

all the
LIGHT
of the
SUN

THE FIVE CLANS SERIES

KAROLINE
RAYNE

ALL THE LIGHT OF THE SUN

KAROLINE RAYNE

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book contains content that may be troubling to some readers. Including and not limited to:

Language, graphic sexual content, themes of BDSM (including but not limited to: Dom/sub dynamics, light bondage), talk of spousal death, depictions of sibling/parent death, grief/grieving, talk of past child abuse (physical & emotional), mentions of possible infertility, pregnancy, and kidnapping.

For my Opa, who instilled a love of history and of stories.
That love manifested in this book, though he'd never be
allowed to read it. Mathias Schagh 1927-1997

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CHAPTER ONE

Ilaria didn't know his name. She couldn't even remember if she had asked for it in the first place. The dark blue of his jacket signified he was a guard, though the location of his typical post in the palace was irrelevant at the moment.

The wine from dinner buzzed through her veins. The guard's hot breath fanned against the tingling skin of her neck. His lips trailed down and over her shoulder.

"My lady," his voice was a harsh whisper, his hands encircling her waist. "Maybe we shouldn't—"

Ilaria shoved him back against the nearest wall, taking two fistfuls of his shirt and yanking him down until his nose touched hers.

"Shut up," she hissed before crushing their mouths back together.

She hadn't picked him for his better judgment; rather, for his discretion. Ilaria could use him as she pleased, knowing he wouldn't tell all of his friends about it. Even if he did, he

wouldn't be the first or the last. He would only come to the realization of how many of his friends she already toyed with.

Sure, she could have her pick from any of the more high-born gentlemen with titles and wealth. Ones who would lavish her with attention, sparkling jewels, and empty promises. Ones who would see her, not for who she was, but what she was—something to be won.

Ilaria had been a man's prize once, and vowed never to be again.

Instead, she took her pleasure from palace guards, who were easy to manipulate, eager to please, and discreet. This one in particular was easy to persuade. All it took was a look; a slight tilt of the head, and he came running like a starved dog.

Ilaria reached around him to grab hold of the door handle and, jerking it open, pushed him inside. The room was mostly dark, aside from a very small fire in the hearth and the still setting sun slipping through the curtains. It suited her just fine. Taking a few steps back until the back of the guard's legs hit the side of a settee and he went tumbling down. Ilaria hiked up her skirts just enough to slip into his lap, and grasped his shirt again to pull him up into another kiss.

The strike of a match and the glow of a cigarette caught her eye from the corner of the room. It was just enough light with the curls of smoke to illuminate the piercing green eyes staring at her.

Ilaria growled, shoving the guard back down and rising to her feet. She didn't offer him a second glance.

“Get out.”

There was no doubt to whom she was speaking, but the guard heeded her unspoken warning. Jumping to his feet, he ran from the room, as if she had set his pants on fire. The sound of the door slamming behind him echoed through the otherwise silent room.

Her heart pounded against her rib cage, both from the surprise and the still-lingering arousal. It took a couple of long, deep breaths before she could force her feet to move. She stood in front of him, staring up into those eyes that were all too familiar. Reaching out, she pulled the cigarette free from his lips and brought it up to her own. She took a long drag, blowing the smoke into his face before she handed it back.

Turning on her heel, she stormed over to the sideboard and sloshed a liberal amount of brandy into a glass. Not even the burn of the alcohol could subdue her nerves.

“Aren’t you going to offer me some?” The deep rumble of his question sent shivers down her spine.

She glared at him as she poured herself another and took a deep swallow.

“Why the fuck are you here?” she asked. She poured him a drink regardless, but left it on the side table.

Taking her own drink, she went over to the window, leaning against the frame. The early evening air was cool as it blew by.

“Am I not allowed to visit my little sister?” he responded, pushing off the wall.

Ilaria snorted into her drink. “You never arrive unannounced, and we just finished dining together. So, why are you interrupting my fun?”

Maxim dropped his finished cigarette to the floor and ground it out with his heel. He crossed the room in quick, long strides, and grabbed her face in his hand. His grip tightened, making her jaw ache. Ilaria thought of pulling away, smacking his hand, or pushing at his chest. But it would do no good. He was almost a foot taller than her own slight frame, and knew all too well the full force of his ire.

“You forget your place,” he hissed in her face.

Ilaria stared at him for a long, hard moment. Maxim was always volatile, and it never played in her favor to fight back when he was like this. Playing nice when he was in a foul mood generally worked out better for her in the long run. So, she did what he expected of her. She turned her eyes to the floor and muttered, “Forgive me. Please, sit and have a drink.”

A smirk curled at the corners of his lips. He took a step back and patted her cheek with a little more force than was necessary.

“Now, is it so hard to be obedient?”

Ilaria scowled at his back as he went to get his drink. His question didn’t warrant an answer.

These unexpected visits from Maxim were rare. He was very strict, emphasizing decorum and manners before all else.

He normally sent a message ahead of his arrival, or in most cases, sent for her to come to him.

Maxim might be a lot of things to her—her guardian, her Chieftain, her jailor—but he was first and foremost, her elder half-brother. There was a decade between them; ten years where Maxim didn't have to compete for their father's attention before she came along. Her father loved her. Ilaria remembered that much about him, but very little else. Then she only had Maxim, who took his role as the authoritative figure in her life far too seriously.

Ilaria took her drink over to the settee and lounged back upon it, watching as Maxim took a nearby chair. The beginning throbs of a headache pushed against the backs of her eyes. All she wanted was a little bit of fun. A chance to break free from Maxim's endless rules. But he even managed to ruin that.

Maxim leaned back in his chair, extracting the cigarette case from the inner pocket of his jacket. He pulled one out and lit it before offering it to her. Ilaria took it, hoping it would help calm her nerves. Maxim lit one of his own and drank from his glass.

“You know that guard will lose his position,” Maxim remarked.

Ilaria took a long drag and rolled her eyes. “That's too bad. He didn't even get to fuck me to make his punishment worthwhile.”

“Ilaria.” His tone wasn't even a thinly veiled threat.

“Maxim.” She bit back. “Really, must you be so uptight?”

“I would prefer not to think about what you get into in your free time.”

“You mean, who gets into me,” Ilaria quipped. Maxim made a choking noise in the back of his throat that he tried to hide in his drink. Ilaria heard it anyway, so she continued, “If you stopped sending away all my lovers, you might not have to continuously hire new guards or find new courtiers.”

“Forgive me for wanting to surround myself with people who don’t know what it's like to be between your legs.”

“Even if I want them to know?” Ilaria asked.

Maxim took a long drag from his cigarette and slowly blew out the smoke. He regarded her for a moment, running his thumb over his lower lip.

“You know how I worry about you.” His words were slow and careful.

Ilaria groaned, dropping her head to the back of the settee and staring up at the ceiling.

“Maxim, please.”

Maxim moved from the chair to sit beside her. He nudged his shoulder up against hers.

“I’m just looking out for you, like I always have. Since Father died, you know I have taken my responsibility of caring for you very seriously. Protecting you,” Maxim remarked.

Ilaria hummed, leaning over to tap the ash from her cigarette into a dish on a side table. She laid her hand over his.

“I know,” she whispered.

Protective was almost an understatement of how overbearing Maxim could be. However, Ilaria knew it was simply in his nature. They were the only family they had left. Ilaria also considered him to be one of the very few friends she had. Anyone she had ever gotten close to either left her, or Maxim had scared them off.

Including Dimitri.

Her heart hurt just thinking of his name. Ilaria had tried so many times to force him from her mind, but she simply couldn't.

Maxim squeezed her hand back before draping his arm over her shoulders. She nuzzled into his side, much like she had as a child.

“I want to make sure you are happy and that you are careful.” He pressed his cheek to the top of her head.

Ilaria knew exactly what he wanted to say, so she said it for him.

“I'm not pregnant, Max. Nor do I plan on it ever happening for me. Any hope of that ended...” she paused, swallowing suddenly on the lump that formed in her throat. “That ended a year ago.”

“Ilaria,” Maxim started, pulling back to look down into her eyes. The green she saw in his, reflected in her own. “You

cannot throw your life away because of that scum.”

Ilaria went rigid and spoke through clenched teeth. “I’m not throwing anything away. I loved him.”

“Dimitri betrayed us. How could you forget that?”

“I forget nothing,” she bit back, rising from her seat. “I see it flashing in my mind every night for the last year.”

Ilaria let out a shattering breath and closed her eyes. The images swirled behind her eyelids. She remembered the day she married Dimitri at eighteen, having never met him before that moment. She remembered standing with him in the church, making promises she didn’t even know she could keep. But Maxim quelled her fears, assuring her that this was the right choice. The only choice. The loyalty of Dimitri’s powerful family was something they needed to secure, and Maxim offered her up as payment for that loyalty.

She never thought she would fall in love with him. Dimitri made it easy. He was handsome with his dark hair and eyes, and the lazy smile that was usually found upon his lips. He wasn't like the rest of his ruthless family, or even the more ambitious members of court. He made her feel safe, protected, cherished even, as the years slowly passed. They talked of a future together, away from court, away from his family and hers. They talked of the children they would never share.

Not after he betrayed her trust. Betrayed Maxim.

Maxim’s judgment was swift and unrelenting. Ilaria hated him for a long time afterward. Until the pain in her heart

slowly started to turn to an empty numbness. Ilaria forgave Maxim for his decisions, even if she found it hard to accept. Though she tried to move forward, there was a part of her that wondered where everything had gone so wrong.

Ilaria sucked in a deep breath, forcing the air to fill her lungs. She didn't want to think about this anymore. She wanted to believe that she had gotten over Dimitri's betrayal. And yet, not even the passing of an entire year had managed to quash those feelings. Her love for him still beat in the bottom of her heart.

"Dimitri got what he deserved." The dark tone of Maxim's voice pulled her out of her own head.

Her eyes shot open and the words spilled out of her mouth before she could stop them. "He didn't deserve to die like that."

Maxim reached up to grab her hand again, but she snatched it away before he could. His lips pressed into a thin line.

"An example had to be made," he remarked slowly. "I never intended for it to bring you pain."

Ilaria let out a small chuckle. "If you didn't want to bring me pain, you wouldn't have made me watch as the life slowly drained from his eyes. If you didn't want to bring me pain, you wouldn't be here right now, reminding me of everything I lost. I had finally managed to put it behind me and—"

"And how exactly did you do that?" Maxim interrupted, surging to his feet to stand before her. "What was his name,

Ilaria?”

“Who?” she whispered, though she knew the answer. Her hands gripped the back of the settee until her knuckles turned white, holding on to it like it was her only lifeline.

“That guard you brought here tonight. The one who would have replaced your beloved Dimitri in the bed you shared?”

Ilaria struck Maxim across the face, the sound echoing in the now silent room. She gaped at him for a moment, the tingle still in her fingers.

Maxim growled much like an angered bear. “You do not hit me,” he snapped, reaching out and grabbing hold of her wrist.

Ilaria tried to pull her arm away, but the grip only tightened, his fingers digging into the soft skin.

“You’re hurting me,” she whispered.

“And you hurt me. After everything I have done for you, after I protected you all these years.” His tone was dark, his voice rough. He yanked her closer. “You will not do that again. If you choose to act like a child, I can treat you like one.”

Ilaria gaped up at him, unable to move. His grip switched from her wrist to her upper arm, and he pulled her in the direction of her bedchamber.

“Max, please, don’t!” Her plea fell on deaf ears.

He tossed her into her room and she landed hard on the floor. She refused to look at him, keeping her eyes fixed on the woodgrain beneath her.

“You will stay here and think of ways to earn my forgiveness,” he said before slamming the door shut.

The click of the lock was like a nail in a coffin. Her stomach twisted and churned as she fought the urge to lose her dinner.

Making Maxim angry was never a wise decision. But she was a grown woman of twenty-six; she would do as she pleased without feeling the need to ask for his permission. Though, she knew it was never going to be that easy. Not without Dimitri.

Dragging herself over to her bed, she buried herself underneath the blankets, clutching a pillow to her chest. Her tears soaked into the soft fabric. The last time Maxim had gotten that mad he'd locked her in her room for three days, only letting her out when he thought she was sufficiently repentant. But she couldn't think about that now. All she could think about was Dimitri and when she closed her eyes all she saw was the hollowness of his eyes—eyes which had always been so full of life.

When she finally had no more tears to cry, she crawled out and sat on the perimeter of the bed. Her feet dangled off the edge as she refused to look over to the other side.

Regardless of Maxim's accusations, none of her lovers ever got to share her bed. No one was ever going to occupy Dimitri's place. Instead, she had to find a way to keep on living without him. It was something Ilaria knew was easier said than done.

Ilaria shook her head. She had to stop thinking like this. She needed to push all these feelings that Maxim had dragged up back down where they belonged. Instead, she grabbed the book she had started the night before. Ilaria settled into the small bench by the window, pushing it open to let in some fresh air.

The book was left unread in her lap as she stared out into the night sky. The stars twinkled in the distance, and the moon was almost at its full brightness. She didn't know how long she sat there, staring out, until she finally forced herself to change and slide into bed.

CHAPTER TWO

The scream ripped from her throat; a name she hadn't spoken in almost five years ringing loud in her ears.

Ilaria bolted upright in bed, her hand clutching at her heaving chest as she fought to breathe. Her dark hair fell in a mess of curls around her face, sweat formed on her brow, and fresh tears burned the corners of her eyes.

“Antony.” His name was nothing more than a broken whisper.

Her hands shook violently, and all at once the room was too warm, too confining.

Ilaria jumped up and ran over to the window, yanking the curtains apart and shoving the panes out. The cool night air was such a sharp contrast to the heat of her skin that the fine hairs stood on end. She rested her forehead against the glass as the tears continued to run down her face, forcing out shaking sobs.

Ilaria couldn't even tell which way was up. Was this what it felt like to finally succumb to madness? To have the mind

crack into broken pieces?

She believed it was no more than a terrible recurring nightmare, but tonight it felt too real. It started almost a year ago—right after Dimitri's death. It started hazy, but with each subsequent time it appeared in her mind, the image became clearer and clearer.

She stood in the nave of a giant cathedral—one she didn't recognize—as it was swallowed whole by a blazing fire. For several months, she would wake up as the colorful glass of the rose window shattered. Two months ago, she saw the figure in the flames. However, she had always woke before he turned around.

Tonight, she finally got to see his face. Part of her always wanted to believe it was Dimitri, even if it made little sense for him to be in a cathedral that had turned to a raging inferno. But it wasn't Dimitri. It wasn't her dead husband.

It was Antony. Her brother; her twin.

Antony, who went missing five years ago. Antony, who left on a journey and never came home.

Ilaria never knew where he went. He refused to tell her before his departure, saying he would explain everything when he returned. He promised to come back to her; a reunion that was not to be.

Six months passed before Maxim called Ilaria into his personal study to break the news to her: Antony was dead. Or, at least, Maxim believed it to be true. A body was never

recovered. All that was found were a few charred bones where Antony was last known to be. If it hadn't been for Dimitri's strength, Ilaria didn't know how else that day would have ended.

In the five years since, a day hadn't passed where she didn't think of Antony. Missing his smiles, his laughs, his never-ending teasing; they were things she would never forget. In her heart, she wanted to believe he was alive out there somewhere.

But these nightmares—for they couldn't be anything other than a horrible manifestation of her subconscious—persisted. And somehow, now seeing what could have been his death struck like ice.

Ilaria shivered, the heated flush dissipating from her skin and the thin silk of her nightgown doing nothing to keep in any warmth. She leaned back against the wall, pulled her knees into her chest, and wrapped her arms around them, hiding her tear-stained face. Closing her eyes, the image of Antony before the flames was burned on the inside of her eyelids. She couldn't unsee it.

She should tell Maxim about these dreams, though she wondered about the wisdom of that action. There was always the chance that he wouldn't believe her; that he would think she was mad.

Maybe she was mad.

Maybe Maxim should have her sent off to some distant convent to live out the rest of her days in prayer and solitude. The idea wasn't initially unappealing. Though, it depended on

how generous Maxim felt that day, because it could either be a quiet convent or the asylum. Ilaria shuttered at the idea. But at only twenty-six years, there was still too much of her life still to live.

Ilaria didn't move from the window. She stayed there, huddled into a small ball, until the first rays of the sunrise filtered in through her window.

A knock at her bedroom door and the jiggle of the handle finally forced her to face reality once more. She frowned. Maxim wouldn't be back so soon, and even if it was, he wouldn't knock so softly.

“Little bird, let me in.”

Ilaria knew that voice. She jumped to her feet and, moving on shaking legs, ran to the door. She yanked on the door, but it was still locked.

“It's locked.” Her words came out pleading and desperate.

A key turned in the lock and she flung the door open.

“Sophie?” Ilaria whispered as if she was seeing a ghost.

The older woman smiled, holding her arms open. “I'm here, little bird.”

“Sophie!” Ilaria threw herself into the waiting arms, burying her hot face into the woman's shoulder.

The scent of lavender and lemon candies tickled her nose, and all the memories came flooding back. A lump formed in

her throat, and she had to fight back tears for the second time that morning. At least now they were happy tears.

Sophie pulled away first, grabbing Ilaria by the shoulders and appraising her at arm's length.

Ilaria suddenly felt like a child again, when Sophie would always make sure she looked like a proper lady. One of the very few people Ilaria could call a genuine friend, Sophie had been everything to her. First her nanny, then her governess, then her ladies' maid and personal confidante. There wasn't a memory they didn't share, and there were no secrets between them. Sophie had been like a mother to Ilaria. However, when Ilaria married Dimitri, Sophie decided that her time was done, and she quietly slipped into retirement.

Even seven years later, Sophie was exactly as Ilaria remembered. A tall, rather robust woman, Sophie was almost a head taller than Ilaria. Her hair might be a little greyer now, but it was still pulled back into a rather tight knot on the top of her head. A familiar faded blue shawl hung around her neck.

"You look unwell, little bird. Come, you will catch a cold," Sophie started with a deep frown. She wrapped her arm around Ilaria's shoulder and led her back into her bedchamber. Forcing her down into a chair, Sophie rummaged through the wardrobe.

Ilaria felt her lips twitch, but she still couldn't get herself to smile. Not yet. Though it felt like Sophie had never left.

"Wait!" Ilaria exclaimed, and Sophie popped her head out from behind the door. "If you are here, does that mean-"

A third voice called out from the other room. “Was this place always so dark and dreary?”

Sophie pulled out a thick, navy robe and held it open for Ilaria to slide into. “You really think Julian would have let me leave him out of all the fun?”

“I’ll have you know that I was perfectly content in retirement.”

Once she had the knot tied on her robe, Ilaria rushed back out to the sitting room.

Julian stood in the middle of the room, his familiar blue guard’s jacket stretched across broad shoulders, a pin of purple thistle in his lapel. He too was grayer, with the thick beard that graced his cheeks and long hair tied back, but his wide smile and the twinkle in his eyes was the same as she always remembered.

Ilaria crumbled to the floor, fresh tears streaming down her cheeks. This time from relief, rather than the sadness that had consumed her since she woke.

“What is this?” Julian asked, kneeling down by her side.

Sophie came to her other side and together they helped her off the floor and into a chair. When they went to step away, Ilaria grabbed each of their hands and gazed up into their aged faces— faces that were more familiar to her than her own parents’; a mother she never knew and a father who died young. Sophie and Julian were the ones who had been there for her.

Ilaria was eight when Sophie and Julian were married. Even though they never had children, Ilaria knew they loved her like their own.

“What are you doing here?” Ilaria finally managed to force out, wiping her tears with the sleeve of her robe.

“I invited them.” Maxim’s powerful voice echoed from the hallway. He stepped through the threshold, and instantly Sophie and Julian went stone stiff. “I was going to tell you last night.”

Ilaria frowned. “That would have saved us both a lot of grief.”


“Be that as it may,” Maxim started, crossing the room. He pinched her cheek. “You were being a brat.”

Ilaria yanked her head away and stuck her tongue out at him. Oh, if he wanted to call her a brat, she could act like one. Though, while she considered continuing to get a rise out of him, she thought better of it. Instead, she offered a quiet word of thanks.

Maxim gave a satisfactory noise and patted her on the head. He really could be so condescending. “Get dressed, we break our fast in half an hour. I have more news for you.”

Ilaria perked up and, despite her nightmares, she asked, “Is it good news?”

Maxim gave a smirk. “It could be.”

image-placeholder

The hall to Maxim's private rooms was not far from her own. It was a walk she was all too familiar with, whether she was a frightened child looking for an ounce of comfort from a brother who barely cared or as an adult when she was summoned. Every detail of this hall was etched into her memory. From the smooth dark marble beneath her feet to the golden chandeliers that hung overhead, and the hundreds of candles that twinkled off the hanging crystals. The one wall was a series of floor to ceiling windows that, when opened, let in a fresh breeze and ample light.

They hadn't been opened yet that morning. It was still very early, Ilaria realized, as the hallway was bare, aside from her and Julian, who stood dutifully behind her shoulder. It was a comfort to have him there again, like when a warm spring breeze comes to melt away a winter chill. After everything she had lost over the last couple of years, it was nice to finally feel like she was getting a piece of it back.

Julian knocked on the door for her, and Maxim called out. Julian gave her shoulder a comforting squeeze as she slid past.

"Call if you need anything," he murmured, for her ears only.

Maxim's private office wasn't as large as the one he used for public gatherings; it was only for family and those particularly close to him. Tall, wooden shelves lined the walls filled with books, antiques, and other random objects that he felt the need to display. The curtains were drawn back but the windows were unopened, and a small fire burned in the hearth. Maxim himself sat behind his desk, a rather large monstrosity

that took up more room than it should, and which was covered in all sorts of papers: letters, petitions, correspondence, orders, and the like. Ilaria pitied his secretary, though Master Piotr was a foul man himself.

“Good, you’re here.” Maxim grabbed a small stack of papers beside him and motioned for her to sit.

A small table had been set before the fire, a covered tray and a tea service at the center of it. Ilaria made herself comfortable in the chair opposite Maxim, and went about preparing them each a cup of tea: hers with extra sugar and his without. She handed him his cup as he pulled the lid off the food. Ilaria pulled a few grapes from their stem and dropped them on her plate before snatching the nearest bun covered in honey and nuts. She might not have been that hungry, but she never said no to sweets.

Maxim gave a rough chuckle with a shake of his head. “Like I would take that from you.”

“Good, because these are my favorite.” Ilaria took an indecently large bite, washing it down with her tea. “What is it you wanted to tell me, Max? I’m sure you didn’t just invite me here to butter me up with sweets.”

“Hardly,” Maxim replied. He dropped the stack of papers on the table beside them and rubbed a hand against his brow. “We have avoided talking about this for a year, but I think now we need to put the past behind us and move forward. You are my heir, Ilaria, whether or not either of us wants to admit it. With

Antony gone and Dimitri not fathering a child by you, it is all we have.”

Ilaria leaned back in her chair, slowly sipping her tea and glaring at him over the rim. “And what other inadequacies of mine would you like to bring up in one morning?”

“It’s an oversight on my part, I admit, that I have not allowed you more opportunities.”

“You know what really could solve your problem, Max?” Ilaria waited until he tilted his head with a frown. “Get married.”

Maxim let out a bark of laughter. “You know that is not possible.”

“It’s possible, you just don’t want to. Regardless, we are in the situation we are in, and there is no changing that. So, what is this about opportunities?”

Ilaria liked the idea of being able to do something, to feel useful and like she had a purpose again. Yes, she had her standard charities and events she enjoyed frequenting, but this was different. She could feel it.

Maxim set his cup aside and tapped the stack of papers. “The Chieftain of Clan Ulrich has decided to step down as his health is failing. Clan Ulrich has this arcane way of choosing new Chieftains outside of a certain established hierarchy, unlike the rest of us, so there is no way of telling who will be picked.”

Ilaria tried to rack her memory of what she remembered about Clan Ulrich; it wasn't much, except that they were located closer to the sea. All of the Five Clans were connected, even if they each maintained a certain level of self-government and their own respective militaries. They answered to each other, forming councils and Tribunals as needed. Though, Ilaria didn't recall a gathering within the last ten years or so.

“What does this have to do with me?” Ilaria asked, taking another bite of her sugared bun.

“I'm sending you as my proxy.”

Ilaria almost choked. “What?”

“In two weeks, Clan Ulrich will have a ball to announce and celebrate their new Chieftain. I want you there to represent our Clan.” The seriousness of Maxim's words was not lost on her.

“You trust me with this?” Ilaria asked, her mind spinning. This was the first time he trusted her with anything of this magnitude. But he was right; she was his heir. She needed to prove she could do these things. Besides, how hard would it be to go to Clan Ulrich anyway?

Maxim reached across the table and squeezed her hand. “I have to. I cannot go myself, and this will be a good chance for you to assume some responsibilities. Prove to me you can do this.”

Ilaria felt a small smile touching her lips, the first in what felt like forever.

“I won't let you down.”

CHAPTER THREE

Sweat poured down the back of his neck despite the cool wind blowing off the water. His legs strained from the uneven terrain, the muscles in his thighs and calves protesting from the effort.

Sebastian hated running in sand. He would take jagged rocks over sand any day. At least then he would have surer footing. Sand just got everywhere, and he had at least a pound in each boot. He long thought of stopping to yank them off, but he shuddered at the thought of wet sand between his toes. No, he'd rather suffer.

His quarry was no more than twenty yards ahead of him, and he'd be damned if something as stupid as sand slowed him down. His long, lean legs ate up the distance between them. Sebastian wrapped an arm around her waist, and she gave an undignified squeak. He chuckled as he tossed the small girl over his shoulder.

“Uncle Bash!” she cried, pounding her fists against his back. “You cheated!”

“If you hadn’t looked back so much, you wouldn’t have slowed down,” he reminded her.

She huffed. “Your legs are too long.”

Sebastian laughed, hoisting her up to sit on his shoulders. “You’ll be able to outrun me eventually, Isobel.”

Isobel folded her arms and rested them on top of his head. “When I’m too big for you to carry.”

“Until then, you better hold on tight!”

Sebastian took off down the beach from whence they came. Isobel gave an excited giggle as they jogged back up the hill towards her mother. She held her arms out like a bird and pretended she was flying, with her long golden hair streaming behind her. It only made Sebastian chuckle further.

He deposited the girl back to the ground, who quickly asked her mother if she could go looking for seashells.

“Just stay where I can see you, darling.” No sooner were the words spoken, and Isobel dashed off towards the sea line again.

Sebastian collapsed on the blanket and immediately went to pull his boots off to remove the unwanted sand.

“You really didn’t have to indulge her, you know.”

“I can’t say no to her, Johanna,” Sebastian replied, dumping out the sand.

He reached for an apple from the nearby basket and leaned back on his elbows. The late afternoon sun was warm against

his already tanned skin as it glistened off the sea. Sebastian reached up, running his fingers through dark blonde tresses. Salt hung heavy in the air, and he filled his lungs with it. There was nothing he enjoyed more. So, when his niece had asked for him to take her on this excursion, he wasn't going to deny her. Johanna deciding to accompany them was also a welcome addition. He would only be home until nightfall anyway, before he had to be back at his ship.

“You do realize, this could have been your life,” Johanna commented. Sebastian felt her eyes burning into the side of his head.

Johanna was more than his brother's wife. She was nineteen when she had hidden out in the cargo hold of his ship for three days before anyone found her. Johanna refused to leave, and pleaded with Sebastian for a position. Something he agreed to reluctantly, but she had proved to be a valuable asset. Within three years she had moved up the ranks, becoming his first mate. The affair that followed almost caused a mutiny that Sebastian was lucky to subdue.

Sebastian bit into his apple to keep from responding right away. He knew she was right, but it just wasn't in the cards for them.

“The love you deserved was not the love I could give,” Sebastian finally admitted.

“Because you're dead and soulless on the inside,” Johanna quipped. “Do you think you are incapable of love?”

Sebastian snorted, taking another bite of apple. "I love Isobel. I love Rudolf. I love you like a sister. I love my ship. Do those things not count?"

"No. Will you ever marry? And don't you dare say you are married to the sea again." Johanna shot him an accusatory look.

"I'm hardly in one place for any length of time," Sebastian said with a shrug. He finished his apple and chucked the core away. "Besides, there are few who meet my expectations."

"You mean, who will follow your rules? You forget that I know them. Maybe I could be more useful to you."

"If you are going to offer to play matchmaker, the answer is no."

"You really are no fun," Johanna pouted.

Sebastian shook his head as he stood, brushing away the last of any stray sand. "I will say goodbye to Isobel before I am on my way. Rudolf will want to see me before I depart, and I'll save the messenger the trouble of trying to find me."

Johanna followed suit, standing beside him and watching where her daughter played in the sand. "Do you think the Council will have made their choice?"


A certain sense of dread crept up Sebastian's chest, the same dread that he'd felt ever since his brother announced his resignation a week ago. Rudolf had been a great Chieftain, at least in Sebastian's eyes. Loyal, fair, and even tempered, Rudolf had served them well. But Rudolf's health was waning,

a fact that Sebastian sometimes chose to ignore. An old injury that persisted and would not leave Rudolf in peace. Sebastian didn't blame him for wanting to retire; to spend more time with his wife and daughter. His only fear was who the Council would select to take Rudolf's place. Rudolf's leadership had always allowed Sebastian a certain sense of freedom to come and go as he pleased, and to run his ship as he saw fit. He had a fleeting worry that the autonomy he joyed would be at risk, but he doubted Rudolf would allow such a thing to happen.

Sebastian ran a hand through his hair. "I doubt they have. You know how the Council is, they can never make up their mind. If anything, they will wait until the ball to make any formal decisions. It would be like them to wait until the last minute."

Johanna hummed lightly. "I suppose you're right."

With that, Sebastian took his leave, bidding Isobel and Johanna a good day before heading back to the fortress on the beach. He wanted this meeting with Rudolf done quickly so he could get back to his ship.

image-placeholder

Sebastian felt like he couldn't breathe, as the wine caught in his throat and he sputtered in an attempt not to choke. He couldn't tell if he wanted to laugh or cry or throw up from a combination of the two. His heart hammered so loudly, he could feel it pulsating in his ears.

“Say that one more time,” Sebastian said, setting the wine glass down on the desk before he managed to snap the stem.

Rudolf gazed at him from the other side of his desk with an amused look. Sebastian resisted the urge to smack it from his smug face.

“The Council voted this afternoon, and unanimously elected you as our new Chieftain.” The pride in his voice was not lost on Sebastian.

“How is that possible? I mean, I know how the process works, but how did my name even get brought up? You couldn’t have nominated me, since we are family and that goes against all the bylaws.” Sebastian knew he was rambling, but he couldn’t wrap his mind around this new revelation.

Rudolf’s smile widened. “I’m glad you already know the bylaws.”

Sebastian groaned, burying his face in his hands. “That’s not the point. Who spoke my name, so I know who I have to personally maim?”

Rudolf leaned his elbows on the table. “Frederick Gunrich, the High Chancellor-”

“What?” Sebastian interrupted. “He’s never liked me.”

“Will you shut up and let me finish? There was also Otto Schmidt, Master of Coin and Josef Bauer, Commander General. Outside of the Council, you were named by Mathias, your first mate, and well, your entire crew really. Believe me, I

was as surprised as you. But I know in my heart, Bash, that you were made for this.”

Sebastian jerked his head up, hearing his childhood nickname on his brother’s lips. A cold chill ran down his spine and a sense of dread quickly followed. He needed air, he needed time. Sebastian went to the window and pulled the panes open to let in the evening air.

“Rudolf, I’m not cut out for this,” Sebastian muttered.

Rudolf rose from his chair, leaning heavily on the walking stick at his side. The stick clunked hard on the floor as he made his way over to his brother. Rudolf laid a hand on Sebastian's shoulder.

“You can and you will. I know this was not what you had anticipated, or even what you wanted. But there are so many who believe you can, who believe in you. They see the way you run your ship and your business. They see the love you have for your people and your land. They see the love you have for me, for our family.” The conviction ran thick through Rudolf’s words. He gave a tight squeeze. “Besides, I’m simply retiring. I’m not dying, at least not anytime soon. I will still be here to help you if you need it.”

Sebastian snorted. “I’m going to need all the help I can get.”

“Does that mean you will accept?” Rudolf grinned.

Sebastian let out a heavy breath and rubbed the back of his neck. “I cannot fight the will of the Council.”

“You could,” Rudolf chuckled.

“And be ostracized for the rest of my life and into the next? No, thank you. But I need some time to wrap my head around this. I came here to say goodbye before I left on a shipping venture to Clan Drakos. I must fulfill that obligation before I can do anything else. I hope you understand.”

“Of course. Nothing will be announced until next week. You have my word, so take the time to tie up whatever loose ends you might have.”

Sebastian embraced Rudolf tightly, thumping a hand on the other man’s back. Rudolf returned the gesture. “Thank you.”

Sebastian took his leave from Rudolf shortly thereafter. He was still convinced he was going to be sick; that this all was some twisted joke or nightmare. But he knew this was not an announcement Rudolf would take lightly, and all Sebastian could be grateful for was that it was done in private. The sooner he was back on his ship, the better off he would be. He needed to put as much space between him and this situation as possible. A week out in the open air was exactly what he needed.

Sebastian made the trip down to the docks in record time. As soon as he boarded, he started barking orders to prepare to sail out on the next high tide. It was as if he never left. This is what home felt like—the large ship with its massive white sails and the miles of ropes hanging down. The ship had belonged to him for almost fifteen years. It was more a home to him than any house ever was. The crew changed over the years, but the feeling of completeness that Sebastian felt with

the wooden boards beneath his feet was incomparable. He took the stairs two at a time as he made his way up to the quarterdeck, where his first mate, Mathias, was waiting for him.

“Say a word, and I will filet you alive,” Sebastian hissed.

Mathias chuckled, leaning against the ship’s wheel and pushing his knit cap out of his eyes. “They made a decision, I take it.”

“Apparently, I have you to thank for at least a part of it.” Sebastian punched Mathias hard in the arm, but it was shrugged off.

Mathias grinned, displaying the large gap where one of his front teeth should have been. Sebastian remembered trying to get his friend out of the drunken brawl, but not in time to avoid losing the tooth.

“You got it then?”

Sebastian shot him a hard look, crossing his arms over his broad chest. “And if I did, I’m not allowed to say anything, and neither are you. Not a word until next week. Promise me.”

Mathias held one hand over his heart and the other up in the air. “May I be struck down by lightning if I breathe a word.”

“Good. Now,” Sebastian paused, clapping his hands together. “We sail on the next tide. I want to be away from this place as fast as we can. I trust you have this under control and if you need me, I’ll be in my cabin.”

Sebastian turned to head down to the Captain’s quarters.

“Shall we expect two nights of lonely violin music then, Captain?” Mathias called at Sebastian’s back, followed by a hardy laugh.

Sebastian scowled but refrained from answering.

His cabin was located right under the quarterdeck on the back of the ship. He loved his cabin; his favorite part easily being the large, glass windows that allowed him a clear view. Everything was made of dark polished wood from the floor to the ceiling. His bed was tucked away in a corner, surrounded by curtains of heavy burgundy brocade. Several other pieces of furniture were scattered about the space. Otherwise, there was a large table before the window with stacks of maps, correspondence, invoices, and the like. Sebastian was meticulous about the organization of his desk and the possessions he kept there. He had seen too many who just threw things around and then wondered why they couldn’t find anything.

Sebastian considered doing some work initially, but decided against it. He was still too distracted to be of any good use in that endeavor. Instead, despite not wanting to prove Mathias right, he found his violin where he had left it on a chair. The instrument was familiar in his hands. It had been a gift from his mother years ago— she was one of the few who believed in his talents and encouraged him to cultivate them.

Sebastian kept mostly to himself for the next three days, until they reached the port of Clan Drakos. Not that he should have been stewing for that long. He kept his mind busy with

the business of his ship, and kept his body exhausted by climbing the riggings and running the decks. Anything to distract himself from his immediate future. Though, he did spend most nights playing lonely violin songs, much to Mathias's amusement. But his crew appreciated his music.

Standing on the deck, staring out at the bustle of the dock, Sebastian intended to try to find something to amuse himself; a distraction. There were only so many days of freedom he had left, so he might as well enjoy himself. Besides, he could only lock himself away in his cabin for so long. He surveyed the bustle down on the dock, not sure of what he was looking for.

Then he spotted her. Her shining dark hair was swept up and off of the elegant curve of her neck, a stark contrast to the smooth ivory of her skin. From his higher vantage point, he couldn't discern the color of her eyes, but he could certainly appreciate her ample curves.

Yes, she would be the perfect distraction.

CHAPTER FOUR

The harbormaster was a portly fellow with an otherwise non-cheery disposition. His waistcoat was too tight around the middle, his hat was perched at an awkward angle atop his balding head, and he tapped his dirty boots against the dock. In his hand, he stared at the gold pocket watch with a frown.

“I don’t know what to tell you, miss, but that ship sailed over an hour ago.”

Ilaria clenched her jaw and flexed her fingers. What she wouldn’t give to wrap her hands around his pudgy neck.

“Maybe you misheard me. I have passage booked on the Granorth, which was scheduled to depart two hours from now. What do you mean, it’s already sailed?”

The harbormaster snapped his watch shut. “I’m sorry, miss, but you’ll have to find passage elsewhere. As you can see, that ship isn’t here.”

Ilaria growled under her breath. This was ridiculous! Maxim had assured her that the ship would be here, and that he had

paid a handsome sum for her to be on it. They decided discretion was the best course of action, since Ilaria didn't want to draw undue notice to herself, so she traveled without an entourage. She had only Sophie and Julian in tow to make sure she was safe and presentable. She rarely left the castle as it was, so she highly doubted she would be immediately recognized. She didn't want the attention anyway, since all she wanted to do was the job Maxim tasked her with to prove that she was capable.

Ilaria wasn't going to go crawling back since she lost her transportation. She refused to do that. Her pride wouldn't allow it. Instead, she was just going to have to find another ship that was going to get her to Clan Ulrich. She made a note in her head to tell Maxim to have this harbormaster fired, since he was clearly inept at his job.

Ilaria plastered a fake smile on her face and said, through semi-clenched teeth, "Are you aware of any others going in that direction?"

The harbormaster shoved his watch in his pocket and pulled out a grimy piece of paper, which he glanced at for less than a second. "Not until next week."

There was a split second where she thought she might punch the man for being utterly useless while invoking her brother's name— Maxim's name was feared across all of the Five Clans.

Her mouth opened to say just that when she caught sight of another man over the harbormaster's shoulder. She was sure

she had never seen anyone like him before. From his richly tanned skin to the way his jacket stretched over broad shoulders, the hard cut of his square jaw and his aquiline nose. More importantly, the swathe of cloth draped around his chest and hanging off one shoulder —they were Clan Ulrich colors—a deep, dark burgundy and a dove gray.

“Clearly, you are as blind as you are stupid,” Ilaria hissed. She pushed past the harbormaster until she came face to face with the man from Clan Ulrich.

He was taller than she anticipated, now that he stood before her. She craned her neck up to stare into his face; a half smirk twitched at his lips, and an unreadable expression graced his eyes. They reminded her of the sea after a storm—blue, grey and turbulent.

“Can I help you with something, miss?” he asked. His language was smooth and even, with an unmistakable resonance and a thick accent.

Ilaria gestured to the material at his shoulder. “You are of Clan Ulrich?”

“I am.”

“And you have a ship?”

“I do.”

“Are you taking passengers?”

“Depends on who is asking.” He sounded almost amused by her questions.

“For myself and my companions.” Ilaria paused to gesture to Sophie and Julian, who were waiting a little way away with their luggage. “Our previous passage left before we arrived, and we need to get to Clan Ulrich. We can pay.”

Ilaria reached into the pocket of her dress and pulled out her coin purse. It was only a small fraction of the allowance Maxim had sent with her, but she knew it would be more than sufficient. Most people didn't see this much money in a year, let alone all at once. However, she didn't care. She needed to be on the man's ship back to Clan Ulrich.

It also didn't hurt that he was easily the most attractive man she had seen in years. There was something about his bearing; his commanding presence, that struck her. Something about the way he regarded her with such clear interest and intrigue. No one had looked at her like that since Dimitri. All her other lovers since, she had persuaded. If she played her cards right, maybe this voyage wouldn't be as boring as she had originally anticipated.

Ilaria tossed the money to him, which he caught deftly in one hand. He pulled the strings open and stared into it, his brow furrowed together. He extracted a couple of coins, feeling their weight in his hand.

“This is all gold.”

“Will it be sufficient for passage for the three of us?” Ilaria persisted.

He let out a small chuckle, slipping the coins back into the pouch and tying it to his belt. “That would be enough for you

to have the Captain's quarters.”

Ilaria smirked, stepping closer to him and running her hands over the lapels of his jacket. Even through the material, she could feel the warmth of his skin. “Will the Captain still be present?”

His responding grin was almost dazzling. “It could be arranged.”

“Does the Captain have a name?” she asked, biting her lower lip. It was a cheap move, but one that couldn't be resisted.

He leaned down and whispered in her ear, “Sebastian, though Captain would suffice. Does the lady have a name?”

Thankfully, Ilaria had an answer on the tip of her tongue. She had spent several nights trying to figure out how to answer this question without giving away who she really was.


“You can call me Aria.”

“Like the song?” he asked, his lips still by her ear and a note of amusement in his tone. “Maybe I'll make you sing, pretty girl.”

“Is that a challenge, Captain?” Ilaria felt her heart pounding in her chest and a flush creeping up the back of her neck.

Sebastian straightened up and offered her his arm. “It's a promise. Now, introduce me to your companions and we will be on our way.”

Ilaria took his arm as they went over to Sophie and Julian. The feel of the muscled forearm underneath her hand was an indication that this was not a man to be trifled with. Ilaria liked trifling though, and she had a sense of excitement; she hadn't had any real fun in a long time. She would see if he lived up to his promises.

image-placeholder

Ilaria stood at the railing of the ship, staring out over the endless stretch of blue. The wind whipped some of the loose strands of hair into her face, but she didn't care. The beginnings of a smile crossed her face as she closed her eyes, breathing in the salty sea air.

She had never felt freer.

There was something about being on the open water. No rooms, no walls; nothing but the sound of the waves crashing against the hull and the snap of the sails in the wind. The sun slowly set along a pale horizon, casting shadows over the deck. She had never been out to sea before, and had only ventured to the docks a small handful of times. Maxim didn't really allow her to go much of anywhere, so standing on a ship with the wind in her hair was an indescribable feeling. She almost didn't want it to end.

A small sigh escaped her as Julian joined her at the railing. He leaned his forearms against the wood, staring out.

"I'm surprised you are not feeling unwell," Julian commented.

Ilaria filled her lungs with more salty air. “Me too. Considering that a carriage usually makes my stomach turn. There is something different about being out here.”

“I remember when you were nine and you insisted on me taking you out on the lake.”

While Julian chuckled at the memory, Ilaria grimaced. “I threw up on your shoes after ten minutes and you had to carry me back to the palace.”

Julian scratched the beard on his chin. “You’ve grown since then.”

Ilaria nudged her shoulder against his. “I would hope so. Enough about me, how is Sophie faring?”

Julian frowned. They had barely gotten out of port by the time Sophie started to turn a sickly shade of green. While Ilaria found the rocking and swaying of the ship comforting, Sophie did not. She was violently ill an hour later.

Sebastian then unceremoniously threw his first mate out of his own room, ordering him to give the space to Sophie and Julian. Mathias had grumbled, but acquiesced once he caught sight of Sophie. Sebastian explained that it was the only other room, besides his own, that had a bed fixed to the wall instead of a hammock, which would only swing more. It was also more in the middle of the ship and much closer to the water, so the sway should be lessened as well. Ilaria was touched by his thoughtfulness, even if it was out of necessity.

“She’s finally resting. Fritz, the ship’s medic, has this concoction of peppermint, ginger, and black horehound. Seems to have helped,” Julian said.

“Wickedly potent stuff,” Sebastian interjected, joining the pair by the railing. He leaned a hip against it. “But I’ve never come across anything that has worked as well as that. Just don’t ask him for a headache remedy. You’ll find yourself asleep for two days.”

Julian hummed in thought. “That might not be bad for her.”

“How long will the voyage be?” Ilaria asked, turning to Sebastian.

“We sail against the tide. Three days if the wind stays behind us. Four if we have to fight it.”

Four days would get Ilaria to Clan Ulrich only the night before the ball. She had hoped to arrive sooner. Clan Ulrich was famed for their beaches, and she wanted to be able to spend some time there, to be able to see the long stretches of white sand and dip her toes into the crystal-clear waters. She tried to not let the disappointment show on her face. Instead, she gave a stiff nod.

“Thank you, Captain.”

Sebastian tilted his head as he regarded her, but didn’t remark on it.

Julian cleared his throat. “If you will excuse me, I’m going to return to Sophie.”

“I will have something to eat brought down for the both of you,” Sebastian said.

Julian thanked him and shot Ilaria a quick look. She returned it with a small smile to reassure Julian that she would be okay. Normally, she would not be out of his sight, but he worried for his wife, something Ilaria completely understood and didn't hold against him. Besides, having him over her shoulder would hinder her fun.

Sebastian continued to lean against the railing. He had long discarded his colors and jacket. The crisp white shirt was open at the throat, with a couple extra buttons undone and the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. Ilaria's fingers itched to run them through the sprinkling of hair upon his chest. But she forced her attention to the black markings on his powerful forearms.

“Are there any others or just the ones on your arms?” she asked as she traced a finger over the twisting lines up his arm.

His grin was wolfish, and the heat flashed in his eyes. “You'll just have to wait and find out, won't you? Now, will you join me for dinner?”

Ilaria agreed, suddenly feeling hungrier than she realized. She took his offered arm, his skin warm beneath her fingers as he led her down into his cabin.

The Captain's quarters were located at the rear of the ship. Ilaria felt him watching her as she took in his personal space. Everything was clean and orderly, not even a single paper out of place. Her travel trunk had already been brought in and

rested against a far wall. She walked around the room, taking it all in; from the dark wood to the heavy fabrics, and the astonishing view from the glass windows that took up almost the entirety of the back wall.

Ilaria spotted the small violin that rested upon a chair.

“Do you play?” she asked, gesturing to the instrument.

Sebastian shrugged, barely looking up from where he was pouring them each a glass of wine. “I dabble.”

She wondered what it would be like to see him play it. Her heart did a little flip when she caught sight of the piano in a far corner. It was a small upright that was bolted to the floor and the wall so it wouldn't move when the ship did. She ran her fingers over the ivory keys, feeling Sebastian's eyes burning into her back.

“Do you play?” He mimicked her question.

Ilaria felt a true smile on her face. It was one of the few things that genuinely made her happy. Having spent almost twenty years mastering her craft, she liked to think she was quite skilled. She had a talent that she hadn't known she possessed when she started playing at eight years of age. But time and practice had honed her skills. Dimitri had loved to listen to her play. Her fingers aligned with the keys, striking a soft chord.

“I dabble,” she replied.

Sebastian came up beside her, offering her the pewter goblet. “Maybe we can dabble together one of these nights.”

“I would like that.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Watching her eat was a mistake.

Sebastian leaned back in his chair, nursing his glass of wine with the intention of slacking his thirst. However, it was not to be. The way she pursed her lips to blow on the soup before she ate it. The way she licked it from her spoon, her tongue sneaking out to slowly lick away any traces. What he wouldn't do to feel those lips and that tongue wrapped around his—

He cleared his throat with a shake of his head. He needed to get himself together, but the tightness in the front of his pants was almost distracting.

