My trust was hard-earned, but Luna and I needed help.

I'd have to take a leap of faith.

Clearing my throat, I stepped closer. “Priestess, can you help me with something else?”

Her black eyes widened. “My Prince?”

Keeping my wings tight against my back, I lowered my voice. “This is of the utmost importance and must be kept secret.” Waiting until she nodded, I continued, “We are searching for a key to break a Maker's bond. I have it on good authority that you might know where we can find one. Is that true?”

The priestess sucked in a sharp breath. Her gaze searched mine, and I clenched and unclenched my fists. I hated asking for help, but we did not have many options. I might have been powerful, but I was not privy to the secrets held by Isvana's Chosen Ones.

“It might take a while... I think there may be one.” She rubbed her temples. “I'll have to send a few letters—discretely, of course—and see what I can find.”

“Do whatever it takes.”

“I understand,” Genevieve said as the door opened behind her.

Luna slipped out. She wiped a handkerchief over her eyes; the cloth stained red, but life sparked in her gaze.

“Marius is going to wake up,” Luna said confidently after she entered the privacy ward. “I know it.”

Genevieve sent me a panicked look. “Princess, I’m afraid…”

I moved forward, taking Luna in my arms. “Patients don’t usually regain consciousness after falling into this type of coma,” I said softly, trying to soften the blow of my words.

“This is the final stage before death,” Genevieve added.

I thought Luna would get upset, but instead, she just shrugged. “That might be how it has been in the past, but Marius is going to wake up.”

My brows furrowed. Did she not understand? “Luna—”

“No,” she snapped, a wave of anger crashing through the bond. “He will wake. I refuse to believe anything else.”

The priestess made a religious sign across her chest. “We will pray, and perhaps Isvana—”

“Yes, Isvana.” Luna turned on her heel. “Come. I have something to show you.”

She took off down the hallway in the direction we came. Genevieve glanced at me with a question in her eyes.

I gestured after my wife. “Luna can probably explain it better.”

Curiosity flickered across Genevieve’s face, and she nodded. The three of us returned to the small room in silence. Luna entered first, opening the wardrobe and pulling out the plant she’d been studying earlier.

I lifted a brow. The stem seemed longer than it was before we left, but that must be a trick of the light. Plants didn’t grow that fast.

“It thrives in the darkness,” Luna murmured, running a finger down one of the leaves. “Honestly, it’s odd. Scientifically speaking, plants don’t usually grow without sunlight, let alone do better than before, but this one does.”

Genevieve stared at the plant. “Where did you get that?”

“You probably wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” was Luna’s response.

“Try me,” Genevieve said.

My wife drew in a breath and raised her eyes, meeting mine. The unsaid question in it was clear. *Can we trust her?*

We couldn’t trust anyone. Not really. On the other hand, Genevieve and the Second Order of Isvana’s Chosen Ones hadn’t turned us into the queen. It was time for another leap of faith. How many more times could we jump before we fell into an abyss?

At least once more, I hoped.

I nodded.

Luna exhaled. “Isvana came to me in a vision.”

The priestess froze, her hand halfway to the pot. “The goddess?”

My wife nodded slowly. “Yes.”

The air grew thick, and for a long moment, no one spoke. Then Genevieve touched a leaf reverently. “You saw Isvana, and she gave you this?”

Luna chewed on her lip. “She gifted me with a seed.”

“And you planted it,” the priestess said.

“I did.” Luna nodded at the pot. “And now, it’s growing.”

“I see,” Genevieve said, not hiding the awe in her voice. “A gift from the goddess herself.”

“I think it’s a cure for the Wasting Illness,” Luna quickly added, as if she knew the priestess was close to shock.

“A cure?” White brows tented as Genevieve looked up. “We’ve tested hundreds of plants and various medicines to no avail.”

“This is different,” Luna said confidently. “I swear to you, I believe this holds all the answers.”

Genevieve’s gaze bounced between Luna and the plant. “Imagine that,” she breathed.

Luna continued, “We will need to run tests and experiments, but the chances are high that this will work.”

Every second dragged on as the priestess stared at the plant. “This is.... A very big development.” She canted her head. “If this is... we’ve been searching... It will help so many people.”

Somewhere in the abbey, someone yelled.

The priestess jumped, making a religious sign over her chest. “I have to... wait here, please.” Without waiting for a response, she disappeared in a blur.

The moment she was gone, Luna looked up. “Do you think she believed me?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “But I do. I’ll always believe you, darling.”

Seconds later, my shadows tingled, warning me of someone approaching. Genevieve was back, but she wasn’t alone. A priest in a white robe stood next to her, his eyes wide as he stared at the plant.

“My name is Vorious,” he said quietly. “May I see it?”

Luna gnawed on her lip, hugging the pot to her chest.

“I’ll be gentle,” he promised.

She exhaled, extending it slowly. “Please do.”

“Goddess help me, I will.” He stared at it intently. “A gift from Isvana

herself.”

Vorious took the plant and raised it high, studying it from all angles. “It certainly looks interesting,” he murmured.

Genevieve nodded. “What do you think?”

He hummed and hawed. “It might be... We need another opinion. Is Imali coming?”

“Yes, she’s on her way.”

With the priestess came a dozen more vampires and witches. Each paraded through the room, which was not built for such an influx of bodies, causing us to stand in the corner. The newcomers inspected Luna’s plant and tossed various theories back and forth. Much of what they said went over my head, but I didn’t mind.

Luna answered question after question about the plant, seemingly pleased to be sharing her theories with like-minded individuals. I stood beside her, rubbing her back slowly, content to take a backseat. It didn’t escape my notice that she kept the Sunwalking and the harbinger a secret no matter what they asked.

By the time dawn was on the horizon, the leaves had been prodded, touched, and smelled by nearly every member of the Second Order.

Footsteps pounded on the stone floor outside our room just as Genevieve was about to leave. A redhead who was a few inches taller than Luna stopped in front of the door, holding the frame and panting. “Did I miss it?” she gasped, short of breath. “I came as soon as I heard.”

Genevieve shook her head. “No, the plant is still here.” To us, she said, “This is Odette. She’s one of our witches who was out tending to some ill in a nearby village.”

“Hello,” Luna said.

Odette murmured a greeting, but her eyes were locked on the plant. “Isvana, have mercy on my soul. You found it.” She looked up, her eyes sparkling. “Long ago, I was tending to an elderly witch, and she told me of this plant and the things it could do.”

Luna’s face lit up. “Truly?”

The witch nodded eagerly. “She said it’s medicinal, and with the right combination of magic and herbs, it will form a healing tonic as black as night. It will be so potent; it can cure the Wasting Illness.” She tilted her head. “Honestly, I thought the plant was an old wives’ tale. I searched and searched, but I never located it.” She touched the leaves reverently. “But here

it is. The cure.”

The last word was a whisper as it left her mouth, but it echoed through the room. Luna drew in a sharp breath. Goosebumps erupted on my flesh.

“Did the witch tell you how the plant works?” Luna asked.

“Not exactly. She was rambling and very close to the Fade. She didn’t even survive the next winter.” Odette frowned. “I think her grimoires are still somewhere in the abbey. Maybe they contain more information.”

“I want to help you,” Luna said. “Please. I can’t sit around and wait.”

Odette looked up. “Your brother has the Wasting Illness, doesn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too.”

A heaviness filled the space, and I squeezed Luna’s hand.

“You must help,” Odette said after a few drawn-out heartbeats. “I wouldn’t have it any other way. Why don’t you meet me first thing tomorrow? I’ll dig up the grimoires, and we can get started.”

A smile stretched across my wife’s face. “I’d love that.”

For the first time in a long while, Luna looked... happy. Tired but happy.

Genevieve and Odette lingered for a few more minutes before leaving us alone. Finally, it was time to sleep. Luna and I climbed into the too-small bed, and I wrapped my arms around her, holding her close to my chest.

“I love you,” she whispered sleepily. “Today was a good day. Tomorrow will be even better, I think.”

Something in her voice kindled a spark of hope within me.

It kept me warm as sleep dragged me under.

ATHENA TUGGED MY HAND, her skirts swooshing as she danced from one foot to the other. “Come on, Bastian,” she said excitedly as the trees parted in the wind, revealing the tall stone towers of Castle Sanguis. “I can’t wait to see your home.”

My lips tilted up, and I followed, happy to give her the lead. Athena had been asking me to come to the castle for some time, and I finally gave in. It was unseasonably warm this summer, and there was barely a layer of frost on the ground.

Of course, she still wore a light coat and mittens, but the clothes didn't dampen her mood. She picked her way through the snow, uncaring that she didn't know the way. Not that she could get lost. The Dead Forest led right to Castle Sanguis.

"Isn't it so nice out tonight?" She looked up at the sky, letting go of my hand to twirl in a circle. "It's not even snowing!"

"It is rather pleasant," I agreed.

She laughed, pressing a brief kiss on my lips. "It's more than pleasant, you big grouch. It's summer, and it's finally warm! You must appreciate it since it's so short."

"Fine," I groused, giving in. "It's delightful."

"Yes. It is." Her cheeks flushed as she smiled at me. Gods. Isvana blessed me when I met Athena. Her energy was addictive, and she was always so... alive.

I liked that. I forgot that I was no longer mortal when I was with her. She didn't want to Bind herself to me, but that was okay. She was young, in her early twenties. We had many years together before I would have to deal with the consequences of being in a relationship with a mortal.

Other vampires had warned me about being involved with a human, but they didn't know Athena as I did. She was fun and bubbly, and we enjoyed each other's company. She made me smile.

Nothing else made me do that these days.

When the main gate came into view, Athena slipped her hand into the crook of my elbow. Her blue eyes shone in the moonlight, and she grinned.

"Thank you for bringing me here, Bastian." She leaned against me. "What are we going to see first?"

"I'll give you the grand tour, but first, I need to see Mother." I nodded at the guards standing sentinel at the castle entrance. They dipped their heads, opening the gate for us.

Once we were inside, I added, "She sent a message last night that she has a task for me."

"A task?" Athena's eyes widened. "What is it?"

She knew what I did for the queen. Who I was. Everyone did. The Prince of Darkness was no secret. But for the most part, I protected Athena from the bloodier aspects of my life.

I shrugged. "I'm not sure yet."

Like most of my tasks, it probably involved death. I excelled at it. Athena

took one look at my face and did not push me further.

That was good. She and I had been... friends for a few years now. We'd taken a liking to each other the moment we first met, and we'd become somewhat of an item after that.

I wasn't sure that I loved her—I wasn't even sure that a killer like me was capable of feeling that way. But we had fun, and that was all I could ask for. Sometimes she met me at my cabin, and other times I visited her home. She'd never been here, though.

Already, the decades were dragging on. I didn't know how Mother did it. She'd been alive so long that very few people even remembered a time when she wasn't the queen.

Athena infused life into my otherwise bleak world. She was a distraction from the darkness that had consumed me since the night of my Making. When I was with her, I smiled. I liked her humanity and the way she saw the world.

"Can I come with you?" she asked as I led her up to the second story of the castle. I'd planned on dropping her off in the library before going to see the queen.

Frowning, I pulled her into an alcove so we could have a moment of privacy. "You want to come with me to meet the queen? If you don't want to go to the library, you could go for a walk, visit the Night Gardens—"

"I want to be with you." Athena beamed at me, her blonde hair framing her face in a way that made her eyes shine. "Please? I came all this way. I want to spend every minute with you before I need to return home."

"Fine." I sighed, ignoring the warning pulse of my shadows as I gave in. "But don't blame me if you get bored."

Athena grinned, doing a little dance as she got her way. "Don't worry. I won't ever blame you, Bastian." She kissed me. "I love you."

My stomach twisted just a little upon hearing those words. I kissed Athena, enjoying her presence, but I didn't return the sentiment. I couldn't. It didn't feel right. Not yet. Maybe one day.

By the end of that fateful night, it was too late for words. Too late for anything.

Athena was gone.

Mother tore her apart in a fit of fury, having "accidentally" lost control and fallen into a pit of rage. Numbness coated me from the inside out. Athena was dead. I was alone.

And now, I would never know what true love felt like.

A HAND JIGGLED MY SHOULDER, pulling me out of sleep. “Sebastian, wake up.”

Blinking blearily, I groaned and shook my head, trying to clear the vestiges of sleep. Luna appeared in my field of vision, her lips pursed, and her concerned gaze swept over me.

“Thank the gods.” She exhaled. “You were screaming and crying out in your sleep.”

Was I? I didn’t remember. A thick numbness coated my insides, like sludge stuck to my bones. It was a familiar feeling. I’d felt this way for decades after Athena’s death.

“I had a bad dream,” I admitted. “What time is it?”

She glanced at the clock. “It’s still the middle of the day.”

Damn. Luna needed more rest than that. I hated that my nightmare woke her and brought her out of sleep. I was supposed to take care of her, not the other way around.

Instead, the past was ruling me tonight. It had been years since I last thought of the night Queen Marguerite killed Athena. What was it about Luna that dragged up these pieces of my past, leaving me vulnerable and forcing me to relive them all over again? I would have preferred to leave the past where it belonged—far away from me.

Luna gently brushed my cheek, the softness in her touch grounding me in reality. “I thought as much.”

She kissed me. It was barely more than a peck, but it was enough to remind me that although Athena was my past, Luna was the entirety of my life now. My present and my future. “Do you want to talk about it?”

My eyes widened, and I shook my head. “No, I really don’t.”

Talking about Athena and reliving the past never brought anything good.

Unfortunately, Luna did not look convinced. She took hold of my wrist and ran her fingers over my Binding Mark. She traced the black lines tying us together, her eyes never leaving the magic tattooed on my wrist. “Are you sure, Sebastian? It’s not healthy to keep these emotions bottled up.” She sucked in a breath. “I know I sometimes tend to live in my head—”

“Sometimes?” I teased her.

“Almost all the time,” she amended. “But I’m here to talk. Maybe it would help?”

Healthy or not, repressing all my memories of Athena—gathering them in a box and shoving them deep in my soul—had kept me going for the past two hundred years.

Up until tonight, I was doing just fine without talking about it. If I talked about Athena, I might realize how broken I was. How scarred my soul was. If that happened, I might not be able to protect Luna.

And that was the most important thing.

“I’m fine, darling. It was just a nightmare. Please, let it go.”

Hoping to distract her, I drew her close, kissing her. For a moment, I thought she might argue or pull away, but she didn’t. She let my lips sweep over hers. She opened her mouth, and I tasted her as she melted against me.

I knew Luna wouldn’t forget about this, that we’d have to return to this conversation later, but maybe I would be better prepared the next time. Hopefully, the conversation wouldn’t occur until after we broke my Maker’s bond and woke Marius. Perhaps if I were fortunate, we wouldn’t even have to talk about it before we returned to Castle Sanguis.

We had too much to do without adding the weight of the past to our plates.

After a few more minutes of sleepy kisses and cuddles, I convinced Luna to go back to sleep. As a much younger vampire, she needed far more rest than me. Even after she slumbered quietly in my arms, I held her close. I would not return to the land of dreams. Not today.

Instead, I ran my fingers through Luna’s hair, trying to shake off the lingering memories of Athena’s death. The shadows were quiet, their song a distant hum as I slowly and methodically shoved thoughts of the past away. I shoved them down, burying them under years of pain and deaths I caused. Locking them away, I forced myself to focus on the present.

Hours slipped by as I lost myself in the gentle rhythm of Luna’s steady, slow breaths. *This* was my entire reason for living. The reason I was here. Every thought and decision I made was all because of her.

Once, I had believed I was incapable of love, that the darkness inside me meant I would never find someone who could care for me that way. When Athena died, and the numbness took over, I was certain I would never know how it felt.

But now?

Love was all-encompassing. It could complete you, consume your being, and transcend all rational thoughts and feelings. It was a force with no

boundaries, a melody echoing in the hearts of connected souls, and a burning, raging, eternal flame that brought light to the darkest places.

As Luna shifted in her sleep, mumbling under her breath about looking for a particular book, I gazed down at her. There was no light in our room, but it didn't matter. We did not need it.

Tracing the curve of her lips, her nose, and her cheeks with my thumb, I savored the feeling of her skin beneath mine.

Luna was my reason for living, my light, my hope.

Without her, I was nothing.

Yet, even as I reveled in our closeness, a nagging sense of unease clawed at the edges of my mind. Though the call of the summons was muted, it was still there, beckoning me back to the castle. It poked and prodded at my soul, seeking a way out of the confines the tonic had placed on it.

I shoved it down, pushing it as far as it could go. My shadows throbbed, and I released them, building a barrier of darkness between me and the summons.

Still, the queen's shadowy tendrils crept closer to my heart. In the depths of my soul, beneath the darkness, I felt her calling me.

Come.

Falling Apart
❧

MARGUERITE

A deep, bottomless pit resided in me where my emotions had once existed. I paced across my bedroom, the *clack* of my heels against the stone a reassuring beat to my weary ears. My Favorites were gone. Earlier this evening, I had banished them to their rooms. Not even their attention brought me any joy. Not right now.

Everything was falling apart.

Yesterday, my generals brought me several reports on the war with Ithenmyr. None of them were good. That scaly bitch who called herself queen wasn't getting the hint: this was my country, not hers. War was exhausting, and even though we were successfully stopping all her advances through the Koln Mountains, there was no happiness in it.

Nothing made me happy. Not anymore. All I could think about was my treacherous son and his Bound Partner. Just the thought of them made my blood boil.

I sent summons after summons, pulling on that bond between us every few minutes, but he didn't obey my call.

"Damn it!" I screeched into the empty room.

There was no response, of course. I pulled on my hair. Where was he? Guards were stationed at every known location Sebastian frequented, and I was waiting for him to show his face. He had to come out of hiding sometime.

I would catch him and his Tethered wife. When I did, they would lament the day they crossed me.

Nothing else mattered. My fangs ached, reminding me I hadn't had a drink in several days, but I didn't care. Blood was secondary to my desire to

drive a stake through my daughter-in-law's heart and sever the Tether.

How dare she do this? I took her from her lowly place—the fourth daughter of the Human Lord, barely a noble at all—and married her to a prince. My prince. She should have been content to live out her years Bound to my son, being the dutiful, quiet wife I required her to be.

Instead, she had the audacity to care about him. To make him care about her?

Anger ran through me, and I clenched my fists. I would not let them take my throne. I had worked far too hard for this.

The glimmer of the Blood Ruby in the mirror caught my eye, and I stopped pacing. The jewel was less lustrous than normal and no longer hummed as it used to. I'd worn it for centuries, and it had never been so dull.

And was that... a wrinkle on my forehead?

I stepped closer to the mirror, my eyes widening. A goddess-damned line was in the middle of my forehead, as obvious as a splash of color in a sea of black. A marker of age, it stood out until it was the only thing I could see.

What. The. Hell.

I was a vampire, for Ithiar's sake. We did not age.

Ever.

I screamed.

Grabbing the nearest object, I hurled the crystal cup at the wall. It shattered, spraying the room with countless pieces of glass, but the violence did nothing to ease the rage within me.

I'd suspected the Blood Ruby was losing its power, but this was all the confirmation I needed.

Why was this happening to me?

I grabbed another cup, intent on throwing it as well, when a knock came on the door. I swung around, my fingers tightening around the glass.

“What is it?” I yelled.

The door creaked open, and a human servant with a red ribbon tied around her neck slowly entered. Trembling, she dropped into a low curtsy. “Good evening, Your Majesty.”

Good? No. This was not a good evening. This was a very, very bad evening. Downright terrible, even.

“What do you want?” I exclaimed.

The servant blanched. “Apologies, My Queen,” she said, staring at the floor. “I have an urgent message for you.”

Tapping my foot, I put my hands on my hips. “What is it?”

“Prinos had a vision,” she whispered. “He is confined to his rooms, for walking the silver planes has drained him, but he says it is of the utmost importance.”

Finally, some news. Gripping my ruby, I tilted my head. “Is that your message?”

She gulped. “Y-y-yes.”

I didn’t respond. Why should I? The servant was nothing but a mortal, her lifespan a mere heartbeat compared to mine. Gathering my shadows around me like a cloak, I was beside her in a second. My fangs burned, and I grabbed her. It turned out this was the perfect moment to ease my thirst for blood.

My fangs were in her neck before she even registered what was happening. She cried out, and fear added sweetness to her blood. Taking what I needed from the servant took little time. In mere minutes, her heart slowed, and she twitched in my arms. She was moments away from death.

I could have stopped.

I didn’t.

This was my right as ruler of this realm.

When not even a drop of blood remained in her veins, I released her. The nameless servant fell in a heap, and I left.

Someone else would take care of the mess.

“WHAT DID YOU SEE?” Sitting across from Prinos, the Fortune Elf, I tapped a near-frantic beat on the armrest.

He blinked, clearing the film in his eyes. The elf was in bed, his face as pale as the sheets beneath him. His brown hair was shorn, barely dusting his scalp, and sweat covered his body. Of all my Fortune Elves, he was the oldest and closest to the Fade. Even now, his skin was almost translucent, and he appeared to be moments away from taking his last breath.

He couldn’t Fade yet. I needed him.

He opened and closed his mouth as though he was searching for the words.

“Tell me!” I yelled, growing impatient.

“I have... Seen your son,” he rasped, his eyes widening.

My spine straightened, and I gripped the chair as though I was on the verge of falling out. My heart raced, and something akin to hope flickered to life within me.

Finally, someone was doing something right.

I asked, "Where is he?"

Prinos met my gaze. His eyes still contained traces of silver, and his voice held echoes of the strange magic his kind possessed. "They are in the east," he rasped. "I have Seen them... searching..."

I lurched forward, grabbing the side of the bed. "Searching for what?"

He coughed. "A... key."

I let go of the bed, my brows furrowing. "What do you mean? What key?"

"I do not know," the Fortune Elf replied, closing his eyes once more. "The silver planes are dark, My Queen. The Dragon—"

"Do not speak to me of her!" I yelled, shoving my chair. It toppled back as I stood and leaned over the Fortune Elf. "I don't want to hear about Ithenmyr. I want to know where my son is hiding." My voice increased in pitch until I was yelling. I didn't care. I'd scream all night long if it brought me the answers I sought. "Why won't he respond to my summons? Why has he turned against me?"

There were so many questions and so few answers.

Prinos trembled, shaking his head. "The darkness is here, Your Majesty. I warned you it was coming."

"So?"

He licked his lips. "Seeing the future is nearly impossible. The silver planes are awash in shadows, and the paths are murky."

"I don't care. Look again." I bared my fangs at him. "I need my son's exact location."

"That's not how it works, My Queen." Prinos's eyes widened. "I'm afraid if I Look again, I might Fade."

I didn't care if he Faded. It wasn't my fault elves lacked the immortality of vampires. They lived for a long time, but all other species in the Four Kingdoms would eventually Fade. Shifters, elves, merfolk, werewolves, and witches could all Mature and live for centuries, but only the vampire was truly immortal.

I looked as good as I did the day I was Made.

Or at least I had until my ruby started to dim.

My nostrils flared at the reminder of the gods-damned wrinkle on my forehead, and I slammed my fist into the headboard.

“Try. Again,” I seethed. Shadows slipped from my palms, wrapping around the Fortune Elf’s neck. I squeezed my fist, slowly stealing the life from his lungs as he writhed on the bed.

Finally, he gasped, “I... shall... try.”

“Good.” The shadows slithered back into my palm, and I righted my chair, dropping back into it.

Silver shone from Prinos’s eyes, and his head fell back onto the pillow.

I wasn’t exactly sure what Fortune Elves saw when they Looked into the future, but I knew communication was futile.

Instead, I waited.

And waited.

A minute passed, becoming five, then ten.

Still, Prinos’s eyes remained silver.

Tapping my foot on the floor, I ran my finger over that wrinkle again and again until the very shape of it was engraved in my memory.

Waiting was terrible.

In the waiting, long-forgotten memories resurfaced.

My footsteps echoed as I stormed down the stone hallways of Castle Sanguis. Servants took one look at my face and paled, scurrying out of my way. Those that did not move fast enough, I shoved aside with my shadows.

Anger was a throbbing, writhing mass of hurt pulsing through my veins, making even drawing breath difficult. My fangs ached, my head throbbed, and I yearned for blood. Hearing news of war always did this to me.

I needed someone to ground me.

Gods, I couldn’t get to my suite fast enough. I would have shadowed, but I didn’t want to show weakness.

Instead, I would prove to them their queen was always present.

Jathos, one of my advisors, hurried down the hall. “Queen Marguerite, I’m afraid I have an urgent matter that requires—”

I extended a hand, and a wall of shadows slipped from my palm. It slammed into Jathos, throwing him backward. He cried out as his body hit the wall, a bone snapping, but I kept going.

I didn’t have time for Jathos today. I didn’t have time for any of them.

Red tinged my vision, my gums ached, and my stomach twisted with the need to eat. Blood was all I could think about.

“Ithiar, have mercy on me,” I groaned, turning the last corner. Even though I had been a vampire for over four centuries, this thirst still took hold of me in moments of weakness.

Flinging my shadows out in front of me, the doors to my apartment flew open.

A tall, well-built human stood inside my private chambers. His dark blond hair curled at the nape of his neck, and he paced, his finger trailing over the page of a leather-bound book.

My fangs ached at the sight.

Nicolas always knew when I needed him.

Drawing shadows around me, I moved through the Void and landed behind him. Dragging my tongue over the tip of a fang, I whispered, “Boo.”

He stiffened, and the book slammed shut.

I grabbed him, his back pressing against my front. My teeth sank into his neck. The first sip of his blood was like drinking fine wine. It soothed the burning ache within me. My shoulders relaxed, and I hugged him as he leaned against me. I drank, letting his blood fill me in a way that nothing else did.

My free hand roamed his body, dipping lower, lower, lower until I slipped beneath the waistband of his trousers. He groaned, pressing himself into my touch invitingly. That was all the encouragement I needed. I touched Nicolas as I drank, the red seeping out of my vision. The pounding in my head became a dull throb, and then it disappeared entirely.

Only then did I pull my fangs from his neck, licking the blood trailing down his golden skin.

Nicolas turned, his brown eyes dark with desire and lust as they swept over me. “Marguerite,” he breathed, tossing his book on the nearby couch. “My love. I’ve missed you.”

He’d only been gone for a few days, but it had felt like a lifetime. At least he was here now. My lips tilted up, and I kissed him. “How did you know I needed you?”

“I always know.” Nicolas smiled and placed his hand over my heart. “We are one.”

That memory faded away. Prinós remained on the bed, his eyes silver and lungs gasping for breath as he searched the future.

“Come on,” I groaned. “Hurry.”

But the Fortune Elf did not hear me. He remained on the silver planes,

and soon, another memory took hold of me. This one was worse. It had taken place a few years after the first one and was the beginning of the worst period of my life.

Until now.

“Where is he?” My fists curled in the fabric of my gown, and my heels clicked as I paced across the throne room. The wind howled, and snow fell in an angry flurry, making sight impossible even for me.

My heart raced in my chest.

Nicolas was missing.

Lord Clement ran a hand through his hair. “Scouts are searching for him, Your Majesty.”

None of this made sense. How did this happen? My Nicolas was an expert tracker. The best there was. The snow should have posed no trouble for him. “He should have been back by now!”

I needed him. He was mine.

“I will inform you the moment he’s been found,” Clement assured me.

“See that you do.” The shadows throbbed as I paced and paced and paced.

Nicolas had gone on a simple trip to the Koln Mountains. It should have taken him a day, maybe two.

He’d been missing for a week. Seven horrible, long, lonely nights.

My heart ached. I never thought I would find myself in love with a mortal, yet here I was, simpering after Nicolas after he’d been gone from my bed for a few days. This was nothing in an immortal vampire’s life, yet it felt like forever.

He was still young, my Nicolas. He wasn’t ready yet, but I would Make him. Soon.

Then, he’d be my consort. By my side, forever.

My love.

My one and only.

Worry twisted in my heart, and a tear slipped down my cheek.

Where was he?

Prinos groaned, the sound pulling me out of the past. His fingers grasped at the linens, and he writhed on the bed. His eyes were still shut.

I ran my fingers over the Blood Ruby. The jewel was cool beneath my touch, and I purred.

“I’ll find them,” I whispered. “And when I do, the bitch’s blood will be

the fuel you need to last me until eternity.”

The jewel did not answer—of course—but a coolness emanated from it, sending calming waves through me.

Then Prinos blinked. The silver cleared from his eyes, and he sat straight up.

“Queen of Shadows, the path you walk is one of death.” His voice echoed with ancient power, and his eyes glazed over. “Darkness has come to Eleyta, and none are safe. The gods are awake, and all are watching as evil spreads through the land.”

I didn’t care about that anymore. I snapped, “My son? Where is he?”

The Fortune Elf snatched my hand and gripped it with a strength that did not belong to him. “Death is coming.”

Good. I liked death. Still, I needed clarity. “Whose death? Hers?” I asked eagerly. Please let it be hers.

“There can be no balance without death,” Prinos said. “The paths of light and dark cannot coexist any longer. Choices must be made. Lives will be lost.”

My heart raced in my chest, and shadows flooded out of me. What did this mean?

Before I could ask, Prinos’s mouth opened and closed. He released my hand and collapsed on the bed. His hands shook, his eyes widened, and a horrible, high-pitched scream left his lips.

“Death is coming, Queen of Shadows,” he rasped, looking at me one final time. “Beware.”

Then, his skin turned glassy. His chest trembled, once, twice, before it stopped. The elf’s entire body flickered in and out of sight for three seconds, and then it faded from view entirely.

The only things left on the bed were the clothes Prinos had been wearing and the wrinkled sheets.

Standing, I brushed off my gown before walking calmly to the door and opening it. Two servants were walking by, and they dipped into a hasty bow when they saw me.

“This Fortune Elf has Faded.” I walked into the hall. “Find me another one.”

I would send all my elves onto the silver planes if needed. Their lives meant nothing to me. I had a son to find, a daughter-in-law to kill, and a ruby to fix.

Nothing would stop me now.
Not even death.

Flourishing in Darkness
❧

“Any changes?” I peered over Odette’s shoulder as the witch ran yet another test on the small leaf we’d harvested from the plant. This was the fourth one we’d run tonight, and so far, it seemed to be going in the direction of all the others. The grimoires Odette had found were surprisingly unhelpful. Many of the spells were extremely confusing, and each potion took a long time to test.

Every failure was a step in the right direction, though. It gave us something to cross off our list. Eventually, we’d get there.

Odette sighed and shook her head as her red hair fell into her eyes. “Nothing yet.” She pursed her lips. “This is the right plant, but it’s not working.”

Frustration leaked into her tone, and I patted her on the shoulder. “We will figure this out.”

Science was one of the only constants in my life. It wouldn’t fail me. Not now, when Marius was depending on this. On me.

“I have faith in you.” Sebastian looked up from his perch on the wooden stool in the corner of the lab, using his finger to bookmark his place in the large leather-bound book he’d been reading for the past few days.

I’d snuck a peek at it yesterday. It was a textbook on ancient military strategy. Not exactly light reading, in my opinion. I much preferred romance. There was something about escaping to another world and immersing oneself in a fictional couple’s love story that delighted me every time.

I crossed the room, pressing a kiss to his lips. “Thank you, Sebastian.”

He was back in his signature black, our clothes having been laundered, and I had to admit it was good to see him in his normal shade.

Odette tapped her chin. “There has to be something we’re missing.” She frowned, flipping through the pages of the latest grimoire. “This one, we haven’t tried yet. I’ll need...” Muttering to herself, she darted to the nearby cupboard and rummaged through it.

I glanced at the page, but upon finding it written in a language I did not know, I returned to the table and added the tiniest bit of water to the plant.

Odette and I had been working diligently in the abbey’s laboratory for the past three nights. I would be lying if I didn’t say the lack of success was frustrating. There was nothing I wanted more than to help Marius. But science was like that. Trial and error were often required, and patience was needed in order to find results.

Still, I was acutely aware of the fact that there were only so many different tests that one could run on a single plant before running out of options. This laboratory was far better equipped for scientific study than anywhere else I’d been in Eleyta, but even here, we did not have a full set of equipment.

The space itself was fascinating, though. Located entirely underground, it was in a natural cave. Turquoise and emerald crystals illuminated the stone walls, a welcome change from the Light Elf magic I’d grown used to. Warmer than the abbey, the cavernous floor was heated by hot springs that ran beneath it.

The cave had always been here, Odette explained on our first night, and the entire abbey was built around the cave system. There were four others just like this one, but they were used for storage.

Though the cave lacked all natural light, Isvana’s plant flourished. It outgrew its original pot the first night we brought it down here, and now it was in a large planter in the middle of the table. It seemed to grow bigger each hour.

“Found it!” Odette exclaimed. She emerged from the cupboard holding a small vial containing a black, inky liquid and a small notebook. Setting the vial down on the table, she stared at the book. “If we... then... this seems like it might work.” She glanced at me. “It’s worth a try, right?”

I wasn’t sure what she planned to do, but honestly, I was up for anything. “Always.”

Odette smiled. “Alright then, let’s get to it.”

She flipped open the notebook, her gaze darting back and forth between that and the grimoire. Mumbling under her breath, she harvested a small leaf

close to the stem of the plant. Knowing better than to disturb someone whose mind was firmly locked on their academic task, I stood back and watched as the witch worked.

A few minutes later, Odette glanced at me. “Could you please grab me a mortar and pestle, Princess?”

I hurried to the cabinet, finding the requested equipment before delivering it to the table. The witch’s brows narrowed in concentration as she mashed the leaf to a gooey green pulp.

“You should probably stand back for this part,” Odette advised.

My eyes widened, but I did as she asked. Moving next to Sebastian, I slipped my hand into his. He closed the book, leaning against me.

“I’m just going to...” Odette exhaled. “But... I can... Alright.” She looked at us. “Here we go.”

She placed the pulp in a long glass container, and her eyes narrowed in concentration. Over the past few days of working with the witch, I was getting to know her. Odette was an only child, born and raised in Eleyta, and she’d been with the Second Order of Isvana’s Chosen for a hundred years.

We’d begun to lay the foundation of a friendship, and I hoped it would continue to blossom. I missed Julieta every day, but part of me knew I couldn’t live in the past. Having a friend in my corner would be nice—especially one as scientifically inclined as Odette.

Placing a paperweight on the open grimoire, Odette gripped the edge of the table with one hand, raising her other palm in the air. She chanted, her voice low and steady, and bright blue threads left her outstretched hand.

My back stiffened at the sight of her magic, even though it wasn’t directed at me. I wasn’t sure I’d ever be able to listen to someone speaking in another language without a bolt of fear running through me. Sebastian and I were used to the Tether now and even—mostly—considered it a blessing, but it didn’t mean I was any happier about being forced into it against our will.

Maybe once this was all over, I would devote some of my immortal life to learning all the languages spoken in the Four Kingdoms. It would certainly be a useful skill.

Blue magic spun around the cave as though guided by an invisible wind, building in intensity. Soon, the ribbons enveloped Odette entirely. Her voice grew louder and louder until she was yelling.

I squeezed Sebastian’s hand, barely breathing as the thick storm of magic veiled my new friend from sight.

And then Odette stopped speaking.

The silence was so sudden that each *lub-dub* of my heart was a boom of thunder. My breath hitched. Sebastian unfurled his wings, and they curled around me protectively.

Odette released the table and spread her arms. The ribbons hovered in the air for another moment before gathering into a tight ball the size of my fist. The sphere rotated clockwise three times. Still turning, it dove into the glass tube with the mashed remains of the leaf.

The witch picked up the vial of the black liquid from beside the grimoire. “Remember the experiment yesterday?” she asked.

I thought back and wrinkled my nose. “The one that produced a sulfuric stench?”

The three of us chuckled.

“That’s the one.” Odette gestured to the glass container. “If this works, this will be even worse.”

Before we could say anything—or even plug our noses—Odette poured the entire black vial into the magic/leaf mixture. The blue sphere twisted and writhed as the inky liquid made its way down the tube until everything bubbled and hissed.

A foul odor, like rotting meat that had been left out for days and then mixed with old eggs, filled the air. To say that it smelled bad would be an understatement of epic proportions.

Sebastian coughed, covering his nose with his sleeve, but I couldn’t move. My eyes were glued to the table in front of me. The concoction was now a deep violet, resembling the darkest part of the night before dawn, and swirls of black ink floated on the surface. Green specks were dotted throughout. Even though it smelled, it felt... right. I couldn’t explain it, but I knew we were on the right track.

Odette pulled out a cork from her pocket and covered the container.

“Now what?” Sebastian asked, his nose still plugged.

The witch huffed a laugh at his reaction before smiling. “Now we wait. The grimoire says it will be ready in four to five days.”

“And then we can test it?” I asked eagerly.

She smiled. “And then we can test it.”

Four or five nights, and then Marius might wake.

I surged forward, hugging the witch. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

Odette smiled, squeezing me back. “I hope it works.”

“Me too.”

Sebastian made a choking sound behind me, and I glanced over my shoulder. His eyes were watering, and though his nose was covered, it didn't take a scientist to understand the foul odor was negatively affecting him.

“I think we may need to come back later,” I whispered loudly to the witch.

She glanced at Sebastian, a smirk dancing on her lips. “I see that. Go ahead.” Odette closed the grimoire. “My olfactory senses were damaged in a lab accident many years ago. I'll keep an eye on things here.”

“Thank Isvana,” Sebastian choked out.

Taking pity on him, I threaded my hand through his. “Why don't we go for a walk? Some fresh air might do us both some good.”

Sebastian's shadows pulled us out of the smelly laboratory so fast I barely had time to say farewell to Odette.

As we moved into the Void, I couldn't help but smile. Not only did we have a plan, but tonight had given me something else, too.

Hope.

Marius would wake. I knew it. And when he did, we would solve the meaning of this prophecy and deal with Queen Marguerite once and for all.



SNOWFLAKES as fat as my thumb drifted down from the sky as Sebastian's shadows deposited us outside the abbey. The flakes added themselves to the already thick layer of white at our feet, glistening in the moonlight. The cool, bitter air wasn't kind as it hit me, the icy edge promising a coming storm.

Next to me, Sebastian inhaled deeply. “Thank the gods,” he said, removing his sleeve from his nose. “I didn't think I could handle another minute of that awful stench.”

A laugh bubbled up inside me. It was rare to see my prince so disturbed by something, but I had to admit, I enjoyed it immensely.

Sebastian groused, “Are you laughing at me?”

My eyes widened, and I shook my head. “No.” I was a terrible liar. My neck heated, and I averted my gaze.

“Luna,” he growled my name.

I snorted, tugging him towards the trees. “Fine. Yes, I'm laughing at you.

Who would have thought a stinky little potion would have brought down the Prince of Darkness?”

Sebastian chuckled, helping me over a fallen log. “In my defense, it smelled *very* bad. Any sane person with a working nose would have found it disturbing.”

“That’s true.” I ducked under a blackened vine. “It did smell bad.”

“Truly terrible,” he agreed. “It might be the worst thing I’ve ever smelled.”

“Really? One time, when I was sixteen, my chemistry class spent a week in a laboratory studying various chemicals. Zania, one of the other students, mixed arint and clystran together.” I snorted.

The chemicals, native to Ipotha, were both components used—individually—to make cleaning supplies. They came from reedy plants that grew on the edge of Ipothan ponds. The professor had warned us to never, ever, let them mix, but Zania must not have been listening.

Sebastian’s brows furrowed. “I’m assuming that was bad?”

“The worst.” I nodded, my nose crinkling at the memory. “They had to evacuate the entire campus because of the smell.”

“I see.” He looked like he was about to burst into laughter and was struggling to keep a straight face. “And that was the worst?”

I pursed my lips. “Well, maybe not the worst,” I conceded. “Once, there was...”

We strolled through the woods, and I regaled Sebastian with tales of experiments gone wrong. He listened intently, asking questions in all the right places until I ran out of words. Then, we continued in amicable silence, enjoying each other’s company.

Sometime later, we came across a clearing surrounded by blackened pine trees.

Sebastian pulled me into it.

“This will do nicely,” he said, turning in a circle.

“Do?” I echoed, canting my head. This clearing, though eerily silent, didn’t appear particularly special. Between the obsidian bark, unnaturally dark vines, and shriveled, dying weeds poking through the snow, it looked like everywhere else in Eleyta.

Sebastian drew me towards him, his hands cupping my cheeks. My breath caught in my throat as he lowered his head and kissed me softly. There was nothing urgent in his movements as he placed kisses over my lips, my cheeks,

and my nose.

“I like hearing your stories,” he murmured, rubbing my Binding Mark with his thumb. “I like watching you work. You are captivating when you concentrate. I’ve wanted to kiss you all night, but Odette wouldn’t leave.”

His lips found mine again, and I melted against him.

“It is her lab,” I reminded him, whispering against his lips. I was more than a little breathless from his attention.

“Which is why we had to leave,” he said, stealing another kiss.

“Not because you needed to escape the smell?” I teased. I wouldn’t be letting this go any time soon.

“That too,” he said. “But I’m delighted to get some time alone with you, Luna.”

He was right. This was nice. Being alone was something vastly underrated. But it also meant something else. An idea sparked in my mind, and once it took hold, it was hard to think of anything else.

Stepping back, I put my hands on my hips and assessed the clearing. I didn’t see anything that would impede my plan. “Yes, this will be perfect.”

Sebastian’s brows furrowed. “Perfect?” he echoed. “Care to fill me in on your plan?”

I picked up his hand, rubbing the Binding Mark. “You’re feeling alright? The summons is still quiet?”

“Yes, I took the tonic as soon as I woke up.” His voice betrayed his confusion at my train of thought. “The call is muted.”

For now.

The unsaid words hung between us, a reminder of the constant burden of the summons. We couldn’t hide forever. That’s what made this more important than ever.

“Good.” I clasped my hands in front of me, hoping I looked serious, but not too-serious. “I want to practice soul sharing.”

We had done it twice before, the first time having been a complete accident. Queen Marguerite had insinuated Bound and Tethered Partners like us were capable of sharing power, but we had never done it until she drugged us with Faerie Wine and made Sebastian fight another vampire to the death. He’d been moments away from being staked when I pushed past the prohiberis and silver dust that blocked magic and uncovered the new powers within me.

The second time we’d soul shared had been no less frightening than the

first, but at least that time, the use of the Tether was intentional. After the fight, the queen tried to murder me in cold blood. The only reason we survived was because we used the connection between us to overpower her long enough to escape.

Needless to say, it was important that we mastered this technique. The next time we met Queen Marguerite, we needed to be as strong as possible. After all, it was us or her. If she'd been a normal vampire, overpowering her would be no problem. Sebastian and I were strong. But she wasn't normal. She was queen because she was the strongest vampire in the land, and the strange ruby she wore imbued her with power.

Sebastian's obsidian eyes gleamed as he brushed his lips across my knuckles.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "We don't know if soul sharing has any side effects."

"Besides saving our lives?" I asked teasingly. I was in a very good mood tonight, with the success in the laboratory. I hoped this next venture would be as fruitful.

"Besides that." He frowned and his gaze flickered with concern as they swept over me. "We can do it, Luna, but you need to feed first. I won't have you trying anything without being at full strength. Especially since we don't know how draining these experiments of yours could be."

That made sense. Besides, feeding from Sebastian wasn't strenuous in the least. The fact that his blood was all I needed was a blessing. Hunting was definitely not something I ever intended to do. Killing that Fledgling had been bad enough.

"Alright," I agreed. "If you insist."

He growled, "I do."

I tilted my head. "You need to feed, too."

His eyes gleamed, and a look passed across his face that reminded me he was not only my husband but a predatory vampire and the prince of this land. Power ran through his veins, and he was a dangerous hunter. Creatures big and small instinctively feared him.

But not me.

He'd never hurt me.

Sebastian grinned. His fangs glimmered in the moonlight. "Deal."

Taking my hand, he led me to a fallen log covered in a strange black moss. As terrible as the dying land appeared, it didn't seem harmful to the

touch.

Sebastian sat first, pulling me onto his lap. He fanned his wings, those dark appendages shielding us from the rest of the silent forest.

I straddled him, making myself comfortable before drawing my long hair away from the side of my neck. “Ready?”

“Always,” was his gruff response.

We moved at the same time. I dipped my head, and he did the same. My fangs grazed his neck as his fingers danced over my Binding Mark. I licked his throat, delighting in his responding shiver. Inhaling, I breathed in his deep, crisp scent, and his nose danced over my skin. I trailed my hand down his wing, and he sucked in a breath.

“Luna,” he growled my name in that way that made my core tighten.

I breathed. “Bite me.”

He did.

As one, we bit.

As one, we drank.

And as one, we kept each other alive. Unfettered power ran through my veins, my shadows sang and danced, and strength flourished within me.

A rightness filled me, along with his blood.

Sebastian was mine, and I was his. He fit me perfectly, complementing me in ways I had never known possible.

We were two halves of the same whole.

Eventually, his hands slid down to my hips, and he released me. I withdrew my fangs, and his neck healed itself.

“Are you ready?” he asked, his grip on me firm as he held me steady.

“More than ready.” Deep in my soul, I knew this was our destiny. Perhaps it had been outlined by the gods long before either of us had been born. The hands of fate were at play in both our lives. No other vampires could walk in the sun as I could. No others cried tears of blood. And Sebastian was powerful. Doubly blessed with wings and shadows. Strong in every sense of the word.

How long had the prophecy existed? How many others had stumbled across it over the years and were waiting for us?

I’d look into it... later.

Sebastian lifted me from his lap, stealing a kiss as we stood. Power pulsed through me as I took a step back. Wisps of shadows unfurled from his palms, adding to the murky, midnight blackness. Between the spread wings and his

shadowy outline, it was as though he was carved from the night itself.
He was a warrior in every way, this vampire of mine.
And I loved him.

A Goddess of the Night
❧

SEBASTIAN

Would there ever be a day when Luna didn't surprise me? Every time I thought I understood her and could predict what she would do next, she proved me wrong. Watching her work in the laboratory with the witch the past few nights had been eye-opening.

Seeing Luna in her element, working on solving a problem, was everything I had ever thought it would be. She was intelligent, persistent, and stubborn.

I couldn't be prouder of her.

And now, she wanted to practice soul sharing.

A part of me—a rather large one—wasn't a fan of the idea. Though this had saved our lives, I couldn't help but feel a sense of trepidation when it came to using the Tether. It was old magic, and so many unknowns came with it.

But I would do anything for Luna, including this.

My wings stretched out, brushing against leaves covered in inky spots. My shadows did not echo my trepidation. They pulsed eagerly, pleased by this turn of events.

Luna moved gracefully to the other side of the clearing, standing about ten feet away from me, and released her wings. She was a goddess of the night in this moonlit clearing.

"Ready?" she asked.

In reply, I summoned a shadow to curl around her. A laugh burst from her lips, the sound bright and vibrant and reminiscent of spring flowers blooming. My body tightened at the sound, and I groaned.

Gods, I loved her.

“Let’s give it a try,” was my response.

Closing my eyes, I searched within myself for the Tether. Luna had described what the magic binding us felt like, but this was the first time I’d sought it out. Deep down, in the depths where I’d buried it, the urgent pulsing of the summons beckoned me beneath the tonic’s shroud. I avoided the muted call.

Instead, I searched for Luna’s presence. Even in this strange, dark place, I could sense her nearby. She waited for me like a ray of sunshine after a never-ending storm. Letting my shadows flow freely through me, I sought her.

Luna gasped. “Keep going,” she murmured. “I can feel you.”

Her words were all the encouragement I needed. I focused on the Binding Mark as energy coursed through me. It was dark and filled with shadows and the night itself, but it wasn’t out of place. Instead, it was *right*.

My magic thrashed and pulsed, eager to connect with her. She was more than my Tethered partner. She was the missing half of my soul, the light that illuminated my darkness. A lightness brushed up against my mind, as soft as a feather, and I shivered.

“Do you feel that?” I asked, keeping my eyes shut.

“Yes,” was her breathless, instantaneous reply.

The distance separating us was nothing. It was as though we were right next to each other. I heard her heart racing as though it were my own, and her every breath echoed through the silent clearing.

Inhaling deeply, I pushed my consciousness toward the dark magic tying us together. A scarlet light flickered. I tried to grab it, but then it... disappeared.

The connection vanished, leaving me with an empty hole inside.

Inhaling sharply, I opened my eyes. Luna remained in the same spot, her gaze locked on me as she frowned. “What happened?”

I ran my hand through my hair. Snowflakes were falling more steadily now, and a soft dusting of white covered us. “I don’t know. I saw the Tether and felt you, but when I reached for it, it vanished.”

Luna tapped her thigh. “That’s strange.” Her gaze dropped to the Binding Mark on her wrist, and she traced the lines of her Tether. “Maybe it only works if I do it?”

“I don’t know.” It wasn’t like there was anyone we could ask. Tethers were so uncommon they were practically myths. “Why don’t you give it a

try?”

Luna nodded, her eyes closing. This time, it was my turn to remain still as she searched deep within herself for the cord binding us. For a moment, I kept my eyes open and just stared at her.

Her wings stretched as far as possible, and shadows misted the air like an early-morning fog on a cold spring day. Those dark appendages twitched every time she inhaled. Between the wings and the moonlight, she was more ethereal and beautiful than usual.

And yet, coupled with the shadows swirling around her hands, her beauty was also a message to anyone who might want to hurt her. She was a powerful vampire, blessed by Isvana herself, and she would not be easily killed.

I found solace in that knowledge.

Shutting my eyes, I waited in the darkness as Luna searched for the Tether. My magic pulsed a familiar tune, but I did not feel her.

After a few minutes, she sighed. “Anything?”

“No.” I opened my eyes once more.

Luna’s lips tilted down, and she strode closer. “We must be missing something.” She held out her hand palm up between us. “Maybe we need to be touching?”

As if I needed a reason to be touching her. Reaching out, I took her hand, pulling her towards me. Her chest brushed against mine, and I lowered my forehead, pressing it against hers. Every part of my body tightened as we closed the distance between us. I may have stolen a kiss or three as we laced our hands together.

Shadows slipped from us both, intertwining and swirling in a soundless waltz. They beat with deep, dark energy, echoing the melody of my soul.

“Let’s try again,” I said, my voice far huskier than it had been moments before. “Both of us, this time.”

“Alright.” She sounded equally affected by our closeness, which delighted me to no end. “Remember, look for the red rope.”

Squeezing her fingers, I nodded and closed my eyes. Focusing on the Tether, I listened for my shadows’ familiar ballad. I dove deeper within myself, seeking that symphony of death and destruction as I searched for the elusive Tether.

It didn’t take long to realize something was different. Luna’s energy was all around. It was more than just feeling her emotions through the Binding

Mark. More than our connection.

This was new.

I couldn't see the Tether, but I felt her as though she had invaded every part of my body, from the air I breathed to the dark magic in my soul.

A flash of bright light appeared. A brilliant form bathed in sunlight moved towards me, pushing the shadows and darkness aside.

Sebastian? Even in this strange place of power, I recognized Luna immediately. Only, she wasn't speaking. Not really. The words were more of a feeling, a sense that filled me with a rightness as they danced through my mind.

Luna? I moved towards the sunlight. It didn't sear my flesh. It just... was.
Can you hear me?

A pause, then the light brightened. *Yes.*

That same light flickered like a candle in the wind, and then it disappeared. Moments later, an audible gasp filled my ears.

I opened my eyes and found Luna staring at me. She wasn't speaking, her mouth opening and closing like a dying fish. She appeared to be in shock. Squeezing her fingers, I tilted my head. "Did you... hear me?"

"I did. It wasn't just your voice, though." She pressed her head against my chest and hugged me tightly. Her wings brushed against mine, and warmth ran through me. "I *felt* you, Sebastian."

Her experience mirrored my own. We might not have soul shared again, but there was no doubt in my mind we had just forged a new connection.

My heart pounded. What did this mean, and how could we use it to fight against the queen?

"Can you still feel me?" I asked.

Luna released my hand and moved back. "I can." She eyed me. "Can you?"

"Yes." Even though we weren't touching, her essence danced over me.

"I want to try something."

Of course she did. Luna adored experiments.

I said, "Anything for you."

There were very few limits on what I wouldn't do for her. As long as she was safe, I was willing to go along with just about anything she wanted. Some might have called me soft, but there was a strength in being willing to do anything for one's partner.

Luna smiled and stepped away, drawing her wings into her. Shadows slid

from her hands, writhing around her in a cloak of darkness. She closed her eyes. Moments later, I felt her presence brush up against my mind.

Sebastian?

I jolted. Luna stood several feet in front of me, but it felt like we were touching. Phantom brushes, light at first but more insistent, trailed down my arm.

I hear you, darling, was my response.

Luna's eyes opened, and excitement flickered across her face. "It's not soul sharing, but it's... more."

"It is," I agreed.

"Do you know what this means, Sebastian?"

"What?"

"It means we get to conduct research." Her eyes twinkled, and she grinned. "Just think about it. There's so much to do! What exactly does this mean? What are the limitations? How far does the telepathy stretch?" Luna's voice grew louder with every word as pure delight coursed through the bond.

"It'll be—"

"Fun," she exclaimed, interrupting me. "I can't wait."

"What about the soul sharing?"

Luna shrugged. "There must be a reason it didn't work. Maybe we need to be in a more stressful, life-threatening situation. I'm sure we could simulate—"

"No." This was the moment when I put my foot down. "We're not going to test that theory. There's no way I will allow you to willingly put yourself in danger."

Her jaw clenched. "You won't allow it?"

I didn't back down. She had a right to be angry, but nothing she said would change my mind. Not about this. Her safety was paramount. "No, I won't. It's too dangerous, and too many things can go wrong."

"Sebastian—"

"Luna." I threw in my biggest argument. "Think about Marius. He needs you."

Her face fell. "That's true. But surely there are experiments we can perform that aren't dangerous. First, we can..."

She detailed her plans, and I listened carefully. When she explained what she wanted to do, my eyes were as wide as saucers.

We were going to be at this for hours.

I WAS RIGHT. Luna had us run one experiment after the other, testing every aspect of our newfound connection. When the night sky grew dusty with the impending sunrise, we had yet to soul share. It wasn't too disappointing, though, because speaking to each other mind-to-mind quickly became as easy as drawing breath.

The telepathy stretched the length of the Tether, but it was the strongest when we were touching. Apart, we could still communicate silently, but together, it was like we were *one*. When we touched, we had a direct line to each other's thoughts and emotions.

I hadn't thought feeling even closer to my wife was possible, yet these experiments had proven me wrong.

Ready to go back? I asked her through our new connection.

She threaded her hand through mine and gave her assent. I drew my shadows around me and moved us both through the Void, landing in the stone hallways outside our room in the abbey.

Keeping my hand around Luna, I held her close. *Did the voices in the Void bother you?*

She grimaced. *Not much. It was too brief of a journey for that.*

"Thank the gods, you're back," a voice behind us said.

Pushing Luna behind me, I turned as Genevieve approached, holding a letter.

The priestess handed me the missive. "This was delivered by messenger for you, Prince Sebastian."

Glancing at the letter, I smiled at Phyrra's handwriting. Thank Isvana, my spymaster must have fled Castle Sanguis when we left. I shuddered to think of what Queen Marguerite might have done to my allies if they remained. "Thank you, Genevieve."

"Of course." She glanced around, and her voice dropped. "That's not all, though."

Intrigued, I tilted my head. "Oh?"

Luna's hand brushed my arm, and she stepped beside me. "Do you have news for us?"

"Yes, but..." Genevieve's voice trailed off, and she frowned. "Why don't we continue this conversation in a more private location?"

That intrigue became full-blown curiosity, mixed with more than a bit of

dread. We agreed, following the priestess to a small, windowless study on the floor below ours. Books lined three of the four walls, and a single sphere hung from the ceiling, casting its dim light on the space.

Sitting at the only desk in the room, the priestess steepled her hands in front of her. “You asked me to look for a key.”

My breath caught in my throat, and my heart pounded. “I did.”

“I know how to make one.”

Death Was Never Far Off
❧

LUNA

Genevieve looked between us both, her black eyes shrewd. “Long ago, when Isvana first created the children of the moon, she was determined to bless them.”

The priestess made a religious sign across her chest, which Sebastian repeated. “Thank Isvana for her many blessings,” he murmured.

“I know of shadows and wings,” I said, glancing at the two of them. “What other blessings exist?”

“The Maker’s bond,” Genevieve replied. “Forged between vampires and those who gave them the gift of immortal life, it provides children of the moon with a connection that surpasses nearly everything else in the land.”

I nodded, listening intently. “That makes sense.”

Isvana seemed to be fond of her children, and her desire for them to be connected was logical. I was certain Sebastian and I had this bond as well, but the Tether between us was so strong it must have made the Maker’s bond seem like child’s play.