“Something the matter, Captain?” she asked, peering up at him and again licking the damn spoon. But now she was leaning forward over her bowl, the expanse of her cleavage on full display.

“Nothing at all.” Sebastian was thankful his voice didn't waver. He felt like a damned teenager. Worse, he felt like a horny teenager. He was a grown man of almost thirty-six; one

little girl licking a spoon wasn't going to be enough to break his cool. "How are you enjoying the soup?"

"It's very good. Your cook is clearly talented." She licked the spoon again.

Sebastian had half a mind to steal it from her. "Mark likes to experiment, especially when he has a willing audience. The men will eat pretty much anything that is hot. I, on the other hand, am probably his biggest critic, so he's always trying to find ways to impress me. He knows this is a personal favorite."

"I can see why. Thank you for sharing it with me," she replied.

Sebastian chuckled. "It's not like I was going to let you starve. You paid handsomely for your room and board."

She nudged the now empty bowl toward the center of the table, resting her elbows on it and then her chin on her folded hands. Her blue-green eyes seemed to twinkle with a mischief Sebastian found intriguing. "I suppose I did. And I also believe I paid for the pleasure of your company."

A slow grin spread across his face. "That comes free of charge. I am not in the habit of paying for a woman's company, nor will I accept."

"Good, neither do I. We are two consenting adults, who are fully capable of making such decisions for ourselves. Shall we discuss terms?" She reached for her wine, sitting back in her chair and holding the cup in one hand.

Sebastian raised a brow, sipping from his own drink. While this practice was nothing new to him and something he always preferred, he was usually the one to initiate the conversation. He found a new respect for her that he hadn't been expecting. Sebastian liked to have his expectations out on the table, and it was nice to be getting hers back so freely.

“Ladies first.”

She leaned back in her chair, taking a slow drink from her cup. “This only lasts until we reach port, at which time, I will be on my way, and you can go yours. Whatever happens between us stays within these four walls. I will not be the subject of gossip among your crew to be overheard by my own companions. I will not share a bed with you, meaning we will not lie together, nor will we actually sleep together. Any other surface is permissible. You will do everything in your power not to release inside of me, for fairly obvious reasons. Aside from that and spit, you will keep all other bodily fluids to yourself.” She paused with a faint smile, her thumb running over her lower lip.

“Is that all?” Sebastian asked with a hint of humor. Most of her expectations were rather standard, in his opinion, except for the thing about the bed. That, he found a little odd, but he wasn't going to push her on it. Besides, sex anywhere other than a bed was more exciting anyway. A flash of her bent over the very table that separated them crossed through his mind. That would do.

“Why? Too much or too little?”

Sebastian didn't immediately respond. Instead, he moved to stand behind her chair so he could whisper again in her ear.

"You do realize you have given me permission to have you whatever way I want, almost wherever I want." He ran his fingers along the curve of her jaw, turning her face toward his. Their lips were only a hair's breadth away, his nose brushing up against the side of hers. But he didn't kiss her yet, no matter how much he wanted to. "I have conditions of my own."

She pulled back enough to look into his eyes. "Go ahead."

Sebastian held her captive in his gaze and even sensed her suddenly erratic breathing. "In this room, there is only you and me. You will give yourself to me unreservedly, knowing I will take care of you. Knowing that your pleasure is as important, if not more so, than my own. You will follow my commands. Your obedience will be rewarded, and your dissent will be punished. I will not do anything you don't like, and if I do, you will tell me without hesitation. I give you this word: sand, and once uttered, everything stops. Do you understand?" He paused long enough to see her nod. "Use your words, pretty girl."

"I understand."


No sooner were the words spoken, he kissed her. Something he had been wanting to do since he saw her on the docks. The soft glide of her lips beneath his sent a wave of desire right to his groin. He groaned, deepening their kiss, teasing her lips apart with the tip of his tongue.

She twisted out of her seat to stand front of him. Her hands fisted in his shirt, pulling him closer. He buried a hand in the hair at the nape of her neck. The other he trailed over her shoulder and down her side to rest on her hip. She was soft and curvy beneath his hand, fitting against the hard planes of his body.

She let out a shattered gasp when he took a couple of steps forward, pushing her back against the table and pressing the full length of his body against hers. Sebastian broke their kiss, resting his forehead against hers, her breasts heaving with every breath where they touched.

His fingers tightened in her hair, and he lightly ground his rock-hard cock against her stomach.

“Do you feel how hard you make me?” he asked, his voice deep and raspy with unveiled desire. He pressed a line of open-mouthed kisses along the side of her neck, nipping at her collarbone. He tugged on the sleeve of her dress, but it would not budge. “Let’s get you out of this. These are your first instructions, pretty girl. Go stand in front of the bedpost, your back to the room and your hands on the post.”

image-placeholder

Ilaria found her feet moving before she could fully process what he had instructed. She crossed the room in haste and wrapped her hands around the wood of the bedpost. Never had she been ordered around in the bedroom. If anything, she was usually the one giving orders. The thrill of being the one to

have to obey sent a shiver down her spine and pooled in a heat in the base of her stomach. The confidence to which Sebastian held himself made her want to know more of what he was capable of.

A rustle of fabric and the heavy thud of something hitting the floor made her start. She went to turn her head, but was stopped by Sebastian chuckling behind her.

“Already tempting fate?” he asked. “Eyes forward.” His voice was suddenly very close.

Boots, she realized. He must have taken off his boots, otherwise she would have heard the heels against the floor alerting her that he was approaching. Instead, she felt him behind her. His hands were gentle, despite the calluses on his fingertips—no doubt from ship rope and violin strings—as he ever so slowly slipped open each tiny button. It was agony at the pace he went, until the last button at the small of her back was opened. He moved the dress forward enough to kiss the top of a newly bared shoulder.

“Arms.” He didn’t need to say more.

Ilaria removed her hands long enough to slip them out of her sleeves before grasping the bedpost again. The dress fell to the floor in a heap of purple velvet, leaving her in nothing more than her corset and thin slip. Sebastian next went to the lacings of her corset, pulling the ribbons free. He had barely touched her, and she felt like her entire body was on fire. She resisted the temptation to rub her thighs together to relieve some of the building tension. Instead, Ilaria focused on her

breathing to keep from panting. A low moan escaped her when the corset joined the dress on the floor. His hands went to her hair, pulling out all the pins that held its heavy weight in place. The dark mass tumbled freely around her shoulders and to the middle of her back.

Sebastian buried his nose in her hair. His breath was hot against the side of her neck as his hand snaked around to slide across her cleavage and into the slip. Those rough fingers teased her aching nipples, rolling the hard points with his thumb. Ilaria arched her back with a soft groan until he was cupping the fullness of her breast. Sebastian's other hand came into her vision, the black ribbon from her corset wrapped around it.

“What do you suppose we can do with this? Maybe we'll wrap it around that pretty throat of yours. Maybe we'll tie up your wrists so you can't touch.” He grazed his teeth over her shoulder. “What will it be?”

Ilaria was certain she was going to come undone by the sound of his voice alone. She wasn't used to this delicious kind torture. With the guards she played with, she was in charge. She called the shots. More times than not, all she had to do was push up her skirt and pull down their pants. It was unnerving to be standing before Sebastian in nothing more than her slip, knowing full well that it was going to be coming off soon as well.

“Please,” she pleaded, even if she didn't know what she was asking for. She needed to be touched, she needed to be kissed.

She needed to feel the hard length of him press up against her and deep inside her.

She felt his smile against her skin. He reached up and took hold of her hands, pulling them away from the bedpost. The straps of her slip slid from her shoulders. The ribbon was around her wrists in an instant and when Ilaria gave a small tug, she knew they weren't coming free. Sailor's knots. They could be untied in a heartbeat, but wouldn't unravel no matter how hard she tried.

Sebastian spun her around, and with two fingers under her chin, tilted her face up to meet his. Ilaria felt her mouth go dry. She knew he had lost his boots, but he had lost his shirt as well. He stood before her in nothing more than his trousers. The tattoos on his arms extended up to the top of his broad shoulders. A light dusting of coarse blonde hair covered his muscled chest and down over his flat stomach, disappearing into the waistband of his pants. What she wouldn't have done to follow that path down with her tongue.

“You thought I was going to be a quick fuck, didn't you, pretty girl?” He trailed his thumb over her lower lip and she sucked it into her mouth. She caught the flare of desire in his stormy eyes and wrapped her tongue around his finger. “I saw the way you licked that spoon. I know you wanted it to be my cock. Is that what you want, pretty girl? To suck my cock?” She moaned around his finger.

Ilaria didn't expect her teasing with the spoon would go this far or get him this riled up. But it was exciting. Sebastian took

his thumb back with a soft pop.

“Is that what you want, Captain?” she taunted him back.
“You want me on my knees?”

Sebastian growled, his hand wrapping around her throat. He simply placed it there without imposing any pressure. For a second, Ilaria thought she had finally pushed him too far. Her breathing intensified as he stared down into her eyes. Sebastian pressed his nose to the side of her neck. Ilaria was so focused on him up near her face that she almost jumped when she felt his fingers slipping between her legs. She felt a flush creep over her cheeks. She knew what he would find there, as she was aroused to the point of distraction.

His finger trailed through her wetness, his thumb skimming across her throbbing clit. The tip of one finger teased her opening as his thumb continued to circle. Ilaria pushed her hips forward, trying to get him to increase the pressure with his hand, which was slowly slipping away.

“Please,” she begged. “Touch me.”

“I am touching you,” he replied, his hand squeezing the inside of her thigh.

“More, please.”

“You beg so pretty,” he whispered, his voice rougher than she thought possible. “But I’m going to make you earn it.” He punctuated his sentence by pushing his finger into her wet heat.

Ilaria moaned and arched her back. Sebastian kissed her ear and down the side of her neck. His lips attached onto her shoulder, sucking until she was sure he was going to leave a mark. She wanted to touch him; she ached to touch him; to know that he was enjoying this as much as she was. But she could do nothing with her hands, tied as they were. Any rational thought after that was wiped clean from her mind. A second finger joined the first, moving faster, stroking her inner walls with a sure confidence, his thumb never leaving her clit. She squeezed her eyes shut, tossing her head back and forth.

He took his free hand and sunk it into her hair, pulling her head back.

“Look at me,” he commanded, his fingers moving that much faster.

Ilaria snapped her eyes back open.

“Please,” she whined. She was not above begging at this point.

“What do you want, pretty girl? You have to tell me.”

“Fuck me, please. I can't-” She was cut off by his mouth.

He kissed her deeply, sweeping his tongue past her teeth and swallowing her moans. She shivered when he finally pulled away.

“Oh, I will.” His breath was hot against her ear. “I’m going to fuck you on that table where we ate, where you teased me with that damn tongue of yours. Where all I could think about was having you laid across it.”

Sebastian peeled his body away from hers, taking hold of her bound wrists and dragging her over to the table. Her legs shook with every step, and she was sure her knees were going to give out.

Sebastian shoved her upper body down on the table.

“Don’t move,” he growled in her ear before pulling away.

Ilaria leaned up on her elbows, her bound hands on the table. She felt completely exposed like this, bent over with everything on display, the cool air of the room caressing her overheating skin.

She turned her head as he stood beside the table, obviously making sure she still saw him. He made quick work of the buttons on the front of his pants, and Ilaria wondered how they hadn’t already popped free. His still damp hand disappeared into the opening, fisting his erection before pushing the material down his legs.

Ilaria swallowed thickly, taking him in. His hard cock was just as big as the rest of him.

“You like what you see, pretty girl?” Sebastian asked, a smirk on his face.

She nodded. “Very much.”

He stepped behind her, his hands trailing up her back and then down her ribs, over the curve of her hips. She jumped when he brought a hand down against her ass. He rubbed and squeezed the soft flesh until the sting went away. Then he smacked the other side, and she felt her insides clench. She

never thought that getting her ass slapped was going to turn her on quite so much.

Sebastian's hips pushed against hers and Ilaria groaned, feeling his cock rubbing against her aching wetness and bumping against her clit. She was close to bursting, and he wasn't even inside her yet.

He ran his tongue over the curve of her ear and grabbed a fistful of her hair. "You are so fucking wet for me, pretty girl. And I'm going to make sure you can't walk straight tomorrow."

His cock started to slide into her in a smooth stroke.

Ilaria dropped her head against her hands with a deep moan. A deep growl reverberated from his chest.

"Oh, shit!" she cursed.

His hand gripped her hip, his nails biting into her skin as he held her still.

"Relax, pretty girl," he murmured, rocking his hips back and forth. "I'm not even halfway there."

She barely had time to begin to comprehend what he was saying. He released her hair to hold her waist in both of his hands. He pulled out until only the head of his cock was still nestled inside her.

"Follow my words, breathe in and breathe out."

As she breathed out, he thrust his hips forward, burying himself to the hilt with his hips flush against her. It forced all

the air out of her lungs.

When she finally thought she regained her breathing, he began to move; slowly pulling out and hard strokes back in. Her hands shot out and grabbed a hold of the edge of the table to steady herself. His rough thrusts made her whole body shake, but she didn't care. She couldn't even think straight. All she could focus on was the powerful knot in her stomach as it intensified.

Sebastian took his opportunity and nipped her neck, sucking on her soft skin, groaning into her ear. His thrusts became deeper and harder, his pelvis grinding against hers. Her breathing quickened with loud gasps and moans.

“That’s it, pretty girl.” His hand slipped from her hip, and his fingers pressed against her clit, working in small, tight circles.

It was all the motivation she needed, and her world unraveled. She saw stars behind her eyelids, and her insides throbbed, clenching down on his still hard cock. She was sure she had stopped breathing. Her heart pushed against her rib cage and in her ears.

Ilaria was sure she had never orgasmed so hard in her entire life. All her limbs felt like jelly, and her toes tingled.

“Fuck,” Sebastian groaned. “You’re so wet and so tight.”

Without warning, he pulled out and flipped her around, lifting her up as if she weighed nothing and setting her down

on the table. He wrapped her legs around his waist as he thrust back into her.

His fingers found the ties in her wrists and quickly tugged the knot loose. In an instant, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders, her fingers digging into the hard muscles. He planted his hands on either side of her hips on the table, his rough thrusts intensifying. Ilaria tossed her head back, and he trailed his tongue along the curve of her neck. The stimulation almost became too much, and she cried out a second time, exploding around his throbbing cock.

He leaned his forehead against hers as she ran her fingers through his hair. Pulling out, he ground against her stomach, giving a low and deep growl. Ilaria felt the heat of his cum against her skin.

Leaning down, Sebastian gave her a last slow kiss, both of them fighting to breathe.

With little effort, he picked her up and deposited her down on one of the sofas. Ilaria languished back against the soft cushions, a small smile spreading across her face. Sebastian reappeared a few moments later, his pants returned to his person and a cool damp cloth in one hand. He gently swiped the mess from her stomach and trailed it down between her legs. Ilaria gave an involuntary wince.

Concern creased his brow. “Was I too hard for you?”

Ilaria leaned up on her elbows and gave him an inquisitive look. “Far from it. It’s been a while for me, and you are bigger than my last lover.”

Sebastian shook his head, tossing the dirtied cloth to the side. He pulled her up to sit in his lap.

“Good,” he muttered. “Because once you’ve regained your strength, I’m having you again.”

She kissed the underside of his chin. “I look forward to it.”

CHAPTER SIX

He was gone by the time she woke early the next morning. The sun reflected off the water outside the rear windows. Ilaria rolled over with a groan, burying her face further into the pillow. Sebastian didn't sleep in the bed last night, respecting her wishes. Instead, he stole a pillow and a blanket, making himself comfortable on the lounge. However, his bed still smelled of him; of salt water and sweat, of shaving soap, and spicy like cinnamon. The events of the previous evening ran through her mind at record speeds.

Last night was... something. Ilaria couldn't quite find the right word for it. She lost track of the time she spent simply seated in his lap, kissing and touching. Her hands finally were able to wander the hard planes of his chest and shoulders. She came for a third time with his lips on her neck and his fingers buried between her legs. Sebastian then stayed true to his word. Before she even knew what was happening, she was face down on the sofa, with her hips up in the air again. Her cheek pressed to cushions, her hair wrapped around his hand, while his other hand grasped her hip as he pounded into her again. Nothing had ever felt so good.

Ilaria squirmed against the mattress before pushing herself up. She pushed her messy hair out of her face with a sigh. The soreness was definitely there, she thought, moving up the bed with a wince. But she didn't care about the discomfort; it was well worth it.

Sliding out of bed, she reached for her slip, still discarded on the floor. She folded up the corset and dress, heading over to her truck. Another dress that didn't require a corset and wasn't covered in buttons was hard to find, but thankfully, she found a light pink dress Sophie had hidden in the bottom. Ilaria tossed it on and tied up the lacings in the front. Next, she brushed out her hair, braided it tight, and wrapped it into a bun secured with several hair pins—something else of hers she had found scattered on the floor.

Her legs were still a little shaky as she went over to the table, a flush spreading across her cheeks. There was little chance of looking at the simple piece of furniture the same way ever again.

A covered tray was laid out on the table with a note beside it. Ilaria picked up the single piece of folded paper and read the contents.

I have gone to check on the status of our voyage. Your companions are on the next deck down and more inward. They will not be hard to find. If you are in need of me, I will be up on deck.

Your humble servant,

S

He had a smooth flowing script, not at all what she had expected. Handwriting like this spoke to a certain level of education, where good penmanship was necessary. But, she supposed, for him it was necessary for correspondence and whatever paperwork a ship's captain had to complete.

Though, there was no mention of what transpired between them. It was to be expected, even if she was a little disappointed. She frowned at that feeling, dropping down into the chair. Ilaria set the note aside, lifting the lid off the tray. She took a handful of grapes and popped one into her mouth. There was no reason to be disappointed. They had very specific terms, and Ilaria would be damned if she was the one to crack. It was just sex, and nothing more.

The tea was still lukewarm when she poured it into the teacup, and she was a little heavy handed with the sugar. She leaned back in the chair, sipping it slowly and staring out the large window, allowing her mind to wander.

Dimitri would have hated this, she thought with a shake of her head. He would find the ship too confining, too dark, too dirty. Not being able to see land would make him uneasy and nervous. She could have convinced him to go if it was what she wanted— Dimitri would never deny her anything.

Ilaria rested her eyes on the table again. Dimitri absolutely would not have fucked her on a table. It wouldn't have mattered how persistent she could be. He preferred lying in

bed and being on top. Dimitri wasn't adventurous that way, not with sex and not with much of anything else. Safety and a strong sense of caution were how he had gone through life. Marrying her was probably the riskiest thing he had never done— until the betrayal.

Ilaria downed the rest of her tea. That was not something she was going to think about. Not now, and hopefully not ever again.

She poked around at the other tidbits of food in the tray— some cured meats, cubes of cheese, the grapes, and a few loose nuts. It wasn't much, but she was happy to have something. She ate a few bites of things before leaving the table behind.

Ilaria wanted to find Julian and Sophie. It wouldn't do well to ignore them, and she wanted to check up on Sophie anyway. Maybe a night's rest was what she really needed.

Their cabin was exactly where Sebastian had described it. After lightly rapping in the door in case Sophie was asleep, Julian cracked the door open.

"How is she feeling?" Ilaria asked, resting her hand on Julian's arm.

He gave a crooked smile. "After actually getting some sleep and whatever concoction the medic had, she is less green."

"I'm not dying!" Sophie called from the bed. "Come here, little bird."

Julian rolled his eyes. “I’ll leave you two and get some fresh air.”

Ilaria nodded, moving deeper into the small cabin. Sophie was propped up in the small bed built into the wall, her graying hair loose around her shoulders. She had regained much of her color since Ilaria last saw her. Ilaria dragged over a nearby chair to sit at her bedside.

Ilaria reached over for Sophie’s hand and gave it a tight squeeze.

“I’m getting too old for this nonsense,” Sophie muttered.

“I’m happy to have you.” Ilaria offered a small smile.

“I know, little bird. I didn’t expect the scoundrel that you call a brother to send us all the way out here when he requested that we come out of retirement. You do know why he didn’t simply go himself, don’t you?” Sophie fixed a pointed look at Ilaria.

Ilaria thought for a moment. “I thought it was because he was simply too busy, and Clan Ulrich is a long way away. Besides, he wanted to give me a chance to start fulfilling some official duties.”

Sophie snorted and dropped her head back to the pillow, rolling her eyes. “He didn’t want to have to face the other Clan leaders: Rudolf Hartmann of Clan Ulrich, Francesco Rossini of Clan Medici, Lars Eklund of Clan Bakken, and least of all, Natasha Petrovitch Velensky of Clan Ianov.”

Ilaria shuttered at the name of Dimitri's elder sister. She had only met the other woman a handful of times during the seven years of her marriage, and each time was as unpleasant as the last. Natasha had a way of staring right through a person, making them think that they would catch fire. The heat of her glare was unsettling.

“But,” Ilaria started carefully. “There is no guarantee that Natasha will even be there, right? Maxim set me as a proxy, don't you think Natasha would do the same?”

“If Natasha was to send someone else, it would be Katya. Either way, you will have to contend with one of the two sisters.”

Ilaria groaned, running her hands over her face. Dimitri's family hated her, most of all his two elder sisters. She never could quite figure out why, other than keeping Dimitri from them, but even he didn't seem particularly fond of his sisters. Somehow, Ilaria hadn't thought about seeing the other Clan leaders, which in retrospect, was incredibly stupid on her part. If Maxim was sending her, of course representatives of the other Clans would be there as well.

Medici and Bakken were the least of her worries. Francesco was known to be old and feeble, and no doubt would send some high ranking official in his place. Lars Eklund of Clan Bakken was something of an enigma to the other Clans, since he rarely came down from the mountains. She didn't spare much thought to the retiring Chieftain of Clan Ulrich, Rudolf Hartmann, since he would soon be out of the picture. It was

the still unknown, new Chieftain that Ilaria had to keep her mind on, along with now, apparently, dodging her sisters-in-law.

“Why didn’t Maxim warn me of this?” Ilaria found herself asking out loud. “Because he thought I might refuse? Not that he would have let me.”

Sophie pressed her lips into a thin line. “Your brother murdered hers. You are probably also very high on the list of people she doesn’t like.”

“That’s an understatement.”

“Originally, Natasha wanted Antony for Katya. Maxim would not have it. Instead, he accepted Dimitri for you. Though I’m sure she’s regretting marrying anyone into your family,” Sophie stated.

Ilaria frowned, rubbing her fingers against her temples. “How do you know all this?”

Sophie smiled. “You don’t think I spent all those years with you and didn’t listen against the doors and walls, do you?”

“Of course not. How did I not know that?”

“Your brother kept a lot from you, and I was sworn under duress not to tell you at the time. But now that we are away from your darling brother, I thought it only right that you know what he had done. I couldn’t bear the thought of you going into this meeting and being seen as ignorant.”

“What else don’t I know?” Ilaria asked.

“In time, little bird. I can’t burden you with all of this right now. But know that there are forces beyond your control. It is rare that all five Clan leaders or their proxies are in the same place at the same time. All I want is for you to be happy, and you can't do that if you continue to live in your brother’s shadow.”

“Thank you, Sophie,” Ilaria said, leaning over to kiss the older woman’s forehead. “I cannot imagine doing this without you, or Julian, for that matter. You should get more rest. I will find Julian and send him back to you if you wish.”

Sophie nodded. “Thank you, little bird.”

After she made sure Sophie was comfortable, Ilaria made her way up to the main deck. She found Julian leaning against a railing, staring out across the wide blue sea.

“She’s going to rest some more,” Ilaria said, coming up behind Julian.

“Thank you. I trust your conversation was pleasant?”

Ilaria snorted. She leaned her elbows on the railing, feeling the salty air on her face. “Let’s call it eye opening.”

Julian laid a hand on her shoulder. “Good. There are things you deserve to know.”

They stood together for several long minutes before Julian took his leave, going back down to Sophie. Ilaria stayed where she was, enjoying the warmth of the sun. She crossed her arms and rested her head on them. This was beautiful. This was peaceful. However, she couldn't stay out in the sun too long,

otherwise her fair skin would turn a rather unfortunate shade of bright pink.

image-placeholder

Sebastian stood at the helm, leaning against the wheel. His eyes found her as soon as she stepped out on deck. He hadn't noticed before, but now in the sun, he could see streaks of red in her hair. It only added to her mystique. There was this deep seeded desire in the pit of his stomach that had to know more about her; her likes and her dislikes, what made her get out of bed every day. There hadn't been much talk the previous night, but he had learned things about her that clearly no other man had known. She was a temptress; a siren sprung further from the sea. She wanted to please as much as she wanted to be pleased. She obeyed.

His fingers tighten around the wheel. At one point, Johanna had accused him of being unfeeling. It wasn't that he was incapable of having feelings. Attachments were messy. It wasn't like he had feelings for this girl. Far from it. They had an agreement: in two days she would be off his ship and out of his life. Sebastian would go back to being unattached and unattainable once more. Though now, he would be Chieftain.

Sebastian hadn't thought about the title at all since he had left, pushing it as far down as he possibly could. He would continue to not actively think about it. There was nothing for him to do anyway, until Rudolf officially retired and handed over the authority. Until that moment, he was still a nobody, and he was going to enjoy every blissful second of it.

Especially the moment in which he caught sight of her coming his way.

“Good morning, Captain.” She greeted him cheerfully, but the smile didn’t quite reach her eyes. She seemed pensive, maybe even a little sad.

“Good morning,” he replied in kind. “I trust you slept well.”

“I did, and you?”

This small talk felt weird to him, maybe because he had known her so intimately. She was still as much a stranger to him as he was to her. This could be a chance to get to know her a little more.

“As best as I could,” he said. He ran his thumb over his lower lip in thought. “Have you ever steered a ship before?”

She shook her head. “This is my first time out in the water.”

“Would you like to try it?”

“You would trust me with your ship?” she asked with a tilt of her head.

Sebastian chuckled, reaching out for her hand and pulling her closer. “There is nothing out here but us and the water. Unless you jerk it way too hard, nothing serious is going to happen.”

“If you’re sure.”

He situated her body between his and the steering wheel. Guiding her hands, he settled them on the rungs like the hands of a clock at ten and two. His chest pressed up against her

back and he leaned down, so he was at the same eye level as her, his lips by her ear.

Sebastian held out a hand that met with the distant horizon. “As long as this line is straight, you are good. If it lists one way or the other, you correct it until it is level again. If it tilts to the right, you move the wheel left. If left, turn right.”

She gave a small chuckle. “That easy, huh?”

Sebastian smiled. He removed his hands and took a couple steps back.

“That easy,” he agreed.

He moved around so he could stand beside her, leaning back against the rail and watching her. Wonder and fear mixed in her eyes, and Sebastian supposed that is what he must have looked like the first time he had taken the wheel. He had always felt the most at home out on the open water.

“How do you do this for hours on end?” she asked, never taking her eyes off the horizon.

“There is a peace out here. A tranquility that can’t be found anywhere else. This relaxes me, much like playing the violin does. Yes, it gets tiring and that’s why you have a crew,” Sebastian paused and gestured out to the men bustling around the deck. “It is not common, but I’ve made sure every single one of them could sail this thing in case the worst would happen.”

“And has it?”

“No,” he said, pushing off the rail. “Thankfully, not. But it never hurts to be particularly cautious.”

That sad look passed over her face again.

“I think I would like to be done,” she said, her voice suddenly very small. Sebastian resumed his place as she stepped back. “I think I will go back inside. Too much sun makes me dizzy.”

She turned on her heel and hurried down the stairs, back to his room.

Sebastian was left wondering what he had said wrong. He stayed at the helm for a little while longer before his curiosity got the better of him. He had to know that she was alright. Besides, she looked so sad and so lost. A sharp contrast to the vibrant woman he had known the night before.

He waved over a crew member who gladly took over Sebastian’s post. Taking the stairs down two at a time, he stopped dead in his tracks when he heard music. He knew that song. *The Waning of Sorrow*. It was single-handedly the most depressing song in his repertoire. It was beautiful in its simplicity, and it contained rather obscure lyrics that many didn’t readily know, but the sweeping melody was enough to provoke something deeper. Sebastian forced his feet to continue moving, standing in the open doorway and quietly propping a shoulder against the doorframe.

She sat at the piano, those lithe fingers of hers dancing over the keys with the ease of experience. He knew she played from memory, since this was not something he kept sheet music of.

Though, he wasn't ashamed to admit that he played this song too, when he was in a particularly dreary mood.

His fingers itched listening to her play. When she went to start it again from the beginning, Sebastian could no longer contain himself. As quietly as he could, he crept over to where his violin lay. Moving to stand by the piano, he noticed her eyes shut. Tucking the violin between his shoulder and chin, he raised the bow and joined her.

Her fingers faltered for a moment, but she continued to play as her eyes snapped open. Her lips twitched.

“B flat,” she whispered.

Sebastian grinned. “I know.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

The last few notes of the song echoed through the otherwise quiet room. Ilaria pulled her fingers back from the keys, resting them in her lap and twisting them together.

She hadn't played in so long, but still, it all came back to her the second she had sat down. The piano always brought her joy. It was something she was good at. Something that was uniquely hers and not something that was always compared to Antony. Antony, who couldn't be more musically disinclined, but who, as a child, would sit and read, listening to her play. Then, even years later, after he was gone, Dimitri had filled that void. An audience of one who appreciated what she could do. It gave her a way to release the stress; the anxiety. A way to wash away the sadness.

When she had come back down here, she found herself instantly drawn to Sebastian's little piano. And she needed to feel that release again. When Sebastian unexpectedly joined her on his violin, in a way she had never heard it played before, she had to let it happen.

Now, the silence stretched between them. She cleared her throat.

“How long have you played?” she asked.

Sebastian leaned on the piano, the violin and bow hanging from his hand. “For twenty-six years. Since the time I was ten. You?”

Ilaria met his gaze. “For eighteen years. Since I was eight. Music means a lot to me.”

“As it does for me. It allows you to express things where words are simply not enough.”

“Will you play something else for me?” Ilaria asked before she could stop herself. She wanted to hear him play again.

“If you will join me,” Sebastian replied, tapping the top of the piano.

Ilaria smiled—and it felt like a real, genuine smile, and not something fake she forced on her face. “I suppose that could be arranged. What else do you know?”

Sebastian snorted and parroted her words, “What else do you know? Hopefully something not nearly as depressing as *The Waning of Sorrow*.”

While she could read pretty much any sheet of music, there were only a few songs she had completely memorized by heart. Most of which were either sad songs or love songs. And since Sebastian didn't want something sad, that only left one kind.

A particular song immediately sprung to mind. It had always been a personal favorite, even if Dimitri had called it too sappy. Ilaria never thought of it that way. To her it felt like the truest expression of love. She couldn't quite put her finger on why she wanted to share this with Sebastian—maybe because they were kindred spirits. Music spoke to them differently. Maybe it was the earnestness in his eyes, or the way his lips quirked when he looked at her. It set a fluttering in her chest that she couldn't quite explain.

Ilaria turned her attention back to the piano, not wanting to meet his eye when she made her suggestion. She set her fingers upon the keys again. “Do you know *All the Light of the Sun?*”

Sebastian took his bow and lightly tapped her on the nose with it, forcing her to look at him again. “You are serious?”

She met his gaze head on this time, an unmistakable twinkle in his deep, blue-gray eyes. “What? Too hard for you, Captain?”

“If you think you can keep up,” he countered, raising the violin back to his shoulder.

A thrill ran through her as she started playing the opening bars, her fingers striking the keys in perfect rhythm. She hadn't bothered to tell him the key, since he quite clearly could figure that out on his own. After a few passes across the keyboard, Sebastian joined in. He kept time, tapping his foot against the floor, which Ilaria found oddly soothing and easy to follow. The music swelled around them, like its own cloud of magic.

Ilaria found herself singing the words to herself in her head, not daring to do so out loud. Her voice wasn't that good, nor did she want to break the spell of the music as they played. It soothed her otherwise aching heart.

She could feel the tension of the song building in her shoulders as her hands glided along without a thought. It was almost second nature to play this song. Her eyes fluttered shut and she let the muscle memory take over, never missing a note. Sebastian's violin effortlessly kept up with her playing, as if she commanded both instruments. It was breathtaking really, how masterfully he played. The two instruments rose to a crashing crescendo. Her hands slowed as she struck the final note, the last words resonating through her mind.

Ilaria didn't realize she was breathless until the song was over. She also didn't notice the tears on her cheeks until she felt Sebastian's warm hand on her face. Forcing her eyes open, she met his gaze as his thumb wiped away the moisture. He didn't have to say anything. She knew he felt it too—whatever it was. The absolute joy. The devastating heartache. It was all reflected back at her in his eyes, even if his expression was placid. He couldn't hide it even if he wanted to; she could see it.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught him setting the violin carefully down on top of the piano. He took a step closer, settling onto the bench next to her, his hand never leaving her face. Her lips quivered when he leaned in for a kiss. His hand slid from her cheek to her chin, tipping it up to his. He brushed his lips against hers in a featherlight kiss that

almost didn't feel real. Just the barest of touches. The whisper of a kiss.

Ilaria leaned into his touch, her hands coming to rest upon his chest. Not pushing, not pulling. She could feel the thunder of his heartbeat beneath her palms. This had affected him as much as it affected her. Somewhere between the notes of the music, something had sent a distinct spark. His other hand came up to cup her face between his hands, his eyes boring down on her. He pressed his lips more fully against her, stealing the air right from her lungs. His tongue barely teased her upper lip before he caught the bottom one with his teeth.

She gasped into his mouth, her hands tightening around the fabric of his shirt.

This kiss was different from the ones they had shared the previous night. Those had been hard and fast, taking as much as they were giving. Last night had been about sex and instant gratification.

But this kiss— this kiss ignited a fire in her blood that she had long thought was dead.

And it scared her.

It scared her how much she liked it. How much more she wanted of him. From this stranger, who with his presence alone and the strike of his violin had her reeling.

Ilaria forced herself to break the connection, to pull her lips from his. She bowed her head, staring at the small space

between them. She cleared her throat awkwardly, smoothing her hands over his shirt again.

“I’m sorry.” Her words were barely a whisper. When she pulled away from him, he let her go. She slid off the bench. On shaking legs, she forced herself to take careful stride across the room and out the door, leaving Sebastian to sit alone.

Ilaria climbed the stairs to the top deck, the sun instantly hitting her eyes, and the wind whipping around loose strands of hair. Ignoring the random looks from the crew, who kept to themselves, she walked further to the bow of the ship, until she could go no further. She stared out towards the horizon, seeing nothing but the widespread blue water. There was no more distance to put between her and Sebastian unless she jumped off. Something she wasn’t planning on doing.

She wrapped her arms around her middle, trying to even out her breathing and keep her stomach from twisting further, or her heart from pounding out of her chest. She needed to collect her scattered thoughts and the wide mix of emotions running through her. Once the shock had worn off, it was replaced with guilt. She never should have touched the piano. She should never have asked him to play that song with her. She never should have allowed him to touch her with such tenderness. Dimitri’s face flashed through her mind’s eye. For the first time, she actually felt like she had betrayed him by feeling something for someone else. Sex was different, because she didn’t have to feel anything for any of her lovers. It was simply a release. And that is how she had to see Sebastian.

Ilaria heard the heels of his boots against the wooden deck, coming to stand a short distance behind her. She didn't want to have to face him. Instead, she made herself steel her spine, her hands gripping onto the rail in front of her until her knuckles turned white. She had to put that distance between them again; to douse the sudden fire with as much cold water as she could.

“I leave the day after tomorrow and we will never see each other again,” Ilaria spoke before he could say anything. “That is how it will be and how it must be. Those are the terms we agreed to. I will continue to hold onto my side of the bargain if you hold true to yours. I will obey your commands and you can use me in whatever way you wish. But whatever happened back there, it cannot happen again. We agreed to sex, and nothing more.”

Ilaria gasped and shuttered when she felt him press the whole length of his hard body against her back, his hands coming to rest next to hers on the railing. His breath was hot against her ear.

“Is that all you want?” he asked, biting her earlobe. She had expected more anger, but his voice was calm. Almost too calm. “To be told what to do and when to do it? For me to fuck you until you are sore and your throat aches from the screams of pleasure, I will pull from you? If that is what you want, I can give you that. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Yes, that's what she wanted. She wanted the release; she wanted to feel. But most of all, at the end of the day, she

wanted to be able to leave him on that dock in Ulrich and never look back.


“Yes.” The word came out like a sigh. “That is what I want.”

“So be it.” His teeth grazed her neck, his hands coming to rest on the swell of her hips. In a flash, he spun her around until their chests were pressed together. “Then, I want you back in my room. Naked and on your knees. You think you can do that for me, pretty girl?”

“Yes, Captain.” Ilaria was proud that she kept the waver she felt out of her voice.

Sebastian took a small enough step back for her to slip by him, his hand swatting her backside as she passed. She gave an indignant squeak but kept moving.

This was what she wanted after all.

image-placeholder

Sebastian stood rooted in his place, watching her scurry away. His hands balled and flexed at his sides for a moment before he turned and slammed his fist into a wooden post.

Fuck, that hurt.

He shook out his hand even though the pain resonated up his arm. It was better than the burning ache in his chest. This feeling was new, and he didn't like it. He didn't form attachments—he couldn't form attachments. She was meant as a distraction; a way for him to forget how his world was about

to be turned completely upside down. Arriving back in Ulrich meant Sebastian was going to have to face his new reality.

He was mad. Mad at those who put him in this position. Mad at his brother for allowing it to happen. Mad at himself for the doubt he felt. Mad at whatever forces of nature put her in his path. But he wasn't mad at her. He couldn't be. It wasn't her fault that she was everything he never knew he wanted.

Shit.

This was a mess.

Sebastian groaned, running his hands over his face and through his hair. Correction, this was a huge fucking mess. Considering he literally promised her not five minutes before to let her go.

In spite of the fact that he literally knew nothing about her. All he knew was she was a wealthy woman from Drakos, who was desperate enough to get out that she trusted him to do just that. For all he knew, the name she gave him wasn't even real. Maybe she had a husband she was running away from, which was probably why she wanted nothing more from him.

But did any of it really matter, he wondered. He knew what she felt like pressed up against him, the taste of her lips and the smell of her hair, like honey and lavender. The music she was able to extract from those delicate little fingers of hers. That passion touched him more than anything else.

So, Sebastian did what he always did. He pushed it as far from his mind as he possibly could. It wasn't worth dwelling

on what could or couldn't be, since none of it was going to exist. All he had was the next thirty-six to forty-eight hours to enjoy before reality was doomed to sink back in. Before he would be honor bound to let her go and watch her walk out of his life. Before he had to figure out how the hell to run a clan and do justice to his people.

Sebastian's feet started moving before he realized he had moved. Several of the crew regarded him with puzzled looks and the occasional frown. Yes, he was their captain, but he considered each a friend; a comrade in arms. They didn't need him to keep the ship afloat. Mathias was more than capable of running the ship, hence why Sebastian would promote him before he stepped off the ship—his home for the last eighteen years.

He was grateful that no one stopped him as he crossed the length of the ship and took the steps back down to his room. The door was closed, and he paused before it, staring at the intricate pattern of the wood. He took a few long, deep breaths to calm his nerves. He needed his control. He had to be in control. It would not do either of them a service if he lost himself. Sebastian opened the door and slipped inside.

She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen—even if she hadn't totally listened to his instructions. She knelt upon a cushion she had stolen from one of the chairs, sitting back on her heels. That pale, pink dress still clung to her voluminous figure. The sun streamed in through the window, reflecting off her dark hair, which she had taken down and was absently running her fingers through. Her head jerked up when the door

shut behind him. Those big, bright eyes blinked at him, almost like a lost bird. From the gentle slope of her nose to her pert chin and the elegant curve of her neck, he wanted to burn her face into his memory. So, when she was gone, he might be able to think of her.

For now, he was going to enjoy the time he was given.

He clicked his tongue and crossed the space.

“Someone doesn’t know how to listen,” he remarked. Running his hand over the top of her head and through her hair before grabbing a handful at the nape of her neck, he pulled her head back to stare down into her wide eyes.

“Captain, I-”

He pressed a finger to her lips. “I would pick your next words very carefully, pretty girl. Otherwise, you might find yourself with a very red bottom.”

Her tongue peaked out to lick his finger, and Sebastian felt it all the way into the pit of his stomach. His fingers tightened in her hair.

“I thought you would want to undress me again, Captain,” Ilaria murmured. “You seemed to have enjoyed it last night.”

Sebastian groaned. Yes, he was going to enjoy every second of peeling that pink silk away from her skin.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sebastian stood on the deck long after she disappeared from sight. He didn't even get to say goodbye to her; well, not in the way he would have liked. No sooner were they docked, she packed her things, thanked him for the journey, kissed him lightly on the cheek and vanished. He couldn't blame her, really. They had made no promises and it would have been selfish of him to want to keep her. Her companions waited for her on the dock, the woman particularly happy to be back on solid ground.

Sebastian groaned, rubbing the back of his neck. It was only mid-afternoon, but he found himself desperate for a drink. The message his brother sent burned in his pocket. A messenger had brought the missive as soon as they were in port. Sebastian didn't need to read it to know what Rudolf wanted.

His time was up.

Everything in his room had already been packed and sent back to the palace. He had given Mathias his promotion, and Sebastian knew his ship couldn't be in more capable hands. So, he did the only thing he could do. He shouldered a small

bag before departing, walking down the gangplank for the last time.

A certain sense of sorrow crept into his bones, but he shook it off. He had to see this as the next step, a new adventure, a new challenge to be conquered. As a child, he always enjoyed puzzles, and this was going to be the biggest puzzle of them all. Playing politics wasn't his strong point; he was too straightforward and too brash for such trivial nonsense. Rudolf was the more levelheaded of the two. His brother was made to hold such a position of high esteem. Sebastian, not so much. At least he didn't think so.

He weaved his way through the lower town. Several familiar faces greeted him as he moved by, though he gave them no more than a pleasant greeting and a tight smile. This might be the last time he would be down here for a long time. He was not looking forward to being sequestered in the palace. It was the nature of his new position, but that didn't mean he had to like it.

Sebastian was surprised to be greeted at the gate by Franz Hofner, Rudolf's personal butler. The withered old man gave a stiff bow.

"Welcome home, Captain Hartmann."

Sebastian snorted. This place had never been home for him, but he kept that opinion to himself. "Thank you, Franz."

"Come, new rooms have been prepared for you." Franz turned on his heel and started across the large courtyard.

Sebastian kept his stride in time with the old man. Despite his advanced age, Franz was still spry and still moved with effortless speed. For a moment, Sebastian wondered if Franz would finally retire when Rudolf did, or if he could inherit him as well. It mattered little, as Sebastian was more than capable of taking care of himself.

They walked around the courtyard and away from the front door. Sebastian's brow furrowed but he kept up with Franz. They came to a stop before a blank stonewall. For a moment, Sebastian was convinced that Franz had suddenly gone senile until he pressed on of the stones. It sank into the wall before there was a creak and a portion of the wall swung inward.

"Franz," Sebastian started, but he couldn't quite formulate the question he wanted to ask. He stared at the opening in the wall.

"The rooms are accessible by the traditional means, through a door in the east wing, where the rest of your family stays. This is your own private entrance and exit. As well as a means of escape if needed. Master Rudolf wanted me to show you this first. Come."

Franz took off into the darkness within, and Sebastian followed close behind. The stairs were small and narrow, carved into the very stone. There was a faint glow and shimmer that lighted their way, though where it was coming from was hard to find. After a few moments, they reached the top of the stairs, where there was an ordinary wooden door. Franz extracted the key from a thin gold chain around his

neck, unlocking the door before handing both to Sebastian. The door slid open and Franz gestured for Sebastian to pass through ahead of him. The butler disappeared from sight when the door slid shut again, leaving Sebastian alone.

Sebastian knew this room, and his heart ached. His bag dropped to the floor as he walked to the massive wooden desk, running his fingers over the wood grain. A pattern he had memorized as a child, while being reprimanded for some sort of juvenile mischief. His father tried his best to discipline the reckless youth Sebastian had been.

Leopold Hartmann demanded excellence from both of his sons, where Rudolf succeeded and Sebastian had fallen short. Rudolf never set a foot out of line. Sebastian always wondered how he could even compare to his brother; what it would be like to have their father look at him with the same respect with which he looked at Rudolf.

Sebastian rested his hands on the table, his shoulders hunched over. He heard the distant opening and closing of a door, but paid it no heed. It was probably Rudolf coming to visit.

Instead, he felt a soft hand on his shoulder.

“He would have been very proud, you know.”

Sebastian whipped around to find the gentle face of his mother smiling up at him. He wrapped her tightly in his arms, lifting her off the ground as she gave a surprised squeak. She swatted at his arm.

“Put me down!” she shouted through a laugh. “I’m not as young as I used to be.”

Sebastian set her down, pressing a light kiss to her cheek. “But still as beautiful.”

Amalie Klein Hartmann might be in her mid-sixties, but no one would ever be able to tell. Despite her petite build, both of her sons had inherited their father’s significant height. She leaned back, grasping Sebastian’s forearms in her hands.

“You look troubled, my son,” Amalie commented.

Sebastian shook his head. “I’m happy to see you, Mama. I missed seeing you before I left last week.”

Amalie scowled at him, even if she maintained her smile. “I am still personally offended that I didn’t hear the news from you personally. Imagine my surprise when Rudolf told me and you had already scurried off.”

“Forgive me, I think it was a state of shock.”

“Clearly, but you are forgiven, my son. I can’t stay mad at you long. If only your father was here to share this with us.”

“I wish that too, Mama,” Sebastian murmured. He had a very vivid memory of the look of pride on his father’s face when Rudolf was named Chieftain, even if he was already very sick by then.

A sad look flashed in her eyes, but it quickly changed. “I wanted you to have these rooms. Your father and I had many good years here. Rudolf didn’t take them because we still lived here at the time. But when your father died, I couldn’t stay

here by myself. But now they are yours. I hope you can find the same happiness here as we did.”

Sebastian was deeply touched by the gesture. Upon his return, he had expected to go back to the tiny room he had held before he left. To come back to his parents’ old rooms was something he wasn’t expecting, and he never could have imagined finding his mother there.

He gave her another hug, but kept her feet on the ground this time. “Thank you.”

Amalie touched his cheek. “You must be tired from your journey. I will have a bath sent up for you as well as something to eat. Rudolf will be expecting you afterward. I will keep him distracted. There is one other thing I want you to have.”

Sebastian couldn’t stop the shock that ran through him even if he wanted to. Amalie removed the white lily pin from her right shoulder. She took his hand and pressed the warm enamel into his palm.

“I can’t take this,” Sebastian whispered, swallowing the lump that formed in his throat. His father was already High Chancellor when his parents had married. A symbol of their Clan, Leopold had the matching lily pins crafted for them.

Amalie wrapped his fingers around the pin. “You can, and you will. Rudolf inherited your father’s, it’s only right that you should have mine.”

“But Rudolf inherited it after Father passed,” Sebastian protested. He knew it was a weak argument, but he had to say something.

Amalie chuckled with a shake of her head. “I’d rather give it to you now while I’m alive, so I can see your father’s gift proudly displayed when you are made the leader of our people.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now, go relax. I’ll take care of your brother.” She gave him a small smile before heading to the door. Pausing in the threshold, she looked over her shoulder at him. “Oh, I made sure to have almost everything in here replaced. Don’t worry, it’s not the same bed you were conceived in.”

“Mother!” Sebastian gave a pained groan. That was not an image he wanted in his head.

He could still hear her faint chuckle even after she had left. He loved his mother, there was no doubt about that, but she loved to say things like that to totally rile him up. There was no looking at that bed, new or otherwise, without her comment in the back of his head.

Instead, Sebastian tried to turn his focus to other things. He grabbed the bag he had dropped on the way in and headed across the study to the bedchamber situated in the back. All of his other belongings had already been brought in and unpacked, he noticed. His violin rested on a small table, and he quickly surveyed it to make sure no damage had been done.

Once he was pleased with his inspection, he rested his mother's pin beside it before glancing around this room as well. The memories here were not as clear as they were in the study, which Sebastian was grateful for, especially if these were to become his own chambers. He wandered the room, opening drawers and cabinets to see where the servants had put everything.

Thankfully, these rooms had a private bath he found behind one of the numerous doors. Sebastian bathed quickly, as was his habit, but he lingered a moment longer in the warm, fragrant water. He was used to cold sponge baths on the ship, where large quantities of hot water were rare. Most of the freshwater on the ship was needed for drinking, let alone for washing. Sebastian savored the moment, leaning his head back against the edge of the tub, his arms hanging over the sides. His mind wandered to a certain dark-haired girl, making his cock twitch against his leg. She was gone only a few hours, and he was already thinking about her.

Sebastian had to come to terms with the fact that he was lonely, even if he didn't want to admit it. He had done everything on his own for so long. He gave a reserved sigh before getting out of the tub. It wouldn't do him any good to dwell on it too long. There was still too much to be done that day.

Going back to the bedroom, Sebastian found his clothes laid out on the bed. He liked to think he was grown enough to dress himself, but it was nice to know the dress code for the evening. The uniform set out for him consisted of deep gray

pants with a stripe down the side, and white, double-breasted coat with two rows of shining gold buttons. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he pulled on his black boots, which had been polished to a shine. He left the rest of the more decorative pieces—the long length of deep burgundy and dove gray cloth, his mother's pin, and his Captain's metal—on the side table.

Going to the small sideboard in his sitting room, Sebastian poured a hardy portion of brandy. He crossed the room to a small table where a covered tray waited for him. Removing the lid, he looked down at food his mother requested be sent to him—fruit, cheese, bread, and cookies. But he didn't have the stomach for food at the moment. He would save his appetite for later.

Nevertheless, he took the drink with him as he pushed open the door leading out to a private terrace. The sun was beginning to set across the sea, casting everything in a soft, early evening haze as a warm breeze blew past. Sebastian leaned on the railing, gazing out over the gardens below, taking a generous swallow from his glass. A few people mingled about here and there. He was going to have to get used to being around this many people again. There would be no escaping them now.

Sebastian finished his drink. It was time to face his brother. He donned the last items of his uniform, pausing to look in the mirror. His mother's lily pin gleamed on his shoulder, holding the cloth of his sash in place. He scowled. He looked too much like Rudolf, and he hated it. This wasn't him. However, it was another thing he had to get used to.

Rudolf's office was only a little way down the hall, so it didn't take Sebastian long to get there. Before he could even knock, the door was thrown up and Sebastian was hit hard in the legs.

"Uncle Bash!" Isobel exclaimed, wrapping her arms around his waist. "I missed you."

Sebastian dropped down to a knee with a chuckle. "I was only gone for a week."

The little girl pouted. "I know, but now you can't leave again."

He knew she meant it as a good thing, so that they might spend more time together. But it felt like a punch to the gut, and he suddenly felt more trapped than he ever had.

Wrapping his arms around her, he pressed a light kiss to the top of her head. "I won't ever leave you again."

"You promise?" She buried her nose into his chest.

"I promise," Sebastian replied. He caught sight of his mother in the doorway and gave her a small nod. "Why don't you go with Grandmama, so I can talk with your papa?"

Amalie came up beside them and offered Isobel her hand. "Come on, dear. Let's go see if your mother needs help in the ballroom for tomorrow night's party."

Isobel gave him one last squeeze before going off with her grandmother.

Sebastian rose from the floor and entered Rudolf's office. The man in question was seated at a small table by the open window, a bottle of wine and two glasses set before him.

Rudolf greeted Sebastian with a light smile. "One would think my daughter loves you more than she loves me."

"I don't have to tell her no like you do," Sebastian commented, taking the offered chair.

Rudolf leaned across the table and poured them each a glass of wine, before raising his. "To Ulrich, and to the future."

Sebastian repeated the sentiment, tapping their glasses together. He regarded his elder brother, who somehow seemed lighter than last he saw him. Sebastian supposed that the feeling of his imminent retirement would lighten Rudolf's mood.

They talked comfortably for a little while. Rudolf inquired about the voyage and the state of shipping business. Sebastian offered what information he could, but kept the secret of the girl to himself. There was not a need to listen to Rudolf's teasing. In turn, Sebastian asked after his health and after Johanna.

"You look good, you know," Rudolf remarked after a while.

Sebastian resisted the urge to roll his eyes. They were, in fact, wearing almost identical outfits. "I look like you."

"And soon you will be me." Rudolf rolled the stem of the wine glass between his fingers for a long moment, before

sighing. “I had wanted to put this off as long as I could, but I will not have you feeling unjustly unprepared.”

Sebastian frowned. He didn’t like the sound of that. “About what, brother?”

“The state of the Clan, the state of our world. Tomorrow will be your investiture and the ball for your formal ascension to Chieftain. Tonight, I have arranged for dinner with the leaders of the Five Clans, including you.”

“Wait a second. Does that mean they all showed up?” Sebastian couldn’t keep the astonishment from his voice. Almost never were all five of them together at the same time in the same place.

“No,” Rudolf replied. “Some came and others sent proxies. This particular selection of representatives might prove more hostile than we could have anticipated.”

“Who’s we? You invited them, not me.”

Rudolf pressed his lips into a tight line. “Be that as it may, I figured I should warn you regardless.”

Sebastian took a large swallow of wine before responding. “Out with it, then.”

“Lars Eklund of Bakken actually showed up for the first time in at least a decade. He must be very curious about you to have left the mountains at all.” Rudolf paused, rubbing a hand against his jaw. “Clan Medici sent their heir, Giovanni Rossini, which I’m not surprised by, since Francesco has been on his deathbed for almost six months.”

“None of those sound particularly shocking, Rudolf,” Sebastian said. “Medici and Bakken mostly keep to themselves anyway. You’re worried about Ianov and Drakos, aren’t you? Don’t lie to me.”

“Of course, I’m worried about them!” Rudolf almost exclaimed. “They have been at each other’s throats for a generation. Tensions between them have been almost at a breaking point for the last year. Ever since Maxim Devarik had Dimitri Petrovitch tortured and murdered.”

Sebastian’s mind was spinning. He had heard the rumors of Dimitri’s untimely death a year ago, but didn’t put much thought into it at the time, since it hardly affected him. Now, he was quickly trying to tie all the random pieces he knew together.

“Wasn’t Dimitri Petrovitch married to Maxim Devarik’s sister?” Sebastian asked.

Rudolf gave a wavering smile. “I’m happy you do listen sometimes. And yes, they were. Happily, from what I heard, until Dimitri got caught up in affairs that were not his own. It is still disputed amongst the Five Clans what exactly Maxim had on Dimitri to declare him guilty and sentence him to death. Especially since they were related by marriage.”

Sebastian wanted to know more about this, and he planned on grilling his brother on the particulars later. However, for now, he needed to know who was going to be at this dinner Rudolf was so worried about.

“Who did Ianov and Drakos send then?” Sebastian asked, his fingers drumming against the tabletop. “I’m going to go out on a limb here and guess that Natasha Petrovitch Velensky showed up.”

Rudolf gave a stiff nod. “Indeed, and with her sister, Katya. The Petrovitch sisters are scary enough individually, let alone together.”

“Wonderful,” Sebastian groaned. “And Drakos? Maxim Devarik thinks himself too important to go anywhere.”

“That’s where we have our first problem.”

“As if it could get any worse. Out with it, brother. Who could possibly be worse than the Petrovitch sisters?”

Rudolf sighed with a pause. He refreshed both of their glasses. “Ilaria Devarik Petrovitch.”

The name sent a chill like ice through Sebastian’s veins. He stared at Rudolf for a long, hard moment. “You are telling me that Maxim Devarik sent his sister, who he normally keeps locked away and out of sight?”

“That’s exactly what I am saying. And she came without fanfare or an entourage. Maxim Devarik sent his prized little sister with almost nothing. I would be very cautious about what game he is playing, especially since we know both of her dead husband’s sisters are here as well.”

Sebastian ran a hand over his face and pressed fingertips to his temples. “Well, this is a fucking mess. And how exactly are we supposed to be sitting at a dinner table tonight?”

“Very carefully,” was Rudolf’s reply.

CHAPTER NINE

The evening air was cool against her skin and Ilaria tugged the shawl a little closer. The gardens were peaceful just before dusk, with dozens of tiny fireflies hovering above the grass and among the roses. When Ilaria saw it from outside her window, she knew she needed to get out.

There was still a little time before dinner and Ilaria needed to clear her mind. Sophie wasn't particularly thrilled with allowing Ilaria to roam the gardens by herself. However, Julian had already run reconnaissance, finding the courtyard and gardens to be well protected and well-guarded. Besides, there was no one out here at this time of day.

"Let her go," Julian argued. "Can't keep the girl locked in here forever, otherwise we are no better than her brother. Besides, there are too many people of gravitas here to allow for anything to happen."

Sophie begrudgingly agreed, only after Ilaria promised to return with enough time to finish dressing and to have her hair arranged. It was a small conciliation to be allowed to have the

space to think; something she felt she hadn't done a lot of over the course of the last several days.

Her slippered feet moved against the small rocks of the pathway, where she found a bench nestled amongst the roses, with a few white lilies popping up in between. Ilaria settled on the bench, watching the beginnings of stars appear in the sky. It was nothing compared to the stars she could see out on the open water.

Ilaria convinced Sebastian to take her up to the highest point on the ship, normally reserved for a watchman. She lost track of time gazing at the stars, though Sebastian watched her more than he watched the sky.

There was a part of her that felt bad for the way she had left him. But they needed a clean break, so she could walk away. She wondered if he was still in port or had already sailed away to other far-reaching places. A man like him, she supposed, didn't stay in one place for long. If luck was on her side, maybe he would be there when she left to go back home. Even if she thought it would be a terrible idea. She couldn't get attached, not to someone like him who lived by his own set of rules. Besides, she didn't want attachments. Anyone she ever cared for were dead—her parents, Antony, Dimitri, even that one cook who liked to sneak her sweets as a child. Only Sophie and Julian remained.

And Sebastian—she could easily find herself attached.

Ilaria's eyes slid shut and she inhaled the scent of the roses and lilies. She should head back inside before Sophie came

looking for her, but a few more minutes to enjoy the peace and quiet weren't going to hurt.

The crunch of boots on the gravel made Ilaria give a heavy sigh. Seems like her peace wasn't going to last much longer. Maybe if she kept her eyes closed, whoever it was would just walk on by her and leave her be. Unfortunately, she wasn't so lucky. The sound stopped right in front of her, and she could feel whoever it was staring at her.

It was the touch of rough fingers on her cheek that snapped her eyes back open.

“Pretty girl, what are you doing here?” His question was no more than a hoarse whisper. His long, tapered fingers curled around her jaw and his thumb rubbed her lower lip.

“Captain?”

Ilaria could barely believe he was there, standing before her looking nothing like she had left him. The white of his jacket stood out against the deep red and grey of his sash, and a white lily pin rested on his shoulder. Even away from the ship, he held a commanding presence, especially so formally dressed. Before she could even register that he was there, he ducked his head, crushing their mouths together. The kiss was hard and demanding, their teeth knocking together. He stole the very air from her lungs, leaving her breathless. He pulled back, tipping her head back with a finger until their eyes met.

“I didn't think I would see you again.”

“Nor I you.”

“I haven't been able to stop thinking about you,” he said, a ghost of a smile crossing his handsome features. “You’re like an addiction I cannot break, and I don't want to.”

A small gasp escaped her at his admission. “Captain, I-”

He interrupted her with another fast kiss.

Her mind was spinning and her heart was racing as it threatened to beat out of her chest. They couldn't be meeting like this again so soon, but as soon as his lips touched hers, any other semblance of thought became irrelevant. She had so thoroughly convinced herself that she had left him behind, until he popped up in this garden like a damn faerie.

The clock in the high tower tolled the hour, breaking the haze around them. Ilaria pulled away first, slowly rising to her feet, though she still had to tilt her head back to look up at him.

“I have to go,” she whispered. As she tried to skirt around him, he caught her wrist in his hand.

“When will I see you again?” he asked.

“Never. We can’t ever see each other like this again. I’m sorry.”

His grip wasn’t tight, and when she pulled away, he released her. She gathered her skirt in two hands and ran back down the path. Thankfully, he didn't follow her, and she kept running all the way back to her room.

The door slammed shut behind her as she leaned heavily against it, panting for breath.

“What are you doing, little bird?” Sophie asked from a small settee, a dress sitting in her lap.

Ilaria didn't immediately answer, trying to calm the thunder rolling through her mind. She pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes as she doubled over. Sophie rushed over to her side, wrapping a steady arm around her waist and steering her to the couch. Ilaria sank down into it numbly as Julian appeared out of nowhere with a glass of water. She downed half the glass before handing it back.

She could feel his lips upon hers.

Ilaria shook herself out of it and plastered a smile on her face. It wouldn't fool Sophie or Julian, but she could pretend in front of others.

“Forgive me,” she started carefully. “I heard the bells tolling the hours and realized I was going to be late getting back. Now, shall we prepare for dinner?”

Ilaria stood and walked into the bedroom before either of them could protest. Even if her knees were shaking underneath, she was never going to let it show. Tonight was too important. She needed to be in complete control. Meeting the representatives from the other Clans was the first step of many big ones she was going to have to take. Aside from Rudolf Hartmann, whom she met upon her arrival, and her sister-in-law, Natasha, she didn't know anyone else. But she would be damned if she didn't pretend otherwise. Ilaria was determined to be the best representative of herself, of her brother, of her Clan as she could.

Thankfully, Sophie did not question her further, even if Ilaria could see the worried expression on her face. Now wasn't the time for it, and she was prepared for Sophie's endless questions. Later.

In less than an hour, she was ready.

Ilaria stood in front of a long mirror, taking in her reflection. The royal blue silk of her dress stood out against her pale skin, the sparkles on the bodice and flowing, sheer sleeves catching the light as she moved. Sophie laced her tightly into her corset to give her the smallest waist she could manage. Her hair was secured back, and a comb of pearls and diamonds glinted off to one side. The gems in her ears matched the comb, and she opted against a necklace.

“We really should put a stitch here to keep this closed,” Sophie muttered, tugging at the front of Ilaria’s dress. The neckline plunged to below her breasts, leaving more than ample amounts of skin and cleavage on display.

“It’s fine, Sophie,” Ilaria chuckled, playfully swatting the other woman away. “It's not like this is for tomorrow, where there will be dancing. This is just for dinner and I’m sure I can keep myself in my dress.”

Sophie gave an exasperated sigh before relenting. Instead, she draped a sash of dark blue and purple over Ilaria’s shoulder and secured it at the top with a pin shaped like a thistle. Now, she looked like a real representation of her Clan, donned with their colors and flower.

There was a knock on the door and Julian stuck his head in after a moment.

“Your escort for dinner is here,” Julian said.

Ilaria nodded, taking one last survey of her appearance before exiting the bedroom. There was a part of her that was expecting a guard to escort her to dinner, but she certainly didn't expect the Chieftain himself.

Rudolf Hartmann gave her a warm smile, leaning on his walking stick. Ilaria took his offered hand, and he raised it to press a light kiss to the top. “You look lovely. Come, there is someone I want you to meet before we dine.”

Ilaria took his proffered arm and allowed him to lead her from the room. They traveled a short distance down the hall, stopping in an antechamber that was no doubt connected to the dining room. Later, she wouldn't even remember what the room looked like. There was another person there, leaning an arm against the mantle of the fireplace. The flames danced across his features; the hard line of his jaw, the slope of his nose. She knew that face.

Ilaria suddenly felt her mouth go dry. This can't be.

Rudolf called out, “Brother.”

He turned and their eyes met, sucking all the air out of the room. Ilaria felt nauseous.

“Let me introduce my brother and my successor, Captain Sebastian Hartmann. Sebastian, this is the representative from Clan Drakos, Ilaria Devarik Petrovitch.”

Ilaria felt the world tilt under her feet and a dull roar in her ears. She almost didn't want to believe it was him, but here he was, standing before her. He looked so different, but it was the fire in his eyes—the recognition flashing before disappearing again. Ilaria could feel the tension in his posture as he extended a hand for hers. His fingers wrapped tightly around her hand, betraying his otherwise cool facade.

“A pleasure,” he muttered, pressing a light kiss to the top of her hand. “Let me express my deepest condolences on the passing of your husband.”

Ilaria thought her heart jumped into her throat, and all she could manage was a quiet, “Thank you.” She didn't know what else to say.

Sebastian regarded her for a moment, his head cocked to one side. He hadn't released her hand. “How exactly did he die?”

“Sebastian,” Rudolf hissed, beside him. “Be nice.”

“I am being nice,” Sebastian replied, letting go of her hand. Ilaria snatched it back. “Forgive my curiosity.”

Ilaria said nothing as she stared at him. His comment was indeed rude, but could she really blame him for it?

“If you will excuse me,” Rudolf started. “There are other guests I need to find.”

Ilaria and Sebastian simply stood there, staring at each other until Rudolf was gone and the door shut behind him. The tension was thick between them, with only the sound of their

breathing and the crackle of the fire. Ilaria clasped her hands in front of her, twisting her fingers together to keep from fidgeting. She felt very small underneath Sebastian's stare. If anything, she should be surprised that he had kept this from her, but she wasn't. Her own secret was much the same, if not worse. Being Maxim's sister always placed a target on her back.

"How could you not tell me?" Sebastian's question finally broke the silence. "Especially since I saw you less than an hour ago."

"I didn't think it mattered," Ilaria protested. "We weren't supposed to find each other like this."

Sebastian crossed the distance between them, moving to stand behind her so he could lean down into her ear. A shiver crept up her back. "I'd be a liar if I said I wasn't happy to see you in the garden, looking quite like something plucked from my dreams. However, what would your brother say when he finds out about this?"

That snapped Ilaria out of whatever fog she found herself in. She whipped around to glare up at him, squaring her shoulders. "My brother can never know. He'll kill you."

Sebastian chuckled. "Not unless he wants to start a war. Besides, I'm one of the few people that the name Maxim Devarik does not scare."

Ilaria was about to say more when the door to the room banged open and she came face to face with the last person she wanted to see.

Natasha Petrovitch Velenskyy was a sight to behold. Tall and willowy, her brown hair fell in perfect waves around her face, which was twisted in anger. She would have been considered pretty, except for the sneer on her lips. She fixed Ilaria with a glare that would have had lesser women quivering with fear.

“What the *fuck* is she doing here?”

CHAPTER TEN

In his first real test of diplomacy and conflict resolution, Sebastian gave himself barely a passing score. Nobody got stabbed, so that was a win in his mind. He wouldn't have put it past Natasha to do something like that though, based solely on the rage emulating from her. Rudolf had tried to warn him. Neither woman had seen each other since Dimitri's death.

Who knew a dead man could cause so many problems? Sebastian never put much thought into Dimitri Petrovitch, and why start now? Except for being literally stuck between the man's widow and his sister, using his significantly large size to put space there. Natasha Petrovitch Velenskyy seethed in front of him, while Ilaria Devarik Petrovitch stood in stoic silence behind him.

The tension was finally broken by Rudolf, who had entered and suggested that everyone move on to the dining room.

Sebastian held his ground as Natasha walked past him, shooting Ilaria another harsh look and muttering, "Stupid bitch."

Ilaria's expression never changed while walking into the dining room. Sebastian wondered if this was the face she wore at home, around her brother; this closed off mask of indifference. He saw so much life in her, and this was not at all what he thought she might be.

His seat was beside hers at the round table. Rudolf sat to his other side, followed by Giovanni Rossini and Natasha, with Lars Eklund on the other side of Ilaria. It was an odd amalgamation in Sebastian's opinion. But thankfully, the conversation swirled between them, leaving Ilaria to remain silent at his side. Giovanni's stories were enough to distract anyone.

Instead, Sebastian watched her out of the corner of his eye. She ate very little—mostly pushing it around the plate—but she drank fairly heavily, more so than he had seen before. The red wine caused a flush to creep up into her cheeks and across the expanse of her cleavage. Like he wasn't having a hard enough time not looking at them to begin with. The cut of the dress might actually kill him.

"Sebastian has a great affinity for music. Isn't that right, brother?" Rudolf's question made Sebastian pay attention to the room at large.

He cleared his throat. "I suppose you could say that."

Rudolf slapped a hand against his shoulder. "Don't be modest now, Bash. His violin talents are second to none, but his singing voice is something to behold."

“You sing?” It was the first thing Ilaria uttered the entire dinner. She peered up at him with wide, bird-like eyes.

“A little,” he relented.

Rudolf snorted beside him. “Why don’t you treat us to a song after dinner? I’m sure we could all appreciate your talents.”

He glared at Rudolf, unsure what his elder brother wanted to achieve here. Playing violin was second nature to him, and he was used to a crowd when he played. But his ability to sing was something very few knew—that was personal.

“I wouldn’t have an accompanist,” Sebastian protested, though he knew it was a weak argument.

“Ilaria plays piano,” Natasha interjected, leaning her elbows on the table and placing her chin in her folded hands. “Quite talented actually. Something my dearly departed brother could appreciate.”

Ilaria practically vibrated beside him. He had already heard her play; a memory that was still very fresh in his mind.

“I would be happy to,” Ilaria responded.

Rudolf clapped his hands together, looking too smug in Sebastian’s opinion. “It is settled then.”

“Wonderful,” Natasha grinned. It was a look that Sebastian decided he liked less than her scowl. “If only Dimitri were here to hear her play one more time.”

Ilaria's fists hit the dinner table, making the dishes rattle. "What do you want, Natasha?"

"Want?" Natasha blinked. The look of innocence on her face was not believable.

"Yes," Ilaria hissed. "You've been baiting me since we walked in here. Tell me what it is you want."

Natasha growled. "You know what I want? I want my brother back, and you dead in his place. I want to wrap my hands around Maxim Devarik's neck until he turns purple. I want you to suffer the way I have suffered."

"You think I didn't suffer? Dimitri was my husband."

"He was my brother! Until yours decided he was no longer worth anything to your family," Natasha shot back.

"Ladies," Lars Eklund began calmly, but he was summarily ignored.

"I loved him, and watching him die was one of the hardest things I ever had to endure." Ilaria's voice was almost like a broken whisper. Sebastian wanted to reach out and take her hand.

"Clearly, your love means nothing if it could not save him. Dimitri is still dead, and I have you to blame for it."

"You have no right! You weren't even there!" Ilaria rose to her feet and leaned slightly across the table.

Natasha mirrored Ilaria's posture. "Because Maxim Devarik forbade it. Because he told me that if I even set foot in Drakos

territory, he would have me strung up alongside my brother!”

Ilaria frowned. “Maxim never would have—”

“He did!” Natasha shouted. “Obviously, you are too stupid to know what he was up to. I wasn’t allowed to be there to defend Dimitri from the monster you call a brother. I wasn’t allowed to bear witness. I wasn’t allowed to retrieve his remains.”

“I had him buried,” Ilaria argued. “Under a tree he always likes to frequent.”

“Who did you bury? Because my baby brother was sent back to me in pieces, wrapped like a fucking birthday present!” Natasha’s volume had reached a breaking point.

Ilaria jerked back as if she’d been slapped. Sebastian grabbed her chair to keep it from tumbling to the ground. She took several steps back until she hit the wall.

“No, Maxim would never—”

“Maxim Devarik is a monster, but you are too blind to see it.”

“He promised me that he had Dimitri buried.”

“His promises don’t mean shit. You’re simply here because he doesn’t want to face me. He knows that I would have his sorry ass dragged before a Tribunal to answer for his crimes.” Natasha sank back down into her chair. “Think wisely, little girl, before you speak of what you don’t know.”

Sebastian turned his back to the table, watching where Ilaria pressed herself to the wall. Her entire body shook, and he could see the beginnings of tears in her eyes.

“Ilaria,” Sebastian whispered, holding his hand out towards her.

Ilaria shook her head fiercely. “Leave me be.” She turned on her heel and ran out of the dining room.

Sebastian glanced over at Rudolf, who gave him a discreet nod. Sebastian was going to chase her with or without his permission. He got no more than a few steps before a chuckle from Natasha made him stop. He didn’t turn around to face her.

“You are new to this table, Captain Hartmann,” Natasha started slowly. “She is a fine actress and plays the role of a grieving widow well. But do not be fooled by her pretty face and her tears. She is no different than the rest of her heartless family.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t discount her pain either,” Sebastian muttered.

He was out the door before Natasha could say anymore. No matter what else she had to say, he didn’t want to hear it. Everyone grieved in their own way, and he had been able to see the sadness in Ilaria’s eyes from the moment he met her. Sebastian followed the sound of sniffing until he found her. A little way down the hall, she leaned against a wall with her arms wrapped around her middle. Her shoulders hunched over in soft cries.

Ilaria jerked her head up when he approached. He didn't say anything, but took her by the arm and pulled her through a nearby door. Thankfully, it was a rather small sitting room that was currently unoccupied. The door slammed shut behind them and Ilaria's knees immediately hit the floor.

"I didn't know," Ilaria whispered, a sob catching in her throat. She turned teary eyes up at Sebastian. "I had gone to that spot under the tree every day for four months. For what, if he wasn't even there? I believed my brother when he told me that's where Dimitri had been placed. I trusted him to help me grieve, even if there was so much anger. How could he look me in the face and lie to me? I do not doubt what Natasha said, because it's too terrible for even her to make up. But to know that even in death, Dimitri was further desecrated and used to hurt his family makes me sick to my stomach."

Sebastian believed her. No one would want that to happen to a loved one, no matter what the offense had been. What didn't add up in his mind was exactly what Maxim found out about Dimitri. Rudolf even told him that no one really knew. And Sebastian doubted even more that Ilaria knew.

He knelt down by her side, lightly touching her cheek. She leaned into his touch. "I believe you. Though I think it is going to take a lot more to convince Natasha."

"She will not listen, and I don't blame her for that. If it was my brother, I would be as furious as she. What she doesn't understand is that I have been in her place. When Antony disappeared, I didn't know what to do with myself," Ilaria

explained as Sebastian frowned. He knew Antony was the third Devarik sibling, but very little was known about him outside of Drakos. News of his disappearance had spread, but it never went further than that.

“Grief is often complicated, and everyone experiences it differently. That doesn’t undermine how you feel.” Sebastian stood and helped her to a nearby couch. Sitting beside her, he continued to run his fingers over her cheek; he didn’t want to stop touching her.

“Dimitri was there for me. He wasn’t perfect, I know that, but he loved me. And after he was gone, it felt like there was a void inside of me that I couldn’t fill. A need to be wanted again, for someone to look at me and see me. Not my name, not my family, but me,” Ilaria paused, licking her lips. All Sebastian wanted to do was bite them. “I didn’t think it was possible until I met you. I’m sorry, I didn’t tell you the truth. Would you have believed me?”

“No,” Sebastian said. “I don’t think I would have. You are more beautiful than the rumors of you. You have more light and more passion than someone I would think to be related to Maxim Devarik.”

“Oh,” Ilaria gasped.

“I want to apologize too. In my surprise, I said some terrible things. I don’t regret the time we spent together.”

The swirls of blue and green in her eyes were bright, but the sadness still lingered there. “Me either.”

“Even if you pushed me away?” he asked.

“I didn’t want to. Walking away this morning was one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do. I want—” She cut herself off, diverting her eyes.

His heart hammered in his chest. Now that he had her here again, he wasn’t going to lose her for a second time. It was stupid, reckless and selfish, but he didn’t care.

“What do you want, pretty girl?” he murmured, brushing his lips against her ear.

Her eyes fluttered shut and her cleavage strained against her dress when she took several deep breaths. His fingers grazed over her soft skin, slipping into the silk. Her breast fit perfectly in his hand, and he flicked his thumb over the hard pebble of her nipple.

“I want you,” she moaned.

Sebastian pinched her nipple, her little noises sending shockwaves to his cock. He was rock hard in an instant.

“Do you know how I want you right now?” Sebastian asked, leaning down to brush their lips together. “I want you bent over this sofa, your skirt around your waist so I can run my hands over your round ass. I want to feel your pussy squeezing my cock as I fuck you. I want to paint your thighs with my cum. That’s what I want.”

She leaned up to kiss him slowly. “We should renegotiate our terms.”

He nipped her lips before pulling away and extracting his hand from her dress. She gave a soft whine. “Oh, we will, and I will make this fantasy a reality. But later. Now, I do believe you and I promised our other guests a song. I want you to go in there and don’t let Natasha get to you. You don’t have to explain yourself to anyone. Least of all her.”

Sebastian stood and offered her a hand up. Ilaria tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow.

“Thank you. I think I needed to hear that. The last year was the worst. Until I met you.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ilaria peeked out the corner of her eye at Sebastian as they walked back to the dining room. He was very clearly taking her the long way, since she hadn't gotten far in the first place. She was grateful for it, though. It gave her another few moments to gather her thoughts and her composure.

Having Sebastian's hand in her dress sent a wave of fire through her blood. How was it that one touch from him could send her heart racing and turn her mind fuzzy? Then that mouth of his. Sweet heavens, did that put a very vivid picture in her mind. She knew he would do it too; every last word of it. In the four days she knew him, Sebastian was, without a doubt, a man of his word. She would be lying if she didn't admit that she wanted that too.

Everything he did was with this quiet confidence—this assured way—that meant he knew exactly what he was doing. Ilaria wondered if she could break his rigid control. Not that she overly wanted to, since she liked it too much. But to see him snap; now that would be something.

“Have you decided on a song?” Ilaria asked, breaking the silence.

The corner of his lips twitched. “Considering I’ve only ever heard you play two, and I refuse to do a sad song, I think the choice is rather obvious.”

“I do know more than two songs.” she countered.

“I don’t doubt it. But it’ll be easier this way. I can give you the key for my range, and I know you’ll execute it flawlessly.” Sebastian patted the hand on his elbow.

“You have very high opinions of my skills. Why didn't you tell me you could sing?”

“Because I don’t, really. Violin was always my first love. Musically, that’s where my strength lies. I would sing around the house as a child, Mother particularly loved hearing it. But when I hit adolescence and my voice dropped, she offered me lessons to see if I could be more.” Sebastian paused and let out a heavy breath. “I could have had a career either with my violin or my voice. But the sea called to me, and I couldn’t be tied down.”

“You were happier out there.”

Sebastian nodded. “Indeed, but that didn’t stop me from playing. The singing stopped, but it was just the nature of things. In retrospect, I’m glad I chose the sea over the stage. I learned leadership, I learned management. I would have been a terrible Chieftain then.”

“But music taught you discipline. I know piano did that for me.”

“I suppose you are right.” Sebastian stopped outside the door and glanced down at her. Ilaria forced a smile to her face, taking a deep breath. She could do this. “Just remember, you owe no one in that room any sort of explanation, least of all Natasha. Understand?”

“Yes.”

He squeezed her hand. “Good. Now, *All the Light of the Sun* in C sharp/D flat. Modern or traditional?”

Ilaria frowned. “Isn’t there only one version?”

Sebastian’s chuckle made her tingly. “Lyrics, pretty girl. Modern or traditional?”

“Again, what’s the difference?”

“Traditional it is then, since the modern is clearly what you are thinking of. It’s about language; modern phrasing, or what is considered to be the original in the ancient tongue.”

Ilaria stared at him, blinking slowly. “You sing in the ancient tongue?”

Sebastian shook his head. “Come on, let’s get this over with so I can lock you in a room and spend the rest of the night between your legs.”

While Ilaria was surprised, she wasn’t at the same time. Of course, the stupid man could sing in multiple languages. As if she wasn’t already impressed by him for a myriad of other

reasons. But now was not the time for that. She had to actually get through the song herself.

“Let’s do this,” she whispered as he led the way back into the room.

Whatever conversation was being had stopped abruptly when they entered the room. The dining table had been cleared and the other guests had moved to various chairs and couches. Ilaria could feel Natasha’s glare burning into her back, but she refused to meet the other woman’s eyes. She had doubts about the terrible things Natasha had confessed to, but she couldn’t think about it now. She wouldn’t think about it now. She kept her singular focus on the piano in the corner of the room.

Ilaria settled down on the bench. Her fingers striking a couple of practice chords before starting the introduction. Sebastian came to stand beside her shoulder, and she glanced up at him.

“Maybe half a step lower,” he said.

Ilaria repositioned her fingers and started again. Sebastian gave a small nod and she continued. Thankfully, it was a fairly long introduction before he joined in.

The deep resonance of his voice—the powerful notes he managed to pull forth—left Ilaria stunned. She had to keep her hands moving to keep up with him. The broad vowels and rolled r’s were like she had never heard them. Ilaria liked that she knew this song by heart completely, inside and outside, forward and backward. Every word was set to memory a long time ago. But this was different. He was different. The way the

ancient language seemed to roll off his tongue like he was a natural born speaker.

Even as the song progressed, he no longer held back the power of the notes he sang. It was breathtaking, how effortless he made it seem. Even the long, elongated notes of the final chorus, ending with each of them hitting the final note simultaneously.

The silence from the room that followed rang in her ears. All she could hear was Sebastian trying to catch his breath.

“Man, I’m out of practice,” Sebastian gasped, breathing through his nose.

Ilaria couldn’t help the chuckle that escaped her, and she turned on the bench to tilt her head at him. “If that was out of practice, I want to know what in practice would be.”

Sebastian cracked a small smile. “Less winded, that’s for sure. And less strained on that middle bridge.”

Rudolf was the first of the stunned audience to recover.

“Bravo, brother,” Rudolf said, joining them by the piano and smacking Sebastian’s shoulder. “And to you, Miss Ilaria. That was quite breathtaking.”

Ilaria flushed at the praise from Rudolf and the seemingly proud stare of Sebastian. They got through the whole thing as effortlessly as he predicted. Stupid man always had to be right.

They were soon joined by the others who also shared their appreciation. Even Natasha mumbled something Ilaria couldn’t quite make out, but knew she struggled to say

something positive to her. Instead, Natasha turned her gratitude to Sebastian, lightly laying a hand on his arm. Ilaria gritted her teeth; she didn't like the other woman touching him, but what confused her more was the intense jealousy that followed.

No, that was not an approved feeling. She swallowed it down as best she could, planting a smile on her face. Getting out of that room became her first priority. Turning her attention to Rudolf, she thanked her host for the pleasant evening, fawning tiredness as an excuse to escape back to her room.

"Let me escort you back," Sebastian offered, detaching Natasha's hand from his arm.

"It is really not necessary," Ilaria protested. "It is only just down the hall."

"I insist." Sebastian left no room for argument.

Thankfully, Natasha didn't try to stop them as they left the room. She obviously knew better than to cause a second scene in the same night. Though, Ilaria wouldn't put it past her to try. Even if she stared at them the entire time they were leaving the room.

The walk back to her rooms was fairly short, and when she reached out to open the door, Sebastian's hand met hers. He leaned down to her ear.

"Leave your window unlocked."

Ilaria blinked up at him and he only smiled. He turned the door handle and gave her a soft nudge inside. She leaned heavily against the door as it clicked shut behind her. Letting out a heavy breath, her shoulders sagged. That was easily the longest and most stressful dinner ever. She didn't even get to enjoy her food all that much, and eating was one of her favorite things.

She pushed away from the door just as Sophie popped her head out of the bedroom.

“You didn't have to wait for me,” Ilaria said, crossing the room.

Sophie placed her hands on her hips. “And how exactly did you plan on undressing, little bird?”

Ilaria chuckled, walking past her, lightly patting the older woman on the cheek. “How did I function so long with you?”

Sophie followed her into the bedroom, gathering up her nightgown and dressing robe. “You had a husband to undress you.”

“Sophie!” Ilaria gasped.

“I'm not wrong.”

“I wasn't saying you were. I'm surprised you said it.”

Sophie shrugged, coming up behind Ilaria to start undoing all the buttons. “I suppose being this far from home has made my tongue a little looser than it normally would be.”

“I’m glad you feel comfortable enough talking to me like that. I know you took care of me through most of my childhood, but I do like to think of you as a friend,” Ilaria said, reaching over her shoulder to squeeze Sophie’s hand.

“I am your friend, little bird. We both know your brother didn’t allow you many of those.” While she said it rather casually, Ilaria didn’t miss the bite in Sophie’s words.

“No, indeed.”

Ilaria knew Maxim loved her, even if his love was overbearing and overprotective. It was like she had grown up in a glass bubble, far removed from the rest of the world. But, now that she was seeing more of it, there was a part of her that wondered if she could ever go back to living under Maxim’s constant watch.

Sophie finished with the buttons and Ilaria slipped her arms from the sleeves. It was a relief once her corset was untied and she could breathe again. The silky nightgown came down over her head and she shrugged into her robe. Sophie helped her pick all the pins from her hair and left it falling in soft waves down her back.

Sebastian liked her hair down.

Ilaria shook the thought from her head as soon as it passed through. She really shouldn’t be thinking about him like that. Even if he had made several evocative suggestions already that evening, and then the one about the window.

“I think I’ll read out in the sitting room before I sleep,” Ilaria said, watching as Sophie turned down the bed. “Let my mind quiet down a bit.”

Sophie nodded. “Do you want me to send tea for you?”

Ilaria shook her head. The sooner Sophie or anyone else was gone the better. “That won’t be necessary. Thank you for your help.”

Sophie waved her off. “It’s my job and my privilege to look after you.”

She was gone a few moments later, leaving Ilaria alone.

Ilaria took her book from the end table and moved out to the sitting room. She went to the window first, turning the lock and nudging the pane open enough to let in a light breeze. Then she made herself comfortable on one of the little sofas. Her legs curled under her and her chin rested in her hand. She didn’t so much as read but stare at the words on the page, completely and utterly distracted.

Sophie was gone no more than five minutes when a light tapping forced her eyes from the book back to the window. A certain dark blonde head peeked over the sill, rapping a knuckle against the glass.

“Good evening,” he greeted her with a wide grin, propping himself on the window’s edge. His long legs dangled over the side. He wore no coat, his shirt open at the throat, and the sleeves pushed up to his elbows, once again exposing his dark tattoos. A small bag was slung across his chest.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Ilaria asked, rushing over. “You’re going to fall and break your neck and I’m going to be blamed for it.”

Sebastian chuckled with a shake of his head. “It’s only a second-floor window. I might break a leg if I were to fall, but I have climbed these trellises since I was only six years old. Though, I’m touched by your concern for my well-being.”

Ilaria grabbed the collar of his shirt and yanked him forward.

“Get in here before someone sees you,” she hissed. She yanked the blinds shut as soon as he stumbled through the window.

“You are rather strong when you’re feisty,” Sebastian commented. He pressed up against her back, an arm coming around her waist. He nipped her ear. “I like that. Makes it all the more satisfying when I can have you submit.”

She leaned against his hard body, enjoying his warmth that seemed to seep from his skin. “I submit because I want to, not because you make me.”

“All the better.” He rested his chin on the top of her head. “I do believe we have terms to renegotiate before I’m allowed to peel this robe from you. Before I can lay you out and worship between your thighs until you scream.”

“Fuck,” Ilaria groaned, pressing her legs together at the sudden heat that flared. Damn him and his stupid words that always managed to arouse her.

“Oh, don’t worry, we will.” Sebastian pushed her hair aside to kiss the side of her neck. “But formalities first.”

Pulling back, he took her hand and led her over to the small dining table in the corner of the room. He nudged her down into one of the wingback chairs before taking the other for himself. Several sheets of paper and two fountain pens came out of Sebastian’s bag. He took a sheet and a pen, sliding it across the table to Ilaria.

“I will write my list and you can write yours,” Sebastian started. “When we are done, we will swap papers, marking the things we agree to and crossing out the others. Then everything that is agreed upon will be written on a master list. We will both sign that copy.”

Ilaria picked up the pen. “All very formal. I like that, since our last set of terms were strictly verbal.”

Sebastian smiled. “I figured you would.”

Ilaria began writing down some items that were basically the same as last time. It might be redundant, but she wanted to make sure Sebastian understood her absolute want for privacy. If she intended to keep him as her dirty little secret, no one was allowed to know—not his brother, not Sophie or Julian, and least of all Natasha and Maxim. An involuntary shudder ran through her at the thought of Maxim finding out. He never approved of her lovers, and if her new one was also a Clan leader—not of her own clan—that could be seen as a problem. Dimitri hadn’t been an issue, since he wasn’t the heir of his own.

Ilaria also reiterated her desire to stay away from beds. That was sure not going to change anytime soon. She looked up at Sebastian who was watching her.

“Done already?” she asked with a frown.

Sebastian put the pen down and, turning the paper around, slid it towards her. Ilaria mirrored the gesture, handing over her own list.

She picked up his and started to read through his conditions. Much like hers, there wasn't some shocking revelation, though it definitely read like she would be giving up a lot more control. He wanted nothing less than total and complete submission. The thought was both thrilling and terrifying. Maybe because she wasn't entirely sure what that all entailed, but she was willing to learn. Reading further, she found the condition about exploratory learning—testing limits and pushing boundaries. That would explain a lot.

Her eyes snapped up to him when she heard him laugh.

“Something the matter?” She frowned.

“You don't really care what we do as long as no one finds out about it, do you?” he asked with a smirk and a tilt of his head.

Ilaria folded her hands and rested her chin on them, gazing at him from across the table. “After having sampled your capabilities, I have no reason to ask for much more, nor am I stupid enough to ask for less.”

“Oh, pretty girl, you don’t even know half of what I’m capable of.” His grin was almost predatory. He held up the paper. “I have nothing to amend.”

“Neither do I.”

“Then let us just sign these two and we’ll keep them together. No point in writing it all out twice.”

Ilaria signed her name with a flourish on the bottom of his paper and then did the same for her own. Once signed, Sebastian took both papers, folded them together and put them in his bag, as well as returning the rest of the writing supplies.

He pushed back in his chair and patted his leg. “Come here. There is something else I want to tell you that I didn’t feel the need to put in writing.”

Ilaria slid out of her chair. His arms wrapped around her waist once she was close enough. Climbing up, she straddled his lap, her knees on either side of his hips and her ass on his knees. Her nightgown rose dangerously high up her thighs, and his fingers plucked at the knot of her robe. Once he had it open, it fell from one shoulder and he reached his hand in to caress the side of her breast. Ilaria ran her hands up the hard planes of his chest to drape over his shoulders.

Sebastian sank a hand into her hair, forcing their eyes to meet. The intensity of his gaze sent her heart pounding.

“I need you to understand,” he said softly. His eyes never left her face. “I take care of what is mine. For as long as you belong to me, I will watch out for you, I will protect you. I will

never allow any harm to come to you. However, we have to acknowledge that there are inherent risks with what we are doing. But know that if anything happens to you, I will support you no matter what you choose, as it is not my choice to make. Do you understand?”

Ilaria stared at him, her lips parting in mild shock. He didn't have to say it explicitly, but she knew what he meant—if she got pregnant. Even if he kept from releasing inside of her, it was still a possibility.

She smoothed her hands over his shoulders. “I understand. But I was married for seven years and not once did anything happen. We actively tried to.”

The grimace he tried to hide made her giggle. “I would prefer not to think about that, if you don't mind. But I appreciate the sentiment. Now that we have our new set of conditions, I do believe that you and I missed dessert, and I would like to remedy that.”

Ilaria gasped when his thumb skimmed over a hard nipple. “What did you have in mind?”

Sebastian grinned, lifting her up by her thighs and setting her down on the table. He peeled the robe from her body, rolling it up and placing it down behind her on the table. Standing between her knees, Sebastian trailed his hand up her sides. Even covered in the silk, it sent shivers through her system. They trailed over her shoulders and across her collarbone, nudging the thin straps down her arms. Ilaria pulled them free, the nightgown pooling around her waist.

“So beautiful,” he murmured, before kissing her long and soft.

Ilaria moaned when he sucked her lower lip into his mouth and nibbled on it. His large, rough hands encompassed her breasts, giving a tentative squeeze. He then turned his attention to her nipples, pinching and pulling them until they were fully erect and aching. Her head fell back as he kissed down her neck and nipped at her collarbone. His lips closed around one nipple, biting it with his teeth before soothing away the sting with his tongue. The telltale flush crept over her skin, and there was no denying the throbbing between her legs.

She tugged on his shirt trying to drag him closer. He smiled against her skin when her hands trailed down to pull on the waistband of his pants.

“Please,” she pleaded.

Sebastian clicked his tongue, batting her hand away. He trailed his hand up her leg and along the inside of her thigh. His fingers brushed over her pussy.

“Damn, you are so *fucking* wet,” he groaned.

“It’s all your fault,” she teased back, but stopped with a sigh. His finger stroked more firmly against her wet slit, tracing her opening with the tip.

He gripped her chin in his other hand, leaning down to press their mouths together again. “I’m going to enjoy this. Lay back.”

Following his direction, she laid back on the table, her robe now behind her shoulders and her head. Sebastian started by kissing down her neck, lavishing her cleavage and nipples with his tongue, and down her stomach. He dropped to his knees and slung her legs over his shoulders. Her nightgown bunched around her waist.

The rough stubble on his cheek scratched the skin on her inner thigh. She shivered, his breath spreading against where she wanted him most. Her back arched off the table when his tongue swiped through her wetness. He finally flicked his tongue against her throbbing clit, ripping a moan from her throat. He peppered it with light kisses and swipes of his tongue before he sucked her clit into his mouth.

She fought to catch her breath, her chest heaving. Her heart raced, and she was soon seeing stars behind her closed eyelids. Ilaria reached down and sank her fingers into his hair, needing to hold on to something. The feeling of his hot mouth and tongue was overwhelming.

“Look at me,” Sebastian whispered, swirling a finger around her entrance.

She gazed down and found him looking up at her, his blue-grey eyes bright. He reattached his lips to her clit as he slowly pushed one finger deep inside. She cried out, her fingers tightening in his hair, but he didn't even seem to notice. His finger moved in slow, lazy thrusts as he continued to do things with his mouth she didn't even think possible. She was close to exploding, the muscles in her thighs and stomach clenching.

Sebastian took this as his cue to add a second finger, moving harder and faster. He twisted his wrist and curled his fingers upward. Her vision blurred; it was almost too much.

“That’s it, beautiful. Give in,” he muttered against her leg.

She stared down at him again, noticing he was only using one hand. The muscles in his shoulder and bicep of his other arm flexed and tensed. The realization hit her in the chest. He stroked his cock while he licked and fingered her pussy. *Fuck*, if that wasn’t the hottest thing she had ever seen.

She reached the precipice a heartbeat later, tumbling over the edge. Her pussy clamped down on his fingers. Her eyes squeezed shut, her back arching off the table, and his name a scream upon her lips.

“Sebastian!” she cried out as it all came crashing down, leaving her no more than a pile of sweaty and panting jelly.

His own groan of satisfaction followed soon after. He leaned his forehead against her inner thigh as he breathed heavily through his nose. He gave a light chuckle.

“I think that’s the first time you’ve said my name,” he murmured, kissing her leg before rising to his feet.

“Hmmm?” she hummed uselessly, his words not totally sinking into her addled brain.

Sebastian helped her to sit up and, cradling her in his arms, settled back down in the chair. He gently pulled up the straps of her nightgown and got her arms back in before he reached

for her robe and draped it over them. He pressed a kiss to her forehead.

“Thank you for trusting me,” he said.