The priestess picked up a paperweight shaped like a bat, running her fingers over the carved edges. “Most of the time, people don’t want to break their bond with their Maker.”

Most of the time, Makers weren’t pure evil.

I didn’t realize I had spoken out loud until Sebastian’s hand tightened around mine. Genevieve looked up, her eyes widening as her mouth fell open. She blinked, bewilderment etched onto her countenance.

Shit.

My mouth always got me into trouble. Just once, I’d like to get through a conversation without saying something completely ridiculous and potentially

life-endangering. We needed Genevieve's help. I didn't want to scare her away from helping us.

After a moment, the priestess cleared her throat. "I suppose that would make things... difficult."

She did an admirable job of not speaking ill of her queen, despite the fact that the Second Order of Isvana's Chosen was clearly unhappy with her. They were harboring us, after all. It seemed Genevieve was smarter than me because my mouth seemed to know no limits.

Sebastian gave me a warning look, and his voice rang through my mind. *Really?*

I widened my eyes. *It wasn't on purpose.*

He scoffed. *It's never on purpose with you, Luna.*

Turning back to the priestess, Sebastian spoke out loud. "The bond needs to be broken. For reasons that are best left unsaid for your safety, I need to be free of it."

A long moment passed as the priestess studied us. "I understand."

Her eyes flickered, and for a moment, I thought perhaps she did understand. What had the priestess seen throughout her life? What was her own Maker like? I had many questions, but instead, I asked, "What do we have to do?"

Genevieve put down the paperweight. "Forging a key will not be easy."

"That's not exactly surprising." Everything in Eleyta was difficult. It was the nature of life in this frozen kingdom. "Let me guess; it'll be dangerous, too?"

She nodded. "Yes."

Again, not a surprise.

"So making a key is a difficult, dangerous task. Sounds about right." Sebastian sounded as resigned as I felt. "Is there anything else we need to know?"

"There is also the matter of severing the bond." The priestess placed her hands flat on the desk. "The consequences of such an act are... unknown."

The tone of her voice was dark, and my heart sped up. "What do you mean?"

She sighed. "Breaking a Maker's bond is not typical. In the history of vampire kind, very few have attempted such a thing."

"That's shocking," I muttered.

Vampires, as a whole, were as terrible as they were beautiful. And they

were incredibly, awfully, horribly beautiful. Each one was too perfect, too pretty, too smooth to be anything other than immortal, goddess-blessed beings.

Other than a few exceptions—Sebastian, Phyrra, and the people of Rivin—most of the children of the moon I’d met were less-than-delightful. I would have thought more people would want to break their bonds, not less.

Although maybe if you were a monster, it didn’t bother you to be tied to one as well.

Genevieve ignored my interjection, continuing, “If the Maker’s bond is severed incorrectly, the younger vampire risks death.”

My stomach formed a knot, and the Binding Mark pulsed with deep emotions. There were too many for me to decipher, but unease filled me. Shadows darkened the room, flooding out of Sebastian, and a haunted look filled his eyes.

Death was never far off in Eleyta. It had been looming since my wedding night, waiting around the next corner like an unwanted friend. Now, it was closer than ever.

We don’t have a choice, Sebastian murmured in my mind. *The bond needs to break.*

I know, but...

Even through our mental connection, I couldn’t continue this train of thought.

If he died, I would break. Assuming the severing of the Tether didn’t kill me first, my heart would shatter into a million pieces.

Even now, my lungs tightened, and breathing was difficult as I thought about a world without Sebastian. It would be filled with death, darkness, and an endless night with no relief.

How could I ever live without him? He was my other half.

Stop.

I gripped the armrest, forcing myself to take a deep breath. I couldn’t continue down this train of thought. It wouldn’t do either of us any good.

Instead, I asked, “What do we need to do to ensure the bond is correctly severed?”

That was the most important thing. I couldn’t think about anything else. Sebastian would survive this. He had to. I refused to consider the alternatives any further.

The priestess hesitated. “There is an ancient ritual.” She rubbed her

temples. “I can do it with the help of a trusted witch, but even so, it will be difficult.”

“And this is his best chance?” I confirmed. “There’s no other way to break the bond?”

Genevieve shook her head. “The tonic will mute the call, but the ritual is the only way to sever the bond completely.”

Then it needed to be done.

What do you think? Sebastian asked through our new connection, this thumb sweeping back and forth across my hand.

I want you to be free, I answered immediately. More than anything else, I wanted every single tie we had to Queen Marguerite gone.

Sebastian smiled, pressing a kiss to the back of my hand. “We’ll do it,” he said out loud.

“Alright.” Genevieve stood, retrieving a fresh piece of parchment and a quill before reclaiming her seat. “Three items are required to break the bond. The first is a feather from a sunfire owl, the second is blood from a living white wolf, and the third is a red moonstone.”

“We can get those,” I said with more confidence than I felt. Maybe if I pretended long enough, the false confidence would become real.

“The stone itself isn’t powerful enough. It needs to be touched by the light of the midday sun.” Genevieve frowned, tapping the paper. “You’ll need to find someone you trust...”

Sebastian shared a look with me before nodding. “We will ensure it happens.”

My Sunwalking was only known to the two of us, and we were going to do everything in our power to keep it that way.

Genevieve smiled. “Good. Once you have collected the items and the moonstone has been blessed, we can perform the ritual.”

And Sebastian would be free from the queen.

Thank the gods.



“HOW LONG WILL YOU BE GONE?” Odette asked from the other side of the large table in the laboratory. Sebastian was in the hallway, testing the length of the Tether. The smell wasn’t as bad as yesterday, but he still found it

insufferable.

“Hopefully, no longer than two days.” I ran my finger over the plant, tracing the ridges in the leaves. It had nearly doubled in size overnight. If I hadn’t known it was goddess-blessed, this abnormal growth would have been the proof we needed. “We have a general idea where we’re going.”

Genevieve had given us vague descriptions of where we could find the three items, but the exact locations were unknown.

Odette smiled. “I’ll keep an eye on things here and ensure things are running smoothly.” She eyed the potion, where the black mixture bubbled away. “It seems to be working.”

Something was definitely happening. I was too much of a scientist to put all my faith in an untested experiment, but even I couldn’t tamp down the hope stirring within me.

“When we return, it should be time to test it out,” I said.

“In the meantime, I’ll see what I can do about this plant.” Odette chewed on her lip. “It’s going to need a bigger pot.”

Sebastian’s presence brushed across my mind, a soothing touch against my mental barriers. It was a gentle caress but enough to remind me that time was short.

We had to go.

I said as much to Odette, adding, “You’ll keep an eye on my brother?”

I hated leaving Marius here while he was like this, but what else could we do? He couldn’t come with us in his current state.

The witch nodded. “Of course.”

Odette and I hadn’t known each other long, but I felt a kinship with her. There was a softness about the red-headed scientist that I enjoyed, and she reminded me of Kinthani.

Maybe one day, we would be true friends.

If Sebastian and I survived this.

My thoughts became morose, and grief for my family edged out of the box where I’d carefully placed it. It was always present, always waiting to take me by surprise.

I could not succumb to it. Not right now.

A hand landed on my hip, drawing me out of the darkness. “We have to go, Luna,” Sebastian said softly, his other hand covering his nose. It was more than a little funny that this dangerous prince found something as minute as an offensive smell so troublesome.

Smiling up at him, I nodded. "Alright."

Picking up my satchel from the table, I slipped in three vials of the summons-muting tonic. We were bringing an extra tonic with us, just in case. The last thing we needed was for the summons to return in full force when we were away from Lightriver Abbey.

In the back of my mind, Keven's prophecy was growing louder by the day. Soon, the moon would turn red, and then everything would come to pass.

We needed to break the bond before then.

A SHORT WHILE LATER, having bid farewell to Genevieve and a still-sleeping Marius, Sebastian and I shadowed to the courtyard outside the abbey. We both wore heavy fur-lined cloaks that had been gifted to us by the priestesses, along with boots that ran up to our knees. Mittens covered our hands, and Sebastian even wore a scarf.

When he put that on, I knew this would not be a pleasant trip.

Letting my wings unfurl, my back adjusted to their weight as I eyed Sebastian. "Where, exactly, does one find a sunfire owl?"

Would it be too much to ask for a warm location? Maybe these owls lived near water and enjoyed the sunlight. I didn't need to go to the beach, but I would give almost anything to get out of the snow, even for a short while. Their name suggested they, like me, at least enjoyed some heat.

As if he knew where my thoughts had gone, he smirked. "They're notorious for building their nests on the tallest peaks of the highest mountains. Unlike most owls that create their homes in holes, sunfire owls keep generational nests largely made of ice."

So much for a trip to the beach.

"And I am assuming that these mountains are cold?" With my hopes thoroughly quashed, I didn't even try to keep the displeasure out of my voice.

He snorted. "Yes, darling. Very."

Hence the scarf. "Delightful," I grumbled.

He wrapped an arm around my shoulder, drawing me in for a kiss. "You'll be fine, darling. The flight will keep you warm."

"A few hours, right?"

“Give or take. It may be a little longer, depending on the weather.”

Sighing, I mentally prepared myself for this journey. One of these days, I would take a book and sit outside in the sun for hours. If that ended up being the only benefit of being the Sunwalker, it would be worth it.

I had never known how much I valued the sun’s warmth until moving to the land of vampires had stolen it from me. Most people valued the sun for its light, but the warming benefits of its rays were vastly underrated, in my opinion. As if laughing at me, a frigid gust of wind blew by. Even for Eleyta, it was cold tonight.

Sebastian sucked in a breath. “A storm is coming.”

My brows furrowed, and I looked up. “The stars are out.” I pointed to the clear night sky. “There isn’t a single cloud in sight.”

He shook his head. “It’s coming.”

Well, that was ominous. As if we didn’t have enough to deal with.

Glowering, I said, “Fantastic.”

A low chuckle rumbled through Sebastian. I wasn’t sure why he was in such a good mood, but it was nice to see him like this. His wings flapped, and he rose in the air. I quickly followed suit, and soon, the two of us flew side-by-side.

I had to admit that from up high, Eleyta’s beauty was breathtaking. The snow-covered mountains and endless forests were stunning. It never ceased to amaze me that such a beautiful land could be home to bloodthirsty, violent people.

We were only a few minutes into the flight when Sebastian’s wings slowed. He flew next to me. “Something’s wrong,” he said, turning in a slow circle. “The darkness is spreading.”

The trees were darker, the green of the pines less vibrant. Shades of gray and black tinged everything in sight as if something had drained the land of all its color.

I shuddered. What did it mean?

Moving faster than before, he turned and flew towards a mountain range in the distance. Urgency pulsed through the bond. *Hurry, Luna. I have a bad feeling about this.*

So did I.

Stories and Sunfire Owls
❧

SEBASTIAN

Dread coiled low in my stomach, forming a knot so thick I could barely breathe. With every beat of my wings, as I guided us to the sunfire owl's nest, the knot grew until it was a living, writhing mass. Underneath it all, the queen's summons was a quiet, persistent hum. I hadn't told Luna I could feel the call again—I didn't want to worry her—but it was there, watching and waiting for the perfect moment to pounce. Thank Isvana, the tonic still numbed the majority of the pain.

Two more days. That was all we needed. Once we collected these items, we could break this bond once and for all.

The frigid air carried shards of ice, promising a blizzard in the near future. It was certain to turn this already bad flight into a dangerous one.

I hadn't flown over this part of Eleyta in centuries. Other than the Second Order of Isvana's Chosen Ones, a few human villages were scattered throughout the area, but that was all. This was an inhospitable place, even for vampires.

Luna was a steady force beside me. She'd taken to flying so well, and it was as though she'd been born with wings. I stole a glance at her, unable to help myself.

She caught my eye, her cheeks flushing. "What are you thinking about?"

"You," I admitted, unashamed of the direction of my thoughts. "Us."

A radiant grin stretched across her features as she spun in the air. "I really like flying with you, Sebastian."

"Me too." This was one of my favorite activities, and it made me happier than I could ever express that Luna enjoyed it, too. Sharing this part of my life with her was sacred and special.

A shadow slipped from Luna's palm, and it brushed up against me.

I glanced at her; my brow raised in question.

"We're going to be flying for a while, right?" she asked.

The winds had died down to a gentle breeze, and with my vampiric hearing, I had no trouble hearing her.

"At least an hour or two." I tilted my head. "Why?"

Luna drew her lip through her fangs in a very distracting manner. "I was hoping... Will you tell me about Athena?"

My wings faltered, and for one long moment, my entire world stopped. My lungs ceased working. My heart stopped beating. Even my eyes stopped seeing. All happiness escaped me, leaving me dry and empty.

"Athena?" I breathed, certain I had misheard. I must have misheard. Had the winds picked back up? Did something damage my hearing?

There was no way she would ask me to talk about this. I didn't know if I could. Just saying her name, forming those all-too-familiar syllables, was like eating silver-laced ash.

Luna drew in a sharp breath. "The other night, when you passed out after the Fledgling attack, you were talking about her."

"What?" I didn't remember any of that.

"You were thrashing. The pain of the summons was so much, and then... you said her name."

A flicker of pain and something else went through the Binding Mark, and my chest squeezed. "Luna, I didn't—"

"It's alright, Sebastian." She moved, flying right in front of me. "I know you had a life before me. You lived for over three centuries, for Isvana's sake. I would never hold that against you. I just... I want to know you. I want to understand."

Athena.

A thick lump rose in my throat, and I swallowed around it as my vision blurred. I never talked about her. Not really. Why would I willingly bring up the most painful moment of my past?

And yet, this wasn't just anyone asking me. This was Luna. I would give her anything... including this. If talking about Athena broke my heart, I would offer the fragments to Luna and hope she would glue me back together again.

Rubbing my fist over my aching chest, I exhaled. "The first time we met was at the Festival of the Autumn Moon. That night, the skies were clear, and

the full moon cast an ethereal glow over the forests.”

Even now, I could see it perfectly in my mind’s eye.

“Like tonight,” Luna said.

I nodded. “Just like that.”

Staring straight ahead, I led us toward the mountains as we flew. “I was young, having not even seen my first century come and go, and eager to make a name for myself as the prince. I had just returned from one of Queen Marguerite’s errands, and for the first time, I was able to attend the festival. I made my way through the trees, pushing aside snow-covered boughs until the moonlit clearing came into view. Fiddles played, vampires danced, Faerie Wine flowed freely, and there were even some curious humans who’d made their way to the celebrations.”

Luna made a sound in the back of her throat. “It sounds... nice.”

“It was,” I said. Damn the hoarseness of my voice.

My life would have been so different if I’d never attended the festival. It was too late for that now, though. Too late for regrets. Too late for Athena. If we’d never met, she could have lived out her mortal life and been happy.

But we did meet. And because of that, I brought her to Castle Sanguis.

And she died.

I cleared my throat. “The moment I stepped into the clearing, I saw her.”

“Athena?”

“Yes.” My voice cracked, and I coughed. “Her blonde hair caught the moonlight as she twirled in the middle of the clearing, her fur-lined skirt spinning around her as she danced without a partner. She was... smiling. It had been so long since I’d seen anyone truly happy that it took me by surprise.”

Pausing to compose myself, I stared straight ahead. The distant peaks were closer now... but not close enough to get me out of this heart-wrenching conversation.

“Even then, Luna, I was not a good person.” I’d lost my claim to that the moment I killed half the army on the night of my Making.

She hitched a breath. “Sebastian—”

“No, it’s true. At that time, I was already a creature of death, forged by the queen and used at her will.” I shook my head. “It is what it is. I’m a killer. I was then and still am.”

“You’re more than that,” Luna whispered. “So much more.”

“I’m a creature of death, darling.” Resignation filled my voice. “The

queen made me into a weapon, and I let her use me. But Athena... the moment I saw her, those blue eyes met mine, and she smiled. No one ever smiled at me. Just her, and now... you.”

A sound of heartbreak escaped Luna’s lips. “I’m sorry, Sebastian.”

So was I. “That night, Athena and I danced with each other and no one else. She told me about her work as a seamstress in one of the nearby villages, and I listened. She didn’t seem to mind me not talking much about what I did, and she spoke enough for us both.”

Another lump of emotion grew in my throat, but I pushed past it. The sooner I finished this story, the better.

“Athena and I met whenever I wasn’t working over the course of the next few years. We grew closer. She was always smiling and laughing, and with her, I felt... lighter. Then one day, she asked me if I wanted to visit the abbey where she’d grown up.”

Luna said, “Shadowmere Abbey, right?”

“Yes.”

Had I known Athena would be dead mere days later, I would have taken more care during that visit. I would have paid more attention. Made more time for her. I would have done many things if I’d been able to See the future, but one thing was certain: I would have never brought Athena to Castle Sanguis.

Luna seemed to realize I was out of words. We were silent for a long time, and the steady beat of our wings was a backdrop to the torrents of my grief.

How was it possible that two centuries later, I still felt the pain of Athena’s death?

It had been easier to deal with this when I’d been numb. When I hadn’t let emotions rule me, I was able to lock up my pain and ignore it. In that, at least, the queen was correct.

But if I were still numb, I wouldn’t care for Luna. I wouldn’t know the joy of having someone who filled me so completely. I wouldn’t know what it was like to have a partner who was the missing piece of my heart.

When the mountains were so near enough that I could make out the rough edges of the shale, I sent a wisp of shadow to curl around Luna.

“Athena would have liked you,” I murmured. “I think you would have been friends.”

“I think so, too.” Luna paused, banking as a brisk gale came at us both.

The wind current was cold, confirming my earlier suspicions about a coming storm.

A hand brushed up against mine. "I'm sorry, Sebastian."

So was I—more than I could ever put into words.

When I was growing up, I'd been with a few villagers, but I'd never had anything serious. Athena had been my first taste at something more. Something deeper. Even now, her memory was bittersweet. Had she not died at the queen's hands, we probably would have drifted apart over the years. She never wanted to Bind herself to me or be Made, so eventually, she would have died. In that way, we were always doomed to fail.

But Luna...

What we had was different. Our love was an all-consuming, blazing, burning inferno that encompassed my entire being.

We continued towards our destination in silence as the night wore on. Clouds gathered on the horizon, blocking the moon.

A few hours into our trek, the air grew so cold that it bothered even me. I adjusted the scarf around my neck.

"Sebastian?" A hint of worry entered Luna's voice. "Are we close?"

"We should be." I searched the numerous mountain peaks for the signature flash of orange that belonged to the sunfire owl, but I didn't see anything.

"Oh." She blew out a breath. "Okay."

I glanced at her, and my eyes widened. Her wings weren't beating as fast as they should be, and her teeth were chattering. I wasn't certain why Luna got so much colder than me—maybe her Sunwalker blood set her apart—but this wouldn't do. Not knowing how much longer we'd have to fly before finding the owl, I made a split-second decision.

I veered towards the nearest mountain. The Tether gave a twinge of warning, but it stopped when Luna followed me. Snow billowed up in a white cloud when my feet made contact with the mountain. I spun around, grabbing Luna as she came straight at me.

Waiting until her feet were steady on the admittedly small mountain peak, I spread my wings behind me for balance and pulled off my scarf.

"Drink, Luna." I exposed my neck. "My blood will warm you, and then we can continue."

Her eyes widened, but she didn't protest as she came close and bared her fangs. They pierced my neck a moment later, and I frowned.

How long had she been hungry? I should have been paying attention and noticed the first moment her wings faltered. Instead, I'd been lost in recollections of the past.

When Luna was finished, her shivers had subsided. Still, I took her face in my hands and studied her. "You should have told me you were hungry," I said. "If something were to happen... You need to tell me."

How could I protect her otherwise?

Her eyes searched mine, and she nodded. "Okay. I will."

Kissing her gently, I looped my arm beneath her thighs and scooped her up. Her bag bumped into her hip, and she wrapped her arms around it. "Sebastian, what are you doing?"

I nuzzled her forehead. "Put your wings away, darling. Let me carry you."

This time, I wouldn't let anything distract me. Not to mention the added bonus that I could feel everything when she was in my arms, and I knew she was safe.

A heartbeat passed before Luna nodded. "Alright."

Her wings disappeared in a flurry of shadows, and she sighed contentedly, snuggling against me. Her head rested against my chest, and I hugged her close. Stealing one final kiss, I launched into the skies once more.

The stars were gone. Grey, ominous clouds covered the moon, and we flew in complete darkness. Deep within my soul, the queen's call drummed a steady, muted beat.

We couldn't break this bond fast enough.

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG before Luna was shivering again. My own blood was chilled as the temperature grew colder by the minute. Neither of us spoke as I navigated the increasingly tight spaces between mountains, searching for a flash of orange.

Snow had begun falling, leisurely at first, but now much harder, and the wind was picking up.

Are you alright, Luna? I asked through our bond.

She trembled in my arms, her breath coming out in puffs of white mist. *Just a little cold.*

Vampires weren't supposed to feel the cold, at least not like this. But it had long since been established that my wife was not normal. She'd been special as a human, and as a vampire, she was truly incredible. It made me worry for her, though, especially in moments like this.

Brushing my lips over her forehead, I held her tight. *Hold on.*

Flapping my wings as hard as they could, I pushed myself to fly faster. The owl was close; I was certain of it.

We just had to find it.

Another few minutes passed before my breath caught in my throat. Orange flashed, and I exhaled. Thank the gods. Relief flooded through me. "I see it. It's not far."

Slowing down, I approached with care. The last thing we needed to do was spook the owl.

Luna shifted in my arms, and excitement flashed through the Binding Mark. "It's beautiful."

I glanced at Luna. Her lips were pale, her fangs poked out, and her cheeks were flushed. Her dark hair escaped its braid, adding a wildness to her that I adored.

I kissed her. "You are."

She grinned, her cheeks reddening further. I drew shadows around us both, hiding us from sight.

The sunfire owl's eyes were wide as it looked out from its perch in the icy nest. The reason for its name was evident: the bird's feathers were like iridescent flames, and its eyes were brilliant burning orbs of fire. Larger than a regular owl, this one was easily half my size. Between its pointed beak and sharp talons, it wasn't difficult to understand why sunfire owls were natural predators.

And we required one of its feathers.

A tiny cry filled the air as I studied the owl, planning my approach. My eyes widened as a small owl, barely the size of my hand, popped its head out of the nest.

Damn it all.

The youngling's presence complicated matters. Sunfire owls were fiercely territorial, willing to do anything to protect their young. I understood where they were coming from. Luna wasn't my child, but I would do anything for her.

Assuming the sunfire owl felt the same way, I would have to be

extremely careful.

Flying back a bit, I kept the shadows wrapped around us both. Speaking through our bond so as not to spook the owls, I said, *Take out your wings, Princess.*

Luna did as I asked, her brows furrowing in confusion. *What's wrong?*

I explained my plan, and Luna's eyes grew incrementally larger. *That doesn't sound safe, Sebastian.*

She was right. But the fact remained that this was our only hope, and we needed this feather. Safety mattered little right now. This was my best option for getting it and keeping Luna safe, so I would do it.

My wife didn't see it like that, though. She opened her mouth to protest, but I shook my head, hoping she could read the seriousness in my expression.

Stay here, I ordered her through our bond. *I'll get the feather.*

Before Luna could say anything else, I let her go. Her wings flapped, keeping her in the air, and I flew towards the owl. Stopping a few feet from the nest, I wrapped my shadows tightly around me and studied my prey. The bird was tense, its eyes as wide as they could go as it searched the night sky.

I was sure the owl sensed my presence, but it could not see me through the veil of my shadows. Reaching out slowly, I kept my movements calm and steady. Luna's worry came through the Binding Mark, but I couldn't focus on that right now.

One feather.

That was all we needed.

In the space of a heartbeat, my fingers closed around a silken feather. Saying a quick prayer to the moon goddess, I pulled out my prize in one quick motion.

The sunfire owl screeched. The sound was shrill and sliced through the silence. One would've thought I'd cut off its wing and not just stolen a single feather. The baby squawked, and I tightened my grip around my prize. I turned to fly away, but before I could escape, the owl flew towards me in a fury, attacking the night blindly.

Shit.

"Sebastian!" Luna cried out, her wings flapping.

I drew on my shadows to disappear into the Void, but I wasn't fast enough. The owl's blind attack landed, and a talon pierced my shoulder. Pain rippled through my body, and I yelled. Blood poured from the wound. I shook the owl loose.

The moment its claws were out of me, I shadowed over to Luna.

“Take my hand,” I yelled, the need for secrecy gone. My arm hurt as though the talons were still in there, and I could barely breathe through the pain.

The moment her fingers landed in mine, I pulled us through the Void.

The Red Moon Will Rise
❧

LUNA

We were barely in the Void long enough for the world to turn dark, let alone for the voices to return. The shadows spit us out on a mountaintop not far from the sunfire owl's nest.

My bag slammed against my hip. I stumbled, flaring my wings behind me in an effort to regain my balance. Faint, angry calls from the owl filled the air, but it hadn't found us. Yet.

Snow fell in a thick curtain all around, and the air was so cold I couldn't feel my fingers. To make matters worse—as if they weren't already bad enough—dawn was coming. We didn't have long before Sebastian needed to be out of the sun.

"I can't go much... farther," he gritted out through clenched teeth. The feather fluttered in his good hand, but his tunic was dark, and the scent of blood filled the air.

My heart raced, and my palms grew sweaty. Sebastian needed help. Panic edged at my mind, pushing and prodding, seeking a way in.

Not for the first time, I wished I was better trained for these circumstances. I wished I was more of a warrior. Still, I had some instincts. Sebastian needed to get out of the sun's path. Then, I would have to clean his wound. Who knew what kind of dirt and debris the sunfire owl had on its talons?

Having formed the semblance of a plan, I scanned the area and searched for any sign of shelter through the blistering snow. We were in the middle of nowhere, even for Eleyta, but I wouldn't give up.

There.

A small cave was tucked into the side of the next mountain. It wasn't

much, barely more than an overhang, but we'd make it work. I flapped my wings and wrapped my arms around him.

He swayed. His face was far too pale. His tunic was too wet. He'd already lost so much blood. How much of the vital substance could a vampire part with before it was too late?

"Hold on, Sebastian," I told him.

"No." His eyes flashed with alarm. "I'm too heavy, Luna."

"Probably." But I was still going to do this. There wasn't any time for doubt.

The wind swallowed his continued protests. I hugged him close, urging my wings to move. My back burned, and it took a lot of effort to lift us both off the ground, but eventually, we were in the air.

To say Sebastian was heavy would be an understatement. It turned out that spending most of my time reading books did not build up an extraordinary amount of muscle. Even as a vampire, carrying him was far more strenuous than anything I'd ever done.

Flying us to the cave took far more energy than it should have, but I did it. Sebastian stumbled away from me the moment we landed, sliding down the wall into the shadows' safe embrace. Dropping my satchel, I fell to my knees and ripped open his shirt.

He winced. "I didn't realize you were so eager to see me without my clothes, darling."

His words lost much of their impact as his face paled and more blood oozed out of the wound. I inched closer to him, hissing as I took in the dirt caked in his flesh.

"I'm sorry." I looked away, digging through my bag. "This is probably going to hurt."

Odette had given me a few extra things for our journey, including a small vial of pure alcohol. Just in case, she'd said.

Thank the gods she'd had the foresight to give it to us. I didn't know if vampires could succumb to infections, but I wasn't going to take any chances.

Sebastian clenched his jaw in preparation. "Do it, Luna."

I hated that this would hurt him. *I* would hurt him. But it needed to be done.

I twisted off the cork, dropping it beside me. The scent of burning alcohol hit my nose, and my nose twitched. With one hand, I pulled the tunic away

from his shoulder.

“I’m sorry.” I squeezed my eyes shut and dumped the contents of the bottle on his skin. In hindsight, I probably should have watched what I was doing, but I couldn’t bear to see him in pain. He sucked in a sharp breath when the alcohol hit his skin, and burning agony came through the Binding Mark.

Opening my eyes, I pulled a clean handkerchief from the satchel and dabbed at the wound. Blood and dirt came away slowly, exposing deep, red gashes that ran down his shoulder. I could have sworn I saw the deep red of muscles, the sunfire owl having cut through several layers of flesh.

Sebastian didn’t speak as I took care of him, but I felt his gaze on me, tracking my movements.

When I was certain the wound was as clean as our environment would allow, I sat back on my haunches and took the feather from him. I placed it in the bag, along with the cork, and then wrapped the empty vial in a scarf to keep it safe. We’d brought one for the wolf’s blood, but I wasn’t taking any chances. If the first broke, we’d need to use this one instead. Better safe than sorry.

Moving next to Sebastian, I pulled off my cloak and swept my hair away from my neck.

“Feed,” I said. “You need it.”

His black eyes met mine, and he lifted a hand, brushing it over my throat. Tingles ran over me everywhere where he touched. “You’re sure you feel strong enough?”

This vampire. He was wounded, and he was checking to see if *I* was alright?

“I’m fine, Sebastian. Bite me. Please.”

He leaned in. His fangs grazed over my neck, and I shivered.

I love you, he whispered in my mind.

I returned the sentiment, and then, he bit me. I gasped, my eyes falling closed and my head resting against the stones as he drank.

There was nothing like this in the entire world. Nothing else in this world came close to the way Sebastian made me feel. We were two parts of the same whole.

Nothing could come between us. Nothing could pull us apart. Nothing else even mattered. Not the howling wind or the snow or the quest.

Not even the queen.

When he pulled away and licked my neck, my skin prickled as it stitched itself back together.

“Let me see your shoulder,” I requested.

Sebastian’s movements were fluid as he shifted, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Thank the gods, my blood worked quickly in his system. Vampiric healing was unlike anything I’d ever seen. Already, the harsh lines of the owl’s talons were fading.

Scooping up a handful of snow, I wiped away the last bit of blood until only a few faint pink lines remained. Soon, even those disappeared, leaving flawless skin behind.

“There.” I kissed his shoulder. “Good as new.” Except for his tunic, which was, unfortunately, in a rather sad state.

He smiled, his hands landing on my hips. He drew me onto his lap and shuffled us as far back from the cave entrance as we could go. “Thank you, Luna.”

I brushed my lips against his. “Anytime.”

There wasn’t anything I wouldn’t do for him.

We remained against the stones, protected by the shadows, as the hours wore on. To say the sun rose would be inaccurate because the snowfall was so heavy the light simply illuminated the blizzard outside.

The day slipped by in a flurry of naps and kisses, interspersed with quiet conversations about everything and nothing. I woke several times to fleeting touches and the graze of fangs against my flesh. Using our clothes as blankets, we lay on the frigid shale. I rested my head on Sebastian’s bare chest, tracing designs on his skin as he told me story after story about his adventures in Eleyta.

Sebastian was my life. My world. Every breath I took, every word I spoke, everything I did was for him.

He was mine.

WHEN THE MOON ROSE, Sebastian took one of the summons-muting tonics. It was still snowing, and we had gotten dressed a few minutes ago. As much as I wanted to enjoy the quiet privacy this cave had unexpectedly afforded us, we couldn’t remain here forever. We had the feather, but it was only one of

the three ingredients required to break the bond.

“Ready?” Sebastian asked. “The wolves live in the White Forest. We’ll have to shadow there.”

Was I ready? No. But could one ever truly be prepared to hunt an elusive wolf intending to collect their blood? I thought not.

“Let’s get this over with,” I said, avoiding the question of preparedness entirely.

Sebastian nodded, holding out his arms in invitation. I stepped into his embrace, and he hugged me. His shadows swarmed out of him, surrounding us both.

“Hold on,” he said.

The darkness of the Void was on us in an instant. Even with my vampiric sight, I couldn’t see a single thing. It was like someone had painted black over my eyelids.

And the voices.

They were back. Louder, this time. More urgent.

Goosebumps ran up and down my arms as we traveled through this unearthly place. I pressed my free hand against my ear, the other gripping Sebastian tightly, but it did nothing to drown out the persistent voices.

“The Sunwalker is here.”

“The harbinger is born. Light and dark converge.”

“The red moon will soon rise.”

“Soon,” they echoed eerily, hissing like snakes. “Sooooonnnn.”

Underneath it all, a new voice joined the others. Deeper than the rest, it was louder and distinctly masculine. “The Queen of Shadows is sseeearrrchhhing for youuuu,” the mysterious voice whispered. “If sssshe killssss you, you’ll be trapped here with ussss. Don’t let her...”

Their voices died off as the darkness faded away.

The shadows dropped us in the middle of a blizzard. The light of the moon, though it was dim, was still a shock to my eyes after the Void. I winced as my vision adjusted, but I couldn’t move. I was frozen in place, and cold sweat beaded on my forehead.

My heart raced, trying to escape my chest. My lungs were tight. I couldn’t breathe. Did vampires need to breathe? I wasn’t sure, but this wasn’t the moment to test it.

Sebastian turned, his worried gaze searching mine. “Luna? What’s wrong?”

The new voice's warning echoed in my mind. *The Queen of Shadows is searching for you.*

My mouth opened and closed as I tried—and failed—to find words. In the end, all I could do was shake my head.

Paralyzing fear immobilized me. The raging storm was nothing compared to the one in my heart.

Queen Marguerite's death could not come fast enough.

Lies and Excuses
❧

MARGUERITE

The wind howled like a screaming mortal as I flew through the snowy night. Brighton was in my sights, the village roofs peeking out of the snow like naughty children hiding behind curtains from their parents. It didn't work for the children, and it wouldn't work for this village, either.

Usually, I moved through the shadows, not bothering to show myself to my people.

Usually, my people understood who was in charge.

That was not the case tonight.

My jaw clenched when I thought of the circumstances that had brought me out of Castle Sanguis. Tonight, my people needed to remember why *I* was the queen. My army needed to know *I* was the ruler of this nation and the one they fought for.

Giving up was never an option, and losses like the ones they'd just suffered were inexcusable.

The buildings serving as army barracks for my human soldiers came into view, and my lips twitched as the cobblestone courtyard rapidly grew near. It had been too long since I'd been flying. Too long since the wind had kissed my wings.

I would do this more often, I promised myself.

Once I dealt with *her*.

For the hundredth time that night, I summoned Sebastian and pulled on the bond that tied us together. He was ignoring me. Anger was a churning, writhing mass in me. Somehow, he was withstanding my call.

All it did was make me hate the bitch he'd married even more.

I caressed the ruby. I couldn't wait to spill her blood. Cackling, I landed

in the empty square. At least I had this to distract me.

I hadn't even taken a step before a vampire ran out between two buildings. General Dubois paled when she saw me, her golden skin turning nearly as light as mine, but she did not slow until she arrived before me.

Dropping into a deep curtsy as though we were in my court, the general stared at the ground. "M-m-my Queen," she said, her voice shaking. "We were not expecting you."

I snapped my wings together, the sound echoing through the night. "No, I'm well aware this visit is a surprise." My tone was icy, and I did nothing to temper the violence simmering beneath the surface of my words.

The general gulped, her form trembling as she remained in a curtsy. "H-h-have you come to survey the troops?"

A wisp of shadow left my palm, wrapping itself around the general's throat. It pulled her upright and tightened. The vampire's eyes bulged, and she stood still.

"I have not come all this way for a leisurely tour, Ophelia," I hissed. "Do I seem like someone who would enjoy something like that?"

"N-n-no, Your Majesty."

"Exactly." I fanned my wings out behind me, freeing my shadows. They poured out of me, painting the midnight sky in darkness and snuffing out the starlight.

Ophelia's bottom lip trembled at the sight of them.

Gods, she was weak. Isvana had only blessed her with shadows, and it showed. I had little time for vampires like her in my kingdom. Part of me wanted to kill her now, but I still needed her.

Reining in my impulse to rip off her head, I snapped, "I am here because of your failure. Gather the troops." I withdrew the shadow-noose, confident she got the message. "Now."

Ophelia ran off in a blur, and I straightened a wrinkle in my gown.

Yes.

I definitely needed to do this more often.

HUMAN SOLDIERS KNEELED in rows on the snow-covered cobblestones. Most of them were visibly injured, and all of them were feeble mortals. Their teeth

chattered, and their hands ran up and down their arms, rubbing as vigorously as they could while waiting.

They weren't my concern. Not yet.

Far more frustrating than the mortals were the ten vampires who stood in front of them, bearing my insignia on their clothes.

My soldiers. My vampires. My *failures*.

Waving my hand, I constructed a ward of shadows around the eleven of us. The humans could still see in, but they couldn't hear anything. This conversation wasn't for them.

I walked in front of the vampires, my heels clicking on the cobblestones. They all stood ramrod straight, staring past me into the distance.

As if good posture would save them now. It was too late for that. There was no room for a lack of success in my court.

"Tell me, why was I sent word the Dragon Queen's army has crossed the Koln Mountains?" My words rang through the privacy bubble, but none of them spoke.

A second went by. Two. Ten.

My patience snapped. I opened my palm. A shadow-whip formed in my hands. Curving my fingers around the handle, I asked my question again.

Still, there was no response.

I brought the weapon down. The whip cracked in the air before lashing across the face of the nearest vampire. He cried out, betraying his spinelessness, and I sneered as blood seeped from his wound.

"Speak!" I commanded the weakling.

"We fought them, Your Majesty," the vampire said, ignoring the blood dripping down his face. "But the Dragon Queen's soldiers are strong. Black magic runs through their veins, and they—"

His cowardly, sniveling words ended in a gurgle when I withdrew a stake from my dress pocket and slammed it into his chest. Black lines stretched from that point like a spider's web until the useless vampire was a disgusting, shriveled corpse on the ground. Lifting the stake from his chest. I moved on to the next vampire.

More excuses. More lies. No answers.

Death came to each one of them. Some begged for mercy. A few cried. Others were stoic.

None survived my wrath.

By the time I reached the end of the line, only two vampires remained.

Made by the same vampire, they were siblings-in-blood.

“My two generals,” I sneered. “Ophelia and Hector.” Tapping the bloody stake against my thigh, I stared at the two of them. “I thought you were capable soldiers. Remind me, how many years have you each seen?”

The pair exchanged a glance and then lowered their eyes.

“My Making was eight centuries ago, Your Majesty,” Ophelia replied.

Hector said, “General Oak Made me seven and a half centuries ago.”

At the mention of the general, a hiss slipped through my fangs.

A timid knock came from outside my study, barely more than the brushing of knuckles against the door.

I shadowed over in a heartbeat, flinging the door open. “Have you found him?” I asked breathlessly.

My love had been missing for an entire turn of the moon. He vanished without a trace, and no one could find him. My heart ached. Nicolas was my other half, and he was just... gone.

General Oak stood in the hallway, gripping a missive in his white-knuckled hands. Though he was a head taller than me, the male seemed to shrink in my presence.

Still, he did not speak.

“Tell me,” I urged the soldier. “Where is he?”

General Oak swallowed. “Queen Marguerite, the humans, they...” His brows furrowed, and he stopped speaking.

Humans? I didn’t care about them. Not really. They were annoying and thought too much of themselves, but they were a part of our lives as vampires. We needed their blood to live. Vampires could survive off animals, but human blood brought us strength.

“What about them?” I snapped. The sooner I dealt with this, the sooner I could go back to finding Nicolas. He was the only human I cared about.

The general’s eyes widened, and the paper trembled in his hands. “They have... they are... the humans have decided...” He thrust the paper at me. “Look.”

I took the sheet, staring at the hastily written script. My heart pounded. I seethed, and red clouded my vision until it was all I could see.

“How dare they?” I hissed. “They’re mortals.”

I reread the words, wondering if something had changed.

It had not.

On behalf of all humans in Eleyta, we claim freedom. For too long, our people have suffered under the vampires' control.

That is no longer the case. We will negotiate with the queen and work to form laws that are beneficial to both our people, or we will fight until none of the bloodthirsty monsters are left.

The Freedom Revolution is here.

Did they dare reject my rule?

My grip on the paper tightened when my eyes landed on the signatures at the bottom. Most of them were meaningless, but there was one I recognized...

No.

My heart dropped, and for a moment, I could not speak. I could not breathe. My legs trembled, and I leaned against the wall.

How could he do this to me?

His name was written there in black ink as clearly as the rest.

Nicolas De La Mont.

My eyes burned, and I swayed on my feet.

I thought he loved me. I thought he was different from the rest. I thought we would have forever.

Wrong.

I was so, so, so wrong.

Was it all a game? Had he been planning this the entire time? Was I nothing but a joke to him?

The Freedom Revolution.

How dare he? With me, he would have had anything. I would have made him a king, at least in name. I would have loved him forever. My heart slammed against my chest. I crumpled the paper into a ball.

I would have been Nicolas's lover, his best friend, and his confidant until

the end of time.

Now?

I would be his worst nightmare.

“This so-called revolution is unacceptable,” I snarled.

General Oak nodded. “Of course, it is, Your Majesty. The humans are being ridiculous. We all know you are the most powerful one of us all. That is why you are the queen. They have lost their way.”

He spoke as if they had whispered a few words in anger instead of forming an entire revolution against me.

This was more than a lost way.

This was treason.

The sight of Nicolas’s signature at the bottom of the page was seared into my mind. I would make him and every other human in this ridiculous alliance rue the day they had ever dared cross me.

And when I was done with them, there wouldn’t be a single being in all the Four Kingdoms who doubted my strength.

A gust of wind carrying shards of ice blew by, pulling me back into the present. Ophelia and Hector were statues, save their black eyes that followed my every movement.

I tilted my head, eyeing them both with disdain. “If your Maker were alive to see you now, he would personally drive this stake through your heart. Neither of you deserves to live. Not after you failed me so spectacularly.”

Hector’s eyes widened, and he trembled. “Queen Marguerite—”

“No! You had one job. One purpose in life: to keep that Southern dragon who calls herself queen out of my country. You failed! How can I let you live knowing you are a waste of blood?” I tightened my grip on the stake. “It would not send the right message.”

A tear ran down Hector’s face as the reality of his fate set in. “My Queen, I have served you well for centuries. Please, at least let me say goodbye to Charles.” He brought his hands in front of his chest and begged.

Begged.

Like a gods-damned coward.

My lip curled. “Absolutely not.”

His eyes widened as my words settled upon him. He cried out as I lurched forward and drove the stake into his heart. The useless vampire collapsed, convulsing as the weapon made quick work of his life.

Ophelia trembled, but she did not say a word.

“You.” I pointed at her. “Come here.”

The general obeyed me instantly, even as her colleague and brother-in-blood died at her feet. “Queen Marguerite?”

I glared at her. “I need you to deliver a message for me.”

The general blinked, but she remained silent.

“Go into Ithenmyr and find the Dragon Queen,” I commanded. “Tell her to stay away from my country, or I will make her regret the day she decided to come against me.”

Ophelia bowed, running off in a blur before I could change my mind. If she survived this, I’d kill her when she came back. If not, well, that was fine with me.

There was no room for failure in my kingdom.

With a wave, I dissolved the shadow ward I’d erected. I twisted the ruby and made my way up and down the rows of quaking humans.

“Now, what am I going to do with the rest of you?” I pursed my lips. “I can’t let you stay here without supervision.” The higher-ups in this contingent of my army were now all lying dead a few feet away. “Mortals need direction, you know.”

They stared at me, their expressions ranging from pleading to absolute fear. None of them were brave, nor did they show any qualities of being true fighters.

I sighed. “Fine. I suppose I’ll have to kill you all.”

Now they screamed. A few of them even dared get up and run away.

My lips twitched. A hunt was just what I needed. Shadows flooded from my hands. My wings flapped. I licked my fangs, giving in to my primal instincts.

The rest of the night passed in a blur of blood and screams and death.

Not a single one escaped.

Reckless Behavior



SEBASTIAN

Over an hour had passed since we landed in the White Forest, and Luna had yet to speak. Eventually, I'd gotten her to move, but whatever had happened in the Void had shaken her to her core.

Now, she gripped my hand so tightly it was as though she thought if she let go, I'd disappear.

She was wrong.

I would never leave her. Not even death could tear us apart. She was stuck with me until the end of time itself.

I ducked beneath a low-hanging branch, holding it up for Luna.

"Sebastian?" she whispered.

At the sound of her voice, I instantly stopped in my tracks. "Yes, darling?"

"I heard them again," she said softly. Her voice was haunted, and echoes of fear flooded the Binding Mark.

"The voices?" I asked, seeking to confirm what I'd already suspected. The Void was vast, and it probably held several secrets.

"They were different this time, Sebastian." She tilted her head, her voice taking on a strange lilt. "They warned me... they said..." She frowned. "It doesn't matter. I think they're real people. Or they were?"

My brows raised nearly to my hairline as I tried to keep up with her. "What?"

"The people in the Void." Her wide eyes met mine. "I think... I think the queen killed them. I don't know if that's possible... how would they end up there? But they were so insistent. So loud. So... real."

There was something in Luna's voice that made my heart pound. My

shadows writhed, urging me to pay attention. This was important.

“What did they say?” I asked.

“The Queen of Shadows is coming for me.” She shuddered, and tears welled up in her eyes. “And if she kills me, I’ll be trapped there, too.”

Sucking in a breath, I clenched my fists. “I won’t let that happen, Luna. You’re mine.”

I would protect her from anything and anyone, including the queen.

A long moment stretched between us as her eyes searched mine. She stepped forward, leaning her head against my chest. “I’m frightened, Sebastian,” she admitted.

My heart twisted at her admission. I hated that she was afraid. I hated that I couldn’t whisk her away through the shadows and never return. We wouldn’t get far without the tonic quieting the summons, and Luna needed her brother. More than anything, I hated that I couldn’t protect her from pain.

“I know.” I placed my finger under her chin, waiting until she looked up at me. “No matter where you are, in this life or the next, on this plane or another, I will never leave you, Luna. I will always fight for you. Always find you. Always be there for you.”

She sucked in a breath. “What about the queen?”

“We’re going to kill her,” I promised. I’d make the same vow a thousand times until we accomplished our goal. “Once we break the bond, we will destroy her.”

“And the voices?”

I raised a shoulder. “I don’t know. If they’re people she killed, maybe this will set them free.”

Or maybe not. To be honest, Luna was my only priority. Everything else was a problem for another time.

“I suppose it’s possible,” she said after a moment. Her eyes darkened, and she sighed. “Or perhaps we’ll die.”

“Don’t talk like that.” I ran my thumb over her bottom lip. “We will break this bond and kill the queen.”

I refused to entertain any other option.

She nodded, but traces of sadness remained on her face. Hoping to distract her, I threaded our hands together once again. “Let’s find the wolves. Did I tell you they are indigenous to the White Forest?”

Luna looked up at me, a faint glimmer of academic interest in her gaze. “Oh?”

I smiled, tugging her behind me through the snow. “It’s true. The white wolves are everywhere here. Legend says Ithiar created them to act as sacred guardians of the north.”

“Really? That’s fascinating.” She paused, drawing her bottom lip through her fangs. “Will you show me how to track them?”

“It would be my honor.” Anything to keep her mind off those voices and their ominous messages.

It didn’t take long to lose myself in the hunt. It was instinctual and easy, even peaceful. Something about being in the forest and tracking prey spoke to the deepest part of me. Other than flying, this was one of my favorite things. It was quiet in the woods, and I didn’t have to deal with anyone else.

Like in the Dead Forest outside Castle Sanguis, signs of the darkness were everywhere. Usually, wild animals roamed freely through the wilds of Eleyta. From the smallest rodents to large deer and other, more deadly creatures, these lands used to bustle with life. Now they were silent. Not only that, but everything was tinged in black. Brittle leaves were unnaturally dark, weeds burst through the snow, choking out any life that might have remained, and inky bark covered the trees.

We cloaked ourselves in shadows, and after I gave Luna a few directions, we moved as one through the forest.



I SMELLED the wolf before I saw it.

We’re close, I said to Luna through our connection. We had switched to speaking mind-to-mind a while ago, not wanting to risk the wolf hearing us.

Pulling on the pulsing shadows within me, I twisted my fingers. A small dagger formed out of the black mist, as real as any weapon made of steel. Shadow weapons always spoke to me in a way that blades forged by blacksmiths did not.

Ready? I asked.

Her fingers brushed against mine. *Always.*

She thickened her cloak of shadows until she was one with the darkness.

Our movements were synchronized, and communication was barely necessary. An awareness of Luna’s every move filled me, one of the new benefits of the Tether.

The wolf's scent was strong and musky, standing out among the smell of snow and pine trees.

Is that a track? Luna pointed to something in the snow.

Bending, I let go of her hand, crouching to inspect it. Sure enough, she was right. It was fresh, untouched by the snow falling freely through the canopy of leaves, and it was large. *It is. Good find, darling.*

Luna kneeled beside me. *Good gods, it's the size of your palm.* She ran her finger through the track before looking up at me. Her expression was a mix of wonder and fear. *Exactly how big are these white wolves?*

I stood, offering her my hand. *Big.*

She snorted, the sound echoing through my mind. *Thank you for that oh-so-obvious explanation, Sebastian. Do you care to be more specific?*

You'll see soon enough.

Some things were hard to believe unless witnessed in person.

After that, the time for questions was over. We followed the increasingly stronger scent until it overpowered everything else in the forest.

And then I saw it.

A white wolf sat on its haunches in the space between two blackened trees. It was easily the size of a small pony. Its fur was thick and shone in the light of the moon, and its eyes were a blue so bright they reminded me of a cloudless sky.

Luna and I were still cloaked in shadows, but I had the distinct feeling the wolf knew we were there. Its eyes were shrewd and flickered with life, and it seemed to look directly at us.

What's the plan? Luna whispered.

Genevieve said we needed to collect the blood of a living white wolf, so we couldn't just kill it. That made things much more difficult.

I'm still thinking about it, was my response.

I wanted to make sure whatever approach we chose would keep Luna safe. That was—

I have an idea, she said.

My eyes widened, but before I could ask Luna to explain what her plan was, she dropped her shadows.

"Hello," she said, her voice calm and collected as if she wasn't risking her life and doing the exact thing I didn't want her to do.

Luna! I hissed through the bond. *What are you doing?*

Didn't she realize the wolf was dangerous? Mentally, I cursed. If the wolf

didn't kill her, I would for being so irresponsible.

The wolf's blue gaze locked onto my Bound Partner. Luna sucked in a breath, but instead of coming back to me—which would've been the smart thing to do—she stepped towards the animal.

Again, I called her name through the bond, but she did not stop. I curled my fists, gripping the hilt of my shadow dagger so tightly it bit into the flesh of my hand, but I didn't care. Luna had no concern for her own safety.

Once again, proving her recklessness, she moved even closer. Her voice was gentle as she said, "We don't want to hurt you."

The wolf glared at her.

My heart pounded. On one hand, fear for Luna coursed through me. On the other, exasperation at her lack of self-preservation filled me. Together, they mingled until they were all I felt.

I let my shadows fall. They gathered at my feet, waiting for my command.

My wife took yet another step forward, and the wolf bared its teeth in warning. My hackles rose, and I gave up all pretense of not appearing as a threat, running to stand in front of Luna.

What is your plan? I asked. Are you just going to ask for the wolf's blood?

She smirked, shifting to stand in front of me. *Actually, yes.*

Stunned, I gaped at her. Was she serious? I reached out to grab her arm, but Luna side-stepped me, avoiding my hand as she approached the wolf.

Trust me, Sebastian, she said.

Trust.

That one word gave me pause. Obviously, I trusted her. It wasn't even a question. I would give her my life for safekeeping a thousand times over. It was the wolf I didn't trust. It didn't know Luna was my treasure. If it hurt a hair on her head, I'd tear it apart.

Luna slanted her head, holding out her hands at her sides. "My name is Luna, and that big grump behind me is Sebastian."

The wolf's ears twitched, and its eyes were sharp as it stared at her. My heart drummed a steady tempo, and my throbbing shadows were the accompaniment. One wrong move, and I would destroy the wolf. Broken bond or not, right now, it didn't matter.

"We just need a bit of your blood," Luna said softly, as though she wasn't being completely unsafe by speaking to a wild wolf. However, there was a lilt

to her words, and I realized she was infusing Persuasive magic into her voice. I didn't think it would work, though. This creature, though large, lacked the distinctive signs of a werewolf. "My husband needs to break a bond. That's all. We don't want to kill you."

The wolf watched Luna. I expected it to attack, to snarl, to lunge at her and threaten to tear her to pieces. Instead, it did nothing. It sat there, staring at Luna with those piercing blue eyes as though she were the only thing in the entire world.

I understood where the wolf was coming from. Luna was fascinating. Every time I thought I understood this wife of mine, she went and did something like this. She was incredible and brave. So brave.

Too brave.

One day, if Luna wasn't careful, actions like this would get her killed.

She took another step forward, then two more.

A snarl rumbled through my chest. "Luna, stop."

She shot me a look over her shoulder. *Stand down, Sebastian. I've got this under control.*

Standing down was not in my vocabulary, especially when it came to my wife's well-being. I gripped the dagger and drew more shadows around me so I could move at the first hint of danger.

Luna moved even closer.

Who knew it was possible to feel so much fear, frustration, and awe all at once?

Most of me wanted to gather Luna into my arms and shadow her back to the abbey, breaking the bond be damned. That same part of me wanted to keep her locked up forever for her own safety, so no harm could ever befall her. The other part of me was in complete awe at her courage.

Soon, she was close enough that if the wolf lunged, it would rip out her throat before I could stop it. Vampires were practically immortal, but even we couldn't survive without our heads.

"Please help us," Luna said in that same lilting, musical voice. She held one hand in the air in the universal symbol of *I mean you no harm*, and with the other hand, she dug in her bag and withdrew the empty vial. "We need to stop the queen, and we've exhausted all our other options."

The wolf angled its head as though considering Luna's words. An entire minute went by before it moved.

In a moment I would never forget, the massive creature dropped to the

ground, rested its head on its front paws, and looked at us through hooded eyes.

“Thank you,” Luna said to the wolf. To me, she whispered, *Hurry*.

I was beside her in the space of a breath. Kneeling, I lifted one of the wolf’s paws. Those blue eyes tracked my movements as I nicked the leg just enough to let the wolf’s blood flow. Luna caught the vital liquid in the vial, filling it to the top before replacing the cork.

When we had enough, Luna placed her hand on the wolf’s head. “Thank you for your gift.”

Standing, the creature dipped its head in acknowledgment before loping into the forest. It had a slight limp where we’d taken its blood, but nothing major.

Now, we were alone.

The shock of seeing Luna walk towards the wolf was wearing off, and in its place, anger was bubbling up inside me.

Wrapping the vial in a cloth, Luna seemed unaware of my inner turmoil. She put it away in her satchel before looking at me with a grin. “We did it.”

How could she be happy right now? She’d almost gotten herself killed.

I stared at Luna, my free fist clenching and unclenching at my side. “That was really s—”

“Smart,” she interrupted me, her grin widening.

“Stupid,” I corrected, shaking my head. Rising to my feet, I dissolved my dagger and ran my hands through my hair. Usually, it helped me remain calm, but right now, that was worlds away. “How could you risk your life like that, Luna?”

She blinked at me. “I’m sorry. Are you angry with me?”

Was I angry? What a question. Did the sun rise without fail every morning? Was the sky blue? Was my love for Luna unending?

“Yes!” I shouted. “I’m furious.”

My heart pounded as my brain unhelpfully supplied me with numerous visions of how this could have all gone wrong. Luna’s dead body. Her head ripped away. Blood coating the snow. The wolf snarling over her.

She was acting dangerously.

“Why?” Luna seemed confused. “I didn’t do anything wrong. I got the blood we need.”

That she thought it was okay made this a hundred times worse.

“You didn’t know the wolf wouldn’t hurt you, Luna,” I snapped. “You

can't just go around throwing yourself into danger at every turn."

How was I supposed to live if she died?

"The wolf didn't hurt me," she said, her tone making it clear she thought this entire conversation was pointless.

"It could have!" I yelled. "It could have taken you from me."

Luna stepped towards me, her eyes searching mine. My heart caught in my throat, and for several long seconds, neither of us spoke.

"Sebastian, people have been trying to kill me since my first night in Eleyta." I snarled, but she held up a hand. "I can't hide. It's not in my nature. Besides, what else were we going to do? Pin the wolf down and hope it didn't bite us?" She smiled ruefully. "Somehow, I don't think it would have worked."

My nostrils flared, and anger still coursed through my body. "You shouldn't have endangered yourself. You should have told me your plan and let me do it."

Her eyes narrowed, and the anger coming through the Binding Mark wasn't just mine. "Is this because I'm female? Is that it?" Her fists were tight at her side, and her voice was rising. "Am I too fragile for something like this? Would the Prince of Darkness like to lock me up in the castle, never to leave again for fear of getting hurt?"

"Yes, I would!" I shouted. "If the Tether weren't a gods-damn rope, I would keep you safe from *everything*! Not because you're fragile, though."

She lifted her lip and snarled. "Then tell me, Sebastian." Her eyes shimmered with a mixture of defiance and vulnerability. Even now, in the midst of an argument, she remained open to me. "Why would it have been okay for you to do this and not me?"