“Thank you for whatever that was. That was something else.”

They stayed cuddled together for a couple moments before Sebastian offered to carry her to bed. Ilaria consented, knowing there was no way her legs were going to get her there.

She fell back into the plush coverings. He pulled the blanket up to her shoulders and, leaning down, kissed her softly.

“Sleep well. Tomorrow is going to be a long day.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

I laria thought she left her nightmares at home. Ever since that night when she saw Antony's face for the first time, they became an almost constant recurrence. They would vary in intensity, but she'd always wake up feeling sweaty, feeling like she walked through flames.

She never told anyone about these nightmares and certainly not Maxim, who would probably think of her as insane. He also never understood the bond between her and Antony. They were like opposite sides of the same coin; different but the same. Seeing his face every night, aged as he should have in the last five years, was becoming increasingly difficult to bear. She had lost so much, and now, it felt like she was losing him all over again. Every time this nightmare decided to plague her.

However, in the days since she left home, there hadn't been a single one. She couldn't quite explain it; maybe it was the distance, maybe it was being in an unfamiliar place, maybe it was the fact that Sebastian would completely wear her out

before she went to sleep. Even if that wasn't the case, the brief reprieve was welcomed.

Until last night.

Ilaria pressed her cheek against the cool windowpane, staring out at the horizon. The sun slowly rose in the east, bathing everything in a warm, soft glow. It was soothing, in a way that not even the alcohol in her hand could achieve.

The brandy was too sweet, even for her taste—almost like sugary blackberry syrup. But it helped numb the pain of watching Antony die—again and again.

Ilaria didn't know how long she slept before the images started to creep into her mind. However, when it was over, she woke up, bolting upright in her bed. Everything was too hot and the thick smoke from her dream still seemed to burn the inside of her nose. She threw the blankets off in an attempt to cool down.


She tried one more time to sleep, but it happened all over again—fresh new imprints. Never before had it happened twice in one night. Maybe her subconscious was making up for the last few days. At some point, she gave up on sleep. She threw on her robe and walked to the small cabinet in the corner of the room, relieved to find something. She poured herself a hardy drink of the brandy. Glass in hand, she sank into the plush coverings of the window seat and stared out into the darkness.

Ilaria took another small sip with a grimace. Hours had passed, and she no longer feared getting too drunk that she

would fall asleep again.

She needed to get these nightmares under control, otherwise someone was bound to find out. She downed the rest of the brandy as it burned all the way into the pit of her stomach. Today was going to be too long of a day for her to continue to sit in the window and wallow in self-pity.

Sebastian's investiture was that afternoon, to be held at the cathedral in the center of the city. Situated on a small island in the middle of a wide river, the cathedral was considered by many to be the largest one ever built. Ilaria thought of the one at home, only a short distance from the palace in which she grew up, was already very large. But apparently this was bigger and therefore, she wanted to get there early, to allow her some time to wander around and now, to hopefully find some solace from her nightmares.

 image-placeholder

The sun was warm on her face as she turned it up to the sky.

“We really shouldn't be doing this,” Julian grumbled at her side.

Ilaria gave him a soft smile. “It's fine, Julian, really. I think I'm more than sufficiently covered.”

Julian was none too happy when Ilaria told him she wanted to walk to the cathedral instead of taking a carriage like everyone else. She wanted to see more of the city; to walk along the banks of the river that ultimately ended at the sea. To continue to feel like a real person, instead of being constantly

locked up. Something had shifted the moment she set foot on Sebastian's ship. She had a feeling of newness—of freeness—she never had before. And she wanted to relish every second of it before it was taken away again.

Julian reached over and pulled the hood of her cloak further over her head. The cloak covered her from head to toe, and thankfully it wasn't too warm. He insisted on it for her safety if her mind couldn't be swayed about walking. A bag was slung over his shoulder that contained her sash and her thistle pin for when they arrived. He refused to let her walk around, loudly proclaiming where she was from. Ilaria gave in, so she too could have what she wanted.

She looped her arm through Julian's as they continued to stroll along the river's embankment.

The late afternoon sun reflected off the water, making it appear even more blue and sparkling. Ilaria wanted to walk here all the time, not wearing this stupid cloak and feeling the breeze in her hair. A large smile spread across her face, as she suddenly felt so much lighter.

They arrived at the cathedral a short time later, as the walk only took about twenty minutes. The bridge that connected the riverbank to the small island was fairly heavily guarded, which was to be expected. But judging by the people milling around, and the number granted permission to cross, it was going to be full inside the cathedral.

Ilaria and Julian were stopped by one of the guards. All Julian had to do was open his bag to flash Ilaria's colors and

pin before they were quickly ushered over.

“How do you suppose he knew we weren’t some rogues from Drakos trying to get in?” Ilaria asked as they crossed the bridge.

“Because I had the foresight to make sure it wouldn’t be a problem,” Julian remarked with a shake of his head. “I made sure word was sent ahead as soon as you insisted that we walk. We couldn’t have you getting here and then not be able to get in.”

Ilaria squeezed his arm. “What would I do without you?”

“Be constantly lost and helpless.” Julian shrugged.

“I’m not lost and helpless!”

“Says the girl who cried after getting lost in her own home.”

Ilaria gasped in shock. “I was seven, and that place has always been a complete maze until you have it memorized.”

“Why do you think after that, Maxim didn’t let you out of your room for a month?”

She bit her lower lip as she tried to remember, but that far back in her memory usually started to get a little fuzzy. “I... don’t remember.”

“I’d be surprised if you did. Sophie and I kept you busy, and Antony had a habit of slipping through the walls with a regular frequency to visit you.”

“Yes,” Ilaria mused. “I suppose you are right. Antony always had a way of making me forget.”

As children, she and Antony had been very close. The door between their rooms was always open to the other. Even as they grew up, that friendship never seemed to waver. Not even when Antony moved from his rooms to the barracks for his military training, starting at age fifteen. He made a habit of sneaking off—much to the chagrin of his commanding officer—to spend time with her. Aside from Sophie and Julian, he was her only real friend.

They reached the front doors of the cathedral and Ilaria stared up at the stone facade in wonder. The two large bell towers seemed to soar up into the heavens, and the eyes of the statues carved into the stone seemed to glare down at her. The marvel of the large rose window up above, though, gave her pause. Something like a cool chill ran down her back, and she didn't quite know why.

Shaking off the feeling, Ilaria unclamped her cloak, revealing the soft purple and gold dress she wore underneath. She handed it to Julian, who exchanged it in his bag for her sash and pin. Once those were securely in place, Ilaria reached a hand out to grab the metal door handle. A shock, like a spark of lightning, zapped her fingers and she yanked them back with a hiss.

Static.

It was the only reasonable explanation.

Julian reached around her and opened the door, giving her a nudge in the back. Ilaria stumbled the few steps in until the

door closed behind them, blocking out the rest of the sun. Julian stayed to the far wall, allowing her to walk freely.

The inside of the cathedral was dim, lit by only candles—though, there were easily several hundred of them. The air was warm and heavily perfumed with incense. She filled her lungs with it as she walked through the entrance and into the main room.

Sandalwood, cypress, and limes.

The scent filled her nose and coated the back of her throat. The smoky haze swirled around the large, open space. The light through the rose window painted the floor in a myriad of colors: red, blue and green. She stepped into the middle of the reflection on the smooth marble floor, bathing herself in the wash of color. Turning, she gazed up at the window.

Her heart constricted in a sudden painful squeeze. There was something about it that made her jittery, like she had seen it before. Which was entirely impossible, since she had never been here before. Maybe it reminded her a bit of the one at home, that there was a certain feeling to the cathedral that felt familiar, if not a little discontent.

Ilaria turned away from the window, going to the stand of candles along the far wall. She pulled a couple of coins from the small bag around her wrist. Dropping them into the donation box, she took a new candle from the nearby pile.

Lighting the candle reminded her of her father. He would take her to their cathedral every week, where they would light a candle for her mother. Her father spoke of her only on

occasion, and Maxim never talked of his father's second wife. A portrait of her hung in their father's office before Maxim had it removed after his death.

Even after her father's passing, Ilaria would continue to go to the cathedral to light a candle for them both. Sometimes Antony came, sometimes he didn't. He didn't understand what this meant to her and to their father. He would always say the same thing:

“The dead cannot see the light.”

The words in her mind suddenly reached her ears. Something akin to a cool breeze brushed up against the back of her neck. Whipping around, there was nothing more than a shadow against the nearby pillar; a dark cloak covering much of his body and a mask on the lower half of his face. The milky white eye held only the faintest glimmer of the color it had been, and it was turned to her.

As soon as she blinked, it was gone.

Ilaria felt that shiver again.

She had to get these things out of her head.

There was still at least an hour before the beginning of the service. Ilaria made herself comfortable in the spot designated for the delegates, and spent the rest of the time on quiet reflection. She forced herself to not think of those words, the shadow, or even that damned window.

Julian joined her soon after, taking up his regular post beside her. She was grateful for the company, even as the

others started to trickle in. Thankfully, Natasha and Katya decided not to even acknowledge her presence and took a seat the furthest away they could. That was drama Ilaria did not need this afternoon.

She caught sight of two other women and a small girl who entered and sat on the other side of the aisle. The older one almost looked familiar with her light blue-grey eyes. This must be Sebastian's mother, Ilaria thought. The resemblance was undeniable. Which made the other two—both stunning blondes—Rudolf's wife and daughter. Ilaria hadn't been formally introduced, but she gave them a small smile when they made eye contact. Hopefully, she would have a chance to meet them at the party that evening.

The service started as soon as the large bells finished chiming the hour. Sebastian almost looked nauseated from her viewpoint, standing beside his brother. Rudolf, on the other hand, was grinning like a fool, the pride so clearly written across his face— even when the heavy chain of office was removed from his shoulders and draped over those of his younger brother.

The chain of gold and rubies stood out against the white of Sebastian's jacket. Ilaria knew they were heavy, having seen and felt the one her own brother wore. It was something Maxim only wore for special occasions, since they were so heavy. But Sebastian wore it well, almost making him seem taller than his already over six-foot frame.

Her own level of pride welled up in her chest for him. If he ran his country anything like he ran his ship, she was sure that Ulrich had a long and prosperous future ahead of them.

The ceremony was winding down to the end, the final prayers and reflections uttered. It was during these moments that the tingling in her toes that had started when the service began only seemed to amplify. Ilaria thought it was from walking such a distance in her shoes, and that sitting was going to improve it. It felt like a thousand tiny ants crawling under her skin, from her toes and up her legs. Her head began to feel dizzy, and she pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes.

“Are you well?” Julian leaned down to whisper into her ear.

Maybe it was the smell of the incense that was finally getting to her head.

Pulling her hands away, she went to give him a small nod when something caught the corner of her eye.

The shadow moved along the far wall.

Before she could react, the shattering sounds of glass echoed through the cathedral. A line of fire spread from the sound, across the red runner carpet down the main aisle at an unnaturally rapid rate.

“Get down!” Julian shouted beside her, knocking her to the ground and away from the fire. Her head struck the stone floor with a sickening thud as a loud boom erupted and the ground shook.

When she came to, there was nothing around her but hot fire and choking black smoke. Instinctively, she grabbed the fabric of her sash, dragging it over her nose and mouth. The weight of something heavy pressed up against her back. Her eyes watered as she tried to make out her surroundings. The sight of a blue sleeve made her shove the weight off of her faster.

She found Julian lying there beside her. A large fragment of wood was impaled into his back, a trickle of blood streaming down from the corner of his mouth.

Ilaria screamed louder than she ever thought she had. She seized his shoulder and gave several rough shakes. He rolled over enough for her to see his unseeing eyes, staring up at the ceiling.

Dead.

If he hadn't knocked her to the ground, she would have taken that spike to the chest.

The heat was becoming stifling and Ilaria gasped to breath against her sash. The flames moved ever closer to her. She knew she had to get out. Reaching over, she quickly shut Julian's eyes before ripping his pin from his jacket. It was safely tucked away in the front of her dress as she turned to find a way out.

The fire was hot as it licked her skin, threatening to burn her. She rushed to a sidewall so she could find her bearings, stumbling over debris. However, she chose to ignore it; if she wanted to live, she had to get out. Carefully, she followed the wall to the back of the cathedral, into the opening over the

knave. She fought to breathe, her lungs aching with each passing breath. She stood beneath the window again, only this time it shattered, raining pieces of colorful glass down upon her, small fragments biting into her flesh.

Her knees hitting the stone floor before she could force out another step. Her vision became hazy as she stared out into the flames, watching everything burning in front of her.

Ilaria had been here before.

In her nightmares.

Frantically, she tried to look around. She caught sight of a figure several feet in front of her. The shadow had lost his cloak and his mask. All she could see was a profile and his one good, clear green eye. There was a small, sad smile upon his lips.

Strong arms wrapped around her and yanked her back.

The ceiling above her started to give way as a loud shriek ripped from her throat.

“Antony!”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The smoke choked his body. Sebastian collapsed to the ground, a hand to his chest. He pulled the chain off his neck, yanked the cloth from his shoulder and undid the buttons of his jacket. He took several deep breaths of fresh air before he dropped down and rolled over. He stared up at the sky, watching as the plumes of black smoke swirled and disappeared. His ears rang and he rubbed the spots from in front of his eyes.

What the fuck just happened?

Sebastian remembered looking down at the beaming face of his mother, but then there was a crash, followed by the screams. He had never seen fire move so quickly in his entire life. Staring dumbstruck, he watched as it swept across the carpet on the stone floor, like a tidal wave of heat. His first thought wasn't for his own safety. Instead, he found himself yelling for everyone to get out and ushering people towards the doors.

He hesitated for a moment, racking his brain to try and remember all the faces that passed him. His stomach clenched

at the thought.

Sebastian popped up and scrambled to his feet. His first priority was to find his mother and his niece, since they were some of the first to pass him before the smoke became too thick to see properly. He frantically looked around until he saw them a little way off and sprinted over. Amalie sat on a short stone wall, clutching her left shoulder, though Sebastian was relieved not to find any blood. Isobel huddled against her grandmother's side, her big, blue eyes wide and wet with tears, her tiny shoulders shaking.

"Are you alright?" He asked, dropping down to look her over.

Amalie gave him a pained smile behind the black soot that was smeared across her face. "I'm fine, I must have landed on my arm really hard." Sebastian wrapped her up in a tight embrace, even as she groaned.

"Uncle Bash?" The tiny voice broke his heart, and he turned his attention to her.

He hugged her next, her arms barely wrapping around his chest. "Hush, sweetpea. Everything will be alright. Stay here with grandmama until I come back for you. Can you do that for me?"

She gave him a small, tearful nod.

Sebastian leaned down and kissed the top of her head and his mother's cheek.

"Go find the others," Amalie said to him.

He gave her a simple nod before surging back to his feet. His head spun as he looked around trying to find anyone else. Natasha and her sister were easy to spot, huddled together. Giovanni and Lars were leaning against each other as they fought to breathe. But where was Ilaria? And where was her guard?

His heart wrenched in his chest as he regarded the flaming cathedral. Flames consumed the wooden roof, the golden spire appearing to almost glow from the intensity. The crackling and splintering sounds of glass were evident as several windows on the sides started to fall out. Sebastian stared up at the two large bell towers and wondered how long they would last, or the large circular windows in the middle. Almost as if he had summoned it himself, the window quivered and shattered. The shards of glass fell in every direction, the sun overhead reflecting the endless colors as it rained down.

Sebastian shivered. If she was alive, he had to find her. Before he could overthink it or even think it through the first time, he rushed to the doors. His path was hindered when a soldier grabbed him by the arm.

“Sir, you can’t go back in there.”

Sebastian glared at the boy, who barely looked old enough to grow a full face of facial hair. How was leaving her in a burning building to die, if she wasn’t already dead, going to allow him to sleep at night? To be able to look at himself and say that he did everything he could? Sebastian knew he would run into that burning building, whether it be for Ilaria, or

Johanna, or his mother, or anyone else for that matter. Bearing the weight of Chieftain meant having to make sacrifices, and he would be damned if he didn't try. Besides, he had promised her—only the night before—his protection.

“Get out of my way,” Sebastian growled. “Before I throw you back in.”

The young soldier swallowed heavily, before stepping to the side

Sebastian covered his nose and mouth with his sleeve, shoving through the heavy wooden doors. If he ever wondered what Hell looked like, this would have been it, with the fire consuming almost every available surface. It had all escalated so quickly that Sebastian wondered if there was something unnatural at work. A single fallen candle wasn't going to send an entire five-hundred-year-old structure up in flames. He blinked away the tears forming from the heat and the smoke.

Several feet inside the door, he was relieved to find a figure kneeling in a pile of colored glass. His eyes barely made out a second figure further down, but his focus was on Ilaria. It had to be her.

Rushing toward her, he grabbed her tightly by the waist and yanked her back against his chest. A scream escaped her, though he couldn't quite make it out over the roar of the fire. It didn't matter; he managed to pull her out the door before he heard the breaking and the crashing as the roof above collapsed.

Ilaria continued to struggle against him as he hauled her out of the cathedral. When she turned her teary eyes up to his, a moment of clarity washed over her face. Instead of fighting him, she latched onto his shirt, burying her face in his chest. Sebastian wrapped his arms around her, holding her close as her entire body shook with unhinged sobs.

Sebastian brought his lips to her ear and whispered to her. “I’ve got you. You’re safe now. Where is your guard?”

The question only made her cry harder, and that answered it. He looked her over quickly, noticing the small nicks and fragments of glass that still clung to her skin. They clattered to the ground as he tried to brush off the pieces that hadn’t cut her skin. She hissed in pain, her fingers tightening in his shirt. Sebastian tucked two fingers under her chin and lifted her tear-stained face to his. The tears caused black streaks to run down, mixing with the soot that covered her almost head to toe.

Sebastian caught sight of a medic running their way and he waved her over. Extracting Ilaria’s fingers from his shirt, he turned to the older woman, who dropped down by their side. She was most likely a midwife by training, based on the look of her, but it didn’t matter at the moment. In fact, the comforting presence might do Ilaria some good.

“What is your name?” Sebastian asked quietly.

“Helga, sir.” She offered him a soft smile.

Sebastian gave a small nod, before turning his attention back to the quivering girl in his arms. He pressed his lips to her forehead. “This nice lady is here to help you, to make sure

that you will be alright. I will come check on you later. I'm needed here."

Ilaria gave him a stiff nod, before whispering, "Thank you."

Once he knew she was safely tucked away with Helga, Sebastian rose to his feet and took a thorough look around.

A sense of pride welled in his chest at the resilience of his people. There were so many people running around, trying to help where they could. Anyone with any skills were helping the injured. Soldiers and common people made a small brigade, taking water from the river to help keep the fire controlled, so it wouldn't spread.

He walked back over to Amalie and Isobel to check on them again. Isobel was curled up in her grandmother's lap, resting her head upon the older woman's shoulder. Amalie trailed soft circles over the girl's back.

She turned her sad eyes up to Sebastian again and whispered, "Where are my mama and papa?"

Sebastian ran his fingers through her hair.

"Sebastian!" The loud shriek was familiar to his ears.

Whipping around, he caught sight of Johanna further down the stone wall. He rushed down to her, where she held Rudolf in her arms. Both of his legs were black and charred; his hands red and blistered. A deep laceration in his side oozed blood all over his once-white coat. Sebastian sank to his knees beside his brother, taking in his pallor, and resting a hand upon his shoulder— one of the few places left uninjured.

“Brother-” Sebastian started, not even knowing what he wanted to say. “You said you wouldn’t leave me so soon.”

Rudolf’s lips tried to twitch into a smile, but it only read as a grimace. “There is no one better than you.” His voice was rough and weak.

“I cannot do this without you.” Sebastian tried to keep the fear from his voice. To be soothing and calm, despite the storm raging inside of him.

“You can, and you will.” Rudolf paused to take a deep, wheezing breath.

“Rest, my love,” Johanna whispered to him, her tears dripping off the tip of her nose.

Rudolf groaned, his eyes falling shut for a moment. A deep, guttural sound echoed from the back of his throat, and his back arched off the ground. The pain Sebastian saw in his eyes struck him like a knife to the chest, but he also saw the calm and the resignation.

“Take care of them,” Rudolf forced past his pale lips, each word punctuated with a pained gasp. “Love them when I no longer can. Promise me, you will tell her.”

“Rudolf-”

“Promise me,” he pushed.

Sebastian gave a solemn nod. “I promise.”

A tick worked in Rudolf’s jaw as he clenched his teeth, trying to hold in the scream Sebastian knew he wanted to

release. He watched as Rudolf's head rolled to the side and he stared off past him, where his mother held his child back in her arms.

It must not have been enough. Isobel broke free from her grandmother and ran as fast as her legs could carry her across the cobblestones. Amalie fought to catch up with her, and Sebastian turned around just in time to grab her around the waist before she could throw herself onto Rudolf's bleeding chest.

"Papa!" she screamed, kicking her legs and beating her fists against Sebastian's chest. But he only held her closer.

"I love you." His last words were no more than the faintest whisper. Rudolf's eyes slowly lost focus and drifted shut.

"Papa?" When she was met with silence, Isobel fought harder against Sebastian's hold. A well-placed kick was enough to loosen his grip enough for her to wiggle free. Sebastian groaned, reaching for her again, but she slipped past his fingers.

Isobel grabbed two fistfuls of her father's jacket and gave him a shake. Sebastian didn't have the heart to pull her away again. His gaze met Johanna's, and though she had tears freely streaming down her cheeks, she shook her head.

"Papa?" Isobel tried again. "Papa, wake up. Please." She got in one more sad shake, and her voice broke. "Papa."

The pained gasps from Rudolf's chest slowly ended until everything was still.

Rudolf Hartmann was dead.

The agonizing screams that followed would be forever ingrained in Sebastian's memory, as Johanna grabbed her daughter, prying her fingers from Rudolf's jacket.

Sebastian grabbed his mother before she could hit the ground. He wrapped her tightly in his arms as she cried into his shoulder. His own tears ran down his face unhindered, buried in his mother's hair.

Sebastian took one last look at the almost serene face of his elder brother, as the cries of his wife and daughter echoed in his ears, ripping at his heart. He would hold true to his promise. He would do everything in his power to protect them.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Ilaria washed her hair four times before she was convinced the smell of smoke was finally completely out of it. The foul odor clung to the inside of her nose for what felt like days. No amount of cleaning or perfume would cover it up. But now, three days later, she finally felt like it wasn't a festering entity in the back of her mind.

Sophie sat behind her on the sofa, running the brush through the long mess of dark hair. She was calmer than Ilaria thought she would have been.

Coming back that afternoon without Julian left a sharp stabbing pain in her heart. His pin was clutched tightly in her fist, and she was openly shedding tears as she handed it to Sophie. A word didn't need to be spoken to convey what had happened. Everyone could see the smoke for miles around, and when Ilaria returned covered in black soot and shaking, it was enough. If Sophie cried for her husband, Ilaria never saw it. She wanted to comfort Sophie the way no one had comforted her after Dimitri. To be that shoulder to cry on and the comforting presence.

Sophie set the brush aside and quickly braided the length of Ilaria's hair, tying the end off with a small ribbon. Ilaria reached over her shoulder to grab Sophie's hand.

"Thank you," she whispered, before turning in her seat to gaze at the older woman. "Are you sure you're alright?"

Sophie gave her a sad, little smile. "I will be fine, little bird. You don't need to worry about me."

"I know," Ilaria replied, running her fingers over Sophie's knuckles. "There is this guilt that he sacrificed himself for me, when he should have come home to you."

Sophie placed a hand on Ilaria's cheek, forcing their eyes to meet. "Julian loved you as if you were his own child, as I still do. He protected you with his life, as he vowed to do from the moment you were born. I knew what I signed up for when Julian and I married all those years ago. We had eighteen wonderful years together. And I wouldn't trade a moment of it for the world. Love never dies, little bird. I will never stop loving him, the way you will never stop loving Dimitri. But love shifts and changes all the time. Don't be afraid to embrace it."

"How did it go from me comforting you, to you comforting me? Again." Ilaria let out a sad chuckle.

Sophie caressed her cheek. "Because that is what I do. Don't worry about me. As long as I still have you, I will be content. I won't leave you again."

Ilaria wrapped Sophie into a tight hug even as two rogue tears trailed down her cheeks. “You promise?”

“I promise.” Sophie patted her back, before pulling back. “You want tea before bed?”

Ilaria gave a small nod, wiping at her face with her sleeve. She didn’t know when she became so emotional. At home, she almost never cried, especially not in front of her brother. Tears were a sign of weakness in his eyes, and Ilaria was determined for him not to see it. The stress of the last couple of days must be creeping up on her. Between almost dying, Julian’s death, and possibly seeing Antony again, recent events had surely taken their toll on her psyche. And she wasn’t sure what was going to fix it, either—if it could be fixed at all.

She also hadn’t seen Sebastian in three days. Not since he had pulled her out of that burning building. Sophie told her he came later that night to check in on her and to offer his condolences on the loss of Julian, but she was already asleep. There was no part of her that was surprised by his lack of visits.

News of Rudolf’s death spread fast and wide. Soon, an uneasy quiet settled within the palace, and outside it as well. After a walk in the garden one afternoon, Ilaria caught sight of the memorial that had started to grow outside the front gates. People came to leave flowers, candles or even handwritten notes. She hadn’t ventured too close to prevent her presence from being a distraction. It was a display of emotion; of grief she had never seen before. An outpouring of sadness for a man

well beloved by the people around him and the people he served.

Ilaria took her tea with her to the window and settled on the bench there, staring out into the night sky. There was something about it that gave her a certain sense of calm. She wondered what it must feel like to be remembered the way Rudolf was. She thought of his family—the wife who loved him, the daughter who had too little time, the mother who would bury her oldest child, and the brother who had looked to him for guidance. Her heart ached for all of them. Ilaria had grieved the loss of a father gone too soon, a beloved brother who never came home, and the husband who betrayed them all. She knew that pain and loss all too well. And yet, she managed to continue to persevere; to live each day despite the heaviness of the pain and the grief.

Once her tea was cold, she moved away from the window and back into the sitting room. Ilaria should have considered bed a long time ago, but couldn't find herself tired enough to even lay down. She was fidgeting and restless, not really knowing what to do with herself anymore that night.

Just as she was about to resign herself to finally crawling into bed, there was a light tapping on her door. Ilaria frowned as she went to answer it. Sophie had gone to her own bed after she had dropped off the tea, and it was honestly too late for anyone else to come calling.

The last thing she was expecting was a rather disheveled looking Sebastian staring down at her. His eyes were dark and

tired, the grim expression on his face etched into the lines on his forehead. His otherwise full lips were pressed into a hard thin line. He looked almost pale compared to his normal golden tan. Ilaria quickly glanced up and down the hall before grabbing onto his shirt and pulling him inside.

No sooner did the door click into place that Sebastian wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her flush against him. He buried his face in her neck. Ilaria returned his embrace, feeling the tension in his shoulders slowly start to relax. He kissed her neck and nuzzled his nose behind her ear. She ran her fingers through his hair. They clung to each other for several long moments, the weight of the last several days slowly melting away.

When they finally broke apart, Ilaria took hold of his hand and led him over to the sofa. He pulled her down with him and she settled into his lap. Ilaria rested her head on his shoulder, one of his hands resting comfortably on her hip, the other trailing down her neck and shoulder.

“We will bury him at sundown tomorrow,” Sebastian said without any preamble.

Ilaria knew who he spoke of without having to ask. “I’m sorry.”

“Isobel is practically inconsolable. The only time she doesn’t cry is when she is asleep.”

“She is ten years old and just lost her father. It is understandable for her to be upset. I was when mine died, and

I was six. All you can do is be there for her. She will look to you to fill that void until her grief has passed.”

Sebastian gave a sad nod. “I know. Mother has tried her best, even though I see the sadness in her eyes. Johanna is hardly holding it together herself. It’s hard to comfort an upset child when you yourself are still struggling.”

Ilaria ran her hand inside his open shirt, from his shoulder down the well-muscled chest, through the dusting of light hair. She felt the way his pulse accelerated beneath her hand. “What about you?”


“What about me?” he echoed, placing his hand over hers.

“Who's taking care of you, when you're taking care of everyone else?” She peered up at him, her tongue peeking out to lick her lips. She wasn't playing fair, she knew that, but the feeling of him hardening beneath her hip was enough to spur her on. “Let me take care of you.”

Sebastian touched her chin, dipping in for a hard, fast kiss that left her head reeling. She looked into those turbulent eyes, as he rested his forehead against hers. “I need you.”

She ground her hip down against his, earning a rough growl. “Tell me where.”

He reached around her, grabbing a decorative pillow and tossing it by his feet. “On your knees and hands behind your back.”

image-placeholder

Sebastian wasn't sure what he intended when he showed up to Ilaria's room late at night. He needed to get out of his own rooms and out of his own head. She wasn't wrong when she asked who was looking out for him. He had to take care of his family before he could take care of himself.

Or rather, have her take care of him.

Ilaria's bright, blue-green eyes looked up at him with those lush lips wrapped around his aching cock. He rested a hand on the back of her head, sinking his fingers into her hair.

"Fuck," he groaned when she increased her suction, pulling him deeper into her mouth. "You look so pretty like this."

She hummed at his praise, sending another shockwave through his system. He arched his hips up, forcing himself further, finally hitting her gag reflex in the back of her throat. He held her there for a moment with his hand on her head before letting go.

She pulled off, gasping for air, a string of spit hanging from her lips to the tip of his cock. Swirling her tongue against the head again, she stared up at him with an almost predatory smirk. "Do that again."

Sebastian was almost sure he had never been so hard in his entire life until she said those small three words. His dick twitched and pulsed at the promise.

Reaching down, he grabbed a hold of her chin. "Are you sure?" His only answer was an enthusiastic nod. "If you need me to stop, tap my leg twice."

“Yes, Captain,” she responded before resting her forearms on either side of his thighs and dropping her head back down.

Sebastian took her braid and wrapped it around his one hand, the other resting between her cheek and her jaw. She sucked him back into the warm depths of her mouth. Despite her eagerness to please him, Sebastian worked slowly, getting her used to taking him that deeply. He didn’t actually need her to choke, or worse, trigger her gag reflex more than just sputtering. That was an experience he didn’t want to repeat.

He stayed slow, until he had her all the way down; his cock buried down the back of her throat and her nose pressed up against his pelvis. He held her there, feeling the way she spasmed around him and the drool that dripped down from her chin. Pulling her off, he gave her a moment to catch her breath before shoving her head back down again. Her nails bit into the hard muscles of his thighs, but she never tapped out.

There was a certain swell of pride in his chest that his girl could take it.

The thought gave him pause for a moment. He never thought of her as his, at least not like in any permanent sense. But watching how eagerly she took him down, maybe he did want more.

After a couple harder thrusts, he released his hold on her. Ilaria dropped her forehead to his leg, panting for breath and wiping away the spit with the back of her hand.

“Are you ready for your reward, pretty girl?” Sebastian asked, even as he took her under the arms and pulled her back

up into his lap.

He tugged the front of her dress down enough for her breasts to pop free, latching his mouth onto one of her nipples. She let out a breathy moan and Sebastian knew he couldn't wait any longer to have her. He slid a hand between her legs, feeling just how ready she was for him. Grabbing fistfuls of her dress, he yanked them up and repositioned her hips over his.

Ilaria draped her arms around his neck as he lowered her down. He didn't think he would ever tire of the feeling of her wrapped around him, hot and wet. The kiss that followed was all consuming. Pulling her face down to his, he took his time to trace the entire scope of her mouth with his tongue. Her hips rocked back and forth against his, grinding her clit against his body, taking her own pleasure first.

It didn't take long before she was panting and cursing, her pussy clenching in a vice-like grip. Sebastian was sure he had never seen a more beautiful picture in his entire life—the way she unraveled in his lap. He kissed her neck when she threw her head back with a low groan, her orgasm shattering her body.

He didn't even give her a moment to recover before he pulled her against his chest and flipped them over. She gasped in surprise. Her back pressed into the sofa as he loomed over her, still buried to the hilt. Sebastian draped one of her legs over his shoulder, turning his head to kiss her ankle. He took hold of her hands and intertwined their fingers together,

holding them over her head. His nose brushed up against hers as he gazed deeply into her eyes. He had never felt this close to anyone else, not before her.

His thrusts were hard and unrelenting. He enjoyed the way her breasts bounced and rubbed against his chest, the way he could feel her gasping for air. The moans that would no doubt leave her throat aching. The loose strands of hair that escaped her braid and were plastered with sweat against her forehead and neck.

“Give me one more, pretty girl,” he murmured into her ear, before nipping at her earlobe.

She came crashing down as the familiar tingle started at the base of his spine, and his balls drew up closer to his body. He managed to pull himself away at the last moment, spilling all over her thigh.

They stayed like that for a long moment, the sweat cooling from their bodies. Even if they both were still mostly dressed. He pressed one last soft kiss to her lips.

Sebastian pushed himself up in shaking arms. He reached over for his discarded pants and found the handkerchief he had hidden in a pocket (which had been intended for tears). Gently, he cleaned her up before helping her to sit, leaning against the sofa. Her skirts were rearranged around her, and he pulled the front of her dress back up, even if he did want to keep looking at her perfect, soft breasts.

After pulling on his own pants, he did up the buttons on the front of his shirt. Laying back down, he rested his head in her

lap. Ilaria lazily ran her fingers through his hair.

“Maybe I should try and seduce you more often,” she said.

Sebastian couldn't help the smile that stretched across his face. He reached up and trailed a finger along her lower lip. “You don't even need to try. But thank you.”

Her brow furrowed together, and he found it far too endearing. “For what? It's not like we haven't done that before.”

“Not for the sex,” he chuckled. “Though that was wonderful. No, for making me forget about my problems and the sadness, at least for a little while.”

“Well, let me know if you ever want to forget again.”

“Oh, you know I will.”

They stayed like that, in a comfortable silence, for a little while longer before Sebastian noticed her slowly starting to doze off. He carried her off to bed and tucked her in before taking his leave.

What he wouldn't have done to lay down beside her and hold her in his arms as she fell asleep. But those were her rules, and he was not going to disrespect her boundaries. He had a fair idea of why she didn't want anyone in her bed. However, there were two very big things he didn't want to even think about in that matter—her dead husband, and her rather violent older brother.

Thankfully, his chambers weren't too far away from the guest wing of the palace. Rounding a corner, he caught sight

of someone waiting outside his door.

“General Bauer,” Sebastian called out as he drew nearer. “To what do I owe this late visit?”

General Josef Bauer was an old childhood friend of Rudolf and Sebastian. While Rudolf joined the political realm and Sebastian went to sea, Josef joined the military. And from there, he had done very well for himself. So, when Sebastian was forced to choose someone to head the investigation into the cathedral fire, there was no one better than Josef.

Sebastian didn't miss the smirk on Josef's face when he took in his appearance, but he chose to ignore it.

“Bash, we've found something,” Josef started carefully.

Sebastian frowned at the familiar name Josef used. It didn't bode well, if he was coming as a friend in the middle of the night. He opened the doors to his rooms and ushered Josef inside. Sebastian moved around his desk and sank down into his chair. He offered the one on the other side to Josef, who simply shook his head. Instead, he clutched the back of the chair in his hands.

“What do you have to tell me, Josef?” Sebastian asked, afraid that whatever news Josef bore was going to ruin his otherwise pleasant evening.

“As you know, we were following a lead. One I didn't necessarily want to disclose until I was absolutely certain it was the truth, as to not start vicious rumors,” Josef stated. Sebastian noticed the way his knuckles started to turn white.

“And what is that?”

“We took our primary suspect into custody only earlier this evening. He will not utter a single word to anyone except one person,” Josef explained.

Sebastian gritted his teeth. He didn't have the patience for this right now. He was tired and emotionally drained. However, for Josef to decide to do this now as opposed to in the morning, it had to be justified.

“Who?” Sebastian finally forced out when Josef said no more.

Josef sighed. “Ilaria Devarik Petrovitch.”

Sebastian suddenly felt very cold. “Who is it that he would want to speak to her?”

Josef met Sebastian's gaze head-on, and he was not prepared for the answer.

“Her twin, Antony Devarik.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Sebastian wasn't sure if he ever slept. He crawled into bed shortly after Josef had taken his leave, with clear instructions to be back first thing in the morning. However, rest did not come easily to Sebastian. He stared up at the ceiling for the longest time, his mind swirling at an incredible rate.

He thought of Ilaria; of the way she felt pressed against him, of the unspeakable string that connected them. The way her eyes sparkled when she smiled, or the way she sighed when he kissed her. Sure, he had other lovers over the course of his life, and some who even managed to keep him for a time. However, there was something about her; something inherently different than any of the others who had come before her. But when he was with her, that familiar feeling of loneliness washed away. He knew he shouldn't have gotten attached, but she had made it almost too easy. It didn't make sense, though, in light of the news Josef brought.

The thought of Antony Devarik currently in his prison made Sebastian's blood pulse and his head spin. The man was

supposed to be dead. At least that was what he had been led to believe. After meeting with Josef again, he was going to have to go down to the prison himself and figure out what the hell was going on. Even though Antony said he would speak to no one but Ilaria, Sebastian was sure he had ways of making the younger man crack.

Sebastian rolled over and buried his face into his pillow, determined to get some sort of rest. He was doomed for another exceptionally long day.

It might have been five minutes, or it might have been two hours—Sebastian wasn't sure—when he was softly shaken awake again.

“Uncle Bash?” a tiny voice whispered. When he didn't immediately respond, the bed dipped beside him, and she shook him again a little harder. “Uncle Bash!”

He lifted his head from the pillow and pried one eye open. Isobel kneeled on the bed beside him, her big eyes wide and wet. A doll of fabric scraps and buttons for eyes was clenched tightly in her hands.

“What's the matter, sweetpea?” His voice was hoarse from sleep.

“Can I sleep with you? I don't like being in my room alone.” Her lower lip quivered.

Sebastian was grateful he had gone to bed dressed—something that wasn't a normal occurrence for him, but he had been far too tired to change.

He held the blanket back and she crawled in beside him, resting her head on his shoulder. Wrapping his arms around her, he held her close to his chest.

Isobel sniffled as she nuzzled into him. “I miss him so much.”

“I do too. But as long as we remember him, think about him, and hold him in our hearts, he will never leave us.”

There was a long silence, and he was sure she had fallen back asleep. Until he heard her little voice again. “Uncle Bash?” He hummed in acknowledgment. “You won’t leave me, will you?”

Her question made his already battered heart ache even more. He knew he shouldn’t make promises he wasn’t sure he could keep, but the reassurance he could offer would be enough.

He lightly tickled her sides, earning himself a small laugh from her. The sound helped lighten the mood, at least a little bit. “You will be so tired of me; you won’t want me around.”

Isobel giggled in response, followed by a big yawn. “I don’t think that is possible. Thank you for letting me stay.”

Sebastian leaned down to lightly kiss her forehead. “You can stay here anytime you want, okay? Even if I’m not here.”

She nodded, but didn’t respond. Her breathing evened out after a few more minutes, and he knew she was finally asleep.

He followed shortly behind, comforted by her warm presence at his side. There was nothing Sebastian wouldn’t do

for her. While her loss would remain painful for a time, she was young; she would persevere and prosper. He would make sure of it.

As much as he wanted to sleep through the morning, he knew he couldn't. At the first light outside his window, Sebastian found himself awake again. Damn ship time. On board, he was always up with the sun, and had been for every morning of nearly twenty years. Old habits were hard to break.

Isobel still lay sound asleep beside him, curled around her own pillow. He smoothed the hair away from her face. When she didn't wake, he carefully got out of bed and rearranged the blankets around her again.

With one last glance back at her, Sebastian slid back into his office, shutting the door to the bedroom behind him. He would let her sleep for as long as she could.

A tray of food and tea waited for him at his desk. He had to hand it to the old butler; Franz was discreet and efficient. He had learned Sebastian's schedule very quickly and anticipated his needs. At first, Sebastian wasn't entirely sure if he wanted or needed a butler, but Rudolf always spoke highly of Franz. And Sebastian couldn't imagine firing the man after everything that had happened.

He fixed himself a cup of tea and snagged a piece of buttered toast. Gazing out the window, he ran a mental list of all the things he needed to do before attending Rudolf's funeral later that day.

An interruption found him before he was barely through a single piece of toast. The door to his office burst open without so much as a knock. A rather haggard-looking Johanna strode in, her bright hair falling wildly about her shoulders and still wearing her dressing gown.

“Bash,” she pleaded, looking on the verge of tears. “I can’t find her.”

Sebastian held a finger to his lips and jerked his head towards the bedroom door. “She found me in the middle of the night.”

“Of course, she would.” Johanna deflated, dropping down into a chair in front of the desk, burying her face in her hands. “Am I such a terrible mother that she wouldn’t come to me?”

“Johanna, no,” Sebastian sighed. He walked around the table and held his teacup out to her. She shook her head, leaning back in her chair. “She adores you and nothing is going to change that.”

“Then why does it feel like I’m losing her too?”

Sebastian frowned. “Because she came to me for one night? I wouldn’t worry too much about it. She just lost her father, if there is anyone most similar, it would be me.”

“We have to tell her,” Johanna insisted, locking eyes with him.

“Now is not the time.” It was harsher than he intended. “Rudolf isn’t even in his grave and you want to further shatter what little comfort she has left?”

“You know that’s not why.”

“Then tell me why? Because as I have said a hundred times in the last three days, I will not replace Rudolf.”

Johanna surged to her feet and glared up at him. “You promised him as he lay dying that you would tell her, like you promised ten years ago.”

“I agreed on the condition that it would wait until our deaths. How was I to know that day would be before she even came of age? Rudolf wasn’t supposed to die first. I was.” His statement trailed off with a whisper. Sebastian always believed that he would die young, more than likely washed away at sea. That was the future he had seen for himself—definitely not this.

“Listen,” Johanna started quietly, reaching up to touch his face. “None of us wished for this to happen, but we have to accept that it has. And we need to move on as a family.”

Sebastian carefully peeled her hand away. “I’m not her father, Johanna.”

“But you are.”

“Mama?”

Sebastian and Johanna startled when the door to the bedroom creaked open and the little figure stood in the doorway. Isobel rubbed her tired eyes with one hand, the other still tightly clinging to her doll. She looked between her mother and her uncle, a crease forming in her brow.

As much as he didn't want to have to do it—how much he wanted to wait until she was old enough to understand— he promised Rudolf on two separate occasions that he would. The timing was never going to be right, and Sebastian simply had to accept the truth for what it was. No matter how long he tried to pretend otherwise.

He sank back down into his desk chair. “Come here, sweetpea.” He tried to remain calm, despite the fact that he was suddenly sick to his stomach.

Isobel scurried over and climbed up into his lap, and Sebastian wrapped a protective arm around her. Johanna stood behind Sebastian, putting a calming hand on his shoulder.

“What’s the matter, Uncle Bash?” she asked, impervious to the worried look he no doubt wore.

He inhaled sharply through his nose, trying to gather his scattered thoughts. There was no good way of saying this, so he simply prayed to get through it.

“Isobel, you know your papa loved you very much. He also loved your mama and would do absolutely everything he could to make her happy. But your mama and papa had a difficult time making you. So much so, that your papa asked me for my help. They wanted you so bad that I couldn't say no. I helped your mama make you. And when your papa found out you were growing in your mama's tummy, I had never seen him so happy. You are their miracle, and I simply helped make their miracle real. Do you understand?”

If the knot in his stomach wasn't tight enough, it certainly was now. Sebastian watched the wave of emotion dance across her little features, the crease in her brow only growing all the more deeper. She stared up at him with wide eyes, like she had never seen him before in her life.

“So,” Isobel started, licking her lips. “Doesn't that make you my papa instead?”

Johanna reached over Sebastian's shoulder to smooth the hair away from her face. “You have two papas, darling. Uncle Bash who helped make you, and your papa who taught you to walk and talk. Who held you in his arms when you were sick and loved you every day. He will never stop being your father.”

They waited with bated breath to see what she would say next, once it all started to sink in. However, Sebastian's nerves were unfounded. In the span of a few heart beats, Isobel reached up and threw her arms around Sebastian's neck.

“Thank you, Uncle Bash,” she whispered, holding on to him tight. “Thank you for helping make me so my mama and papa could love me.”


“I love you too, sweetpea. Don't ever forget that.”

He held on to her for as long as she wanted. Turning his head, he meant Johanna's eyes over his shoulder.

“Thank you,” she mouthed silently.

All he could do was nod his head. Sebastian wasn't his brother, he knew that. There was no way he would ever

replace Rudolf in Isobel's heart, nor did he want to. She deserved to remember Rudolf the way she always would, and maybe there would be enough room for him afterward.

image-placeholder

After the emotional drainage of the morning, Sebastian wasn't any more prepared for the afternoon. There were only a couple of more hours before he would be present for Rudolf's funeral. In the meantime, he busied himself in meetings with his councilors, each more tedious than the last. All offering him their condolences with sad eyes. By the fourth one, he was of half a mind to throw his drink at the poor man. His patience and tolerance wore thin.

Franz brought him a light lunch that he didn't even bother touching. He didn't have the stomach for food or much else. But he forced himself to grab the pear from his plate. He stood at the window, gazing out into the drizzling clouds. It was going to be wet and miserable, much like his mood.

Sebastian waited for Josef to return with an update on their prisoner. A gnawing feeling crept up into his chest. Facing Antony Devarik was not something he foresaw himself doing, today of all days. To face the man Sebastian's own generals believed was responsible for the fire which took Rudolf's life. Or who was the twin brother of the woman he was currently fucking. Though, Ilaria was far more than that—it wasn't going to make it any less awkward.

A knock at the door drew him out of his dark thoughts. He turned from the window as Josef sauntered in.

“Any updates?” Sebastian asked, discarding his now bare pear core.

“Very much the same. I don’t think he’s moved, let alone blinked.” Josef paused and rubbed his hands together. “He honestly freaks me out a little bit. He will say nothing except to repeat his request for his sister.”

Sebastian gave a solemn nod, cracking the knuckles in both his hands. “Let’s go see if I can loosen his tongue.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The morning sun had long disappeared behind a heavy curtain of dark clouds rolling in from the sea. The constant light drizzle finally ceased as Ilaria slipped out of the palace. Her cloak wrapped tightly around her to keep out the impending chill in the air. It was only right for her to also pay her respects.

She stood a little further away than the other representatives who had remained for Rudolf's funeral. Lars Eklund would leave on the evening tide to head back up to the mountains. Giovanni Rossini had indicated a desire to explore the countryside a bit more before returning home, but he would also be gone by morning. Which only left her and her two sisters-in-law. As far as she knew, they were also going to leave as soon as possible, only staying out of courtesy to attend Rudolf's funeral.

Ilaria still hadn't yet decided when she was going home. Not that she was totally looking forward to being underneath Maxim's thumb again. She finally had a taste of freedom, and she wasn't going to waste it by slinking back off to her brother

so soon. There was still so much she wanted to see, so much she wanted to do; to feel alive in a way she never had before.

The service was kept to a minimum due to the imminent threat of more rain. The murmured prayers were lost to the wind and Ilaria could hear little from where she stood. It didn't matter, though, because she knew those grief-stricken looks all too well. The little girl who tried to hide her tears in her mother's skirt, who was herself openly weeping into a handkerchief. Rudolf's mother had a gentle hand on the woman's shoulder. Sebastian was beside them, his head hung low as he stared into the place where his brother would be laid to rest.

Once everything was said and done, Sebastian reached for the white lily pin that rested on top of Rudolf's coffin. Ilaria recognized it as the one he had worn that day, and the one that perfectly matched Sebastian's. He turned and knelt down in front of his niece and pinned it to the shoulder of her dress. She turned and threw herself into her uncle's arms. Holding her close, he picked her up, her face buried in his neck.

They made a very striking family. The thought made Ilaria's heart ache for them. Even if she were to stay and carry on her affair with Sebastian, where did she fit into that perfect picture? She didn't. She would forever be his dirty little secret, much like he was hers. There was no more than that for them.

With the service complete, Ilaria turned to retire back to her rooms. She only made it a few steps before she was stopped by a man with his hand on her shoulder. She bristled; it wasn't

Sebastian, and no one else had permission to touch her. Whipping around, she stared up into his face, the cold clearly in his eyes.

Before she had a chance to give him a proper tongue lashing, he spoke first. “Ilaria Devarik Petrovitch?”

“Yes, and who are you?”

He removed his hand with the incline of his head. “General Josef Bauer. I have been summoned to fetch you on behalf of Clan Ulrich. I’d ask you to come with me quietly so as to not cause a scene at such a delicate time.”

“Why does this sound like I am being arrested?” Ilaria hissed under her breath.

“Because you are, but I wished to prevent you from the assumed embarrassment, and ask you again to come with me.” His voice started to take on a sharper edge.

“Under what charge am I being arrested, General?” Ilaria’s head started to spin. This wasn’t happening.

“Accessory to commit a heinous crime.”

Ilaria gritted her teeth; getting answers from this man was like trying to squeeze water from a rock. “General, while I appreciate your candor, will you please be straightforward with me as to why I am being arrested and under whose authority you are working? The laws of the Five Clans state as such when matters arise of inter-clan disputes, and I am not a member of Clan Ulrich. These laws also necessitate the requirement to produce a warrant. While your desire for

discretion is marked, I will not go freely when I don't even know what I have been perceived to do as wrong.”

There might have been something noted as a smirk on Josef's face. He stood, squaring his broad shoulders and planting his feet. “I was warned that you had a rather sharp wit. So be it then.” He paused, leveling her with a rather cold glare.

If he thought he was trying to be intimidating, it wasn't going to work on her. Not after twenty-six years of Maxim Devarik. He pulled a folded slip of paper from his jacket pocket and handed it to her. Ilaria snapped the wax seal and unfolded the paper as the General continued to speak.

“Ilaria Devarik Petrovitch, I am placing you under arrest on behalf of Clan Ulrich. You are charged as an accessory to arson in conjunction with the cathedral fire that took the life of Rudolf Hartmann, as well as aiding and abetting one Antony Devarik in the execution of this heinous crime. This is under the direction of the Chieftain of Clan Ulrich, Captain Sebastian Hartmann.”

Ilaria stared numbly at the paper in her now-shaking hands. Every word Josef just said was written plainly for her to read. The now familiar swirl of Sebastian's “S” jumped out at her like a slap in the face.

Somehow, there was no part of her that was surprised by this. Maxim warned her that people would always look to them when something disastrous occurred. The Devariks would be blamed first, before any other option was considered.

Though, the use of Antony's name in the warrant gave her pause. That meant they either suspected him, or already had him in their custody. Ilaria hadn't seen her twin in five years, before seeing his face in a fire pulled from a nightmare. If these accusations held any merit, it meant simply that Antony was alive. Or at least, he was before the fire.

Either way, she was going to have to play nice. There wasn't a doubt in her mind that she could convince Sebastian that she had nothing to do with it.

Ilaria took a deep breath and let it out, folding up the paper. Tucking it into the pocket of her dress, she turned her attention back to Josef.

She held out her wrists. "I suppose you're going to want to cuff me, so I don't try and run away?"

Josef shook his head and held out his arm as an alternative. "I don't think it will be necessary. Unless you plan on something foolish."

"My brother always told me that running away is an admission of guilt, so I don't plan on any such thing," she said, looping her arm through his.

Josef escorted her through parts of the palace she had never seen before. While she wanted to take a moment to revel at her surroundings, she knew this journey ended in a jail cell. The cell itself was small and narrow. A single bed was pushed up against the far wall, a small table with two chairs set off to one side, and the only window was easily eight feet off the ground

and covered with thick metal bars. The stone walls and floor were a dark grey, and rather depressing.

Ilaria stepped into the small room and looked around. It was clean, she would give them that. No dust on the furniture, no spiders crawling on the walls, and no dried blood stains on the floor. Maxim's prison cells were significantly more terrifying compared to this.

She pulled her cloak from her shoulders and draped it over the bed before sinking down into one of the chairs. Resting her elbows on the table, she laid her chin in her hand. Josef stared at her from the doorway.

"I suppose you have an entire list of questions already drawn up for me. If it pleases you, I would be more than happy to dispense of this formality as soon as possible," Ilaria stated.

Josef shut the door behind him and settled down on the chair before her. He pulled a folded pile of papers, a pen, and a thin pair of reading glasses from the inside of his jacket. The glasses perched at the edge of his nose, and Ilaria would have laughed if there was any humor in this situation.

She was too tense. The fluttering of her stomach intensified tenfold and the pounding of her heart echoed in her ears.

Josef started with the most basic of questions, and thankfully asked several at one time. Ilaria answered in kind.

"My name is Ilaria Devarik Petrovitch of Clan Drakos. My elder brother is the Chieftain of Drakos, Maxim Devarik, and my twin brother is Antony Devarik. My late husband was

Dimitri Petrovitch of Clan Ivanov, the younger brother of their Chieftain, Natasha Petrovitch Velenskyy. He died a little over a year ago after seven years of marriage.” Ilaria paused, licking her lips. This was beyond awkward.

“Thank you,” Josef said, quickly jotting down everything she said. “Now, let’s start at the beginning. When and how did you arrive at Clan Ulrich?”

“I arrived about a week ago. My original passage had left without me, so I found alternate accommodations, which happened to be on board a ship run by Captain Sebastian Hartmann.” Ilaria went on to explain that neither knew who the other was until the dinner on the day they docked. Everything that happened on the ship, she kept to herself.

“When was the last time you saw Antony Devarik?” Josef peered up at her over the rim of his glasses.

“Five years ago.”

“Will you care to elaborate?”

“The last time I saw Antony was five years ago, shortly after we had turned twenty-one. He came to me one night saying he was leaving in the morning on an errand for Maxim.”

“Where did he go?”

“I don’t know.”

“Who did he associate with?”

“I don’t know.”

“What happened after he left?”

Ilaria sighed, sitting back in her chair. “Antony was gone for about three months, without so much as a letter to me. He would normally at least write.”

“What happened then?”

“Maxim called me into his office one evening after dinner. Now, Maxim is generally serious by default, but I could tell that something was a little off. He sat me down and told me that Antony was dead.”

“How did he die?”

“It was believed to have been some sort of fire, or maybe a wild animal got to him. Maxim didn’t have any definitive answers either. All he told me was that some charred bones had been found, and they were believed to have been Antony, based on nearby possessions.”

Josef scribbled notes down. There was a long pause as he shuffled some of the papers again. “And you testify that you have not seen him for even a moment since that day five years ago?”

Ilaria frowned. Part of her felt like this was a trap to get her to say something to incriminate herself. She was not going to be tricked into anything. She wondered as to the wisdom of telling him about seeing Antony in the fire, not knowing if it would help or hinder her cause. In the end, she opted for the complete truth. Even if Josef didn’t believe her, Sebastian was going to.

“I saw him the day of the fire.”

Josef jerked his head up. “When and where?”

The shadowy figure she had seen before the service might have been him, but it was only when the figure was outlined in flames that she was absolutely certain it had been Antony.

“After the initial blast, my bodyguard knocked me to the ground and he died in the aftermath. I was rendered senseless and when I came to, the entire place was up in flames. I tried to get out by feeling my way around the walls. I was in the knave when the windows started to shatter. I saw him then, some distance in front of me, surrounded by flames. I didn’t see much after that.”

“Are you sure what you saw was your Antony?”

“I cannot, without a shadow of a doubt. I may have seen him because he was actually there, or because I inhaled so much smoke that I hallucinated him.”

Josef cocked his head to one side. “Are you known to have hallucinations?”

Ilaria thought of her nightmares, but those wouldn’t be called hallucinations.

“No. Though in the face of fear, grief, and the possibility of imminent death, the mind has been known to play games. Maybe my subconscious thought seeing Antony would bring me comfort before I died.”

“How did you escape the fire?”

“Captain Hartmann pulled me out.”

“Are you suggesting that the Chieftain of Clan Ulrich raced back into a burning building to rescue you?”

“I’m not suggesting,” Ilaria said. “I know he pulled me out. Ask him if you don’t believe me.”

He hummed low in his throat as he wrote this down. A few more shuffles ensued before he started again.

“Last set of questions, to establish your whereabouts for a couple of key nights. Where were you the night before the fire?”

“At the dinner with the other Clan representatives.”

“And after that?”

“In my room.”

“Were you alone?”

Ilaria bit the inside of her cheek. She hadn’t been alone.

“No.”

“Who were you with?”

“That is none of your damn business!” Ilaria snapped before she could stop herself. This entire line of questioning felt incredibly invasive, and she was not going to stand for it. What she did in her private time was none of the General’s concern.

“Excuse me, I do believe it is. Now who were you with?”

“I refuse to answer.”

Josef set his pen aside, and steeping his fingers, he fixed her with a hard look across the table. “You have to, unless you have something to hide.”

“I have nothing to hide,” she bit back.

“Then shall we assume guilt by omission?”

Ilaria growled, rising to her feet to lean against the table. “No.”

“Fine, then where were you last evening?”

Ilaria felt her heart drop into the pit of her stomach. Both of these nights were spent in Sebastian’s company. This was impossible.

“In my room,” she eventually ground out, knowing what the next question was going to be.

“Were you alone?”

“No.”

“Who were you with?”

Ilaria tried a new tactic. “Am I the only person who has been subjected to this line of questioning?”

“So far, yes.”

“And the Chieftain has offered no insights to you about any of this?”

“Why would he disclose anything to me about your whereabouts?”

Ilaria gritted her teeth. There was no way around this. She was going to have to admit to something she didn't want to. Worse, it was the very thing she had made Sebastian promise not to tell. A small flicker did pass through her mind that he hadn't disclosed anything to even Josef.

She chose her words carefully and whispered through a clenched jaw. "Because he was with me."

"Who was with you?"

Ilaria pushed away from the table, taking a few steps back to put space between them. The backs of her legs hit the frame of the bed, and she knew she couldn't go any further.

"Spirits preserve me," she murmured to herself before giving Josef her full attention. She took a deep inhale. "On the nights in question, I was in my room. Captain Hartmann was with me on both occasions. We're fucking. Don't believe me, then go ask him yourself. Now, get the fuck out. I'm done."

Josef actually looked a little startled, which only reaffirmed Ilaria's opinion that Sebastian hadn't told him. He opened and closed his mouth twice before giving up on speech. He folded up all his papers and tucked them away. He murmured a quiet farewell as he slipped out of the cell. The door closed heavily behind him, the unmistakable click of a lock echoing through the now quiet space.

Ilaria seethed. How dare Sebastian do this to her, put her in this position? Lying was no longer an option, but sometimes the truth was even more difficult to swallow. The General learned that the hard way, that was for certain.

She turned around and grabbed the pillow from the bed and threw it across the room. It landed with a soft plop only a couple of feet away. There might have been humor in it if she wasn't so angry.

Part of her wondered if Sebastian would confirm or deny her admission. At this point, she almost didn't care. She said it out loud. She admitted to having sex with the new Chieftain of Clan Ulrich. Somehow, saying it aloud made it seem that much more real. Yes, they had a physical agreement, but for someone else to actually know gave it a sort of finality that Ilaria wasn't prepared for. She wanted to believe it was just sex. She told herself it was just sex.

Then why was she craving his attention?

She threw herself down on the bed and screamed into the blanket. This misery she had brought into herself, she knew that.

The click of the lock and the opening of the door signaled she once again had company.

Ilaria didn't even raise her head from the bed to see who it was.

"Get the fuck out." The words were muffled by the blanket.

"Ilaria?"

The shock that ran through her forced her out of the bed like she had been struck by lightning. Some of her hair had fallen free from her braid and fell into her eyes. Shoving them away, she glared at Sebastian, who stood in the doorway. He was still

dressed from the service, even if the jacket was opened on top. Her heart hurt just looking at him.

“Are you here to mock me too?” she hissed.

“Ilaria,” he stared.

“Don’t fucking say my name!” she shouted, interrupting him. The prick of angry tears pressed at the corners of her eyes. She was still too emotionally raw to see him right now. “You lost that privilege when you signed a warrant for my arrest. When you had your General question me like I was a petty thief.”

“I had to do it. Ilaria, I’m being watched at every turn. If I mishandle this investigation, my people will never forgive me, nor will they let me forget it. My entire rule hinges on these moments. I have to do everything according to every rule in the book. There cannot be any missteps.”

“Then why this charade? Because you cannot possibly think I had anything to do with that fire.”

“It cannot look like I’m showing you any favor. You had to exonerate yourself, so that we can move past this.” Damn him and his stupid logic.

“Then why did your General want to know where I was on two of the nights I shared with you?”

Sebastian sucked in an audible breath. “What did you tell him?”

“The truth! I told him that we’ve been fucking. Are you happy now? Was it your goal to completely humiliate me?”

“Is that all you think it is?” Sebastian asked, his voice softer and quieter than she expected.

“Excuse me?” She wiped angrily at a tear that managed to escape.

“Is that all you think we have been doing? Fucking?” Sebastian repeated his question, taking several steps closer to her. Ilaria backed up until her back hit one of the stone walls. He crowded her space, placing his hands on either side of her head. “Don’t get me wrong, I love having you under me, panting and moaning. Begging for more. But you can’t say it has meant nothing. That you feel absolutely nothing for me. Because you drive me crazy.”

“Sebastian, I—” Ilaria stopped, biting her lip and staring up at him. The conviction was evident in his eyes, along with the warmth that radiated through them. She wanted to lie and tell him it meant nothing. That she didn’t think about him. That she didn’t crave his touch. But she knew it would be a lie. She smoothed her hands over the front of his jacket, feeling his increased breathing. “You matter to me.”

His lips crushed against hers, sucking the very air out of her lungs. She kissed him back with equal fervor, their tongues meddling together like it was the most natural thing in the world. His hand cupped the side of her face and the simple touch burned through the coldness she surrounded herself in.

Sebastian pulled away first, resting his forehead against her and staring into her eyes. She thought he might actually be

looking into her soul. His perfectly formed lips turned up into something of a smile, his thumb lightly stroking her cheek.

“You matter to me, too,” he whispered back. He pulled away and reached for her hand, dragging her to the door. “Come, there is someone who wants to see you.”

“Who?” Ilaria asked, picking up her feet to keep up with his long strides.

“Antony.”

Ilaria stopped dead in her tracks. “Wait, what? Is Antony alive? And you have him here?”

“Yes and yes. He was brought into custody yesterday evening. I only found out about it after I left your room,” Sebastian explained. “And he will speak to no one but you. You are all he has been asking for.”

When Sebastian gave a small tug on her arm, she hurried along beside him. Only a few doors down from her cell was where Sebastian stopped. He pulled the key from his pocket and turned the lock, holding the door open for her.

“Thank you,” she whispered to him. “You don’t know how much this means to me.”

Sebastian placed a hand on her arm before she could walk past him. “I cannot leave you alone with him.”

While Ilaria wanted her privacy, she understood why she couldn’t have it. She gave him a small nod before stepping into the small cell.

The figure sat on the floor, his cloak wrapped tightly around him and a bandage covering much of the right side of his face. The pale, milky eye staring ahead and unfocused.

“Antony?” Ilaria whispered, kneeling down at his side, reaching out to touch his shoulder.

He jerked his eye up to hers, the recognition in that one eye burning brightly.

“Ilaria?” Hearing her name again from his lips made her heart skip a beat.

“I’m here, Antony.”

His hand shot out and he grabbed her. Before either she or Sebastian could respond, he enveloped her in a tight embrace, his face buried in her neck, his tears soaking her skin.

His words were broken when he spoke.

“I’m so sorry.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sebastian stood off to one side, a shoulder propped up on the wall. Ilaria could feel his eyes watching them, but she didn't care. She cradled her twin in her arms, playing with the ends of his scraggly hair.

After the first outburst of emotion, Antony was quiet, leaning against Ilaria for support. He was thin and she could see where his collarbone protruded from his chest. This was not how she remembered him. Antony normally would have rivaled Sebastian in size; broad across the chest and shoulders, but several inches taller. The years of training he put in to achieve a stocky build had all but seemed to have melted away.

“What happened to you?” she whispered against his hair, sure that he wouldn't have heard her. But he did.

Antony turned his head enough so he could see her. “Life happens, Ilaria.”

“That hardly explains anything,” she scoffed.

Antony stared off at Sebastian for a moment, before turning his attention back to his sister. He shrugged. “You haven’t seen me in five years, Ilaria. People are bound to change. You have.”

“Be that as it may, you are easily half your regular size,” Ilaria quipped.

“I haven’t—” Antony stopped.

“What’s the matter, Antony?”

He jerked his head in Sebastian’s direction. “Can we talk freely in front of him?”

Ilaria was more surprised by the question than she thought she would be. Sebastian wasn’t going to leave them alone—he had made that clear—but it still wouldn’t deter her from talking to Antony. After so many years, she needed to know more—where he’s been, what he’d done. The all too familiar ache in her chest when she thought of him seemed to ease now that he was here again.

Ilaria met Sebastian’s gaze before responding, “Yes, we can.”

“Good,” Antony replied. “Because this is probably the nicest dungeon I’ve ever been in. Clean, fresh, no rodents to chew on your toes.”

Ilaria couldn’t help the chuckle. “I thought the same thing.”

Antony rolled his one eye. “Yes, well, you and I spent too much time as children wandering around where we should not

have. I don't think Maxim ever forgave us for getting locked in that cell."

Ilaria shuttered at the memory. They had been no more than ten years old, thinking they were important and brave— or rather, dared the other to sneak down where Maxim had held his prisoners. The stench of bodily fluids was enough to almost make them throw up, and the blood was still slick beneath their feet. When they thought they heard a guard coming, they jumped into an empty cell, the door slamming shut and locking behind them.

"We were stuck in there for six hours before anyone found us. Maxim was furious. He wouldn't let me see you for two weeks," Ilaria recalled.

Something crossed Antony's face that Ilaria couldn't place, and he shivered. "I believe you got locked in your room for the same amount of time."

"Why locked in a room?" Sebastian's question startled her; she hadn't realized he planned on participating in the conversation.

"You have to understand," Ilaria said. "We were six and Maxim was sixteen when our father died. Maxim insisted that he was capable of being Chieftain in his own right, without the need for a proxy until he came of age. As a result, he became our legal guardian."

"And Maxim Devarik knew nothing of children," Antony picked up where Ilaria left off. "His answer to our misbehavior, brought on by lack of guidance, was to lock us in

our rooms and not allow us to see each other. Being separated from your twin was more than we could bear at the best of times.”

“Were there no children your own age?” Sebastian asked with a frown.

Ilaria shook her head. “No, all we had was each other, our nannies, and our guards. That’s what Sophie and Julian were to me.”

“At least Sophie and Julian were nice,” Antony snorted. “Tessa and Lucius were miserable. At least they went away when I went to the barracks.”

“And you left me!” Ilaria pinched his arm.

“Trust me, you didn’t want to be there either.”

Antony groaned as he tried to sit more upright. Ilaria helped him up and into a nearby chair, and he landed heavily in it. He made it seem like he wanted to wipe his face, but stopped with a hiss when he touched the bandages on his right cheek.

“Antony,” Ilaria stared carefully, sitting down in the chair in front of him. She held her palms out on the table and he grasped her hands. His nails dug into her wrists. “What happened to your face?”

“You know, there was this fire recently.” Antony’s humor was ill-placed, and Ilaria glared over at him.

“That fire killed Julian, and Sebastian’s brother. So, I would mind what you are trying to make light of,” Ilaria hissed at him.

“Indeed,” Sebastian intoned from his place at the wall.

“I’m sorry, that was in poor taste. I caught sight of you, and it hindered me. When the roof collapsed, burning embers jumped up at me. Since they were on the side of my blind eye, I didn’t see them coming.” Antony blinked his milky white eye.

“And what about your eye?” Ilaria wanted to get away from talk of the fire, at least right now. There would be time enough for that later once they were more comfortable with each other again.

“Oh this?” Antony waved his hand in the direction of the right side of his face. “When you are punched too many times in the same place, one of those times, something is bound to break. It doesn’t really bother me all that much anymore.”

Ilaria didn’t like the nonchalant attitude he had about his injury, and wasn’t sure if he was even telling the truth. How would he have gotten punched in the face enough times to cause him to lose his sight? She knew he was more than capable of defending himself.

“Antony—”

“Ilaria, don’t,” he cut her off. Letting go of her hands, he stood from his chair. “I’m tired.”

Ilaria frowned. She didn’t like this one bit. He evaded her question and was shutting her out. She knew she shouldn’t push her luck, since there was so much more she wanted to know. But there would be enough time. She too rose and gave

him a small nod. Sebastian appeared beside her and took her arm.

“We shall leave you then,” Sebastian said, pulling Ilaria towards the door. “I’ll have something to eat sent down to you.”


“Thank you. Will I see you again soon?” Antony asked, even as he sank down onto his small bed.

“In the morning?” It came out more as a question as she looked at Sebastian for confirmation and he gave a small smile. “I’ll come back in the morning. We can break our fast together.”

With that, they left Antony once more to his solitude. The heavy door locked in place and Sebastian stashed the key back in his pocket.

“Come,” he said. “We should find ourselves something to eat.”

All Ilaria could manage was a small nod of agreement. Even if food was the furthest thing from her mind.

image-placeholder

Sebastian had dinner sent to his rooms. Why he felt like bringing Ilaria there as opposed to back to her own rooms, he wasn’t quite sure. Maybe it was because she finally admitted that he meant something to her. That he was more than a means for personal gratification. So, to see her in his space brought a wave of feeling he didn’t know he had been hiding.

She gazed around the room, taking in the wall of bookcases off to one side and the stunning view of the harbor from his window. Her fingers trailed over the smooth wood of his father's desk. She looked like she had always belonged there.

Sebastian stood at the sideboard, pouring them each a glass of a sweet cherry wine. It would pair well with the roast duck that the kitchen was sending up.

He slid up behind her and reached around, offering her the glass. She murmured her thanks as she took it from him. Bringing it to her lips, he watched, riveted, as she took a small sip and her eyes grew wide.

“This is delicious.”

Sebastian pressed his chest up against her back and trailed the tip of his tongue over the shell of her ear. “Not as much as you.”

Her hum of satisfaction vibrated through him.

A knock on the door pulled them apart. Sebastian tried to hide his suddenly dry throat in his glass of wine as Franz swept in and out of the room with their dinner, with barely an acknowledgment. Sebastian was going to have to give the man a raise.

As soon as they were alone again, Sebastian ushered her over to the table.

“This will be better than the ship's food,” he commented. He also didn't think he could watch her eat anymore soup without wanting to fuck her senseless afterward.

Removing the covers from the food, he revealed a plate of roast duck, crispy potatoes, and braised red cabbage.

“There was nothing wrong with your ship’s cook,” Ilaria said, taking a bite of duck. The sound she made was almost obscene. “This is so good. Are you going to eat?”

Sebastian realized he hadn’t even touched his food, too busy watching her across the table. “Not when you are such a distraction.”

Her fork paused halfway to her mouth, and the smirk that formed there was almost his undoing.

“At least,” she said, taking the bite. “It’s not more soup.”

It was like this woman could read his mind. Sebastian gave a small chuckle before digging into his dinner as well. They ate in a comfortable silence until both their plates were emptied. They stacked them back on the tray and Sebastian left them outside his door. There was no need for them to be interrupted.

Ilaria cleared her throat and looked at him over the rim of her wine glass.

“Do you honestly think he did it?” she asked.

Sebastian downed the rest of his wine, reaching for the bottle to replenish both their glasses. This was not a question he was expecting or even really knew the answer to.

“I don’t think there is a question as to if he did it,” Sebastian started slowly. “It’s more of a question as to why, to what end, and under whose authority. You said it yourself, he is half the

size he used to be, and I believe your assessment. He had nothing personal to gain by setting that fire.”

Ilaria tapped her fingers on the table. “I suppose you’re right. I think I’m having a hard time wrapping my mind around him actually doing it, though. Antony was never a violent person, not like Maxim.”

“But time, distance, and influence can all fundamentally change a person. I know you still want to see your twin in him, but it might just not be.” It was a hard truth that had to be said, even if he didn’t want to burst her hopes at having Antony back.

Ilaria sighed. She reached up and pulled the pins from her hair, letting them fall in soft curls around her shoulders. He wanted his fingers to be the ones running through the dark mass instead of her own.

“I know,” she finally admitted. “I want to know why just as much as you do. To find closure after the horrific events of that day. But you saw how skittish he became when I started asking about his eye. How are we ever going to get him to actually open up?”

Physical violence was not going to get Antony to talk—Sebastian already tried that intimidation tactic the previous evening. Antony had the audacity to practically laugh in his face, once again refusing to speak to anyone other than Ilaria.

Sebastian pushed back from the table and patted his leg. “Come here.”

Ilaria scurried over and settled down in his lap. One arm wound around her waist and the other buried into her hair, grabbing a fistful at the nape of her neck. He pressed a featherlight kiss to her forehead, the tip of her nose, and a peck at her lips.

“You are going to have to get him to talk,” Sebastian murmured against her mouth. “He trusts no one but you. It’s going to take time, and you might not like the answers he has to give. But know, I will keep his presence here as much of a secret as we can until we get those answers. After which, Antony’s fate is out of our hands. Much like you had to absolve yourself, he is going to have to do the same.”

Ilaria nodded, burying her face in his neck and wrapping her arms around his shoulders.

“I wish it didn’t have to be this way. I never thought that after all this time, this is how Antony and I would meet again. We were inseparable as children, and now as adults, it seems strange to think we will no longer walk the same path.”

“I know,” he whispered into her hair. “I thought my brother would be with me through this too. But such is the way of life.”

“I’m sorry—”

“Don’t,” Sebastian interrupted her. “If I have to listen to one more person express their sympathies or condolences, I might actually scream.”

Ilaria hummed, pressing her lips to the vein in the side of his neck. His fingers tightened in her hair. “Tell me how I can make you feel better.”

“Keep that up,” he growled into her ear. “And you will find yourself over my desk with your skirts about your waist.”

Her teeth scraped against the underside of his chin. “Perfect. But first, I ask for a favor?”

“Anything.” He pulled back enough to see the smile on her face, a sight he didn’t think he would ever tire of.

She ran her hands over his shoulders. “Will you play something for me?”

Sebastian thought his heart couldn’t beat any faster. How had he found someone so perfect for him? “You never have to ask.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Ilaria ran her fingers through the ends of her hair as Sophie tied up the back of her dress. Sebastian would be coming for her any minute to go back down to Antony's cell.

She hadn't slept much the previous night, despite almost doing so while listening to Sebastian's violin. There was something so soothing about the sound; the masterful way the bow moved across the strings, the way his fingers slid up and down the neck, pulling out sounds she never thought possible. When he finished, he walked her back to her room. Ilaria spent the rest of the night staring up at the canopy above her bed.

Ilaria hadn't the faintest idea on how to get Antony to confide in her, the way they always had when they were younger. So much had changed in the last five years that even finding a good starting place was going to be difficult.

Sophie finished lacing up the dress and ushered Ilaria over to the vanity to start doing up her hair. Ilaria met her eyes in the mirror, and something seemed to spark. Sophie told her on the ship that there were things she didn't know—things Sophie heard but couldn't share.

Maybe now she could get Sophie to open up.

“Sophie?” Ilaria started carefully. When Sophie hummed her acknowledgement, Ilaria continued. “Do you know anything about Antony from when we were children?”

The brush stilled in her hand. “Why do you ask, little bird?”

“I find myself thinking of him more lately. And I wanted to remember more things about him.”

“Oh, I didn’t see him after I retired, and then he disappeared two years later,” Sophie commented. “Antony wasn’t my charge, but Tessa would seek my advice sometimes.”

Ilaria frowned. “What about?”

“All sorts of things. Maybe because I was a bit older than she was, and she thought I was more experienced. Or maybe because you weren’t my first charge, unlike her. She had never raised a child before Antony.” Sophie resumed her brushing bit, but said no more.

“How was it that I had you and Tessa had Antony? Why were we not raised together?” Ilaria asked, hoping the question would prompt Sophie into saying more.

“When your mother died, your father thought it best for each of you to have our own caregiver, so that one person's attention wasn’t too far stretched. You were the calmest, gentlest baby. You almost never cried, and you were always laughing. Antony was more difficult. He never settled down. The only time he was ever content was when he was beside you. Even as you grew older, you were his reason for living.”

“What do you mean?” Ilaria asked, before she even began to process what Sophie said.

Sophie set the brush down and finished doing Ilaria's hair. She took her hand and pulled her over to the bed. Sitting down, she took Ilaria's hands in her own. Ilaria blinked at Sophie slowly, wondering what she was going to say.

“Now, there are so many things I should tell you, since Antony has been gone for so long. You deserve to know. Antony was forever dedicated to you. He followed you everywhere, he had to be where you were. He was your perpetual shadow, but I'm sure I don't have to remind you of that.”

Ilaria shook her head with a sad smile. “No, I wanted him around nearly as much. When Maxim would separate us, it was more difficult than most other punishments.”

Sophie's fingers tightened. “It was so much more than that. Antony took all your other additional punishments onto himself.”

“What?” Ilaria gasped.

“Yes,” Sophie whispered. “It started after you two managed to disappear in the dungeons.”

Ilaria and Antony only talked about that incident the night before. Apparently, Sophie knew more about it than Ilaria. “I remember that. Maxim wasn't happy when he found us.”

Sophie shook her head, her fingers tightening. “Tessa and I were beside ourselves when we couldn't find you. We didn't

even want to tell your brother, but we had to. Maxim was beyond furious that we seemingly lost you. When you were found and taken to your rooms, Maxim went to Antony first to find out what happened. Antony took the entire blame, said that it was his idea and he had to talk you into it.”

“But that simply wasn’t true,” Ilaria protested. “We dared each other.”

“I know that, but Antony convinced Maxim it was his fault and he took the punishment,” Sophie’s voice wavered.

Ilaria could see the tears in Sophie’s eyes, and it made her own burn too. “We were separated for two weeks.”

“You were separated so you wouldn’t see Antony.” Sophie paused with a heavy sigh. “So, you wouldn’t see what happened to him.”

“Sophie,” Ilaria started, her voice breaking. “What happened to Antony?”

The tears slid down Sophie’s cheeks. “Maxim viciously beat him, while Tessa and I were forced to watch, so we would know what would happen if we slacked on our duties again. He sustained a black eye, a busted lip, and his ribs ached for weeks. He was a child! A foolish child. He didn’t deserve that. But that was only the beginning of Antony’s suffering.”

Ilaria felt her heart breaking. “But why would he—”

A knock on the door disturbed her line of thought.

Sophie stood, dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief before going to answer the door. Ilaria trailed behind her.

Sebastian greeted them with a light smile. Sophie ushered him into the room before gazing back at Ilaria for a second before taking her leave.

Ilaria's lower lip trembled. Sebastian gently touched her cheek, trailing his thumb over that lip. He tilted his head to the side, the tenderness in his gaze making her heart beat that much faster. She stepped into the safe confines of his arms, resting her forehead on the hollow of his throat. He somehow still smelled of the sea, mixed with the refreshing tang of his shaving soap.

Ilaria didn't know when things had shifted between them; when he became more to her than simply a lover, and that she would turn to him for solace and comfort. There was something about him that drew her in and made her trust him.

Maybe it was that he had risked his own life for hers.

"I never thanked you for saving my life," Ilaria murmured against his skin.

His arms tightened around her waist. "You don't have to."

"But I want to anyway," she replied. "So, thank you. And thank you for letting me have time with my brother. Sophie said something to me this morning and I think I can get him to open up."

He ran a hand down her back. "What did she tell you?"

Keeping her face hidden in his throat, Ilaria recounted what Sophie told her in the same amount of excruciating detail. Somehow, saying it made it more real—made it a fact instead

of this idea in her head. It didn't make it any easier to think about. If anything, it only made it worse.

Sebastian nodded as he pulled away slowly. He touched her cheek again and pressed his lips to her forehead.

“Hopefully, it's enough of a start,” Sebastian said. “Let's go see him and find out what he has to say.”

Ilaria took his offered arm. They walked in silence down to Antony's cell. Her mind still spun. She wanted to be calm; she wanted to be able to talk to him without freaking him out. Having him shut down was going to do no one any favors. But as soon as she stepped into the room and saw him again, all bets were off.

Antony remained seated on his bed, his head leaning against the wall, his bad eye turned in their direction. It wasn't until the door closed behind them with a click that he turned to acknowledge them.

Ilaria rushed over to his side before she could stop the impulse. Seeing him again—seeing how broken he was—made Ilaria wonder. There was no way he survived on his own for the last five years.

She grabbed him tightly by the shoulders and stared into his face.

“Why the fuck did you do it?” she asked in a harsh whisper.

Antony frowned in response and answered with a question of his own. “What are you talking about?”

“Why did you take my punishment after the incident in the dungeons?” Her tone was firm and insistent. She had to know.

Antony pulled away with more strength than she believed him to have and leaned against the wall. He glared down at her. The chill in his voice sent a shiver down her spine. “Do not ask questions you do not want the answers to.”

“Antony,” she started carefully. “Sophie told me. She told me what Maxim did to you. Why would you take that for me?”

His one eye grew wide and a visible tremor raked his form. His chest heaved with the breaths he took and his shoulders slouched over.

“Because you are the other half of me,” he whispered, low and sad. “We are two sides of the same coin, you and I. If I could save you from that pain, I would do it. And I did, over and over again. Then you didn’t have to feel the weight of his fists or the sting of his belt.”

Ilaria felt her mouth fall open. She caught Sebastian shuffling his feet at the far side of the room. Even if she had told him all of this before they came down here, it was different coming from Antony’s lips.

“Antony,” Ilaria said, but stopped. She didn’t even know what to say.

“Ilaria, listen to me.” Antony pushed away from the wall and knelt down in front of her. He held out his hands like he wanted to touch her, but pulled them away. “Everything I have ever done has been for you. I took our punishment because the

thought of him laying a hand on you made me physically ill. The thought of him hurting you was more than I could bear.”

“Then why are you here?” Sebastian interjected from the other side of the room.

Antony snapped his gaze up over Ilaria’s shoulder to Sebastian. He pressed his lips into a thin line as he sat back on his heels.

“As a warning,” Antony replied. He turned his attention back to his sister. Ilaria saw the moisture gathering in his eye until it trailed down his unmarred cheek. She brushed it away, but he grabbed a tight hold of her wrist.

“For what?” Ilaria asked when he offered up no more information.

Antony started to tremble. “Listen to me, you are not safe. I’ve tried and I’ve failed you.”

“You’ve never failed me. I don’t know what you are talking about.” Ilaria felt the pressure building behind her eyes, the splitting headache becoming inevitable as she tried to process what he was trying to tell her.

His grip on her wrist intensified and it began to throb. He leaned in, bringing his mouth closer to her ear. His whisper was so quiet she almost missed it, but she knew what he was saying was for her ears only.

“You cannot go home. If you go back to him, your life will become as miserable as mine has become. My life would be forfeit, and he would see no further use for me.”

Ilaria reeled back.

“What?” she hissed.

Antony gave a grim nod. “You have to defect. You have to relinquish your standing within Drakos. You have to find a way to stay safe. Please, for me, say you will defect.”

Ilaria didn't know how to respond. None of it made any sense to her. Nothing Antony said computed with what she knew, or believed to have known, about Maxim.

Was she really safer if she never went home?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The sky was painted red, orange and yellow; the underside of the clouds a vibrant pink. He felt lighter being out here; to be able to hear the cry of the birds overheard and the crashing waves. To be able to fill his lungs with the salty air. This was where he had always felt the most at home.

Sebastian thought about how much had changed in the almost three weeks it had been since he was down here last. Since he raced Isobel down the shoreline. How he went from being blissfully ignorant the last time he stood in this spot, to being made Chieftain and losing Rudolf. And finding her.

Sebastian dropped to the sand, burying his head in his hands. He didn't know what to do. He plucked her out on a whim that day off the dock, dazzled by a pretty face, looking for a distraction. Oh, did he find one. And the shock and surprise he felt when he found out she was Maxim Devarik's sister— but she was so much more.

Ilaria stood on her own, away from her family name. He admired her for that. He admired her strength and conviction. Her love of music matched his own. When they were together,

it was easy and comfortable. Every intimate moment they shared was always better than the last. All he wanted to do was run his hands through her dark, red-tinted hair, and trail his lips over the curve of her neck.

Sebastian groaned, dropping his hands.

He was doomed.

He was never going to be able to let her go.

When Antony tried to convince her to defect that morning, Sebastian felt something splinter inside him. If she defected, she could stay here. She could stay with him. The thought alone terrified him more than he thought. It terrified him to think that he could have what he wanted: her and nothing else.

He knew what he wanted to do. The question was if he had the guts to do it.

There was only one person he could go to who would be able to give him some sort of perspective. Someone who would, hopefully, not talk him out of it.

Rising out of the sand, he headed back to the palace. Thankfully, it was late enough that no one really noticed him slipping in. He traversed the halls until he reached the door he sought.

Sebastian took a deep breath before giving a sturdy knock. He hoped she was still awake.

The door creaked open.

“Bash?” Amalie asked, poking her head through the opening. She must have taken one look at his face and knew something was wrong.

“I hope I’m not disturbing you,” Sebastian muttered.

“Never.” Amalie gave him a soft smile before ushering him inside. As soon as the door was shut, he pulled her into a tight embrace. Her fingers ran through his hair at the nape of his neck. “What’s the matter, my son?”

“I need someone to talk to.”

Amalie squeezed his shoulders, leaning back to get a good look at him. Sebastian suddenly felt like a child again under his mother’s scrutiny. She led him over to one of the sofas and made him sit.

“You can always talk to me. Shall I have tea sent up or is this talk going to need something stronger? Oh wait! I have just the thing.” She scurried over to a small cabinet, pulling out a bottle of a clear liquor with a whole pear floating in it. Pouring some into two glasses, she handed one to Sebastian and kept the second for herself. “Your father always had a bottle of this on hand. He said it made his thinking clearer when he was troubled.”

Sebastian inhaled the crispy scent of the pear before taking a sip. The brandy was sweet, but not overly so. The flavor of ripe pear lingered on his tongue, and a slight spice crept up the back of his throat, leaving behind a comfortable warmth. He remembered his father drinking this—or rather, he

remembered the floating pear in the bottle. The concept always fascinated him.

“Thank you,” he said.

Amalie settled down in a chair across from him, sipping slowly from her own glass. “What has you so troubled?”

Sebastian took another drink, not knowing where to start. By disclosing his relationship—or whatever it was—with Ilaria to his mother, he was breaking one of her most fundamental rules. No one was to find out, no one could know. But the deep, aching feeling in his chest wasn’t going to subside anytime soon.

“I’ve... been seeing someone,” Sebastian offered, watching the expression change on his mother’s face.

Amalie’s eyes grew wide, her drink catching in her throat. “Seeing someone? Romantically?”

Sebastian tried to ignore the shock in her tone. “Yes, romantically. Why are you surprised by this?”

“Forgive me,” Amalie said, leaning forward to pat his knee. “You are not one to talk about your personal life with me. I was not expecting this kind of conversation, since there has been no one for you since Johanna.”

Sebastian shuttered. That was over a decade ago. “I prefer not to think about that anymore. Johanna and I were never meant to be. Rudolf loved her more than I ever could.”

“But you also gave them their greatest gift,” Amalie murmured. Sebastian stared, his mouth falling open. She

chuckled before continuing. “Of course, I know about Isobel. She looks too much like you, especially at that age, even if everyone chooses not to see it.”

“I’ve already told Isobel the truth,” Sebastian said. He took a mouthful from his glass, hoping it would help calm his nerves.

“Good.” Amalie nodded. “Now, tell me about this woman of yours. It’s the Devarik girl, isn’t it?”

“Shit, Mother!” Sebastian exclaimed before he could stop himself.

“Tell me I’m wrong.” She gave him a knowing smirk.

Sebastian rubbed the back of his neck. “You’re not wrong.”

“Told you. Now, tell me all about her.”

“You’re not concerned because she’s a Devarik?” Sebastian found himself asking.

Amalie waved her hand. She stood, grabbing the bottle of liquor before replenishing their glasses.

“Why would it matter what her familial name is? She might have been born a Devarik and married a Petrovitch, but that doesn’t make her any different than you being a Hartmann. A name is a name, Bash, nothing more.”

“I know that.”

“Your concern is with her brother, Maxim Devarik. A man both revered and feared across all of the Clans.” Amalie paused, waiting for his nod of confirmation. “Clan Drakos has

always had a reputation for being difficult. Even their father, Artem Devarik, was not known for his better moods.”

Sebastian tapped his fingers against the armrest of the sofa. He decided to throw all the cards on the table and see what his mother was going to say. “She’s considering defecting. And if she does, I would want her to stay here with me.”

“To what end?”

“I would marry her.”

Somehow saying it out loud made it more real.

“Why would you do that?” Amalie pressed.

Sebastian knew what she was fishing for. But could he say it? Could he really admit what was simmering just below the surface for the past couple of days? Could he acknowledge that gnawing feeling?

“I love her.”

Amalie smiled, moving to sit beside him. She took his hand and gave it a tight squeeze.

“Why are you telling me and not her? Would she not reciprocate your feelings?”

What was it with his mother and asking the tough questions? But he knew it was exactly for that reason that he came to her: to help give him some sort of perspective; to make sure that he wasn’t making a huge mistake.

“When we are together, there is nowhere else I want to be. I think she is afraid to admit to anything because of her late

husband. She was very committed to him.” Sebastian chose to not think about Dimitri overly often. Ilaria’s late husband was always a sort of unaddressed cloud that hovered in the background. However, Sebastian wasn’t going to allow it to cast a shadow if it could be avoided.

“Do you feel threatened by him for her affections?”

Sebastian snorted. “Hardly. He’s dead. It’s not like he is going to come back and steal her away. He is a part of her past, much like Johanna is part of mine.”

“Have you told her about Johanna and Isobel?”

“No,” Sebastian answered with a shake of his head. “I will though, when the time is right.”

“Good.” Amalie patted his knee again before rising.

Sebastian’s brow furrowed as Amalie disappeared into her bedchamber. There was some quiet rifling before she came back, a white cloth wrapped in her hand. Sebastian took the offered gift, slowly unraveling it. The hair clip sparkled in the low light, dotted with diamonds and tiny porcelain lilies. It was a piece he had only seen a small handful of times in his life.

“If you are certain she is the one for you, then you can have this for her,” Amalie explained, carefully closing his fingers around it.

“Mama,” Sebastian protested. “I can’t take this from you.”

“You said the same thing about my pin.” She teasingly tapped the pin on his lapel.

“But this is...” Sebastian stopped. He couldn’t even begin to put this into words.

“I know,” Amalie whispered. “Your father had an eye for beautiful things. It’s been mine for thirty-six years. It is only right that your bride should have it.”

“Thank you.” He pulled her into a tight embrace.

“Bring her to tea tomorrow. I would like to officially meet her. And I promise, not a word from me about what we talked about tonight.”

Sebastian nodded. Now he was just going to have to work up the courage to actually ask her.

He bid his mother goodbye a short time later, after he finished the rest of his brandy. His father was definitely on to something with that liquor.

Returning to his rooms, he spent the better part of the rest of the night doing one of two things. He started on the edge of his bed, running his fingers over the hair comb from his mother. His mind couldn’t quite wrap around the fact that she had given it to him in the first place. He imagined what it would look like tucked into Ilaria’s hair. The glimmering white would be a stark contrast to her dark tresses.

He finally set it on his bedside table, convincing himself he wouldn’t think about it anymore and would try to get some sleep.

Sleep evaded him too.

The rest of the night was spent staring up at the ceiling. No matter what he did, Sebastian could not turn his brain off. He wondered how he would do it. Would she want him to be a traditionalist and get down on bended knee? Or would she just laugh at him for being ridiculous? Had Dimitri proposed to her?

Sebastian growled. Grabbing his pillow, he rolled over and buried his head underneath it. This was borderline absurd. This was not the way he did things. He made decisions and stuck by them. Never had he ever questioned his own judgment the way he was right now. He forced himself to stop thinking about it, and eventually, he fell asleep.

The next morning, he was up sooner than he wanted to be. However, he bathed and dressed. His hand hovered over the hair pin for a second before he picked it up and tucked it into the pocket of his jacket.

Ilaria was waiting for him to take her down to see Antony again that morning. He made it down to her room in what felt like record time, and he still hadn't made up his mind on what he was going to do.

But seeing her decided everything.

Ilaria stared up at him with those wide, bright eyes. She wore that same pale, pink dress as their first morning on the ship. The memory of peeling that silk away from her skin was almost more than he could bear.

“Sebastian?” Ilaria asked, her face marred by a small frown.

The words were out of his mouth before he could even think of what to say.

“Marry me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Ilaria felt her mouth fall open as she gaped at him. Her heart pounded in her ears, and she wasn't sure she had even heard him properly.

Marry me.

Two little words she never expected to hear, uttered from his lips.

For a moment she thought he might be joking. However, the tick in his jaw and the earnestness in his eyes told her otherwise. He might not have wanted to say it, but he meant it.

“Sebastian,” she started again, licking her lower lip as she tried to find the right words. “We can't.”

“Yes, we can,” he countered.

“No, we can't. Have you completely lost your mind?” Ilaria stared at him, taking a few careful steps back. She found that her thinking became too muddled when he was close.

The thought of remarrying never crossed her mind. She never thought she'd ever find someone else after Dimitri. Then again, Dimitri was found for her. Could she trust her own

judgment in finding a suitable partner? And was getting married again really what she wanted?

Sebastian cocked his head to one side, crossing his arms over his broad chest. “Give me one reason why we can’t?”

“My brother would not allow it.” The argument was weak, but Maxim would not approve of Sebastian. Deep down Ilaria knew it to be true.

“Once you defect, Maxim Devarik will no longer have any control over you. You’d be free to make your own choice.”

“And you think that choice should be you?” The question came out harsher than she intended. However, knowing if he was completely committed to this notion was going to be important.

Before she could even blink, he was across the space. He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her flat against his chest. Gripping her chin, he forced their eyes to meet again.

Leaning down, Sebastian whispered in her ear. His deep, gravely words sent fiery shockwaves through her body. “Are you fucking someone other than me?”

“Don’t be absurd.”

Ilaria shivered, feeling his hand trailing up her thigh, taking her dress with it.

“Do I have to remind you how good it could be? What it would be like to be mine, always?”

“And you do know that this is a forever commitment, until the day one of us dies?” Ilaria hated the waver in her voice, but she had to know that he understood what he was getting himself into. “That I have certain expectations for a husband, as I’m sure you do for a wife?”

His fingers skimmed around to her inner thigh. Ilaria widened her stance just enough, and a knowing smile spread across his face. “Would you like to discuss marriage terms? A formal marriage contract was always going to be necessary; my council would require it. But we can draw one up between ourselves if you wish, or amend our current terms to include more long-term expectations.”

“Yes!” The last consonant was drawn out into a soft hiss as a single finger trailed through the growing wetness between her thighs.