I moved into her space, cupping her cheek with my hand. "Because, Luna, you're not just any female. You're *mine*." She sucked in a breath, her eyes searching mine, but I kept going. "When you're reckless, when you act without thinking, when you talk to the queen and say the first thing that comes to your mind, you're putting the thing I love most in this entire world in danger."

No Room for Fear or Panic
❧

LUNA

Of all the words that left Sebastian's lips, only one jumped out at me. The rest, the claiming words, the ones that made my core twist in all the right ways, I'd store away in my heart and think about them late at night for years to come.

But right now, one word had all my attention.

"You think I'm *reckless*?" The idea was so preposterous I could barely think, let alone put together a coherent thought. Me. Reckless. The scholarly one who lived in her head and desired to spend days in the library. Of all the ways I'd describe myself, reckless would never be one of them. "Seriously?"

The wind whistled all around us, and snow fell so heavily that Sebastian's hair was turning white where he stood, but neither of us seemed to care. My blood pounded, keeping me warm enough.

"Yes." He pulled his hand away, and his eyes flashed as shadows flooded out of him. Even now, standing beneath the snow, he was so beautiful it almost hurt to look at him.

"Why?" I blinked repeatedly.

"Do you truly not know?"

I shook my head.

"You're making rash decisions and acting without thought," Sebastian said with a touch of exasperation in his tone. "For Isvana's sake, Luna, you need to be more careful."

My brows nearly hit my hairline. Why were we talking about being careful? We were literally on a quest to retrieve items so we could break his bond—something that might kill him. What did being careful have to do with it?

I clenched my fists. “Oh? Is that what you think?” The hard tone of my voice echoed the burning-hot anger pulsing through me.

“Yes,” he growled, his wings bursting from his back. “If you were more careful, I wouldn’t have to worry about you dying every two gods-damned minutes!”

I did not want to be careful. Not anymore. Carefulness did not get us very far. It was the exact opposite of what we needed.

If I had been careful, I never would have tested the Sunwalking hypothesis. If I had been careful, I probably would not have fallen in love with Sebastian. And if I had been careful, I would not have chosen to drink his blood and become a vampire.

“You’re wrong.” I gripped the satchel so tightly that my nails ripped a hole in the fabric. Great. “We need to be prepared to do whatever it takes. The queen has already proved that she is willing to do anything to kill me. This isn’t the time to hide.”

His chest heaved, the air thickening between us, and his gaze searched mine. “I can’t lose you.”

They were four words, yet they hit me right in my core. Whoever said words weren’t powerful had never been in love. They’d never given their heart to someone else to hold, to protect, to keep safe. There was no way they’d experienced having a partner willing to go to the ends of the earth for them because they’d know just how powerful words could be.

Words could make you, break you, mold you. A word could give someone life or take it away. They were far more powerful than anyone gave them credit for.

The problem was Sebastian’s fears were unfounded. Whether it was in this life or the next, I would never leave him. We were Bound together, our souls were intertwined, and every part of me belonged to him. He didn’t need to worry because I could not exist without him. Living or dead, I would always be his because he held my heart as much as I held his.

“You won’t.” I picked up his hand and laced our fingers together, pressing our joined hands against my heart. “I’m yours. Always and forever.”

“Luna...” His eyes softened, and the next few moments seemed to stretch for hours. My words hung between us, and he studied me.

I whispered, “I’ll never leave you.”

The anger flooding through the Binding Mark dissipated. His free hand slipped behind my neck, and he pulled me towards him. Our mouths met in a

clashing kiss that was dark, needy, and urgent. I groaned, allowing myself to melt against him.

This was why he didn't have to worry about me going anywhere. I gripped his cloak, my tongue sweeping into his mouth as I tasted him. How could anything separate us? We were meant to be. Our fates were intertwined, written in the stars themselves.

Eventually, his lips left mine, and he peppered kisses along my jaw. "Will you at least try not to risk your life again?"

His mouth moved down my throat, his fangs grazing my skin ever so softly. When I didn't respond, he nipped me. "Luna," he growled.

I inhaled. "I can't promise that, Sebastian."

A pause, and then his lips lifted off me. Groaning, he pressed his forehead against mine. "Isvana help me, Luna. You're going to be the death of me."

"Not on purpose," I whispered. That would be rather counter-intuitive since I wanted him alive. I wanted us both to live. We had so much more to do. So many things to explore. So much research to conduct. "I will endeavor to be more careful for you."

"Thank you." His lips found mine again for the briefest of kisses before his arms held me close to his chest. "You can practice that careful, not-reckless behavior now while we get the moonstone."

A retort rose on the tip of my tongue, but before I could say it, his shadows pulled us into the Void.

THOSE SAME VOICES AND SLITHERING, snake-like hisses returned the moment the darkness wrapped around us like an unwelcome hug.

"Wake the harbinger."

"Fulfill the prophecy."

"Kill the Queen of Shadowsssssss."

Goosebumps broke out on my arms, but I refused to let them feel my fear. I could not freeze again. We needed to get the moonstone and return to the abbey. Already, I felt bad for leaving Marius. I wanted to go back to make sure he was still alive.

The voices started shouting, but I did not give in. I focused on my breathing. In and out, again and again. I would not let the fear win. Not again.

Sebastian's grip around me tightened, and I focused on that point of contact. The darkness could push up against me all it wanted, but it couldn't take me from him. Sebastian ruled the night. I was his, and I knew he wouldn't let me go.

My shadows pulsed and throbbed, reminding me of their presence, and I found solace in them, too. I wasn't the helpless, scared human who'd been brought to Eleyta to marry the Prince of Darkness. Now, I was the Sunwalker, a vampire in my own right, and I'd been blessed with wings and shadows.

I could do this. These disembodied voices would not be my demise.

Breathe.

Eventually, the shadows lifted, taking the voices with them. Silence had never felt as sweet as it did at that moment. I sagged against Sebastian, grateful to be out of the darkness.

Then, I took in our surroundings.

Whatever peace the silence had brought me vanished. My stomach dropped. "Where are we?"

To our right was a sheer cliff that it fell into a dark sheet of nothingness. I shuffled backward, needing to put as much distance between myself and that cliff as possible. To our left was a stretch of ice so thick I couldn't see through it.

In front of us, the storm had worsened. To call it a blizzard would be like calling a toddler well-behaved. It was a tempest of epic proportions. The wind whipped all around us, carrying shards of ice that stung my skin. Snow fell in thick sheets, making it virtually impossible to see more than a foot outside the cave entrance.

We would not be flying out of here.

Sebastian's arm tightened against me. "This is the Forgotten Passage," he said, answering my earlier question.

My lungs tightened at the ominous name. "And does the passage... go anywhere?"

A dark chuckle echoing with long-forgotten secrets escaped him. "Not anymore."

There must have been a story there, but I didn't want to get into it now. This place was the antithesis of welcoming. Even for Eleyta, it was horrible. The sooner we got out of here, the better.

"We can't stay out here." Sebastian led me away from the cliff. "Come

on.”

He pulled me deeper into the icy cavern, where a strange scarlet glow lit the icy walls. Taking a deep breath, I steeled myself for what was to come. Thanks to my new vision as a vampire, I no longer hated the dark, but that didn't mean all my fears were magically erased.

Even so, I followed Sebastian. He was here, and he would keep me safe. And so, I followed him.

IT WAS impossible to tell time in the Forgotten Passage. We could have been here for an hour or half a day. While we strode through endless pathways made of ice, Sebastian showed me how to make a shadow dagger. The hilt was heavy, and I used it to notch the walls and mark our passage.

We stopped once to feed, but that was nothing more than a quick exchange of blood before we continued toward the crimson sheen.

On and on and on, we walked. The shadows throbbed, and the hairs on my neck prickled. A sense of foreboding settled upon me, and no matter how much I tried, I couldn't shake it.

“We're close,” Sebastian murmured.

“How can you tell?” I glanced around but didn't see anything different. “Have you been this deep in the passage before?”

“I haven't been here before, but I can feel the stone.” He squeezed my hand and pulled me to a stop beside him. “Close your eyes and focus on the space around us.”

Doing as he asked, I inhaled deeply and tried to concentrate. At first, I didn't hear much besides the *lub-dub* of our hearts, but after a few minutes something else caught my attention. It was so quiet I would have missed it if it weren't for Sebastian's direction. A steady pulse, like the throbbing of a heart, came from nearby.

I opened my eyes. “Oh!”

He grinned. “Did you feel it?”

“Yes!” My lips tilted up, and I listened again for the pulse. Now that I knew it was there, it was easier to pick out. “That's incredible.”

“It'll keep getting stronger the closer we get,” he said. “Come on.”

Now that I had something to focus on, the journey went faster. We turned

corners, descended a sloped hallway, and climbed slippery steps. The red glow brightened, and the pulse grew stronger until it was as loud as a beating drum.

And then, after we turned the final corner, we found it.

The moonstone was in the middle of an icy cavern. Our prize was encased in a column of pure translucent ice. The vibrant light illuminated each individual layer of ice. It was like looking into a deep, clear-water pool. There were stones embedded in the ice, each as large as a person. They were colorful and...

I cried out.

They weren't stones.

This wasn't just a passage.

It was a graveyard.

Now that I realized what I was looking at, I could make out frozen faces looking back at me from the ice. Mouths open wide, eyes bulging, fangs gleaming.

People caught in their death throes, forever frozen.

"Oh gods," I whispered, stumbling back a step. "What are... In the ice... it's..."

I spun in a circle. Dozens of bodies were entombed in the walls. Death was everywhere in this place.

Bile rose in my throat, and I whimpered.

"They're long dead," Sebastian said grimly, tucking my head against his tunic. It was a kind gesture, but it was too late for that. The sight was already seared in my mind. "The Forgotten Passage has a history of making people disappear. Stories speak of humans and vampires walking into this place and getting lost, never to be seen again."

"I think it's safe to say we found them." Shivers ran up and down my spine in a continuous circuit. "Can we get out of here? This place is creepy."

I would be more than happy never to visit another icy graveyard in my life.

Sebastian nodded. "Absolutely. Once we get the moonstone, we can leave. You'll Sunwalk, and then we'll return to the abbey."

It was a simple plan, but it calmed me. Having steps to work through always made me feel better.

"Alright." I nodded. "We can do that."

Short and simple, this plan was to the point. I couldn't think further than

that. If I spent too much time thinking about our end goals—waking up Marius, breaking Sebastian’s bond with the queen, determining exactly how the harbinger, Sunwalker, and the Wielder of Shadows worked, figuring out soul sharing, and killing the queen—I would become overwhelmed to the point of being unable to function. Small steps were feasible and often easier to deal with.

Inhaling, I squared my shoulders. The sooner we got this over with, the better. Ignoring the bodies in the wall, I tightened my grip on my shadow dagger and approached the central column. The weapon was a heavy, comforting presence in my hand. I wasn’t great with the blade, having never been trained to use anything remotely close to this, but for the first time, I was beginning to understand why people armed themselves willingly.

There was a certain sense of security in knowing I could defend myself if necessary with more than just my vampiric body. I liked the idea of holding my own against someone if needed. People were always trying to kill me. It was rather exhausting.

The closer I got to the moonstone, the thicker the air became. Breathing became increasingly difficult, and then, the air rippled. My skin tingled, and magic crawled over us. It was like crossing the queen’s wards, but different. My mother-in-law’s magic was dark, throbbing, and intrusive. Sebastian’s magic was also dark and held a warning of power to it, but it never made my skin crawl.

This ancient magic was neither of those things. It made my shadows pulse with warning.

“Do you feel that, Sebastian?” I wasn’t sure why I was whispering—it wasn’t like the bodies encased in ice could hear us—but it felt appropriate.

He grunted a “yes.” He took my elbow and drew me near, lowering his voice. “We need to be careful. The moonstone could have several protections around it.”

Keeping one hand on the satchel, I circled the column slowly. The air was as thick as molasses here, and magic bore down on me. Every single step took more effort than the last. If I’d still been mortal, I was fairly certain I wouldn’t have been able to move at all.

Reaching out, I touched the ice.

The scarlet light flashed, pulsing like a beating heart.

I withdrew my hand immediately. “Is that supposed to happen?”

“I don’t know.” Sebastian’s hand landed on my hip, and he tugged me

against him. “This magic isn’t natural. Let me do it.”

For once, I did not argue. Something about this cave—probably the bodies encased in ice—made me want to turn tail and leave as fast as I could.

Forming a dagger out of his shadows, Sebastian pressed it against the ice. He held the hilt tightly, using his fist as a hammer as he slowly chipped into the column. My heart pounded, and I gripped my dagger as he worked.

We needed to get out of here. That sense of foreboding was just getting worse.

The ice fell away in small slivers until, finally, the moonstone was revealed. Without the layers of ice, the light was as bright as the sun itself. I shielded my eyes with my arm as Sebastian hit the hilt of his dagger one last time.

A deafening crack echoed through the chamber. The ground shook beneath our feet. A roar came from beneath us, like a long-forgotten monster waking from a slumber.

I dropped my arm, and my eyes widened as I looked around. A scream crawled up my throat, and my heart raced. Fissures spread through the ice. The moonstone blazed like it was moments away from exploding.

I did not need to be an expert in caverns to know that this was very bad.

That feeling was confirmed when my magic’s melody quieted moments later. My shadows vanished, and the dagger dissolved into nothingness.

Shit.

“Damn!” Sebastian swore. He reached into the column and grabbed the moonstone. A heartbeat later, shards of black, shimmering stone rained from the ceiling.

“Is that prohiberis?” I asked, although I already suspected the answer.

“Yes,” he grunted as a shard the size of his fist slammed into his head. He shook off the impact, grabbing my arm. “We have to get out of here.”

I was in full agreement. Prohiberis was a stone that blocked all forms of magic. I’d only been around it a few times, but already, I knew its effects were extremely unpleasant.

“Give me the moonstone.” I opened the bag, and he shoved it inside.

I had barely secured the top of the bag before Sebastian yanked me behind him. Rarely had I seen him so worried, which only served to make my heart race faster.

We were in real danger.

Everywhere I looked, prohiberis fell from the ceiling. The fissures in the

ice grew larger, and the ground shook beneath our feet. We ran through the ice tunnels, dodging chunks of rocks, ice, and debris.

At that moment, without my magic, I almost felt mortal. If it weren't for the fangs in my mouth and the too-beautiful-to-be-real vampire prince by my side, I could have forgotten I was a creature of the night.

The temperature dropped as we ran. Neither of us spoke, the pounding of our footsteps echoing the beating of our hearts. Thank Isvana, I'd had the foresight to mark our passageway through the tunnels. The notches acted as guideposts, leading us out of the cavern.

The entrance was in sight when the ground shook again.

This time, though, something was different.

A massive crack appeared in the ice in front of me, and the ground disappeared beneath my feet.

One Way Out
❧

SEBASTIAN

A high-pitched, blood-curdling scream filled the cavern as the ice beneath Luna's feet gave way. "Sebastian!"

My name had never filled me with as much horror as it did at that moment. Luna's hand slipped out of mine, and I lunged for her. I was too late. Her fingers flailed, and she fell.

"No!" I yelled.

I fell to my knees, the ice cutting into my legs, as I stared down the black hole where my wife had stood a moment ago. It was an abyss, a monster, a void that swallowed her whole.

This could not be the end. I refused to let her become one of the countless beings who called the Forgotten Passage their tomb.

Our story would not end like this.

The Tether twinged in warning, the rope uncurling deep within my stomach. We were out of options. Throwing caution to the wayside, I leaped into the hole after Luna.

Prohiberis and shards of rocks and ice rained down on me. The air rushed past me, but the Tether quieted as Luna's terrified face appeared in my field of vision. I reached for her, grappling in the darkness.

Take my hand! I yelled through the bond. The magic binding us was older than prohiberis. At least we still had this.

Her fingers brushed against mine, and then, I had her.

She sobbed, "Sebastian."

"I'm here," I choked out. Death would not win today. It would not steal Luna from me.

We were still falling. The wind whooshed past us. Hugging Luna, I

turned us so her back was to my front, and we were both looking up at the falling prohiberis.

I will always love you, I said.

Then my back slammed onto the ice, and everything went black.

WHEN I FINALLY CONVINCED MY eyes to open, pain radiated through my entire body. Luna hovered over me, her wrist was in my mouth, and blood streaked down her face.

“Oh, thank the gods,” she wept.

I was still alive.

I pulled my fangs from Luna’s wrist. She wiped away her tears. Bending, she brushed her lips over mine in a tender kiss. It was soft and warm and filled with concern. “I wasn’t sure you would wake.”

My head throbbed, my throat was dry, and my entire body hurt.

None of it mattered, though. Luna was alive.

“Are you okay?” I visually searched her for injuries but didn’t see any. I would suffer a thousand falls, and be staked a million times to spare her pain.

“I’m fine.” Luna twisted some fabric in her hand. The satchel, I realized.

My eyes widened. “The wolf’s blood, did it—”

“The vial isn’t broken,” she said quickly. “The sunfire feather and the moonstone survived the fall as well.”

That was good news, but Luna didn’t look happy. Her mouth pinched in a straight line, and tears still flowed down her cheeks.

“What’s wrong?”

“The tonic...” She swallowed. “It’s gone. The vials broke, and there’s none left.”

Alarm ran through me, and my blood chilled. It took everything I had not to let my panic show on my face. I didn’t want to worry Luna further. Trying to remain calm, I reached within myself and pulled on my magic.

My veins were empty and void of magic. Silence was the only response. Not only that, but there was a horrible pain in my left side. I inched my hand upwards until I encountered something cold and unnatural. A shard of ice as long as my hand was stuck in me.

Damn.

Luna didn't seem to notice the injury, and I didn't draw her attention to it. The horrible truth was we could not do anything about it right now. The entire cave was made of prohiberis. If I pulled out the ice, there was a chance I would bleed out before I healed.

At least that explained the pain.

A dozen expletives slipped from my tongue as I pushed myself to my feet. The cave was empty and cold, save for the presence of the obsidian magic-blocking stones.

Gods.

A quick glance upwards confirmed we'd fallen several hundred feet. It was a miracle I was standing, even with Luna's blood. Obviously, we couldn't return the way we came.

Reaching out, I helped Luna to her feet. My breath was heavier than normal, and I swayed, trying to mask the agony.

Concern radiated from her as she glanced at me. "Sebastian, I think you should rest."

"No, we need to go." My head swam as though I had downed a glass of Faerie Wine too quickly, but we couldn't stay here. Without the tonic, we were on a clock before the summons came back. Would it be minutes? Hours? Less than a day, certainly. "We can't waste any time."

Luna frowned. "I don't know."

"I'll be fine." I shook my head, hoping she didn't feel the pain coming through the Binding Mark. "Don't worry about me."

Internally, I begged her not to fight me on this. The only thing on my mind was getting us out of these caves before the summons returned. Prohiberis was strong, but it wasn't all-encompassing. It didn't block the Tether, and it wouldn't be strong enough to block the queen's magic.

We needed to get out of here.

My wife studied me for a long moment before she nodded. "Okay. We'll go, but tell me when you need to rest."

"I will," I lied.

Luna meant well, but we couldn't stop to rest. We had no time to waste.

HOURS PASSED as we picked our way through the cave. This one wasn't built

like the last. The ice was thinner, and it creaked as we moved. Every single crack echoed, sending shivers down my spine. Luna's hand trembled in mine, but she never let go.

After a while, my worst fears came true. The tonic wore off. The queen's call was a quiet whisper, a brush against the back of my mind, until it wasn't. Soon it was a tempest, and I was a leaf being thrown back and forth.

Come, Queen Marguerite called me. Come, come, come!

Instead of answering her call, I became a master of ignoring. Not just the queen. All of it. The pain in my side that just kept getting worse, the summons, even the fear that even after all this, we might not be able to break the bond.

I ignored them because I needed to get Luna to safety.

It must have been close to midday by now. Once we got out of here, Luna could Sunwalk, expose the moonstone to the light, and we could shadow back to Lightriver Abbey. It seemed so simple. We just had to make it.

Forcing myself to walk was like moving through thick mud, but I ignored that too. No matter what, I refused to let Queen Marguerite win.

Night has Come
❧

MARGUERITE

“I’m terribly sorry, Your Majesty.” The Fortune Elf’s eyes were wide, and silver remained in her gaze. She trembled, kneeling on the marble floor. “I can’t See anything at all.”

My fingers tightened around the side of my throne, and I glared at her. “What do you mean?”

The useless elf quivered before me. “The silver planes are dark, My Queen. There is nothing there. Faint traces of fire and earth run through the future, but I can’t track their path.” Her voice shook, and she wrung her hands together. “The balance is broken, Your Majesty.”

I didn’t care about that. I didn’t even care about the darkness anymore. All I cared about was my missing son and *her*.

“Look again,” I snapped. “Get out of my sight and keep trying until you See something of worth.”

Why was I surrounded by such incompetence? I didn’t have time for this! This evening, I found three more wrinkles. Three!

What was this world coming to?

The elf paled, her sun-kissed skin turning as white as a sheet. “But if I spend too long on the silver planes, I might—”

“I don’t care!” I shrieked, my voice loud enough to shatter glass. “Do it, or I will find a new Fortune Elf who understands their job. I do not ask for much. I am not a hard taskmaster. One thing. That’s all I want. How is it so hard to find two vampires in a land full of them?”

The Fortune Elf’s lip wobbled, and she dipped her head. “I will try to See them.”

I glared at her. “Good. Get out of my sight.”

The elf ran out of the throne room so fast she nearly slammed into the Favorite standing by the door. I hadn't played with my pets in a few days. I had no energy left for them.

Everything was going wrong.

My ruby was dimming. Every day, it was less lustrous. Each time I touched it, less power ran through my fingertips.

It needed to recharge.

Standing, I descended from my throne and made my way to my private chambers. My black train swished as I moved, mimicking my shadows. The wind whistled, blowing through the cracks in the stones, and the hallways were empty. The guard outside my room opened the door silently, dipping his head as I passed by.

Ignoring him, I went straight to the enormous gilded mirror on the opposite wall.

The moment I caught sight of my reflection, I screamed.

THE FREEDOM REVOLUTION was crossing into its second month.

Two gods-damned months of this insanity.

Somehow, the humans were evading my army, moving during the day when vampires could not be out in the sun. There was no way they were working alone, though. Mortals lacked the strength and intelligence required to devise a plan like this on their own.

I would find the traitors responsible for this and destroy them all. I'd bathe in their blood and fall asleep to the tune of their dying wails.

Five generals sat around the large mahogany table in my boardroom, updating me on the war front. Their words washed over me, but I barely heard them.

I gripped the chair's armrests so tightly that the wood cracked beneath my fingers. I scarcely noticed the tiny splinters embedding themselves in my hands.

This was all his fault.

Nicolas.

Had he been playing me the entire time? Each time I fed from him, took him to my bed, talked with him late into the day, had he been cataloging my

secrets, knowing he would eventually betray me to the humans?

My heart ached, stung, and burned with the bitter pain of betrayal. Nicolas had shared my bed. My home. He'd been my Source, my confidant, my lover.

And now, he was my enemy.

Shadows coiled around my fingers, and I slammed my clenched fist on the table.

Immediately, the others stopped talking.

General Oak was the first to look at me. "Your Majesty?"

"Where is Nicolas?" I asked. "You haven't found him yet."

He sighed and rolled his eyes as if this line of questioning was beneath him. "My Queen, we have gone over this several times." The other generals nodded in agreement.

"Queen Marguerite, this is greater than one human," General Brimol picked up where Oak left off. "The so-called Freedom Revolution fighters are rebelling against our rule all throughout Eleyta."

General Oak added, "Your lover—"

"Don't speak of him like that!" I yelled. Anger coursed through my veins, and I gripped the edge of the table, flipping it over as I stood.

The generals scrambled out of the way as papers and ink flew everywhere, but none of them said a word.

I snapped, "Nicolas is nothing but a traitor, now."

"Of course," Oak said quietly.

I balled my fists at my sides. "You would do well to listen to my commands." My wings burst out from my back, and my voice chilled. "Find Nicolas, and you will find the rest."

Without waiting for a response, I swept out of the conference room. The generals couldn't help me. Two months was an inexcusable amount of time for a revolution to continue.

I needed something new. Something different. Something that would make me the most powerful one of them all.

I gasped. That was it.

Struck by inspiration, I ran in a blur through my castle.

Down, down, down I went until the silver doors of Ravenwood Dungeon were in my sight. Two guards stood in front, leaning casually against the wall, chatting.

Coming to a stop, I smoothed out my gown and cleared my throat. The

guards turned to me with wide eyes, their faces suddenly devoid of all color.

“Q-q-queen Marguerite!” the taller one exclaimed. He straightened his shoulders and had the decency to look sheepish about being caught slacking. “How can we help you?”

I would probably kill them for their ineptitude if I weren’t so intent on seeing my plan to fruition. I glared at the guards, making sure they saw the displeasure written across my face. “The inmate from Ithenmyr. Does she still live?”

One never knew with prisoners. They had a nasty habit of dying when it was least convenient for me.

The shorter guard swallowed. “Yes, My Queen.”

“Good.” I raised a brow. “Let me pass.”

Keys jingled, and then, the doors opened. Instantly, the scent of death and decay washed over me. Ravenwood Dungeon was home to my land’s darkest, most depraved criminals. I’d inherited most of these prisoners, long-lived as they were, from my predecessor.

A shiver ran down my arms, but I refused to acknowledge it as I entered the tight stone hallways.

Click, click, click.

My footsteps echoed through the rounded halls as I passed cell after cell. Dirty, bony hands stuck out of doors, wails were a discordant symphony growing louder by the second, and prisoners cried out for even a moment of my time.

They knew me, feared me, worshiped me.

Even they understood who I was.

A lesson Nicolas apparently had not learned.

The reminder of his betrayal sent blood boiling through me, and I trembled. Curse the gods for these all-too-human emotions! I was four centuries old, for Ithiar’s sake. I should have had these under control long ago. But no. I still needed sleep and blood.

At this moment, I was far too mortal for my liking.

Down I went into the bowels of Ravenwood Dungeon until light was but a distant memory.

There, deep below the earth, was the level I sought. A solitary guard stood in front of the silver door, marking the entrance to the prohiberis-lined section of the dungeon.

He nodded when he saw me. “Queen Marguerite.” Respect filled his

voice. Good.

I met his gaze. "I'm here to see her."

"Of course." The guard unlocked the door, pulling it open and bowing as I went past him.

The magic-stealing stones drew the power out of my veins when I stepped into the hallway. My shadows were silenced, and I inhaled sharply.

"I hate the prohiberis," the guard said.

I didn't answer him, but I felt the same way. I disliked being without my power, but I wouldn't be here long.

The prisoners in this part of the dungeon were in far worse shape than the others. Many were close to Fading, and all of them feared me. The inmates produced a ballad of pain and torment. Their wordless groans were the sweetest melody, and the agonizing moans were the perfect harmony in every way.

The seventh cell on the right was my destination.

A soft, feminine song reached my ears. At first, it sounded like a children's lullaby, but as soon as I made out the words, a chill ran down my spine.

"Night is here; death has come; betrayal is in the air." A crazed laugh, and then the singer started again. Her voice swelled as I approached. She shouted, "Night is here! Death has come! Betrayal is in the air!"

This was the witch I sought.

Perhaps she had already lost her mind.

I frowned. That wouldn't do me any good. I needed her.

I stopped in front of the cell and placed my hands flat on either side of the enclosure. The witch's back was to me, her greasy brown hair falling almost to her feet. Her clothes were little more than rags, and her frame was skeletal as she hopped from one foot to the other.

She sang, "Night is here, death has come, betrayal is in—"

"Enough!" I kicked the door. The bars rattled, and her refrain stopped, dissolving into crazed laughter as she turned around.

"You came. I knew you would." The witch grinned, twirling a white femur bone through her fingers. Was it from an animal or another inmate? Noticing where I was looking, the prisoner banged the bone on the floor. It split in two.

Forcing myself to remain calm, I clenched my fists. I was here for a reason. I couldn't let her madness deter me.

The witch studied me, her gaze unnervingly piercing, and she cackled. “You need me.”

Wondering exactly what I was getting myself into, I nodded slowly. She was right. I did need her. Turning to the guard, I said, “Release her.”

The vampire gaped at me. “Your Majesty, Koleta is a powerful—”

“Release her!” I shouted and slammed a foot down. “I will not ask again. Do your job or consider this prison your new permanent abode.”

Keys clanked together as he pulled them out hastily. “Of course, My Queen.” His fingers trembled as he sought the right one, trying several in the lock.

Koleta laughed. “Night is here, night is here, night is here.”

The door unlocked, and the witch stumbled towards me. I grabbed her arm roughly, making no effort to be gentle.

Now, the other prisoners seemed to come to life.

“Your Majesty!” one yelled.

“Take me, too!”

A whisper, “Please.”

“Death is better than this place.”

Ignoring them all, I dragged Koleta behind me.

“Night is here; death has come; betrayal is in the air,” she sang in that irritating voice.

Up, up, up, we went. The witch babbled on and on and on, repeating the same three sentences. The moment we were out of Ravenwood Dungeon, I shadowed us into a small study on the castle’s first floor.

“Night is here, death has—”

I slapped my hand against Koleta’s mouth. “Enough of that,” I hissed, my nails digging into her face and drawing blood. “I get it. I’ve been betrayed. The question is, can you help me?”

Koleta was a powerful witch. Her imprisonment by King Renwick, the vampire who’d held the Eleytan throne before me, had begun a century before my Making. She’d been caught participating in several nefarious activities before being placed in the cells beneath Castle Sanguis.

The witch tilted her head, her eyes taking on a knowing gleam. “So it’s true. The humans have rebelled?”

Every time someone brought up the Freedom Revolution, my blood boiled. A storm raged within me. Betrayal was bitter in the back of my mouth. I needed blood. Tonight.

I snarled. "Yes."

The witch wasn't shocked. She didn't even flinch. She just nodded sagely, as though I'd told her it was snowing.

"It was foretold," Koleta said. "I knew you'd come to me."

Shadows slipped from my hands, darkening the room. "Can you help me?" The words tasted like sawdust as I forced them out of my lips, but I had to ask. There had to be a way to stop the rebels and ensure my claim on the throne went uncontested until the end of time.

"I could be persuaded to assist you," was the witch's response.

My lips curled. "I want to destroy them all," I told her. "Every traitorous one."

Especially Nicolas.

A macabre smile danced across the witch's skeletal face. "Then yes, you've come to the right person. Night is here; death has come; betrayal is in the air." Koleta laughed madly. "I can do as you ask. There are several items I require."

"Tell me."

"First, a ruby..."

I STARED in the mirror as Koleta's words echoed in my mind.

Night is here; death has come; betrayal is in the air.

The ruby around my neck was so dark, it was almost black. I grabbed it, squeezing tightly.

"I will find them," I promised the jewel. "And when I do, blood will flow freely, and you will bathe in it until you shine like a crimson sun."

And then, no one would ever cross me again.

Rays of Sunlight
❧

LUNA

The ice caverns were a never-ending maze of creaking ice, cold winds, and prohiberis. So much prohiberis. The walls, the floor, and even the stalactites were made of the black substance.

My magic was quiet, the shadows were nowhere to be seen, and I couldn't draw my wings out of my back no matter how much I tried. All I had left were my fangs.

And Sebastian.

I wasn't sure what I would do if he hadn't been by my side through this. But he wasn't his normal self. He was quiet, brooding, and the Binding Mark was silent. Every so often, he grimaced, but whenever I asked him what was wrong, he insisted it was nothing.

He was lying to me. It didn't take me long to realize he was hiding the pain of the summons. I wasn't sure how he was blocking me from feeling his pain—perhaps sheer stubbornness—but this wasn't the moment to ask.

Not for the first time, I cursed myself for falling. It was my fault we were in this situation. The summons was a small nudge at the back of my mind, but I imagined it was much worse for him. It only made me move faster through the tunnels.

We had to get back to Lightriver Abbey.

THE FIRST RAY of sunlight breaking into the tunnel was little more than a distant spark of yellowed light, but it gave me the strength to continue. I

replayed Genevieve's directions until I was certain of what to do next.

Please, Isvana, let it be midday when we arrive.

I wasn't sure when I started thinking about Isvana as my goddess. Perhaps it was around the same time she'd come to me in my dream that wasn't a dream. Either way, she was mine now.

Soon, those sparks morphed into small shards of sunshine. Hope swirled within me, strengthening me.

We turned one final corner, and then, we were there. Outside, the shining sun illuminated a clear blue sky and dozens of snow-capped mountains. The scent of crisp air filled me, and I inhaled deeply, appreciating the fresh air.

Sebastian groaned. "Thank the gods." He leaned against the ice, and flashes of pain came through the Binding Mark for the first time since we'd fallen.

"Is it the summons?"

He grunted.

My brows furrowed, and I tore my gaze away from the cave entrance to meet his eyes. I gasped, and my heart lodged in my throat. Looking back at me were two bottomless pits of pain.

It was worse than I thought.

"How bad is it?" I asked urgently.

Sebastian sucked in a breath. "Bad."

That he admitted it to me was an indicator of just how much pain he was in.

I pulled up my sleeve and offered him my wrist. "You should feed," I urged him. "Maybe it'll help."

The stubborn vampire shook his head. He slid down, leaning against the icy wall. "Don't worry about me, Luna. I'll be fine."

How could he ask me not to worry? Didn't he know he was my entire life? Asking me not to worry about him was like asking the sun not to shine.

Pointless.

That was a lot to say, though. In the end, I settled on, "I'll always worry about you, Sebastian."

He smiled softly and leaned his head against the wall. To others, he might have appeared relaxed, but I knew better. The slight grimace on his face and the furrow of his brows spoke to the pain pulsing through him. "Go on," he said. "I'll wait here."

As if he could do anything else. As it was, I would be pulling the Tether

to the limits, moving to the far reaches of the distance we were allotted.

“Fine.” I sighed. Crouching beside Sebastian, I took off the satchel and placed it beside him. I brushed my lips over his, and then I whispered, “Keep this safe for me?”

“Of course.”

Before I could rise, his hand laced around my neck, and he pulled me back towards him. His mouth claimed mine in an urgent, bruising, passionate kiss that woke every part of me.

When it ended, leaving me with tingling lips, those pain-filled eyes searched mine. “Come back to me, Sunwalker.”

“Always,” I promised.

It was time. Holding the shining moonstone in my right hand, I stood and headed toward the sunlight. Isvana’s blessing, the dark magic of the moon that kept all vampires alive, urged me to stop and stay in the safety of the shadows, but I did not obey.

My heart raced within my chest as I stood feet away from the entrance of the cave. On one side, shadows and darkness remained, untouched by the sunlight. On this side, I was safe. On the other, the ice glimmered as though it was embedded with hundreds of diamonds.

A flutter of fear rose within me, and my blood chilled. Vampires weren’t meant to go in the sun. It went against the very core of our beings. We were creatures of the moon.

I refused to let fear defeat me. I’d already charged into the sunlight once without considering the consequences.

Now, the situation was more dire than ever.

Still, I didn’t move.

“Luna.” My name was like music on Sebastian’s tongue, and I glanced over my shoulder at him. His hand was pressed against his temples, but his gaze was strong as he looked straight at me. “You can do this.”

His encouragement was exactly what I needed. Tightening my grip around the moonstone, I drew in a deep breath and stepped over the line.

Warmth blanketed me as the sunlight welcomed me into its embrace. My skin heated, and a smile crept onto my face. At the same time, the song of my shadows returned. It was a dark symphony, a low, steady hum, a welcome tune filling my soul.

The prohiberis was gone.

My magic was back, and already, I felt stronger than before.

“Thank Isvana.” Making the same religious gesture across my chest that I’d seen others make, I turned in a slow circle.

The last time I’d Sunwalked, there hadn’t been time to appreciate the sunshine. I’d been so focused on planting the seed that I hadn’t realized Sebastian had followed me until it was too late. His agony-filled cries as the sun burned the flesh off his bones were forever seared in my mind.

He’d explained that sun-burnings were the worst way for vampires to die, but I hadn’t truly realized the depth of how bad it was until I witnessed it with my eyes. Now, I understood.

But Sebastian had survived. I got to him in time, and my blood had revived him, even though he’d been moments away from death. That was one of the first times the Tether had been a blessing between us. Again, when Queen Marguerite had incapacitated me during the fight with Bertrand, the Tether saved us.

Even though it had been forced upon us, it was no longer a burden or something to be feared. Instead, the Tether was a connection that strengthened us. A special kind of power came from working within the bonds others placed upon us, a strength I had never before known.

And now, as I stood beneath the sun, I tilted up my head and let the light warm my skin. Like a lover, its touches danced across my face, leaving heated tingles in its wake. Had the sun always felt this good? Had anyone ever appreciated its golden touch as much as I did right now?

I would argue that no one in the history of the world understood my joy. I was a flower blooming in the spring, bursting through the snow after a long, endless winter.

When I’d been sold into marriage, I had thought my life was over. I thought I’d be living in the dark forever and never see the sun again.

I’d never been so happy to be proven wrong.

Basking in the sunshine, I extended my hand and unfurled my fingers. The moonstone was light in my palm, the size of a quail egg, and as bright as the queen’s ruby. As soon as I exposed it to the light, a scintillating scarlet flash erupted. My shadows sang, and a rightness filled me.

Sending a prayer of thanks to the moon goddess that this task was done and could be crossed off the list, I turned around. “Let’s...”

My voice trailed off, and my eyes widened.

“Sebastian!” I yelled.

He was slumped over, his eyes shut as he gripped the satchel to his chest.

Blood soaked through his tunic onto the ice beneath him. The Binding Mark between us burned. Another scream ripped out of me as I ran toward him.

As soon as I stepped back into the cave, my magic disappeared. I didn't have time to worry about that, though. Sebastian was the only thing on my mind.

Dropping to my knees in front of him, I shook his shoulders. "Sebastian!" There was no response. Nothing at all. He was unconscious.

Tears pricked at my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. "No, you can't do this to me. You can't leave me here."

I pulled up his shirt, a strangled cry filling the otherwise silent cave. A wound several inches long stretched across his side, where a piece of ice had lodged itself in his flesh.

How had he hidden this from me?

I went to pull out the ice before I realized he must have left it in for fear of not healing fast enough.

"Damn it, you stubborn vampire!" We could have talked about this and made a plan. I could have helped him.

It was too late for plans now, though. The *lub-dub* of his heart was so faint that I almost missed it.

I had to act quickly.

Pulling up my sleeve, I raised my wrist to my mouth and bit. The burn of my fangs breaking flesh barely registered through the fog of panic, and the moment blood hit my tongue, I lowered my wrist to his mouth.

The first red drop landed on his lip, hovering there for a moment.

"Please," I whispered. "Don't die on me."

After the longest second of my life, his tongue darted out, and he licked the blood. "More," he rasped.

"Take it all." I moved, placing my wrist in his mouth.

The pull of his lips against my skin was desperate, almost feverish. He drank and drank and drank. All I could do was stare at him as the color slowly returned to his face.

How many times could one cheat Death before it claimed its prize?

Even as the question appeared in my mind, the answer swiftly followed. I would never let death win. If it stole Sebastian from me, I would follow him into death's dark embrace and wrench him back. We were a pair, the two of us. Where he went, I would follow. Nothing, not even the end of life, could pull us apart.

Only once Sebastian pulled his fangs out of my wrist did he look at me. My skin didn't heal, but that was the least of my worries.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I need to heal," he groaned. "The prohiberis... it's blocking everything but the summons."

As if confirming his statement, an all-too-familiar pulse ran through my head.

"Once the sun goes down—"

"We can't wait for sunset," he said. "We need to get out of here."

"What?" I shook my head, gripping his hand. "We can't! The sun will kill you."

He shook his head weakly. "I won't make it, Luna."

"Don't say that!"

How could he say that? Didn't he know how much he meant to me—how much I needed him to live?

"It's time." He coughed. "You'll have to shadow us through the Void the moment we are out of the cave."

My heart raced. What he was asking me to do would hurt him, and he was already in pain.

"But even in that time, the light will burn you," I argued desperately. There had to be another way. I was a scientist. Why couldn't I think of something?

"It doesn't matter." Pain-filled eyes met mine. "We have to go."

My heart raced as I desperately ran through various scenarios in my head. The problem was, I couldn't think of a single thing we could do that wouldn't hurt him.

In the end, I was forced to admit he was right.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, already anticipating the pain he would endure.

"It'll just be a moment."

A very painful moment.

Hating every single thing about this horrible plan, I pushed myself onto shaky legs and picked up the satchel. Making sure we had the three items, I offered him my hand and helped him to his feet.

"Alright, but I'm going first." That way I could summon the shadows and attempt to block the sun before he moved into it.

"Taking charge, are you darling?" His voice was jesting, but he winced as more blood soaked through his tunic.

“Yes,” I said firmly.

Part of me wondered if we should try soul sharing again. Maybe that magic would be enough to help Sebastian heal. I didn’t want to take the risk. What if it hurt him? I would never forgive myself.

No, the best thing to do was to get him back to Lightriver Abbey.

“Go.” He gave me a small push toward the cave entrance before leaning against the ice. “I believe in you.”

His faith in me gave me the strength to step back into the light.

This time, I had no desire to enjoy the sun’s embrace. I moved quickly, exhaling the moment I was out of the prohiberis’s reach. I called on my shadows, and they responded immediately, bounding like eager puppies wanting to play. Allowing them to flood out of me, I built a wall of darkness between me and the sun. Pouring shadows into it, I worked until the barrier was nearly opaque.

A groan came from inside the cave, and I looked over my shoulder. Sebastian had inched forward. His face was drained of color, and the scent of blood filled the air.

“Ready?” I asked.

He nodded, sweat beading on his forehead. “Let’s get this over with.”

My entire body was on pins and needles as Sebastian took a step towards me, then two. He kept his hand on the ice wall, steadying himself as he approached the light.

For a moment, I held onto hope that my barrier of shadows would be enough to protect him. Maybe, by some small mercy from the gods, this would work.

That grain of hope shattered the moment he stepped into the sun. His skin sizzled as the light fell upon it, and he shouted. It was like his skin was being flayed from his bones. The sound cleaved my heart in two, and I gasped, grabbing him.

“Hold on,” I begged him. “Don’t die on me.”

In response, he roared.

My breaths were shallow as I drew on my magic as quickly as I dared. Yanking us into the Void, my head spun. I gripped Sebastian so hard that I was worried I’d hurt him. The moment we were out of the sun, Sebastian’s cry morphed into deep, ragged breaths.

Picturing our room in the abbey, I dragged us through the darkness as quickly as I dared. The voices screamed at me, but I ignored them. Every

second spent in that empty place felt like a lifetime, but we eventually landed on the stone floor. The shadows fell away, and I got a good look at Sebastian.

I moaned, the sound mangled and desperate, as I got a good look at his injuries.

*A Herd of Rabid Fledglings Couldn't
Stop Me*
❧

SEBASTIAN

Being set ablaze by the sun, even for a second, was akin to torture. But somehow, being burned alive and the pain from my wound was not nearly as bad as the never-ending summons pulsing away in my brain.

The moment we were out of the Void, my shadows returned. I yanked the ice out of my side, letting it fall to the ground in a bloody mess. Agony radiated through my body, but at least the wound would heal.

That did nothing to mute the queen's call, though. Even now, she haunted me. I couldn't wait to break this bond. She might have Made me, but she was nothing to me anymore. I hated her with the fire of a thousand suns. I wanted to see her die a long, drawn-out, and painful death.

"Sebastian," Luna whispered.

I looked over at her. "Yes?"

"Drink this." She handed me the tonic. I hadn't even seen her pick it up.

Uncorking the vial, I downed the citrus liquid in one go. Within a few heartbeats, the pounding of the summons faded. I sighed, dropping the empty container on the bed. "Thank you."

"Of course." Luna raised her hand and cupped my cheek. Her eyes searched mine, the depth of concern in them so vast that I could barely breathe. She whispered, "You need to feed."

Now that the summons was muted and the wound in my side was healing together, I felt more like myself. "Only if you do, too."

Luna hadn't eaten since before the fall, and I knew she was hungry. It was my job to worry about her and take care of her.

"Now?" She frowned, an all-too-familiar stubborn glint entering her eyes. "I won't. You're in far worse shape than me."

Sighing, I prepared to argue with my beautiful, yet frustrating, wife. Then my gaze dropped, and I caught sight of my arm. I drew in a sharp breath. She was right. Blisters ran down every exposed part of my skin, and even though the immediate pain of the queen's call was gone, I wasn't exactly the picture of health.

Realizing she wasn't going to give up, I dropped onto the cot and sighed. "Fine, you win. I'll feed first."

Luna smiled and came to sit next to me. She pulled up her sleeve, offering me her wrist. "Drink," she said softly. "I won't even tease you about how nice it felt to hear you admit I was right."

She lied.

The moment I bit her, her free hand traced imaginary patterns on my chest. All the while, she took great pleasure in telling me how nice it was to hear me admit she was right. Luna had much to say on the topic, and she talked until I felt normal again.

I withdrew my fangs, licking her arm clean before kissing her. "Thank you, darling."

She smiled. "Always."

I raised a brow and tilted my neck. "Now it's your turn."

This time, I wouldn't be taking no for an answer.

She pursed her lips, studying me. "I have a better idea."

I barely tamped down a growl. Whatever this idea was, it had better involve her feeding. "Oh?"

"You're feeling alright?"

"I'm fine." I was a three-hundred-year-old vampire. Healing was not difficult. "You need to feed, Luna."

I wasn't going to let this go.

"I will." Instead of biting me, though, Luna stood. She took my hand and tugged me off the bed. "Come with me."

Confusion ran through me as I followed Luna out of the room. The hallways were empty and curtains were drawn over the windows.

"What are you planning?" I asked as she led me down the vacant corridor.

"A quick excursion."

"Princess," I growled.

She chuckled. "Don't worry, oh protective one. I'll still let you take care of me. But Odette mentioned this place when we were running our

experiments. Since it seems like we have a while before anyone else wakes up, I thought we could explore a bit.”

“You *will* feed,” I told her.

“I promise,” she assured me.

I squeezed her hand. “Then lead the way.”

I DIDN'T KNOW what I was expecting, but this wasn't it. Luna led me down two sets of stone stairs before she pushed open an unmarked wooden door. The scent of salt reached my nose as thick tendrils of steam crawled toward us.

Grinning, she stepped aside to reveal a massive bathing room. My jaw fell open. I had no idea this was beneath the abbey. The bath itself was the size of a lake. On one side was a small waterfall; on the other, the water disappeared into what I assumed was an underground river. Thick clouds of steam hovered above the water, making sight difficult.

“According to Odette, Lightriver Abbey was originally built here because of this space,” Luna said, gesturing around us. “It's connected to the cave she uses as a laboratory. The waters are rumored to have healing qualities.”

I drew her close and nuzzled her neck. “Is that so?”

She glanced over her shoulder, her twinkling eyes slowly undressing me. “Very healing,” she said. “Since everyone is sleeping, this seems like the perfect moment to conduct... research.”

My body tightened at the suggestiveness of her words. “Say less, darling,” I growled. “Let's go.”

This seemed like the perfect way to spend a few hours alone before the world fell apart. Something told me we wouldn't have an opportunity like this for a while.

“I'm glad you approve,” Luna smirked. “This wouldn't have been nearly as much fun without you.”

I pulled the door shut behind us, turning the lock so we wouldn't be disturbed. “I assume your research involves several steps?” I asked, blatantly eyeing Luna's backside as she moved ahead of me.

“Of course, it does.” She laughed. “What kind of scientist would I be otherwise?”

My lips twitched, and my muscles tightened in eager anticipation. Every time I'd participated in my wife's experiments, I enjoyed them immensely. "Tell me, darling, what would you have me do first?"

She stopped a few feet away from the water's edge. Her eyes glimmered, and she tugged on my tunic. "You should probably take this off. It doesn't seem conducive to the experiment."

The garment was on the ground in a flash. "Anything else?"

Her fingers went to the waistband of my trousers. "These too."

I dropped them next to my tunic, taking my undergarments off at the same time for efficiency.

A cool breeze ran over me, but I did not move. Luna's eyes crawled over me slowly, but nothing was threatening in her gaze. Love, admiration, and desire pounded through the Binding Mark.

"What next, love?" I glanced at the bath. Up close, it looked even more inviting. "Am I the only one getting in the water?"

"No," she said. "In order for this experiment to be properly conducted, I think I need to join you."

"And you need to feed," I reminded her. "That, too."

Her hands went to the hem of her shirt, and she pulled it over her head. My mouth dried, and suddenly, standing still was much more difficult as she slowly removed each item of her clothing.

Luna took her time undressing, each movement seemingly designed to drive me insane with want. Eventually, each garment joined mine on the floor until she stood naked before me. She was stunning. It didn't seem to matter how many times I saw her like this because awe continually filled me at the sight of her. She was perfect in every way, and she was *mine*.

"Gods, I love you," I groaned.

Luna smiled, saying the words back. She went over to a shelf I hadn't noticed before, grabbing two massive towels, a bottle of shampoo, and a bar of soap. Her hips moved with every step, and she took her time strolling to the edge of the bath.

Outlined in violet, Luna dipped her toe in the steaming water. She sighed contentedly, the sound going straight to my core. She lowered her body into the bath, dipping her head underneath before rising and pushing her wet hair out of her face. "You didn't think I'd pass this up, did you? This is exactly what I needed."

As if she knew I was waiting for her invitation, Luna took her time

dunking her head again. Her lips tilted up into a teasing smile as she swam to the middle.

Treading water, she turned and met my gaze. “Come in and help me wash my hair?”

“A herd of rabid Fledglings couldn’t stop me,” I growled, practically leaping into the water.

It was hot, but not uncomfortably so. Not that it mattered. It could have been boiling tar, and I would still join her. As soon as I lowered my body into the water, knots that had been forming for days loosened beneath the heat. I groaned, “Gods.”

“That good?” Luna chuckled.

In response, I dove under the water and swam towards her. I’d grown up near the Black Sea and had many years of experience swimming. Reaching out, I grabbed her hips and pulled her towards me as I stood. The water came to my hips, and the stones were smooth beneath my feet.

A squeal filled the air as I pressed my lips against hers. When she was thoroughly kissed, I held her close. “It’s a very nice surprise, Luna, but the bath isn’t what makes me happy.”

She tilted her head. “Oh?”

“It’s you.” I kissed her again because I couldn’t help myself. Luna’s hands went around my shoulders, and she moved as close as she could get, never breaking our embrace. My tongue ran over the seam of her mouth, and she moaned. Our kiss deepened, becoming a tangle of tongues and teeth as we reveled in being with each other.

When I touched the tip of a fang, a sound of pure longing burst from her lips. Shadows slipped out of her, and she moved closer to me.

More, Sebastian, she murmured through our mental connection.

I chuckled, enjoying the way she pressed herself firmly against me. *What about your experiment?*

Consider this additional research, she said without skipping a beat.

Happily.

Striding over to the side of the bath, I brushed my lips over Luna’s mouth, her neck, and her shoulders. I took my time going lower, my mouth trailing over her chest as she squirmed against me.

“Please,” she whispered, her voice hoarse with want. Steam rose all around her, and with her slicked-back hair and drops of water sliding down her, she resembled a siren.

My siren.

How could I deny her plea?

Shifting us both so one arm was wrapped around Luna's hips, I held her firmly against the side of the bath. With my free hand, I explored her body. My hand inched down her front before dipping beneath the water. I didn't get too far, though, before I paused.

She moaned my name.

"What's wrong, darling?" I asked teasingly. My lips met hers in a lazy kiss as if I wasn't close to exploding from need. But this, being with her, taking my time with her, was the highlight of my day, my week, my year. Feeling the way she tried to get closer and closer, hearing the soft sounds slipping from her mouth, made the waiting worth it. "I thought you had research to conduct? Something about healing waters..."

My hand slipped down another inch, her skin soft beneath my fingers, and she gasped. "Forget about the entire experiment, Sebastian. Just don't stop."

That was the last thing on my mind. Instead, I held her up, my lips trailing a path over her skin, as my other hand dipped lower, lower, lower.

"Sebastian," she breathed. "*Please.*"

I captured her mouth in a claiming, bruising, world-ending kiss. "I will never leave you wanting, Luna."

Giving up on teasing her, I kept kissing her as my fingers swept over her. She was so soft, so beautiful, so *mine*.

She clung to me, her racing heart echoing in my ears as she broke apart for me. When her pleasure crested and her screams echoed through the bath, I held her close. When her body was limp and lifeless, her head resting on my shoulder as pure delight ran through the Binding Mark, I swam us back to where we'd first entered the water.

Luna lifted her head, glancing at me quizzically. "What are you doing?" She wiggled suggestively. "I thought we were going to..." Her voice trailed off, but her hand moved down my body, making her intentions extremely clear.

I caught her hand, setting her on the small ledge that ran beneath the water and acted as a bench.

"We will," I said, my voice hoarse. "First, let me take care of you. I haven't forgotten about your hunger."

My needs were secondary to hers. They always had been and always

would be. I would never put myself first because how could I be happy if she was in need?

Luna didn't argue... much.

Once I'd convinced her to listen, she sat with her back to me and held onto the side of the bath. I had the perfect view of the water lapping against the swell of her ass as I ran the shampoo through her hair. She hummed as I worked through her tresses, and contentment came through the Binding Mark. Shadows flowed out of us both, darkening the room until even the faintest traces of colored light vanished. It didn't matter, though.

We were together.

These moments were the ones I cherished. I hadn't known love could heal like this, that it would scrounge around in your soul, pick up all the broken pieces—even the ones you thought were forever lost—and put them back together. But it did, and it made my life all the sweeter.

After Luna rinsed her hair, I took the bar of soap and washed every single inch of her perfect body. Then, she turned. Her eyes were dark with desire, but there was a shyness in her voice as she asked, "Can I do you?"

A purr rumbled through my chest at the offer.

Shyness forgotten; Luna laughed. "I'll take that as a yes. Come here, Sebastian."

I moved towards her, taking her spot on the bench and setting my arms on the ledge. She hummed as she moved behind me, her chest purring along with mine. Her hands carefully ran through my shorter hair, washing it tenderly before she picked up the bar of soap.

"Hold still," she whispered, kissing the shell of my ear.

I did as she asked, though doing so became more and more difficult with each passing moment. The soap traveled over my shoulders, down my chest, and beneath the water. Luna was extremely thorough in her efforts to clean me, making sure to get every single part of me. By the time she was done, I was fairly certain I'd die if I didn't have her soon. The most exquisite agony filled me. Every breath she took, every brush of her fingers against me, fueled my fire.

I needed her.

Dunking my head beneath the water to rinse off any residual soap, I turned and scooped her up in my arms.

She squealed. "What are you doing?"

I kissed her. "You'll see."

She'd had her fun. Now, though, it was time I took care of her.

Water sluiced off us as I walked us out of the baths, ignoring the towels on the floor. The air was warm, steam rising around us and drying us off as I claimed Luna's mouth. She made a surprised sound, but her shock quickly gave way to something else as she wrapped her legs around me.

We kissed and kissed and kissed until our purrs echoed through the baths.

Walking us over to a wall, I lifted my mouth from hers and tilted my head. At the same time, I pressed her back against the wall, using my hips to support her.

"Bite me, Luna," I whispered. I hadn't forgotten that she needed to eat.

Her eyes darkened, and she licked her fangs.

I thought she would argue, but her mouth went to my neck instead. She licked from the base of my throat all the way to my ear.

"Alright," she said.

If I thought my muscles were tense before, now everything was just on this side of being too much. But I wouldn't rush her. I forced myself to remain still and wait for Luna. We'd been through so much already, and if teasing me made her feel better, I would let her do it all day.

Eventually, her fangs grazed my throat. "I love you, Sebastian."

Then she bit. The moment her fangs broke my skin, warmth flooded through me. The soft sounds she made as she drank, slowly pulling my blood into her, invigorated me like nothing else.

The magic tying us together was stronger than ever. A thought struck me. Whether it was inspired by Luna's mouth on my throat or the strength of our connection, I wasn't certain. Either way, the idea seemed solid. While Luna replenished her strength, I dove deep within myself, seeking the Tether.

Unlike the first time I sought that red rope binding us, I found it quickly. The Tether's light was intense, and it radiated like a star. The moment I was close, I reached out for it with a tentative hand.

This time, it did not disappear.

I grabbed the crimson strands, holding on with all my might. Energy jolted through me like a thousand bolts of lightning. A floodgate opened between us. This time, there was a permanence to the connection. This path wasn't going anywhere.