How was it that he could make her forget anything else? That the feel of him touching her set her blood on fire, and sent any semblance of reasonable thought quickly out of her mind?

Sebastian touched his lips to the curve of her neck. “You don’t have to give me an answer now, but promise me you will at least consider it.”

Ilaria tilted her hips forward as the tip of that finger hovered over her swollen clit. But he held it there a moment, trailing his lips from her neck to her collarbone. His teeth nipped at the soft flesh.

“Please,” she begged— she always got what she wanted when she asked nicely. “Touch me, please.”

“Promise me you’ll think about it.”

Sebastian gave a light teasing swirl that had her knees buckling.

“I promise,” she breathed out.

His mouth sought out hers, pulling her into a demanding kiss as he thrust two fingers deep inside her. Her moans were smothered by his kiss. Her hands clawed at his shoulders and back, trying to find something to hold on to.

“You are always so wet for me, pretty girl,” Sebastian murmured against her lips when he finally pulled away for air.

Ilaria groaned, squeezing her eyes shut as she fought for breath. Her insides were coiled into a hot spring which was waiting to be set free. The squishing, wet noises his fingers were creating were almost obscene and made her cheeks burn a deep flush. Stars formed behind her eyelids when he kept rubbing that spot inside her and grinding his palm against her aching clit.

“Fuck,” she moaned, clamping down hard on his fingers. Sebastian growled in her ear, working her through the intense orgasm.

“That’s it, pretty girl. You did so good for me.” He kissed one flushed cheek, carefully removing his soaking fingers.

Ilaria opened her eyes and saw him staring down at her, the biggest grin on his face. He lifted his wet hand to his mouth

and licked them clean with a groan of satisfaction. Her legs felt like jelly and her chest heaved with the need to suck in as much air as possible. She couldn't believe he did that.

With an arm still securely around her waist, he lifted her off the ground enough to take a few steps forward to settle her down on the sofa.

"I think that's the fastest you've ever made me come," Ilaria remarked as soon as she was sitting down. Though her comment did nothing to help her blush.

"That sounds like a challenge." The corners of Sebastian's lips twitched, as he sat down beside her. He draped an arm over her shoulders, and she nestled her head where his shoulder met his neck.

"Believe me, it wasn't." Ilaria chuckled, before growing serious again. "It's moments like this that make me never want to leave you."

"Then don't. Stay and marry me." His arm tightened around her, and he brushed a few stray hairs from her face.

"Sebastian, it's not that simple. Marriage is not something to be stepped into lightly, just because we have this amazing physical connection. I never considered marrying again. After Dimitri..." Ilaria trailed off, biting her lower lip. It was almost weird to talk about him with Sebastian, but she was going to have to.

"I know his death was hard on you," Sebastian offered when she didn't continue.

“It wasn’t just that,” Ilaria paused with a heavy sigh, burrowing further into his neck. Maybe it would be easier this way. “Dimitri was chosen for me. We married the day after my eighteenth birthday. I had never set eyes on him before in my entire life. I hadn’t even known I was getting married that day until Maxim walked me into a church. There he was, no more than twenty himself. Everything we did, we learned together: emotionally, sexually.”

Some of this was painful to say, but Ilaria had to say it to make him understand why she couldn’t immediately say yes. The thought of going home now was so unappealing, even if Antony had been the first to suggest it.

“I’m not trying to replace him, Ilaria. I hope you know that. I’d simply be the next one,” Sebastian said into her hair.

“I know you’re not. But he was my first for everything. And while there have been a few others in the last year since his death, none of them could even hold a candle to you.” Her voice trailed off with the last few words, but she knew he heard her with the way his embrace tightened. “But nothing in life is ever easy. There are still things in the way.”

“Give me one example,” Sebastian challenged.

Ilaria poked his side. “Like my brother in your dungeon.”

Sebastian pressed his lips together. “You have me there. Well, said brother is waiting for us.” He stood and offered her a hand.

Her legs were still a little shaken. “Well, someone decided he couldn’t keep his hands to himself.”

Sebastian pressed up against her back with his hands on her hips, nuzzling his nose into her hair. “When you agree to marry me, my hands will be at your permanent disposal.”

Ilaria turned around, draping her arms around his neck. “While that is incredibly tempting, we still need to go.”

Sebastian lightly pecked her lips and, taking hold of her hand, pulled her towards the door. Thankfully, due to the early hour, they traveled down to the dungeon unimpeded. Sebastian retrieved the key from his pocket and unlocked the door, holding it open for her.

Ilaria slipped in to find Antony already at the small table, contently munching on a small honey roll. He looked better today, Ilaria noticed right away. The bandages had been removed from the right side of his face, though the skin was still obviously pink and tender. A black patch rested over his bad eye, and the straps disappeared into his loose auburn hair.

He gazed up when she entered, and a smirk spread across his face.

“You look well fucked this morning, sister,” Antony commented with a chuckle, popping the rest of the sweet into his mouth. He brushed the crumbs away before turning to face her completely.

Ilaria’s mouth dropped open. The flush deepened to the point where she thought all the blood in her body had rushed

to her cheeks. Ilaria raised her eyes to the mirror on the far wall. Aside from the color that splattered across her cheeks and down her neck, her eyes still had that glassy look, and her hair was a mess.

“Antony!” Ilaria shouted as soon as she could force something out.

Antony chuckled again with a shrug, grabbing his cup of tea. He took a long sip, his eye finding Sebastian behind her.

“We are adults, Ilaria. This is nothing compared to the time I walked in on you and Dimitri actually fucking.”

Ilaria thought she might actually pass out from blushing so hard. That was not a memory she particularly wanted to relive in front of Sebastian. “That’s because you came through our conjoined door without knocking.”

“How was I supposed to know you two would be naked on the floor of your sitting room?” Antony countered. “Especially with Dimitri—”

Ilaria rushed over and pressed her hand to his mouth. “Please just stop talking.”

“Oh no, I do believe I want to hear the end of this,” Sebastian commented from his regular place, leaning against the door.

Ilaria snapped her head. “No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do.”

“We had sex on the floor, what more could you possibly want to know?” Ilaria glared at him. This was humiliating to even think about. She had enough of a hard time talking to Sebastian about Dimitri at all, let alone their private sexual endeavors.

Antony pulled her hand away from his mouth. “Oh please, what I saw will forever be burned into the back of my mind.”

“That’s because I’m your sister, dumbass,” Ilaria growled. “You shouldn’t have seen anything, because you really should have knocked first.”

Antony pouted. “I wanted to see you—not like that obviously.”

Ilaria stole the teacup out of his hand and downed the rest of it. The hot liquid burned a path down her throat. She almost wished for something stronger. Dropping down in the chair before him, she fixed them each a cup of tea before she plucked another honey roll from the tray.

“Be that as it may,” Ilaria started carefully, licking the excess honey from her fingers. “That’s not why we are here.”

Antony sat back in his chair, crossing his arms. “I don’t know how much more you really want or need to know.”

“We still need to know why you set that fire, Antony. Without that, you are stuck here.”

“I’d gladly stay here for as long as muscles over there will keep me here. This is paradise compared to the last fifteen

years, let alone the last five. It's almost like I'm being spoiled before they decide to execute me."

Sebastian joined them at the table and Ilaria fixed him a cup of tea.

"You won't be executed," Sebastian commented.

Ilaria started. That was her worst fear for Antony, and to hear Sebastian say he wouldn't do it felt like a wave of cool water over hot rocks.

Antony raised a surprised brow. "Is that your mercy, or the mercy of Clan Ulrich? Because I would honestly prefer death than being sent home."

"Mine," Sebastian replied, his hand coming to rest on top of Ilaria's on the table. "Unlike Maxim, I won't murder my brother-in-law."

"Sebastian," Ilaria hissed at him.

Antony almost choked on his tea, pounding a hand against his chest. "You're getting married?"

"No," Ilaria answered at the same moment Sebastian said, "Yes."

She cleared her throat. "He's asked."

Antony looked contemplative for a moment, like a hundred different thoughts were running through his head.

"I had honestly hoped you would have found someone new, sister," Antony started, fiddling with his eye patch. "However,

the Chieftain of Clan Ulrich was definitely not on my list of consideration. However, you could do no better.”

“What do you mean?” Ilaria asked.

“Look at him,” Antony said, gesturing in Sebastian’s direction. “He can and will protect you. He is a Chieftain in his own right, like Maxim is. That alone makes him worthy of you. And based on the state you arrived in; you clearly enjoy his company.”

Ilaria felt Sebastian staring at her profile. Every word out of Antony’s mouth rung true. Despite their current situation and surroundings, if Antony thought Sebastian was worthy, why was she still questioning it?

“Antony, there is more to it than that,” Ilaria started.

“But there’s not!” Antony pushed away from the table, bracing his hands on the smooth, wooden surface. “Listen to me. I will tell you about the fire, under two very specific criteria.”

“Which are?” Sebastian prompted, when Ilaria could say nothing. She almost knew what was coming.

Antony lifted his eye, meeting both their gazes across the table. “Prove to me that Ilaria will be safe away from Clan Drakos and away from our darling brother. Ilaria needs to formally defect, and you two must marry. Do those two things, and I will tell you everything.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Please, Sophie, say something,” Ilaria whispered, her hands tightening on Sophie’s numb fingers.

After hearing Antony’s ultimatum, Ilaria seriously needed to lay down. She still couldn’t immediately give Sebastian an answer. This was all happening so quickly, and she hadn’t even thought any of it through. She hadn’t even told Sophie about Sebastian, let alone Antony.

Sophie had brought her fresh tea when Ilaria finally forced herself out of her bed again. They sat on the small sofa in the sitting room, when Ilaria cracked open the gates and let everything out.

Sofia stared at her wide eyed. “That is a lot to take in, little bird.”

“I know. I should have talked to you sooner. I never thought any of it would escalate to where it has,” Ilaria explained. “I can’t do this by myself anymore. I need you, Sophie. I’m sorry to dump this all on you.”

Sophie shook her head, reaching for her tea. “Let’s start at the beginning. How long have you and the Chieftain been doing what you’re doing?”

Ilaria blushed for what felt like the hundredth time that day. “Since the ship. We didn’t know who the other was then. But there was just this spark between us, and we enjoyed each other’s company. I don’t think he even thought it would come to this, but he’s adamant in his desire to marry me.”

“Do you want to marry him?” Sophie raised a brow, giving Ilaria that knowing look she had received many times in her childhood. The look that said Sophie knew better than her. “Because it sounds to me like you’re stalling.”

“Even if I am, this isn’t a decision to be made lightly,” Ilaria argued, even if she felt like she was talking in circles.

“Little bird, stop thinking with your head. You’ll forever overthink this until you’ve talked yourself out of your chance for happiness. What does your heart tell you?”

Ilaria closed her eyes and leaned her head against the back of the couch. What did she really want? Wasn’t that the question she had been asking herself since she first saw Sebastian? She wanted him from the minute she saw him. But never in her wildest imagination did she think it would come to this point. She didn’t even want to think about what Maxim would say when he found out, because he was doomed to at some point. This was not a secret they could keep forever. However, she had Antony’s vote of confidence, and that meant more to her than anything else.

Ilaria married once before because of her brother. This time, she was going to do it for herself. She still couldn't quite place her feelings for Sebastian, but she knew he would take care of her, that they shared similar interests, and she would never get bored in the bedroom. The thought of leaving him behind and going home felt like a lead weight in the pit of her stomach. She did have some sort of feelings for him, otherwise the idea of losing him wouldn't hurt quite so much. However, she refused to give those feelings a name. Naming them made them real, and the thought of possibly falling for him scared her more than it should. It stopped being just about sex a long time ago.

She knew what she wanted to do. And for the first time in her life, she was going to be selfish and do something for herself.

“I will marry him.”

Saying it out loud sent an unexpected thrill through her system. She would be able to call him hers, just as much as he could say she was his.

Sophie grinned and gave Ilaria a big hug. “I'm happy for you. I really am. You deserve all the happiness.”

“Thank you, Sophie,” Ilaria whispered before pulling away. “I know it's probably too soon to ask, but do you think you would ever remarry?”

Sophie huffed with a snort, though a sad look quickly flashed across her face. “I'm too old for that nonsense. Julian and I were happy for the time we had. There is no point in me


remarrying. But you are still young, little bird. You and that Captain of yours will make a very handsome couple, and the most gorgeous babies.”

Ilaria chewed on her lower lip. She stopped thinking about having children a long time ago. After Dimitri, she thought it wouldn't happen, since in seven years it never did. Did she even still want them? Did Sebastian want them? That was a question she was going to have to ask him during their marriage negotiations. Sebastian never hid what he wanted, so Ilaria trusted him to be honest.

“Yes,” Ilaria finally muttered. “I suppose so.”

Sophie smiled. “And you will still have me, no matter what. Now, your future is clearer. Tell me again about Antony.”

Ilaria reached for her tea and launched back into everything she learned from Antony.

image-placeholder

Sitting at his desk, Sebastian turned the glittering hair comb over in his fingers. After the morning, he was growing more confident that Ilaria would ultimately agree.

They were supposed to have tea that afternoon with his mother. However, Sebastian got caught up in all the new paperwork his position required, and the time had come and gone before he even realized. Which was fine, since he never invited Ilaria to go, but had only anticipated just bringing her along. He did send a message to Amalie that they would come for supper instead.

That was a larger risk, Sebastian knew, that he was taking. Supper wasn't just his mother, but Isobel and Johanna also. Might as well throw his entire family at her at once and pray she doesn't run away.

He heaved a heavy sigh, wrapping the comb back up again and slipping it into his coat pocket. A small packet of papers was tucked away too, before he pushed away from his desk. Time to suck it up and ask Ilaria to go to dinner.

Sebastian stared at her door for a long moment before knocking. Her ladies' maid, Sophie, opened it and grinned up at him. A frown marred his face, wondering why she looked so happy. She ushered him in before discreetly disappearing, like she was known to do.

Ilaria stood by the window, looking out over the gardens below. The setting sun cast a warm glow to her skin. Sometimes it hurt how beautiful she looked to him. He came to stand before her. Her eyes sparkled as he brushed a loose piece of hair behind her ear. She turned her head to press a light kiss to his palm.

"Ilaria," he whispered, his thumb trailing over her cheek. Suddenly, words seemed to fail him.

"Ask me again," she murmured with a soft smile.

Sebastian shook his head to clear his thoughts. "Excuse me?"

Ilaria rose up on her toes and pressed a featherlight kiss to his lips. "Ask me again."

“You’re not going to call me crazy again, are you?”

Her teeth nipped his lower lip, which earned her a deep growl. “You’ll just have to find out, won't you?”

Sebastian hummed low in his throat, resting his hands on the swell of her hips, her arms draped around his neck. Gazing down into her soft face, he asked the question he wanted to ask the first time.

“Ilaria Devarik Petrovitch, will you marry me?”

Her eyes misted over, even as she smiled. “Yes, I will marry you, Captain Sebastian Hartmann.”

Sebastian seized her around the waist and spun her around until she laughed. It was a sound he would never tire of; for her to be this happy, and for him to be the reason for that happiness. All those weeks ago, when Johanna had asked him if he would ever marry, never did he think it would happen in less than a month. But there was something about her, and he was drawn to her without thought or reason. Sebastian was convinced that he could never feel like this for another person.

But he did, and it was all Ilaria. A confession rested in the tip of his tongue, but he swallowed it down. Now was not the time for that.

Setting her back down on her feet, he took her face between his hands and placed a lingering kiss on her lips. When her mouth parted with a sigh, allowing him to dip his tongue in, he was half tempted to keep on kissing her. And as much as he wanted to toss her onto the nearest piece of furniture and

ravish her until they were both spent, they did have an appearance to make.

“You will not regret this,” he said. He held her close, her face buried in the side of his neck.

“You make me want to do reckless things,” she murmured against his skin.

“Like agreeing to marry me?”

“Particularly that.”

He pulled away slowly and released his hold on her. This wasn't going to be the fun part, but the sooner he got this over with, the better. Reaching into his jacket, he took out the packet of papers.

“Obviously not now, but I brought these for you to look at, to consider, and to make notes for amendments,” Sebastian said, tapping the papers against his hand.

“Which are?” Ilaria asked.

Sebastian held up each as he named them and handed them to her. “Your official Decree of Defection, a standard Agreement of Marriage to appease my Council, and the copy of our personal negotiated terms. I know it's a lot. You don't have to look at them now, or even tonight. But tomorrow, we should come to an agreement on these so we can move forward.”

Ilaria tapped the packet against her lips, giving him a wary look. “This is going to happen quickly, isn't it?”

Sebastian nodded. “We don’t necessarily have the time for a lengthy betrothal period. A week at most.”

The color drained from her face as she walked across the room to place the papers in a small table. She rested her hands against the smooth surface.

“I shouldn’t be so surprised, because you’re right. The sooner this marriage happens the sooner we can have the truth, and the sooner we can move on with our lives.”

“Yes,” Sebastian replied. He joined her at the table, staring at her profile. Reaching into his pocket, he extracted the wrapped comb. “I wanted to give you this as a gift to celebrate the moment.”

Holding it out to her, he waited as she plucked it out of his hand and slowly pulled the cloth away.

She gasped as she held it up to admire the way it sparkled. “This is beautiful, Sebastian, truly. Where did you get such a thing?”

Sebastian didn't answer right away, instead he took the comb and tucked it into her hair, right behind her ear. Taking her hands, he led her over to the mirror on the wall, so she could see how it looked. He stood behind her, his arms around her middle, his gaze meeting hers in the glass.

“I spoke to my mother yesterday evening. I did not tell her explicitly of you, but she has this uncanny ability to somehow know everything. When I told her I was seeing someone, she guessed it was you in a heartbeat. I could not lie to her. I hope

you understand that.” Sebastian paused, waiting for her to nod in agreement and when she did, he continued. Reaching up, he lightly touched the comb. “She gave this to me, for you. It was a gift my father had given to her for my birth.”

Her eyes grew wide as the implication sank in. “I can’t take this from her.”

“You can and you will.” He paused to kiss her cheek. “She wanted you to have this.”

“It’s breathtaking. I will have to thank her.”

“You can at dinner.” He gave her one last light squeeze before relinquishing his hold. “Which at this point, we will be late for.”

“You want me to meet her now?” Ilaria asked, surprised.

“Of course, and the rest of my family.”

Sebastian gave her no time to protest, taking hold of her hand and pulling her along to the door.

“Sebastian, wait!” Ilaria protested.

Sebastian stopped dead in his tracks at the desperation in her words.

“What’s the matter?” He gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

“Are you sure you want to do this? I mean, this is a big step. I have no reservation to meeting your mother. But your brother’s wife and your niece? My brother is the reason—”

“Stop.” Sebastian pressed a finger to her lips. “Don’t even think about that. They do not know about Antony. They do not know he is here and they certainly don’t know his involvement or the connection to you. I promised you we would keep him a secret for as long as we can.”

Ilaria tugged his hand away. “But won’t they hate me later, once they find out? You’re going to marry me without telling them?”

Sebastian smoothed his hands over her shoulders to lightly grasp her upper arms. Of course, he had thought about all of this. These were things that kept him awake at night. But if he had learned anything about her in the time they had spent together, Ilaria was nothing like the rest of her psychotic family. She was warm, sweet, and passionate. She cared, because if she didn’t, she wouldn’t be hesitating right now.

“I will tell them everything when the time is right. Because once we get through all that paperwork and actually marry, Antony will tell us what we need to know. Once I have all the facts and all the answers, I can sit my mother and Johanna down to explain the circumstances. I will not do that until every little thing is in place.”

Ilaria exhaled heavily. “I will trust your judgment when it comes to your family.”

Sebastian leaned down to kiss her forehead. “Thank you. Now, let’s get going before we are later than we already are.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Ilaria didn't know what to expect from Sebastian's mother. She had only seen the older woman twice before, from a distance. There was a doubt in the back of Ilaria's mind that Amalie was going to take one look at her and decide she wasn't good enough for her son. The thought gave her pause. What would she do if his mother decided she didn't like her?

"Don't overthink this," Sebastian whispered to her, giving her hand a light pat. Arriving at their destination, he pulled open the doors to the dining room.

They stepped into a small, private dining room. A table for five was set in the middle of the room, and the windows along the far wall were open to the cool evening air. Ilaria's eyes found Amalie as soon as Sebastian shut the doors behind him.

His mother looked up with a smile on her face when she spotted them. Rising from her chair, she approached the pair. Her smile only widened when she saw her gift tucked into Ilaria's hair.

Sebastian made the formal introductions, but whatever he was saying fell on deaf ears. Ilaria's heart was pounding so

heavily. She didn't realize until that moment how much she wanted the approval. How much she wanted Amalie to like her, if only a little bit. Ilaria never knew her own mother that being able to even have someone else's meant something to her.

Ilaria started when she was pulled into a tight embrace.

"Thank you," Amalie whispered to her. "For making my son happy."

Pulling away, Ilaria gave her a small smile and reached up to touch the comb in her hair. "And thank you for this. I will cherish it."

"It looks better on you than it ever did on me," Amalie said. She hooked her arm through Ilaria's and led her over to the table. Sebastian followed close behind. "You will have to tell me everything! We should plan the wedding for spring. It's quite nice that time of year out by the water."

The trio sat down on a sofa under the windows. Sebastian reached out to take Ilaria's hand.

"Mama, we aren't going to wait that long," Sebastian started slowly.

Amalie frowned. "We have to wait at least a month before throwing a party, it would otherwise be in poor taste."

Ilaria knew that a thirty-day grieving period was usually customary before any other large life events were planned. But neither she nor Sebastian had that sort of time.

“We won’t have a party, at least not right now,” Sebastian explained. Ilaria was glad he was taking the lead on this because she wouldn’t even know where to start. “Once all the papers are signed and passed through the Council, we will marry. I’ve already called the meeting for the day after tomorrow.”

Amalie’s eyes grew wide. “That could mean a week at most, depending how difficult the Council wants to be. And no offense, my dear, they haven’t taken kindly to Devariks in the past. Besides, don’t you have to wait for the approval of Maxim Devarik? Not only for his sister, but for an inter-clan marriage?”

“We will not seek Maxim’s approval,” Ilaria found herself saying. She needed to deal with the specifics of her own family. “I will formally defect and swear new allegiance to Clan Ulrich. Leaving me to marry whom I wish.”

“That seems rather hasty, doesn’t it?” Amalie paused, staring at them with a tilt of her head. Ilaria couldn’t begin to wonder what she was thinking. “You are not already with child, are you?”

“No!” Ilaria said far too quickly, but Sebastian gave her hand a squeeze. She cleared her throat. “No.”

“Oh.” Amalie almost sounded disappointed. “Well, that would explain the need for haste, and Sebastian is rather virile.”

“Mother!” Sebastian shouted with a groan.

Amalie smirked. “I’m simply stating a fact. I’ll never say no to more grandchildren.”

Ilaria felt the heat creep up the back of her neck. Oh, she knew first-hand the strength of Sebastian’s virility. It was one of the things that attracted her to him initially.

“Mama, please-”

“Uncle Bash!” A voice shouted from the doorway, and Ilaria couldn’t have planned the timing better. She was glad to be out of that increasingly awkward conversation.

Sebastian barely had enough time to stand before Isobel launched herself at him. Catching her easily, he tossed her over his shoulder.

“Put me down!” she protested with a giggle, her fists hitting his back. He lowered her down, kissing her cheek before setting her on her feet again.

Ilaria felt her heart melt, watching the two of them and seeing the little girl stare up at her uncle with clear admiration. She could clearly see the family resemblance between them. The same pouty lower lip, the same stubborn chin, and the same mischievous twinkle in her eye. Isobel obviously took after her father’s side of the family more than her mother’s. If Ilaria looked hard enough, she was almost convinced... she stopped with a shake of her head. Rudolf and Sebastian were very similar looking to each other as well.

Ilaria was drawn out of her musing when Sebastian reached for her hand again.

“Isobel, I want you to meet Ilaria.”

The girl stared up at her with wide eyes, and Ilaria knelt down to her level.

“I’m glad to finally be able to meet you,” Ilaria said.

“You are very pretty,” Isobel whispered in awe. “Are you going to be my new Auntie?”

Ilaria chuckled; this child held nothing back. Sebastian came down beside her, taking Isobel’s hand as well.

“Would you like that?” Sebastian asked her.

Isobel didn’t even hesitate as she nodded enthusiastically before giving Ilaria a tight hug. “I’ve always wanted an Auntie!”

The loud bang against the wall was enough to startle them all apart. On instinct, Ilaria grabbed hold of Isobel and shoved her behind her skirts. Sebastian placed himself between the two girls and the door.

Johanna stood in the doorway, her eyes a little glazed over and breathing heavily. “Where is she?”

Isobel poked her head around Ilaria’s skirt. “Mama?”

Johanna made a sour face when she saw Ilaria, and Isobel hiding behind her. “Come here, baby. Get away from her.”

“But, Mama,” Isobel protested. “She’s going to be my new Auntie.”

Johanna jerked her eyes up to Sebastian. “You’re really going to marry the Devarik slut?”

Ilaria kept her face placid, even if she shivered inwardly. The cold, harsh edge of Johanna's words were no less sharp.

"Johanna," Sebastian hissed, taking a few steps forward to grab her arm. "Don't you dare."

Johanna tried to pull her arm free, but Sebastian's grip would not relent. "Oh, I'm sorry. Did I hurt your whore's feelings?"

"Johanna!" Now it was Amalie's turn to protest.

Ilaria turned away from the glaring woman and offered her hand to Isobel, whispering to her. "Will you come look out the window with me?"

Isobel tried to glance around her again, but Ilaria could barely hear Sebastian's thinly veiled words, and she was sure they were not fit for children. She remembered what it was like to be that young. Johanna's frustration and grief were not things she should be exhibiting in front of her child.

Isobel nodded, taking Ilaria's hand. Ilaria led her over to the window, lifting her up to sit on the windowsill.

"The gardens are very pretty, aren't they?" Ilaria asked, to keep Isobel's attention away from her mother and uncle.

Isobel nodded. "The lilies are my favorite."

"They are your Clan's flower."

A moment later, Ilaria heard the door open and shut again. Amalie joined them at the window.

“Where did Mama and Uncle Bash go?” Isobel asked when she realized they were missing.

Amalie wrapped an arm around Isobel’s shoulders. “They went to have a little talk. But we should eat. I promised to save them some dinner.”

Amalie helped Isobel down, who scurried over to her place at the table. The chair had an extra cushion on it so she would be high enough.

Ilaria met Amalie’s eyes, her look sad and troubled.

“I’m sorry,” Amalie stated, but Ilaria waved her hand.

“Don’t apologize to me. I have been called worse in my life. I just regret that she would say those things in front of her daughter.”

Amalie sighed, wiping away a tear that slid down her cheek. “She is taking Rudolf’s death extremely hard. She uses Isobel as a shield to hide her sadness. Isobel shouldn’t have to be the bearer of her mother’s grief.”

Ilaria watched Isobel as a servant brought in the plates of food, putting one in each place, but leaving two covered. Isobel picked up her fork and started to dig in without a second thought. Ilaria was glad she had a moment's distraction.


Ilaria turned to Amalie again. “If Johanna didn’t hate me simply for my connection to Sebastian, I would have liked to talk to her. I know what that pain feels like, to lose the man you love suddenly and tragically. It has only been a year for

me, but if Sebastian hadn't found me, I'm sure I'd still be hiding my sadness as well."

"My husband was sick for a long time. I watched him pale and wither away. But we had thirty-six years and two wonderful sons. It didn't make the pain of his passing any less, but I am grateful for all the time we had. How did you handle the grief?" Amalie asked.

Ilaria bit her lip, with a shake of her head. "Not well. Dimitri's death still haunts me sometimes, but as time progresses, it becomes less sharp. I buried my grief in sweets initially, and then..." Ilaria paused with a sigh. "A string of unfortunate lovers, until Sebastian."

Amalie reached out and patted Ilaria's cheek. "Bash has a big heart, though he tries to hide it. Just be mindful of that. Come, let's eat before the food gets too cold."

image-placeholder

Sebastian wasn't sure what he was angrier about—Johanna's blatant disrespect for his future wife or her unseemly behavior in front of Isobel. Both of which had his blood boiling and were unacceptable in his eyes.

With a firm hand around her arm, Sebastian dragged her back down to his rooms. There it was more private, and they wouldn't be interrupted or overheard. He gave her a push into the room, slamming the door behind him.

"What is wrong with you?" Sebastian hissed as he turned on her. "What kind of example are you trying to set?"

“Me?” Johanna bit back, glaring back at him. “How dare you subject my daughter to that woman!”

Sebastian leaned back against his desk, crossing his arms about his chest. “That woman is going to be my wife. I hoped you would embrace her like a sister.”

Johanna fell back into a chair with a cynical laugh. “You are delusional, Bash. I want nothing to do with her and I don’t want her around Isobel either.”

“What do you have against her to pass judgment before even knowing her?”

“I don’t want to know her. Need I remind you that she is a Devarik. Her brother murdered her first husband. Is that a fate you are trying to achieve?” Johanna tapped her fingers against the armrest.

“It doesn’t matter to me,” Sebastian countered.

“It should! For the safety of your own family, for your daughter!”

Sebastian hid the grimace from his face. She loved throwing that at him any chance she got.

“Isobel would benefit from Ilaria’s company. She too lost her father young.”

“I can help my daughter cope with her grief,” Johanna snapped.

Sebastian fixed her with a pointed look. “Much like you are handling your own? Clinging to her and lashing out is not

going to bring him back.”

Johanna’s face twisted into a sneer, angry tears forming in her eyes. “I know he’s not coming back. I held him as he died. As his daughter tried to shake him awake. I don’t close my eyes at night without reliving that moment over and over again.”

Sebastian knew she struggled— Amalie told him shortly after Rudolf’s funeral. Though, he could already see it. The tired look in her eyes, which were always filled with unshed tears; her possessiveness of Isobel, who she rarely let out of her sight. He knew about the liquor, too. Though angry, she didn’t currently appear inebriated. That was what worried him the most.

Sebastian pulled another chair to sit in front of hers, leaning forward and offering her his hands. Johanna stared at them for a moment, before laying her own palms in his.

“I do worry about you, Johanna. I’ve worried about you since the moment we met, all those years ago. You found a great love with my brother, one that I was always envious of. But you cannot destroy yourself in the wake of your loss. I lost him too, so did our mother and Isobel. We all feel the acute pain of his death.” Sebastian tried to keep his voice as calm and even as he could.

Johanna sniffed with a shake of her head, the tears overflowing again. “I miss him so much.”

“I do too,” Sebastian whispered back. “But we all must move on.”

“No!” Johanna pulled away from him abruptly, knocking over the chair in the process. “I can’t and I won’t.”

“Johanna,” Sebastian started.

“Don’t you dare use that condescending tone of yours on me. I am no longer a sailor under your command. I am your sister and the mother of your child.” Her volume raised with every passing word.

“Yes, she is my child. Is that what you finally want to hear me say?” Sebastian shouted back at her. Johanna always loved to find ways to push him, but now she was pushing too far. “I might have signed away my parental rights to Isobel to my brother, but do not think for a second that now that he is dead, that I won’t take them back.”

Johanna paled. “What?”

“You heard me. You better watch yourself and your behavior in front of Isobel and Ilaria, who will be my wife. Make me think for one second that Isobel is not happy or safe with you, and I will take her away.” Sebastian stepped closer so she could stare up into his face, so she would know that he meant every word he said. He didn’t want to have to take this drastic of a step, but Isobel took precedence over everything else.

Johanna grabbed a desperate hold on the front of Sebastian’s jacket. “You wouldn’t dare!”

While he might have tried to continue to think the best of her, with her this close, he could smell the liquor on her

breath, and it made his stomach turn.

“Don’t try my patience.” Sebastian pried her fingers from his jacket and walked her back to the door. “You will go back to your room. Isobel will stay with me tonight. Argue with me, and it will be longer.”

“Bash, please...” she started but trailed off. At least she still could think straight and made a wise choice. “Very well. I will have a few of her things sent over.”

“Thank you,” Sebastian responded. He squeezed her hand. “This isn’t meant to punish you.”

Johanna huffed. “It feels like it.”

“You need to take care of yourself first, Johanna, and in the meantime, Isobel will be safe with me.”

“I know she will. This will be good for both of you. Good night, Bash.”

Sebastian watched her go, wondering exactly what he was going to tell Isobel when he arrived back in the dining room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The unfamiliar ache in his chest was almost more than he could take. Sebastian didn't know what he had done in his life to earn this feeling. The feeling of this simple domesticated happiness, he never thought possible.

He stood in the doorway to his bedroom, leaning against the frame as a small smile tugged at his lips. Convincing Isobel to sleep in his rooms that night was decidedly easier than he anticipated. Maybe because she did like spending more time with him, and Ilaria promised to be there too. In the time he'd been gone to deal with Johanna, the two of them bonded. Even Amalie expressed surprise to him about how naturally Isobel and Ilaria came together.

Isobel curled up on one side of the bed, her eyes fighting to stay open. Ilaria was by her side, running her fingers through the little girl's hair and telling her some fanciful story about witches and dragons. Sebastian found himself as thrilled with her story as he was with the picture before him. It comforted him knowing they could be close, more than he hoped they would.

Two of the people who meant more to him than anything else in the world.

Ilaria stopped her story when Isobel finally dozed off. She tucked her into the blankets before creeping over to Sebastian and out of the room. He gazed at Isobel one last time as she wrapped herself around a pillow, before shutting the door quietly behind him.

“She is a beautiful child,” Ilaria commented, settling down on a small sofa.

Sebastian hummed in response. Going to the cabinet, he got them both a glass of wine before settling down beside her.

“You are so good with her,” Sebastian said.

Ilaria took a sip of her wine. She wiggled closer until she was nestled against him, his chest pressed up against her back. He wrapped an arm comfortably around her waist.

“I remember what it was like to lose my father. To wonder why the person who loved you the most was suddenly not there anymore. She needs that comfort and that stability now more than ever. I believe you are up to the challenge.”

“I only want what is best for her. Taking her away from her mother, even for one night, was not what I wanted to do.” He would have done anything to avoid that, but Johanna’s instability was not something she should be exposed to.

Ilaria tilted her head back to look into his eyes. “I know you will, Sebastian. You are a good man who loves his family.”

Sebastian set his wine aside before running his fingers over her cheek. “Soon to be our family.”

He didn't miss the short glimpse of sadness flash in her eyes as she bit her lower lip. “Have you thought about wanting more children?”

There was something in the way she worded the question: more not any. He knew he was going to have to tell her about Isobel and Johanna eventually. However, he hadn't expected it to be right now. But if he couldn't tell her now, he didn't think he would have a more perfect opportunity.

“Ilaria,” he started, his fingers still on her cheek. He tipped her head back a little further.

“I know,” she whispered. “I mean, I had my suspicions. She is your child.”

Sebastian sighed, his arm tightening around her. “Yes. Does that bother you?”

Ilaria leaned up to lightly kiss his lips. “Why would it? We existed before meeting each other, we lived before now. You have accepted me for my past, and I will accept you for the same. Does she know?”

Sebastian nodded. “We told her after Rudolf's passing. It was what he wanted. They wanted a family so bad and when Rudolf came to me with the proposition, I couldn't tell him no. How could I deny him the one thing he wanted? Rudolf never asked much of me. At the same time, I didn't expect my life to take this turn. That it was possible for me to find a woman I

wanted to marry and build a life with. Would you want children?”

“I always did, but after seven years, I lost most of my hope. But with you, I’m willing to put the disappointment aside.”

Sebastian found a wide smile crossing his face. He leaned down and gave her a long, slow kiss.

“If nothing else,” he murmured against her mouth. “We will have a fun time trying.”

Ilaria gave a giggle. Before he had realized what happened, she turned in his arms and now had a knee on either side of his thighs. He grinned up at her as his hands trailed down her back to grip her ass, tugging her hips snugly against his. He groaned as his growing hardness nestled between her legs.

She sunk her fingers into his hair, bringing her lips down to his. “As tempting as this is right now, there is a child on the other side of that door. And I think we should wait until after we marry.”

Sebastian pouted, though he understood her sentiment. Because then the next time they were together, it would be even better.

“If you insist,” he teased.


“Don’t worry, I will make it up to you.”

“How do you plan on doing that?” Sebastian cocked his head. This was a game he enjoyed too much.

Her breath was hot against his ear, sending shivers through his system.

“Oh, you’ll see,” she stated slowly and low, the desire heavy in her words. “I promise you will like it.”

Fuck, if that wasn’t the sexiest thing he had ever heard. Now, he was determined more than ever to make sure they received the full support of his Council.

image-placeholder

Ilaria and Sebastian spent the better part of four hours the next morning going through every detail of the three documents he had given her. The Decree of Defection was probably the easiest out of the three. It was fairly standard and straightforward. Ilaria knew what she had to say and when she needed to say it.

The marriage contract, on the other hand, proved to be a much lengthier process. Only because there were stipulations and conditions that no longer applied to them. There was no point even pretending that Ilaria was a virgin, based strictly on her widow status. That one made her laugh the hardest. That there would be no dowry, as they weren’t asking Maxim for literally anything. Ilaria possessed her own personal cache she brought with her, which would be more than sufficient.

Sebastian warned her that the only two things his Council was truly going to care about were the money and the politics. Not that she could blame them for that anyway. Even with her fairly limited interactions with Maxim’s own Council, she

knew how they would think. Sebastian coached her through any question they might throw in her direction.

Once those two matters were settled, there was little time for their own personal negotiations. Ilaria was of half a mind to tell Sebastian to just burn the whole damn thing. But from the moment they met, these terms had been almost like a security blanket and a reassurance of their mutual attraction. So, she simply suggested that they could discuss them after they married before the wedding night. Sebastian's hesitation was admirable, but Ilaria was sure it was going to be alright regardless.

So, she found herself waiting outside the Council chambers as Sebastian went in first. The small heels of her shoes clicked on the marble floor as Ilaria paced outside the door. Sitting had no appeal. On a small bench along the corridor wall sat a small wooden box she had brought, with her colors draped over it and her pin resting on top.

Her stomach twisted into knots as she wrung her fingers together. What was easily only half an hour felt like six. Every terrible thing was running through her head at once. What if they didn't like her? What if they wouldn't give their support?

Ilaria stopped pacing, leaning heavily against the wall. When all of this started, Sebastian promised to keep their affair a secret. But soon, everyone was going to find out about them. The very thought made her sick to her stomach. Unbidden, Dimitri's face flashed through her mind with that ever-present gentle smile.

Dimitri would understand. He would want her to be happy and safe. Right? They always talked about life outside their natural sphere, outside the confines of their current lives and their families. He wanted that for them, for her. That was one of the true gifts Dimitri possessed; his ability to see beyond the moment. To think in the long term instead of the short term.

Marrying Sebastian was the first real choice she ever made for herself. Something she wanted, not what her brother wanted, and not because it was expected of her. A real, genuine want to be with someone who saw her for who she was, rather than what she was. Sebastian saw her and nothing else. And Ilaria wondered how in such a short amount of time, so much had changed. Honestly, for the better too.

The door to the Council chamber creaked open, drawing Ilaria out of her borderline frantic wonderings. Sebastian stepped out a moment later. He took her face between his hands and smoothed his thumbs over her cheeks before kissing her forehead.

“All will be well,” he whispered to her.

Somehow, the reassurance was something she didn't know she needed. With a small nod of her head, she stepped back, taking the small box with her things on top. Tucking it under one arm, Sebastian took her other hand in his as they entered the Council chamber.

Six other men sat around the small, central table. A few looked at her with curiosity, some with a bored expression. The only one she recognized was the General, who gave her a

small smile. But one in particular appeared to openly gawk at her. He was easily the eldest of the group, his snow-white hair curled around his ears and deep lines marring his face.

“Evelina,” the name left his lips, and no one seemed to hear it.

Except Ilaria. She jerked her head in his direction, a frown on her face.

“What did you say?” she asked, even as she felt Sebastian’s hand on her elbow.

The old man shook his head like he was trying to clear his thoughts. “Forgive me.”

Ilaria pulled her arm from Sebastian’s hold. She set her box down on the table in an empty place. She stared at him across the table. She had not heard that name uttered by anyone for over twenty-years.

“How do you know that name?” she insisted.

“Ilaria,” Sebastian whispered to her.

The old man’s eyes grew wide as he gaped. “Ilaria Devarik?”

The quiet murmurs around the table became almost like a dull roar.

Ilaria stared up at Sebastian. “Did you not tell them it was me?”

Sebastian shook his head. “I wanted them to meet you before they could pass judgement upon your family name.”

Ilaria chewed her bottom lip. His reasoning was sound, but it still didn't answer how this old man knew that name.

Sebastian urged her to sit in the chair before retaking his own beside her. When he cleared his throat, the rest of the room fell silent again. Now, they all stared at her with open interest.

“Georg Wagner, Chief Justice,” Sebastian whispered, as if the name meant anything to her. He then addressed the man directly. “Now, answer my lady's question.”

Georg stared up at her again. “Forgive me, I was simply surprised. You look so much like her, Evelina Tiberius Devarik.”

“You knew my mother?” Ilaria asked before anyone else could jump in.

“Not formally, no. I was sent as the envoy all those years ago upon your birth. The Chieftain, then, was too old to travel, so I was sent in his stead. Artem Devarik was very proud of his twins and enamored with his wife. I will not forget how beautiful she looked. It's a pity she didn't last the year,” Georg explained.

Bearing twins was extremely hard on her mother, Ilaria knew that much. She also knew that her mother wouldn't live to see their first birthday.

“Indeed,” Ilaria replied stiffly.

“Now, gentleman,” Sebastian interjected before more could be said. “We have all reviewed the paperwork and agreed to no

further amendment. Let us begin with signing the Decree of Defection and move on to the marriage contract. Are there any objections to this course of action?”

Sebastian was met with a murmur of agreement. For a man who didn't necessarily want his position, Sebastian certainly knew how to command a room.

The packet of papers was slid in front of Ilaria, who took the offered pen from Sebastian. With a deep breath, she set the pen to the paper. It felt like she was ripping away part of her identity by agreeing to forsake Clan Drakos forever. But it wasn't only her clan she was leaving behind. The thought of Maxim flashed across her mind, making her shiver. With the recollection of what he had done to Antony spinning through her brain, she signed the paper.

After handing the pen back to Sebastian, the paper made its way around the table for all the witnesses to also sign. She took her colors and her pin, also handing them off, knowing that Sebastian would at least safeguard her pin. It had been the last birthday gift her father had given to her before his death. The thought of losing that sentimental piece was hard for her to swallow. Thankfully, Sebastian understood its value to her personally, and previously promised to keep it hidden for her.

“Excellent,” Sebastian said once the papers reached him again. He added his signature to the bottom before filing it away. “On to the next order of business. Was there anything that needed to be asked before an agreement on the marriage contract can be finalized?”

The man to Sebastian's immediate left spoke first. Ilaria tried to recall his name as Sebastian had tried to help her know all the names beforehand based on the location of their seats. This must be Frederick Gunrich, the High Chancellor.

"What kind of support can you offer to our Chieftain?" he asked.

Ilaria was prepared for that question. "To be able to be an ear to listen and a shoulder to lean on. To offer comfort and council when he wishes to seek it. It is not my intention to meddle in affairs of which I know nothing about."

"So, would you keep any political opinions to yourself?" Frederick asked next.

"Depends on what you would describe as political, sir. I wish to support the Chieftain in endeavors to better serve his people through acts of charity. I, however, will not intercede in matters outside of the immediate needs of the Clan. Unless my opinion is sought by either the Chieftain or this Council." Ilaria had practiced that answer for most of the morning.

Frederick seemed satisfied with that answer, gesturing to the man beside him to continue. This was Paul Hesse, Secretary General.

"And what of inter-Clan secrets?" Paul inquired.

"Can you please clarify or be more specific," Ilaria said back.

Paul almost seemed to smile. "What dealings of a political nature did you have with your brother, the Chieftain of

Drakos, Maxim Devarik?”

“I did not have a seat on his Council, if that is what you are implying. Nor did he talk to me of such matters. I spent most of my life a prisoner in my own home. I only saw Maxim how he wanted me to see him.”

“One last question from me,” Paul stated. “Where are your loyalties in regard to Clan Ivanov as a result of your marriage to Dimitri Petrovitch?”

“I have no loyalties or affiliations with Clan Ivanov. Dimitri and I lived with my brother for the entire course of our marriage. And as it currently stands, the Chieftain of Ivanov, Natasha Petrovitch Velensky, hates me.”

Paul relinquished his turn for questions.

Sebastian’s hand gripped her knee underneath the table. It was a comforting presence and his show of support. As they had discussed, Ilaria was going to have to answer anything thrown at her without his interjection. Then it couldn’t be perceived as him putting words in her mouth.

General Josef Bauer passed on his turn with a knowing smile. She had answered more than enough of his questions to last a lifetime.

Karl Muller, the Chamberlain, and Georg also passed on their turns. It lastly fell to Otto Schmidt, the Master of Coin who was currently seated to her right.

Otto adjusted the small pair of spectacles that rested on the top of his nose as he reached for the contract.

“I understand there will be no dowry or payment of any kind for this marriage. Is that a correct statement?”

Ilaria’s hands rested on the small box in front of her. “We will not be asking Maxim Devarik for any sort of monetary compensation as a result of our marriage. However, when I first left Drakos, he gave me a fair share to cover any costs I might incur while on my travels. I also have my own personal collection of jewels, which I can produce if what I have in this cache is not adequate.”

Otto took the box she gently pushed in his direction. Sebastian’s hand tightened on her leg. They both knew it was more than sufficient, but she personally couldn’t wait to see the look on the older man’s face. Otto turned the lock on the front and opened the lid. His eyes grew wide as his mouth quite literally fell open. He didn’t say a thing as he lifted a single coin, turning it over in his fingers.

“I trust this will do,” Sebastian said, a hint of humor coloring his words. Ilaria was certain he still possessed the pouch of gold coins she had originally given him. “It is also all gold.”

“Say something, Otto,” Frederick persisted.

Otto set the coin back into the box and pulled off his glasses. He stared at Ilaria for a long moment.

“Maxim Devarik gave you this as travel money?” Otto asked. The surprise was still clear on his face.

“Indeed. Is it not enough? I do have this pink sapphire—”

“No!” Otto interrupted. “I will have to count it, but by the looks of it, it is more than we receive in taxes in a year.”

That statement set off a wild round of muttered surprise.

“Gentlemen!” Sebastian called over the din. “If there are no other questions, shall we put this to a vote?”

Ilaria gripped his hand under the table and held her breath as they went around the table in their vote.

She wasn't sure why she was particularly surprised when their agreement to marry was unanimously agreed upon. Sebastian prepared her for the worst, and thankfully that had not come to pass.

Sebastian leaned down and lightly kissed her lips.

“Four days,” he whispered to her. “In four days, you will be my wife.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Feeling the sea breeze trail across his skin was more welcoming than he thought it would be. Sebastian hadn't realized how much he missed this; the smell of salt and the sound of the waves crashing against the hull. For the first time since he stepped off this vessel, he felt at home again.

That was why he wanted to marry here, on his ship, the familiar wooden board beneath his feet. A place that had felt more like a home than any building ever could. Where he went from an untried boy to a man. His whole life he had been running away from being compared to his otherwise impeccable elder brother. But out here, he could be who and what he wanted.

He ran a hand over the black markings on his forearms. Even these tattoos had become so much of who he was. He'd been wearing sleeves to his wrists the entire time he was at the palace. Not for any particular reason other than the necessity to be fully dressed all the time. But here, he didn't feel the need to hide them. Besides, he knew Ilaria liked them.