Shadows, darkness, and night ran through me, but that wasn't all. There was also light. Luna's essence intertwined with mine, threading together. Strands of light and dark twisted until they formed a sturdy rope. Currents of

power were a raging river as they streamed between us. It was overwhelming, the joining of our magic.

I pulled my eyes open. My heart pounded. The Tether was just as strong as ever. Stronger, even, if that was possible. Sparks danced beneath my skin, my shadows whirled, and magic coursed through me.

Luna lifted her mouth from my neck, her eyes shining. She raised her wrist. The Tether was an iridescent crimson line running through her Binding Mark.

“I can feel you,” she whispered in awe. “Your shadows, your darkness... everything.” A hoarse laugh escaped her. “Oh, the research we need to conduct.”

At this moment, I couldn't think about science. Between the sensations of Luna's naked body pressed against mine and the Tether connecting us, I felt more alive than I had in a long time. Every beat of my heart, every breath in my lungs, every pulse of my shadows was *more* than before.

Luna wiggled in my arms. “I need you, Sebastian.”

A growl rumbled through me. “Gods. I need you, too.”

Holding her close, I moved us to the middle of the floor. Toeing the towels, I maneuvered them until they covered the ground, forming a makeshift bed. Only then did I lay Luna down, covering her with my body. The Tether glowed, our magic flowing freely between us and illuminating the space.

Then, beneath the glow of our binding, we moved as one. We connected in every way, and my dark soul sang as rightness filled me.

A Bond to Break



SEBASTIAN

The next few hours flew by as we experimented with soul sharing. Using the Tether was easier than ever. In true form, the entire experience delighted Luna, and she chattered on and on about all the ways we needed to test the magic binding us.

I let her talk, just happy to be in her presence. We were both alive, which sometimes felt miraculous. Between Isvana's plan, the upcoming ritual to break my bond with the queen, and the soul sharing, it seemed we were finally on the right track.

The sun had completely set by the time we shadowed back to our room.

I grabbed another vial, downing the cloyingly sweet tonic while Luna grabbed the satchel. We didn't need to speak—we were still completely in tune with each other.

Hand in hand, we went in search of Genevieve.

It did not take long to find the priestess. She was exiting Isvana's temple and speaking with two other vampires when she saw us. She stopped, dipping into a low curtsy.

"Your Highnesses," Genevieve said once I'd given her leave to rise. "I didn't realize you'd returned."

"We got back while everyone was asleep," Luna answered. Her grip tightened on my hand, and a burst of apprehension came through the bond. "Tell me, Marius, is he..."

"He still sleeps," the priestess said reassuringly.

Luna exhaled. "Thank the gods."

Genevieve added, "Odette is hopeful that he will wake when we administer the potion tomorrow night." She glanced at me. "Were you

successful?”

I nodded. “We were.”

Momentary shock filtered through the priestess’s expression before it changed to admiration. “Alright. I wasn’t sure you’d be able to do it, but clearly, I underestimated you.”

Her lack of belief in us was a little insulting. I was the prince of this realm, after all. But this wasn’t the time to focus on that.

Genevieve raised her hand and signaled to a black-haired witch who was walking past. “Beaufort?”

He looked up immediately. “Yes, Priestess?”

“We have need of your skills if you have the time.”

“Of course.” Beaufort nodded. “Whatever you need.”

The priestess smiled. “Perfect. You’ll need a few things.” She rattled off a list, and the witch disappeared into the abbey. Turning back to us, Genevieve said, “Let’s go. It seems we have a bond to break.”

GENEVIEVE BROUGHT us to a large storage room in the abbey’s basement. Humming under her breath, she moved confidently, rearranging boxes until the space seemed to satisfy her. Other than the storage crates, the room was completely empty. Several long rectangular windows lined the top half of two walls, letting in faint streams of yellowed moonlight.

A knock came at the door. “Come in,” the priestess called out.

Beaufort slipped inside. He carried a square, folded-up table under his arm, a box of salt, and his grimoire. He set up in the middle of the room, his movements illuminated by thin strips of moonlight.

“Please place the objects you retrieved here.” The priestess pointed to Beaufort’s table.

Luna did as she was asked, laying out the feather, the vial of blood, and the still-glowing moonstone on the surface. After a moment, she stepped back and laced her hand through mine.

I’m scared, she admitted through the bond.

I drew her against my chest. *It’ll be okay.*

This wouldn’t be the end. It was but one step in our journey. We would persevere through this.

A few minutes passed as Genevieve and Beaufort conferred in the corner. Several times, the witch looked at us, his gaze assessing. Of the four of us, he looked the oldest. If he'd been mortal, I would have put him at six or seven decades of life. For a witch, though, he could have seen twice as many centuries as me. Like many others in the Four Kingdoms, witches Matured when they reached their twenties.

I kept my eyes on him. I did not know him, and though the Second Order of Isvana's Chosen had shown themselves trustworthy, I would never let my guard down again.

"You should sit down, Prince," Beaufort said eventually. "Severing the bond will not be easy on your body."

"Thank you, but I'll stand."

His brow rose. "Alright. Have it your way."

Before we went any further, I had to confirm something. "Why are you doing this?" I asked Genevieve and Beaufort. "Why are you helping us do this? You have to know it's not exactly... safe."

That was an understatement. By doing this, they were effectively painting a target on their backs. If Queen Marguerite ever found out they helped us, she would destroy them.

Beaufort and Genevieve shared a look, but the witch spoke first.

"We may not be warriors here, but we have witnessed many things over the years. Lives lost for inexplicable reasons, deaths that could have been prevented, and laws that were on the wrong side of kindness. Many in Eleyta don't care, but we do," he said.

That made sense. Queen Marguerite wasn't known for being a gentle ruler.

"When the Wasting Illness appeared a decade ago, we reached out to the queen for help. It originated here," Genevieve added. "Again and again, we sent missives requesting her assistance. She never responded, not even when the humans began to die from the illness. She just... left them." Her eyes hardened. "Vampires were humans, once. Isvana blessed us, but we were meant to look after the mortals. Our relationship was supposed to be symbiotic, but the queen has forgotten that. She has lost her mortality."

These words were treason.

What do you think? I asked Luna through our bond.

She shifted, eyeing the two of them for a moment before nodding. *We can trust them.*

I agree.

“I’m sorry for not helping earlier,” I told them. “I’d heard of the illness, but the queen kept me so busy, I never realized how bad it had gotten.”

Not until Luna and I married, and she told me about Marius.

“I understand.” The priestess chewed on her lip for a moment before adding, “There’s something else you should know. A few years ago, a visiting Fortune Elf Saw the future and shared their vision with us.”

I tilted my head. “Oh?” That, in and of itself, wasn’t odd. Fortune Elves were known through the Four Kingdoms for their cryptic visions. Luna and I had been in the middle of such occurrences more than once.

Genevieve continued, “I was told to be on the lookout for a halfling with the Wasting Illness. The child was a harbinger of change, and once he arrived, I was warned someone would need my help soon after.” She met my gaze. “You might say we’ve been waiting for this for a while.”

They know of the prophecy, Luna whispered.

This changed things. If they knew and didn’t tell anyone, I was certain we could trust the Second Order. A weight lifted off my chest, and for the first time since asking Genevieve about the key, I could take a proper breath.

I said, “Thank you for being willing to help us.”

“Of course.” Genevieve bowed her head. “We will assist and shield you both for as long as we can. Some have already been at work in this endeavor.” She exchanged a knowing look with the witch. “You may remember meeting Beaufort’s brothers?”

I narrowed my eyes, trying to place her words, before memories came flooding back.

The twin witches from the queen’s third trial. Now that she mentioned it, I could see a passing family resemblance.

“Those were your brothers?” I asked the witch incredulously.

Beaufort nodded. “Frederic and Alfonse are my younger brothers. Frederic is... hardhearted, but Alfonse sees the light.”

I remembered the twins. One of them, Alfonse, had guided me toward picking the right plant. He was the reason Luna and I were alive.

“Fascinating,” I murmured.

It was like a veil had been placed over my eyes, and it was now lifting. Was it possible others knew of the prophecy? Were there others who would celebrate the queen’s demise?

“If doing this means the queen’s iron grip on the throne may be loosened,

it is worth it,” Beaufort said, rapping his knuckles on the table. “I, and many others, believe Eleyta could benefit from a more kindhearted ruler.”

Part of me warned me to be careful because this entire conversation was treason, but I squashed those thoughts. I claimed no more ties to Queen Marguerite and her horrible rule. If it was treasonous, so be it. Sometimes, a little treason was necessary.

Placing my hand over my heart, I bowed my head. “I swear to you; we will do everything in our power to help them.”

“We know.” Genevieve smiled. “That’s why we’re helping you.”

Beaufort pulled out a pocket watch and glanced at it with a frown before he slid it away. “It’s time. We need to begin.”

“Alright.” I turned, kissing Luna softly. It was a kiss of strength, of hope, of ardor. If this was our last moment, I wanted it to be good—audience be damned.

She squeezed my hand. “I’ll be here the whole time. Once this works—”

“If it works,” I corrected. There was a chance it didn’t, and I didn’t want her to get her hopes up.

It seemed it was too late for that, though. She shook her head, placing her finger on my lips and quieting me. “*Once* it works, we’ll wake Marius. Then we can plan out our next steps.”

Killing the queen.

I never would’ve imagined this would be my future. A year ago, a decade ago, a century ago, I was living in darkness. Now, my entire life was different. Luna was my light, my jewel, my everything. She was a lantern in the darkness, illuminating everything she touched.

And she was mine.

“Okay,” I said around her finger. “Once the bond is broken, we’ll start thinking about what comes next.”

Stealing one final kiss, Luna moved a few feet away.

Beaufort stepped forward and canted his head. “Last chance to sit down, Prince. This is probably going to hurt.”

I clenched my jaw. “I can take the pain. Do whatever it takes, I want this bond gone.”

After that, things moved quickly. Soon, I stood in the middle of a salt circle while Beaufort strode around me three times. He held his hands out at his sides, and blue ribbons streamed out of him, swirling around me.

“Breaking the bond will not be easy,” the witch warned. “We may be here

for a while.”

“Understood,” I replied.

Luna pulled over a crate to the edge of the salt circle, and she sat. Her wings burst from her back. She held my gaze.

I'm here, Sebastian, she whispered through the bond. *I'm not going anywhere.*

“Isvana, Mother of vampires, Goddess of the Moon, Keeper of Health and Healing, we come to you today,” Beaufort intoned. “In the beginning, bonds were formed. Blood sustained. It provided. It was your gift to vampire-kind. Today, we ask that a bond be broken.”

He chanted, switching to another tongue as he pleaded with the goddess. His voice swelled, until his words were the only thing I could hear. The blue ribbons were a tornado, swirling around me and making it hard to see out.

The witch held out a hand in silent request, and Genevieve gave him the sunfire owl's feather. His fingers wrapped around it. His voice deepened. “Blood was spilled. Sacrifices were made. We beg you, Isvana, break the bond.” He drew in a deep breath and began the refrain again. “Blood was spilled...”

The air thickened like soup. Breathing was nearly impossible. Seconds ticked by in agonizing slowness. I was about to lose hope when the feather burst into flame.

“Fire!” Luna yelled. “Is that—”

“It's normal,” Genevieve assured her. “Beaufort knows what he's doing.”

A huff, then Luna mumbled, “Alright.”

Beaufort continued. With a swirl of his hand, he summoned an unseen wind into the room. Now nothing but ash, the feather rose in the wind, forming a spinning gray sphere.

The vial of wolf's blood followed suit. It, too, burst into flame, turned into ash, and spun next to the first sphere.

When Genevieve handed Beaufort the moonstone, something shifted in the room. Like the calm before a storm, a silent heaviness settled over us all.

The center of my chest tingled, the sensation spreading rapidly through my torso. At first, it was just uncomfortable. I could do this. I could stand strong while the bond was broken.

Beaufort's voice crested. Echoes of ancient power ran through his words, and those tingles exploded into something more. Something painful. Magic crawled through me, touching every single part of my body. My lungs

tightened, my heart raced in an effort to escape my chest, and my skin burned.

“Sebastian, are you okay?” Luna’s voice broke through the fog of hurt clouding my mind.

“I’m... fine,” I said through clenched teeth. Sweat beaded on my forehead, and I furred my fists. “Keep going.”

Beaufort nodded at me through the swirling magic. “This next part will not be easy, Prince.”

No, I was starting to see that. Maybe I should have sat when I had the chance. It was too late for that, though.

Within moments, the moonstone went the way of the feather and the wolf’s blood. An iridescent light filled the room.

Flames raced through me. I was no longer hurting, I was pain itself. From the top of my head to the tips of my toes, the bond tried to claw its way out of me. Fire was in my blood, my stomach, my limbs. Air burned as I struggled to breathe. My nerves were no more than sparks. Even my shadows betrayed me, heating until I was moments away from combusting into flame.

Beaufort brought his hands together in a resounding clap, and that fire became an inferno. Blackness edged my vision. My fangs ached, my head swam, and my knees trembled.

I was burning alive.

The last thing I heard was Luna’s scream.

Pain, Tears, and Blood
❧

MARGUERITE

“Tell me, Blair, do you like me?” I ran my fingers through the Favorite’s hair, guiding his movements as he ran his tongue over me, tasting me as I’d commanded him to.

He paused his movements, looking up at me with glazed-over eyes. “Of course, Queen Marguerite.” His voice was as dead as his eyes. “I would do anything for you. You are the rightful queen of Eleyta and the only one who can properly look after me.”

Usually, hearing my pets proclaim their undying love and devotion for me made me smile and infused me with a dose of something akin to happiness.

Now, it just served as a reminder of everything I had lost.

Blair went to return to his task, but suddenly, this was the last thing I wanted.

“Get off me,” I growled, pushing him away.

The Favorite stumbled back without a word, standing at the foot of the bed. He made no move to cover his nudity, instead staring blankly at me. “My Queen?”

What was my life coming to that I could no longer find solace with my pets?

“Get out!” I yelled.

I grabbed the crystal goblet from my bedside table and chucked it at his head. It missed, slamming into the wall and shattering into pieces. At this rate, I would run out of glassware.

Blair’s eyes widened, and he did as he was told. The door slammed shut behind him.

I groaned. Alone, again.

Drawing on a robe, I stood and pulled my hair out from underneath the material. My foot landed on a shard of crystal, and a stabbing pain like a dagger lanced through me. I sucked in a breath but made no effort to take the offending piece out.

Pain was good. It was necessary. It reminded me that I was still here, even after all these years. Still alive.

Besides, pain meant tears. Tears meant blood. Blood meant power.

I reached for my ruby without thinking about it, letting the past take hold of me again.

“THIS WILL NOT BE EASY, Queen Marguerite.” Koleta circled me, her eyes wide and erratic.

Three days had passed since I’d removed her from Ravenwood Dungeon. It seemed that one could remove the witch from incarceration, but one couldn’t remove the insanity from the witch. Even now, I caught her humming that eerie lullaby under her breath.

She unsettled me and very little did that these days.

“I don’t care about easy,” I snapped. “I want this gods-damned revolution over with.”

When I found Nicolas, he would pay the ultimate price for his betrayal. He was wrong if he thought he could steal my throne from me. No one could take it from me, not even the human I’d invited into my bed. The moment he betrayed me, he signed his death warrant. He would be begging for death by the time I was done with him.

Koleta’s lips tilted up, and she cackled. The sound was like a cawing raven, and it did nothing to endear her to me. “I was hoping you’d say that. Do you have what I asked for?”

I nodded. “All the ingredients are in the storage room.”

“Excellent.” She smiled, showing off her blackened, broken teeth. “I assume you’re not squeamish in the presence of blood?”

I bared my fangs at the witch. “Not at all.” I could use some right about now.

Koleta laughed. “Wonderful. Lead the way.”

If this were any other person daring to speak to me like this, I would have ripped out their throat for their impertinence. But right now, Koleta was my only hope. It would all be worth it if she could do as she claimed and make a token of my strength that would render me unbeatable, ensuring I never lost my throne.

What was a little disrespect in the face of immeasurable power?

Grabbing her arm, I shadowed us through the Void to the hallway outside the storage room I'd commandeered for our efforts.

The vampire guarding the door dipped his head when he saw us. Triboulet was a mere foot soldier in my army, barely a decade past his Making, but he was loyal.

"Everything is as you left it, My Queen," he said.

"Thank you. We are not to be disturbed."

"Of course." Triboulet opened the door, and the witch and I stepped inside.

The first thing I smelled was the stink of an unwashed body. Beneath that, though, was the delicious smell of fear. A naked human male was bound and gagged to a chair in the corner of the room. An open wound ran across his chest, and blood oozed from the laceration, but other than that, he was in fairly good shape.

For now.

A wolfish grin crawled over my face as I turned to the witch. "Will this do? As you can see, I've procured the ruby, and this is one of the strongest-willed males my soldiers captured alive."

The prisoner was a rebel—one of the damned humans fighting in the so-called Freedom Revolution.

Koleta approached the prisoner. "He looks strong enough." Bending, she inhaled sharply and ran her tongue down his face, tasting him. "His fear is certainly powerful."

The human moaned, and a puddle grew underneath him as Koleta ran her nails over his skin. She ripped off his gag, biting his lip until blood beaded. She licked it, and a mangled cry slipped from his chapped lips.

The witch turned to me, her eyes gleaming. "He will be a wonderful first sacrifice."

The prisoner's eyes widened, and he found his voice, screaming. "No! Please, don't do this. I will do whatever you want, Queen Marguerite!"

I sneered at him. "What I want is the location of one rebel. I'm sure you

know who I'm talking about."

Blood drained from his face. "I'm sorry, Nicolas is in hiding. But I can tell you—"

"I don't care about anything else!" Waving a hand, shadows slipped from my palm and wrapped around the rebel's mouth, silencing him once again. "Let's get started, shall we?"

A knock came on the door, pulling me out of the past. "Your Majesty!"

Yanking the shard of crystal out of my foot, I watched the skin knit itself together before I grabbed a wrap dress and slid it over my body. Once I was clothed, I went to the door and pulled it open. "What?"

General Triboulet stood tall, his hand raised to knock again. He dropped his fist and dipped into a bow. "Good evening, My Queen."

I huffed. I didn't have time for pedantic pleasantries. My ruby was losing its power, and I was exhausted. "Get on with it, Triboulet," I snapped.

My schedule was full. Between finding my son, killing his wife, and recharging my Blood Ruby, I had little time for anything else.

"I'm afraid..." He paled, and he mumbled something under his breath.

I'd never seen the general like this. Unfortunately for him, whatever was going on with him would have to wait. I had far more important things to deal with than this.

"Spit it out!" I commanded him.

He gulped and whispered, "It's the humans... I... They're dying."

My eyes narrowed. "So what? Humans mean nothing. Besides, they breed like rabbits. I'm sure their numbers will replenish soon enough."

Honestly, who did he think I was? I did not have the time to deal with these types of things. Others looked after the humans, ensuring they did their jobs properly and were readily available whenever vampires needed to feed.

Triboulet took a step back, shaking his head. "This is different. The darkness is spreading, and humans are no longer reproducing as they once did. They are ill, My Queen."

"How many of them are sick?" We could afford to lose a few humans, and I was rapidly tiring of this conversation.

His eyes widened. "A-a-all of them, Your Majesty. Hollowfield and Calenth are both ghost towns," he said, referring to two human villages near the Koln Mountains. "The entire population contracted the Wasting Illness three weeks ago. Now they're dead."

I was still having trouble understanding why he thought I would care

about this. Humans were nothing but mortals with insignificant lifespans. There were so many of them. Far more than vampires. It seemed no matter how many died, more cropped up a few years later.

A headache was coming on. Great. Just what I needed. Rubbing my temples, I glared at the general. "What's your point?"

Triboulet opened and closed his mouth. "We need the humans, Your Majesty," he said slowly as if I were lacking intelligence. "For their blood."

Rage boiled within me, and my nostrils flared. I straightened, shadows slipping from my palms as my wings snapped out. "Don't speak to me like that!" I wanted to reach out and shake him. "I am not an idiot!"

The general trembled. "I didn't... I mean... I'm sorry."

Sorry.

He was sorry.

How many ridiculous, unimportant, lackluster apologies had I heard in my long life? How many times had people come to me spouting lies and asking for forgiveness, only to turn around and betray me at the first opportunity?

Apologies meant nothing.

I took a step towards Triboulet. To his credit, he did not quake. "I will only say this once." I sneered. "The humans don't matter. I could care less about them."

"Your Majesty?"

This male. Had he always been so dimwitted, or was this a recent development?

"Triboulet, you're walking on thin ice. You should think twice the next time you dare come to my quarters. Otherwise, you may find yourself as the next donor to my... cause." I tapped the ruby, raising a brow.

His eyes widened, and the acrid scent of fear leaked from his pores. He'd witnessed enough sacrifices to know exactly what I was referring to. He extended his neck in a show of submission and dipped into a low bow. "Understood, Your Majesty. It won't happen again."

"Good." I released the ruby. "Now, get out of here..."

My words ended in a strangled scream.

Something shifted within me. It was a turning, twisting, burning snapping of a rope. A severing. An end to something centuries old. A death that should never have come. It was the impossible made possible, the ruin of a connection, a betrayal so deep, it ripped me down to my core.

My lungs tightened, my eyes widened, and I gasped, stumbling back. My wings slammed into the wall, the pain not registering as an emptiness filled me. What was once full was now hollow.

“Queen Marguerite?” General Triboulet asked. “What’s wrong?”

No, no, no.

This was wrong.

This should be impossible.

“My Queen?”

I ignored Triboulet. Searching within myself, I sought the bond connecting me to my son. It was always there, ever since the night I Made him.

But it was gone. Vanished, like it had never existed at all. Like I hadn’t shared the gift of immortality and Made him into the prince he was.

“No!” I shrieked.

Somehow, I’d assumed this little jaunt with his wife was temporary. That after all this, once she was dead, maybe I would have my weapon back. That my son would return with his tail between his legs and realize the fault in his ways.

Now, the absolute wrongness of my assumption slammed into me.

He cut our bond. He severed our connection, spitting in my face. I sacrificed for him. I gave him a position, a home, a name to be feared. *This* was how he repaid me?

I looked up and *screamed* my fury to the heavens. Rage poured out of me, and I repeatedly slammed my fists into the wall. Stones crumbled to dust, but I did not stop.

Alone. Betrayed.

Again.

Thrice, my sons had betrayed me. Thrice now, they’d abandoned me. Could no one just be mine? Could no one do what I asked? Sebastian would pay for this. Death was too good for him now.

A hand landed on my shoulder. “Queen Marguerite?”

Triboulet dared touch me?

I twisted around, snatching his hand before he could pull it away. “Did I give you permission to do that?” I snarled. “Or to speak, for that matter?”

His eyes were wide, and he trembled. “Apologies, Your Majesty. I just thought...”

“That’s your problem.” I tightened my grip on his arm with one hand, and

with the other, I grabbed him by the throat and squeezed. “I find I’ve grown tired of you, Triboulet. Once, you were a good soldier. Once, you knew how to listen.”

“I do know how to listen,” he insisted.

I ignored him, drawing on my shadows. They came to my call, moving us through the Void. We landed in a cold storage room beneath Castle Sanguis. The floor was covered in dried blood, and the air stank of fear, sweat, and death.

Keeping my hand wrapped around the general’s throat, I released his wrist and formed a dagger out of the shadows. The Blood Ruby pulsed at my throat in eager anticipation of what was to come.

Triboulet’s eyes bulged as my fingers dug into his neck.

I yanked him close enough to kiss and whispered, “My ruby is hungry. I would ask if you had any last words, but I don’t care what you have to say.”

He shook. “Please, no! I’ve served you. I’ve done as you asked. This isn’t...”

His cowardly, useless pleas ended in a gurgle as my shadow dagger severed his head from his shoulders. Blood spurted like a red fountain from the wound. I fell to my knees, dragging his corpse over to me. Lifting the ruby reverently, I dipped it in the fresh blood and chanted the now-familiar words Koleta had taught me all those years ago. They easily fell from my lips, and the air thickened as the magic streamed out of me.

The ruby bathed in Triboulet’s blood and shone like a star of death.

Finally.

My power was returning. It was mine. Once again, I would be the strongest in the land. This was exactly what I needed to defeat the challengers to my throne. It was...

The jewel flashed once, twice, then it sputtered and returned to its murky state.

“No!” I yelled. “No, no, no!” My heart raced in my chest, and fury pulsed through me. I reached up and tore my hair out from the roots. Kneeling in my general’s blood, I clutched the necklace to my chest. “Come back to me! Shine! Imbue me with power!”

I shouted at the jewel until my voice was hoarse.

Nothing happened. The ruby was as good as dead. It held barely any power, and right now, it would do little in terms of protecting my throne.

That horrible, two-timing witch.

Had she done something to stop the jewel's effectiveness? Koleta had promised me the ruby would always shine as long as I bathed it in the blood of strong warriors. Human or vampire, elf or shifter, it didn't matter. The ruby fed on strength and fear, and it got both from the sacrifices I procured.

What had changed?

Death Wasn't an Option
❧

LUNA

Sebastian cried out and fell to his knees in the middle of the salt circle. Shadows flooded out of him, and he gripped his chest like he was having a heart attack. I lurched to my feet, intent on going to him.

“No!” Genevieve grabbed me, holding me back. “You can’t enter the circle. The severing is underway, and it cannot be stopped. You’ll kill him.”

The witch ignored us as he chanted. Endless streams of ribbons left his hands as he walked around Sebastian.

Agony was a never-ending wave crashing through the Binding Mark.

This was worse than the summons. Worse than anything else I’d ever experienced. My own head pounded, but my pain was nothing compared to Sebastian’s. He roared, his eyes squeezed shut as beads of sweat rolled down his face.

“Hurry, please,” I begged the elderly witch. “You’re hurting him.”

Beaufort cast me a glance that said, *I’m working as fast as I can.*

Not fast enough.

Every single groan that came from Sebastian’s lips was a wooden stake driven into me. Each was worse than the last.

On and on and on, the witch worked. Minutes became hours. The passing of time did not bring any relief. Wave after wave of hurt ran through the Binding Mark. I’d never given birth—nor would I, since vampires did not bear children—but I imagined the intense clenching, searing, burning pain in my muscles would be similar.

But Beaufort couldn’t stop. Not without potentially hurting Sebastian more or even killing him.

Death wasn’t an option. Not now, not ever.

Keeping that in mind, I didn't speak when Beaufort raised his hands. Seconds later, when Sebastian shouted, I bit my tongue. When the blue ribbons dove into my husband, forcing a guttural roar out of him, I clenched my fists in my tunic and choked on a sob. And when the blue threads froze in the air, the color leeching out of them until they were completely white, I did not speak at all.

Once again, Beaufort clapped.

Silence fell, as loud as any symphony. The ribbons dissolved. The burning in my muscles eased, the ache dissipated, and Sebastian slumped over, clearly exhausted.

Beaufort stepped forward and broke the salt circle. "Go ahead."

I did not ask any questions. Relief ran through me as I dashed in, gathering my prince in my arms.

Sebastian's eyes were closed, and his breathing was labored, but he was alive. I probed the connection between us. It was as strong as ever.

I glanced up at the witch. Heavy shadows hung beneath his eyes, and his face was drawn, nearly skeletal. He looked as though he'd aged a decade in the past few hours.

"Such strong magic," he murmured, swaying from side to side. "In all my years, I've never felt anything like it."

Sebastian moaned in my arms, and I pressed my lips against his forehead.

I'm here, I said through the bond. To the witch, I asked, "Did it work?"

He ran a sleeve over his forehead, his chest heaving. "I believe so, Your Highness. I've never encountered such a powerful Maker bond, but I think the severing was a success. You will know in a few hours when he wakes."

Genevieve placed a hand on my shoulder. "Would you like to stay here or go back to your room?"

I chewed on my lip. "I'll bring us back to our room." That way, I could keep Sebastian comfortable. I drew on my shadows, but before I released them, I looked at Genevieve, and then Beaufort. "Thank you both. This means more to us than you will ever know."

The priestess smiled. "If having this bond broken means that Eleyta may one day be in better hands, it will be worth it."

These openly treasonous words kindled hope within me. Eleyta was a cruel, cold, hard place, but maybe there were others like Genevieve, Odette, and Beaufort who would celebrate the queen's death. Maybe others might work with us, not against us.

I hoped so.

THE VOICES in the Void were louder than ever. They cried out as we moved through the darkness, their words tinged with echoes of pain and sorrow.

“Death is coming.”

“Darkness is here.”

And then, after a few moments, the refrain shifted. The temperature dropped, the voices deepened, and the blackness of the Void became even more absolute. It was as though light had never existed here. “The Queen of Shadowssss must die,” they intoned.

“Death, death, death,” the chorus of voices chanted. “Death to the queen.”

And under it all, one low voice said, “Failure issssss not an option.”

Even after the shadows deposited us in our room and I stumbled over to the bed, cradling Sebastian in my arms as best I could, their chilling refrain still echoed in my mind.

Death was coming.

I DOZED on and off throughout the day, checking on Sebastian every time I woke. It wasn't until early the next evening that his eyes blinked open. I dropped the damp cloth I'd been wiping over his face and quickly kissed him.

“Hey,” I whispered. “How are you feeling?”

His black eyes swept over mine as he moved, pushing himself up to sit next to me. “I feel... different.” He rubbed his chest. “Lighter.”

I sucked in a breath. “Do you mean...”

“I think it worked.” Sebastian's lips twitched. “I can't... the queen's presence used to be something deep within my mind. I could always feel it, but now, it's gone.” His shoulders loosened. “She's gone.”

The last word escaped him on an exhale. A lightness I'd never seen in Sebastian covered him, as though he'd been carrying a massive weight on his shoulders, and now it was gone.

“I'm so happy for you, Sebastian.” I rested my head against his shoulder.

Queen Marguerite was horrible, and I wasn't even bound to her. I could

not imagine being tied to her, especially not for over three centuries. Sebastian was a saint for having put up with her for so long.

Sebastian stared at me for a long moment before a disbelieving laugh escaped him. “I’m free of her.” He peppered kisses all over my face, my jaw, my chin. Cupping my cheek, he looked deep into my eyes. “We’re going to do this. We’re going to kill the queen.”

He sounded so confident. So sure.

“You think so?”

He nodded. “Yes. The Maker’s bond is gone. We will succeed, Luna. I know it.” He grinned and kissed me again.

“Alright.” It was infectious, this confidence of his.

Reaching inside to that place where the Tether resided, I pulled on the magic. The connection between us opened, and his emotions flooded into me. Shades of red filled the room, and I stared at the glowing magic linking us.

For so long, it had been a curse, but now...

The Tether was a blessing.

With its help, Sebastian and I could do this.

We could do anything.



AFTER SEBASTIAN HAD ASSURED me that he was stronger than ever—and had proven it in our bedroom—it was time to see Marius. A novice had stopped by with a message from Odette: the potion was ready. I hurriedly changed into a clean robe, courtesy of the priestesses, before we shadowed to the wing where Marius slept.

My brother’s condition remained unchanged. He was frail and unmoving in the bed, his skeletal chest rising and falling. His skin was far too pale, and his hair was plastered against his face. His mouth remained open; his lips chapped as he breathed in the stale air. If it weren’t for the slight point in his ears, the arch marking him as a halfling, one wouldn’t have known he had elf blood.

If my little brother survived into his twenties, he would Mature. A gift from the gods that blessed the elves, witches, shifters, and merfolk in the Four Kingdoms, Maturation extended lives for several centuries.

If he survived.

Right now, Marius looked like he was moments away from death. I'd never seen him in such bad shape. Tears rushed to my eyes, and I choked back a sob. Despite the open window letting in the slightest of breezes, the room stank of sweat and sickness. The witches had been feeding him liquids and keeping his bedding clean, but nothing could remove the miasma of illness. Not completely.

My stomach churned, and Sebastian squeezed my hand.

I'm here, he whispered through our bond.

Thank the gods he was. I didn't know if I would have been strong enough to handle the sight of my brother like this without Sebastian. He was my rock, my strength, my love. No matter what else happened to us, he was mine.

Right now, I needed him more than ever.

Sebastian pressed a kiss to my knuckles, his gentle touch sending tingles through me. "Go to your brother," he murmured, squeezing my hand. "I won't go anywhere."

I smiled, releasing his hand and moving to Marius's side. Kneeling on the ground, I took my brother's hand in mine.

"Hey there, Mar-Mar." The nickname was one I'd always used for him, and it just felt right. I squeezed his frail fingers, trying to ignore how I could feel every bone through his papery skin. "I've missed you."

There was no response. His chest rose and fell steadily, but that was it.

Pressing his hand against my cheek, I whispered, "It's just us now, Marius." Shadows flooded from me, covering my brother in a blanket made from the night itself. "Our family... they're dead." My eyes watered, and I sucked in a breath to try and keep the tears at bay. It was too late. They fell, leaving crimson markers of my grief on the bed. "They're resting, and they've found peace."

One of Marius's fingers twitched, and the movement sent a jolt through me. Realistically—scientifically—I knew it was just his body's natural reaction, but that didn't stop hope from running through me.

"We're going to wake you up," I murmured, rubbing his hand to warm him. "The witches here are very good. Odette is coming with the potion, and it's going to work. I'm sure of it."

Soon, I would be hugging my brother.

When I left Ipotha to marry Sebastian, I never imagined *this* would be my reunion with my family.

But here we were.

The harbinger, the Sunwalker, and the Wielder of Shadows.

A hand brushed my shoulder. Sebastian crouched beside me, tilting his head towards the door. "Someone's coming," he murmured. "It's time."

True to his word, the door creaked open less than a minute later.

"May I come in?" Odette's head poked into the room, her red hair in a messy bun on top of her head.

I turned, clutching my brother's hand once again. "Yes, of course."

The witch entered, carrying the vial like it was a precious jewel. The foul smell was gone, and the color had changed. Violet and turquoise swirled together like an aurora, the remaining specks of Isvana's plant an emerald green among the rest of the potion.

"I've read the grimoire hundreds of times over the past few days." Odette placed the vial on the nightstand. "I'm hopeful this will work."

I swallowed, suddenly nervous. This was the moment we'd been waiting for, the one I'd anticipated since Syndra first told me of the plant. And yet, now that it was here, I found myself filled with fear. What if this didn't work? This wouldn't be the first time a witch tried to help my brother. It wasn't even the fifth or the tenth or the twentieth time it happened.

Statistically, failure was the likely outcome. As a scientist, I knew trial and error was a part of the research process.

The problem was that I wasn't a scientist at that moment. I wasn't even certain I was capable of rational thought at the moment. I was an older sister, waiting to see if my little brother would wake.

And I was scared.

But I refused to let fear rule me. Not anymore. I could be scared and still do this. Bravery wasn't overcoming fear. It was staring at the wall fear tried to build, and dismantling it brick by brick until it was possible to get through. Bravery was acting in spite of fear. And Marius needed me to be brave.

Drawing a deep breath, I brushed my lips over Marius's cheek. "I'll be right over there."

I swapped spots with Odette, her white robes swooshing as she took my place beside the bed. She picked up Marius's hand and held it gently before glancing over at us. "Would you mind if I prayed for him?"

My brows rose. I hadn't expected her to ask, though I didn't think anything was inherently wrong with it. Before my marriage, I had followed Kydona in a... mediocre way at best. After my wedding, my religiosity

hadn't improved. I'd been a little preoccupied with breaking the Tether and finding Syndra's plant. But ever since I'd met Isvana, I couldn't deny that perhaps there was a place for faith in my life. Could science and religion mix? I wasn't sure, but I would strive to find out.

"Please do," I whispered.

Besides, Marius could use all the help he could get.

Sebastian's fingers nudged mine, and he held my hand as Odette dipped her head, murmuring quietly. "Isvana, Goddess of the Moon, we come to you..."

Her voice dipped, her words becoming too low to hear, but it didn't matter. Odette prayed, and a sense of calm and rightness filled me.

Somehow, everything would be alright. There was a light at the end of this tunnel. A way for everything to end. We were drawing closer every day.

Eventually, Odette's prayer ended. She released Marius's hand and looked up. "It's time."

Unceremoniously, she pulled the stopper out of the vial and plugged my brother's too-frail nose. With the other hand, she tipped back the vial. The moment the liquid entered Marius's body, he choked, his body spasming.

I gasped. My nails dug into my palm, and every second felt like a lifetime as the liquid disappeared into my brother, one drop at a time.

It was over just as quickly as it began. The vial was empty, and Marius dropped back onto the cot, his chest heaving. His eyes were still closed, though, and he looked just as sick as before.

My heart strained against my chest, and I looked between Marius and Odette. "Now what?"

"Now we wait," the witch said solemnly.

"IT'S BEEN EIGHT HOURS, DARLING." Sebastian crouched beside me where I kept vigil at Marius's bedside, and his eyes swept over me, mirroring the concern coming through the Binding Mark. "You're tired, and you need to sleep."

I was, but Marius wasn't awake yet. His skin color had improved, but he still looked too frail. Odette had stayed for hours, but eventually, she'd been called away by her other duties.

Sleep wasn't an option. What if he woke while I was out? What if I missed something?

I opened my mouth to reply, but a yawn slipped out of me. Sebastian's eyes widened, and in one swift movement, he hugged me to his chest and lifted me in the air.

"No—"

"Did it sound like I was asking, darling?" he murmured, holding me tight. "You're going to sleep because you need to take care of yourself."

My treacherous eyes started slipping shut against my will. His words sounded so good, but I needed to stay awake.

"I can't leave him." I shook my head, struggling to leave Sebastian's arms. His grip only tightened. I hated to admit it, but it felt good to be held. "Marius needs me."

When he woke, I needed to be here. He would be so scared if he was alone. Already, I had a lot to explain to my brother. It wasn't every day one got kidnapped, brought into another country, saved by a spy, and then delivered to an abbey where vampires and witches worked to heal you from the debilitating illness that had haunted you for your entire life.

Sebastian pressed his hand against the back of my neck, gently pushing my head against his chest. He brushed a feather-soft kiss over my lips. "We won't leave."

He slid down the wall, his wings bursting out of his back and drawing around us like a blanket as he settled on the ground.

I yawned once. Then again. Did my body not understand my need to remain alert? Sleep had to wait. I tried to fight it but after a few minutes of Sebastian rubbing my arms and back in soothing motions, my eyes slipped shut. This time, they refused to open at my command. One day, my body would no longer bend to the mortal requirements of sleep, allowing me to remain alert all day and night without the constraints of rest.

This was not that day.

"You'll watch Marius?" I asked sleepily, giving in and snuggling against Sebastian's chest.

"I won't take my eyes off him for a moment," he promised.

Truth echoed in his words, and soon, I fell asleep.

WARM. I was so warm. Everything, from my head to my toes, was heated. Not in a bad way. It was more like how I imagined cats felt after sitting in a sunny window for hours. Warm and listless but delightfully relaxed.

Where was I?

Opening my eyes, I squinted at the bright sunlight. Recognition flitted through me as I pushed myself to my feet. My tunic and leggings were nowhere to be seen. Instead, a black, flowing gown was draped over me, the hem falling just above my bare feet. Green blades of grass danced in the breeze, and leaves rustled above my head.

Understanding washed over me. I groaned. Another vision. At least this time, I had a grasp on what was happening to me.

“Isvana, are you here?” I called out.

The wind’s warm embrace was the only response.

No matter. This time, I wasn’t going to stay in one spot. I was going to explore.

Holding the hem of my dress, I turned in a circle.

The first thing I noticed was the trees. They were... normal. Completely and utterly normal, untouched by the black rot spreading through Eleyta. The bark of the closest tree was a rich brown, and the leaves were a vibrant green that reflected the sunlight.

Next, I looked up. The canopy of leaves was thick, and the foliage ranged from a light green to one so dark it was almost black. The entire forest was beautiful, colorful, and *alive*.

Grass crinkled beneath my feet, and a grin spread across my face. Bending, I ran my fingers over it, enjoying the soft prickliness of each individual blade. It had been far too long since I’d touched grass. Far too long since I’d seen anything but the frozen snow that blanketed Eleyta.

Tiny flowers, as colorful as the rainbow and the size of my fingernails, sprouted among the grass. Once I noticed them, I couldn’t stop seeing them. They were everywhere. They grew on the ground, in cracks in the bark, and even on top of a large, mossy stone resting against a nearby tree.

“Interesting,” I murmured.

What kind of flower could grow on stone?

I went to pick one, but as I ran my fingers over the tiny stem, a laugh that sounded like an owl hooting came from behind me.

My eyes widened, and I dropped the plant, turning around.

Standing a few feet away from me was Isvana. As radiant and naked as

before, she eyed me with a smile. The same raven sat on her shoulder, its beady eyes watching me carefully. The bird seemed more lifelike than others I'd seen, and I got the distinct feeling it was more than just a raven.

"I see you've found my Rainbow Blooms." Isvana bent, picking one of the flowers and sniffing it delicately. "I come to this grove to find solace when times are difficult."

I could see why. It was beautiful.

Remembering who stood in front of me, I dipped into a curtsy. "Greetings, Isvana."

She murmured a hello before saying, "Stand, daughter of the moon." I complied, and the goddess smiled. "I told you we'd meet again."

"You were right." I raised a brow, a memory of our first meeting surfacing. "I planted your seed. It's... interesting."

The goddess made a sound of amusement. "How so?"

"The plant flourishes in the dark," I told her.

"Oh?"

I got the impression she was humoring me, but true to form, my mouth had a mind of its own. "It's not normal, you know. Most plants require sunlight to thrive. I'd never heard of a plant that grows in the darkness. Evidently, it requires more study, but I was shocked when it adapted well to the conditions—"

A hand landed on my arm, and I jolted, my words drying up on my tongue.

Isvana chuckled. "It is a very interesting plant," she admitted. "But I did not summon you here to discuss its biological attributes."

Of course not. That would be foolish. Why would a goddess want to talk about science?

"Apologies, Isvana." I wrung my hands in front of me.

She chuckled. "No need to apologize, my child. But time is short, and we have much to discuss."

Of course, we did.

"What would you like to talk about?" I asked.

Isvana smiled and waved her hand. "Not here."

Before I could ask what she meant, golden specks filled the air, and the clearing shimmered. The ground shifted beneath my feet, my stomach lurched, and I stumbled back a step.

By the time I straightened, everything was different. The sunlit forest was

gone, replaced by a massive space as dark as the night. Black tiles were cold beneath my bare feet, inlaid with squiggling lines of moonlight. Obsidian walls rose high above my head, and the roof...

There was none. Not really. The walls rose and rose and rose, and above them was the night sky. But it wasn't *my* night. The stars were different. They glowed brighter, as though we were close enough to touch them, and several constellations were completely new to me.

Isvana stepped into my field of vision. She'd swapped her nudity for a silver gown that hung off one shoulder, draping artfully over her form. It shimmered as though it was made of starlight, as did the black crown resting atop her hair of the same color. The raven sat on her shoulder, and she held an obsidian scepter. Most impressive were the two wings fanned out behind the goddess.

They looked just like mine.

Instinct had me releasing my own wings. The weight was comforting in this strange place, and I dropped to my knees. Something told me standing in this place was wrong.

Isvana smiled, dipping her head. "Welcome to Moonlight Palace, daughter of mine." She extended her hands. "This is my home."

What was I doing here? I had no words, which was strange for me. This was so far beyond anything I had ever experienced. Science would say this was not real, yet the cold tiles beneath my knees would argue differently. What was one supposed to do when their lived experiences did not align with what they'd been taught?

This was the world-changing, life-altering moment that most people dreamed of. Not only had I met a goddess—twice—but she'd brought me to her home. It sounded far-fetched, and yet, here I was.

Seeming to realize I was tongue-tied, Isvana laughed. "Come," she said. "Sit."

Before I could point out the obvious—there were no chairs—she waved her hand, and two appeared in the middle of the room. That was convenient.

The goddess sat, and I slowly stood, walking over and sitting beside her. I desperately wanted to know what this was about, but I didn't ask.

It turned out there were moments when I was capable of holding my tongue, after all.

Luckily, I didn't have to wait long to find out why I was here. The goddess tapped her scepter on her knees, and glowing moonlight filled the

room.

“The path you follow is difficult,” Isvana said after a moment.

“My entire life since I’ve arrived in Eleyta has been difficult,” was my probably ill-timed retort.

Internally, I sighed. There went my newfound ability to hold my tongue. That was remarkably short-lived. Still, there was no other way to describe my experiences. Between my family and Julieta’s deaths, being abducted, Made, and then being thrown into a deadly tournament, my life hadn’t exactly been easy.

Rather than being insulted, Isvana smiled. “That is true. It has. Keep your head up high, Luna. The end is near, and the Black Rose cannot stand for much longer. Already, she is descending into absolute madness.”

Descending? I was fairly certain the queen had lost her mental capabilities long ago.

Instead of saying that, however, I nodded. “What do we need to do?”

Isvana smiled and placed her hand on top of mine. “Seek the red moon, Luna. There are those near you who can help. Look for friendship, and you will uncover the information you need.”

That sounded doable.

The goddess’s grip tightened. “Be forewarned, daughter of the moon; the time will come when you need to make a choice that will determine the course of fate. Pay attention, and whatever happens, do not be fooled by beauty, for death lies beneath it all. Lean into the light you carry in your soul. It will save you.”

The moment the final, ominous words were out of Isvana’s mouth, her eyes widened. The raven squawked, and the palace disappeared in a shimmer of gold.

I WOKE WITH A GASP. My lungs squeezed, struggling to draw breath. My heart raced in my chest, making a concerted effort to escape the confines of my ribs, and panic settled deep within me.

Sebastian’s arms tightened around me. “Luna, what’s wrong?”

Breathing was still nearly impossible, but I choked out a single word, “Isvana.”

It was all I could manage, but luckily, it was all that was needed. Sebastian knew exactly what I meant. He didn't doubt me at all, nor did he question me.

"You can tell me about your visit with the goddess when you're ready." He kissed the space between my brows. "Just breathe. I've got you."

And I did.

With every passing moment, drawing breath became a little easier. My slow-beating heart returned to its normal rhythm. The *lub-dub* was oddly comforting as it echoed in my ears.

Breathe.

When I felt normal once again, I turned in Sebastian's arms. He didn't say anything, instead waiting as I collected my thoughts.

Eventually, I was ready.

"I saw the goddess again," I told him. "She was—"

A sharp inhale came from the bed. It was quiet, but I was a vampire, so even the quietest inhale was still a shout in my ear.

My heart stuttered, and all words fell away. Isvana's visit was no longer important. Not right now.

Marius's finger twitched. It twitched!

Thankfulness was a river running through me, pulling me from Sebastian's arms and bringing me to the bed. I took my brother's hand in mine. "Marius?" I whispered.

He drew in a breath. A moment later, Sebastian's hand landed on my shoulder. Something deep in my soul clicked.

I was touching Marius, and Sebastian was touching me.

Like a key turning in a lock, a sense of rightness settled into place inside me.

You walk the path of light, daughter of the moon, Isvana's voice was a gentle night breeze in my mind. *The harbinger, the Sunwalker, and the Wielder of Shadows complete the prophesied triangle.*

Power ran through me from Marius's touch, amplified by Sebastian's hand on my shoulder. I wasn't sure what was happening; I didn't even know if this made sense. But I knew it was right, just like I knew the sky was blue and Sebastian's affection for me was vast.

This was meant to be.

The shadows sang a deeper, louder song. Their music was ancient, older, and more intense than before. My darkness was amplified, but there was

nothing bad about it. If anything, I felt stronger than ever. Like I could do anything. Be anything. Nothing would stand in our way.

I glanced over my shoulder to ask Sebastian if he felt the same thing when another flutter of movement came from the bed.

My heart caught in my throat.

Marius opened his eyes.

Science and Magic
❧

SEBASTIAN

“**M**arius?” Hope infused Luna’s voice, and she squeezed her brother’s hand. “Can you hear me?”

The halfling groaned, his brown eyes sweeping over my wife. They were the same color Luna’s had been before I Made her. He was awake. It worked. I would be lying if I said I wasn’t at least a little shocked. I’d been alive for a long time, and I’d never witnessed such a miraculous event.

I released Luna’s shoulder. Stepping back, I leaned against the wall. I wasn’t relaxed, though. Far from it. My shoulders were tense and it was like a wire ran down my spine. This was a private moment, and all of a sudden, I felt like an intruder.

My brother-in-law licked his cracked lips. “Lulu?” His voice was hoarse, barely audible, but it echoed through the space.

Luna cried out, throwing herself onto her brother. Her shoulders shook as she hugged him, and immense relief and joy flooded through the Binding Mark. The halfling’s fragile arms went around her, and for a long moment, neither of them spoke.

Which left me watching them.

I felt... strange. Happy, certainly. Luna’s brother was awake, which was fantastic, and she wasn’t alone anymore.

But there was something else, too. Something I hadn’t even considered until this moment. What if Luna no longer wanted me now that her brother was awake? What if our connection wasn’t as strong with her love divided between two of us?

Luna’s affection for her brother ran deep. It was evident in how she spoke of him, in the letters she wrote him when we were first married, in her search

for a cure.

To be loved by Luna was unlike anything else I'd ever experienced. To have her direct a seemingly endless supply of passion and intelligence towards you was to feel like the sun was created to shine only for you. Her love warmed me like nothing else, banishing the darkness of my soul. It made me want to be better, to be deserving of the way she felt about me.

I did not doubt her affection for me. I could never. But did she love Marius more?

These dark thoughts clouded my mind, threatening to bring me to my knees. What would I do if Luna's sunshine was no longer a part of my life?

Before I could delve further into the murky pit of my depressing thoughts, Luna turned. She extended a hand to me. "Will you come here?"

I pushed off the wall and laced our fingers together.

"Marius, this is my husband, Sebastian." Luna rose to her feet and stood beside me. "I love him. He's my... everything."

My brother-in-law studied me. "He kept you safe?"

"Yes." Luna leaned her head against my arm. "He did."

I echoed her words through our bond, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

"It's nice to meet you," Marius said after a moment. "Thank you for looking after my sister."

"Always," was my response. "She means the world to me."

Color rushed to Luna's cheeks. "He's very good to me," she assured Marius. In a not-at-all veiled attempt to take the attention off her, Luna asked, "How are you feeling?"

He blinked. "I feel... fine," he said, sounding shocked. I'd feel the same way. When we first saw him, he looked like he was moments away from dying. "Better than I have in a long time."

Luna smiled. "Good."

"Can I sit up?" Marius asked after a moment, his brows furrowed.

The smile slipped from Luna's face. "I... You can try, I suppose." She held his elbow. "But if it's too much or you feel any pain, you have to wait. We're not exactly sure how quickly the healing process works."

"I promise," he said.

Luna helped her brother sit up, tucking a pillow behind his back and drawing the blanket around his waist. He looked a little better like this, less like a skeleton and more like a thin, too-small human. Still, though, he wasn't a normal, rambunctious child. Not yet, but maybe one day, he would be.

Marius studied me with an intensity that did not belong in the eyes of someone so young before he turned to Luna. “I thought the Prince of Darkness was supposed to be evil? He doesn’t look all that intimidating.”

I barely held in a snort. For someone who had just woken from a comatose state, Marius certainly had a way with words. Luna’s mouthiness appeared to be more of a familial trait than I’d previously assumed.

Luna’s eyes widened. “He can be quite scary,” she assured her brother. “You should see him with his wings.”

“Wings?” Marius’s attention returned to me, a twinkle entering his eye that reminded me of the young children in my village when I was still mortal. Finally, he looked like a ten-year-old. “Will you show them to me?”

I didn’t enjoy being a spectacle, but this wasn’t just anyone asking. It was Luna’s brother. I would do anything for her, including making him happy.

Rolling my shoulders, I let the shadows slip from my palms. They darkened the room, slowly stealing the light, until it was nearly dark.

Then, I released my wings. They hung heavy on my back, filling the small room. The tips of the dark appendages brushed against the walls, and I stood tall.

“Kydona help me,” was Marius’s only response.

Luna laughed. “Sebastian is rather impressive, isn’t he? He’s very good to me, and I’m sure you’ll enjoy getting to know him.” She glanced up at me. “Will you call for Odette? She needs to know it worked.”

I nodded. “Of course. I’ll give you two some privacy.”

Luna kissed me quickly. Through our connection, she said, *I’m going to tell him about me.*

Being Made.

Do you want me to stay?

She shook her head. *I’ll be okay.*

Nodding, I squeezed her hand. “I’ll be right outside.”

Luna smiled, and I moved through the shadows, landing in the hallway.

A novice was walking by. His gray robe was darker than the ones the priestesses wore, and his black hair was in a bun at the nape of his neck. Like all others of his rank, he was training to be a priest in the Second Order of Isvana’s Chosen Ones. We’d met several of them during our stay at the abbey.

“Excuse me?” I raised a hand to catch his attention.

He stopped in his tracks, bowing. “Yes, Prince Sebastian?”

“The witch Odette, do you know her?” When he nodded, I continued, “Please find her. It’s important that she come quickly.”

“Of course, Your Highness. Anything else?”

Chewing on the inside of my cheek, I considered for a moment. “Yes, there is one other thing.”

The novice dipped his head, listening intently as I explained what I needed. When I was done, he bowed again, promising to complete my task as quickly as possible before he disappeared down the hall.

Leaning against the wall, I pulled out a shadow and let it spin around as I waited for Odette. Quiet murmurs of conversation drifted under the door, and the Binding Mark pulsed with happiness.

It wasn’t long before footsteps came from down the hall. Odette ran towards me. She carried a woven basket, and I caught a glimmer of metal poking out.

“It worked?” she asked breathlessly.

“He’s awake,” I confirmed.

The witch grinned, and in her excitement, blue ribbons sparked at her fingertips. “This is fantastic,” she gushed. “There are so many things we need to do. I’ll have to mass produce the cure, get it to others, find out how Marius feels...” She continued muttering to herself as she opened the door and slipped inside. I followed, staying in the shadows as Luna and Odette chatted.

My wife seemed to have found a kindred spirit in the witch. Several times over the next few hours, I caught Luna grinning as she and Odette poked and prodded Marius relentlessly. By the time they decided they had enough information for now, the halfling yawned from his spot on the cot.

“Why don’t we split up?” Odette suggested. “There are a few witches in the abbey and nearby villages that can help me with the magical aspect of the cure. Will you prepare the plant? That way, you don’t have to deal with the smell.”

My nose wrinkled at the memory of that gods-awful stench. I’d been around corpses that smelled better.

“Of course. Sebastian and I will get to work right away.” Luna glanced at me, raising a brow. “If you don’t mind?”

I smiled. “Not at all.”

There were hundreds of humans suffering from the Wasting Illness in Eleyta. I might have had serious issues with the queen, but I was still their prince and felt more than a little responsible for them. After all, vampires

needed humans. The queen had mistreated them long enough.

We said our goodbyes, then shadowed to the lab.

A GASP LEFT Luna's lips when the shadows lifted. "Wow." She let go of my hand and spun in a circle. "Odette said the plant had grown, but I didn't expect this."

The laboratory was pitch-black, dark even for our vampiric eyes, and every available surface was covered in pots. Isvana's plant—Syndra's plant—had grown. Odette must have transplanted it countless times in the few days we were gone.

"Neither did I. It's almost—"

"Magical," she finished for me.

She was right. I never pretended to know much about plants, but this was not normal.

For a long moment, neither of us spoke. Then, Luna turned to me. "I didn't know."

My brows knit together as I tried to follow her train of thought. "Know what?"

Releasing my hand, Luna touched a leaf. She hummed, running it through her fingers before canting her head. "I didn't know that science and magic could co-exist. I always thought it was one or the other." She turned, running the tip of her tongue over her fangs. "It's not, though. They can work together. Maybe... maybe that was how it was always meant to be."

Her mouth moved, but no sound came out. Luna wandered through the lab, touching all the plants. I remained at the entrance, mindful of the Tether but content to watch Luna think.

She was brilliant, this wife of mine, and she didn't hide it. I loved that about her. Intelligence was not something to be hidden or frightened of. Luna might not be skilled in swordplay or a talented fighter like Phyrre, but she didn't need it. Her mind was a tool, and she used it every day to the best of her ability.

After a few minutes, Luna returned to my side. "Alright. Enough time debating the logic of science and magic working together. Let's get to work."

I refrained from pointing out that she had been holding the debate all on

her own while I'd watched her. Instead, I plucked a few leaves off each plant and brought them to the table in the middle of the room while Luna cleared a workspace.

Under her direction, we worked for hours. I collected leaves and prepared vials by dipping them in boiling water until she declared them clean and free of dangerous particles before lining them up in rows on the tabletop.

By the time Odette joined us, it was nearly dawn. "You've accomplished much, Your Highnesses." She tapped the rim of a clean vial. "I must admit, I'm impressed. I wasn't sure how much you'd be able to do."

"I had a great assistant." Luna pecked my cheek. "How's Marius?"

Odette walked over and pressed a key into Luna's hand. "He's sleeping, but he looks well. Some of the priestesses took the liberty of moving the three of you into a different part of the abbey, so you can always be close to him."

That was incredibly thoughtful of them. Odette gave us directions to the new room and promised to let Luna know if she ran into any trouble before we left to find our new accommodations. It wasn't difficult, and soon, we stood in front of a black door on the third floor.

Luna squeezed my hand, passing me the key. "I just want to check on Marius."

"Go ahead. I'll wait."

For Luna, I'd wait for days, weeks, or even years if she asked me. Time had no meaning when it came to her.

Cracking open the door, Luna poked her head inside the room. Less than a minute later, she exhaled, sliding the door shut quietly behind her. "He's sleeping soundly, and he looks a lot better."

"I'm so glad." Hopefully, Luna would get some sleep. She'd barely rested since Odette first administered the cure. Between breaking the bond and waking Marius, the past few days had been exhausting.

Unlocking the door to our new accommodations, I slipped inside first. It was bigger than our last room, and I carefully inspected the wardrobe, under the bed, and the small water closet. Some might have considered my actions paranoid, but I believed them prudent.

Before letting Luna enter, I went through the room, placing my hands on the walls and erecting several wards around the entire space. Once those were secure, I added more until the entire abbey was surrounded. One couldn't be too careful.

Only then did I call out to Luna. *Come on in, darling. It's safe.*

The knob turned, and she slipped inside. “Wow, this is an upgrade,” she said after a moment.

It certainly was. The room was decorated in shades of blue, ranging from a deep navy to something I’d once heard called cerulean. The large bed rested on a fuzzy carpet, and curtains blew in the breeze. Several cracks in the stone floor allowed the wind to enter, but it was a much more comfortable space than the last room.

Taking Luna’s hand, I urged her to sit on the bed. As soon as she complied, I sat next to her and drew her leg onto my lap. Carefully removing her shoe, I tossed it on the ground before rubbing my hands over the base of her foot. She’d been standing for hours. Though she hadn’t said anything, I noticed her adjusting her weight in the lab.

A soft groan escaped her mouth, the sound going straight to my core. Everything in me tightened. Encouraged by her subsequent soft gasps and moans, I pressed both hands against the heel of her foot, moving up and down until she practically melted in my hands.

A sense of peace washed over me. Here, alone, none of our problems bothered me greatly. How could they, when I was in her presence? In these moments, I forgot about the queen, the numerous deaths I’d caused, even the blood staining my soul. Luna made me feel like maybe I wasn’t entirely lost.

“Give me the other one, darling,” I murmured, not wanting to speak too loudly lest I shatter the calm.

Luna did not argue. Instead, she shifted so both her feet landed in my lap. Working quietly, I kneaded her feet before slowly moving up her legs. She groaned, collapsing on the bed as a sound of absolute enjoyment escaped her.

“That feels so good,” she said.

I kissed the arch of her foot. “I’m glad. You deserve it after working so hard in the lab.”

The Binding Mark pulsed with pleasure as I worked. Shadows slipped from her palms, darkening the room. The knowledge that I was making my wife happy filled me with pride. Each one of her smiles, each gasp, each moan as she melted in my hands was like a ray of sunshine illuminating the night.

For decades, I’d been alone, living in the darkness. I hadn’t even known joy could be found in such simple pleasures. Athena, the gods be with her soul, had made me smile, but our relationship had been different. We’d had fun, and she’d been a good companion, but we’d never lived together for a

long period of time. We'd never had the opportunity to build the kind of long-lasting relationship where it was acceptable to remain in silence and simply enjoy each other's company.

That was the kind of relationship Luna and I had. By the time I moved on to her hands, rubbing each one with care, my wife was blinking sleepily at me from her position on the bed.

"Come here," she whispered, inching back towards the pillows.

No other invitation was needed. I crawled next to Luna, releasing my wings and curving them around us. Gathering her in my arms, I sent a wave of contentment through our bond.

She sighed contentedly. "Why are you so good to me? It's probably not great for your scary image, you know. What if people learned the Prince of Darkness was gifted at giving foot rubs?"

I chuckled. This was one question I had no problem answering. "I don't care about my image. I'm good to you because you're mine."

She snuggled against my chest. "I like that." She hummed. "I'll always be yours, Sebastian."

Sleep came easily that night.

I WOKE from a dreamless sleep to a cold room and an empty bed. Panic flooded through me, my heart raced, and I jolted upright. A quick scan of the space told me no one was there.

Memories of Luna's screams when those bastards tried to kidnap her ran through my mind.

I had to find her.

In a hurry, I released my shadows. They crawled over the floors and up the walls while I checked the wards. They were still intact. Panic rose before I glanced at my wrist and remembered the magic tying us together.

I shouted Luna's name down the bond.

Her response came a moment later. *I'm fine.*

I clenched my fists at my sides. *Where are you, Princess?*

A pause, then a knock came from the wall.

Next door.

Pulling my shadows back, I moved through the Void into Marius's room.

The moment I laid eyes on Luna, my breath left me in a ragged exhale. Wearing a shawl draped over her nightgown, Luna sat on the edge of her brother's bed and trailed her fingers down his cheek. The halfling was asleep, but the faint scent of fear lingered in the room.

She glanced at me, her black eyes wide and her mouth curved in a frown. One of her fangs peeked out as she whispered, "He had a nightmare."

Marius stirred beneath her touch, pressing his cheek into her hand.

I moved over to the bed, crouching behind Luna and placing my hand on her shoulder. "What was it about?"

"I don't know. Something that happened in the Broken Mountains, I think." She shuddered, leaning against me. Pulses of sadness came through the Binding Mark. "He's my little brother, Sebastian. I should be protecting him. Instead, when he's strong enough, I'm going to have to tell him about our family."

"You have each other," I said. "That's going to mean something."

A pause, and then she turned. "Do you think so?"

"I do." It was more than what I had after Athena died.

The halfling whimpered, tossing and turning. He was caught in the throes of a bad dream.

Shadows slipped from Luna's hands, dancing over her brother in a gentle caress. The moment those dark wisps touched him, he quieted down.

"See?" I kissed her brow. "He knows you're here."

She squeezed his hand. "I'll always be here for you, Mar-Mar."

He muttered something unintelligible beneath his breath, turning before settling beneath the blanket again. It wasn't long before his breathing steadied, and he slipped into a deep sleep.

After ensuring Marius was soundly sleeping, Luna tucked him in once more. We returned to our bed, and she fell back asleep immediately.

I remained awake for hours, consumed by thoughts of the future. When I had been in my deepest, darkest places, I had been alone. No one had comforted me. I had no family, no true friends. Just me. I wasn't even sure what I would have done if someone had been there for me after Athena died.

But Luna wasn't alone. She had me and Marius. I would do everything in my power to make sure they survived. Even if it meant giving myself up in the process.

What a Betrayal
❧

MARGUERITE

An icy gale was a relentless battering ram, slamming into me from all sides the moment my shadows deposited me on Castle Sanguis' roof. The temperature permeated my skin, dove into my bones, and gnawed away at any vestiges of warmth I might once have had.

Triboulet was dead. His blood was still wet on my hands. My Maker's bond with Sebastian was gone, and my ruby was broken.

My. Ruby. Was. Broken.

I *screamed*, my voice piercing through the darkness of the night. It did nothing to ease the ache of absolute wrongness burning through me.

How could this have happened? How could things have gone so horribly, terribly wrong?

The Blood Ruby was supposed to infuse me with power, rendering me unstoppable. It was meant to let me reign forever.

I would have to visit *her*. After she'd helped me create the Blood Ruby, Koleta had proven to be a... troublesome houseguest. She sang her lullaby day and night, but I needed her alive in case I had questions.

Several centuries ago, I'd thrown her into a prison all on her own. There were very few people I enjoyed less than Koleta, but I had no choice. I would have to endure her presence again and find out why my ruby was broken. The last time I had visited her was over a year ago, and I would have preferred never to return.

And yet, here I was, doing that exact thing.

First, wrinkles. Now this. What else could go wrong?

A snarl ripped through me as I again gathered my shadows around myself. Moving through the Void was quick and painless. I stepped out of the

darkness onto the ice, noting the rippling of several wards as I entered the prison.

Walls of thick, opaque ice rose above my head, stretching several stories tall, and icicles dangled dangerously above me. Beneath my feet, the same glaciers stretched as far as I could see. The temperature was so cold my skin took on a faint blue sheen. Had I been human, my teeth would have chattered.

Warmth was a distant memory, long forgotten in this ancient place of cold, ice, and death.

“Koleta!” I yelled. “Where are you hiding?”

A tinkling laugh. A bone cracking. Then, “Night is here; death has come; betrayal is in the air.”

“Damn you!” I yelled. “Show yourself.”

A giggle, then she repeated the same gods-damned refrain I’d heard every time I visited. It was little wonder this witch was one of the people I hated the most.

Seething, I followed the horrible refrain until I found her.

Surrounded by hundreds of fish carcasses piled in teetering stacks, Koleta sat cross-legged near the cavernous river that kept her alive. The water flowed despite the frozen air, kept moving by long-forgotten magic. Fish with rows upon rows of fangs filled the waters, their bite deadly to anyone who dared enter their domain.

They were Koleta’s only food.

“I was wondering when I’d see you again.” A gummy smile danced on the mad witch’s face. She had aged since my last visit and had lost several more teeth. The spark in her eye was one I’d seen in the mirror.

“Koleta,” I growled her name.

“*Marguerite.*” She echoed my tone. “How can I help you?”

Her sarcastic mimicking just made me angrier. I stomped my foot. “Everything is wrong!”

She should have looked shocked. She should have gasped or moved or widened her eyes or... something!

Instead, the witch blinked. “Oh?” Her tone was calm. Lackadaisical, almost. She looked... pleased. Like a cat who’d gotten into the cream. What the hell?

Koleta continued, “Have things... not gone as planned? Is your country falling apart? Are vampires being Made and let loose in the wild? Perhaps chaos is falling all around you?” Her brows lifted almost to her hairline.

Slowly. Purposefully. *Treacherously*. “What a shame. What a sorrow. What a... betrayal.”

Shock and anger pulsed through my veins. She *dared* speak to me like this? Snarling, I crossed the length of the icy prison in a heartbeat. Picking Koleta up by the neck, I slammed her against the cavern wall. Her tiny, bony hands clawed at my arm, but she was no match for me. A vampire would always win against a mad witch.

“You did this!” I shrieked.

Her thin lips tilted up, up, up. “Did what?” she asked coyly, as though she had no idea what I was talking about.

I grabbed the Blood Ruby with my other hand and shoved it in her face. “This!”

Koleta stared at the jewel. She stared and stared and stared until it looked like her eyes were moments away from falling out of her head.

I tightened my grip around her throat. My heart was a herd of elephants stampeding through my chest. My wings exploded from my back. Streams of shadows poured out of me. “Speak!”

She opened her mouth and *laughed*. Laughed! At. Me. That anger shifted in my veins, turning into writhing, churning fury. I was death, and she dared laugh in my face?

“Is this not what you wanted, Queen Marguerite?” The witch smirked. “Did you not desire power?”

“Yes!” I shouted. Power was everything. It was the only thing that kept me going after Nicolas’s betrayal. Of course, I needed it. “Now, the ruby is broken!”

Koleta tilted her head. “You don’t say.” She chuckled, the sound grating on my every nerve.

She wasn’t surprised. Why wasn’t she surprised?

“Fix it!” I yelled.

“Night is here; death has come; betrayal is in the air.”

I shook her—hard. Purple bruises bloomed beneath my touch. They were flowers of the night, and I was the bringer of destruction. She cried out, but I did not remove my fingers. “What did you do?”

Koleta’s fingers scraped at the ice. She spoke in pants, her breath coming shorter and shorter. “You... never... asked.”

My brows knit together, and I stepped back, letting the witch fall. She dropped to the ice, landing on all fours and breathing in deeply.

“What?” I asked.

A crazed laugh. “You sold your soul to the ruby, yet you never asked.” She inhaled deeply, rubbing a hand over her neck. “What is the cost of power, Your Majesty? Did you ever wonder what price the ruby demands for the power it gives?”

It was my turn to stare at her. Price? I didn’t care about that. Power was the only thing that mattered. Nicolas had betrayed me. My sons all betrayed me. No one could be trusted.

“What are you saying?”

Momentary lucidity flashed through her eyes. “The ones you’ve sacrificed are in the Void,” she hissed.

The Void? Why were we talking about that?

I slapped her, the sound echoing through the cave. “I don’t care about that!” I yelled. “Tell me how to fix my jewel.”

“They speak and speak and speak, never stopping. Loud, loud, loud, they yell. I know what you’ve done. Who you are. I know what you’ve become.” A maddening, crazed laugh slipped from Koleta’s lips. Goosebumps covered my arms. “Perhaps the voices spoke to me. Perhaps I decided I’d had enough.”

“Speak plainly, witch!” I was going to strangle her if I didn’t get some answers.

Koleta stood on shaky legs. “Time and again, you took, took, took.” She raised a finger and pointed it at me. “Maybe the ruby has decided you’ve taken enough. Maybe, after all these years, it decided that you have claimed more than your fair share of power.”

“Fair share? There is no such thing! All the power is mine.” I scowled. “Why didn’t you bring this up last year? You told me that if I released the People of the Night—”

“Did you?” Koleta interrupted me as a massive grin spread over her face. She looked far too delighted for a witch who’d been imprisoned for centuries on end. She danced, hopping from one foot to the other like the fool she was. “Did you do it? Did you let them out?”

I stilled. Why did she care about the People of the Night? My mind raced to put together the pieces, but I was missing something. Why would Koleta care about Ithiar’s fanatics? She had been imprisoned for centuries before I locked them up in what remained of Whiterose.

“What did you do?” I snarled.

The witch laughed. “Perhaps, Queen Marguerite, I grew tired of this imprisonment. Tired of this icy cavern you abandoned me in, making it my home, my prison, my life. Perhaps I grew tired of life in general.”

Those elephants stomped on my chest. My breath caught. My eyes widened. A growl rumbled through me. “What?”

“Perhaps I grew tired of you. Perhaps there is a prophecy. A harbinger, a Sunwalker, and a Wielder of Shadows. A path of light, not of darkness.” Koleta sneered. “Perhaps a certain elderly priest visited me a few years ago and told me of your crimes. He, too, sought a way to free himself from your horrid rule. Perhaps I decided what he offered me was better than life in this frozen prison.”

It took a few moments for her words to sink in, but when they did, shock and horror ran through me. This was her doing. She... knew?

“You planned this?” I gasped.

“Planned?” Koleta laughed. “Queen Marguerite, I’ve been in this prison for so long, I don’t even remember what the sun looks like. Not only did I plan this, but I set everything in motion. Have you noticed, perhaps, the graying of your hair? The wrinkles on your face?” A horrible, menacing, gummy scowl overtook her face. “Even your vampiric beauty cannot compete with the blackened husk of an organ that used to be your heart.”

Gray hair? My heart stopped. No. It couldn’t be. My hand flew to my head of its own volition, and I yanked out a handful of hair. Black strands filled my palm, but among them was a single gray strand. It was a godsdamned beacon of my waning power. “No!”

“Yes.” The witch cackled. “When endless decades went by, and my imprisonment continued, I knew I had to make a change. Slowly, so slowly, I worked. The prophecy, you see, has been around for centuries. But the rest? The ruby draining? Ciro? Your loss of power?”

She mockingly curtsied, her rags barely clinging to her frame. “That was all me. You see, Queen Marguerite, I’m done with life. And since you ensured my existence consisted of nothing more than a frozen hellscape, I decided to take you with me.”

Snarling, I opened my hands. How dare she speak to me in such a way? Did she not remember who I was?

Shadows flooded the prison.

“I’m going to kill you!” I yelled.

Koleta did not flinch. “Night is here; death has come; betrayal is in the

—”

She never finished her horrid lullaby. I ripped out her jugular with my fangs. Her disgusting blood was like rancid wine left out too long. I spat it out, dumping her body in a heap.

I lifted my head to the icy ceiling and howled my anger.

Once again, I was alone.

The witch had played me. She'd told me the gods had spoken to her; that if I released the People of the Night, I would gain immeasurable power. If I freed them, Ithiar would be pleased, and I would be the strongest queen in all the Four Kingdoms. I could take over the entire continent if I wanted. The world, even.

I'd come to visit her at Ciro's suggestion.

Ciro, my trusted priest who'd advised me in the ways of Ithiar, the god of blood, for centuries.

Ciro, the priest who had Tethered Sebastian and that bitch.

Ciro, another who betrayed me.

Bitterness ran through me. More screams. I pounded the ice. I threw blasts of shadows at the walls. The prison shook. Icicles fell in haphazardous piles. My anger was a furious beast, demanding more, more, more. I screamed and cried and yelled until my throat was raw.

Pieces fell into place. Betrayal had occurred right before my eyes.

Fury pounded through my veins, unlike anything I'd ever felt.

I would make them pay for this—all of them. When I was done, no one in Eleyta would ever forget the name Queen Marguerite Coraline Amélie Montquartier.

I was the most powerful of them all, and they were fooling themselves if they ever thought otherwise.

*Snowball Fights, Laughter, and Very
Serious Conversations*



“I’m not an infant, Lulu.” Marius crossed his arms, glaring at me as we walked down the stone hallways of the abbey. Well, if pressed, I could concede that “walked” was a slight overstatement. We moved at a slow and leisurely pace, one I was certain wouldn’t break my little brother. He added, “We can move faster than snails stuck in a snowstorm. I promise I won’t break.”

“Marius, you’ve only been awake for four days,” I reminded him, taking another tiny step down the hallway.

He bounced on the balls of his feet. “Yes. Four *long* days.”

I frowned. “I’m not sure it’s safe. I don’t want to push you too hard.” What if the Wasting Illness wasn’t gone? What if it was hiding in his body, waiting for the opportunity to pounce?

Marius blinked a few times and then turned, looking behind me. “Vampires can go outside at night, right, Sebastian?”

I swiveled on my feet, glaring at my husband, who had been following us silently up until now. His eyes widened, and he looked between Marius and me, clearly trying to decide what to say.

Sebastian swallowed. “Yes, vampires belong beneath the moon.”

I growled his name through our bond, and Sebastian moved in a blur to stand beside me, pecking my cheek. *Sorry, darling. I couldn’t ignore the question.*

“See!” Marius jumped in the air and pumped his fist. “Let’s go.”

He had taken the news of my Making well. Too well, if I was being honest. Growing up in Ipotha, we’d always known vampires existed, but I would have thought he’d be at least a little upset about it. Instead, my brother

had shrugged and told me he was happy I was here.

Honestly, I felt the same way. Seeing Marius like this—healthy and able to walk without having to stop for frequent breaks—made my heart sing.

“Please, please, please,” Marius begged in the way that only ten-year-olds seemed capable of doing. “I want to go outside and feel the air on my face.”

I rubbed my arms. “I don’t know. What if the weather’s bad?”

I was pulling at straws now. Marius knew it, too.

“It’s a flurry,” my brother said, pointing out the nearest window. “Barely any snow.”

Damn.

Sebastian chuckled, and I glowered at him. “Is something amusing you, oh Prince of Darkness?”

He shrugged, his eyes crinkling in amusement. “It’s a little funny, that’s all. Watching you get a taste of your own medicine.”

I gasped in mock indignation. Truth be told, I was a little stubborn. Nothing like this, though. Right?

“Fine,” I grouched. It was clear this argument wasn’t going anywhere. “We’ll go outside,”—I turned to Marius and pointed to him—“but you need to wear a cloak, hat, and mittens. I won’t take any chances that you get sick again.”

“Thank you!” He charged me, wrapping me in a hug before we returned to our chambers.

By the time I declared my brother ready to brave the outdoors, he was bundled up within an inch of his life. Sebastian and I wore cloaks in solidarity, although we didn’t need them, and Marius was grinning from ear to ear.

I took my brother’s hand. “Ready?”

He nodded. “More than ready.”

Sebastian laced our fingers together, squeezing tightly. A jolt of something powerful ran through me as we all touched, and I breathed in deeply.

These two right here—my vampire prince and my halfling brother—were my family. My future. My everything.

THE SHADOWS DEPOSITED us in the snow-dusted courtyard. The blanket of white spread far and wide, covering everything in sight.

A snowflake fell lazily from the sky, landing on Marius's cheek. He laughed, brushing it off with a finger and staring at the snow in wonder. "This is amazing!" He let go of my hand, dropping to his knees to touch the powder at our feet.

I tried to see this through his eyes. To me, snow was cold, bitter, and a marker of the nearly never-ending winter in Eleyta.

To Marius, though, it must have been beautiful. The alabaster abbey glistened in the light of the crescent moon, the thick black trees wore pearlescent coats, and countless stars popped in and out from behind clouds, sparkling brightly.

After a few minutes, Marius stood. He ran in a circle around us in the courtyard, his feet leaving prints as he darted through the snow. He stopped at a statue of a child picking flowers, brushing the snow off her head before continuing his speedy path. He dashed around us, ducking beneath the few trees and bushes that grew in the courtyard, looking more like a regular child than he ever had.

Sebastian chuckled. "Marius," he called. "Watch out."

My brother's head popped around a tree just as Sebastian threw a snowball in his direction. Marius's laughter rang through the night, warming me from the inside out. He had already endured so much that I sometimes forgot how young he was.

However, when a snowball landed in the middle of my chest, I was quickly reminded of his youth.

Marius giggled, running away from me. "Come get me."

He continued taunting me as I bent and scooped up a pile of snow. My shadows pulsed as if encouraging me. I formed a sphere, packing the snow just enough to avoid it falling apart, before standing.

"Hey, Mar-Mar!" I shouted.

The moment he looked at me, I tossed the snowball in his direction, purposefully holding back some of my strength. I missed, which wasn't overly surprising. Good aim had never been one of my strong suits. That, like many other things, had not changed after my Making.

"You missed me!" Marius ducked behind a tree. "You'd better run, Lulu!"

I opened my mouth to retort when something smacked me in the back. I

jolted, spinning around as Sebastian laughed.

Laughed!

The sound, which was so rare I'd only heard it a few times, was like darkness and violence and the night mixed together. It was deep and low and sent shivers of delight through me. It was like spotting an exotic animal escaping its hibernation after a long winter. Beautiful, wild, and such a rare experience that you cherished it forever. I stood in wonder for a moment, letting his laugh soak into my bones.

Another snowball hit me, this time on my arm.

Sebastian smirked, the challenge clear on his face.

My lips tilted up as I bent, making more ammunition as quickly as possible. "I'm going to get you back for that."

Gathering shadows around him, Sebastian chuckled. *Only if you can catch me*, he said.

His wings burst out of his back through the special slits in his cloak, and he rose in the air with a flap.

Laughing, I pelted him with snowballs. Or at least, I tried to. In reality, my weapons arched through the air, landing uselessly on the other side of the courtyard.

Marius left his post behind the tree, armed with a dozen spheres. He threw them at us both and quickly proved that his aim was much better than mine.

The air was light, and mirth filled the courtyard as the three of us played. Snowballs flew, names were called, and I felt happier than I had in years. This was the life Marius should have always had. He was outside, running around and laughing as any child his age should.

A tear sprang to my eye, and I brushed it away. Papa would have been so happy to see Marius living the life he always deserved.

"Pay attention, Lulu!" A snowball hit my thigh, drawing me out of my thoughts.

Marius stuck out his tongue, running away from me.

I darted in my brother's direction, stopping just long enough to form another snowball, when the iron gates guarding the abbey creaked.

Instantly, the air shifted. My heart skipped a beat, and my muscles tightened. I grabbed Marius, moving him behind me as Sebastian landed in front of us. He and I gathered shadows in our palms, and I released my wings.

“What’s going on?” Marius asked, tugging on my cloak.

“I don’t know,” I whispered. “Stay behind me.”

A lock turned in the abbey gate, and then the distinct sound of metal opening filled the night air. My shoulders tensed as I waited to see who would walk through.

It was only a few seconds, but it felt like hours before a cloaked figure entered the courtyard. The moment they did, Sebastian exhaled. *We’re fine*, he said.

He released his shadows into the night and approached the familiar figure walking towards us.

“It’s alright,” I told Marius. “It’s just Phyrra.”

“Who?” he asked.

I forgot he wouldn’t know who she was. He’d already been very sick by the time the spymaster had rescued him from the Broken Mountains, and she’d left him with the Second Order of Isvana’s Chosen Ones to find us.

“She works for Sebastian,” I told him quickly.

Phyrra came closer, sliding a key into her pocket and dipping into a bow a few feet away. “I came as soon as I got your message, Bastian.”

Sebastian had mentioned he’d sent multiple missives to the spy, but since he wasn’t sure where she was, he wasn’t sure she would receive them. I wasn’t clear how his messaging system functioned, but obviously, it was effective.

“Good to see you, Phyrra.” Sebastian clasped Phyrra’s arm in greeting. “What news do you bring?”

“I’ve done what you asked.” She withdrew a slip of paper from her pocket. “This is the information you seek.”

My curiosity spiked as I eyed the sheet of paper, but I didn’t ask questions. Sebastian would tell me later, when the time was right.

“Thank you, Phyrra.” He read the note before putting it away. “Will you be staying at the abbey?”

“Not at the moment. I have many things left to do.” She smiled ruefully, her eyes twinkling. “A spy’s life is never dull.”

With that, Phyrra turned and ran out of the courtyard. Sebastian shut the gate behind her, rejoining Marius and me in a moment.

My little brother’s eyes were wide as he stared at the now-closed gate. “She’s a real spy?” Wonderment filled his voice.

“She is,” I confirmed.

I didn't know exactly what Phyrra did for Sebastian other than manage his spy network, but I knew he trusted her. That was enough for me.

"Wow," Marius breathed, still eyeing the place where Phyrra had stood. "I just met a spy."

Sebastian tucked me against his side and addressed my brother, "I'm a literal vampire and the prince of this realm, but you're impressed by a spy?"

"Obviously," Marius said dryly, rolling his eyes. "Being a spy is far more interesting."

Then, as if he hadn't just practically insulted one of the most powerful vampires in Eleyta, Marius spun on his booted heel and started back to the abbey.

Sebastian stared at my brother's retreating form. "I think... I think he's mouthier than you."

I snorted. "You might be right."

Before the cure, most of Marius's energy had been allocated toward staying alive. Now, it felt like I was getting to see my brother for the first time. He was energetic and brimming with life, ready to tackle whatever came his way.

I couldn't be happier for him. I only wished Kinthani and Papa were here to experience it, too.

Sebastian kissed me. His voice was soft as he said, "You're a fantastic sister and an even better wife."

His words were a warming flame in my veins, fighting against the Eleytan cold that was always present in this northern kingdom.

Hand-in-hand, Sebastian and I followed Marius back into the abbey.

This was a good moment. A happy moment. But it wouldn't last.

The slip of paper was on my mind, and I knew our little bubble would pop soon enough. I needed to tell Marius about our family—when he was awake, this time—and the queen needed to be stopped. The possibility of death loomed heavily above me.

I prayed fervently that these happy moments wouldn't be Marius's last good memories of me.

BY THE TIME we made it back to our rooms, the moon was setting. We'd

caught up to Marius, who was asking Sebastian a million questions about Phyrra and spying in general. Sebastian answered each one patiently while the Binding Mark steadily filled with amusement.

Marius was happy. For now. He wouldn't be soon. I hoped he wouldn't be angry with me for not telling him the moment he woke. I just... I'd wanted to protect him.

But that could only go so far.

Marius yawned, and I seized the opportunity to put an end to his questioning. "Go get changed into pajamas, but don't go to bed just yet," I ordered him in my best "big sister" voice, pushing him towards his door. "There's something I want to talk to you about."

His hand landed on the doorknob, but he paused, looking at me. "What's wrong?"

His clothes were dripping on the abbey floor, the sound echoing through the stone hallway.

"I'll tell you once you're not soaking wet." I reached over and turned the knob, gently pushing him into his room. "Go."

This time, he obeyed.

The bedroom door slipped shut, and I turned around.

"You're going to tell him?" Sebastian asked quietly.

"I have to. It's time."

He didn't argue with me. He didn't tell me it was too late and we should go to bed and do this tomorrow. No, he knew as well as I did that this could be put off no longer. Until now, I'd deflected any questions Marius had about our family, but that time was up.

"I'm nervous," I admitted. "What if he hates me for not telling him right away?"

What would I do if that were the case? Would it be worse to have Marius alive but not want to be around me than to be all alone? I thought so.

An arm wrapped around me, and Sebastian drew me in for a hug. "He won't."

"He might," I argued.

"He'd be a fool to hate you," Sebastian said. "But either way, I'll be with you the whole time."

Sebastian slipped off my wet cloak, hanging it next to his in our room. Then it was time. Squeezing his hand, I gathered my strength and knocked on Marius's door. It swung open a heartbeat later.

As directed, he'd changed. His wet clothes were nowhere in sight, and he wore a long tunic and breeches that were slightly too big for him. Adding in his laughter from the snowball fight from earlier, I was immediately reminded of my brother's youth.

He was so young, and he should never have had to deal with any of this. Boys his age usually went to school, played with friends, engaged in harmless pranks, and complained about homework. They did not usually suffer from debilitating, nearly life-ending diseases, get kidnapped and stolen into another country, only to be rescued and then cured with a plant from the gods.

No, Marius was not normal. But neither was I. Maybe that was our fate as the harbinger and the Sunwalker.

Marius frowned and met my gaze. "I know you've been hiding something from me, Lulu."

So perceptive.

My stomach twisted, and I sighed. I should have known I couldn't hide this from him. After all, Marius was half Fortune Elf. Had he seen this conversation? Did he already know what I was going to say?

Taking Marius's hand, I drew him into his room. "You're right." We sat on the bed, and I stared at his small hand clasped in mine. Two violet orbs cast their light on the room, but they did little to ease the gloomy atmosphere. At one point, I might have hated it, but right now, it felt appropriate.

I'll be right here if you need me, Luna, Sebastian murmured, sending a shadow to wrap around my arm. He leaned against the doorjamb, his back to us to give us privacy.

The way he stood by me was everything I never knew I needed.

"Lulu?" Marius squeezed my hand, drawing me back to the present. "What did you want to talk about?"

My gaze dropped to the spot where our hands met. The two of us made a funny pair. A halfling and a newly Made vampire, an older sister and the younger half-brother she needed to protect. Not only that, but we were the two remaining members of our family. When Julieta died, I never imagined her loss would be the first in a seemingly endless stream of death. It followed me wherever I went.

A knot formed in my throat. I swallowed past it with difficulty, shaking my head. I had to be strong for Marius. "What is the last thing you remember before waking up in the abbey?" I asked.

Marius stiffened, pulling his hand out of mine. “You mean when I was taken?”

I nodded.

He drew his legs onto the bed, curling into a ball and staring at the floor. “They came at night. I was sleeping, but loud laughter woke me up.” He glanced at me. “I knew right away something was wrong.”

I was familiar with that feeling. Too often, I’d felt wrongness settle over me like an ill-fitting tunic whose seams rubbed uncomfortably on my body.

“What happened next?” I asked.

“There were two voices.” Frowning, he twisted his fingers together where they held his legs against his chest. “No, three. They talked loudly about a fire... something about the queen’s orders.”

My stomach twisted, and fresh anger boiled in my veins. I’d already suspected that the queen had ordered my family killed, but this was enough evidence for me.

She needed to die.

Did you hear that? I asked Sebastian through the bond.

A growl rumbled down our connection. I hadn’t known he could do that, but he did. *We’re going to kill her, Luna. I promise.*

Death used to scare me, but not when it came to the queen. I needed her to die. I didn’t know if that made me a bad person, but it was how I felt. I’d have to look into the philosophical ramifications of such feelings later.

If there was a later.

“Then what happened?” I looked back to my brother.

He sucked in a breath. “One of them mentioned they were supposed to kill me too, but then... they argued. Something about a prophecy? Money.” He frowned and rubbed the back of his head. “Then someone hit me.”

I hissed, baring my fangs as shadows slipped from my palms. How could anyone hurt a frail, sickly child? Some things just weren’t done—but then again, Queen Marguerite had shown time and again that she had no morals.

“And then?”

“I don’t know. I woke up a few more times, but it was always a blur. Yelling. Pain. Anger. Harsh words. Then... I stopped waking.” Marius raised his eyes to mine, looking far older than his ten years. “Lulu, I should be dead right now.”

My heart ached at those words. “No,” I protested.

“Yes.” He nodded, his eyes filled with sadness. “I always knew I would

die young. I never saw myself in the future.” He let go of his legs and took my hands in his. “Papa is dead, isn’t he?”

He knew. Somehow, that made things even worse.

A crack ran through my heart. I whispered, “Yes. They’re all dead.”

“I saw it. I thought it might be a nightmare, but...”

“It was real.”

He sucked in a breath. “Oh.”

One word. How could a single syllable be infused with so much pain?

That crack grew until my heart shattered into a million pieces. “Yes. It’s just the two of us now.” I glanced up at Sebastian and amended, “Three of us.”

The harbinger, the Sunwalker, and the Wielder of Shadows.

Three against the world.

The Heavy Weight of Memories
❧

SEBASTIAN

Delicate, tiny soft snores like rumbles from a newborn puppy came from Luna's sleeping form beside me. She'd fallen asleep the moment we returned to our room, but I couldn't rest.

Instead, I stared at Phyrra's note. I'd read the words so many times, I'd already memorized them.

I looked into the three astronomers you asked about. Two, Ignatius and Aviani, are loyal to the queen and should not be approached. Jehanne's allegiance is unknown.

And at the bottom, in a hastier scrawl, was:

Travel with caution.

I groaned, my head falling back against the headboard. Jehanne Lambert was a renowned astronomer in Eleyta whose temper was the stuff of legends. She was famously private and often refused to work with people who disturbed her peace.

Unfortunately for us, we had no other choice. We needed her help. Between Keven's vision in Castle Sanguis' library and the damned prophecy Zephyra had read for us, it was abundantly clear we needed to challenge the

queen on the night of the red moon. As neither Luna nor I were astronomers, nor could we See the future, this was our only option. I refused to let the red moon catch us by surprise. There were already enough factors working against us.

Luna rolled over in her sleep, her hand landing on my thigh. Mumbling something under her breath, she licked the tip of her fangs. I scooted down the bed, gathering her in my arms and running my hand down her back. Within moments, her breathing settled.

Pressing the lightest of kisses against her hair, I held her close. “I’ve got you, my love.”

And I would never, ever let her go.

LEAVING the abbey the next night was a teary affair. Luna and Marius cried. They hugged for so long that it seemed like their arms might fall off. I stood behind Luna, my hand on her lower back as I waited. I didn’t want to push either of them, but the journey to Jehanne’s territory would take some time.

After several minutes, Luna released her brother. “I love you,” she whispered, kissing his cheek. “They’re going to keep you safe here.”

“I want to go with you.” Marius stared at Luna before turning his pleading eyes to me. Gods, how did parents deal with this? He looked like a lost dog with that wide gaze, and the slight quiver in his lip certainly added to his cause. “I promise I’ll be good.”

More sorrow came through the Binding Mark.

“I’m sorry.” I shook my head regretfully. “It isn’t safe.”

Marius frowned. “Please?”

Luna sighed, and I could see how much denying her brother hurt her. “We need to move fast, Mar-Mar. I’m sorry.”

His shoulders deflated. “Okay. But you’ll be back soon?”

“Of course,” Luna said. “The moment we have what we need, we’ll return.”

“Promise?” Marius asked, his lip wobbling.

Gods. What was this ache in my heart?

I stepped forward, clasping the halfling on the shoulder. “We’ll come back for you.”

Part of me knew it was unwise to make promises I didn't know I could keep, but Marius was my wife's only living family. That made him my family too. I would do everything in my power to protect what was mine.

Marius sniffled. "Okay," he whispered. "I'll be waiting."

Genevieve, who had been standing back, took the halfling's hand in hers. "We'll look after him."

"Thank you." I dipped my head. "If a full turn of the moon passes and we don't return—"

"I'll send a message to Phyrra," the priestess finished for me. "I remember."

We'd already spoken, and Genevieve would take care of Marius if something happened to us. I hated setting up such precautions almost as much as I hated the thought that I might be bringing Luna into danger, but I didn't want to leave her brother without proper care. He was still a child, after all.

"Thank you," Luna said.

Genevieve turned to Marius. "Come along. Odette has something she wants to show you."

The halfling instantly perked up. "What is it?"

The priestess smiled coyly. "I'm not allowed to tell you." She winked. "It's a surprise. Do you want to come see?"

Marius chewed on his lip, but after a moment, he agreed. The two departed the courtyard, leaving us alone.

Wiping a final tear from her cheek, Luna slipped her hand into mine. "Ready?" she asked.

I turned, my gaze crawling over her. She wore a fitted white tunic and leggings edged in fur, a gift from the priestesses, and her long hair was in an intricate braid that ran down her back. Between the moon shining down on her like an angelic halo and the slight glow on her face that remained from when we'd fed earlier, she was stunning.

And she was mine.

Bending, I stole a kiss. I was unable—and unwilling—to stay away from Luna when she looked like that. After I'd thoroughly kissed her, I said, "I'm ready. Are you hungry?"

"No, we fed earlier." Her brows raised. "Did you forget?"

Warmth coursed through me. I most certainly did not forget. Feeding had filled the hunger within me, but the act itself had led to... other activities.

I ran my finger up her neck, delighting in her responding shiver. “I could never forget you, darling.”

“Good.” She smiled at me. “We’re going to the Black Sea, right?”

“Yes. I can shadow us there, but we’ll have to go on foot the rest of the way.”

Hopefully, Jehanne would be in a good mood when we arrived. Her territory was large, and finding her would probably take a few days.

“All right.” Luna squared her shoulders. “Let’s go.”

I pictured our destination in my mind and pulled on my shadows. Darkness wrapped around us both, lifting us into its murky embrace.



THE STEADY TEMPO of crashing waves against rocks came to me first. Seconds later, the shadows fell away, revealing the massive, slick, obsidian rock on which we stood.

For a moment, my heart caught in my throat. Had it not been for the black bark on the trees, the dark vines choking the life out of the trees, and the unnatural weeds bursting through the snow, I would have thought this place unchanged.

Unbidden, memories I had long since buried slammed into me like heavy bricks. They were a giant smashing into me, pushing me down, compressing my lungs, and making breathing nearly impossible.

How could the past have such a strong hold on me even after all these years?

Luna let go of my hand, and alarm pulsed through the bond. “Sebastian? What’s wrong?”

I opened my mouth to respond, but my throat was thick with emotion. Damn. “I... this... there are memories.” I bent, picking up a smooth onyx stone that fit nicely in my palm. I’d had one like this, once. I found it while skipping rocks with my brothers. It was one of the first memories I ever had. My fingers tightened around the stone.

The black waters lapping at the shore, the forest, and the village beyond spoke to me.

Luna’s eyes flashed with recognition. “That’s right. You grew up near here, didn’t you?”

She remembered. I'd only spoken of my family and life before my Making once, but she remembered.

I slipped the stone into my pocket, swallowing past the growing lump in my throat. "Yes."

Her gaze searched mine. "Do you... Can you show me your home?"

I should have known she would ask, just like I should have known that coming this close to Brookton would drag up old memories. I had hoped that by shadowing us to the Black Sea instead, she wouldn't make the connection.

I was wrong.

Running a hand through my hair, I frowned. "I don't... I haven't been here since..."

Since I left to find adventure, witnessed a horrible murder, and was whipped within an inch of my life before being Made.

Luna moved towards me, placing her hand over my heart. She leaned in close, her forehead resting against my chest. "Sebastian?" she whispered my name in the way that always made my heart skip a beat.

I held her close, dreading the direction of this conversation. "Yes?"

She worried her bottom lip, drawing it between her fangs. "I'd like to see where you grew up."

"It's not much," I said, hoping to deter her. "Most human villages in Eleyta are the same. A couple of temples, schools, a blacksmith or two, a healer or witch in residence, homes, and small businesses."

And, of course, the vampires that lorded over them all. That didn't seem important at the moment, though.

Luna nodded. "I'm sure, but it's more than just a regular village to you." She looked at me, her black eyes wide and pleading in a way that I already knew would be my downfall. "Seeing the place where you grew up and getting a picture of your life before would mean a lot to me." She paused, then added, "Please."

That last word was my undoing. For Luna, I would do anything, including take her into the town I'd actively avoided for over three centuries.

My mouth opened, and I heard myself agreeing before I could think of better excuses. "We can go, but we have to remain cloaked in shadows."

Brookton was still home to hundreds of humans, and any one of them could share our location with the queen if they wanted to. The people of this place no longer had any ties to me. Not anymore.

A soft smile spread across Luna's face, and she stood on her toes to kiss

me. "Thank you, Sebastian."

Hoping I wouldn't regret this, I nodded and released my shadows. They swarmed around me, dancing in the darkness alongside hers. The dark wisps cloaked us both, hiding us from sight until even other vampires would be unable to see us.

I laced my hand through Luna's. The sooner we got this over with, the better. I summoned my wings and led her toward the blackened, overgrown forest. Wrongness was in the air, a thick fog that rendered even breathing difficult, and I couldn't shake the thought that everything was broken.

My shadows urged me to hurry, and I heeded their call. We wove around trees, jumped over the frozen streams peppering the forest, and battled with the black overgrowth as the scent of smoke and life grew stronger. Hundreds of humans were nearby, their distinct smell permeating the air. Luna didn't seem bothered by their presence, moving swiftly and without a sound, as though she'd been a vampire for years and not weeks. Sometimes, I couldn't believe how much had transpired since our wedding. She was taking to her new life so well; I couldn't help but be proud of her.

The trees were still thick when the wind carried faint conversations towards us. The humans who called Brookton their home spoke of everything and nothing, completely unaware of our presence.

Then, snow-covered roofs came into view. My heart sped up, and memories flooded through me, one by one, until differentiating the past from the present was impossible.

"Come along, Bastian," Lucien, my oldest brother, called as he ran down the stairs. "It's time to open the store, and Papa needs our help!"

He always needed our help on Market Days. These were the busiest days of the year, even more than Festival Days, and even I knew there would be no time for playing today.

I hopped down the steps, taking them two at a time. "Coming!"

As the youngest, my job was sweeping the shop and ensuring everything was tidied. Lucien and François, my other brother, often took on the bigger jobs. One day, though, Papa wanted to pass things down to me.

"Hurry up, slowpoke!" Lucien yelled. "Lord Milanal is due to come in tonight."

My heart squeezed, and fear ran through me as I jumped down the last few stairs.

The vampire's business was important to my parents. The lord always

bought the finest silks and other imported goods Papa procured specially for him. Because of him we always had food and a warm fire, even on the coldest night.

Still, I was nervous. Whenever the vampires came, Mama made us hide in the upstairs closet the whole night while our parents served them. She said the lord was dangerous, but I'd also overheard her telling Papa the vampire was so beautiful, he looked like a piece of art brought to life. That confused me. How could something deadly be beautiful?

I hurried around the shelves to where Lucien and François were talking behind the counter. They turned and stared at me.

"What is it, little brother?" François asked.

"I have a question," I declared.

Lucien snorted. "You're five. You always have questions. We don't have time for them today."

He thought he could boss me around because he was four years older than me. I did not like that. Besides, my brothers weren't doing anything.

Puffing up my chest, I ignored Lucien's tone and plowed ahead. "The vampires—"

The bell at the front of the shop rang, and Lucien clapped his hand over my mouth. "Don't."

Mrs. Cratchet, the town seamstress and well-known flirt, sashayed towards us. "Good morning, boys!"

Lucien returned the greeting as François glared at me. "We don't talk about the vampires," he hissed out of the corner of his mouth.

Mrs. Cratchet stopped in the middle of the shop, inspecting a bolt of fuchsia fabric. The moment her back was to us, Lucien shoved me towards the broom. "Start cleaning. If you keep asking about the vampires, Papa will send you to the castle and let the queen eat you."

I shivered, the threat far too real in my five-year-old mind, and grabbed the broom. I swept as vigorously as my little arms would allow. That day, I made sure there wasn't a single speck of dust on the ground when the sun set, and Mama shepherded us into the closet.

The memory dissolved like grains of sand, giving way to another.

My feet pounded over the cobblestones, and peals of laughter filled the air as Marie, Bruno, and I ran toward the obsidian waters ahead.

It was finally summer, those short two months of the year where it didn't always snow, and the Black Sea was calling my name. Everyone knew only

the bravest swam in there. It was dangerous since the midnight waters made it impossible to see the potential monsters lurking beneath the surface. It was an unofficial rite of passage in our village, and this year, I was finally old enough.

I couldn't wait. I'd watched my brothers take the same dip in the years prior, and now, it was my turn. Being the youngest meant I had to do everything last. All I wanted was to experience life, to enjoy it. There had to be more than Brookton, right?

I'd find out soon enough. When I was of age, I planned to join the army. I was saving my money slowly, getting ready to buy a sword and leave.

"Come on, you two!" Bruno stripped off his tunic at the shore, and his breeches were next.

I pulled off my clothes, leaving them in a pile nearby. The wind was cold on my bare skin, and my undergarments were not doing much to protect me from the chilly weather, but I didn't care.

I was finally growing up.

Marie kept her shift on, leaving her overdress and cloak in a bundle before daintily walking into the sea.

I wasn't taking that approach. It might have been summer, but frost still covered the ground at night.

Lifting my legs as high as possible, I splashed into the black waters.

"It's cold!" Marie squealed.

It was freezing. Still, I'd waited so long for this. The moment I was able, I dunked myself beneath the surface.

My heart stopped for a long moment as the cold water slammed into me from all sides. My teeth chattered, my lungs squeezed, and my hands grasped at nothing. My feet sank into the gritty sand, and I pushed up. A second passed. Two. Then I broke the surface of the water, raised my fist, and cheered.

Next to me, two other heads rose. Marie and Bruno's lips were blue, and their faces were pale, but they wore matching grins.

We were finally getting older. I couldn't wait to tell my brothers I swam in the Black Sea, just like them. It was as amazing as I thought it would be.

What other kinds of adventures were waiting for me in Eleyta?

Luna and I turned a corner. We moved through the village square slowly. Too slowly. Another memory took over, one more painful than the rest.

"Don't go, Sebastian." Mama gripped my hand with far more strength

than I thought she possessed. Tears streamed down her face as she looked up at me. "You'll get yourself killed."

Mama said she didn't have any favorites, but I knew she loved me more than my brothers. I saw it in every smile, every laugh, every time she played cards and chess with me. She didn't want me to leave, but what was I supposed to do? I needed to find out what else existed in Eleyta.

"Philippe is in the army," I said, referring to the tailor's son who had left for the south the prior spring. "He comes home all the time." Bending, I kissed Mama's cheek. After my fourteenth summer, I'd shot up and now I towered over both my parents. "I'll be back before you know it."

She trembled, shaking her head. "I don't think so."

That day, I'd brushed her worries off as nothing more than motherly concern. Looking back, I wondered if she'd had a touch of the Sight. Maybe she'd Seen something. Maybe she had a feeling. Either way, she was right.

I never returned.

Giving Mama one last hug, I turned to my father. He stood stoically to the side, staring at me through hardened eyes. Disappointment was etched onto his face, and he shook his head. "You should stay here and look after the shop, Bastian. It's what I raised you to do."

This again. We'd been over it a hundred times.

I adjusted the sword at my hip. "I can't, Papa. Adventure is calling my name."

Crossing his arms, he huffed and took a step back. "Fine. Have it your way."

My brothers were there, and we exchanged quick farewells. Nothing long or drawn out, barely memorable. That was it. I turned my back, fool that I was, and strode down the cobblestone streets away from my family for the last time.

A hand tugged on mine, drawing me back to the present. Luna stood in front of me, her concerned eyes sweeping over mine. *Are you alright, Sebastian?* she asked through the bond.

I'm... there are many memories here, I replied after a moment.

Regret coursed through me. Why did I agree to this? Why did we come? We should have gone north, skirted around the Black Sea, and continued our search for Jehanne.

Then I saw it.

Papa's shop stood where it always had, the tall three-story building in a

row of others just like it. A wooden sign had always hung off the front, but it looked different now. Lopsided. My steps quickened despite the trepidation growing in my gut like a twisting, churning maelstrom of dread. I fed more shadows into my cloak, hiding us both from sight as the boarded-up windows came into view.

There were no signs of life. No sounds, no smells, nothing. It was abandoned. They were gone.

My breath left me in a whoosh, and a pang of loss ran through me. Resting my palm on the door, a single tear ran down my cheek.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

I wasn’t even sure what I was apologizing for. Not being a good son? Not listening to them? Not coming back? No matter how painful the memories were in Brookton, I didn’t regret joining the army. I didn’t even regret being Made, because all those decisions led me to Luna.

But I regretted not coming back to see them at least once. Now they were dead, and it was too late.

This was your home. Luna’s voice was soft in my mind.

Yes, I replied. *I grew up here.*

Seeming to understand that I couldn’t say anything else, Luna wrapped her arms around me. For a long moment, neither of us moved. The past was a heavy burden on my shoulders, and it took several minutes to gather myself.

Eventually, we moved away from my parents’ shop. I guided Luna through the town, and we moved as ghosts in the night. I showed her the school, Ithiar’s temple, and the old blacksmith’s shop where I used to watch sparks fly as the smithy forged weapons, speaking as needed through the bond.

Every single minute we spent in Brookton was harder than the last. By the time we returned to the Black Coast, I could barely put one foot in front of the other.

And yet, I had to keep going. This wasn’t the time to let the past rule me.

We had a queen to kill.

Time Grows Short
❧

LUNA

The namesake waters of the Black Sea were extremely unsettling, and their inky waters stretched as far as the eye could see. The surface was as smooth as glass, reflecting the dim light of the moon and stars, and it probably would've been appealing if not for the color.

Sebastian ran ahead of me, keeping the obsidian waters on our left. He guided me around trees and over fallen logs. We kept our shadows around us, hiding us from sight as we journeyed north.

Neither of us spoke.

I didn't regret asking him to show me where he grew up. Every new thing I learned about him was another puzzle piece that fell into place, revealing more of him. I knew him better with each passing day. But I regretted that visiting his family home had made him so upset.

If I visited Ipotha, would I feel the same? Probably. There were so many memories there, between Julieta and my family. But still, I would go back if he asked. I would do anything for him.

A few hours passed. The dying forest was a blur of black trees, dangling vines, and unnatural silence.

Eventually, Sebastian slowed. His movements were as graceful as ever, but mine were significantly less smooth as I halted beside him.

He glanced at me, putting his finger to his lips. His voice was unwavering through the bond. *I think we're close.*

I wasn't sure how he came to that conclusion. This area looked like the rest of the woods we'd run through.

Did you hear something? I asked.

He nodded, his mouth pinched in a firm line. *Yes, I...*

Sebastian's next words never came.

A ferocious snarl came from the woods. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled, and my heart squeezed. My shadows pulsed, and I startled. I dropped my hold on the shadows for a single moment, but it was enough. An enormous wolf with a smoky coat stood before us. It turned and met my eye.

Everything happened so fast that I barely registered it.

Sebastian shoved me to the side. I slammed into the ground. A flash of pain ran through my back, and I groaned, grappling at the snow.

Dropping his cloak of darkness, Sebastian gathered shadows in his hands. He snarled. The wolf roared. I cried out. The massive beast leaped in the air.

"Sebastian!" I yelled.

He moved out of the way, but he wasn't fast enough.

A massive paw landed on his chest, forcing him to the ground. The wolf growled, raising its other paw high in the air. The moonlight glistened off its sharp talons. Violence ebbed off the creature, and I knew I was looking at a bringer of death. One strike of those claws against Sebastian's neck could kill him.

I struggled back to my feet. "No!"

My fangs ached, my heart thundered, and the dark predator within me woke. This was my husband. My Bound and Tethered Partner. My love.

I refused to allow anything to happen to him.

Crimson tinged my vision. Baring my fangs, I jumped on the wolf. "Get off him!"

Pulling the creature with my bare hands, I channeled all my strength and anger into my movements. My fingers tightened in its fur, and I swung the wolf around. It flew through the air, yelping as it slammed into a tree. A terrible *snap* echoed through the otherwise silent forest, the trunk splitting in two from the impact.

The gray wolf dropped to the ground, but it did not stay down. Growling, it prowled towards me. Its teeth gleamed as it yipped and snapped at me.

Fear was cold as it ran through my veins. The last wolf we'd encountered—the white wolf—had seemed to like me. This one, though... it was angry. And deadly.

A dangerous mix.

My wings burst from my back, and I summoned more shadows to my hands. Snarling, I bent my knees and matched the wolf's offensive position.

Next to me, Sebastian lurched to his feet. Thank the gods. His wings

snapped out as shadows poured from his hands, darkening the forest. His tunic was torn, and blood dripped from his shoulder. This was becoming an unwelcome trend.

My fangs burned at the sight.

“You’re hurt,” I snarled.

He glanced at me. “Calm down, Luna.”

Calm down. *Calm down?* This was not the moment for calmness. Libraries and laboratories were places to be calm. Not here, with a wolf wearing my husband’s blood. This was a place for strength.

I *screamed*. Birds startled, flying into the night as I charged the predatory animal. “I’m going to kill you!”

No one injured my Bonded Partner—especially not some wolf.

It watched me advance, and I could have sworn its mouth twisted into a smirk. My wings flapped, and I drew droves of shadows into my palms, intent on tearing the wolf to pieces.

I was moments away from clawing at the wolf with my bare hands when a massive weight flew into me from the side. Sebastian shoved me to the ground, pinning me down.

“Don’t!” he shouted.

I stared at him, at the rip in his tunic and the now-healed wound on his shoulder. The laughter returned, bubbling up inside me. “Don’t?” I echoed his words in disbelief. “The wolf—”

“Is the person we’ve come to see,” he blurted.

My eyes widened, and my heart stopped. “What? Is this a joke?”

I stared at Sebastian, but I didn’t detect any trace of amusement on his face. “No joke, darling.” He turned to the wolf. “Are you done? We’re not going to hurt you. We need your help.”

The wolf inclined its head and barked. A flash of white light erupted from it, and when it was gone, a very beautiful, angry, naked female stood where the wolf had been. A werewolf. Her bare feet dug into the snow, and she leaned against a tree, apparently uncaring about the rough bark.

Sebastian eased off me, helping me to my feet. I had neglected to ask my husband about the person we were meeting—a mistake that would not happen again.

The werewolf canted her head in a very animal-like fashion, her brown hair falling over one shoulder as she studied us with orange eyes. “The stars did not speak of your arrival.” She frowned and balled her fists at her sides.

“Why are you trespassing on my lands? You do not belong here. Leave!” she barked.

My hackles rose. Who did this werewolf think she was?

Sebastian pulled me behind him. “As I said, we need your help, Jehanne.”

The angry female inhaled. Her eyes were sharp as they crawled over us. Unmasked malice emanated from her. She snapped, “Oh?”

He nodded, ignoring her tone. “We are in need of a reading.”

“Why do you think I would do anything for you, Prince of Darkness?” Jehanne sneered at us. “I don’t have any reason to trust you.”

Sebastian drew in a deep breath and squared his shoulders. Though he appeared at ease, a burst of worry flashed through the Binding Mark. Just as quickly as it appeared, however, it was gone.

“We’re going to kill the queen,” he said calmly as if he was making a statement about the weather—snowing, as usual—and not a treasonous declaration.

My heart thundered in my chest. Was I angry before? Now I was worried. What was Sebastian doing? This wasn’t exactly news we should be spreading, especially not to a werewolf who had just tried to kill him.

Those orange eyes studied us for another moment before Jehanne nodded. “Well, why didn’t you say so?” She grinned, her tone suddenly ten times lighter than it had been moments before, displaying two elongated canines. “This is delightful news.”

Another flash of white light, and the gray wolf was back. It was only slightly less unsettling the second time. Jehanne barked, then she loped into the snowy forest.

Sebastian drew his wings into his back. “I think we’re meant to follow her.”

As if emphasizing his words, the wolf stopped and howled.

“You want to follow the wolf that just tried to maul you?” I stared at him. “Is this really the best plan?”

I wasn’t exactly known for making the best decisions—my mouth had gotten us into trouble more than once—but this didn’t seem wise, even for me.

“It’s our only option, Luna,” he said. “We need to find out when the red moon is coming and Jehanne is an expert in these types of things.”

Another howl, this one more pointed. It was evident the wolf was losing patience.

“Can we trust her?” was my question.

He chuckled darkly. “Darling, we can’t trust anyone.”

I sighed. I knew he was right. “Fine.” I glared at him. “But if Jehanne kills us, I’ll be angry with you.”