Sebastian smiled as he thought of his bride. Never had he thought in less than a month's time he would find himself Chieftain, mourning the loss of his brother, and marrying the woman he loved. He hadn't told her, not in so many words, anyway. He didn't need words; he showed her with his actions and his dedication. And maybe there was a certain level of fear that she might not feel as strongly for him as he did for her. There was that little voice in the back of his head that questioned everything. He didn't even know if she was going to let him share a bed that night. Could Sebastian comfortably accept spending his wedding night on a lounge instead of in bed beside his wife?

Shaking his head, he banished those thoughts. In the time leading up to today, they both had been incredibly busy and hadn't even had time to revisit their own personal terms. Sebastian wondered how and if those would change. He did have the copy with him just in case, tucked away into an inner pocket of his jacket.

Sebastian's eye caught sight of his mother and Isobel boarding the ship. The little girl bubbled with excitement, her blonde curls bouncing. Pushing away from the railing, Sebastian went to greet them.

He had extended an invitation to Johanna in an attempt to show there were no hard feelings between them. But his missive went unanswered, and her door remained closed when he called upon her. Both actions concerned him, but Isobel was never far away from him or her grandmother, so whatever pissy mood Johanna was in, she could keep to herself.

Amalie smiled brightly as she approached, though once she took in his current state of dress, she looked concerned.

“My dear boy,” she started as he leaned down to kiss her cheek. “I trust you are not getting married in that.”

“My jacket is in my quarters, which are currently occupied,” Sebastian replied.

“Good. Are we waiting for anyone else?”

Sebastian shook his head. “This is it. You two, my crew, and Ilaria’s ladies’ maid.”

“Thank you for letting me come, Uncle Bash,” Isobel said happily.

“I couldn’t do it without you.” He gave her a wink, which made her giggle. “Let me go see if she is ready.”

Sebastian bid them a quick farewell before heading off in the direction of his quarters. He took the stairs two at a time up to the bridge. There, he found Josef. He might not have been completely honest with his mother. Antony sat on the deck beside Josef, his red hair falling forward to hide most of his eyepatch. Thankfully, in a group of sailors, he would not stand out. And Josef would make sure he didn’t go anywhere.

Ilaria didn’t know Antony was there. He was one of a small handful of surprises Sebastian had for her. With Antony up on the bridge, she would be able to see him first. Ilaria hadn’t asked Sebastian for Antony’s presence. Perhaps she was afraid he would say no, that he wouldn’t risk removing Antony from

the dungeons. Sebastian would have made sure her twin was there, whether she had asked for him or not.

Sebastian nodded to Josef as he passed.

“Thank you,” Antony whispered.

Sebastian paused and spoke over his shoulder. “I do this for her.”

The door to his quarters was shut when he arrived. He took a deep breath, to calm his suddenly racing heart, before knocking. Sophie poked her head out a moment later, giving him a smile and a nod. She stepped out through the door.

“Is she ready?” Sebastian asked as Sophie closed the door behind her.

“She needs a moment more.” Sophie regarded him with a tilt of her head. “I know we have not been well acquainted, Captain. But I hope to speak frankly with you.”

“Of course.”

“I have been with her for almost her entire life,” Sophie started. “I was the first to hold her after she was born, even before her own mother. Antony had been born first, a rather robust baby. When their mother started screaming again, I was sure something was wrong. No one expected a second baby. Twins are incredibly rare. She was so small, there were a handful of us that were certain she wouldn’t survive. But she persevered. She has always persevered through everything life has thrown at her.”

Sebastian was riveted at Sophie's story. It was perhaps because he actually knew so little of Ilaria's life before he saw her on that dock. Something he very much wanted to remedy over time. He wanted to know everything there was to know about her, and this was only a small insight.

“Thank you for sharing this with me.”

Sophie smiled up at him. “You have earned her loyalty, Captain. Do not take that for granted. Take care of her and she will do the same for you.”

Without another word, Sophie headed up to the bridge where she would join Antony— since she was the only other person who knew he was there.

Sebastian watched her go as her words turned over in his mind. He would take the information she shared to heart. Continuing to talk to Sophie was going to be higher on his priority list going forward.

He tapped the door with a single knuckle before he eased it open. There she was, waiting for him.

Ilaria stood in the middle of the room, her hands clasped tightly in front of her. Her dark hair was pulled back with a few loose pieces framing her face and his mother's comb behind her ear. The dress she wore was of the palest lavender, with sheer sleeves that barely clung to her bare shoulders and a tight bodice that hugged her curves.

Sebastian was left speechless.

“It’s too much, isn’t it?” Ilaria whispered when he could say nothing. “It was supposed to be the dress I was going to wear to the ball. I made Sophie take down the skirts a little bit but —”

“It’s perfect,” Sebastian interrupted her when he finally found his words. “You look so beautiful.”

Color stained her cheeks, the delicate blush standing out against her pale skin. He found that making her blush was increasingly becoming one of his favorite pastimes. Despite how naughty she could be when she wanted to, he found it endearing that she could still be flustered.

“Thank you.”

Sebastian stepped closer, lightly running the backs of his fingers over her cheek.

“How did I ever get so lucky?” he mused out loud.

“More like dumb luck,” Ilaria teased. “If you hadn’t come into port that day, I would have found myself another ship’s captain.”

Sebastian growled, his hand sliding from her cheek to curve around the back of her neck. “But you are mine.”

She laid a hand on his chest and tapped his chin with a single finger. “Not until we are married. I still can’t believe we are here.”

“Neither can I,” Sebastian said, leaning down to rest his forehead against hers and to stare into her eyes. “But there is no other place I would rather be, then with you.”

Ilaria pressed her lips together. “Are you sure we are doing the right thing? That we aren’t rushing into something so permanent?”

“We might be, however, it is necessary for your safety and for the Clan.”

Ilaria looked away, but he was quick to draw her gaze back. The beginnings of tears wetted her eyes.

“I don’t even know your birthday,” she whispered brokenly.

“The fifteenth day of the fifth month.” Sebastian’s reply came without hesitation. If this was what she needed right now, he would give her whatever answers she sought.

She bit her lip like she wanted to hide a smile, even as a tear trailed down her cheek. “I’m the fifteenth day of the eighth month.”

At this Sebastian chuckled, even as he wiped away the tear. “See, we share the same number. That has to account for something.”

“I suppose you are right.”

“You will learn I’m always right.”

“If you say so.”

“I do.” Sebastian eased away, his hand falling from his place on her neck. “We should be going before we are overly missed. Everyone is here.”

Ilaria agreed. She reached for his jacket and held it up for him to slide into. Sebastian did up the long row of gold buttons

on the front. Ilaria handed him his Captain's medal, which he affixed to his chest. He draped his colors over his shoulder, securing it with the lily pin.

He took her hand, lightly kissing the top before tucking it into the crook of his arm.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

Ilaria gave a nod. “I am.”

“Good. I have a surprise for you.”

Before she could protest, Sebastian pulled her out of the room and started up the stairs. They stepped out onto the bridge, the evening sun slowly starting to sink beneath the horizon.

Ilaria squeaked when she saw who was standing there. Releasing her arm, Sebastian watched as she threw herself at her brother. Antony grabbed her around the waist and held her tightly to him.

“You're here,” she said, grinning brightly and holding Antony at arm's length.

“I wouldn't miss it.” Antony jerked his head in Sebastian's direction. “It was all his doing, too.”

Ilaria blinked slowly up at Sebastian.

“You did this for me?” she whispered.

Sebastian shrugged like it didn't matter, but seeing her so happy was well worth the risk of showing Antony's face in

public. Almost no one would recognize him anyway, except for maybe the resemblance between the siblings.

“He matters to you, and I knew you were both too afraid to ask,” Sebastian said. He held his hand out towards her again and she grasped it in her own. “Don’t ever be afraid to ask me for something you want.”

Ilaria hugged him. “Thank you. You don’t know how much this means to me.”

“I think I have a fair idea,” Sebastian chuckled as he pulled away. “He will stay up here with Josef and Sophie. But we should go, the chaplain is waiting for us.”

Sebastian waited for her nod with baited breath. Together, they went down the stairs to the main deck, where the rest of the crew and his family waited for them.

Standing beside her and knowing that they were going to have forever was an unfamiliar feeling for him. Sebastian was sure he would never marry and now, he couldn’t wait for it to happen.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

His warm skin beneath her palm helped ground her to the moment. Her hand rested on top of his as the chaplain wound the burgundy and grey cloth around their wrists. The words barely sunk into her mind.

“As your hands are bound together, so is the life you will share together. No longer two, but one in body, mind, and spirit. May you share a life with peace and understanding, with patience and acceptance, with love and devotion. From now unto eternity. May your lives be blessed with all the light of the sun.”

The final knot was tied in place. So, it was done.

Ilaria glanced up at her new husband. The term still felt strange in her mind and on her tongue. But the softness on Sebastian’s face and the warmth in his eyes made every doubt melt away. He was that calming presence beside her, while her insides whirled around as if in a hurricane. She welcomed the delicate press of his lips against hers before they trailed to her ear.

“I can think of a couple other things I want to tie up with this cloth.” His whispered words sent shockwaves through her.

Ilaria bit her lower lip to keep the noise that built up in her throat from escaping. Heat flared in the pit of her stomach.

“You haven’t tied me up since our first night together,” she whispered back.

A wicked smile crossed his face as he untied the cloth and stashed it away in his pocket. “A situation that will be remedied, I assure you.”

“Tonight?” The question slipped out before she could stop it.

“As you wish.”

Ilaria shivered in excitement. Who knew that was actually something she was going to like and want more of? Being with Sebastian was always a learning curve for her, and suddenly she wanted more. So much more, now that he was hers. She had her own surprises for him too, to show him how seriously she was taking their relationship.

They were set upon a moment later by the myriad of well-wishers amongst his crew, as well as Amalie and Isobel.

The little girl wrapped her arms around Ilaria’s waist. “You look like a princess.”

“And you will too, one day.”

Isobel beamed up at her before launching herself at Sebastian.

“Congratulations, my dear.” Amalie smiled and also gave her a hug. “If you ever need anything, and I mean anything, don’t hesitate to talk to me.”

“I appreciate that more than you can know,” Ilaria replied. “What would you like for me to call you now?”

“I would love for you to call me Mama, but I understand if that is too personal for you.”

Ilaria shook her head, her eyes misting over again. “My mother died before I even turned one, so I would love to call you Mama.”

The pair embraced again. When they pulled away, Sebastian draped his arm around her shoulders and Ilaria leaned into his side. They talked with Amalie and Isobel for a little while longer before they departed. Ilaria and Sebastian made the final round to make sure everyone could pay their respects. When they were finally done, Ilaria looked up to the bridge to find it already empty.

Sebastian led her in that direction anyway. “Josef has already taken Antony and Sophie back to the palace. You may spend more time with them when we return.”

Ilaria nodded. She understood why it had to be this way. Though, she was still completely happy her brother could at least witness the wedding.

“How long will we be out to sea?” Ilaria asked as they descended the stairs to the Captain’s quarters.

Sebastian held the door open for her. “Only for tonight and tomorrow night. We shouldn’t be gone too long, but it will allow us at least a full day together. Just the two of us.”

“And your entire crew,” Ilaria teased.

Sebastian snorted. “The ship can’t sail by itself. However, they know we want the utmost privacy. Because when I am done with you, I will have to carry you home.”

Home. Ilaria liked the sound of that more than she thought she would. This was a whole new life for her. A new clan, a new home, a new husband. Suddenly, the world no longer felt so closed off. She was making decisions about her own life based on what she wanted. And right now, all she wanted with him.

Ilaria draped her arms around his neck, rising up on her toes to kiss his lips. “I will hold you to that.”

Sebastian hummed, deepening their kiss and grazing his teeth over her lower lip. He pulled away after too short a moment. Reaching into his jacket, he pulled out the packet of papers.

“We didn’t have a chance to discuss this before, so now is a better time than any. I want you to consider this while I’m gone.”

Ilaria took the papers from him and unfolded them. Even though she knew what they were. “Where are you going?”

“Old habits die hard. I need to make sure we get out of port. Then to the galley to get our dinner, because we do have to

eat.”

Ilaria tossed the papers onto the table before stepping closer. One hand playfully tugged at the waistband of his trousers, but he caught her wrist before she could go any further.

“There’s something else I’d rather eat.” She pouted up at him.

Sebastian chuckled, pulling her hand up to kiss the top of it. “We will have plenty of time for that. I, however, will require real sustenance. The sooner I go, the sooner I will be back. Do your thinking while I’m gone.”

He was gone a moment later.

Ilaria sighed as she dropped into one of the chairs. She really didn’t need to read their agreement again. Over the last four days, she had lost enough sleep thinking about what she wanted to do, and nothing was going to change her mind at this point. This was her moment and she was going to grab onto it with both hands. To seize her own future and her own destiny.

Flipping through the pages, she pulled out what had been her original list. Folding it neatly in half, she placed it on top of the rest. That was the only one that mattered. She would give Sebastian what he wanted and was open to anything else he might want to try. Part of her wanted to make sure that he would have no regrets in marrying her. She had everything to gain from the match, and he had everything to lose.

A sort of warmth grew in her chest when she thought about Sebastian. Even something as small as wanting to make him smile or laugh. She knew this feeling; a feeling she hadn't felt in over a year. Could she really be falling in love with Sebastian? It was a possibility she hadn't considered before. After Dimitri, the idea of finding someone else to love seemed so far away. She had been so afraid of forming that kind of attachment again.

Yet, she married again. There was no bigger attachment than that. Despite all the sort of jumbled up emotions that were running through her, tonight was for Sebastian.

Ilaria had her wedding night as a clueless virgin with a man who wasn't any more experienced. Even though the sex with Sebastian was always mind blowing, Ilaria wanted it to be special for him. Something he would always remember.

Ilaria was pulled out of her thoughts when the door opened again. Sebastian slipped in, kicking the door shut behind him. In his hand he carried a small wooden tray with two covered dishes.

"I hope I haven't been gone too long," he commented, setting the food on the table.

"I hadn't even noticed." Which wasn't even a lie, because she had gotten so far into her head, Ilaria had no idea how long it actually was.

Sebastian started undoing the buttons on his jacket and he caught sight of the papers in the table. "Have you put more thought into it?"

Ilaria nodded. Rising up out of her chair, she helped him with the long line of gold buttons before he shrugged it off. She hung it over the back of a chair.

“I have,” she replied simply.

Sebastian tugged at the shirt’s collar to get it undone and rolled the sleeves to his elbows. Something about those powerfully corded forearms with the black tattoos did something to Ilaria’s insides.

“What have you decided?” he asked, a hint of worry lacing his tone.

Ilaria reached for her own list on top. She unfolded it and held it up so Sebastian could see which one it was. Without another word, she tore the paper in half, and half again.

Sebastian stood wide eyed and Ilaria was pleased she had caught him off guard.

“I don’t want this. Any of this. However,” she paused and reached for his list. “This, I want. All of it.”

“All of it?” he repeated as a question. “Even the—”

“All of it.” Ilaria enunciated each word. “I want everything. You gave me a taste of it the last time we were in this room together. You teased me with promises that we thought, at the time, would not come to be. You have been kind and gentle to me since then. But now that we are here again, where we started, I want to give everything to you. Guide me, teach me how to please you the way you want. Every wish, every hope, every desire.” Ilaria paused just long enough to sink down to

her knees in front of him. Sebastian said nothing as he touched her cheek. “If you want my submission, you have it. I want to be good for you, Captain.”

“Ilaria,” Sebastian murmured her name. His fingers ghosted over her cheek and along the curve of her jaw. “I can’t accept this.”

“Oh.” The embarrassment colored her cheeks. “I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

Sebastian stopped her, pressing his finger to her lips with his eyes boring down into her. The steely-blue stared back at her, a whirlwind of emotion racing through those eyes.

“This gift you gave me is too great. I haven't even begun to earn this from you, let alone you giving it to me so willingly. You are my wife before anything else. We are equal partners in duty, in service, and in life. If this is what you truly want, it is for us and us alone. In the privacy of this room, in our rooms back at the palace, where you and I are alone. I will not share this with anyone, not for fear of judgment, but because it is mine. You are mine.”

His finger slid away from her lips.

“I am yours,” she whispered back.

He tipped her chin up and dropped a quick kiss on her lips. “If it is your wish, we can play tonight, see what feels good, and I will honor my promise to have you bound and at my mercy. Or we can wait, so you don’t feel like we have rushed into something we might not be ready for. And don’t worry,

you're still getting fucked, no matter which way you choose. But on my terms or ours?"

The more she had thought about it in the last several minutes and even the last several days, the more she wanted it. She wanted Sebastian to be genuinely himself with her, whatever that might entail.

So, Ilaria didn't hesitate to answer.

"On your terms, Captain. I want this."

"Very well. If this becomes too much for you, what is your word to stop?"

"Sand."

"Good girl," he murmured. "Come now, let's eat."

Ilaria watched as Sebastian stepped back. He left her kneeling there for a moment as he fetched a pillow from one of the sofas. He settled into his chair beside the table, dropping the cushion between his feet and then pointing at it.

She got the subtle hint. Her skirts fluffed out around her as she situated herself on the cushion. Sebastian's fingers found her hair, carefully pulling out the comb and setting it aside before pulling all the other pins out.

"When we are alone," Sebastian said, running his fingers through her loose curls. "I want your hair down like this."

"Yes, Captain."

"Wrists." Sebastian pulled the length of cloth out of his pocket.

Ilaria offered up her hands as he wound the fabric around her wrist and secured it with a small knot on top.

“Isn’t this counterproductive to your desire for me to eat?”

He sunk his fingers into her hair, grabbing a handful. Her scalp stung as he pulled back, her neck arching. His face was suddenly close to hers.

“I would mind your mouth, pretty girl.”

“It’s a simple question, Captain.”

Sebastian pulled harder. “Are you trying to earn a punishment so soon?”

Ilaria bit the inside of her cheek. While she was curious to know what kind of punishments Sebastian had in mind, she wasn’t stupid enough to push him so early.

When she ultimately didn’t respond, Sebastian released his hold on her hair. Her head fell forward, her forehead resting against his thigh. He lightly stroked her cheek.

“If you continue to be naughty, you will stay down there. If you behave, you can sit with me while I feed you. Which will it be?”

She nuzzled against his leg. “I’ll be good.”

Sebastian raised an eyebrow with a small smirk. Helping her up, she settled into his lap, one of his arms around her waist. Ilaria leaned back against his shoulder. This was easily becoming one of her favorite places to sit, with his solid chest against her back and his strong thighs beneath her.

After the lids were removed from their plates, Ilaria was relieved to find a wide array of finger foods. This had been clearly planned, and she was grateful he wasn't going to try and feed her something messier. Sebastian picked a piece off the plate, a fig with blue cheese and cured ham, holding it up to her lips. The sweet and the salty exploded against her tongue, a low groan escaping her.

"I take it you like it," Sebastian chuckled, kissing her behind the ear.

Ilaria nodded enthusiastically as she swallowed the bite. "Your food is so good. I don't think I've had anything in the last couple of weeks that wasn't amazing."

They continued to eat in a comfortable silence as Sebastian brought every bite to her lips. Ilaria could see herself getting spoiled with this treatment, not that she minded it. This felt intimate and special.

Once the plates were cleared and set outside the door, Ilaria was back down on her cushion, her wrists still bound together. They had moved a little way from the table to give them more space. Sebastian stood in front of her, his eyes never leaving her face.

"I'm going to untie your hands long enough to get you out of that dress," Sebastian commented. "Because it's too pretty for me to completely ruin."

He helped her to her feet and untied her, draping the fabric over his shoulder. Spinning her around, he pulled on the lacing running up her back. Ilaria shivered as the straps slid further

down her arms, the bodice pulling away from her body before the entire garment dropped to the floor.

She wore nothing underneath, leaving her completely naked. There was a part of her that wanted to be self-conscious, but he had seen her naked before. The slight chill in the room caused the hairs on her arms to stand at attention and her nipples to harden. Sebastian wrapped his arms around her form, pulling her flush against him again. His erection now nestled against her backside, and he buried his nose in her hair, biting the skin of her neck.

“You drive me fucking crazy.” His breath was hot against her ear. Then, Sebastian turned her around again and took hold of her wrists, tying them back together. “On your knees.”

Ilaria dropped back down without hesitation. She didn’t have to wonder long as to his intentions.

Sebastian took a step back as he undid the buttons down the front of his shirt, shrugging out of it and tossing it aside. The muscles of his chest and shoulders rippled, and Ilaria wanted so badly to touch them, even if she couldn’t. His attention then went to removing his boots, and then his hands found the waistband of his trousers. Ilaria subconsciously licked her lips as he freed his cock; long, thick and hard.

“You want my cock, don’t you, pretty girl?” he asked, running his hand up and down the shaft. “After that night in your room, I couldn’t stop thinking about how good your mouth and throat felt.”

Ilaria remembered that night too. She wanted to think of some witty response, but knew it was neither needed nor necessary. Instead, she waited quietly. Sebastian approached her, his cock inches from her face. He trailed his hands up her neck and along her jaw, over her cheeks and through her hair before taking two large fistfuls. The heat pooled between her thighs as he tugged slightly on her hair, pulling her head back.

“Open,” he commanded. The head of his cock slid along her tongue and her lips closed around it. His eyes were hooded and full of desire. “I’m going to fuck this pretty mouth. Tap my leg once if you need me to slow down and twice to stop. Do you understand?”

Despite her mouth currently being occupied, Ilaria still managed a small enough nod of acknowledgement.

He slid all the way in until he hit the back of her throat and he groaned. Ilaria hollowed out her cheeks as he moved out and then in again, each inward stroke going a little deeper than the last. Ilaria tried to relax as best she could, and was rewarded with a growl from Sebastian that resonated from his chest. His blunt nails scratched against her scalp, using her hair as leverage to move her mouth back and forth.

Ilaria moaned and the vibrations made him curse. He thrust his hips forward, making her take all of him down. The spit seeped out, trailing down her chin. He held her there for a moment, cutting off her air. Her lungs burned until he pulled out, allowing her only a moment to catch her breath before shoving his cock back into her mouth.

She had sucked his dick before—even taken him this deep—but this was different. Something purely carnal and full of lust. Glancing up, his face was twisted with pleasure as he shoved her down one more time. She felt him twitch against her tongue, but he didn't release.

He pulled out as he looked down at her, spit still dripping from her chin. A light coat of sweat made his tanned skin slick as his chest heaved to take in steady breaths.

Ilaria wasn't sure how long they stood staring at each other before he yanked her up and crushed their mouths together. There wasn't a care to the drool all over her face as he snaked his tongue past her teeth. Their tongues danced in and out of their mouths, like they were trying to share the same air.

Sebastian broke the kiss first. His forehead rested against hers, his thumb caressing her jaw and an arm around her waist.

“You are so fucking amazing,” he whispered, his words breathless. “How do I get to call you my wife?”

She wanted to wrap her arms around him too. Instead, she settled for nuzzling her nose into his shoulder.

“Did I do well for you, Captain?” she murmured against his neck.

He hugged her closer. “Very well. Now, I want to make you feel as good as you made me.”

Before Ilaria could even react, Sebastian had an arm under her knees. He swept her up into his arms and carried her over to the bed. There he paused, his eyes searching hers.

Ilaria understood his hesitation. While she had torn up her list, she never explicitly told him that this was okay. The thought of finally lying in bed with him, having him hold her as she slept, to wake her up with the gentle press of his lips, sent chills down her spine. Even with her bound wrists, she reached up and touched his chin.

“It’s okay,” she said. “This is our bed. I want to share it with you.”

She was sure she had never seen a more radiant smile than the one he graced her with.

In the blink of an eye, he deposited her in the middle of the bed. Crawling up her body, he left a series of soft kisses from the tops of her knees to the curve of her hip, to the middle of her belly and underneath her breasts. He nipped at her collarbone, making her gasp before he possessed her mouth again. He took her wrists and held them above her head. She felt him reaching for something, but didn’t realize what it was until he eased back.

She tugged on her arms to find that he tied her to one of the rails along the headboard. She wondered how she missed it before, but it wasn’t a design element that stood out. It seemed natural to be there.

“It was designed like that,” Sebastian mused, sitting back on his heels and running his hands over her thighs. “To have arms restrained, and the end bedposts are good for legs too, but maybe for another time. Closer together with a little slack is better, because then we can do this.” With little effort, he

flipped her over. He raked his nails down her side, his hips snug against her ass. “I will take you like this first. However, I’m not done playing with you yet.”

Ilaria’s hair fell into her face when he flipped her back. He smoothed it away and tucked the loose pieces behind her ear. Laying down beside her, Sebastian propped up on an elbow. He tilted her head towards his and she melted into the languid kiss, their lips and tongues melding together. He trailed the backs of his fingers over her cheek to cup the back of her head, holding her closer still.

If it weren’t for the unmistakable pulsing ache between her thighs, she could have laid there and kissed him forever. But a whimper of need escaped when he cupped the fullness of her breast. He gave the flesh an appreciative squeeze, his thumb circling her nipple without actually touching it.

The circles tightened until he was lightly flicking the straining bud. She moaned softly. His lips trailed from her mouth, down the curve of her neck, biting and kissing along the way. Her back arched off the bed when he teased the nipple with the tip of his tongue.

“Fuck,” she hissed. His teeth caught the nipple, biting and pulling.

He licked the sting away then moved to its partner, giving it the same treatment. His fingers continued to roll and pinch the other.

The bite of the pain was immediately replaced by the pleasure. Having him play with her breasts, lavishing them

with his mouth and fingers, left her heart racing and her breathing shallow. The tingles started in her toes, and she had to squeeze her legs together. Ilaria was convinced she was going to see stars. Sebastian pushed her breast together with both hands so he could lick both nipples at the same time.

“Fuck! Please, Captain,” she pleaded, arching her back.

Sebastian smiled against her skin, his hand leaving her breast to hold down her hip.

“You’re a needy little thing, aren’t you?” Sebastian asked, tracing circles around her hip and down between her legs. He trailed a finger through her slit and barely skimmed over her aching clit. “So, very needy.”

“If I am,” she panted, wanting to push closer but finding herself trapped in the cage of his arms. “It’s your fault.”

“Oh, is it now?” His finger circled her clit but didn’t touch it.

“Yes!” she persisted. “Please, Captain, I need you inside me.”

“Only because you beg so pretty.”

Sebastian kissed her again. Without a warning, he flipped her over and lifted her up by the waist until she was on her knees. Ilaria felt so exposed to his eyes as he touched her, skimming over her waist to her ass and down her thighs. She felt his throbbing cock nestled against her, the blunt head at her entrance. Grasping a hold of her hips, he pushed all the way inside with one deep stroke. His hands settled in her the

curve of her hip, his nails digging into the skin. He held her still as he set a hard, fast pace. The sounds of their groans and slapping skin filled the room.

Ilaria moaned into the pillow beneath her.

“Oh, fuck,” she groaned. “Your cock feels so good.”

Ilaria didn't even know where those words came from before they were out of her. Clearly, his foul mouth was rubbing off in her. Not that he seemed to mind it by the growl that emulated from his chest. He kissed the back of her neck, the noises of his pleasure filling her ears.

All too quickly, her legs began to tremble and the heat radiating from her stomach covered her whole body. She gasped for air as she panted, tightening around the strap that kept her tied to the headboard. Her pussy clamped down on his cock as she reached for the precipice.

He stopped moving instantly.

Ilaria tried to wiggle her hips to get him moving again, even as she started to slip back down. A choke of disappointment lodged in her throat. Her tongue dry and heavy in her mouth, any attempt at reasonable speech was long gone.

Ilaria didn't even have a moment to process what was happening before Sebastian flipped her to her back.

“You really think I'm done with you?” he asked. He wrapped her legs around his waist, leaning forward until their noses touched. His hands braced on either side of her head. “Not even fucking close. I want to see your face as you come.”

His cock slid back in effortlessly. This time his pace was slower and more deliberate, but just as forceful. He hit all those places inside her that had her stomach knotting and her toes curling.

Nothing compared to this, not even all the other times they had been together. No matter how sweet or rough he was in the past, this was a feeling she would carry the rest of her life. Staring into each other's eyes, their breathing falling into unison. His pelvis grinding against her clit.

“That’s it, pretty girl,” he whispered to her. “Come for me.”

“Sebastian,” she whined, her thighs clutching around his narrow hips and her heels digging into his ass. “Together.”

His fingers found her hair again, cradling her head between his hands. The tenderness in his eyes was almost enough to make her cry.

“But that means—”

“Yes!” she interrupted him, her body starting to shake. “Inside me. I need your cum inside me.”

Sebastian buried his face in her neck with a guttural moan. “*Fuck, Ilaria.*”

Hearing her name on his lips like a prayer was enough to send her over the edge. The tightly wound coil in her chest broke free. She screamed out so loud, she was sure she would be heard on deck.

Sebastian followed a heartbeat later. The warmth of his release flooded her insides as he held still, even as his

shoulders shook. His cock remained buried deeply in her pulsating pussy. Neither of them could move, let alone speak, and they stared at each other intently.

Ilaria knew nothing was ever going to be the same after this. After this powerful moment of intense connection.

When they finally settled back on Earth, Sebastian reached up and released her hands. He rubbed her wrists as he pressed featherlight kisses to them. Carefully, he slid out and settled down at her side.

Now that she was free, Ilaria wasted no time snuggling up against his side. A leg draped over his, her head on his shoulder, and her fingers running through the hair on his chest. Sebastian wrapped an arm around her shoulders to hold her close, while his free hand teased the end of her hair that fell forward.

Ilaria didn't know how long they lay there in silence until they started to drift off to sleep, the slow and comforting sound of his heartbeat against her ear. There were no more words left to say and really, nothing was needed.

Breaking two of her biggest rules in one night should have felt shocking, but there was nothing there except happiness and contentment. Being by Sebastian's side was going to be worth whatever else the world had to throw at them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Sebastian could easily find himself becoming addicted to watching her sleep. Tucked into his chest, he ran his fingers through her hair, her warm breath against his neck. He smoothed the blanket around her before staring up at the ceiling. The biggest smile crossed his face.

There was a part of him that still didn't want to believe this was real. That they were here again, but as husband and wife. To be able to lay together and savor her warmth. It was everything he didn't know he needed. Somehow, Ilaria walked into his life, weaseled her way into his heart and refused to let go. Not that he was complaining.

Love was strange that way, he supposed. He had never actively looked for it and there was never anyone who held his interest long enough. Most women didn't want what he offered or couldn't give him what he wanted. So, when Ilaria dropped to her knees, Sebastian thought he must have died. No one had ever done that for him before, not the way she had. If he hadn't already married her, he would have done it in that instant.

Ilaria stirred beside him. Gazing down at her, Sebastian noticed how her brow drew together and a frown marred her lips. The beginning of tears seeped past her eyelashes. One rolled down her cheek. He smoothed his finger over that tear, wiping it away. She shivered for a moment.

Just as Sebastian thought she might have settled down, she bolted upright. A devastating scream ripped from her throat before they transformed into painful sobs. He had only heard a sound like that once before—from Johanna when Rudolf died.

Sebastian lightly touched her shoulder.

“Ilaria?” he whispered, in an attempt to not startle her further.

She turned those brilliant eyes to him, wet with the tears that now ran unbidden down her cheeks.

“Sebastian?”

The way his name came out all broken and sad, pulled at his heart.

He touched her cheek and she threw herself into his arms, burying her face into his neck as another round of sobs shook her shoulders.

“I’m here,” he murmured to her, running his hands over her back. “It was just a bad dream.”

She shook her head vigorously. “No, it wasn’t.”

Sebastian eased away, tipping her tear-stained face up to his. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Ilaria sighed with a sniff. “We are happy, aren’t we?”

He frowned. “Of course, we are. I’m beyond happy, you make me happy.”

“You make me happy too. I just-” Ilaria stopped, biting her lip. Sebastian waited for her to continue on her own. “Then why does it still hurt so much?”

He didn’t have to ask to know what she meant. While talking about his wife’s former husband on their wedding night was not necessarily something he wanted to do, he knew he had to face this. He had to show her that whatever happened in the past didn’t matter to him.

“Is that what your nightmare was about? Dimitri?” Sebastian asked.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Denying what you are feeling isn’t helpful or healthy. Sometimes, it is easier to share the burden. I meant every word I said today. I will be here for you, to support you, to care for you, through everything life has left for us. So, I will always be here to listen without judgment.”

Sebastian moved to settle back against the pillows and opened his arms to her. Ilaria settled back in against him, and she ran her fingers across the black tattoos on his forearm. He nuzzled his nose into her hair, breathing her sweet scent.

This was contentment.

“It wasn’t so much a nightmare as it felt like a memory,” Ilaria stated softly. “Once Dimitri died, I would remember that

day every single minute of every single day for months. Until I realized that living with that sadness was not really living. I was so sad and so angry. How could he do that to us?”

Sebastian knew very few details of what actually happened to Dimitri. All he knew was what Rudolf had told him—that Maxim Devarik killed his sister’s husband. There were always rumors rolling around, but he didn’t heed them too heavily at the time. What business was it of his to know or care about what killed Dimitri Petrovitch?

Now, he did.

“Ilaria,” he started carefully. “Will you tell me what happened to Dimitri?”

Her fingers stopped moving for a moment. She clung to his arm, hugging it to her chest like it was her only lifeline.

“Dimitri committed treason. He had been caught sending letters to his sister, Natasha, with Clan secrets he should not have known, and should not have shared. I didn’t want to believe that Dimitri would do such a thing, but Maxim showed me the letters he had intercepted. They were so damning; it was hard to believe otherwise. True to his nature, Maxim had Dimitri condemned and executed in under two weeks.” Ilaria paused with a heavy breath. Sebastian tightened his arms around her, trying to give her comfort and support. “I was there the day he died. Standing to the side with Maxim beside me, I hid my face behind a black veil so no one could see how much I was crying. I wanted to beg Maxim to stop, to do something other than this. But Dimitri betrayed us, betrayed

me. How could I ever forgive him for that? How could I look my husband in the face and not think about how he tried to undo everything we built together?”

“You only reacted to the information you had,” Sebastian responded. He pressed his lips to her temple.

Ilaria shook her head fiercely, the tears returning. “I couldn’t do anything to help him. All I could do was stand there, while Maxim forced me to watch as Dimitri was beaten and whipped. As his skin bled and burned. Until they finally put a rope around his neck, and I saw the light slowly fade from his eyes. I will never forget that look of intense sadness and great fear. I still see it sometimes.”

“Like in your nightmare?” Sebastian tucked a strand of loose hair behind her ear.

“Yes.” Her answer was nothing short of a whisper. “Though, I woke up before I could see him again. I just knew where I was and the feelings I felt that day. I will never forget.”

“Thank you for trusting me with the truth.”

Sebastian rolled this new information around in his head and somehow, all the dots didn’t quite all line up for him. Not with everything Ilaria admitted to, but the words spoken during the fight she had with Natasha at dinner. He didn’t doubt Ilaria’s words or her memory. Now was not the time, but Sebastian made a mental note to see if he could dig into this a little further. For now, he was content to lay here with her.

“I’ve never told someone the whole of it before,” she admitted, wiping away the last of her tears. “It was always so much easier keeping it to myself. Who was I going to talk to? Antony was gone, Sophie and Julian retired, and complaining to Maxim would get me nowhere.”

“Did you have any other friends?”

Ilaria gave a sad little shake of her head. “No. Who needs friends when you have a twin to play with and then a husband to watch after? Anyone else, Maxim always scared away. I’ve spent my entire life hidden and locked away. When he sent me here, I also thought it was a cruel joke. To dangle the world in front of me to only snatch it back. But for the first time, Maxim underestimated me. I found you, I found a happiness I’ve never had before.”

Sebastian stooped to give her a quick kiss. She melted against him.

“I think I know what we need,” Sebastian murmured against her mouth.

Ilaria hummed in response.

He eased from behind her and got out of bed. Finding his pants where he had left them on the floor, he pulled them on and grabbed his shirt, which he just tossed over his shoulder as he went over to his desk and found what he was looking for. His violin was on his chair where he had kept it hidden. Pulling it out, he set it on top of the piano before approaching the bed again.

He held the shirt open for her and Ilaria scrambled in. Turning her around, he did up a few of the buttons in the front but it still sagged off one shoulder. The bottom barely reached the tops of her thighs. But it was the way she grabbed the collar and brought it to her nose that suddenly left him dry mouthed.

She let out something between a sigh and a moan. “It smells like you.”

Sebastian groaned. His arms encircled her and picked her up. Her legs immediately wrapped around his waist as his hands settled on her ass to hold her up. Now he could look up at her, her dark, shining hair falling around her face with an impish grin. Ilaria took his face between her hands and kissed him.

Sebastian walked them backwards until Ilaria hit the wall. His mouth never left hers as he ground his pelvis against hers, earning him a soft moan.

When they parted, his lips were still touching hers and he gave her ass an appreciative squeeze.

“I’m going to fuck you against this wall, wrapped in my shirt. I want to replace all those bad thoughts in your head with only good ones. Ones made with us.”

Before she could even process what he said, his hand slid down between their bodies. She was already more than ready for him, and he was so hard it was almost hurt. He knew he would never get enough of her. He fumbled with the front of his pants before he easily slipped inside.

Ilaria sighed, wrapping her thighs tighter around his hips and her arms around his broad shoulders. He pressed her more firmly against the wall, his one hand splayed on the wall beside her head. Working in short deep thrusts, he felt surrounded by her. The feel of her skin against his, the smell of her hair, the sounds she made when he tilted his hips just the right way. A low moan escaped as she bit down on her lip and tilted her head back.

Sebastian kissed her arched neck and nipped at her shoulder. He growled softly in her ear, making her squirm.

“I’m going to fill you up so you feel me trailing down your leg for hours.”

It didn’t take long before Ilaria was clutching down on him, forcing his orgasm from his body. Being this close to her, feeling her come undone and knowing it was his doing, sent his heart racing. He loved her. Loved her more than he ever thought was possible.

Sebastian smoothed her hair away from her face. “How is it that you make me lose control?”

Ilaria smiled up at him and lightly nipped his lower lip. “The same way you do it to me.”

They shared another long kiss before he carefully pried her legs off of him and set her back down on the floor. “But now I think we could use a little music.”

Even though a little bit of the sadness lingered, he could see the happiness seeping through her eyes. Sebastian knew he

would do anything to make sure she didn't feel that kind of sadness ever again.

image-placeholder

“Are you really sure you want to do this now?” Sebastian asked as he trailed behind her, heading down into the dungeons.

They had only returned from their short voyage that afternoon. Sebastian's rooms were now ones they shared, and Sophie had taken the liberty of moving Ilaria's things in while they were gone. He had hoped to spend the rest of the day showing Ilaria all of their new space aside from his office and their bedroom. However, she insisted on seeing Antony as soon as possible.

“We have fulfilled his requirements, don't you want to know the truth?” She asked over her shoulder.

Sebastian reached out and grabbed hold of her hand, forcing her to stop. There was something about that statement that didn't quite sit right with him.

“Of course, I do. I just don't like the idea that our marriage was something your brother required.”

Ilaria blinked up at him. “Is that really what you think we did? Do you really think so little of me that I would only marry you out of obligation? I wanted you just as much as you wanted me. I would think the last two days have proved that.”

“No, I’m sorry.” Sebastian squeezed her hand. “It’s just something about this doesn’t feel right. Why would Antony hide this information from us until now, and will he actually tell us what we want to know?”

“I trust my brother. Antony has never lied to me. I don’t think he is even capable of lying. Despite his look and bravado, Antony has always been a pleaser, and he would do anything for me.”

“What about Maxim?” Sebastian asked. “If he would do anything for you, would Antony do the same for Maxim? Especially since he is an elder brother and holds that much more authority?”

Ilaria frowned. Tugging on Sebastian’s hand, they continued to walk together.

“I suppose. I never really thought about that. Do you honestly think Maxim might have been involved?”

Sebastian shrugged, not wanting to give away that that was the thought that had been gnawing at him all day. “I wouldn’t rule it out, and besides, we should be prepared for anything Antony might tell us.”

They arrived at Antony's door a few minutes later. Sebastian pulled out the key to let them in. Ilaria slid in first and he followed after her.

Antony was seated at the small table. A small stack of papers littered the surface, a small tin of multicolored pencils sat beside him, and in the middle of the table, a small bowl of

cherries. He looked up as they entered, his lips twisting into something of a smile.

Antony turned his attention to Sebastian first and gestured to the table. “Thank you. It has been so long since I’ve been able to do anything like this. It keeps my hands busy and my mind out of trouble.”

Sebastian nodded, even as he propped himself up against the wall.

“What are you working on?” Ilaria asked, taking the seat across from Antony.

Antony shook some of the pencil shavings off the paper and held it up. Even from his vantage point across the room, Sebastian could very clearly see that the picture he drew was nearly identical to the bowl on the table. So unbelievably lifelike that it was almost like a moment stolen out of time. For a man with only one useful eye, the depth was remarkable.

“I’m still trying to get the red right, but it’s not bad,” Antony replied with a shrug before setting the paper down again.

“Antony!” Ilaria exclaimed. “This is amazing.”

Antony picked up a pencil and scrawled his name across the bottom. He slid it towards Ilaria. “You can have it if you want.”

“Thank you. But we came to talk, Antony. You promised us the truth.”

He sighed, gathering up the pencils into their cases and stacking the papers together. He carefully set them aside, leaning back in his chair.

“I know I did. And I will tell you, but you must ask yourself if you are ready to hear what I have to say or if you wish to continue enjoying your lack of knowledge. This will change things, Ilaria. For you, for me, and for him. I cannot tell you this will not be painful to hear or to accept. But know that everything I say will be the honest truth, or else let me be struck down by lightning.”

Sebastian grabbed a third chair that sat against a far wall. He dragged it over to the table and sat down beside Ilaria. Taking her hand against his own, he absently ran his thumb over her knuckles.

“We are ready,” Sebastian answered when Ilaria looked at him.

There would be no turning back after this.

“So be it.” Antony cleared his throat, brushing the wayward curls away from his eyepatch. He braced his forearms on the table, looking at them intently. “There is no reason to pretend that I am not responsible for that fire, because I am, and I have accepted what I have done. Know that it was never my intention for anyone to die. One should not play with fire, the same way no one should underestimate the power of the water of the sea. We think we have the control to manipulate it to our will, but sometimes, it takes control over us.”

“But why did you do it?” Ilaria whispered the question they had both feared the answer to.

“I was sent here with a singular mission to prove my worth. To show that I was ready to inherit the one thing that was promised to me,” Antony said slowly.

Sebastian frowned and spoke what was running through his mind. “You are Maxim Devarik’s heir. Without him and your sister procreating, it falls to you.”

Antony shook his head. “It falls to me because I am the elder twin. I was born first. Maxim waited a patient seven years in the hope that Ilaria would have a child, then he would have disposed of me.”

“Antony, he wouldn’t—”

“Yes, he would!” Antony interrupted her. “He had been waiting and testing me my entire life. Trying to make me and twist me into what he wanted me to be. I protected you from all of that. I never let you see or know what he did to me. You mean more to me than anything else in this world, Ilaria. You have been what’s kept me alive these last five years. Knowing that you were safe. So, when Maxim told me he was sending you away, sending you here, I panicked. That’s when I received my last instructions from him—to set that fire and ensure there was only a single casualty.”

“But there were two,” Sebastian stated. “Julian and Rudolf.”

Antony nodded, pressing his lips together. He gave Sebastian his full attention. “I never wanted them to die.

Julian, who meant so much to Ilaria, and your brother, with a wife and small child. I know what it's like to lose your father, and I do not wish that upon anyone. But I didn't anticipate the kind of bang that fire would cause, and in my ignorance, I killed two people who should not have died."

"Then who were you tasked to kill?" Ilaria whispered, her voice barely above a whisper. Her grip on Sebastian's hand was so tight, the tips of his fingers were starting to tingle.

Deep down, no matter how much he wanted to ignore it, Sebastian knew what Antony was going to say.

The immense sadness crept into Antony's good eye.

"You, Ilaria. Maxim sent me here to kill you and make it look like an accident. But I was too weak, so I couldn't do it myself. And for that, Maxim will have my head."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Sometimes the truth hurts like a sting from a bee; a small prick and then a lingering pain. Other times, it was like a knife to the chest. A sharp, throbbing ache that refused to let go; that gripped onto the heart and held it in such a tight vice that it felt like it might explode.

Pain was something Ilaria was all too familiar with. Emotional pain, physical pain, it made no difference to her. But hearing that her own brother wanted her dead was more than she thought she could handle. Maybe because it was not even something that crossed her mind when Antony promised to tell her the truth. She had served Maxim her entire life. Had she really become so useless in his eyes?

That thought alone made her incredibly sad.

It didn't help her nightmares either. Every night the image became clearer and clearer, yet she still hadn't seen Dimitri's face. This was only a small comfort, to not have relive the moment of his death. She had woken up in the middle of the night crying more times than she wanted to admit. Eventually, she was able to keep the tears quiet enough that it wouldn't

wake Sebastian. Instead, she always snuggled closer into his chest, letting his warm presence comfort her.

Sebastian was also good at making her forget, at least for a little while. His methods of distraction were always welcome. In the month that passed since that day, they made a habit of taking walks on the beach every night after dinner. Sometimes talking, sometimes simply being together, but always walking hand in hand.

Ilaria's slippers dangled from her fingers as her toes sank into the sand. She peeked over at Sebastian's boots. He never took them off, no matter how much she persisted.

"Your hatred of sand is hilarious, you know that, right?" Ilaria teased.

Sebastian snorted. "It just feels weird."

"And yet, it was your idea to come down here every day."

"You smile more out here." He wrapped an arm around her and steered them back towards the palace.

"I think the fresh salt air does something for me," Ilaria remarked, leaning her head back against his shoulder. "My stomach has been twisted up in knots."

"That hasn't stopped how much you had at dinner." Sebastian's tone was light, but Ilaria could hear the concern in his voice.

"Are you calling me fat?" Ilaria tried to sound offended.

"Never. I worry about you, that's all."

Ilaria knew he did. When he didn't have pressing matters to address as Chieftain, Sebastian hardly left her side. She wasn't sure if he was concerned that she would do something stupid or that she would spiral if she was left alone with her thoughts too long. Either way, he made sure she always had some sort of distraction.

If he couldn't be there with her, she spent time with Sophie, learning more practical skills like sewing. Antony, on Sebastian's instruction, was given a larger room with a view, even if he was still not allowed to leave it. It was for his own safety and Ilaria understood that, but at least now she could visit him whenever she wanted.

However, they never spoke again of the truth he gave her. Instead, they tried to remember the good parts of their childhood; the fun they had together. Even if most of it was short lived. Not until she started talking about those times with Antony, did she realize how miserable her life had been.

Once they reached the end of the beach, Ilaria paused to pull on her slippers. Sebastian offered a steadying hand. He was always there, anticipating her needs before she even realized she needed something.

They travelled back up to their rooms through the secret door. Ilaria loved being able to come and go as she pleased without feeling like she was being watched. Sebastian had made sure to have a second key made for her.

Franz was waiting for them as soon as they slipped back into the room. Ilaria grew accustomed to Rudolf's former

butler, and understood why Sebastian had kept him in his employ. The man worked miracles.

“Franz,” Sebastian greeted him. “To what do we owe this late visit?”

“There is a messenger here to see you, Captain. He will speak to no one but you,” Franz explained. “I tried to tell him it must wait until morning, since you and the missus don’t like to be disturbed after dinner.”

Sebastian looked over at Ilaria with a frown. She felt a shiver run through her. This only meant one thing: her time was up.