He snorted. “Noted.”

Together, we ran after the wolf. She led us over hills, into thick dying forests, through underbrush, and around a small snow-covered mountain. After an hour of running, I was ready to declare war on all types of exercise as long as it meant I would never have to run again.

Thankfully, it wasn’t long before Jehanne came to a stop in front of a tight cluster of pine trees. She shifted, standing on two legs again before slipping into the trees.

“Follow me,” she called out, disappearing from sight.

I glanced at Sebastian. *Is it safe?*

He shrugged. *Safe or not, we must go.*

Sebastian looked relaxed, but his wings formed on his back. A few wisps of shadows escaped his palms, swirling around him. My own darkness pulsed and sang at the sight of his, and I released my wings.

Immediately, I felt better. Jehanne might have been a werewolf with no qualms about nudity, but we had power running through our veins. Being a vampire was rarely delightful, but at least we could defend ourselves if necessary.

“Time grows short, Prince of Darkness,” Jehanne sang through the trees. “Come on, unless you plan on burning in the sun.”

A glance at the sky confirmed Jehanne was right. Dawn was a dusty pink overtaking the darkness, and Sebastian needed to get out of the sun.

“Let me go first,” Sebastian said, moving towards the pine boughs.

As if I was going to fight him on that. Warrior, I was not. I followed him through the trees, keeping my wings out and my shadows gathered around me like a protective hug.

When I stepped out into the clearing, my jaw dropped. This was not at all what I expected.

A well-built, homey log cabin made of pale, almost white wood sat in the middle of the snowy clearing. It was small, clearly built for one, but well cared for. It certainly didn’t match Jehanne’s angry exterior.

A chimney rose from the cottage, filling the air with the scent of burning wood. Immediately, I tensed. Fire was no longer a friend of mine. Not only

was it deadly for vampires, but it was the cause of my family's death.

The cabin door creaked open, and Jehanne's head popped out. "I don't have all day," she snapped. "Come in." Turning on her heel, she muttered, "Damned immortal vampires, showing up for a reading, then wasting my time."

I should probably warn you, Jehanne has a bit of a temper, Sebastian said through the bond.

I met his gaze. *That seems to be an understatement.*

Luna, watch what you say in there. His voice was serious, the warning clear.

I swallowed. Any levity I might have felt was long gone. *I will.*

We followed the temperamental werewolf into her home. I went in last, keeping my shadows wrapped around my arms like bracelets and my wings tight against my back.

Once again, I was surprised by what I found.

For an angry werewolf, Jehanne seemed to really like the rainbow. She'd donned a long amber gown that fell to the floor. She was in the middle of tying a white belt around her middle as I closed the door behind me. Azure carpets covered the wooden floors, a coral throw was over the back of the only armchair in the space, and colorful mosaics hung in frames on the walls. The tiny cottage was filled with so much joy that for a moment, I forgot we were in Eleyta.

Then the fire crackled, the loud *pop* like an explosion, and I remembered exactly where I was. Moving away from the hearth, I kept my back to the wall.

Noticing my trepidation, Jehanne snorted. "Relax, vampire. I didn't bring you all this way just to kill you."

"Relaxing isn't in my repertoire," I replied before I could stop myself. I really needed to get my tongue under control.

"Fine, have it your way." The werewolf shrugged and gestured to the small wooden table, where an empty teacup sat next to a closed book. "Sit, and I'll get ready." She placed her hands on her hips. "I assume you're wanting to hear from the stars?"

First, I was talking to a goddess. Now, we were trying to hear from the stars. What was next, speaking to a creature of legends? The scientist in me had trouble reconciling these situations with reality, but I'd have to deal with that another day. We had enough on our plates.

Sebastian nodded, leading me to one of the chairs. He pulled it out, and I sat, keeping my wings out.

“We’ve been told there is a time in the near future that would work best for our plans,” he told the werewolf. “We’re hoping the stars can lend us further direction.”

His chosen vocabulary implied we had a plan, which wasn’t exactly true. We had a desire: to kill the queen. Other than that, we didn’t quite have the rest of it sorted out yet. To be fair, we had been rather preoccupied between breaking the queen’s bond and waking Marius. But hopefully, we’d have something more... solid before we returned to Castle Sanguis.

Why didn’t Sebastian tell Jehanne about the red moon, though? I supposed it would make sense to keep it a secret to see if her reading matched what had been prophesied, but it still seemed like an odd choice.

I hoped we would not be waiting for too long. I wasn’t sure how much longer I could stand living on the run. If anything, the past few weeks had taught me that being Made into a vampire did not automatically mean one was suddenly amazing at all facets of life. I did not enjoy the outside life, nor was I equipped for it.

Books were not readily available in the wild, we were dependent on others for shelter, and it was cold. Did I think Castle Sanguis’ temperature was unpleasant? It was nothing compared to the elements we had braved since Queen Marguerite tried to kill us during her tournament.

Perhaps when this was over, I would get a cat. They seemed to enjoy being inside, and I could mirror my life after them. Maybe more than one. How many would Sebastian let me get before he put his foot down? Probably a lot. Maybe I could have an entire cat colony. One for each room in our home, wherever that would be.

Caught up in my plans to acquire a cat (or a dozen) to cuddle while reading, I missed Jehanne’s rummaging through a closet.

A loud *thud* pulled me out of my feline-infested daydreams as a heavy crystal ball landed on the table in front of me.

I thought she’s an astronomer, I said to Sebastian.

He claimed the third and final seat while Jehanne sat across from me. *She is*, he replied. *An astronomer and a mystic. Jehanne studies the stars, the moon, and the planets scientifically, but they also... speak to her.*

Fascinating.

The werewolf cleared her throat. “So, what exactly are you looking for?”

“Anything that will give us direction on the best time to act,” Sebastian replied.

Jehanne cracked her knuckles. “Get comfortable,” she said. “We might be here a while.”

Only One Will Survive
❧

SEBASTIAN

My shadows pulsed a low, steady tune as we sat across from Jehanne, waiting for her predictions. Everything was coming to a head; I could feel it. My shoulder had healed during the run to the cabin. In the grand scheme of recent events, another injury was a small price to pay for information on the Blood Moon.

Jehanne slowly spread her fingers and held them over the crystal ball. Her eyes slipped shut. Her lips moved, her silent chants adding an eeriness to the small cottage that hadn't been there before.

Luna sucked in a breath, and worry flickered through the bond.

I squeezed her hand. *I'm here*, I whispered. *I won't let anything happen to you.*

I would never have brought Luna to this place if I thought Jehanne would harm her.

A red light flashed in the crystal ball, flickering like lightning during a thunderstorm. My heart tried to escape my chest, my palms dampened, and the air seemed to hold its breath.

Inky fog, like an early morning mist, filled the sphere. It twisted and turned, churning rapidly. Within it, swirls of purples and blues spun in a tiny tornado as Jehanne continued her silent chanting.

Several moments went by, and I wiped my free hand on my trousers. When it seemed like the air was so thick that I could cut it with a sword, Jehanne inhaled sharply.

A golden flash filled the ball, pulsating three times before a single strand of the same color wove through the mist. It was a beam of light cutting through the fog, bringing light to the darkness.

Three drawn-out, seemingly endless heartbeats went by. Luna's grip tightened on my hand. My chest tightened. Jehanne slammed her hands down on the table, opened her mouth, and sang. It was not a song, per se, but a humming deep in her throat. The wordless tune was eerily, achingly familiar, and yet it held notes of ancient power. Goosebumps dotted my arms, and time crawled.

I couldn't help but wonder if this was why Jehanne lived without a pack's protection. I'd heard tales of her strange ways, but I hadn't witnessed them until now. Perhaps it was simply a side-effect of her age. Jehanne was one of the oldest werewolves in Eleyta, having moved here several centuries ago.

The crystal ball vibrated, the tabletop shaking beneath its force. I gripped Luna's hand and released a few shadows. The threads of power hung around my middle, out of sight, but they were there if I needed them.

Jehanne's face contorted, and she hummed even louder. I could've sworn I heard words now. *Show me, show me, show me.*

Maybe they were in my head, but I didn't think so.

As soon as the ball stopped moving, the strange mist shifted. The colors separated into individual strands. Shapes formed. They were fuzzy at first, but soon they were as clear as the werewolf sitting in front of us.

Three forms stood side by side. One was smaller than the others, and they had a flickering light within their chest. The second was bright like the sun, and the third was taller than the other two, wielding twin swords of darkness.

A jolt of surprise ran through me. *I was the third figure.*

The scene was frozen, a captured moment of the future, but it was clear enough. My jaw fell open, and Luna made a sound of surprise. Neither of us spoke, however, because the humming stopped.

The sudden silence that befell the cabin was deafening. It was a black hole, a silent, singular moment in time, a calm that preceded absolute change.

Then a log *popped* in the fireplace.

The sizzling fire shattered the silence. Jehanne slapped her palms on either side of the crystal ball. She opened her eyes. They were black, swirling pits of darkness.

Luna sucked in a breath. *Do you see that?*

I nodded. *Yes.*

It would be hard to miss.

"Night is here; death has come; betrayal is in the air," Jehanne intoned in a guttural voice that was not hers.

The hairs on the back of my neck prickled, and my shadows swirled in warning. Few times in my life had I ever felt such a sense of impending doom.

The werewolf continued, “In fourteen nights, the prophesized moon will rise. Blood will be shed, and light and darkness will converge.” Her unnaturally black eyes widened, and she pinned me with a stare.

I swallowed. “Jehanne—”

A shriek. Then, “Shadows will battle the sun, and only one will survive the crimson night.”

Her nails dug into the sphere, scratching against the glass. “The balance is broken, and death is here.”

Then, her head snapped back, and she cried out. The horrifying wound was like an animal being torn in two by an invisible force.

Shit.

Unsafe, unsafe, unsafe, my shadows throbbed in warning.

Gathering Luna in my arms, I shoved away from the table. Even more shadows slipped from my palms, and I prepared to leave.

Not even a second later, the scream came to an abrupt end. In the silence, my heartbeat was a thunderous drum. I tightened my grip on Luna and stared at the werewolf.

Jehanne straightened, her eyes returning to their normal orange, as she tilted her head. “Did the stars speak?” she asked quietly.

I stared at her. Was this a joke? Could she honestly not remember what just happened?

Luna and I exchanged a glance. I kept hold of my shadows, but I didn’t pull us into the Void yet.

“Y-y-es. They did,” was Luna’s response.

Jehanne rubbed her temples and nodded. “Good. You have what you came for?”

“We do,” I said. And honestly, even if we didn’t, I wouldn’t stick around after that performance. I’d seen many things during my life, but few caused my blood to chill like ice. “We don’t have any coin on us, but we will return with payment.”

“Just kill her,” Jehanne said. “That royal bitch murdered my mate and half our pack decades ago. Having the queen’s blood spilled will be payment enough.”

“It shall be done.” Or we would die trying. “Thank you, Jehanne.”

“Don’t thank me,” she said in clear dismissal. “Go. Rest. You’ll need all your strength for the days ahead.”

NEITHER LUNA nor I spoke during our journey back to the abbey. We fell into bed fully clothed, the exhaustion of the trip wearing us both down.

Between visiting my childhood home and the werewolf, I would be happy if we never saw anyone else ever again. I hadn’t always been this anti-social, but having one’s life threatened numerous times in the span of a few months would do that to anyone.

Drawing Luna toward me, I buried my face in her hair. She was already asleep, her body even less used to the strenuous exercise than mine was.

“I’ll keep you safe, darling. I promise.” My heart was beating far faster than normal as I held her close. Once again, I made a promise I had no business making. But I would do it a hundred times over for her. I kissed her forehead. “I won’t fail you.”

CRIMSON BLOOD DRIPPED from the walls, adding new, macabre tones to the throne room. There was so much of it. It was a painting gone wrong, a nightmare brought to life, a silver-tipped blade straight to my heart.

Blood was on the queen. Her hands. The floor. The walls. It was everywhere except the one place it needed to be—inside Athena.

I fell to my knees, my heart breaking as I stared at the ground in front of me. Athena’s body was in pieces, torn apart in a manic frenzy. I wanted to hold her, gather her, turn back time, and never bring her here. But I couldn’t.

In the end, I lifted my gaze to the bloody queen. “What did you do?” I cried out.

Mother looked at me, her fangs dripping with Athena’s blood, and she tilted her head. “It was an accident.”

Her words made no sense to my grief-addled brain. How could this be an accident? How could she do this? Athena was mine. Or she had been.

Words, thoughts, and movements escaped me. How could I do anything at all? How could I keep going after this? A pool of grief was at my feet, and I

was ready to jump in and drown.

Athena was dead.

“I’m... sorry,” the queen said.

Sorry? What good was an apology? What would it do for me? Athena would still be in pieces, her blood still coating everything in sight.

A guttural groan escaped me. “How could you?”

Queen Marguerite blinked. “I received bad news.”

“Bad news?” I echoed. “You received... bad news.”

And then she killed the only thing that mattered to me.

“Yes.” She stroked her glowing ruby. “It might have been a slight overreaction.”

“Slight?” There were hundreds of words to describe what she’d done, but that was not one of them. My fists clenched, and my nails cut into my palms.

“Really, Sebastian, she was just a mortal.” Queen Marguerite shrugged. “I’ve apologized. What more do you want?”

I swallowed, my mouth dry. I wanted Athena.

How could the queen be so callous about this? Athena might have been human, but she was my... first. My first real love, my first relationship as a vampire, and now...

She was dead.

I was alone.

Truly, completely, utterly alone. I couldn’t even go to see my family. A century had passed since my Making. My parents and brothers were long dead. Even if, by some miracle, my brothers’ children lived, I doubted they knew who I was. I wouldn’t find comfort in the arms of distant family members I didn’t even know.

I wouldn’t find comfort at all.

Athena was dead.

“Sebastian.” Mother continued to speak, but I tuned her out.

I couldn’t do this. I couldn’t listen to the queen’s excuses while Athena’s blood covered the floor in front of me. Maker or not, I couldn’t deal with this. With her. The longer I stared at the remnants of my first love’s body, the more rage pulsed through me.

I was going to kill someone. I needed to kill someone. It should have been the queen, but I couldn’t. Not yet. I wasn’t strong enough.

But the blood.

It was everywhere.

Shadows pounded, pulsed, and throbbed as they struggled to get out of me. Too much. It was too much. I released them, the dark wisps streaming out of me.

“Sebastian!” the queen yelled. “What in Ithiar’s name do you think you’re doing?”

“Leaving.” I couldn’t stay here any longer.

She gripped the sides of her chair. “I did not give you permission to leave.”

I raised my gaze to hers. Blood was spattered across her face. “Deepest apologies, Your Majesty.” I bowed. “May I please go and,”—I gulped, staring at my now-red clothes—“clean up? I fear that there is blood on my trousers.”

Her eyes dropped as she took in my outfit. “Ah,” she said. “Of course. You may go.”

I was in the Void so fast I didn’t hear her next words.

Athena was dead.

The following hours, days, and months went by in a dark, cold blur. Nothing mattered. No matter how many tasks I completed for the queen, no matter how many people I killed, no matter how much blood I drank—never killing, only drinking—numbness coursed through me.

Eventually, I gave in to it and let it take me over.

I was the Prince of Darkness, Master of the Shadows, twice blessed by Isvana, and the chosen weapon of the queen.

And I was alone.

I WOKE TANGLED in the sheets. Goosebumps peppered my flesh, and although it was the middle of the day, sleep was impossible. Even if I’d been tired, there was no way I was returning to that nightmare.

Living through it once was enough.

Instead, I brushed my lips over Luna’s and held her close.

“What’s wrong?” she murmured, her eyes still shut.

I kissed her nose. “I’m just going to stretch my legs,” I told her.

She rolled over, burying her head in the pillow. “Don’t go far.”

“I won’t.” The Tether wouldn’t allow it even if I tried.

Luna murmured something under her breath, easily slipping back to sleep. Drawing the blanket over her sleeping form, I pulled on a tunic and loose pants. Shadowing into the hall, I leaned against the door.

Memories of Athena's death still haunted me. I'd avoided thinking of her for years, but now they came to me every time I slept. Like a friend I never wanted, days of long ago were forever keeping me company. Was this the gods' idea of a joke? Were they trying to tell me something? I didn't know.

Eventually, the tell-tale swishing of robes came from my right. I looked up as Genevieve stopped in front of me. "Is something wrong, Prince Sebastian?"

Other than the memories of the brutal murder of my first love?

"Not really," I said, not wanting to bother the priestess with my multitude of problems. "I just couldn't sleep."

She nodded, and I noted the basket of vials in her hands for the first time.

Hoping to distract the priestess from asking me anything else about the past, I asked, "Are those the cure?"

Genevieve grinned. "Yes. Odette and the other witches have been hard at work. Because of them, all the humans in our region no longer suffer from the Wasting Illness. It's a miracle." She made a religious sign over her chest. "Thank Isvana, you and your wife came to us. This will bless many throughout Eleyta."

"Luna will be so happy to hear that." She'd worked so hard for this.

"We are the ones who are pleased beyond measure. If there is anything we can do, let us know."

I thought for a moment. "There is something."

"Oh?"

I explained my request, and when I was finished, Genevieve nodded. "Alright, it can be done." She turned as though to leave before pausing. "Oh, and Prince Sebastian?"

"Yes?"

"I know we haven't spoken much about what you and the princess are planning, but if these cures are a sign of what is to come for our country, Eleyta will truly be blessed in the years to come."

With a curtsy, she hurried down the hall. Long after the priestess left, I stared down the vacant corridor. Could we truly usher an age of blessings into Eleyta? Was it even possible? Or was this country too broken, too scarred?

I pondered Genevieve's words until Luna woke.

"TRY TO OPEN UP THE TETHER," I said to Luna.

We circled each other in the large empty storeroom Genevieve had allotted us for training. The two of us wore lightweight leggings and tunics made for exercise.

She frowned, concentrating as she tried to do what I asked. It took a few seconds, but then that connection opened between us.

"Can you do it faster?" Every single moment was a potential opening for the queen. We couldn't afford even that.

Her brows furrowed. "It's easier if we're touching."

"I know, love, but we might not be close enough for that. Who knows what we'll encounter when we challenge the queen? She has any number of tricks she can throw at us."

All of them were horrible, deadly, and exactly the kind of situation I would never have taken my wife into on purpose. Except, that was exactly what was happening. We'd be returning to Castle Sanguis in less than a fortnight.

I had remained at Queen Marguerite's side for over three centuries, and I knew exactly how she operated. I had seen her eyes grow cold and her face freeze as she decided someone's fate. I had watched magic swirl in her palm moments before she made her final judgment. I had witnessed the deaths of humans and vampires at her hand for infractions that others would consider tiny, at best.

My wife wasn't ready. Not by a long shot. I would do whatever I needed to do to prepare her. Reaching within myself, I tugged hard on the red rope tying us together.

Luna straightened, those beautiful black eyes I loved dearly widening. "I felt that."

A smile crept on my face. "That was the point."

She chuckled, tugging on the bond between us. It was a good effort, as though someone was pulling at my core. Not hard, but insistent, like a toddler yanking on their parent's leg.

"Good job." I opened my palms, widened my stance, and let shadows

flow out of me in a thick storm of darkness. “Try again.”

When Luna went to grab the bond this time, I formed a sphere of shadows and threw them at her. She didn’t notice them in time. The ball slammed into her, dropping her onto her ass.

A yelp slipped out of her mouth. “Why’d you do that?”

My heart ached at the sight of her on the ground, but I didn’t let it show on my face. “Get up,” I said firmly.

She snarled, her wings snapping out behind her as she stood. “Answer the question. What was that for?”

Because she wasn’t ready yet. Because the queen was powerful. Because I was so gods-damned worried I’d lose my beautiful, book-loving wife. I’d do everything to get her ready, including pushing her as far as possible.

“The bond is there,” I said. “That’s great. But we need to do more.”

“So you attacked me?” Luna growled. The sound would’ve been adorable if the Blood Moon hadn’t been looming over our heads.

“Yes.” As much as it pained me, I would do it again and again until she was ready.

Bewilderment crossed her face. “Why?”

“The queen isn’t going to sit around and wait for us to get our act together, Luna.”

She just stared at me, so I threw more shadows at her. What better way was there to make my point?

This time, Luna darted out of the way just in time. The shadows slammed into the wall. She cursed.

“Get angry,” I said, shaping another sphere. “Yell. Swear. Fight back. Defend yourself.” With each word, I threw shadows at her. “I need you to practice because I won’t survive if you don’t make it out of this alive.”

Queen Marguerite would be the most difficult opponent we’d ever faced, and the sooner Luna realized that, the better.

Creating twin balls of night, I threw them at Luna. She barely batted them away in time.

Growling, she climbed to her feet. Shadows swirled around her. They danced around her wings, swirling over her arms like ribbons of pure darkness. Anger pulsed through the bond.

Good.

I needed her mad. Furious, even. I needed her to tap into every part of herself if she was going to survive this.

Firm in the knowledge that this was important, I steeled myself against the part of me that hated hurting Luna.

I gathered more shadows. “Not good enough,” I growled. “Again.”

*A Horrible, Exhausting, Not-At-All
Fun Routine*



LUNA

Once, I thought Sebastian was an imperturbable teacher. That was no longer the case. Whatever patience he'd exhibited when he taught me how to wield my shadows had disappeared. Again and again, he attacked me until darkness surrounded us on all sides.

Still, he didn't stop.

We had been at this for hours. My feet ached, my back burned from where my wings dragged on the ground, and my thighs felt like they were on fire. Was that supposed to happen? I'd fallen on the floor so many times my bottom was numb.

I had no idea it was possible to be so sore, so hurt, and so utterly *bad* at something.

Did I ever think I was good at fighting? Every other time we had practiced these skills together—which, admittedly, was not much—I'd at least felt like I was learning something. When Sebastian and I flew together, I felt like his equal.

Now, every single year that separated us was evident. Every decade he had more than me was echoed in the aches in my joints. Even my fangs hurt.

Blood tears streaked down my face, having started flowing around the same time I'd lost feeling in my ass. Despite my best efforts, I couldn't stop crying. I was a bloody, snotty, achy mess.

And Sebastian did not give up.

"Again," he snarled for what must have been the hundredth time. Shadows whirled around his arms, and I sobbed as I reached within myself.

You can do this, I told myself. *You must do this*.

Thirteen days remained until we would challenge the strongest vampire in

the land. That didn't seem long, especially considering the abysmal state of my fighting abilities.

I wanted to curl into a ball and cry, but I didn't. I kept looking for the Tether. It took a few heartbeats before the flickering cord appeared.

I sought it out, grabbing and yanking it as hard as I could. A heartbeat passed, and then I felt it. A floodgate opened, and his magic slammed into me just in time. I threw up a wall of shadows, stumbling back. His sphere collided with the barrier with a *boom*, and I fell to the floor, exhausted.

Instantly, Sebastian drew his shadows into himself. He crossed the room in a blur and gathered me in his arms.

"Good job," he praised.

I stared up at him. We had vastly differing definitions of "good." I said, "I barely touched the Tether."

"But you did it."

"Barely," I grunted. One success after hours of failure wasn't much.

Seeming to sense how done I was, Sebastian's shadows gathered around us. He held me close as the empty storage room disappeared. We were in the Void for seconds, if that. I barely had time to inhale and prepare for the onslaught of voices when the shadow rose, and the scent of salt filled my nose.

Sebastian placed me on a bench. "Put your wings away," he directed.

I did.

"Lift your arms."

I complied.

He slipped my disgusting, sweaty tunic off me, discarding it on the ground. My leggings soon followed, and then he divested himself of clothing. He picked me up once more and walked slowly into the water.

I hissed. The liquid was at once a soothing balm and too much for my weary muscles to take. He slowed down even further, only moving when I confirmed I was alright.

Eventually, we made it into the water. I stood... or at least, I attempted to. My aching legs shook so hard, my teeth clattered. Wordlessly, Sebastian held me up. When my arms trembled during my attempt at lathering shampoo into my hair, he took over. Every glide of his hands over my skin, every gentle caress, every feather-soft kiss was an apology for the so-called training.

I leaned against him, letting him take care of me. He was my other half, my strength, my rock.

Once my entire body was clean, Sebastian placed me on the ledge. He dunked himself quickly. I absolutely, definitely, did not watch as the water sluiced off his sculpted chest. Nor did I observe as he washed his hair and body, noting how he seemed unaffected by our training session.

Then, when Sebastian was still completely bare, he turned to me and offered his hand. He lifted me out of the water as though I weighed nothing, and I clung to him. We hadn't even been out of the water for a minute before he wrapped a fluffy towel around me. He maneuvered another around his waist, somehow making sure he didn't drop me during the process.

"Hold on," he said gruffly.

I nodded, words still too hard to come by.

The shadows came, and we traveled through the Void once more. The voices barely had the chance to begin their now-familiar tune, crying out, "Death is coming," before we landed in our bedroom.

The moment the shadows lifted, Sebastian put me on the bed. Rummaging through the wardrobe, he pulled out a nightgown and helped it over my head. His movements were so gentle, so soft, that it was hard to remember that a mere hour ago, he had been attacking me relentlessly in the name of training.

Sebastian tilted his head, exposing his neck to me.

"Drink," he said huskily. "Then you can sleep."

I didn't even have the energy to put up a fight. I clambered towards him, licking the tips of my fangs before climbing into his lap. His arms wrapped around me, and then I bit him.

The first taste of his smoky, cinnamon blood filled a hole that I hadn't known existed. The next made me feel stronger than I had ever thought possible.

And the third.

The. Third.

It consumed me. Overwhelmed me. Empowered me.

It flooded through me like lava erupting from a volcano. It filled all the cracks, all the exhaustion, all the weariness that had been present a moment ago. Now, something new and hot flooded through me instead.

I pulled my fangs from his neck, licking as his skin healed. Sleep was the last thing on my mind. Instead, I couldn't help but notice that while I was dressed, Sebastian most certainly was not.

"Are you hungry?" I asked, hoping he was.

He shook his head, drawing me against him as he moved further on the bed. “No.”

My hand traveled down the planes of his stomach, tracing each line of his skin. Gods, this vampire was too beautiful for his own good. “Are you... tired?”

Sebastian caught my fingers as they dipped lower on his stomach. “No,” he said.

I wiggled my hand out of his. “Good.” I shifted, clambering back onto his lap and kissing him. “I’m not tired either,” I said against his lips.

For a moment, we both lost ourselves in the embrace. Every time we came together like this, it felt right. Good. Too soon, however, Sebastian’s hands landed on my hips. He lifted me off him. “You need to sleep, Luna.”

“No, I need you,” I protested.

He smirked. “I’m right here.”

I went to kiss him again, but he caught me, flipping me around so my back was to his front. “Sleep,” he whispered, drawing the covers over us both. “You’ll need your strength.”

My stomach dropped, and though I already suspected the answer, I asked, “Why?”

He chuckled, and there was more than a little darkness in the sound. “Because darling, tomorrow we are doing this all over again.”

I groaned.

OVER THE COURSE of the next week, Sebastian and I fell into a routine.

A horrible, exhausting, not-at-all-fun routine.

After the first night when Sebastian completely decimated me, I started visiting Marius early in the evening. Like most humans and witches in the abbey, he kept the same hours as vampires. Marius would eat his breakfast, and Sebastian and I would drink coffee, my husband often just keeping his hand on my shoulder or staying in the hall to give my brother and me some privacy. Marius and I always arrived back at one of two topics. We’d talk about our family—that inevitably ended in tears—or we made plans for the future.

My little brother was still captivated by Phyrra. He wouldn’t stop asking

Sebastian about the spymaster. Ever since Marius had learned of the spy's reputation as one of the fiercest fighters in all Eleyta, he was making plans to train so he could fight like her. He had spirit, and slowly, he was gaining strength.

Every day, Marius looked better than the day before. His skin was filling out, his frame was less skeletal, and he had a healthy glow. I thanked Isvana each time I saw my brother. Soon, I would be as pious as the priestesses.

Not only did being with Marius bring me joy, but it brought me strength. I couldn't explain it, but it was easier to tap into my magic after spending time with him. There was something about our connection that sang when we were in close proximity, especially when Sebastian was nearby.

After breakfast, Marius and I parted ways. Odette had taken a liking to him, and together the two toiled away in the underground laboratory, making more vials of the cure. There were so many humans affected by the sickness that it would take months to help them all.

While Odette and Marius worked, Sebastian and I trained. A lot. An excessive amount, really. At least, in my opinion. I wasn't sure how much more I could take, but every time I asked if we could take a break, Sebastian said it wasn't enough. He was tireless in his efforts to train me.

Every night, he lobbed shadows at me until my clothes were in tatters, tears streaked my face, and exhaustion was all I knew. No matter how much I protested his attacks, he did not stop until I woke the Tether between us and pulled magic from him.

No longer was he satisfied just by a simple wall of shadows. Each night, he pushed me further and further. We soul shared, the Tether's scarlet glow filling the abandoned storage room as power flowed between us.

His attacks were relentless.

This was a side of my husband I had glimpsed in the past but hadn't seen in its full glory. Sebastian was a predator, a master of his craft, and a skilled warrior. He had centuries of experience over me and knew how to use his skills to his advantage. Not that he needed one because, again, I was not an excellent fighter. But at least I was getting better.

Slowly but surely, I was getting faster and defending myself against his attacks.

The second night, Sebastian fed as well. Since then, we'd both taken to eating before falling into an exhausted slumber.

Now, only seven days remained. It was such a short amount of time. So

much could be done in a week, yet it felt like nothing more than the blink of an eye.

“Luna!” Sebastian barked. “Pay attention.”

I snapped back to the present, ducking just as a sphere of shadows exploded in the space where my head had been moments before. Damn. We’d done this so many times that I knew what came next.

Attack. Duck. Turn. Shadows. Move.

It was a tuneless dance, spurred on by the pounding of our feet and the beatings of our hearts, and it was wearing me out. On and on, we fought.

After barely avoiding the shadow-spear Sebastian threw at me, I huffed. I needed something more. It wasn’t fair that I was the one constantly being hit.

Sebastian goaded me. He pushed and needled and growled until anger flooded through my veins.

I’d had enough of this. Enough of not being the best. Enough of being sore and hurting and a failure.

Rage coursed through me, and my shadows writhed, encouraging me forward. I reached within myself and pulled on the Tether. Darkness rushed to my hands, and I threw a massive wall of shadows at Sebastian. He turned, but he wasn’t fast enough. It slammed into him, shoving him back a few feet.

Finally!

Approval pulsed through the bond. “Good job,” he said.

I didn’t speak. Instead, I reached within myself and opened our connection. Crimson light shone from our wrists, as bright as any Light Elf orb. I pulled as much power as I could before heaving it towards Sebastian in a never-ending flood of darkness. On and on, the shadows poured out of me until I had nothing left. Slowly, I allowed the link between us to fizzle out before my legs gave out, and I slumped to the floor.

Sebastian clapped, slowly at first, but then more quickly.

“Well done, Luna,” he said, pushing away from the wall where I’d sent him. “We’ll make a warrior out of you, darling.”

His hair was disheveled, and his tunic was torn, but the grin on his face said it all. He was proud of me. After an entire week of practically being tortured by his non-stop attacks, it felt good to get him back.

Sebastian came over and offered me his hand. He helped me to my feet, holding me against his side. “You did so well,” he praised. “How would you feel about a break?”

I blinked. This was an unexpected but welcome turn of events. “You

mean an actual reprieve from this torture?”

“Training,” he corrected, his lips twitching.

“I’m well-versed in dictionary definitions, and this absolutely can be categorized as torture,” I informed him.

Sebastian laughed. “Fine. How would you like a break from this so-called torture?”

“I’d love one,” I told him. Just because I’d made progress didn’t mean I was immune to the aches and pains brought on by these relentless attacks.

“I was hoping you would say that.” Sebastian held me against his chest as shadows swirled around him. First, we returned to our room, changing quickly into fresh clothes and washing up.

“Hold on.” He slipped something into his pocket before retaking my hand. “This journey may take a minute or two. We’re going a little further than normal.”

I swallowed, tightening my grip. The longer we were in the Void, the more time the voices had to find me. I might no longer have been physically sick when we shadowed from one place to another, but the strange things I heard made this type of transportation over long distances unpleasant.

Still, I would go. I would do just about anything to get out of training.



MY PREDICTION WAS CORRECT. The voices in the Void were quieter today, but their message was as eerie as ever.

“Save usssss, Sunwalker,” they whispered.

Others hissed, “The Queen of SSSSShadows is going to kill usssss all.”

“Save usssss,” the chorus echoed their earlier call.

By the time the shadows lifted, I was well and truly spooked. My heart’s beat was a drum. I squeezed Sebastian’s hand, holding him like he was the only thing keeping me from being swept away by the voices.

“Open your eyes, Luna,” Sebastian whispered, his fingers brushing my cheek.

I hadn’t even realized they were shut. I did as he asked. The moment moonlight touched my eyes, I gasped. This was definitely better than training.

“Wow,” I breathed, spinning around to take it all in.

An enormous waterfall loomed high above us, stretching toward the night sky. Where rushing, roaring water should have been, there was nothing but massive frozen chunks of ice. Cascading water, caught in motion and frozen in time, they were beautiful in their stillness. The ice was so thick it was white, carrying hints of the foam I was certain gathered above the water when it was running.

And the rocks behind the waterfall. That was where the real beauty lay. The stones shimmered like a piece of natural art. It was as though thousands of gems were embedded within them. Dark trees with long, thin trunks rose around the frozen waterfall, some growing on the rocks themselves. Though they were black, which matched the rest of Eleyta, they had an unparalleled beauty. The sight stole my breath. My slow-beating heart stopped for one long moment. This was incredible. Nature was in charge here, and we were simply the observers.

Sebastian's arms wrapped around me. He drew me close, my back resting against his chest. At that moment, nothing else mattered.

We just were.

Together.

A few minutes passed before I found my voice. "Where are we?"

"This place doesn't have a name," he said. "Or if it did, it's been lost to time."

Somehow, that made it even more beautiful. A lost grove. Forgotten by all, allowed to exist on its own. Now a refuge for us. Already, the aches of training seemed less horrible than before. Beautiful tranquility was healing in more ways than one.

I whispered, not wanting to speak too loudly in such a still place, "It's stunning."

He hummed, the sound reverberating through me. "I think so too. I discovered it many decades ago, and I've visited this location several times. Being here brings me peace."

I could see why. A gray squirrel hopped from one tree to the next, chattering at us as it moved. The brisk breeze blew my hair, but it didn't seem as bad as it normally did. The air was cold, but not bitter. The snow was whiter than normal. Even the stars were brighter. This place was the embodiment of peace.

Sebastian brushed back a lock of my hair. His voice was a gentle caress in my mind. *If we're quiet, there's something else we might be able to see.*

Intrigued and more than a little curious, I asked, *What is it?*

Patience, darling. He tapped my nose. *I don't want to spoil the surprise.*

The last surprise Sebastian had for me was when I learned to fly, and I loved that one. I told him, *I shall attempt to wait patiently.*

He chuckled. *Good. It shouldn't be long.*

He was right. Scarcely ten minutes passed before a branch cracked in the forest behind us. The breeze carried the rustling of feathers to my ears, and then, the snow crunched.

Turn around, love. Sebastian's arms guided me, holding me firmly against him.

I would have protested the assistance, being fully capable of moving on my own, but my words failed me as I caught sight of the creature walking out of the bushes. Then I was grateful for Sebastian's grip because my own legs momentarily faltered. To say the animal was magnificent would be an understatement.

Larger than any horse I'd ever seen, it had the body of a lion and the head of a bird. Instead of fur, it was covered in feathers. It was four-legged, and each paw was larger than my head. Not only that, but it was equipped with massive, razor-sharp talons. Eagle wings protruded from its back, and the bird-that-wasn't-a-bird was so black it seemed to absorb the light. The only exception was the two silver eyes looking directly at us.

The creature approaching us moved with far more grace than I would've thought possible. My breath caught. The peace morphed into something else. Ancient. Powerful. The air crackled. My shadows swirled, and my dark magic drew me towards the animal. It was magnetic, a pull from deep within, just like I'd felt with the white wolf.

What is it? I asked Sebastian.

His knuckles brushed my arm. *A Nightwing. They're extremely rare, and very few of them remain in Eleyta.*

The Nightwing was as beautiful as it was dangerous. There was no doubt it was powerful.

That pull tugged in my core. I needed to get closer. Without even registering that my feet were moving, I slowly approached the Nightwing.

Luna, what are you doing? Sebastian's voice pulsed with worry.

That was a good question. Honestly, I didn't know. But I had to get closer; somehow, I knew it was safe. Looking into the Nightwing's silver eyes, I moved with careful confidence. *Don't worry,* I said. *It won't hurt me.*

I wasn't sure how I came to that conclusion, but I knew it was true. The animal was massive and magnificent, but it was also a friend. A lovely, vicious, capable-of-killing-me-with-one-swipe-of-its-talons, friend.

Extending my hand, I held it palm up in front of me.

The Nightwing dipped its head as though in greeting, and I took the final step. My fingers grazed its head. Soft, yet hard. Like everything else about this bird, it was a contradiction. I ran my fingers down the groove between its eyes.

Something foreign brushed against my mind. *Greetings, Sunwalker*, a new, deep voice rumbled.

My eyes widened. I sucked in a breath and pulled back my hand. "You can talk."

A low grumble went through the Nightwing. *I can talk to you*. Silver eyes studied me carefully. *You carry Isvana's blessing*.

Many of them, apparently.

A shadow slipped from my palm. *Yes*.

My name is Gabri, the Nightwing said. *My people have been waiting a long time for you*.

"What do you mean?" I asked, bewildered.

"Is the bird talking to you?" Sebastian asked, a splash of shock coming through our bond.

I nodded. "I... yes."

What else could I say? I searched for more words, but it turned out, I didn't need them. Sebastian knew what I required before I could even think it. He enveloped me in a hug. Already, I felt safer in his arms.

Sebastian dipped his head in the Nightwing's direction. "What is your message for us?"

Gabri walked to the nearest tree. Lifting his claws, he scratched the trunk. Bits of bark flew off the tree, landing on the snow. Black oozed out of the tree in the place of sap. The bird made a sound of disgust and turned to us. *The balance is broken, Sunwalker. When the time comes to restore it, we will be waiting for you*.

Sebastian's grip around me tightened. "What is he saying, Luna?"

I kept my eyes on the Nightwing. "He says the balance is broken." Addressing Gabri, I asked, "Does this have anything to do with the red moon?"

When the Blood Moon rises, the Queen of Shadows must fall, Gabri said.

Only then will light come to Eleyta. When the dragon and his rider arrive, you must bring them to me.

Dragons? My mind went blank. No. I couldn't deal with dragons right now. I had a vampire queen to kill. In my studies, I'd learned about the Dragon Massacre that took place in Ithenmyr over a century ago, but I knew very little about it.

Forcing myself to take a breath, I rubbed my temples. One problem at a time. "What dragon?" I asked.

You'll know when the time is right, was Gabri's cryptic response. *Until then, Sunwalker, know that we will stand with you. Kill the queen. Bring the light. Prepare to right the balance, once and for all.*

More cryptic words. Had everyone lost the ability to speak plainly?

"What do you mean?" I asked.

All will become clear in time, Gabri cawed. His wings flapped, stirring the air. Rising gracefully, he dropped his head in our direction before disappearing into the night.

Alone once more, Sebastian and I stood in stunned silence. Could we never have one normal day? One moment in time when strange things didn't happen?

Apparently not.

"That was... interesting," Sebastian eventually said.

That was one way to describe it. I twisted in his arms. "Did you plan this when you brought me here?"

His eyes widened, and he shook his head. "No. I'd hoped a Nightwing would come, but I never thought..." He dragged a hand down his face. "They've never spoken to me."

No, I was the only one these things happened to. I was the strange one in this relationship, not Sebastian. The one with tears of blood. The one who walked in the sun. The one who heard voices in the Void. And now, the one who conversed with beautiful, mystical creatures.

Life as a vampire was certainly not tedious.

Your Darkness is My Darkness
❧

SEBASTIAN

After the Nightwing's arrival and subsequent conversation with Luna, the real reason I'd brought her here seemed slightly anti-climactic. Nevertheless, I would continue with my plans.

Taking Luna's hand, I gently drew her towards a fallen log. I brushed off the snow, sending it tumbling to the ground. The log was flat enough. Black and green moss covered the top, and it faced the frozen waterfall. I gestured for Luna to take a seat. She did, clearly waiting for me to take the spot beside her. Instead, I kissed her softly and kneeled in front of her. Releasing my wings, they fanned out behind me, hiding the rest of the clearing.

Her brows came together. She frowned, the most adorable, quizzical look coming over her face. "What are you doing, Sebastian?"

Gods, I loved the way my name sounded on her lips. The way she said it was like I was the one who made the moon rise and hung the stars in the night sky. When she spoke, it made me feel like I was her entire world.

It was all the confirmation that I needed. This was the right decision.

Remaining on the ground, I pressed my lips against her knuckles. Then I said, "I love you."

That confused look remained, even as she returned the sentiment. "That doesn't explain what you're doing."

This wife of mine.

I turned her wrist gently. Kissing the inside of her palm, right above the Binding Mark, I ran my fangs over her flesh. She shivered, and desire flooded through the bond. Her response delighted me.

Inching up the fabric of her sleeve with my free hand, I kissed a trail up her arm. Every soft moan that escaped her, every gasp, caused my muscles to

tighten further. Eventually, I switched to her other arm, repeating my ministrations on that side.

“You’re beautiful,” I murmured, kissing the inside of her elbow.

She giggled. “That tickles.”

I shushed her. “Truly stunning, inside and out.”

I let her sleeve fall, returning my attention to her hands. Those beautiful, scientific hands. My ring sat on her finger, a marker of our union. It wasn’t enough, though. We’d been forced into our marriage, but now, we had something more.

“Sebastian,” she said breathlessly. “What are you doing?”

“You’re my entire life, Luna.” Taking her hands in mine, I held them tightly. Her beautiful obsidian gaze met mine. I could stare into those eyes forever, losing myself in her. “Do you remember the first time we met?”

“You came to my father’s keep on our wedding day.”

I nodded. “I had no idea then that you’d change everything.” She sucked in a breath, but I continued, “Darling, you are more than just the Sunwalker to me. From the first day I met you, you have been a shining light in my life. You were the spring coming after a long winter. You infused newness, sunshine, and hope into what had become a very dark, numb existence.”

She whispered my name again, her eyes wide. “What are you saying?”

I quieted her with a kiss. It was a rather effective method, after all, and a pleasant one at that. “That first night, when you stood trembling before me, your face hidden beneath that veil, I had no idea our marriage was the beginning of the rest of my life.” I ran my thumb over the edge of her Binding Mark. “But now I know.”

I shifted to one knee. “Luna Brielle Montquartier, will you marry me?”

A heartbeat passed before an incredulous laugh burst out of her. “What? You ridiculous old vampire. Did you hit your head? We are married.”

“I know that, Princess.” I did not release her hands, but I let my shadows loose. They streamed out of me as I held her gaze. “We made a vow before others that we would stand together, but that was before I knew you.”

Her mouth fell open, and I kissed the back of her hand. “Tonight, I come before you not as a prince or as the male being forced to marry you.”

My heart was a galloping horse in my chest. Nervous. I was nervous. Once again, Luna was reducing me to mere mortal emotions after all these years. For once, though, I didn’t mind. Instead, I took those nerves and bundled them up inside. This was a moment to be nervous because I was

baring my soul.

Taking a deep breath, I continued, “I am here simply as the one who has fallen deeply, madly, irrevocably in love with you.”

Her eyes searched mine. “Sebastian—”

“Don’t be mine for the sake of a treaty,” I implored her. “Be mine because I love you so much that I cannot stand the thought of being apart from you for even a single moment in time. Be mine because, without you, I am less than nothing. I am a wisp of a shadow, a fleeting existence, barely here at all. Marry me for *me*, darling. Be mine, forever.”

She inhaled sharply. I released her hand, reaching into my pocket. My fingers clasped the stone I had grabbed before we left, and I withdrew the necklace I’d made for her. It shone in the moonlight, the stone as smooth as it was when I picked it up on the shore of the Black Sea.

For a long moment, Luna did not speak. Her mouth opened and closed. I could hear her heart racing in her chest.

I swallowed, the necklace still dangling from my hands. “Say something, Luna.”

She moved off the log and dropped to her knees in front of me. Her wings formed, outlined in silver moonlight against the midnight sky. Together, we were cocooned in a space of our own making. At that moment, nothing else mattered. There was only us.

Luna carefully touched the necklace, as though it was made of glass. “Did you make this?”

I nodded.

“It seems you have some skills I don’t know about.”

My lips twitched. “A few.”

She reached out and took the stone. She turned it over, examining it from all angles before slipping it around her neck.

“Does that mean you agree?” I asked.

“Do I agree?” A smile that could light an entire city erupted on her face. “Of course, I do. I’ll marry you, Sebastian—although, to be fair, I don’t think our first marriage can be undone since it seemed rather legally binding—but I don’t care. I’ll do whatever it takes to prove that I will always stand by your side. Your darkness is my darkness. Your shadows are my shadows. Your life is my life. You’re mine.”

I blew out a long breath. “You’re my entire world, Luna.”

Her eyes sparkled in the moonlight. Drawing in a deep breath, she took

my hands in hers, mirroring my position from earlier.

“Sebastian,” she breathed my name. “You’re the reason I draw breath, the fire in my heart, the shadows that dance in my soul. Every good thing in my life is because of you. I love you, you ridiculous, sweet vampire. Of course, I’m yours. I never belonged to anyone else.”

One long, long moment passed. An entire universe could have been formed in the time we stared at each other. Then, we moved at the same time. Our mouths met in the middle in a clashing, searing, devouring kiss. It was a storm, a quaking of the earth, a reckoning. This was no gentle peck on the cheek. It was a declaration, a commitment, a vow to spend eternity to be spent together.

I poured everything I had into this kiss. Luna was the center of my world, and I needed her to know how much she meant to me. Our lips and tongues and teeth tangled until even that wasn’t enough. Wrapping my arms around her, I stood, bringing her with me.

Luna tugged at the hem of my tunic, breaking our kiss long enough to demand, “Take this off.”

I would have balked at an order from anyone else, but when it came from her, it was just... right. I stepped back and did as she asked. My clothes landed on the snow. Hers followed moments later.

My eyes devoured the marvelous sight in front of me. Luna was naked, except for the necklace I’d just given her, and she stood confidently in the snow. The wind didn’t bother us, and the moonlight illuminated every stunning curve and crevice. She was a picture of beauty and fierceness and perfection.

And she was *mine*.

Then I noticed her eyes crawling over me, much in the same fashion I’d been studying her. A hunger that had nothing to do with blood grew within me, and a purr rumbled through my chest. A moment later, a matching purr came from her. Need coursed through me.

Luna closed the distance between us, placing her hand on my chest above my heart. “I love you, Sebastian Marcel Jacques François Montquartier, and I will be by your side from now until the rest of our lives.” Her hands ran down my chest, going lower, lower, lower until I could barely concentrate on her words as her hands explored every part of me. “Generations to come will speak of our story. They’ll tell tales of our devotion to each other and how it brought us through our countless trials. It can’t be over so soon. I won’t stand

for it.”

Then, her lips met mine again, and there were no more words. How could there be?

I opened my palms, and shadows slipped from my hands. They rearranged our clothes on the ground to make a bed. We pulled in our wings. I lowered Luna gently, our lips never parting. She was perfect in every way. When we joined, I could have sworn my soul felt lighter than ever.

Luna and I were one. The Tether between us was not a curse but a blessing, and we would do whatever it took to take down the queen.

No matter what.

I Was Death
❧

MARGUERITE

“**Y**ou seem tense, My Queen.” Alexander rubbed my feet, the red sheen of his silken loincloth catching the purple light. He was handsome, I supposed, for a mortal. I thought him to be in his twenties, and his physique was attractive.

I eyed the Favorite from my reclined position on the couch. Obviously, I was tense. Anyone in my position would be. My kingdom was falling apart, everyone was betraying me, and my hair was going *gray*. Gray! I was a godsdamn vampire, and I was aging!

Tense didn't begin to describe it. I was a single moment away from snapping.

“Come here.” I pulled my foot out of his grasp and patted the couch cushion. “I'm hungry.”

The Favorite did not say a word as he nodded, coming to sit beside me. That was good. My pets knew talking back was not allowed. At least *they* still understood who was in charge.

Running my tongue over my fangs, I tilted Alexander's neck and bit him. I was not gentle or kind. I dragged his blood into me, ignoring his sharp intake of breath and the taste of pain in his blood.

Even as I drank, I knew it wasn't enough. It would never be enough. The only thing that would help me now would be to see the blood drain from the Ipothan bitch. I needed to watch her lifeless body fall to the ground and witness the life leeching from her eyes.

I wouldn't just stake her. That would be too good for her. No, I would make death last a dozen mortal lifetimes for her. This was no longer just about the gods-damned Tether. No longer just about the fact that she turned

my son into a traitor.

Piece by piece, she was destroying my entire kingdom.

In return, I would ruin her.

After all, I was good at death.

THE RUBY WAS A GLOWING STAR, casting its bloody sheen on my alabaster skin. I turned one way, then the other, admiring my profile in my floor-length gilded mirror. With my waist-long silk midnight hair and the thin robe wrapped around me, the jewel stood out against my skin.

I smiled at the sight, rubbing the ruby's smooth, cool surface. The witch promised this would give me power. I hoped she was right.

If she lied, I'd return for another visit. I hadn't released her, of course. One did not release such a prized possession. Instead, I relocated her until the time came that I needed her services once again. She was my prisoner, after all.

My last words to her were that I'd be back once I got my revenge.

A knock came on the door. "Queen Marguerite?"

Shadowing over, I yanked it open. "What?"

A human servant stood in the hallway, a purple ribbon tied around his neck. He trembled, holding a rolled-up scroll in my direction. "I-I-I have an urgent message for you, Your Majesty."

I snatched the paper from him and broke the seal. My eyes flew over the words.

Found him. Come quickly.

At the bottom was a location. Short, to the point, and exactly what I needed.

I glanced up at the servant, noting his pale complexion. "Go." I flashed my fangs at him. "Get out of here."

He muttered something unrecognizable under his breath, running away as fast as he could. He nearly slipped as he turned the corner. Another time, I'd have found his haste amusing.

I had no time to chase humans now, though—at least, not that one. A

smile stretched across my face, and I crumpled the paper. Finally, revenge would be mine.

I glanced at the clock. Nicolas had evaded me for five months, fifteen days, and nine hours. His death would last at least that long. By the time I was done with the human I'd once loved, the Blood Ruby would be overflowing with power. Before he died, Nicolas would regret the day he forgot whose bed he'd joined.

I was the Vampire Queen, Ruler of the Shadows, and Mistress of the Night.

No one crossed me.

I threw the paper in the bin, crossed to the wardrobe, and took out my finest gown. Made of the blackest velvet, the dress draped over my body and highlighted my curves. My hair fell in waves over one shoulder, and the ruby scintillated.

I was ready.

Drawing on my shadows, I closed my eyes and moved through the Void to the location mentioned on the note.

The journey was short. The shadows lifted, leaving me in the middle of a cobblestone square. A few hours ago, this had been a prosperous human village bordering the Black Sea.

Now, it was a battleground. A graveyard. A reminder that rebellion was never, ever, a good idea.

I inhaled, filling my nostrils with the aromas of sweat, snow, unwashed bodies, and blood. The horrible perfume permeated the air.

Everywhere I looked, bodies were strewn on the reddened snow. They wore scraps of clothing, their necks mangled messes as they lay in pools of their own blood.

I sneered at them. What else did the rebels expect to happen when they began their so-called Freedom Revolution? This was the end they deserved.

Several vampires milled about, checking the humans for signs of life—and killing them instantly if they were still living. The moment the vampires saw me, they dipped their heads. Their reverence was appreciated, but I was not here for them. Ignoring them, I eyed the obsidian sheen of Ithiar's temple in the distance.

My destination. My heart raced in my chest, eager for revenge, but I took my time. I did not shadow over or run like some Fledgling, unable to control myself.

Instead, I meandered through the courtyard, carefully stepping over each body as I savored the death around me. With each step, I ensured my vampires saw exactly what I wanted them to—a queen who was far greater than they could ever hope to be.

Still, I smiled when I approached Ithiar’s statue, guarding his temple. The god of blood was a vampire, of course. His muscular, sculpted body stood before his temple, giving all his worshipers a view of his perfection. In Ithenmyr, they worshiped Ithiar as the god of war, but they did not know him as we did. He encouraged war, yes, but only because it led to bloodshed.

It all came down to blood.

Ithiar and I understood each other. He enjoyed the shedding of blood, and I enjoyed the power that came from it. He was always my favorite of the two deities vampires worshiped.

I glided up the stairs, sending my shadows ahead of me.

The doors flung open, slamming into the temple walls with a boom. I strode through the opening. The moment I was inside the temple, my shadows released the doors. They banged shut behind me.

A muffled cry rose, destroying the silence of the temple.

One solitary violet orb hung in the middle of the space, casting its dim light on the inside of the room. There were no windows here, no doors, no other illumination.

Ithiar did not require light. He was a god of the night through and through. Blood was shed in the night; lives were stolen in the night; vampires lived by the night.

Unlike some weaklings who mourned the lack of sunlight after they were Made, I did not miss it. Those yellowed rays dictated mortals’ lives, but true power came alive in the shadows.

Beneath the purple light were three people. Two humans, as naked as the day they were born, were kneeling on the marble floor. Shadow gags muffled their cries. Their hands were bound behind their backs. A grinning vampire stood to one side, nearly cloaked in darkness.

Jean-Martin stood tall behind the humans, beaming as he dipped his head in my direction. He was wingless, but shadows flitted around him, marking him with Isvana’s blessing.

I strode towards the three of them. “Good work,” I said to Jean-Martin.

The vampire nodded. “Of course, Your Majesty. The moment we discovered the rebels’ nest and found these two... together, I knew you’d

want to see them.”

Together.

Nicolas was... sleeping with her? He'd left my bed only to join that of a human whore? Was this the reason he left me?

The bastard.

“You did well. Return to the troops. You will be rewarded for your service.”

He bowed. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

I waved my hand, gesturing for him to leave. Jean-Martin disappeared into the Void.

Then, it was just the three of us. Me, the male I made the mistake of loving, and the blonde human whore he'd replaced me with.

Blood boiled. My nails cut into the tender flesh of my hands. My fangs ached. Red tinged my vision. Wings burst from my back.

The whore squealed like a pig.

Oh, revenge would be sweet.

Kneeling in front of Nicolas, I met his eyes. “Hello, love,” I crooned, scratching his cheeks. “Did you miss me?”

AS PROMISED, Nicolas's death was not quiet. Nor was it clean or quick or painless. He suffered for months in excruciating agony before I finally sacrificed him to the Blood Ruby.

And the whore he left me for? The reason he joined the rebellion?

Claudette.

A frisson of delight ran down my spine at her memory. I'd kept her for myself. She'd been my first Favorite—the beginning of a long line of mortals who served my every whim.

That night in Ithiar's temple, she'd screamed bloody murder when I removed the gag. Kicking and thrashing about, Claudette had tried to claw my eyes out the moment I approached her.

The fool.

The moment my shadows had slipped into her, her screams had ceased. A perfect, never-ending silence had overtaken her. Life had left her eyes, and she'd become the most compliant mortal I'd ever met.

And then I'd played with her. Oh, the fun we'd had.

Nicolas cried out the first time I bit her, begging me to stop. When I toyed with her, ensuring he saw everything I did, he yelled, swore, and pleaded for me to leave her alone. "It's not her fault! She didn't do this! Take your anger out on me."

I ignored him. Nicolas had lost the ability to tell me anything the moment he'd betrayed me. Because of him, I learned the most important lesson: Humans were *nothing*.

Plucking a gray strand from my hair, I sneered at it. Nicolas had died centuries ago, along with the so-called Freedom Revolution. It was high time I reminded Eleyta who was in charge.

With that thought in mind, I left the mirror behind and gathered my shadows around me. Triboulet was dead. Koleta was dead. Ciro was dead. Everyone was either dead or dying.

Not me, though.

I was death.

The Perfect Weapons
❧

LUNA

“Come on, darling.” Sebastian tugged on my arm. “It’s time to wake up.”

Groaning, I buried my head in the pillow. Maybe if I didn’t look at him, he’d go away. It was worth a try. “I don’t want to,” I complained. “I’m so tired.”

Sebastian didn’t take the hint. “Darling, we only have three more nights until the red moon rises. There’s no time for sleep.”

“On the contrary, there’s always time for sleep,” I argued into the pillow.

Especially since Marius wasn’t even awake right now. Odette was taking him on a trip to the closest human settlement tomorrow during the day, so he was asleep. Lucky.

“Luna,” Sebastian growled.

I pulled my head out from the pillow and narrowed my eyes. “How come you aren’t sore? Yesterday I got in as many hits as you did.”

I still wasn’t a warrior, but I was getting better. Begrudgingly, I had to admit Sebastian’s teaching style had some merit.

The vampire prince to whom I was wed smirked, the expression only adding to his roguish just-rolled-out-of-bed-but-still-looked-amazing appearance. “I have three centuries on you, darling.”

“That doesn’t seem fair,” I grumbled.

I went to shift off the bed, but yesterday’s pain echoed through my body. I hadn’t even known it was possible to be this sore. I would have been black and blue all over if I’d still been human. Unfortunately, my vampiric skin was just as perfect as ever.

That was the problem with being a nearly immortal, almost too-perfect-

to-be-real vampire. Inside, I still felt mortal things like exhaustion, hunger, and weariness, but on the outside, I looked like the rest of my kind.

Vampires were the perfect weapons—beautiful shells hiding the deadly beast within.

Even now, my shadows were eager to play. Apparently, they did not receive the message that I was exhausted and deserved to sleep longer. They wished to fight with Sebastian, to let my wings loose, and play with his darkness.

If the rest of me wasn't a mass of aches and pains, I might have been amused by how the shadows were almost sentient.

It took significant cajoling, and an offer of coffee, before Sebastian finally convinced me to get out of bed. I sat on the edge of the mattress, giving him my best *I could be sleeping right now* glare as he dug through the wardrobe.

He emerged with a bundle of clothing. "Put these on, Luna."

I fluttered my eyelashes at him. Really, I was willing to do anything to get to sleep a little longer. Maybe then, I'd feel better. "But what if we took a little nap—"

"We can sleep after the queen is dead." His tone made it clear he wasn't open to arguments. "You need to train."

That's what it always came down to. Honestly, I was starting to worry. Not about Sebastian, but about me.

If anything, the past week and a half had shown me exactly why Sebastian was known as the Prince of Darkness. All the fear I'd felt when I first came to Eleyta was justified. If I'd seen Sebastian in his darkest, most powerful, deepest moments, where the shadows took over and filled him, turning him into a creature of the night, I would have turned and run the other way.

Even now, knowing who he was, I couldn't help but be both awed and slightly fearful of his power.

He was powerful and skilled. I was the weak one in this partnership. I was the one hurting after every session. I hadn't told him yet, because he already had enough on his plate, but I couldn't help but fear that I wasn't going to be strong enough. That despite the soul sharing, despite the bond, despite the training, we would fail, and it would be *my* fault.

We would die—he would die—because of me.

That, more than anything else, haunted me.

But I didn't want to say that to Sebastian.

So instead, I took the clothes from him and brushed my lips over his. "What about the coffee I was promised before my inevitable ass-kicking?"

His lips twitched. "I'll go flag someone down."

Shadows swirled around him, and then he was gone. I could feel his presence through the bond, though, and I knew he was in the hallway. Excited by the thought of coffee, I pulled off my nightgown and stepped into the attached bathing room. It was little more than a closet, containing only a mirror, toilet, and a sink, but it was enough.

Leaving the door open, I splashed water on my face and arms, letting the droplets run down my skin. Thank the gods, Lightriver Abbey was equipped with running water and boilers, just like Castle Sanguis. I was spoiled now and didn't want to go back to living without such luxuries.

Water dripped off my face, and I couldn't help but be captivated by the vampire looking back at me in the mirror. There was a strength behind my eyes that had never existed before. A darkness, too. Had it always been there, or had killing the Fledgling made it appear?

As I studied my reflection, shadows darted through my gaze. They didn't scare me, though. Not anymore. The darkness was a part of me, just like the Sunwalking.

Sebastian's gift hung between my breasts, the black stone smooth and gleaming as a small drop slid down it. I would never take it off, I vowed. This meant far more to me than my wedding ring. I'd seen him pick it up on the shores of the Black Sea. I knew what it meant to him.

I would cherish this forever.

Eventually, I pulled myself away from the mirror. Leaving the too-beautiful reflection behind, I pulled on the comfortable tunic and leggings before running my hairbrush under the water. I brushed and plaited my damp hair, leaving it in two tight braids that ran close to my skull.

I just finished tying the second one when shadows swirled at the base of the bed. Moments later, Sebastian appeared bearing two large steaming mugs.

He handed one to me, and I sniffed it appreciatively. Gods, coffee was one of Eleyta's gifts to the world.

The drink smelled good but tasted even better. The first bitter sip slid down my throat, warming me from the inside out. The fact that vampires could still enjoy coffee when food tasted like ash was definitely a blessing from the goddess of the moon.

A low moan may or may not have left my lips as I drank the dark brown goodness. This was, without a doubt, the best cup of coffee I had enjoyed since being Made.

Sebastian chuckled, sipping his own drink with care. “If I’d known you’d be so delighted by the coffee, darling, I would have made sure it was here the moment you woke up. Perhaps then, getting you out of bed might not have been such an issue.”

I enjoyed the drink so much I didn’t even take offense to his words.

“Perhaps not.” I finished the coffee, delighting in how it slid down my throat and gave me instant energy.

Once it was empty, though, there was nothing else I could say or do to distract Sebastian from his goal of training. Even my well-placed kisses and suggestions of other, more fun activities that required far less clothing didn’t sway him, which was a real shame.

For a vampire who was so enamoured with his wife, he was incredibly stubborn. It took one to know one, I supposed.

Sebastian got his way. I slipped my hand into his, and he shadowed us to the training room. My muscles preemptively ached, reminding me that my place was in a library, not a battlefield.

I would have complained, but the moment our feet landed on the floor, Sebastian lobbed a shadow at me.

And so, it began again.

RIVULETS OF SWEAT ran down my brows, my neck, and my back. My clothes stuck to me, and my lungs tightened uncomfortably. I was one big ball of agony.

Two hours of torture had passed, and one thing was clear: Sebastian found joy in this. The Binding Mark pulsed with something akin to amusement, which only made me scowl.

This wasn’t fun, but at least I was improving.

On the other side of the room, Sebastian ran a hand over his forehead, preparing to attack me again.

“Ready?” he asked.

I didn’t bother answering. I was already reaching for the Tether,

preparing to pull as much power as possible. The red rope binding us was within my reach when suddenly, the doorknob twisted.

Immediately, Sebastian turned. Casting me a look over his shoulder that clearly said, *stay here*, he fanned out his wings as the door opened.

I didn't know why Sebastian thought I would listen to him now. I didn't in the cabin, and I wasn't inclined to do so tonight. I moved behind him, peeking out from behind his expansive wings.

Phyrra stood in the hall. She slipped Sebastian a note before her gaze ran over me. She smirked at my appearance. "Are you trying to kill your wife, Bastian? She looks terrible."

I couldn't even take offense at her words. I was certain she was correct. Sebastian had not been easy on me.

"We're training," Sebastian said. He glowered at me over his shoulder. *Can't you ever listen to orders, Luna?*

I shrugged. *When it suits me.*

Really, though, it was just Phyrra. I was certain if the person on the other side of the door had posed a real threat, Sebastian would have been much more upset with me.

Sebastian pocketed the note. "Come in, Phyrra," he said. "Your arrival is fortuitous. We're practicing, and we could use your help."

A glint entered the spymaster's eyes, and she shed her cloak, leaving it by the door. "Oh?"

By the time Sebastian had finished explaining what he wanted to do, a knot formed in my stomach. It only intensified when I caught sight of the twin silver daggers strapped to the spy's thighs.

This was going to be a very long night.

THAT WAS the understatement of the century.

Did I ever think Sebastian was a hard teacher? It turned out he was taking it easy on me.

Phyrra wielded her daggers as though they were extensions of her arms. She was a warrior through and through, and defending myself against her was far more difficult than I had ever imagined or anticipated.

Even with the Tether open and with power flowing freely between

Sebastian and me, it took everything I had to fend off Phyrra's advances.

There were so many of them.

The spymaster either did not care that I was newly Made, or she forgot because she was relentless in her attacks. Minute after minute, hour after hour, she came at me with the silver blades.

I couldn't have tried to attack her, even if I wanted to. From the moment she started fighting, I was forced to be defensive. My lungs squeezed, and I was certain I would die in this room. I couldn't even complain to Sebastian. This was his idea, after all.

Phyrra attacked, and I ducked. She lunged; I fell to the ground to avoid her knives.

Torture, all of it.

Several hours later, I was exhausted. Phyrra was tireless in her attacks, relentless in her speed, and frustratingly good at keeping me on my toes.

She pulled back an arm and launched a dagger at me. I darted out of the way, but I was too slow. The silver blade sheared a lock of my hair. My heart raced as though I had just run a marathon. I watched in horrified fascination as a long piece of hair fluttered to the ground.

One millisecond later, and that would have been my cheek, carved with silver. I shuddered, wrapping my arms around myself. I knew I needed to move, but I couldn't stop staring at the hair.

Sebastian held up a hand. "Give us a minute, Phyrra?"

The spy glanced at me, then at him, before nodding and slipping out the door. It shut quietly behind her, leaving us alone.

Banishing his shadows, Sebastian turned to me. His concerned gaze swept over me as he closed the distance between us. The moment he was close enough, he ran his hands over me, checking for injuries.

"Are you okay, Luna?" he asked.

My brows knit together, and I stared at him. What kind of question was that? A rather obtuse one, I thought. It seemed like he was waiting for an answer, though.

"No, I'm not." I shook my head. "Phyrra is trying to kill me."

Even though I had been there when Sebastian invited the spy to join his torture session, it still felt like she was trying to end my life and not simply "train."

Sebastian did not try to refute my statement. He didn't defend her or give me some platitudes. Instead, he nodded. "She is."

I inhaled sharply, but before I could speak, Sebastian continued, “Queen Marguerite won’t pull any punches.” He gently cupped my cheek, as if he knew I was moments away from breaking. “Whatever she has, she will throw it all at us... at you.”

Because I was the weaker member of our pair. Even the Sunwalking, though impressive and interesting, did not make up for my lack of life experience or my less-than-stellar warrior abilities. Why wasn’t I born able to wield a sword or dagger? If I’d known this was my life’s route, I would have dedicated some time to learning how to use weapons.

Two weeks did not a warrior make.

If I didn’t learn fast enough... if I was too slow... then Sebastian... then I ... we would...

I couldn’t even finish the thought.

A tear ran down my cheek. Then another. Before I knew it, I was crying. Damn the flood of tears that had been my curse since my Making. I sniffled, wiping at them with the back of my sleeve before I made a huge mess.

I needed to get it together.

“Look at me, Princess,” Sebastian said, brushing his thumb over my bottom lip.

I did as he asked.

He bent, kissing me slowly, before pulling away. My heart skipped a beat at the depth of adoration in his eyes. It was an endless ocean, a starry night, a beautiful sunset casting the world in an orange glow.

“I know it’s difficult,” he murmured.

I nodded, forcing myself to breathe and stop the flow of tears. “It really hurts,” I admitted.

He kissed me again. “You can do this.”

Could I, though? I’d continued to try, of course. But I wasn’t blind to the truth. I’d be dead if I didn’t miraculously become a better fighter in the next three days.

With that gloomy thought, I sighed and rolled my shoulders. “All right. Let’s keep going.”

A flicker of pride ran through the Binding Mark, and he squeezed my shoulders. “That’s my girl.”

Farewells and Other Things
❧

SEBASTIAN

Phyrra remained in the abbey, helping me with Luna's training. Her timing could not have been better. Not only was she a worthy opponent, but she'd slipped me a note detailing Queen Marguerite's plans for the night of the red moon.

Though Isvana had not blessed my spymaster with wings, Phyrra was incredibly strong and a gifted warrior. Not only that, but she was able to fight Luna more easily than me. Every time one of my shadows hit my wife, a part of me broke. I hated seeing her hurting, even if it was to make her stronger. I doubly hated that I was the cause of her pain.

This was easier... for me.

Not for Luna.

She was struggling, but she wasn't giving up. I could not have been prouder of her. We fought together against Phyrra, working as one until opening the Tether and sharing our power was as easy as drawing breath. Every time Luna fell to the ground, she got back up. When shadows came barreling at her, she fought with darkness of her own.

Though she was smaller than most vampires, Luna had an admirable inner strength. From the first moment she came at me with a candelabra on the night of our wedding to finding Julieta's murderer and growing into her own as a Fledgling vampire, Luna tackled challenges head-on. This was no different.

Every night, she was getting stronger. Faster. Better.

By the end of our session last night, she'd caught Phyrra by surprise and thrown the spy on her ass.

Maybe, just maybe, we would be able to kill the queen.

I held onto the thought as Luna and I descended the stairs toward the underground laboratory. We weren't training tonight. Luna needed to save her energy for the red moon tomorrow. Besides, there were things we had to take care of.

"Are you ready?" I asked her quietly.

Wide, black eyes met mine. "To kill the queen? No. But it's going to happen whether I'm ready or not. I'll do my best."

I squeezed her hand, pushing open the door to the laboratory.

Marius and Odette were tinkering away, which wasn't a surprise. The witch seemed to have taken a liking to the halfling. What did surprise me, though, was the presence of my spymaster. Phyrra was perched on one of the wooden tables, her legs dangling as she smiled in Marius's direction.

"Have you really been all over the Four Kingdoms?" the halfling asked, his back to us as we entered the room on silent feet.

Phyrra looked up, dipping her head in acknowledgment of our presence. "I have."

"Even Ithenmyr?" Marius asked.

"It has been quite some time since I was there," she replied.

"Because of the evil king? He didn't like spies, did he?"

"He hated females," Phyrra said. "And spies. But mostly females."

Marius shook his head. "It's a good thing he's—"

"Hi, Mar-Mar," Luna interrupted. She released my hand, enveloping her brother in a hug. Their relationship was strong, and I hoped they would be able to nurture it for years to come.

"Hello." He waved. "Phyrra was just telling me about her life as a spy." Marius clutched his hands against his chest, and he sighed dramatically. "It sounds glorious."

A chorus of chuckles filled the room.

"Does it?" Luna asked.

Marius nodded vigorously. "When I grow up, I'm going to be a spy just like her. I'll be Mature, and then, I'm going to travel all over the Four Kingdoms. Maybe one day I'll even go across the Indigo Ocean to the Obsidian Coast and meet the fae!"

There was so much youthful innocence in my brother-in-law's words, so much hope and excitement in his voice, that I found myself smiling at him.

Reaching over, I ruffled his hair. "One day, when you go on all these adventures, I'd love to hear about them."

He turned to me and smiled. “Really?”

I nodded. His mouth widened into a full-on grin, and he darted over, wrapping his arms around me. I startled, stiffening for a moment, before reaching over and patting him on the back.

He mumbled against my tunic, “You’re not so bad... for a vampire.”

I snorted. “Thank you, I think.”

Marius stepped back, and his gaze turned assessing as he looked between Luna and me. “This is it, isn’t it? The time you were telling me about?”

This child was far more intelligent than I was at that age. When I was ten, I wanted to do nothing more than play practical jokes on my older brothers.

Luna nodded. “Yes. Tomorrow night, the Blood Moon will rise. We will leave the moment the sun sets.”

“We?” Marius’s brows raised to his hairline.

I swallowed. Luna and I had discussed this, and I knew she’d told Odette what we were planning—the two of them were growing closer every day—but we hadn’t told Marius yet. “We,” I confirmed. “There is power when the three of us connect. It’s like sparks running beneath my skin.”

“I feel it, too,” Luna said. “Ever since you woke, Marius, there’s been a connection between us.”

“It’s powerful,” I added. One of the most powerful things I’d ever felt.

“Do you feel it?” Luna crouched, looking Marius in the eye. “A spark when the three of us touch?”

He frowned, chewing on the inside of his lip. “Sometimes, I thought... maybe.”

“We think you should come with us,” Luna said. His eyes widened, and she quickly added, “Not all the way, but... you’re the harbinger.”

She glanced over her shoulder at me, a cry for help in her eyes.

“We don’t want to endanger you, Marius.” Looking at Phyrra, I raised a brow. “We’re hoping to bring Marius to the Dead Forest, just outside the wards. And after...”

“I’ll make sure he’s safe, Bastian.” Phyrra put her fist over her heart and bowed her head. “You can depend on me.”

“And then you’re going to kill the queen,” Marius said confidently.

“We’re going to try,” was Luna’s response. “We’ll give it everything we have.”

“You will,” Marius said.

Was this childlike faith or something more? Had he Seen the future? Did

he know what was to come?

Luna brushed a lock of hair off the halfling's forehead and cupped his cheeks with both hands, pressing their foreheads together. "No matter what happens tomorrow, I love you."

"You have to come back, Lulu," he insisted. "You're my only family left."

"I know," she whispered.

She didn't say anything else, but her sadness filled the bond. Luna hugged Marius again, and both siblings sniffled as they embraced.

Phyrra and Odette averted their eyes, moving to the far corner of the laboratory. They whispered quietly, clearly giving the siblings some privacy. I turned around, studying one of the many plants. I couldn't go far, but I wanted to give Luna as much space as I could.

She'd worked so hard and spent countless hours searching for a cure. Because of her tireless efforts, every available surface in the laboratory was covered in potted plants, all derived from the original seed. She'd never given up. Thanks to her, Marius was awake and talking.

It would be the cruelest twist of fate for Marius to be healed, only for Luna to die and leave him alone.

Isvana wouldn't be that savage... right?

I would hope for the best and put my all into the upcoming battle.

Eventually, Luna and Marius pulled apart.

"You'd better come back to me, Lulu," Marius said, sounding much older than his single decade of life.

"I'll do my best," she promised.

The rest of the night went by in a blur. Eventually, we left the laboratory and sought out Genevieve, thanking the priestess for the sanctuary she and the other members of the Second Order of Isvana's Chosen Ones had provided us. They took us in during our time of need and risked the queen's wrath to keep us safe. We'd forever be grateful for them.

By the time we finally shadowed back to our room, the first rays of dawn painted the sky. Long after the shadows had dissipated, Luna remained standing in the middle of the room. She was deep in thought, staring out the only window. Her fingers drummed a restless beat on her thigh.

After a few minutes, I shadowed over. Placing a hand on her hip, I tugged her against me. She didn't fight me, a gentle sigh escaping her as she allowed me to support her weight. I ran my hand over her arm. She exhaled, relaxing

against me.

“What are you thinking about?” I asked.

She twisted around, and her eyes swept over my face. “How did you know I was thinking?”

I chuckled. “Darling, you can’t hide anything from me. You study books, but I study you.”

Not that I needed to be a genius to realize she’d be thinking about tomorrow. It was only natural. I was thinking about it, too.

Luna smiled. “If memory serves correctly, I said something similar to you many moons ago.”

She most certainly had. Early in our relationship, she’d told me—rather cheekily—that she was researching me.

“Is a husband not allowed to study his wife?” Trailing a finger down her face, I lifted her chin and brushed my lips over hers. “Is he not allowed to know her likes and dislikes? To know what makes her smile and laugh?”

Her mouth opened, and she licked the tips of her fangs. Gods, I loved it when she did that.

Luna’s voice was little more than a whisper as she conceded, “I suppose it’s acceptable.”

“Good, because nothing could stop me from learning everything about you.” My head dropped, and I kissed her chin, her neck, behind her ear. Every brush of my lips against her elicited a shiver and a moan, confirming what I already knew—my wife loved being touched.

And distracted.

The gods only knew how much we needed a distraction right now.

Tugging Luna’s hand, I walked us backward to the bed. With every step, I stole another kiss until the back of my knees hit the mattress.

I paused. Just because I wanted a distraction didn’t mean I would push her. “Luna—”

“I want you, Sebastian,” she said, seeming to know exactly where my mind was. “I need you.”

My breath left me in an exhale, and Luna took advantage of the moment to tug my tunic over my head. She looked at me with hunger, and just like that, I was no longer the one in charge.

Her deft fingers danced over my chest, her touch sending sparks through me.

“Tell me what you want, Luna,” I whispered.

Her eyes danced. “I don’t want to think about what tomorrow holds.” She straddled me, inhaling deeply as she scented my neck. Shivers ran through me, and I clenched my fists in the covers, willing myself not to move.

“I’ll do everything in my power to keep you safe.”

“I know you will.” She kissed me, her lips hard and insistent against mine. If I’d had any doubt about what she wanted, it would’ve evaporated when she said, “I don’t want to think about my aches and bruises. All I want is you.”

She moved just long enough to leave her clothes in a pile on the floor. However, I had no time to appreciate the beauty of her form. Within seconds, she was back in my lap.

“I want us to be together in every way, Sebastian,” Luna said. “One last time.”

She didn’t say anything else, but she didn’t need to. Her unspoken words hung between us. There was no guarantee we would make it out of tomorrow night unscathed. The odds weren’t stacked in our favor. But we’d done everything we could.

At this point, whatever happened, happened.

I lifted Luna’s hand, kissing her Binding Mark. “Whatever you want, darling. I’m yours.”

I’d always be hers. Today, tomorrow, until the end of time. Death couldn’t separate us because what we had was bigger than it. It was a connection that brought together two souls in the deepest of ways.

My words were an unleashing. Luna groaned, her mouth slamming onto mine. Shadows poured out of her, covering us in a blanket of darkness.

I released my wings, curving them around us, and kissed her back. There was nothing soft about this embrace. It wasn’t gentle or even kind. It was a vow, a swearing of allegiance to each other, a promise of what would come.

I will always be with you, I whispered through our bond. My tongue prodded at the seam of her lips, and she opened for me. I tasted her, relishing how she shivered as I touched her fangs.

I will fight with everything I have tomorrow. For you. For us, she promised.

I know.

Our kiss deepened, and our bodies were desperate for *more*. I wanted her. I needed her.

Her fangs grazed my neck in clear question, and I pressed into her touch.

She inhaled. Her tongue grazed my skin. She bit. This wasn't a tender drawing of blood. The Binding Mark reverberated with her need as her mouth pulled against my neck. It was deep, urgent, and powerful.

More, her voice whispered in my mind, not lifting her mouth from where she drank.

My hands reached under her, holding her firm as I lifted her. With a few careful maneuvers, we made it to the edge of the bed. I abandoned my pants, leaving them on the floor, before inching backward. I flipped Luna onto her back, the mountain of pillows coming in handy, and I dipped my head.

She curved her neck, giving me perfect access to her even as she continued to drink.

Bite me, she commanded.

I did.

The moment my fangs broke her skin, the sweet flavor of her blood filled me. No matter how many times I drank from her, I could never get enough of this. Of her. She moaned against my neck, and her blood filled me with power.

My wings fanned out, and shadows streamed from me as we drank, but it wasn't enough. Supporting her neck with one hand, the other traveled down her body. With every touch, she pressed herself more firmly into me. When I got to her middle, she arched her back into my touch, begging for more through our connection.

As if I would deny anything she asked for. With all the care I could muster, I moved over her. Luna's hips rose to meet mine, and we joined as one. The moment we came together, a lightness washed over me. It was always this way—good and right and meant to be. She must have felt the same way because she moved beneath me with urgent need.

I need more, Sebastian, she whispered in my mind.

I slid my hand beneath her, drawing her even closer. *Anything*.

If she asked for the stars, I'd give them to her.

She closed her eyes and dove deep within herself. A heartbeat later, the Tether flew open. The sheen of the magic binding us lit the room as Luna reopened her eyes. She gasped. *Now, I can feel everything*.

Power, shadows, and emotions flowed freely between us. There was nothing hidden, nothing that wasn't laid out before us.

Together, we moved.

Together, we fed.

Together, we reached our peaks.

Absolute rightness filled me. This was more than just a feeding. More than just a physical joining of two beings. It was everything.

She was mine.

My wife. My princess. My treasure.

The Red Moon Rises



LUNA

It was snowing when the four of us stepped out of Lightriver Abbey. This wasn't surprising. Not anymore. If it had been warm outside and the snow was melting, that would have surprised me. But snow? I wasn't even fazed by the white flakes falling liberally from the sky.

Tonight, I had no words. None of us did. Even Marius was quiet as he walked behind Sebastian and me. Phyrra brought up the rear, ready to bring Marius to safety as soon as it was time.

Sebastian's grasp on my hand was bordering on too firm as he led me into the courtyard, but I didn't want him to let go. I needed him like spring flowers needed the sun to grow.

The first streaks of red muddied the night sky, blotting the stars out of existence. Goosebumps peppered my flesh, and a shiver that had nothing to do with the cold ran down my spine.

The priestesses had told us the last Blood Moon took place over three thousand years ago. Now, it was back.

The air seemed to crackle, and I could have sworn copper mist fell from the heavens. Tonight, everything would converge. This was bigger than us. Bigger than just killing the queen. It felt like a turning point in history.

Ever since Sebastian and I had been together last night in the most intimate of ways, we'd kept the Tether open between us. Tonight, we would test it for all it was worth.

Sebastian and I wore black, which was as unsurprising as the snow. What was unusual, however, was the style of our clothes. We'd traded our typical garments for ones made of leather and lined with fur. They were tight-fitting but allowed us to move freely. Complete with gloves that covered our hands

—and the markings of the Tether—the garments had slits in the back to accommodate our wings.

The style was strange, though. Old. According to Phyrra and Sebastian, the clothes would signal our intentions to anyone who saw us. We were dressed for battle.

The thought chilled my blood, but it was too late for fear. It was too late for doubt. Too late for anything.

Sebastian came to a stop in front of the gates, and the rest of us followed suit. “Is everyone ready?” he asked.

A chorus of “yes” went around our small group.

Sebastian nodded. As always, he stepped into the role of leader smoothly. “Good. Join hands.”

Phyrra took my free hand, and Marius picked up Sebastian’s on the other side. A jolt ran through me the moment we connected. Magic flowed through my blood, stronger than before, confirming what we’d already known. Marius was important.

If we were going to kill the queen, we needed every advantage.

A strange sense of peace filled me as Sebastian gathered his shadows around him. I should have been scared—and I was—but a sureness filled my soul.

This was exactly where we were meant to be.

“DEATHHHHHH TO THE QUEEN,” the voices demanded, a macabre chorus piercing the thick black veil of the Void.

They were loud tonight. Powerful, even. Whether it was our actions that brought them forth or the red moon, I wasn’t sure. My skin prickled, and I could almost feel them.

“Fulfill the prophecy,” another voice said.

“Light and dark convergeeeee,” a third one chimed in.

“Death, death, death,” the chorus picked back up. “Kill the queen, and free our souls.”

“Kill herrrrrrr,” they cried out.

A cold wind brushed against me, and I could have sworn a hand touched my shoulder.

Were these the souls of the ones the queen had killed?

“Release ussss from this miseryyyy,” they moaned.

“Break the shacklesss binding usss,” others added.

Their chanting continued until it was the only thing I could hear. If it weren't for the hands gripping mine tightly, I would have found the darkness all-consuming. But Sebastian was here, and I would survive this. The Void could not destroy me.

No, if our training had taught me one thing, it was that I was a powerful—if untrained—vampire. Tonight, we would be putting everything I had learned to the test. All Sebastian's torturous training, all my practice, all the soul sharing we'd done would come to a head.

The voices were right.

Death was in the very air we breathed.

WHEN WE GOT out of the Void, things moved quickly. The shadows left us in the Dead Forest, and Castle Sanguis loomed overhead. My chest tightened, and my palms slickened.

We were back.

“Hurry,” I whispered. I didn't want to stay here any longer than necessary.

It seemed the feeling was mutual. Phyrre stepped back as Marius, Sebastian, and I removed our gloves and joined hands. Rivers of power, like a strong current, coursed through me. My shadows thrummed. My heart sped up. Colors were brighter. The crunch of snow beneath Marius's boots was like a shout in my ear.

Dark, powerful magic flowed until it was the only thing I could feel. I was Luna, but I was more. I was a shadow, curling around Sebastian. I was the blood running through my veins. I was a storm, waiting to be unleashed. What had been sparks were now entire bolts of lightning. I was practically vibrating as a copious amount of magic filled me.

Eventually, Sebastian cleared his throat. “That's enough,” he said hoarsely.

Nodding, Marius stepped back and broke the connection. I dropped my hand, gasping for air. The lightning remained in me.

“Marius...” My throat thickened. How could I say goodbye?

“I’ll see you later, Lulu,” my brother said, hugging his arms around himself.

No amount of power could have stopped me from feeling the way my heart broke at his words.

“I love you, Mar-Mar,” I replied, holding back tears.

I wished I could promise I’d see him again, but I wouldn’t lie to him. None of us knew how tonight would end.

Instead, I forced myself not to cry. I would be strong for Marius. I wouldn’t let his last memory of me be one where I was a blubbering mess. Phyrra crouched low, and my brother jumped on her back without another word. Once he was secure, the spy took off in a blur, disappearing into the trees.

Now, we were alone. Suddenly, this all felt real in a way I’d never expected. I stared at the place where Marius had stood only moments before, the extra power still pulsing within me. Was it enough? Or had I just said goodbye to my brother for the last time?

Sebastian slipped his hand back into mine, and he squeezed. *Are you ready?*

This was the moment we’d been waiting for. I reached within myself, testing the Tether one last time. When I found the connection waiting for me, I nodded. *Let’s go.*

There were no more kisses. No more pleasantries. Once again, Sebastian pulled us into the Void. We were there for seconds, maybe less, before the darkness lifted.

We were back in Castle Sanguis.

The moment my vision adjusted, my breath caught in my throat.

For one long, eternal moment, I stared at our surroundings. We were not alone. Far from it, in fact. Sebastian’s shadows had deposited us in the middle of the banquet hall, where a lavish feast was taking place. It had all the markings of a lively party, but now, it was as quiet as a graveyard.

We stood in the middle of the room, surrounded by hundreds of blood-thirsty vampires. Their eyes drilled into us from all sides. There were no humans, fae, or witches in attendance. Just vampires. Creatures of the night who desired nothing more than death and bloodshed.

The air seemed to hold its breath in terrified anticipation.

A chair scratched the floor. A hitched breath came from the head table.

Queen Marguerite stood. She gripped a goblet of wine, her black hair perfectly coiffed into a lavish up-do. Her low-cut gown was scandalous by Ipothan standards, the onyx velvet absorbing the light. Wisps of shadows hung around her, but what caught my attention and held it was the ruby around her neck.

It was wrong. Dimmer, somehow. Lackluster.

Sebastian cleared his throat. His wings snapped behind him, and he stepped forward. “Queen Marguerite Montquartier, Ruler of Vampires and Wearer of the Blood Ruby, we have come to challenge you for the throne.”

A collective intake of breath ran through the room. An eternal moment passed where everyone seemed frozen in time. Not even the wind dared blow.

Then, glass shattered.

I Would Not Let Them Win
❧

MARGUERITE

W *e have come to challenge you.*

My son had said the words calmly, but he might as well have shouted his betrayal from the rooftop. The remains of my wine glass were at my feet.

I stared at the pair of traitors. I couldn't tear my eyes away from *her*. That twisted, horrible, newly Made, library-loving bitch. She stood next to Sebastian, holding hands like love-sick teenagers. Their wings were flared, and they flaunted their blessings from the moon goddess.

I *despised* her. My hatred for her was a deep, dark, bottomless pit. Even her name was horrid. *Luna*. Who named someone after the moon? Ridiculous.

Silence was as loud as any symphony as everyone waited for my reaction.

The gods-damned audacity of these two traitors, arriving in the middle of a feast to challenge me, was shocking. Not since Nicolas's betrayal had anyone hurt me so deeply. I would make them pay, just like him. The ruby pulsed at my throat, a single throb that reminded me of its fading presence.

I will feed you, I assured it.

The Fledgling's blood would surely be a strong enough sacrifice to ensure my ruby would never dim again. I would enjoy the process, bleeding her right to the moment of death, then allowing her to heal. I would do it again and again. Pain, torment, and agony would become all they knew. They would suffer for centuries for this.

But first, we had business to take care of. A challenge to the throne could not be ignored, even by me. There were laws in Eleyta, after all.

"Everyone, get out!" I demanded.

My command broke whatever trance the attendees of my feast had been in. All at once, they flung themselves to their feet. Dishes rattled, chairs slammed onto the floor, and cries erupted around me. Those who could shadow did. Others disappeared in a blur as they ran out of the banquet hall. Doors slammed, and footsteps echoed until utter silence filled the space.

The two challengers were statues. Slowly, I approached. Glass crunched beneath my feet. My shadows writhed. They sang a melancholy tune of death. I inclined my head, releasing my wings.

They thought to flaunt their blessings in front of me?

I would do the same.

“I’ve been searching for you,” I said, circling them. “I looked for you all over Eleyta. Tell me, where were you hiding?”

Sebastian stared straight ahead, refusing to meet my gaze. “We have come to challenge you for the throne,” he repeated, his voice cold.

So that’s how this was going to be?

“What a pair you make,” I crooned, ignoring his words completely. “What a perfect, beautiful pair.” I smiled. “I’m going to enjoy breaking both of you.”

A tremor ran through the Fledgling. What a weakling. One threat, and she quaked in her boots. Sebastian had broken our Maker bond for *her*?

Honestly, this was almost adorable. They thought they could win against me? I had over twenty centuries on my side. Thrice, I’d dealt with challenges to my throne, and thrice, I’d won.

My victory tonight would be sweeter than all those combined.

I would show them why I was the queen of this gods-damned country. Of all the things I’d done during my reign, all the decisions I’d made, the people I’d killed, the laws I passed, this Fledgling was the one I regretted the most.

Listening to my Fortune Elves and allying myself with Ipotha had been a mistake. I should have ignored them when they told me of the coming darkness. And when Ciro, Ithiar damn his soul, had brought up the Binding, I should have killed him right then.

I had many regrets, and they all stemmed back to her. Pure malice ran through me, leaving an acrid taste at the back of my mouth. They wanted a fight?

I’d give them one they’d never forget.

Hearfrost Hollow
❧

SEBASTIAN

“**S**ince we have laid the challenge at your feet, Queen Marguerite, we wait for your choice of location,” I said.

Every vampire knew the rules related to issuing a challenge to the throne. It was simple, really.

One party challenged, and the other chose the location.

Hopefully, she didn't want to fight here. This banquet hall wasn't exactly an ideal location for a battle to the death. Tables, upended chairs, and benches were strewn around the room from when the vampires had made their hasty retreats. Half-empty goblets of wine were a testament to the speed with which the feast attendees had fled.

The queen pursed her lips. “Where shall I choose?” she smirked. “I could pick any number of places, you know.” She circled us once more. The *click-clack* of her heels echoed through the room.

Beside me, Luna tensed. We needed to get this over with.

“A location, Your Majesty?” I growled.

She smirked. “I'm thinking.” A moment passed, then she added, “Do you have a preference?”

As if she cared.

“None,” I snarled.

The location didn't matter. Whether she wanted it to be a public battle in an arena for all her people to watch, in the Caves of Death to the south, or on the Ice Fjords in the west, we would go.

“Hoarfrost Hollow.” The queen's voice echoed through the cavernous space, and my heart dropped.

Luna hitched a breath. *Where is that? Is it like the Forgotten Passage?*

I wished we were returning there. Anything would be better than Hoarfrost Hollow. Already, my skin crawled with the thought of what we might encounter.

Sebastian? Luna's voice grew more urgent. *Where is Hoarfrost Hollow?*

Beneath my gloves, my hands grew clammy. I swallowed. *It's as close to a graveyard as vampires get.*

Of all the places in Eleyta, this was one I would never have dreamed of taking my wife. No one in their right mind ever went there, and for good reason. It was haunted. Powerful, ancient magics resided in Hoarfrost Hollow.

But the queen was not sane.

We couldn't change it now that she'd spoken the location. Gods-given laws governed Eleyta, and this was one of the rules we all had to follow. There was no way around it.

I nodded, drawing shadows around Luna and me. "We'll meet you there."

We had no choice.

The challenge was underway.

BITTER, biting, frost-ridden cold slammed into us the moment we emerged from the Void and landed in the middle of Hoarfrost Hollow. We were the first to arrive. I was certain the queen was toying with us, but we'd take any advantage, including a moment alone. Power ran through my veins from when we'd connected with Marius. It twisted around my shadows, and I could've sworn my fingers sparked a few times.

We were as ready for this fight as we'd ever be.

This location was as bad as they came. The wind slammed into us like a wall of ice. The air smelled of death and decay, and the ground hummed with old magic. Nothing was comforting about this place. Between the snow and the crimson moon, we might as well have been standing in a frozen pool of blood.

There were no trees in Hoarfrost Hollow. There was no life at all. A dozen standing stones covered in thick layers of translucent ice were the only things present. Each was a coffin carved of the whitest rock. They stood two dozen feet from the next, forming a circle of death around us.

Fear washed through the bond, and Luna pressed against my side. *What are those?*

I curved my wing around her. *Tombs.*

She sucked in a breath. *Whose?*

The First vampires. They were placed here long ago, after the Bloody Night.

Even now, vampires still whispered about how those first moon-blessed beings lost all sense of morality. Their control slipped, and they murdered hundreds of humans. Their actions nearly doomed all vampire-kind to death. Thank the gods, the Firsts were entrapped and entombed in these coffins.

Damn, she said.

The wind whistled around us as if agreeing with Luna's silent assessment.

I would have replied, but shadows swirled in the air. My heart squeezed. Oily, centuries-old magic crawled over me. The Maker's bond might have been gone, but I would never forget how the queen's shadows felt.

"She's coming," was all I could say before a cackle broke the silence of the night.

The queen emerged from the shadows alone, which was standard as per the rules of the challenge. The only exception was Tethered partners, for obvious reasons.

Predatory hunger filled my Maker's gaze, causing my stomach to churn. She'd exchanged her gown for a formfitting pair of obsidian fighting leathers, which conveniently showcased the ruby at her throat. She wore knee-high boots, and two wooden stakes were strapped to her thighs.

"So glad you could make it," she said, sarcasm dripping off every word. "I would hate to miss the opportunity to see my lovely daughter-in-law bleed."

Neither of us spoke as the queen approached, her feet moving silently over the snow. Beneath our gloves, the Tether pulsed and vibrated in time with my shadows.

"This is a fitting place for a fight, don't you think, Sebastian?" The queen came to a stop a few feet away from us.

I growled, "This fight was going to happen regardless of the location, Your Majesty."

She chuckled. "Is that so?"

I nodded, but it was Luna who said, "Yes. Your power has grown unchecked, and you are terrorizing the people of Eleyta."

Queen Marguerite's mouth twisted into a villainous sneer. Her eyes glinted with pure evil, and violence rippled off her in waves. She stepped towards my wife.

Automatically, I drew shadows from my palms and snarled in warning. The queen knew the terms of the challenge. No touching until the fight officially began.

She tutted. "Don't worry, Sebastian," the queen said, never taking her eyes off Luna. "I'm just here to look."

"Don't," my wife sneered. "I hate you."

The queen scoffed. "*You hate me?*"

"Yes."

"Why?"

My brows practically hit my forehead. Did the queen honestly not know?

Luna seemed just as shocked. "Are you serious?" she questioned. "You want to know why I hate you?"

"Deadly serious, little vampire," the queen responded, seeming amused.

Anger pulsed through the bond, and Luna released my hand. The Tether was still open. I trained my eyes on the queen. I would not look away.

"You want a list?" Luna's wings snapped behind her back.

The queen tilted her head. "Certainly. It's not like any of us have anywhere else to be."

"Fine." My wife's tone was hard. "First, you treat humans like they're trash."

The queen scowled. "That's not a crime. It's our gods-given right as children of the moon."

Luna did not back down. "We'll have to disagree, I'm afraid."

This wasn't going to end well. Not that it could, given the parameters of the challenge, but this was especially bad.

"What else?" the queen asked. "I'm curious what charges you level against me."

Luna ticked items off her fingers. "You let the People of the Night out of their tomb. You killed my family, the people of Rivin, and you tried to kill me."

"Is that all? A few deaths, and you challenge my throne? Hardly something worth ruining your life over." She glared at me. "You betrayed me, my son."

"I'm not your son," I snarled. I had stopped calling her Mother the

moment she strung my wife up in a gilded cage.

“I Made you!” Quen Marguerite shrieked. Her mask of amusement fell. Her eyes were swirling pits of darkness. Rage ebbed off her. Shadows leaked from every orifice. “You’re mine.”

My blood boiled at the queen’s claim. Once, I would have let her make it, but no longer. I pulled Luna back from the older vampire, shielding my wife with my body.

“I’m hers. Not yours. Not anymore.” The queen opened her mouth to speak, but I shook my head. “Enough of this. We could go on for days about the reasons you deserve to stand here today, but we’re not going to do that.”

The queen ran her fingers over that cursed ruby. “Oh?”

She still didn’t look afraid.

“No,” Luna snapped. The Tether thrummed and pulsed. Anger rushed through the Binding Mark. “You’re going to die tonight, Marguerite Montquartier, for your crimes against Eleyta.”

The queen laughed, and it sounded like death itself. “You think you can kill me? You’re a Fledging.” She sneered at me, her black eyes promising pain. “And you, Sebastian. You might deny it, but you’re my son. I gave you immortal life. Your name. Your place in this country. It is all because of me. And you dare turn against me?”

“You have gone too far,” I said. It truly was that simple.

“You will regret speaking to me in such a manner,” was the queen’s response. “I am going to make you bleed until pain is the only thing you know.”

Then the time for talking was over.

The queen’s eyes hardened to black diamonds. Her massive wings flapped, and she rose in the air. She drew shadows out of her hands like threads of yarn and wound them around her palms.

A pit grew in my stomach. This was the moment everything would be put to the test. I reached inside and pulled out a swath of shadows. They were a black river flowing out of me. I erected a shield of darkness around us.

In the space of a heartbeat, Queen Marguerite conjured shadow knives. In the next, she threw them at us. They whizzed through the air, moving so fast they were little more than bursts of black against the crimson night sky.

The blades slammed into the shield. It shook, but it held. I pulled off my gloves, dropping them on the ground as Luna did the same. The Tether glowed, nearly as bright as the moon.

Ready? I asked her.

Take it all, Sebastian. Luna reached over, linking our bare hands together. The moment we touched, power surged through us both. It was more than I'd ever felt. Magic brimmed, overflowing in my veins. Red sparks danced over our joined hands. My shadows throbbed, eager to be released. Magic flowed through me.

After a few moments, Luna stepped back. We'd discussed this. I would stay in the front as much as possible. Even after we pulled apart, the red sparks flitted over my hands.

I threw back my head and *roared*. My wings flapped, and I rose in the sky to meet the queen in battle. This was one fight where I did not mind being the Prince of Darkness. For this, I would embrace my destiny.

I was the Wielder of Shadows, and together with my wife, we would destroy the queen.

Or we would die trying.

The Weak Link
❧

LUNA

Sebastian was a vision of death.

I'd witnessed him in battle with Bertrand, but this was different. Every movement, every emotion, every shadow spoke to his determination and commitment to his craft.

This was his element, in the same way libraries and laboratories were mine. He thrived off the strategy, the offensive and defensive, the moves and countermoves. He was a warrior through and through.

Perhaps most telling was the flicker of enjoyment that came through the bond as he erected a massive shield of shadows. He wasn't having fun, but perhaps he wasn't as scared as he should have been.

Though I was frightened enough for us both.

I had thought myself prepared for this battle, but that belief dissipated when we landed in the queen's banquet hall. My blood ran cold. My stomach was in a knot, and my hands were clammy.

Power flowed through me to Sebastian, I kept that connection between us open, letting him take as much as he needed.

Queen Marguerite was a formidable opponent. She threw shadow daggers at us, having a seemingly endless supply of dark magic. Her centuries of experience were evident as she darted like a bat in the sky.

How were we going to defeat her?

It was too late to back down, though. Far too late. I flew behind Sebastian, staying at the very end of the Tether. My wings flapped, using those new muscles on my back, and my entire body was tense as the challenge continued.

The queen didn't seem worried, though. On the contrary, it seemed like

she was toying with us.

Queen Marguerite threw shadows at Sebastian. He batted them away. He lobbed darkness at her, and she easily evaded it. On and on and on, they fought. Neither seemed to tire or feel any burn in their muscles from flying for so long.

I felt it, though. The twinge in my back was a warning that this couldn't go on forever.

Sebastian lobbed a series of spiked shadow-spheres at the queen, but she moved seamlessly out of their path.

"Is that all you have, young ones?" A laugh that was like the coldest night escaped her. "It's going to take much more than that to bring me down."

Her eyes locked into mine, and a malicious grin crawled over her too-beautiful face.

"L-u-n-a," she sang, stretching out the syllables. "I think it's time we play, don't you? After all, it would only be fair."

I didn't answer, but it didn't matter. She was already coming for me. My stomach plummeted, and I desperately gathered darkness around me. Shadows streamed after the queen like deadly serpents, writhing in the air. She screeched at the top of her lungs, the sound bone-chilling in its intensity.

Time seemed to slow.

The racing of my heart was as loud as the roaring wind. Sebastian called my name. I moved out of the way like he'd taught me, throwing my hands up in front of me and summoning a wall of shadows.

The queen's magic struck my barrier. I stumbled back, my body shaking. My wings faltered under the impact. My arms ached. My back burned. But I was still alive.

For now.

The queen laughed. "See? Isn't this fun?"

No. This was the opposite of fun.

We have to keep moving. Sebastian's worried voice filled my mind. He flew to me, erecting another shield between us and the queen.

He was right. Being on the defensive wouldn't do us any good. We needed to take her down. Two against one seemed like good odds, but we were still fighting. Shouldn't this have been easier?

Minutes dragged on.

Blades made of shadows kept coming, narrowly missing our wings as we tucked and turned, throwing up shield after shield. We didn't have the chance

to attack because she was so fast.

Each time I dove out of the way, each time I pulled on my shadows or fed power through the Tether to Sebastian, each flap of my wings, wore me out.

The knot in my stomach grew until it was a brick, pulling me down.

This task felt more impossible than ever.

Soon, even the extra power from Sebastian and Marius wasn't enough. I was far too aware of the fact that until recently, I had been mortal. My wings moved slower, even with the power of the Tether. I was dragging us down. I wasn't good enough.

I was the weak link.

Something had to change. This wasn't going to work if we kept going like this. We hadn't even hit the queen.

Think!

My eyes darted back and forth, trying to see if there was another way forward. Another option. Something that would help us get ahead. Anything.

I was so distracted that I didn't see the queen move. One moment, she was flying in front of Sebastian. The next, she was an arrow, diving at me. A strange violet-tinged shadow-dagger was gripped in her hand.

My heart seized. I stared at the dagger. It was wrong. Every instinct I had warned to move out of the way.

I flew to the right, throwing up shields, but she intercepted me. Her weapon flew through the air, moving far too fast.

My eyes widened as it approached. I tried to get out of the way, but I was too slow.

The blade tore through my wing like it was made of paper.

A half-moan, half-writhing cry escaped my chest. Flames started at the point of impact, blazing a fiery trail over my flesh.

I faltered.

My eyes burned. Pain radiated from my torn wing. I was certain my right side was on fire.

Weak.

I was so weak.

Sebastian shouted, but I couldn't hear him. I couldn't hear anything except the rush of wind.

He flew toward me, but somehow, he was getting further away.

I'm falling.

The thought barely registered before another thought slammed into me—

the Tether.

As if on cue, the cord tying us together tightened. The distance became too much.

Sebastian kept coming, but I was too high and falling too fast. I tried to slow my fall with my wings, but it didn't work. The Tether unraveled in my core. The stabbing, barbed pain of the magic binding us burned. The red moon glowed.

I fell and fell and fell.

Pure panic ran through the Binding Mark.

Fly, Luna, Sebastian urged me.

Tears ran down my cheeks as I twisted, trying to see him one last time.

It hurts, I said.

Those stone coffins came closer.

I love you, I told him. *So, so much*.

I slammed into the ground. A sickening crack. Pain all over. My back, my wings, my legs, and my heart all broke.

Black spots appeared in my vision. An anguished roar filled the air.

Then I didn't hear anything else.

I Learned My Lesson
❧

MARGUERITE

They were fools to think they could ever defeat me. Fools to think they could take on the Wearer of the Blood Ruby and win.

Even now, Sebastian dove toward the ground. His wings were tight against his back, and the wind carried his weak cries of pain to my ears. The Fledgling had landed in the middle of the tombs, which seemed oddly perfect. Blood slowly leaked out of her back, staining the snow, but she wasn't dead.

It took far more than a simple fall to kill a vampire, even one as newly Made as her. Nevertheless, she'd be in severe pain. The knowledge that she was hurting brought me no small amount of joy. It served her right. The last time we'd met, she threw me into a wall.

Revenge was sweet, indeed.

I'd chosen Hoarfrost Hollow well. This was the burial ground of the Firsts, and it seemed only right that I would bleed my daughter-in-law dry and feed my ruby in this place where power ran through the snow.

Hoarfrost Hollow was a sacred spot of death.

Snow billowed up around Sebastian as he landed next to her. Even from here, I could hear his anguished cries. Such a weakling. Had he always been like this? I didn't think so. Even after I killed that first human, he hadn't been so emotional.

A few months with the Ipothan girl, and she'd broken him beyond repair. He used to be my best prince. My weapon. I used to be able to tell him to do anything, and he did it without question.

For over three centuries, he had obeyed me. But now, he had gone the way of the other princes before him. All of them eventually stopped listening

to me. Why couldn't anyone do what they were told? Was it so difficult to listen to my commands?

The next time I Made a prince, I would be more careful. I would pluck them from infancy and raise them as my own so they would have no ties to humanity. When the time came, I would Make them, and they would serve me into eternity.

But first, I had to deal with this mess.

Gathering shadows in my palms, I descended. The princess was still unmoving, her hand pale in my son's grip. Even from here, I heard him whispering for her to get up and fight.

Ridiculous.

They couldn't win.

I landed on top of one of the stones, balancing on one foot as I looked at the pathetic scene below me. I'd left my feast for *this*?

They hadn't even put up a fight. Not really.

A vicious snarl ripped out of Sebastian. "Don't come any closer." He stood, spreading his wings and covering his broken wife from view. Tears tracked down his face, confirming what I already suspected.

He was too far gone.

I snorted. "What are you going to do, Sebastian? Do you think you can somehow take me on just because you broke the bond between us? I'm too powerful. No one can stop me. Not even you."

He gathered shadows in his hands. He was wrong if he thought those would help him. Nothing would save him now. Even that radiant gleam from their Tether had died off. The only unnatural glow came from the strange moon in the sky. I wasn't sure why it was red, my Fortune Elves hadn't told me it was coming, but that was a problem for another time.

I clucked my tongue. "You made a mistake, Sebastian."

He shook his head and gathered shadows around him. "No. I love her."

"Love?" I spat. "You love her?"

"Yes."

"That sentiment is for fools!" I trembled, rage taking over me. Nicolas's face flashed before my eyes. "We don't love, Sebastian. We are creatures of the moon—weapons of death and destruction. Vampires are better than love and emotions. We rule because we are the strongest and the most powerful. We do not love. We destroy."

"You're wrong." His wings twitched, and he clenched his fists. "Luna is

everything to me. I love her more than life itself.”

The ruby throbbed at my neck, and I clutched it with all my strength. “Do you love that broken Fledgling more than me?”

Something akin to pity entered his eyes.

Pity.

How dare he feel that way? How dare he think I needed that? I did not need it, nor did I want it.

“I never loved you,” he said sadly. “For a time, I respected you. But then you killed Athena.”

“That human whore?” I snapped. “You’re still thinking about her? It’s been two centuries!”

“She was my first love!” he yelled.

I scoffed. The entire concept was ridiculous. Love was for fools and soft-hearted weak beings. It wasn’t worth anything. Built on lies, all it did was hurt.

“You should’ve learned your lesson with the first one.” I shifted on top of the tomb, letting shadows weave around my legs as I sneered at my errant prince. “You should have realized that humans betray us. They ruin us.” My fingers tightened around the ruby. “They destroy everything good and right, and for what? For a life that will be over before they know it.”

“What happened to you?”

He looked at me as if *I* was the one with the problem here, not him. His wife, the one he “loved,” was bleeding on the ground behind him, and he felt bad for me.

Unacceptable.

“What happened?” I echoed his words. “What. Happened?”

I leaped off the stone, landing a few feet away from him. He drew shadows around him. I scoffed. As if those would protect him from my wrath.

Nothing would save him. Not now. He’d challenged me, and for that, he would die.

“What happened is I learned my lesson.” I scowled. “Once, many years before you were born, I had a human. Nicolas.”

Sebastian’s eyes widened. “What?”

“He betrayed me.” Anger was like lava, running through me. “Just like you. I was willing to give him everything. To be everything for him. If he remained by my side, I would have given him the world on a silver platter.

But did he?"

I was practically screaming now, but I didn't care.

Sebastian said, "I'm guessing he did not."

"No!" Shadows exploded out of me, lethal wisps of darkness. Each dripped with my power. Sebastian tried to shield himself and his broken wife, but it didn't work.

I was the queen here. I was the most powerful. And no one, not even my son and his insolent book-loving bride, would steal my throne from me.

My shadows obeyed my every command, wrapping around him like deadly ropes. Sebastian's wings snapped behind him, and he yelled. I gagged him, his muffled cries a balm to my broken soul.

He was strong, but no one was stronger than me.

I crooked my finger, and the shadows bent to my will. They dragged him through the snow to my feet. Sebastian thrashed against them, trying to get out of the bindings.

It was no use.

I had him, and nothing he could do would save him from my wrath. He would pay the ultimate price for what he'd done. The ruby pulsed in time with my heart, urging me forward. Death was its song, its call, its only reason for existing. In that way, the jewel and I were one.

I raised a hand, the shadows around Sebastian coiling tighter, tighter, tighter. I infused my shadows with the last vestiges of the ruby's power.

Sebastian gasped for air. A sickening crunch echoed through the snowy night. His body contorted in pain. It wasn't enough, though. None of it would be enough until they were both dead.

But this was too fast. Too easy.

I hadn't even tasted the Fledgling yet. After all they'd put me through, I would be damned if I killed them too quickly.

Snarling, I twisted my hand. The shadows slammed Sebastian into the nearest tomb. The stone cracked on impact, a fissure running up the length of the coffin, but neither he nor the stone moved.

I left my shadows around him, and then, I turned my attention to the Fledgling.

Her eyes blinked open. Fear flashed across her countenance, and she trembled.

"Hello, Princess," I crooned, a smile stretching across my face. "I'm going to make you wish you were dead."

A Symphony of Cruelty and Malice
❧

LUNA

A *few minutes ago*

“Wake up, Luna,” a voice whispered in my ear.

My entire body hurt, from my pounding head to my aching toes. Waking up was the last thing I wanted to do. I was so tired. Why couldn't I sleep?

“Wake up,” the voice urged again. It was persistent. Louder.

With a groan, I pried my eyes open.

Instantly, regret flooded me. Brilliant sunlight burned my retinas, and I grimaced. Why was I having a vision? Wasn't there something important happening right now? I thought there was, but my mind was a smoky haze. I could not think of the reason I should not be here.

“Isvana?” I called for the goddess. “What's going on? Why did you wake me?”

She appeared in my field of vision. The raven was perched on her shoulder. She wore a gown of flowing moonlight that draped over her curves. She was so beautiful, it almost hurt to look at her.

Isvana's brows creased, and she frowned as she kneeled beside me. “You can't sleep right now, Sunwalker. You must wake up.”

I shook my head, the movement only amplifying my headache. “I can't. Everything hurts.”

Isvana took my hand in hers. Her skin was smooth, and she smelled like the crisp night air. “You must rise, Luna.” She squeezed my hand. “This is the only chance you will have.”

My mind was muddled, and her words weren't making much sense. “What do you mean, it's the only chance?”

“Wake,” the goddess breathed. Her lips brushed over my forehead, and then a tingling sensation ran through my entire body. “Be strong, daughter of the moon. Claim what is yours.”

I COULDN'T MOVE.

I couldn't breathe.

I couldn't think.

Even the shadows were quiet. I couldn't feel Sebastian.

I was on the brink of death. It was freezing, unforgiving, and remarkably horrible. As a vampire, I was already not truly alive, but I knew the next time I died, it would be final. There would be no coming back from whatever the queen had planned for me.

All I could do was blink. Queen Marguerite stared down at me. I was looking death in the face, and I was frozen. The ground beneath me was cold. Something wet was on my hands. My lungs burned, and I couldn't make them work no matter how much I tried.

The Binding Mark burned on my wrist. Flames licked my arm and burned me from the inside out.

Isvana's words echoed in my mind, urging me to rise. To get up. To fight. I couldn't die here. This couldn't be the end. And yet, what could I do?

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Sebastian. His crumpled body lay against one of the tombs.

No.

How could this be happening?

A hot tear ran down my face. I gasped, trying to breathe as my heart was cleaved in two.

Queen Marguerite *laughed* at my pain. “Are you scared? You should be.” She caressed the ruby. Leaning in close, as though she was sharing a secret, she whispered, “I'm going to make you pray for death's release from the torment and misery I will put you through. You will wish you were never born.”

My palms sickened, and my heart raced in my chest. A mewl, barely louder than that of a kitten, slipped from my lips.

I tried to move, but nothing worked.

The sneering, vicious queen continued regaling me with all the ways she would torture me. Her words were a symphony of cruelty and malice and utter destruction. There was no question in my mind she spoke the truth.

If I didn't do something, I would be tortured for the rest of my life. *Get up*, I told myself. I couldn't stay here. This couldn't be the way I died.

Sebastian needed me. Marius needed me. There was too much left to do. Too much we hadn't yet done.

It didn't seem to matter. No matter how much I tried, my body wouldn't move. Even vampiric healing was no match for falling from the skies.

I couldn't move yet, so I did the one thing I could think of. I looked at the queen in those deep, lifeless pits that were her eyes, and I forced words out of my mouth. It was an excruciating, extended process, but eventually, I heard myself ask, "What is wrong with you?"

Absolute ire flashed across her face. "Me?"

Shadows gathered around her, and fury radiated off her, but I was still alive. Still breathing. There was still time.

If I could get her talking, maybe I could... figure something out. Maybe I could gather enough strength to open the Tether. Maybe this wouldn't be it.

"Yes." I nodded, the movement barely there. "Why are you so cruel?"

"Cruel?" She picked up the ruby and spoke to it. "Did you hear that? She thinks we're cruel."

If I hadn't already known the queen was mad, that would have solidified it for me. "Little girl, you do not know the extent of my cruelty. Do you think this country runs itself? That the laws that govern the vampires and humans alike just exist? Is your nose so deep in those books you adore that you haven't noticed there are real-life events and people living outside those pages?"

"No, I—"

She continued speaking right over me. "Who do you think keeps everyone in line? Who do you think makes sure that Eleyta is the strongest of the Four Kingdoms?"

She stepped closer to me, kneeling in the snow where my blood pooled.

I forced my head up. It took everything I had, but my limbs slowly responded to my call once more. I met her gaze. "I'm assuming it's you?"

Queen Marguerite slapped me. My cheek stung, but I didn't cry out. Instead, I reached inside for my magic. It was sluggish, muted, and covered in a black fog. But it was there. Growing. Slowly.

I needed more time.

“Yes, it’s me, you idiot. Do you think Eleyta would be anywhere without me? I gave *everything* to this country. I sold my soul for it!” The queen gripped her ruby, her eyes flashing with promises of torture. “Do you think I do not know about loss? I had it all! A lover. The promise of a future. I had someone who cared.”

There was so much pain and sorrow in her voice that, for one singular moment, I felt sorry for her. What must have happened to turn her into such a hateful person?

Then I glimpsed Sebastian. My wonderful, sweet, dark vampire. My pity for the queen dissipated like smoke on the wind. Whatever happened to her, she still wanted to kill us.

My fangs ached. I wanted blood. I needed it. My head shifted, and I stared at my husband. My prince, bound and broken and—

He moved.

It was small, a twitch of his leg. Hope ran through me.

I had to keep her talking. For both of us.

“What happened to them?” I asked.

She told me. Every dark, dirty detail, she shared them all. Nicolas, the Freedom Revolution, the entire twisted affair. By the time she was done, horror swam in my stomach.

All the pieces fell into place. The queen’s hatred, her disgust towards humans, even the Favorites. Beneath all the cruelty was just a female suffering from a broken heart.

Then the most incredible thing happened. The Tether tingled. A feather-light caress brushed against my mind. Warmth flooded the bond.

Keep her talking, darling.

I nearly wept at the sound of Sebastian’s voice in my head. Thank all the gods. I might not have been a warrior, but I could talk.

“I’m sorry that happened to you,” I said slowly, carefully choosing my words. “No one deserves to experience the pain of heartbreak.”

“Sorry?” Queen Marguerite scowled. Shadows swarmed off her. “I don’t want your apologies. I don’t want anything from you.”

Time was running short; I could feel it in my bones. Soon, she would grow tired of this.

“What do you want?” I asked, desperate to keep her talking.

Darkness flashed through her eyes. “I want power.”

“Maybe we can help you?” I said feebly. Inside, I tried to summon my shadows, but they were still just out of reach.

She scowled. “If you want to help, you’ll be a good little Fledgling and stay still.”

I swallowed, and alarm pulsed through me. “What?”

Shadows swirled above the queen’s hands, forming a long, thin dagger. A strangled scream clawed its way out of my throat. Queen Marguerite plucked the weapon out of the air.

“Please,” I said. I wasn’t above begging, it turned out.

How had things gone so wrong?

Queen Marguerite tapped the blade on my cheek. It was cold, and I didn’t try to contain my shivers.

“I don’t need you,” she said icily. “I don’t need anyone. All I need is for my ruby to work again.”

A tear slipped down my cheek.

The queen noticed it, laughing.

“Oh, goodness.” She gathered the tear on the edge of her dagger before licking the blood off the blade. “It’s time you learned your lesson, Luna. I will always win. There is no escaping me. I am death.”

Then she lifted the shadow dagger, and I knew the end had come.

Your Blood is Mine
❧

SEBASTIAN

Queen Marguerite raised the dagger above her head. From here, I could see the entire dreadful scene. The queen. Luna. My wife's blood. All of it.

A mad cackle filled the air.

"Don't do this!" Luna cried out. The words were a knife to my soul.

No matter how much I struggled against the bindings, I couldn't get them loose. This couldn't be happening.

"No!" I yelled around the gag.

Queen Marguerite glanced over her shoulder, a dark smile twisting her lips as she met my eyes. "I hope this hurts you as much as it does her."

Then she plunged the dagger into Luna's chest until only the hilt remained.

My wife *screamed*. The sound was unlike anything I'd ever heard. It was like Luna was being flayed apart from the inside out. It was heartbreaking, horrifying, and devastating all at once.

Pain shot through me as though I were the one who had just taken a dagger to the heart. The Binding Mark was a blazing inferno, searing my very soul.

"Luna!" I roared, struggling against the shadows binding me.

A mad laugh escaped the queen. She tipped back her head and ripped off her necklace. Blood poured out of Luna's wound. Too fast. She was bleeding out, just like Athena had. Twice, I had failed the ones who loved me.

Queen Marguerite raised the ruby to the sky. She chanted in a language I did not speak. It didn't matter. I didn't need to know the words to understand what was happening.

Lowering the ruby, the queen dipped it in Luna's blood. The jewel shone brighter.

Again, I called my wife's name.

There was no response.

The pain grew worse, and the bond between us weakened. It frayed, bits and pieces of the Tether crumbling. Grief was an anguish-filled storm swirling within me.

The numbness was on the edge of my consciousness, beckoning me, but I ignored it. I had to be stronger than this. Stronger than death. I could not fail Luna. Not now.

Tearing my eyes away from the heart-wrenching scene in front of me, I turned my attention inward and focused on the Tether. That magical rope was still there, but its light was so faint I could barely see it.

I refused to give up. Not while there was still a chance.

Gathering all my strength, my shadows, and my dark magic, I focused on the one thing that mattered to me: Luna. Centering myself on the connection binding us together, I focused on the light that was intrinsically hers, on the beauty of her inner being, and the cord tying us together.

Slowly, so gods-damned slowly it hurt, the Tether brightened.

Please let this be enough.

Sending the prayer to whatever gods might be listening, I shoved everything I had at the Tether. I forced the connection to open despite the queen's horrible magic. I pushed and shoved and prodded until, finally, it seemed to work. It was barely more than a sliver of our usual power, but it would have to be enough.

The queen's chanting swelled. Shadows swirled around her like a cloak of darkness. Luna did not move at all. I had to act now. This was our one chance at survival.

Gathering all the power I could find—mine, Luna's, it didn't matter anymore—I drained us both dry. I took all the magic, molding it until it was a writhing mass of shadows crackling with crimson lighting.

Then I pulled back my arm. The shadows binding me constricted, but I twisted and turned until that gods-damned ruby was in sight.

Queen Marguerite didn't notice me. She was too caught up in her enchantment. I took a deep breath and threw the magic at the jewel.

Time crawled as the shadows sailed through the air.

My lungs ceased breathing. My fingernails cut half-moons into my palms.

My heart did not beat at all. The sphere got closer and closer.

Several things happened all at once.

Just as the ruby was about to hit, the queen stopped chanting. Silence fell upon Hoarfrost Hollow, and Queen Marguerite turned towards me. Her eyes flashed with darkness. Blood-soaked hands rose in the air. She snarled, “You —”

The magic slammed into the jewel, and it *exploded*. Thousands of minuscule red shards turned to dust and rained over the snow.

Less than a second later, the shadows binding me weakened. My heart beat once again, and I felt... better. Stronger.

“My ruby!” the queen shrieked. Her voice was higher than I had ever heard it. She grasped at the air, but it was too late. The jewel was gone. She clawed at her chest. She tore her clothes, her nails leaving red trails on her skin, and she sobbed, “No, no, no, no, no. This can’t be happening!”

She ripped out her hair in clumps. Mad. The queen was utterly mad.

I couldn’t watch her devolution into insanity all night, though. I stretched my arms, trying to break the bindings. Inch by inch, they moved. More. I funneled every bit of strength I had into this. I needed to be free.

Then, Luna groaned. It was the best sound I’d ever heard. Her hand inched up her chest until the dagger’s hilt was within reach. Her fingers curled around it. I held my breath. She yanked it out.

Hope became a burning flame within me.

“You!” Queen Marguerite dove at Luna. “Your blood is mine. Your soul is mine. Everything you are is *mine!*”

“No.” Luna gripped the shadow dagger, crawling away from the queen.

The ruby, she whispered. It must’ve been strengthening her magic and stopping us from healing.

And now, it was gone.

Without wasting another moment, I reached for the Tether again. This time, the connection between us flew open. Dark magic rushed through my veins. Having my power back was intoxicating, but I did not keep it for myself.

I sent wave after wave of shadows to Luna. The red markings glowed until they rivaled the moon in its radiance.

More, more, more, I gave until I had nothing left.

Queen Marguerite stood on shaky legs, still screeching.

She looked... wrong.

Her face was sunken, her skin stuck to her bones, and her hair was graying rapidly. Like a corpse brought to life, she raised a thin finger and pointed it at Luna.

“I will destroy you,” she declared, her voice filled with madness and anger and death.

Clambering to her feet, Luna held out her hands. “No, you won’t.”

She twisted her hand, and ribbons flowed from her palm. But they weren’t shadows, and they weren’t dark.

Pure sunlight wove around fingers, forming a stake that glowed so brilliantly my eyes burned. Luna lifted her weapon. Without hesitation, she plunged it into the queen’s heart.

A horrific scream filled Hoarfrost Hollow. It echoed off the tombs. Goosebumps erupted over my arms.

Queen Marguerite stumbled back. She grabbed at the stake, her hands burning on impact. Her flesh sizzled, and steam rose in the air.

The queen’s skin changed. Fissures made of pure sunlight spread like golden wildfire from the point of impact until every inch of her body was covered in web-like lines. She glowed like a star about to explode.

Luna wrapped her hands around the stake and pulled the weapon out. The sunlight vanished, dissolving into the night air.

But the queen...

Her body shriveled upon itself. Her skin turned black. Her eyes sunk into her skull. Her nails turned as dark as death itself.

And she fell with a horrible, final *thud* to the ground.

Time seemed to stop for a long moment. Stillness unlike anything I’d ever experienced fell upon Hoarfrost Hollow. Not even the wind dared whisper as Queen Marguerite died.

Then, the queen’s body split apart into ash. A brisk wind blew, and her body... disappeared.

The enormity of the situation slammed into me. She was dead. Gone. After all these years, she just... died.

I stared at the gray stain that had been the queen seconds before.

A life reduced to nothing.

“Sebastian—”

Luna’s next words never came.

The ground shook. Magic rippled, and an enormous wave of power washed over me. I stumbled back from the force of it. Our fighting leathers

stitched themselves together, and the dirt and grime covering us vanished. My power was replenished.

When the magic was gone, there wasn't a single mark of the battle we'd just fought.

Although Luna had no physical markings of the fight, her hands clenched and unclenched at her sides. Small tremors ran through her, growing in strength until she was shaking uncontrollably.

Luna raised wide eyes to me. "She's... I... the queen..."

I shadowed over to Luna and gathered her in my arms. "I've got you." And I would never let her go.

She continued to tremble. "Did you see... I just... the light."

"I saw." I kissed her forehead, her nose, her mouth. "You did it."

"I did it," Luna echoed, her voice tinged with disbelief. "She's dead?"

"Yes, darling." My arms tightened around her. "The queen is dead."

Eleyta's throne was empty.

But not for long.

There was one thing left to do before the challenge could officially be declared complete. But we wouldn't go yet. Not until Luna was ready. Rules be damned. My wife was more important.

She pressed her head against my chest. "I didn't think... When I fell... I thought..."

"I know." At that moment, when the dagger had pierced her chest, I'd known true fear. "But you did it. You killed her."

I rubbed her back slowly, murmuring nothing in particular, until Luna's tremors slowed.

Lifting my wrist, I brought it to her mouth. "Drink."

She looked up from my tunic, raising her own wrist in a silent demand. I took it without arguing. This wasn't the time for a fight, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't hungry. Together we replenished our strength. Once we were full and the shadows' song had returned louder than ever, I held Luna close.

I was drawing on my shadows, preparing to return to Castle Sanguis, when the ground shook again. The snow beneath our feet cracked, and the strangest thing happened.

A stem poked through the snow. Two. Twenty. Hundreds. In the space that it took to draw breath, Hoarfrost Hollow was covered in them. They defied the laws of nature, blooming as soon as buds grew.

Within minutes, crimson roses filled Hoarfrost Hollow. They stretched as

far as I could see in all directions.

They were... beautiful.

Strange.

New.

Luna's hand dug into my side. "What does it mean?"

"I don't know." I raised my free hand, tilting her head until her eyes met mine. "But honestly, love, I don't care."

Her brows furrowed adorably. "Why not?"

I stole a kiss. I'd steal as many as I wanted now. "Because we have an eternity to figure it out."

Darkness, Strength, and Power
❧

LUNA

It turned out that when you killed a queen, there was a lot to do. While all I wanted to do was climb into bed and sleep for a week, it wasn't possible. At least, not yet.

Sebastian said there was one more thing left to do, and he shadowed us back to Castle Sanguis. We landed in the throne room. Like the banquet hall earlier, it was not empty. Hundreds of vampires stood in groups of threes and fours, talking quietly.

Even after we arrived, Sebastian's shadows cloaked us from the others. I clutched his hand, not eager to face all these vampires. Being in Lightriver Abbey had been so nice that I'd forgotten what it was like to be surrounded by hundreds of vampires who were far more cruel than kind.

Do we have to face them now? I asked through our bond. *Could we wait until tomorrow?*

He shook his head. *This needs to be done now, Luna. They would have felt the wave of magic and known something has happened.*

I frowned. The strange magic had repaired my clothes after the queen died, but I still felt dirty. I would need a dozen showers to wash away the sensation of the queen's touch.

After a moment, Sebastian spoke again. *Don't worry, Luna. You just killed the queen. A few curious vampires won't hurt you.*

I killed the queen.

I didn't even know where the idea of making the stake of pure sunlight had come from, but the moment that magic had appeared in my hands, I'd known it was right.

It's going to take some time to wrap my head around that, I admitted.

A very long time.

A masculine chuckle rumbled through the bond. *We have time, Luna. An eternity.*

That was true. What would we do now?

Alright. I drew in a deep breath and squared my shoulders. *Lift the shadows. I'm ready.*

He did as I asked.

The shadows slipped away. All conversations halted abruptly. Hundreds of black eyes raised to us, and then, a collective gasp ran through the room like a wave.

“Marguerite Montquartier, the Wearer of the Blood Ruby, is dead,” Sebastian proclaimed. “The former queen died by my wife’s hands. By the laws of Isvana and Ithiar, the challenge is completed. As one ruler fades away, another rises to take their place.”

Whispers, quiet at first, filled my ears.

“The queen is dead.”

“They killed her.”

And a little louder, “She was a...”

“Truly, this is good...”

Someone coughed. “Can you believe...”

As the crowd gained confidence, their voices grew louder.

“Queen Marguerite is dead!” a voice called out.

Another raised their fist in the air. “Long live the king and queen!”

“King Sebastian!” someone yelled. “Queen Luna!”

“Long live the vampires!”

“The queen is dead; long live the queen!”

Their words sunk in, and blood drained from my face. We were doing this now? No time to prepare mentally? Just... out with one ruler and in with another in the same night?

Sebastian’s brows furrowed. “Luna, what’s wrong?”

The crowd’s excited chanting continued, but I ignored them. My grip on his hand tightened, and my tongue was sandpaper in my mouth. “I... They’re... What they’re saying... about us.”

I knew vampire rulers were chosen by force, but somehow... I hadn’t exactly considered what would happen if we won. I thought we would at least get a chance to acclimate ourselves to our new reality. The throne was empty, but not for long, apparently. We hadn’t even had the chance to get cleaned

up, but it seemed the vampires didn't care.

How could I do this? I barely knew how to be a princess, let alone a queen.

Sebastian seemed to understand where my mind went. "Luna, Eleyta needs a ruler." He raised a brow, and his obsidian eyes twinkled. "Now they have two."

My mouth opened and closed repeatedly, and my chest constricted. "Is there... do we have to..."

My voice trailed off as words seemed to fail me. This was new and not exactly delightful. I had never thought I would find myself in this position.

"There's no coronation if that's what you're asking," he said.

I nodded, still speechless. There went my dreams of returning to the cabin and spending a week in bed. This was going to be a very long night.

He squeezed my hand. "You'll be amazing."

I didn't have time to respond before a vampire pushed through the quieting crowd. Her blond hair was in a tight braid, but I recognized her instantly.

Memories of her cruelty when we first met ran through my mind, and I hissed, "Estrella."

What was she doing here?

I didn't realize I'd said the last part out loud until Sebastian's hand landed on the small of my back. *I know you don't like her, darling.*

That was an understatement. *Why is she here?* I asked again. *She was friends with Darcy.*

One of the vampires who had sold us out to the People of the Night, Darcy had killed Syndra when the witch tried to warn me what was coming.

Phyrra investigated her thoroughly, he replied calmly. Estrella's been working in Southern Eleyta, near the Ithenmyrian border, since the night after the first ball.

I didn't respond, so Sebastian continued, *I'll kill her if you'd like.*

Just like that, he was willing to get rid of a trusted vampire. For me.

I sucked in a breath. On the one hand, I *really* didn't like Estrella. On the other, there had been enough death already. *No, that's fine.* A thought struck me, and I shivered. *Can she hear what we're saying now?*

No, this communication is through the Tether. I made some discrete inquiries while we were with the Second Order. Not even Estrella can hear us. Our words belong to us, and us alone.

Thank Isvana.

Sebastian laced his hand through mine and led me to the edge of the dais. We spread our wings and stood tall.

Estrella dropped to her knees a few feet away from us, extending her neck in a show of submission. Well, at least now she had her tongue under control.

“My King.” She looked at Sebastian, then at me. “My Queen.” Raising her right hand, she formed a small dagger out of the shadows. “Allow me to be the first to pledge my allegiance to your crown.”

My eyes widened. We really were diving straight into this. I thought I’d at least have time to wrap my mind around ruling an entire country, but no.

I glanced at Sebastian. He smirked, his eyes twinkling. *Vampires might be long-lived, but we enjoy a good ceremony.*

Evidently. I infused as much dryness into the word as possible.

Out loud, Sebastian said, “Go ahead, Estrella De La Point. We will accept your pledge.”

She dipped her head and extended her left hand towards us. Gripping the hilt of the dagger, she plunged the blade through her own hand.

My heart stuttered, but no one else seemed surprised.

Estrella’s blood dripped steadily on the floor. “In the names of Ithiar and Isvana, gods of blood and the moon, may your reign be filled with darkness, strength, and power. I hereby pledge myself to you both as your willing servant. Do with me as you will.”

She made a religious gesture with her free hand and stared at us.

Were we supposed to say something? I wished I had a manual, a textbook, or even a pamphlet with directives on how to proceed.

Sebastian knew what to do, though. He stepped forward, placing his hand on the vampire’s head. “We accept your vow of loyalty, Estrella De La Point. You may stand.”

The mindreader withdrew the shadow dagger from her hand, the wound healing immediately as she rose to her feet. “Thank you, Your Majesties. I look forward to serving you for centuries to come.”

She moved to the side, revealing rows of vampires all waiting to swear their allegiance to us.

“Oh my gods,” I muttered. “This is going to take forever.”

I was already exhausted from the earlier events. A battle to the death wasn’t exactly a walk in the park. Already, I knew I’d be sore for days. Sebastian glanced at me, frowning. He gestured over his shoulder to a nearby

servant, who scurried away. A few minutes later, the servant returned with a few others. Between them, they carried two identical black thrones.

The seats were set up, and I pulled my wings into myself. Sebastian and I sat at the same time. I shifted, trying to get comfortable. My husband, on the other hand, took to the throne like he'd been born to sit in it.

"Next," he commanded regally, his voice echoing through the throne room.

One after another, vampires came to the foot of the dais. They repeated variations of the same vow Estrella had taken. Those who did not have shadows of their own used daggers formed by others, and each pledged their allegiance to us.

Minutes became hours. The Blood Moon set, the sun rose, and servants drew curtains over the windows. Sebastian sent a raven shifter after Phyrra and Marius to inform them of what happened and to ask them to stay with the Second Order of Isvana's Chosen Ones until it was safe to return.

Still, the vows kept coming.

When the last vampire, a black-haired lord named Gareth, was finishing his vow, my eyes were barely staying open. The moment the lord finished, Sebastian took my hand in his. He met the eye of a vampire standing nearby, one who'd pledged their own vow not long ago.

"The queen and I are retiring," Sebastian said. "We are not to be disturbed."

"Of course, Your Majesty." The vampire dipped his head. "Have a good night."

Sebastian brought us back to our room. It remained untouched, and the bed called my name invitingly. My entire body was sore. Sebastian helped me undress. Wordlessly, he led me into the bathing room. I showered, going through the motions of washing my hair and body mechanically, before slipping on the first nightgown I could find.

Then I collapsed on the soft, welcoming mattress. It hugged me like an old friend, and I buried my face into the pillow.

I was asleep in seconds, dreaming of a bright future for Eleyta.

WE SLEPT FOR TWO DAYS, only waking to feed and take care of personal

needs before falling back into bed.

Killing queens was not for the faint of heart.

On the evening of the third day, a knock came at the door, pulling me out of sleep. Sebastian was already standing by the time I lifted my head off the pillow.

“I’ll get it,” he said, drawing on a pair of trousers.

I nodded, my head falling back as I watched him through hooded eyes. Gods, he was beautiful, this prince—this king—of mine.

If it weren’t for the black bands marking our wrists, I would have trouble believing we were bound. Sometimes, the events of our marriage felt more like a dream... or a nightmare, depending on how I was feeling. But when I remembered he loved me, it all seemed okay.

Sebastian pulled open the door. “Yes?”

“Your Majesty, you need to come quickly,” said a voice outside the room.

My husband’s shoulders tensed. “What’s wrong, Nelo?”

“Nothing is wrong, My King. There’s... a situation in the Hall of Favorites. You should come to see.”

Sebastian’s fingers drummed on the doorframe, and he looked over his shoulder at me. *Is that alright with you?*

I couldn’t get over how considerate he was. We were still Tethered, so if he was going, I was too. Instead of demanding I come, he asked.

Smiling, I slipped out from under the covers and swung my legs over the side of the bed. *Give me five minutes, and I’ll be ready.*

Sebastian nodded, turning back to Nelo. “We’ll be there in a half-hour.” He slipped the door shut and leaned against it.

I eyed him. “Half an hour?” I crinkled my nose. “I only asked for five minutes.”

My vampire pushed off the door, prowling towards me. “Did you say that?” He stopped a foot away from me, his eyes twinkling. “I could have sworn I heard you say thirty minutes. Or was it an hour? I’m not sure.”

“Sebastian—”

He bent, his arms landing on either side of me, caging me in. His mouth claimed mine in a deep kiss. I melted against him, my fingers reaching up and tangling in his hair as we embraced. His tongue prodded at my mouth, and I opened for him eagerly. Our kiss deepened.

Too soon, he pulled away. A mischievous glint entered those eyes. “You see, darling, I needed more than five minutes to do this.” He scooped me up,

moving me to the middle of the bed once more.

His lips met mine, and his hands made quick work of my nightdress. Any protests that I might have had—which, to be honest, were very few—died out completely when his mouth left mine, blazing a trail lower, lower, lower.

Soon, I couldn't speak at all.

For once, I found I did not mind one bit.

With Sebastian, no words were necessary.

So Much We Need to Do


SEBASTIAN

After I finished assuring Luna no one would be upset that we were a bit late—half an hour had become an hour before we knew it—we left our room. She'd changed into a form-fitting black gown with a long slit that ran up the middle, showcasing her legging-clad legs. It wasn't the first time I'd seen her in this garment, but she looked different today. More beautiful if that was possible. Stronger than ever.

I was proud to call her my wife.

We could have shadowed to the Hall of Favorites, but we walked instead. Why hurry now? The queen was dead, and we had all the time in the world to spend together.

An air of levity had settled upon Castle Sanguis. I noticed it as soon as we left our wing of the castle. The vampires we passed bowed and curtsied in our direction, which wasn't exactly new, but the real changes came from the humans.

They seemed... happy.

There was a bounce in their steps, and they even smiled as we passed them. No servant had smiled in Castle Sanguis the entire time I'd been alive.

We were walking down a hallway on the castle's second floor when one human stopped us.

"Your Majesties." He clutched a woven basket in his arms and dipped his head. He wore a purple ribbon around his neck. "I just wanted to thank you for what you've done."

Luna glanced at me before smiling. "You're welcome."

The servant grinned, bowing before hurrying on his way.

Four more times, servants stopped us in the halls. Each professed their

thanks—not to me, but to Luna. Already, word of what she'd done was spreading.

Masculine pride swelled deep in my chest as I kept my arm around her, holding her close. Luna had always been a beacon of sunlight to my darkness, ever since that first night when we met, but now her light was spreading. Everyone was coming to see what I had known early on.

She was a treasure.

By the time we had walked through the castle and arrived at the Hall of Favorites, I realized things were only going to get stranger.

The double doors marking the entrance to this forbidden wing were open. That was never the case. This hall had been heavily guarded for my entire existence; the doors were always locked. Only the guards and the queen had the key.

Her pets were never allowed out without her permission.

Nelo peeled off the wall, bowing.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

His brows knit together. “Your Majesties, the Favorites... They’ve...” He shook his head. “Come see for yourself.”

He entered the hall, pausing to make sure we were following. He led us past several closed doors, our footsteps echoing on the stone. We stopped at the door at the end of the hall. I laced my fingers through Luna’s, drawing her against my chest.

Nelo cleared his throat. “When the servants brought the Favorites their breakfast, they found this. I thought you should see it, Bastian.”

He sounded more confused than anything, and my shadows didn’t warn me of any danger. Even so, I would go first.

Nelo turned the knob. The door opened on silent, well-oiled hinges, revealing an ornate room. The guard stepped inside first, and I quickly followed.

What I found stopped me in my tracks.

Eleven humans were scattered around the room, some standing and others sitting. It wasn’t the lack of clothing that caught my attention, however.

It was the life in their eyes. There had only been one Favorite in recent years who had willingly chosen to become one of the queen’s pets. I didn’t know his name, but he was over by the table, reading a book. He put it down when we entered, looking at us with all the other humans.

Each one had the same spark of humanity in their gaze.

“Sebastian... oh.” Luna’s voice died off as she came to stand beside me.

“What happened?” I asked Nelo.

This was unprecedented. Once Queen Marguerite chose a Favorite, the only way out was death. I’d never seen one of her pets break her trance.

One of the former Favorites stepped forward.

“My name is Blair.” He bowed, holding a black blanket around his waist. “When the queen... when she died, magic rippled over us.”

Murmurs of agreement rose through the room.

A young blonde stepped forward. I recognized her as Abigail, the human we saved from the hunt. “It was like a cool breeze washed over me. One moment, I was trapped in my own body, and the next, something unlocked inside me.”

Nelo said, “Some of the Favorites have been alert since the night the queen died, but a few didn’t wake completely until tonight.”

Each of the humans shared their stories one by one, echoing what Blair and Abigail had said. Miraculous. That was the only way to describe it.

When they were done, and we’d confirmed they were all as healthy as expected, Luna and I left the humans in Nelo’s care. He assured us the humans would be fed food of the highest quality and clothed appropriately.

Once our feet landed on the stone floor of our room, Luna spun on her heel. Her eyes sparked, and a grin spread across her face. “The queen’s magic broke. First, the voices in the Void disappeared, and now this. I wonder if there’s anything else affected by the queen’s passing.”

I stared at her. “Did you just say the voices in the Void are gone?”

Luna blinked. “Didn’t I tell you?”

“No, love.” I shook my head. “You didn’t tell me that.”

I certainly would have remembered something so monumental.

She frowned. “Oh, I thought... I must have gotten lost in my head. They’re gone, Sebastian. I didn’t realize it at first, having just killed the queen and all, but I haven’t heard them since the night of the red moon.”

I blew out a breath. “That’s amazing.” I’d always hated that the voices bothered her.

“It is.” Luna started to pace. “We have so much to do, Sebastian. We need to find a new home for them.”

Sometimes it was hard to keep up with Luna when she was like this because it felt like her mind was working three steps ahead of our conversation.

“The Favorites?”

“The humans,” she corrected softly. “We need to deal with all of them, not just the ones the queen abused. I don’t want anyone in Castle Sanguis to feel like they have to stay here against their will. Any humans who want to leave should be allowed to leave at will.”

That sounded reasonable.

“Is this your first official law as queen, darling?”

She canted her head. “It is, isn’t it?” She tapped a finger on her bottom lip. “It won’t be my last, though. There’s so much we need to do. We need to free the humans, and then...”

LUNA WAS A NATURAL-BORN LEADER. She took to being queen like she was always meant to be in charge. By the end of the night, she had three lists started.

“One for immediate changes.” She pointed to the shortest list, which already had over twenty items. “These are items we can implement immediately. The second is for short-term projects, and the third will take us the longest.”

At the top of her list was summoning Phyrra and Marius to Castle Sanguis. That, at least, would be easy. Other items included finding new lodgings for the Favorites while we tried to track down their families. We made plans to interview all the non-vampiric servants individually to determine if they wanted to stay in Castle Sanguis.

While Luna worked on that, I conferred with the royal treasurers. It quickly became apparent that Queen Marguerite had drained the country’s coffers dry. Multiple advisors informed us that the situation with Ithenmyr was far worse than I had originally thought.

The former queen might have been unnaturally obsessed with the darkness, but there was no doubting that it was real, and the effects of the dying land would be here for a long time. I had already penned missives and sent trusted vampires to the Koln Mountains to assess the situation. One thing was certain: the Dragon Queen in Ithenmyr was brutal and would need to be stopped. Sooner or later, we’d have to deal with her.

On top of all that, I intended to have Phyrra search for any remaining

members of the People of the Night. Justice would be implemented in Eleyta, and we would bring order to this country, one wayward vampire at a time.

By the time dawn was on the horizon, both Luna and I had enough tasks to last us for weeks. I wasn't upset about it, though. On the contrary, I felt better than I had in years. We could do this. We could bring peace and stability to Eleyta, making it into the country it was always meant to be. Together, we could do anything.

We were husband and wife. Bound and Tethered partners. King and Queen of Eleyta. The Wielder of Shadows and the Sunwalker.

Two beings sharing one soul.

No one could tear us apart.

Not now.

Not ever.

First Epilogue
❧

LUNA

A *few weeks later...*

A heavy arm pressed me down into the bed, and I groaned. “Sebastian, you’re pushing me into the mattress again.”

This was the fourth time I’d woken up in this position this week. Being king meant even Sebastian was more tired than normal. Running a country was not easy, and we were keeping long hours trying to sort out the mess Queen Marguerite had left in her wake.

She had spent so much money on her tournament that the human villages throughout Eleyta were on the brink of starvation. Even the grain Ipotha was still sending on a monthly basis wasn’t enough to save them all. Thank the gods Sebastian and I had stepped in when we did because we’d been able to divert what little funds remained to help the villages just in time.

Sebastian still hadn’t moved. I shifted from beneath the weight of his limb and poked him in the chest. “Could you move your arm, please?”

In response, he cracked open an eye. “Morning, Luna,” he said gruffly.

Instead of doing as I asked, he pulled me closer to him.

“Sebastian!” I smacked his chest. His very bare chest. Apparently, he’d forgone all clothing when we’d come to bed. I hadn’t noticed earlier, but that was no longer the case. “Let me go. We need to get up.”

In reply, he licked my neck leisurely. “Do we?” he asked. “Are you sure?”

When I didn’t immediately respond, his fangs grazed my throat. “Or perhaps, you might find time for an... experiment.”

My interest flared, and my core tightened. This vampire knew exactly what to say to catch my attention. I shifted in his arms, intrigued. “What kind

of experiment?”

He grinned, his fangs sharp and predatory and not-at-all frightening. “It’s very rigorous,” he said gravely. “It even has a name.”

“Oh?”

“I’m calling it, ‘How quiet can Luna be?’”

My eyes widened, but I didn’t pull away. “I’m not sure…”

“Shhhh.” He put his finger on my lips. “In order for this to work, you’re supposed to be quiet.”

Then, as if to prove his point, he kissed me. His hand slipped behind my neck, holding me close as our mouths met in a passionate embrace. With every sweep of his lips, every touch of his tongue, every moment we spent together, he told me how much he adored me. Once my lips were plump and bruised and nearly numb, Sebastian pulled away. He laid me on the pillows, supporting his weight on his elbows as he rested above me.

“Remember, darling, be quiet.” He grinned, his fangs on full display, before he bit my neck. Pleasure coursed through me, my entire body wanting more. Needing more. At the exact same moment, he pulled up my nightgown. I spread my legs, and he fit perfectly.

No matter how many times we came together, I would never grow tired of this.

He was mine.

My husband. My king. My entire world.

IN THE END, Sebastian’s experiment was wholly unsuccessful on several fronts. I was not quiet. At all. Needless to say, I’d never been so happy to fail at anything before. By the time we made it out of our bedroom, I’d failed several iterations of his tests. On the bed, in the shower, and in front of the wardrobe while I was trying to pick out a dress.

By the time we made it to the castle library to check in with Marius, the castle brimmed with life as vampires and servants alike went about their day. My brother was settling into life in Eleyta, and we’d procured several tutors to help him catch up with his studies.

I ruffled Marius’s hair. “How are you, Mar-Mar?”

He looked up from the book he was reading. “I don’t want to study,” he

grumbled. “I told you, I want to be a spy like Phyrra. I don’t need to know mathematics for that.”

Sebastian chuckled behind me. *Good luck with that.*

Marius hadn’t let his fascination with the spymaster go, and he spoke about her more and more each day.

I slipped into the seat next to him. “What did I tell you?”

He groaned. “I can be a spy when I grow up, but I need to do my studies first.”

“That’s right.” Hopefully, my brother would let go of this obsession before he Matured. I hoped he would find a safe, peaceful vocation that did not take him far from Castle Sanguis.

The tutor, a Light Elf by the name of Vryntha, smiled at us. He approached the table and set down a stack of books. “We are studying the history of the Four Kingdoms, Your Majesties.”

“Sounds delightful,” Sebastian drawled.

I shot my husband a look. We were already having enough trouble getting Marius to focus on his studies. The last thing I needed was for Sebastian to encourage him in his disdain for learning. Sometimes, I didn’t know how it was possible that two people who were related could be so different.

The clock struck, and Sebastian touched my arm. “We have to go, Luna, or we’ll be late.”

It certainly wasn’t relaxing, being queen. I still hadn’t gotten the cats I wanted, but it was on my list of things to do. Eventually.

I gave Marius one last hug. “Have fun studying.”

“I won’t,” he grumbled.

Sighing in defeat, I stood and slipped my hand into Sebastian’s. We traveled through the Void, landing in the throne room in seconds.

Two matching thrones—far less ostentatious than Queen Marguerite’s had been—sat at the front of the room. We were hearing petitions tonight, and we’d likely be here for hours. I wasn’t upset, though. We were making changes in Eleyta. Our people were happier and healthier. We’d moved Odette’s laboratory to the castle, and with her potion, every single person who had suffered from the Wasting Illness had been given the cure.

We’d barely settled onto the thrones when the doors banged open.

“Your Majesties!” Tristan shouted as he barreled into the throne room. He dropped to a hasty bow at the foot of the dais, clearly out of breath.

“What is it?” Sebastian demanded.

The vampire looked at us with wide eyes. “There’s a dragon on the roof.”

SEBASTIAN’S HAND was an iron grip around my arm as we shadowed to the roof. I wasn’t sure why he was holding me so tightly.

Did he think I was going to touch the dragon? I wasn’t insane. Sure, my mouth had run away from me a few times, but I still had a brain. All thoughts emptied out of it, though, when the shadows disappeared.

Heavy snow fell from the sky, obstructing my vision, but even a blizzard couldn’t have hidden the creature standing in front of me.

“Oh, my gods,” I whispered.

There really was a dragon.

It was far larger than the Nightwing but just as beautiful. The dragon was green, its scales resembling a forest in springtime, and twin horns adorned its head. Two massive amber eyes stared at us, unblinking.

Sitting on the dragon was a rider. They wore a thick, fur-lined cloak that obscured their identity and heavy boots that ran up to their thighs. The snow didn’t seem to bother them, though, as they sat astride the massive, fire-breathing beast.

I wondered if the dragon’s scales made it warmer to the touch. None of the snow that fell on it remained there, melting instantly.

The rider dipped their head in our direction. “Are you the Prince of Darkness?”

Sebastian nodded, but he did not release my arm. “I am.”

A sigh of relief came from the rider. “Thank Thelrena.” They reached up and pulled off their hood, revealing a beautiful elf with long red hair. “I am the High Lady of Life, and we desperately need your help.”

My shadows pulsed encouragingly. Just like before, with the white wolf and the Nightwing, something urged me to trust them. I pried Sebastian’s hand off my arm and took a step toward the dragon.

When I wasn’t immediately incinerated, I moved even closer.

“This is about the darkness, isn’t it?” I asked the elf.

She nodded. “It is.”

I glanced at Sebastian over my shoulder. “We thought this might happen.”

The reports we'd gotten from the Koln Mountains were strange, to say the least. Sebastian and I had both postulated that we might need to act sooner rather than later. It seemed the time had come.

"My name is Luna, Vampire Queen of Eleyta." The title still felt foreign on my tongue. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

The elf smiled and bowed her head. "Likewise."

I turned to the dragon standing a foot away from me. "Does your dragon..."

"He won't bite... much," she said, patting his flank rather affectionately. "Though he's not a fan of being stabbed."

The dragon huffed. Honestly, I didn't blame it. Who liked being stabbed?

The High Lady of Life was odd, but I sensed no malice from her.

"That won't be a problem." I stepped back. "Please, come inside. We're happy to help any way we can."

Second Epilogue
❧

SEBASTIAN

M *any years later...*

“Hurry up, Luna.” I leaned against the wall, straightening the lapels of my black silk shirt. “We’re going to be late if we don’t leave soon.”

A meow came from my feet, and I bent to scratch Noir behind her ears. One of the seven cats Luna adopted in the years since we took the throne, Noir had wormed her way into my heart. She was all black, with the exception of a single white dot in the middle of her forehead. Noir purred, rubbing against my legs.

I was still petting the feline when amusement burst through the Binding Mark. I dismissed the cat and glanced around. Luna was still in the bathing room.

A tinkling laugh came through the bond.

My brows furrowed. “What game are you playing, darling?”

Shadows pooled on the ground, and Luna appeared in front of me. “No games,” she said. Her smile contradicted her words, however.

I would have replied, but the sight of my stunning wife stole my ability to form words. She was always beautiful and breathtaking, but tonight she had taken things to an entirely new level. Even after all these years, she still managed to surprise me.

Luna twirled. “Do you like it?”

Like wasn’t a strong enough word to describe the sensations coursing through me. Instead of answering, I took her hands and pulled her to me, pressing my lips against hers.

“I love it,” I said earnestly. “I love you.”

Whoever designed this outfit should get a raise. I made a mental note to find out, taking a moment to appreciate how the garment highlighted Luna's assets.

Leaving her shoulders exposed, golden silk ran tight across her bodice before flaring out around her. Slits were cut in the legs, giving her ample room to move. The dress shimmered as if it was made of spun sunshine. Her wings were out, and her long hair fell in loose curls like a waterfall over one shoulder.

Other than the necklace I'd given her all those years ago, the only other jewelry she wore was a matching black crown resting atop her head. Her arms were bare, leaving her Binding Mark on full display.

If anyone doubted who she was, they would know the moment they saw those markings.

As if anyone could forget the Vampire Queen. After Luna's actions during the Battle of Balance, everyone in the Four Kingdoms knew of her. She was a legend twice over. Once for killing Queen Marguerite, and the second for how she fought when everything was on the line.

Luna smiled, displaying her fangs. "I'm glad you like it."

Bending, I kissed her again. Slowly, leisurely, passionately.

I poured everything I had into the kiss. It didn't matter that we'd been together for years; every embrace felt like our first. I nipped her lip, and she shivered beneath me. A small moan escaped her as my hands wandered lower, drawing her body tight against me.

She was perfect.

Minutes ticked by as we kissed and kissed.

A knock came on the door.

"Lulu? Are you coming?" My brother-in-law's gravelly voice filtered through the door. "We need to go. Stop making out with your husband."

With a groan, Luna broke our kiss. "Coming!" she called out.

We shared a look. Since he'd Matured last year, Marius had been begging Luna to let him join Phyrra on her missions. To date, she'd refused, but he was wearing her down. Slowly, carefully, he was making her see he couldn't be trapped here forever.

Letting Marius come tonight was a compromise. The Wasting Illness had never returned, thank the gods, but Luna was very protective of her little brother. She hated letting him out of her sight.

Although, as I opened the door, I conceded that "little" was a misnomer.

Marius was nearly as tall as me, and the hours he spent training with the guards meant he was strong and muscular. There wasn't a hint of the frail halfling in sight.

The three of us joined hands. That same jolt of power ran through us even now. Shadows swirled, and then, we were off.

THE JOURNEY through the Void was longer than normal, but it was smooth. The shadows lifted, leaving us in a lively ballroom. The air was warm, and the atmosphere was light as vampires, humans, shifters, witches, and elves intermingled. Conversations rose, mixing with the occasional laugh. A small orchestra played in the corner of the ballroom, and the windows and doors were open, letting the breeze come in.

The moment the three of us gained our footing, Marius stepped back. "I'll meet up with you two at the end of the night," he promised.

"Go, have fun," Luna gave him an encouraging push toward the crowd.

It was all he needed. Marius disappeared into the crowded ballroom, and Luna smiled as she leaned against me. "Can you believe it's finally happening?"

I kissed her. "I always knew it would, from the first moment you told me about it."

"Really?"

"Of course." I squeezed her hand. "You're amazing. You can do whatever you set your mind to."

Luna twisted in my arms and beamed up at me. "It's not just my night, you know. Tonight, everyone—"

"Queen Luna!" a small voice called out moments before someone slammed into us.

I looked down as the child, who was perhaps five years old with pointed ears and long silver hair, tugged on Luna's skirt.

My wife let go of my hand, bending to the elf's level. She opened her arms in greeting, and the child dove into Luna's arms, snuggling in close.

Luna hugged the elf. "Hello, Arabella."

"Hi," the youngling said, her voice like wind chimes. "I missed you."

Still holding the child, Luna glanced up at me, a grin dancing on her

beautiful face. Barely a month had passed since we had hosted Arabella and her family at Castle Sanguis.

“Where are your parents?” I asked. Usually, Arabella ran free through the forests, but it was rather busy here tonight.

“Right here.” A low, booming voice came from behind us, and I turned.

Standing with a red-haired baby on his hip was Arabella’s father. Taller than even me, he was an imposing presence. His sleeves were rolled up, displaying the mating mark on his arm. His silver-white hair was in a bun at the nape of his neck, much longer now than it had been when we first met, and he wore a golden circlet around his head.

Arabella launched out of Luna’s arms. “Daddy!” She clapped, and a flurry of vines erupted from the ground, catching several people off guard as the new growth wound around their feet. “Oops.”

Her father smiled. “Not to worry, little one. Your mother has a habit of doing the same thing when she’s excited. I’m sure she can fix it.” To us, he said, “We’re so glad you could come. This means a lot to us.”

Luna stood, slipping her hand into the crook of my elbow. “Us too.”

Since the balance had been righted, this project had occupied much of Luna’s time. She had a passion for the unification of the Four Kingdoms, as did the new powers in Ithenmyr. Together, along with the Council of Lords in both Ipotha and Drahan, she had spent countless hours preparing for tonight.

This was more than just the opening of the first university in Ithenmyr that would accept females. It was a tangible symbol of the unity that had been built after the righting of the balance.

A bell rang, and the music stopped. A hush fell over the crowd as two elves walked out onto the stage in the middle of the ballroom. One was a blonde with curling black horns like a ram. She wore an ebony gown, and her hair was coiffed in a way that highlighted the red markings covering her body.

Next to her was a tall, redheaded elf wearing a forest green tunic and matching leggings. Flowers were woven through her hair to form a crown, and tattoos covered her entire body. The green swirls and whorls started at her neck and made their way down to her bare feet.

“Balance,” someone whispered.

“The High Ladies,” another said in awe.

“Mommy!” Arabella yelled.

Darting away from her father, the young elf ran towards the dais. Before

she could get there, however, another redhead stepped out of the crowd and grabbed her. The gangly boy was a teenager, his pointed ears and red hair matching his mother's.

The High Lady of Life smiled at them before addressing the crowd. "Welcome all, to Ithenmyr. For many of you, this is likely the first time you've been to our country since... well, you know."

Chuckles rose throughout the room. Everyone knew about the broken balance. The Battle of Balance had been a turning point for the Four Kingdoms. The fight against the darkness had been difficult, and many lives had been lost, but in the end, balance had been restored.

She resumed, "Tonight, we are here..."

The two elves on the stage continued to address the crowd as I turned to Luna. Pulling her against me, I nuzzled my nose against her hair.

I'm so proud of you, I whispered through the bond.

She looked up, her black eyes meeting mine. *Do you think my father would approve?*

I kissed her softly. *Of course.*

Luna smiled, unshed red tears swimming in her eyes. *I miss them, Sebastian. Even now.*

I know. I held her close. *But we're making our own family now.*

We might not have had any biological children, but we had an entire country under our care. Not to mention Arabella and her family. Luna had forged a strong friendship with the child's mother in the time before the last battle, and it had withstood the test of time.

I didn't know what the next years would hold, but I was confident that whatever came our way, we would tackle it together.

When Luna was with me, the darkness didn't exist. She shone a light into my life that was unparalleled, and I loved her for it.

She was mine, and I was hers.

Forever.

THE END

**THANK YOU FOR COMING ON LUNA AND SEBASTIAN'S JOURNEY TO THEIR
HAPPILY EVER AFTER.**

Are you curious about the Battle of Balance or the family we met during the Second Epilogue? You can learn more about both these, as well as see how

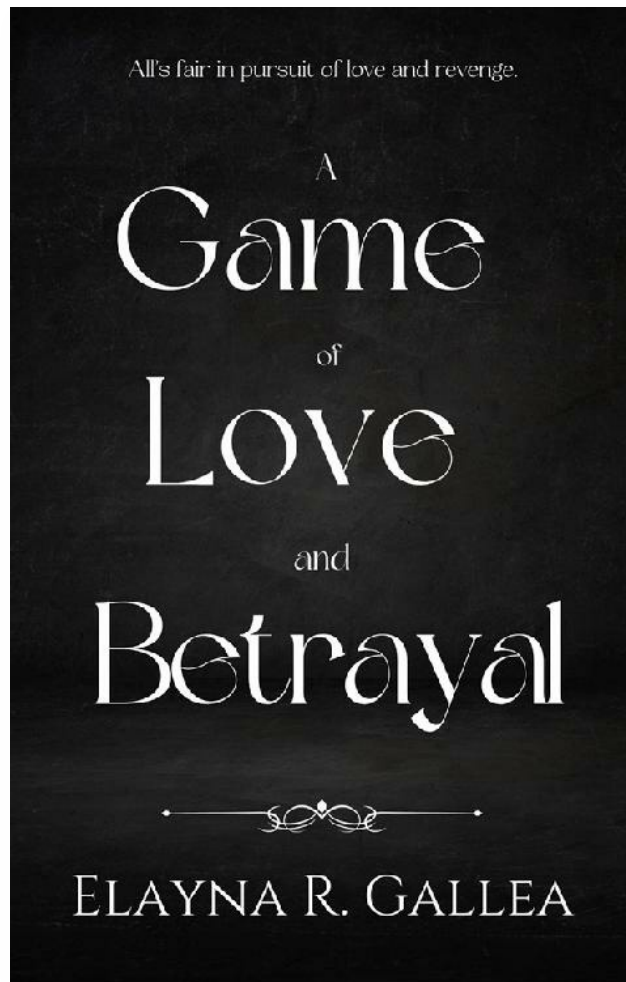
Luna and Sebastian were involved in the battle, in [The Ithenmyr Chronicles](#).

Want more Sebastian and Luna? Enjoy [this bonus scene](#) from the future when Sebastian takes Luna on a well-deserved honeymoon.

Not done with me? Come hang out with me and my readers on Facebook!
[Join Elayna R. Gallea's Reader Group](#)

A Game of Love and Betrayal

THIS ENEMIES TO LOVERS FAE/VAMPIRE FANTASY ROMANCE TAKES PLACE
IN THE FUTURE OF THE FOUR KINGDOMS.



He requires a wife. She needs to kill him. All's fair in pursuit of love and revenge.

What's a vampire to do when the fae who made her an orphan is searching for a wife?

Make him choose her and end his life on their wedding night, of course.

Brynleigh has been carefully planning this for years. Her plan is simple: date Ryker Waterborn, the Fae Representative's son, make him fall in love with her, and kill him after they say, "I do."

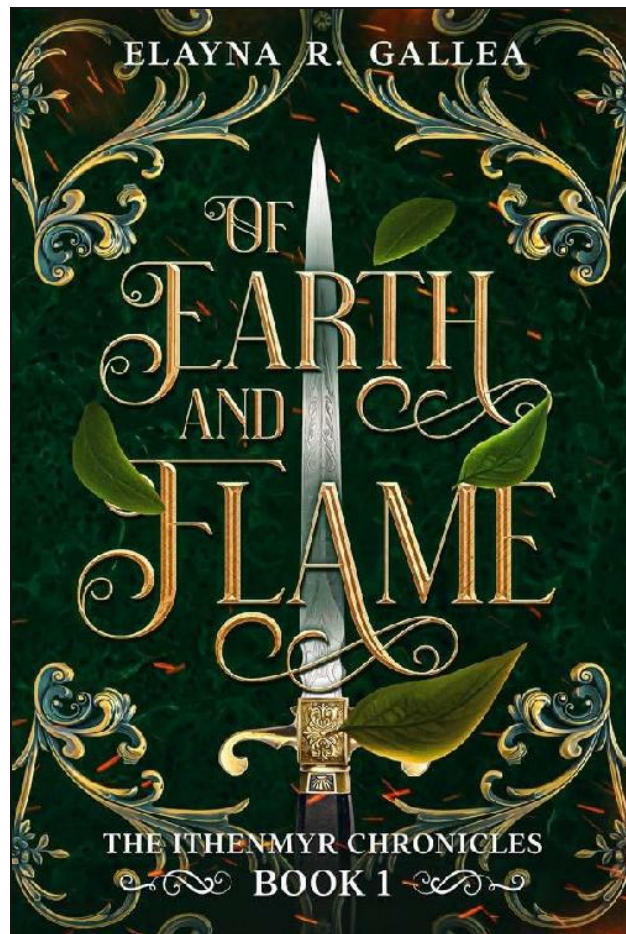
Unfortunately, it isn't going to be that easy. She won't be the only one going after Ryker's hand. Far from it. Two dozen men and women from around the Republic of Balance are competing in The Choosing in the search of their perfect partner. The catch? It's a blind selection process, and contestants won't see each other until they have selected their partner.

Nothing will stand between Brynleigh and her revenge, not even a competition for love.

***A Game of Love and Betrayal* is the first book in The Choosing Chronicles, a captivating enemies-to-lovers, new adult urban high fantasy romance.**

Of Earth and Flame

THIS INTERCONNECTED SISTER SERIES TO THE BINDING CHRONICLES
TAKES PLACE IN THE SAME WORLD, AND AT THE SAME TIME AS
TETHERED/TORMENTED/TREASURED.



She refuses to be bound to anyone; he's trying to find freedom.

Aileana is the king's pet. She has lived her entire life in a tower, waiting for the day she will be forced to marry his son.

When that day arrives, she has a plan. Armed with her daggers and her desire for freedom, she runs from the king and his deadly power.

Xander has spent his entire life on the run. He doesn't need anyone or anything, certainly not a mate. But when his path crosses with a feisty elf, nothing will ever be the same again.

He has secrets to keep. She wants to leave Ithenmyr behind and not look back.

Fate has other plans for them both.

This Rapunzel retelling is a slow burn, enemies-to-lovers high fantasy romance and is filled with banter, fated mates, fake marriage, and world-building.

Books 1-4 of this series are out now.

Acknowledgments

We're here. Honestly, I can't believe it. When I set out to write Sebastian and Luna's story, I never imagined it would become something so big. In a lot of ways, this series has changed my life. I'm not going to get into major detail—mainly because I don't want to bore you—but let's just say we have a running joke in our house about vampires now.

Tethered, Tormented, and Treasured started out as a fun series, and it remained that way the entire time I wrote it. I followed my muse, having fun with the ideas that came to my mind. In a lot of ways, this is the best part of writing. You get to take the ideas that form in your brain and bring them to life.

This book flowed. It poured out of my fingers. But I still had moments of doubt, as all writers do. I am so grateful to the people around me who encouraged me to keep going.

My readers always get the first “thank you”, because where would I be without you? You're the reason my books are being read. Every page read, every review, means the world to me. Thank you so much for reading my words and spending time in the Four Kingdoms. I hope you enjoyed your stay.

To my writer's group. Our chat is so important to me, and I value the input, cheering, and excitement that comes through our interactions. I wouldn't have been able to finish this trilogy without you. Thank you.

To my beta readers, thank you for seeing my raw words and bare-bones story and appreciating it for what it was. Thank you for your advice and encouragement.

To my ARC readers, I appreciate you taking the time to read before everyone else.

And of course, to my amazing husband. You might not be a vampire prince (unfortunately), but you're still amazing and I love you. You've supported me every step of the way on my writing journey, and I am so incredibly grateful.

To my kids. Thank you. You make me smile each and every day. I love you.

And once again, thank you reader, for everything.

About the Author

Elayna R. Gallea lives in beautiful New Brunswick, Canada with her husband and two children. They live in the land of snow and forests in the Saint John River Valley.

When Elayna isn't living in her head, she can be found toiling around her house watching Food Network, listening to Broadway, and planning her next meal.

Elayna enjoys copious amounts of chocolate, cheese, and wine.

Not in that order.

You can find her making a fool of herself on Tiktok and Instagram on a daily basis.



Also by Elayna R. Gallea

The Ithenmyr Chronicles (*An interconnected series that takes place in the Four Kingdoms at the same time as Tethered*)

[Of Earth and Flame](#)

[Of Wings and Briars](#)

[Of Ash and Ivy](#)

[Of Thistles and Talons](#)

[Of Shale and Smoke \(Late Winter 2023\)](#)

The Choosing Chronicles

[A Game of Love and Betrayal \(2024\)](#)

Legends of Love (New Adult Standalones)

[A Court of Fire and Frost \(a Romeo and Juliet Retelling\)](#)

[A Court of Seas and Storms \(a Little Mermaid Retelling\)](#)

[A Court of Wind and Wings \(a Hades and Persephone Retelling\)](#)

The Sequencing Chronicles (Young Adult) - a complete series

[Sequenced](#)

[Rise of the Subversives](#)

[The Wielder of Prophecy](#)

[The Runaway Healer](#) (a prequel novella)