“Thank you, Franz. Have him sent in in five minutes.”

Franz gave a stiff nod before disappearing out the door.

“He’s sent for me,” Ilaria whispered. “What are we going to do?”

Sebastian wrapped her tightly in his arms, pressing his lips to the top of her head. “I will deal with this. You are a member of my Clan and more importantly, my wife. You belong here.”

Ilaria nodded against his chest. “I know, but I willfully ignored the fact that Maxim would find out about us eventually. You are a Chieftain, just as he is; this news couldn’t have been contained.”

“I’m surprised this news didn’t come sooner,” Sebastian said. “But it shall be overcome. I want you to go into the bedroom and stay there. Let me handle this.”

“I can handle my brother’s messenger.” Ilaria scowled. “He needs to know that I’m not Maxim’s to push around anymore.”

Her teeth ground together. What she wouldn’t do to tell Maxim exactly what she thought of him at this point. To curse his name for everything he put Antony through.

“I don’t doubt it. But let’s not make a scene,” Sebastian reasoned.

Ilaria huffed. “If you insist.”

“I do,” Sebastian replied. There was a knock on the door. “Now, go.”

He swatted at her backside as she scurried from the room.

Ilaria slipped into the bedroom, but didn’t close it all the way behind her. Instead, she kneeled by the door, peeking through the keyhole. Sebastian might have told her to stay out, but she wanted at least to see what was going on.

Franz let the messenger in and Ilaria sucked in a breath. She didn’t immediately recognize him, but there was something familiar about him. However, he wore the blue and purple fabric draping from his shoulder and thistle pin holding it in place. He held a military bearing as he stood up straight in front of Sebastian’s desk.

“Captain Sebastian Hartmann, Chieftain of Clan Ulrich,” the messenger addressed Sebastian, who only acknowledged him with a simple nod. “I am Tobias Victarian. I have been sent on behalf of the Chieftain of Clan Drakes, Maxim Devarik, to retrieve his sister, Ilaria Devarik Petrovitch.”

“Hartmann,” Sebastian growled and when the messenger only cocked his head, Sebastian continued. “Ilaria Devarik Hartmann. She is my wife and is not going anywhere.”

Tobias didn't immediately reply but pulled out a letter from the inside of his jacket. He handed it to Sebastian and waited for him to crack open the seal before speaking again.

“I regret to inform you that any decisions made by Ilaria Devarik since the time she has left Clan Drakos are null and void. She is unwell and unable to make such important decisions on her own, and should be returned to the care of her brother, who understands what she needs.”

Ilaria's mouth dropped open in shock and her blood started to sizzle in her veins. This was beyond unbelievable. First, Maxim wanted to kill her, and now he was trying to make her look legitimately insane. As much as she wanted to march right in there and yell at that messenger, that wasn't going to help her case about her sanity.

No, she had to be very careful.

“What she needs,” Sebastian started, his voice smooth. However, even Ilaria knew he was barely holding on to his fury. “Is for that asshole who calls himself her brother, to leave her the fuck alone. When you tell him, feel free to use those exact words.”

“Captain, I understand your unwillingness to let her go, but trust me, you don't want to test the patience of Maxim Devarik.” How the messenger continued to hold his composition, Ilaria would never know.

All her life, people had feared Maxim's name and what that could mean for them. But she had stopped caring who he was a long time ago. And clearly Sebastian didn't care either, because he laughed.

"That name means nothing here," Sebastian hissed. "Maxim Devarik may think his arm is long, but he is no more than I am. And I really don't give a shit what he thinks."

"Neither do I." Ilaria pushed the door open, no longer being able to sit and idly listen to the conversation.

She walked around to stand beside Sebastian, resting a hand on his shoulders to hide how much it was shaking. This gave her an opportunity to really get a good look at Tobias. He was tall but rather slender, a mess of dark curls falling into equally dark eyes. There was something about him that struck her, like a distant memory that was too fuzzy to remember. He shifted his weight between his feet under the intensity of her gaze.

Suddenly it clicked.

"Tobias Victarian. I remember you," she said.

Tobias grew pale. "You do?"

"You served with my twin, Antony Devarik, from the time you joined the barracks. What was it now, ten years ago?"

"Eleven, ma'am. Antony," Tobias stopped swallowing hard. "Antony was a dear friend. We shared a room in the barracks. I was most distressed when I heard of his passing."

Sebastian reached over his shoulder placing his hand on hers. Ilaria squeezed his fingers. Knowing that Tobias had a

personal connection with Antony was going to make this a lot more interesting.

“It comforts me to know Antony did have friends. Were you aware of any mistreatment against him?” Ilaria went immediately for the throat. There was no point in pretending anything else was going to come of this conversation.

The beginnings of cracks in Tobias’s otherwise calm demeanor were starting to show. He gestured to a nearby chair and Sebastian nodded. Tobias dropped into the chair and buried his face in his hands, his shoulders sagging.

“It depends on what you mean by mistreatment. The army served him well, Antony was a natural leader, he was just afraid. But he would come back to our room late some nights with a busted lip, a black eye, or a scrape across his cheek.”

“Did he ever say where they came from?” Sebastian asked.

Tobias shook his head. “Not explicitly. He always had some excuse—he tripped or some other such nonsense. I never believed it, no one gets hurt like that by themselves. At one point, I suggested he talk to Maxim, but I had never seen him so angry. So, I had my suspicions.”

“What were those?” Ilaria pressed.

Tobias looked up at her with sad eyes. “That Maxim was abusing his little brother. But there was no one to talk to about it. I did what I could, I supported him whenever he needed it, and I didn’t ask questions.”

Ilaria pressed her lips into a thin line. “How did you end up acting as Maxim’s messenger?”

“I volunteered,” Tobias replied. “Since I knew Antony, I thought... I don’t know what I was thinking, honestly. Maybe to atone for not being able to help Antony? That I could save you instead? Clearly, you don’t need to be saved. Not from him at least. However, everything I said was directly communicated to me. That is what your brother believes, and he expects me to return with you forthwith.”

“Well, I am doing no such thing,” Ilaria said. “As you can see, I’m fully sane and have made this choice of my own free will.”

“I understand,” Tobias said, standing back up. “I just don’t know what I will tell your brother.”

Sebastian also pushed away from his desk. “I appreciate your honesty with us, Tobias Victorian. I will have a room prepared for you and you can stay until we decide how we want to proceed.”

Sebastian called for Franz to return and gave him the direction to find a room for Tobias.

“Thank you,” Tobias said with an incline of his head. “Your kindness will not be forgotten.”

Tobias followed Franz out of the room, leaving Sebastian and Ilaria alone again.

Taking her around the waist, Sebastian pulled her down into his lap. He lightly touched her chin.

“Are you alright?”

Her heart warmed. He was always so concerned for her.

She laid her head on his shoulder, slipping her hand into his shirt to touch the warm skin.

“I will be. I think I just need to process things. But for tonight, can you distract me?”

Sebastian grinned, trying to tug down the front of her dress. He kissed the smooth skin of her breast and her breath caught in her throat. It was nice to feel something other than sadness.

He whispered in her ear. “You don’t have to ask me twice. But we are talking about this in the morning. We can’t have you shoving down your feelings forever.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

She really wasn't well, and Sebastian didn't know what to do about it. He didn't blame her though, he doubted he would be doing any better with everything that had been exposed over the last month. However, he couldn't watch her repress it all and not be able to express what she was going through.

Easier said than done, Sebastian knew that. Especially with a brother like Maxim Devarik, who probably made her push things down her entire life. Sebastian might not get her to love him as he loved her, but he'd be damned if he didn't try. She deserved that much.

After making sure she'd fallen asleep, Sebastian slipped out of bed. He left the bedroom door cracked open when he went back into his office. Pouring himself a drink, he took it over to the window. There was too much running through his head to even think about sleep.

First, his concern for Ilaria's wellbeing. Maybe he would speak with Antony privately and see if he could offer any insight. There wouldn't be anyone who knew her better than

her twin. Sebastian made the mental note to visit him first thing in the morning.

Antony was a problem in and of itself. As much as a part of Sebastian's logical brain wanted to blame and condemn Antony for the fire, he just couldn't do it. Not with what he knew now. Antony was a product of his less than stellar upbringing through very little fault of his own. If anyone was truly going to be held accountable, it was going to be Maxim. Yet, Sebastian wasn't sure how he could do that with another Clan leader.

He downed the rest of his drink, setting the glass down on the desk. He braced his hands on the wooden surface. He really should try to get some sleep, even if he really didn't want to. The only good that would come of it would be to have Ilaria in his arms again. The thought of possibly picking up his violin also ran through his mind.

Just when he had made up his mind on what he wanted to do, he heard a loud scream followed by the loud thud of something hitting the floor.

Sebastian ran back to the bedroom, throwing the door open to find Ilaria out of bed. She was tangled up in the blankets on the floor, screaming with tears running down her face. No matter the nightmares she had had in the last month, Sebastian had never seen it like this.

Dropping down beside her, he wrapped her tightly in his arms, fighting against her flaying as she tried to break free.

“Hush,” he said to her, trying to keep his voice even.
“You’re okay.”

Ilaria pulled harder to get away.

“No, no, no! Let him go! Let him go!” she yelled, beating her fists against Sebastian’s chest.

He frowned. That was an interesting choice of words. He seized her by the shoulders and realized that the fall hadn’t woken her up. Her entire body shook with the force of her sobs.

Sebastian started out by giving her a light shake, when that didn’t work, he tapped her cheek hard enough to startle her. Her eyes snapped open. All he could see was the intense sadness and the overwhelming pain.

“Sebastian?” She choked out his name as if it was the most painful thing in the world.

He nodded, still touching her cheek. “I’m here.”

She pulled away from his hand like she had been burned. Backing away as far she could until her back hit the bed frame. She pulled her legs into her chest, wrapping her arms around them and hiding her face.

Sebastian reached out again, and she jerked back.

“Don’t touch me!” she hissed, though the words were mumbled by her knees.

He sat back on his heels, not knowing what to do. Sebastian had never felt so useless before. At the very least, he should be

able to console his own wife after a nightmare. He had done it several times before, but this was different.

“Ilaria. Don't hide from me. Talk to me.” He tried to conceal his own rising panic.

She shook her head vigorously. “No! Leave me alone.”

“I can't leave you like this,” Sebastian argued. “Tell me what is wrong.”

“What difference does it make? What is there to talk about?” She peeked out at him from behind her hair.

He either had to treat her like a scared child or a wounded animal. Though, he feared it was the latter who was ready to bite his arm off. This wouldn't be the first time she completely shut down after a nightmare, but usually, she never woke up this inconsolable. Normally, after a few minutes, she'd calm down enough for him to comfort her, once she realized where she was.

“We've been here before. Talk to me,” he insisted. “Share whatever this burden is that you insist on carrying by yourself.”

“Why? I've always dealt with this on my own.”

“But you don't have to! By virtue of our relationship and the promises we made to each other, I am here to share this load. And I want to. You've had to face your fear and your pain alone, but it doesn't have to be that way.” Sebastian made up his mind. If she wasn't going to face this, then he was going to have to for her. He must make her see that this state

of fear and sadness was not healthy. “These nightmares of Dimitri’s death aren’t doing you any good. It’s an unresolved trauma—”

“Don't you dare assume to know how I feel,” Ilaria snapped at him. She untangled herself from the blanket and perched on the edge of the bed. “Until you’ve lost someone you love in such a sudden, tragic way, you will never know how I feel.”

“Did I not just lose my brother a little over a month ago? Did he not die suddenly and horrifically? Rudolf was incredibly important to me.” The pain of Rudolf’s death was still sharp within his heart. However, Sebastian knew how to deal with that grief; he knew what he had to do in order to let go and move on. Ilaria had been holding onto this for far too long. “So, don’t claim that I don’t know how you feel. We have all suffered a loss, it is how we deal with it.”

“And how was I supposed to deal with it? My twin was gone, anyone I ever cared about was gone. All I had was Maxim, who was the cause of my pain. Who only ever tried to tell me what was best for me. But he had no regard to how much I suffered.”

Sebastian sucked in a deep breath through his nose. Pushing himself off the floor, he joined her on the bed, but kept his distance.

“No, he didn’t. And now, you still suffer from his lack of care. Let me care for you.”

“Why?” she asked with a cock of her head, using the corner of the blanket to wipe some of the tears from her face.

“Because you are my wife.”

“So, I’m some sort of an obligation you have to fulfill?”

“No!”

She was twisting everything backwards and it was making his head spin. He knew what he should have told her a long time ago, but was too afraid to admit it; to put his heart on the line and hope that she would accept it and not shatter it to pieces.

“Then why?” she asked again, this time as a broken whisper.

When Sebastian reached out for her hand, she didn’t jerk it away. He ran his thumb over her knuckles. Never had he thought this was the way it was going to happen.

“Because I love you.”

She tried to pull her hand away, but this time he wasn’t letting go.

“You can’t!” she cried, a new wave of tears streaming down her face.

“Yes, I can. You can’t tell me not to love you, because I already do. I think I’ve loved you since the moment you licked that damn spoon, or when you played piano for me the first time. I loved you on our wedding day and I’ve loved you every day since. You, Ilaria Devarik Hartmann. You and no one else.”

Sebastian wasn't sure what he had been expecting, but her screaming and trying to get away from him was not even on his list of possible reactions. Thinking she would give those words back to him and fall into his arms was very much a stretch, but the sheer panic on her face, her wide wet eyes, and her lips trembling was not what he wanted to achieve.

Jumping off the bed, she backed up slowly until she hit a wall.

"Please," she whispered brokenly. "Don't love me."

"I already do. How can you say that?"

Ilaria wrapped her arms around herself again, looking like she almost wanted to double over.

"I don't deserve your love."

"That is for me to decide," Sebastian replied.

"Please," she begged again.

"Why are you so afraid of this?"

A choked sob escaped her throat. "All love has ever given me is more pain. Another thing to fear losing."

"You won't lose me."

"You cannot promise that!" she shouted back, her small frame starting to tremble again. He caught her eyes, and she stared back at him with such intensity. "You shouldn't have married me. All I'm going to do is get you killed!"

"You don't know that." Sebastian tried to reason with her.

“Yes, I do. Tonight,” she paused, fighting to keep breathing. “Tonight, I didn’t dream of Dimitri’s death. I dreamed of yours! I saw you dying just like he did, tortured to death by my brother. Beaten, whipped and burned. I lost one husband that way. I refuse to lose a second to the same fate.”

“Maxim isn’t going to kill me.” Sebastian somehow managed to maintain a certain level of calmness and gentleness. Especially since he knew she believed every word that came out of her mouth.

“Yes, he will.” she protested weakly.

“No, he won’t.”

Sebastian rose to stand in front of her, resting his hands on the wall on either side of her head. He didn’t touch her, but he crowded her space to reinforce that he wasn’t going anywhere.

He continued, “I am not Dimitri. All I’ve ever done is give you the love and care you deserve. You are mine now, pretty girl, and nothing is going to change that.”

Sebastian barely had a second to brace himself before she threw herself at his chest. Her arms wrapped around his torso and her nails dug into his back.

“And I am yours, Captain.” Her words were muffled against his chest.

It wasn’t “I love you,” but it was enough for now.

Sebastian, ever so slowly, removed his hands from the wall and wrapped them around her. His hands traced circles over

the tense muscles of her back and shoulders. He kissed the top of her head, feeling her sag against him.

“We should try to get some more sleep,” he murmured after a while.

“I don’t want to sleep. I can’t live through that nightmare again.”

“What would you like then?” he asked.

“Tea and for you to play for me.”

Sebastian felt a slow smile across his face. “That can be arranged. Why don't you make yourself comfortable while I send for tea and grab my violin?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The following morning, Sebastian had already arranged for them to have breakfast with his mother and Isobel. Johanna had an open invitation, but never came. She refused to see him at all, and as long as she chose to keep herself locked away, Sebastian would abide by her wishes. As long as Isobel was happy, that was all he cared about.

Sebastian leaned back in his chair, his teacup dangling from his fingers over the armrest. Breakfast was cleared away and now, Amalie and Ilaria were rifling through a pile of sketches from the dressmaker. Since Ilaria only had what she came with, Sebastian made sure that she would be well equipped as the wife of the Chieftain. Isobel was happily digging through a box of fabric scraps, trying to find some of her favorite pieces.

“What about this one?” Isobel asked, holding up a swatch of cloth.

From his vantage point, all Sebastian could see was something very pink and very sparkly. He chuckled to himself before finishing the last of his long-cold tea.

For someone who never wanted to be pinned in one spot for long, Sebastian found that having a place to really call home and a family to fill it was comforting. Seeing the three most important people in his life smiling and laughing sent a warm flutter through his chest.

If he didn't know better, he would have thought the events of last night had been nothing more than a bad dream. But he did know better, and he could still see the tired sadness in Ilaria's eyes. She hid it well, and that was what concerned him the most. He needed to talk to Antony. Now was a better time than any, since Sebastian knew he could leave Ilaria comfortably with Amalie and Isobel.

He set his teacup down on the table and rose out of his chair. "If you will excuse me, ladies. I trust you all have this well under control. I have appointments I need to keep."

Sebastian bid them each a quick goodbye; he dropped a kiss on his mother's cheek, to the top of Isobel's head, and lightly on Ilaria's lips. He promised to be back as soon as he could before disappearing out the door. If he lingered any longer, it would be harder to leave.

Stepping out into the hallway, he was thankful to find it mostly quiet. When Antony was removed from the dungeons and put up into a more decent room, Sebastian still ensured that no one would accidentally stumble upon him there. It was, and remained to be, Josef's priority to maintain that secret and thus, he was the only one outside of Sebastian and Ilaria to see him. He brought Antony all his meals and anything else he

might need. Josef was the only one who knew who he was and his connection to the rest of them.

Sebastian had always been of a mind that he couldn't blame Antony until he knew the truth, and now that he did, he couldn't hold it against him. Antony, in many regards, reminded him of an eager, small child who only wanted to please. That lack of development was all too obvious in Sebastian's opinion. He would look to Ilaria for that guidance now, and his trust was now more well placed.

Arriving at the door a short while later—tucked into the corner of the palace that was only ever used if there was a large influx of guests—Sebastian tapped on the door. When he was met with a muffled sound, he unlocked the door himself. He found Antony up against a far wall, upside down. His toes barely skimmed the wall, but he held his entire body weight up with his arms and shoulders. A thin coat of sweat covered his bare chest.

“Oh, hello,” he said, before flipping down and landing on his feet. “I wasn't expecting company. Josef only left a little while ago. Is Ilaria coming too?”

“No,” Sebastian replied. “I wanted to speak with you privately.”

Antony pressed his lips into a thin line, going over to a nearby chair to grab his shirt. Before he could pull it on, Sebastian saw the long line of white scars that crisscrossed his back. If Antony realized Sebastian saw, he didn't comment on it.

“Want to have a seat?” Antony asked, gesturing to the small table and chairs underneath a window. They settled down across from each other.

“Do you do that often?” Sebastian asked, gesturing to the wall.

Antony smiled, crossing his arms. It was still a rare expression for him, but Sebastian was glad for it. “Only recently. Since you feed me so well, I finally feel strong enough to try and get back to where I was. I’m not as broad as you, but I used to be able to do that one handed. You should try it sometime.”

“Maybe, I will,” Sebastian chuckled. “While I wouldn’t mind swapping exercise tips, I came to talk to you about some things.”

Antony cocked his head to the side, a move Ilaria had mirrored last night. “Should I be worried about my current situation? I will say, this room has a much better view.”

Sebastian tapped his fingers against the table. “It’s about the fire.”

“Ah,” Antony sighed, pushing his hair out of his face. His one eye blinked slowly. “I suspect you are ready to present charges against me.”

“I’m not.”

Antony snapped his head up to stare at Sebastian, like he hadn’t heard him correctly.

“Say that again.”

“Given everything I have learned about you over the last month, I cannot hold you responsible for the fire.”

“Even if I lit it?”

“Not because you wanted to. You feared for your own safety and that of your sister. I cannot fault you for that. Tragic accidents are bound to happen, even if I still mourn the loss of my own brother. If I were to charge anyone, it would be Maxim Devarik. For your torment and Ilaria’s neglect.”

A tear slipped out of Antony’s eye and he lifted his eyepatch to wipe at his other eye.

“Thank you,” he whispered. “I don’t know what I’ve done to earn your mercy or why you even care what happens to me.”

“You matter to Ilaria and she matters to me. My goal is to make her happy, to help her through all the sadness she has suffered in her life. That begins with ensuring your safety,” Sebastian explained.

“Ilaria has been through a lot and she deserves someone like you. So, thank you, for her and for me.”

“Then, there is something I have to ask you.” Sebastian paused, taking a deep breath. Here goes nothing. “Does your family have a history of intense, unrelenting nightmares?”


Antony bolted out of his seat with a shout. “What?”

“Ilaria suffers from nightmares—”

Antony interrupted him; the panic clear in his words. “I need to talk to her now. Please, if you care about her as much as you claim. Fuck, this is bad.”

“Why?”

Antony leveled Sebastian with an intense gaze. “Because I suffer from them too. And they aren’t ordinary nightmares. They are glimpses of the future.”

image-placeholder

Numb. It was the only word to describe how she felt. A cold, chilling numbness. She didn’t know if she wanted to scream, cry, throw up, laugh, or any combination thereof. Her gaze shifted from Antony in front of her, to Sebastian beside her and back again.

How could they be so calm about this?

“So, you’re telling me, we can see the future?” she finally managed to ask.

Antony nodded. “Not the whole future, just glimpses of what could be. It doesn’t mean that what you see is how it has to be.”

Sebastian’s hold on her hand tightened and she leaned more into his side. His solid warm presence was keeping her from completely losing her mind.

Ilaria licked her dry lips.

“Can we start at the beginning again? How the fuck did this happen? How did it happen to you so many years before me?”

She stopped before she could continue with another long list of questions.

Antony took hold of her other hand across the small table.

“I don’t know why it happened. No one really ever could give me an answer as to why. How, that was answerable,” Antony paused with a frown. “I might as well start at the beginning. I was ten when it started for me. Shortly after the incident in the dungeons, and the first time, Maxim really took his frustrations out on me. I didn’t understand how my older brother, who was supposed to be taking care of me, could hurt me like that. After, that I promised myself that I would do everything in my power so it never happened to you.

“I think it was the trauma of the moment that set it off. The nightmares came slowly at first, little pictures and glimpses. That’s when I started drawing as an attempt to figure out what I saw. Maxim found my sketches, and that’s when he found out what I could see. He’s used it against me for the last sixteen years.

“When Ilaria and Dimitri couldn’t have children, he wondered if she might be able to do the same thing. So, he orchestrated more trauma in the hopes that the nightmares would be triggered.”

“Dimitri?” Ilaria whispered brokenly, turning her face into Sebastian’s shoulder. Her tears wetted his shirt.

“I’m so sorry, Ilaria. I’m so fucking sorry.”

She looked up at him. “You didn’t kill him.”

Antony chewed on his lower lip. “The letters Maxim gave you to show Dimitri’s guilt, I forged them. I didn’t want to do it to you or to him, but the threats he made were so much worse.”

“No!” Ilaria flew out of her chair, her back pressed up against the wall. “Dimitri died for nothing? All his declarations of innocence were the truth?”

“Yes,” the word slipped quietly from Antony’s lips. “But know that Dimitri’s death was the nicest thing for you. I will not even utter the other ideas Maxim had.”

“But what about...” Ilaria stopped, swallowing thickly on the lump in her throat. A thought popped into her mind, words Natasha had spoken not so many weeks ago. “Natasha told me that Dimitri was returned to her. In pieces.”

“Ilaria,” Antony sighed.

“Tell me, Antony! For once in our lives, don’t keep secrets from me. I need to know. I have to know. What did Maxim do with Dimitri’s body?” Her voice grew in volume, even as it wavered. The truth was scary, but in order to understand and to overcome, she had to know. She couldn’t live with any more lies or secrets.

A few tears escaped the corner of Antony’s eye. “Dimitri was... returned to his sister.”

“In pieces?” Ilaria shouted.

“Yes.” The words were barely above a whisper. “I begged him not to. I pleaded, for your sake.”

Ilaria felt her stomach turn and flip. She had to resist the urge to throw up.

Sebastian approached her and she crumbled against his chest. She took what comfort she could from him as her mind raced. This was all too much to comprehend at the moment. She knew she was going to need a long time to come to terms with the exact circumstances that took Dimitri from her. That was the past. A past that shaped who she was now. However, she had to focus on one detail at a time.

Now, it was the nightmare that showed her the terrible things that were going to happen to Sebastian.

Ilaria let Sebastian lead her back over to the table. Antony stood when she unexpectedly rounded it, looking like he was prepared for the worst. Instead, she threw her arms around him as he audibly gasped from shock.

“Antony,” Ilaria said, pulling away and grasping him by the forearms. “Thank you.”

“For what?” he asked.

“The truth. For the first time in my life, someone isn’t trying to keep it from me. I know all of this has been really hard on you, but I don’t blame you for whatever role you might have had with Dimitri. We both know how Maxim is. And I’m sure whatever other choice there was, it would have been far worse.”

Antony returned her embrace. “Thank you for believing me.”

“I never doubted you,” she whispered back. “Now, are you going to tell me how to get these damn things under control? Because I do think I can suffer through my last nightmare again.”

The three settled back down to the table in the corner of Antony’s room. Somehow, Ilaria felt better, for reasons she couldn’t explain. She couldn’t quite explain why, but it made her feel better even if the truth was actually worse. No wonder Natasha had completely freaked out.

“There is no controlling it,” Antony said with a sigh. “I’ve tried for a long time. Everything—liquor, sleep deprivation, food, exercise, sex—you name it, I tried it. It is about understanding what you are seeing and being able to disconnect from it. Not everything I have seen has occurred or will occur. The more it affects you, the more resilient the images become.”

“I saw you in the fire,” Ilaria said to Antony. “A wayward shadow until I finally saw your face. It gave me hope that you were still alive until the ceiling crashed down on us.

“I saw you too. But I saw you being yanked out at the last minute, though I never saw who saved you. In my dreams or in real life.”

“I did,” Sebastian interjected, finally joining the conversation. “I’d run back into any burning building for her.”

“Can we avoid burning buildings all together?” Ilaria asked, nudging Sebastian’s shoulder.

“We can surely try. But tell him about this latest one from last night,” Sebastian urged.

Ilaria turned her attention back to Antony with a frown. “How do you cope with what you see? The one I had last night was particularly upsetting and I don’t want to see it again.”

“I draw most of what I see, that helps me process it. You just have to find your way. But also remember that the dreams are not real, no matter how real they might feel. Your actions every day can affect them, so there is a chance it will never happen.”

They talked for a while longer. Antony did his best to answer everything Ilaria asked. She knew he didn’t have this kind of support when it started for him, but she was extremely grateful he could share his knowledge.

By the time they left, only some of the numb feeling remained. But Ilaria was sure of one thing: she never wanted to see Maxim again, for as long as she lived.

CHAPTER THIRTY

The water was hot and heavily fragranced with lavender, peppermint, and rosemary. Ilaria leaned her head back against the rim of the tub, the bubbles rising all the way up to her chin. Her toes peeked out at the other end. For some unknown reason, she enjoyed this quiet time alone. Even if being alone with her own thoughts usually wasn't a good thing for her.

For the last two days, she had tried to wrap her mind around everything Antony had told her—about Dimitri, about the dreams. Eventually, she just stopped. Dwelling in things that cannot be changed, that caused significant levels of hurt, wasn't good for her— a point Sebastian made almost every chance he got. Instead, she focused on the things she could change.

This didn't make the nightmares better. Seeing Sebastian in the same scenario that she had lived through with Dimitri ripped at her heart every time. But something Antony had said afterwards stuck with her. He told her to focus on the details: scents, sounds, feels. Anything to try to pinpoint if and when

what she saw would ever happen. Being able to look at it through a more analytical view allowed her a certain level of disconnect; like she was an entity outside her own body, observing the scene.

But it was so fucking hard. Especially when the emotions were very much present and raw. The last two nights, she still woke up crying, clinging desperately to Sebastian's solid form. He held her, whispering soft words of comfort in her ear. He'd kiss the tears away until there was nothing left.

"How do you put up with me?" she asked, muffled against his chest.

"You've had a lot thrown at you all at once. Information that has turned your entire world upside down. It's completely understandable," he replied. "And besides, I know underneath, there is a vibrant, beautiful girl just waiting to come out of her shell."

He wasn't wrong, and as Ilaria slid deeper into the water where only her nose stuck out, she tried to take his words to heart. She liked the person she was becoming a lot more than the person she would have been if she had stayed home. She shuddered; thinking about a home with someone like Maxim was not a happy thought. No, she was quite content where she was.

"What do we have here?" An amused voice asked from the doorway. She hadn't even heard it open.

She peeked up over the rim of the tub to find Sebastian standing there. He stood with his arms crossed over his chest.

Ilaria got a strong urge to just lick him.

“The water is still hot if you want to join me,” Ilaria murmured. She rose up onto her knees in the tub, giving him the perfect view of her cleavage.

Sebastian groaned, pushing away from the door. He stopped beside the tub and smoothed his fingers over her cheek.

“You are very tempting,” he said.

“Tempting enough to get you in here with me?”

“Are you sure?” His eyes bore down at her.

“I wouldn’t ask otherwise,” she said, before Sebastian could even open his mouth again. “I know there is this dark cloud over me right now, but I’m trying. I want to be present for you, for us. I know I used you to hide my sadness, but you make me so happy. I want to start here, in this happiness. I want to live again, my way. And that includes you. You are the first thing I ever chose for myself, and I want it. I want you.”

Sebastian stooped down to lightly kiss her lips. “You have me, and we will build an amazing life together. Just don’t ever shut me out.”

“Yes, Captain.” A slow smile spread over her face.

He nipped at her lip. “There’s my pretty girl.”

Sebastian straightened up, pulling off his shirt in the process. He quickly divested himself of his boots and pants. Ilaria took him in; she would never tire of seeing him naked.

She moved away from the side of the tub so he could slip in behind her. Her back pressed up against his chest and he wrapped his arms around her, holding her firmly.

Sebastian dropped a kiss to her bare shoulder.

Ilaria hummed low and slow. “I could get used to this.”

“I’m going to make sure you are thoroughly spoiled and that you want for nothing.” Sebastian pressed his nose into the side of her neck.

“You already have,” she murmured. “I never thanked you for the dresses the other day.”

Sebastian chuckled. “You don’t have to thank me for your clothes. I like being able to give you things.”

Ilaria trailed her fingers up and down his arms, following the sweeps and curls of his tattoos. She found them fascinating, and even more so when she could see them close up. His muscles twitched.

“How long did it take to get these?” she asked.

Sebastian moved one arm in front of them, holding it out for them to get a better look at.

“I had them done over the span of almost a year, each arm.”

“Did it hurt?”

Sebastian snorted. “Excruciatingly so. If you’re lucky, it’s five needles poking holes at once. But to have them as solid as I do, it takes a lot longer. The pain during the process is bad, and healing afterward is almost worse.”

“Then why do it? Other than because they look nice.” Ilaria trailed one long, black line from his wrist up to his bicep.

“They are a testament to my courage, my strength, and my endurance. A symbol of pride and heritage. Not everyone in Clan Ulrich gets them. I think the ones who go out to sea tend to be the most frequent bearers. After I had done one complete arm, Rudolf thought he could do it too.” Sebastian paused with a chuckle. “His was from the wrist to the elbow, and always hidden beneath a shirt or jacket. It was all he could handle, which I don’t fault him for. I thought about not doing the second arm and then maybe only doing half. But I didn’t like the idea of looking lopsided.”

Ilaria shook her head. She twisted in his arms until they were face to face. Lifting out of the water enough to drape her arms over his shoulders, she smiled down at him.

“That sounds very much like you,” Ilaria commented.

His fingertips trailed down the curve of her spine and the swell of her backside before resting on her hips. He pulled her closer as the water sloshed around them and onto the floor.

“I think one would look nice right here,” Sebastian said, a finger caressing the top of her shoulder. “It could be a testament to your courage and strength.”

Ilaria scrunched up her nose. “They look better on you, but I’ll keep that in mind.”

Instead, she threaded her fingers through his hair and leaned down, pressing their lips together. The kiss was soft and sweet

—giving and taking—neither in any particular rush. The taste of the sweet wine from dinner still lingered on his tongue when she lightly sucked on it.

Sebastian groaned into her mouth. Trailing his hands up, he cupped her face. Ilaria pulled away from the kiss, peering down into his eyes, both of their breathing shallow and rapid. The warmth of the water gave a slight flush on both their faces.

“Tell me again,” she whispered, leaning her forehead against his. She needed to hear him say it.

“Promise you won’t freak out on me again?” Sebastian asked with a chuckle.

“I won’t. Please.” Her hands trailed down his chest, feeling his heart racing underneath her palm.

He placed two fingers under her chin and tipped her face up. “I love you. I am hopelessly and irrevocably in love with you.”

Her heart fluttered in her chest, followed by the feeling of contentment. Who knew that in a little over a year, she would have someone who could love her again? Who wanted to be with her and no one else?

Ilaria didn’t know when it happened, but somehow it had, and she was too blind to see it. Her stomach flipped. She loved him too.

“Sebastian,” she murmured, brushing her lips against his. He simply stared up at her, the love, warmth, and affection

clear in his eyes. All he did was wait, not pushing or prodding, his hands skimming over the backs of her shoulders. “I—”

A loud pounding on the bathroom door broke the spell.

“Captain?” Franz yelled out.

Ilaria frowned. Franz never yelled, or even raised his voice. He was always neutrally stoic.

Sebastian heaved a sigh, a tick working in his jaw.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered to her before turning his attention to the door. “What’s the matter, Franz?”

There was a pregnant pause.

“There is a gentleman here, insisting on seeing the missus.”

Ilaria felt all the blood drain from her face.

“No,” she gasped. “It’s too soon.”

“You don’t know it’s him,” Sebastian reasoned, bringing his hand to her face.

Ilaria shook her head, the tears already starting to burn the corners of her eyes. Easing out of the tub, she reached for a drying cloth and wrapped it around herself.

“Maxim already sent Tobias. He wouldn’t send another messenger two days later.”

Sebastian extracted himself out of the water and took the cloth Ilaria offered him.

“He wouldn’t just show up without any warning after having just sent a messenger.”

Ilaria wrapped her arms around herself with a shiver. “You don’t know my brother like I do. The message was the warning. Maxim had no intention of letting Tobias take me back.”

Sebastian pulled her into his arms, and Ilaria took comfort in his warmth.

“Well, we can’t stay in here and speculate. Let’s get dressed and see what he wants.”

image-placeholder

Maxim Devarik was exactly and nothing like Sebastian expected him to be. He was tall, yes, and fairly broad across the shoulders, but Sebastian was bigger. Similar to Ilaria, Maxim's hair was dark, with only the faintest hint of red, though it was his brilliant green eyes that were disconcerting. There was a coldness there that was unmistakable.

If there was any feeling in those eyes, Sebastian didn’t see it.

The trio sat at the table in one of the smaller dining rooms. Sebastian insisted on this location, because it put a table between them and he could hold Ilaria’s suddenly cold fingers beneath it. His other hand rested on the table, beside his glass of wine.

“You have to understand my distress,” Maxim started slowly. “When news of the fire finally reached my ears and I had no word as to the safety of my sister.”

“I would think the news would have traveled faster,” Sebastian mused, not buying Maxim’s attempt at sincerity. “Since it killed the previous Chieftain of Clan Ulrich.”

“The loss of Rudolf Hartmann is indeed tragic. He knew when to mind his own business.” Maxim twisted the stem of his wineglass between his fingers. “Certain Clan affairs should be left to their respective Clan. Which is one of the reasons I cannot and will not accept this marriage.”

Sebastian was certain his back molars would be dust when they were done. “That is not for you to decide. Ilaria is no longer a child who needs your permission.”

“I think I will be the judge of that,” Maxim bit out, but then tried to smooth over his words. “She has been my concern for the last twenty years. I think I know what is best for her.”

“Like marrying her to a stranger at barely eighteen?” Sebastian countered. While Ilaria’s face remained a constant neutral, he was sure his fingers were turning purple.

“Dimitri Petrovitch was the only—”

Ilaria yanked her hand from Sebastian’s and slammed it down into the table, making both men jump.

“Don’t you dare say his name,” Ilaria hissed. “You are the reason he is dead.”

“Ilaria.” The way he said her name, in that condescending tone of his, set Sebastian on edge. “Dimitri betrayed us.”

“The only thing Dimitri did wrong was to love me. Were you so threatened by his love that you had to end his life?”

The question was barely a whisper, and Sebastian felt it right through the heart.

Maxim sighed with a shake of his head, taking a deep drink from his glass. “We are not talking about this again. This petulant behavior of yours will not be tolerated.”

“You will not speak to my wife in that tone,” Sebastian growled.

The slow smirk that crossed Maxim's face was worrying.

“I did not sanction this marriage, nor did you ask for my permission. I will not recognize any agreement between the two of you. As a result, I’m taking my sister back home with me, regardless of what right you think you might have to her.”

“Have you not ruined my life enough?” Ilaria’s soft question barely reached their ears, and when she kept talking, her voice rose in volume. “I am twenty-six years old. I think I am quite capable of making decisions regarding my well-being. Furthermore, I did not need your approval. I am no longer a member of Clan Drakos. You have no control over me.”

“You forget I do, sister,” Maxim murmured. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a couple slips of paper. Unfolding the top copy, he slid it across the table. Sebastian picked the paper to look at it. It was the same one Tobias had come with, declaring the state of Ilaria’s sanity. “Until it can be proven otherwise, I am her sole caregiver, and any agreement she entered into with you will be null and void.”

Ilaria snatched the paper from Sebastian's hand and balled it up.

"I don't care what some stupid piece of paper says. I know my own mind. I am staying here, with a husband who actually gives a shit about what happens to me."

Maxim took the ball, smoothing the paper back out. "Be that as it may, you have no power to make these decisions." He rose from his chair, laying his hands on the wooden surface between them and leaning forward. "You have until the morning to decide if you are going to be cooperative and come home like the good girl I know you are, or if it must be the hard way."

Maxim swept out of the room like he owned the place, the door slamming shut behind him.

Sebastian wondered for a moment if Maxim actually knew where the rooms that had been prepared for him were. But at the moment, Ilaria was his focus.

"I hoped to not have to see him again," Ilaria commented. She leaned her head on Sebastian's shoulder. "As unrealistic as that might sound. I somehow managed to block how angry he would make me."

"Be that as it may, we still need to figure out how to deal with him, since he seems determined to take you with him." Sebastian rested his chin on the top of her head.

"I know," Ilaria sighed. "I just don't think my head can handle that right now. We should probably just go to bed and

start figuring out how to deal with him tomorrow.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Any logical person can be reasoned with. Maxim Devarik was neither logical nor reasonable, at least in Sebastian's estimations, and Sebastian liked to think himself a fair judge of character. However, none of it made any sense to him. Maxim made no sense to him. If he had wanted Ilaria dead, why was insisting now that he wanted her back?

Sebastian frowned, leaning back into his desk chair. This wouldn't be the first night he had lost sleep over this. He would have much preferred to be in bed, but he needed to decide what he wanted to do. Maxim wasn't simply going to go away and leave them in peace.

Antony.

Sebastian snapped upright in his chair. Maxim must think that Antony was either dead or missing. Ever since the fire, he had been under constant watch by either himself or Josef, and Sebastian would never question Josef's loyalty. There was no way that Antony and Maxim had communicated in any way. If Antony was actually dead, Ilaria became Maxim's heir, which

was reason enough for Sebastian to understand why he would want her back.

This was definitely something he was going to have to readdress with Antony, sooner rather than later. Hopefully the younger man would have some more insights into his elder brother.

Sebastian ran his hands over his face and through his hair. He really should get back to bed, and was just about to do so before he heard feet outside his door.

“Uncle Bash?” A small voice sounded, followed by a soft knock.

Sebastian’s brow furrowed together. Isobel almost never knocked, and she hadn’t come to see him in the middle of the night in a long time. Not that he minded it, but this was odd.

Walking to the door, he heard her again.

“Please, Uncle Bash!” The sheer panic in her little voice was enough to send his heart racing.

Sebastian ripped the door open to find one of his worst nightmares. Isobel stood there with the wet tracks of tears running down her cheeks, her lower lip quivering. But it was the person beside her that made his heart stop.

Maxim had an almost devilish smirk, his green eyes still bright in the darkness of the hallway. His hand was wrapped tightly around Isobel’s forearm.

“Look what I found roaming the halls after dark,” Maxim began slowly, before Sebastian could speak.

“Give her to me,” Sebastian ground out.

Isobel struggled against Maxim’s hold, but whimpered when his grip tightened.

“I would be more careful with your things, Captain. You never know when someone will swoop in and take something that belongs to you.” Maxim regarded him with a tilt of his head. “However, I do believe you have something I want. I’m willing to give back yours if you give me mine.”

“She is not a commodity to be bought or sold. Neither of them are.” Sebastian had to be very careful with his words.

“That is where you are wrong. People like you and me have to shape those around us to have them reach their full potential,” Maxim commented with an unsettling calmness. “This one reminds me a lot of Ilaria at her age. Pretty, but fearful, wanting to please. She will be easily made complacent.”

“You cannot have her, and I’m not giving Ilaria back to you after your treatment of her over the last two decades. So, I would cut your losses and leave.” Sebastian growled.

Maxim clicked his tongue. “That’s not how this works.”

“Let go of me!” Isobel yelled, kicking out her legs in an attempt to hit Maxim in the shins.

Maxim yanked her off the ground and she screamed. It took everything Sebastian had not to punch him in the face.

“I’d be more than happy to get the brattiness out of her,” Maxim suggested.

“Take your hands off her before I remove them for you,” Sebastian growled. He could hear his pulse in his ears. He had to find a way out of this, before Isobel was traumatized any more than she already was. The only thing Sebastian’s mind could go back to was Antony. At least then they would have strength in numbers.

Isobel continued to struggle against Maxim's hold.

“I think I have something better than a little girl,” Sebastian finally forced out. This was a risk he was going to have to take.

Maxim quirked a brow. “And more than my sister, who I know is just in the other room?”

“Yes.”

“If you are fucking with me, you will regret it.”

Maxim tossed Isobel in Sebastian’s direction, and he caught her easily. She nuzzled her face into his shoulder.

Sebastian smoothed the hair away from her face, kneeling down in front of her.

“Listen to me,” he whispered for her ears only. “Go crawl into bed with Aunt Ilaria and stay there until I come back.”

Isobel wrapped her arms around his neck, giving him a tight hug before darting off.

Sebastian rose back to his feet and gestured back out into the hallway. There wasn’t any more that needed to be said. However, as they traveled down the long hallway, he peeked

out the corner of his eye to make sure Maxim was still beside him. This was not an enemy to have at your back.

They rounded another corner before Sebastian was yanked back and slammed against a wall.

Maxim glared at him with a hiss. “Do you think I’m stupid? Leading me around on a merry chase?”

Sebastian bared his teeth. Without Isobel there, he no longer felt the need to hold back. He took one pointed swing of his fist and connected with Maxim’s jaw.

“You stupid son of a bitch,” he growled.

Maxim jerked back with a groan, spitting the blood in his mouth onto the floor. They stared at each other for a long, hard moment, both of them panting for breath. Without warning, Maxim launched himself at Sebastian, who didn’t see the move coming, or the knife in his hand.

Sebastian yelled as the blade dug into his side, and he gnashed his teeth together.

“You really think I’d let you lead me who knows where without any sort of protection?” Maxim twisted the blade.

Sebastian started to see dark spots in front of his eyes before Maxim’s fist hit his face, and then all was black.

 image-placeholder

Ilaria slowly woke up the next morning, thankful for having gotten through an entire night without a nightmare. Someone warm was curled up against her chest and she frowned, even if

she wasn't quite awake yet. She peeled her eyes open, expecting to find Sebastian there, but was greeted by a small, blonde head.

“Isobel?”

The little girl peeked up at her.

“Oh! I didn't wake you, did I?”

“Of course not, sweetheart. Where is Uncle Bash?”

Isobel buried her face into Ilaria's chest, who wrapped her arms around her.

“He went with the mean man,” Isobel whispered.

“What mean man?”

“The one with the green eyes.”

Ilaria yanked back and seized Isobel by the shoulders. “Was he tall with dark hair?”

Isobel nodded. “Yes, and he said he would take me instead of you.”

“Shit!”

Ilaria bounded out of bed. This wasn't happening. Her heart was racing and her pulse was pounding. She swayed on her feet, suddenly very dizzy, and slowly sank down to the floor.

“Aunt Ilaria!” Isobel jumped down next to her. “Are you okay?”

“I'll be fine,” Ilaria murmured, even if she didn't believe it. “Why don't we wait for Uncle Bash to come back?”

Ilaria forced herself to her feet, her knees shaking. Isobel bounced off and grabbed her robe for her. Slipping it over her shoulders, she took Isobel's hand and they went to the small sitting room off the bedroom.

She and Sebastian made a habit of taking most of their meals there. The chairs were more comfortable and the view was better, as opposed to in his office. Besides, it felt more homely.

Ilaria sank down into one of the sofas, burying her pounding head in her hands. Isobel crawled up onto the couch next to her, running her little hands over Ilaria's back. Ilaria felt her stomach twist and turn, her breathing become shallower.

"Aunt Ilaria?" Isobel's question barely reached her ears. The little girl shook her shoulders.

Everything became a blur. Ilaria barely registered Isobel jumping off the sofa. She rushed to a nearby table, dumping the wide mouth vase of lilies and water onto the floor before shoving it into Ilaria's hands. She then went to the door and opened it, shouting out in the hall.

Ilaria heaved into the vase, tears streaming down her face. She fought to breathe as her stomach emptied of what little was in it.

When she finally calmed back down, the vase was carefully pried from her numb fingers and a cool cloth draped over the back of her neck. Her whole body trembled.

“Hush, my dear.” Amalie’s voice broke through the haze of her mind.

Ilaria lifted her eyes to the older woman’s, as the recognition settled in. Amalie’s arms came around her as Ilaria fell into them.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” Ilaria sobbed into her shoulder. “Sebastian—”

Amalie shushed her again, rocking them back and forth. “We will find him, but you need to calm down. Breath, in your nose, out your mouth.”

Ilaria tried to follow those directions, but it wasn’t easy when her head was spinning. After making sure she wasn’t going to throw up again, she was worried about what happened to Sebastian. It wasn’t like him to disappear in the middle of the night, especially with her crazy elder brother.

“I feel better,” Ilaria whispered, sitting more upright.

“You are still so pale, dear,” Amalie murmured. “Are you sure you are feeling well?”

Ilaria shook her head. She might as well be honest. “No, I feel terrible. My stomach hurts, the world won’t stop spinning, and I’m still so tired.”

“Has this been happening a lot lately?” Amalie asked, still running a hand over her back.

“More so in the last week or two, but never this bad until this morning. What do you think is wrong with me?” Ilaria

whispered, though she wasn't sure if she wanted to know the answer.

Amalie chuckled, wrapping her arm around Ilaria's shoulder. "I think it would be quite obvious by now. You're going to have a baby."

"What?!" Ilaria shouted and cried at the same time. Relief, intense happiness, and sadness ran through her all at once. Was it even possible? Clearly, it was, but she couldn't believe it—and so soon.

"Does that mean I get a cousin?" Isobel piped in from her spot on the floor.

Before any of them could answer, there was a pronounced knocking on the door. Josef stuck his head in without waiting for a response. He looked grimmer than Ilaria had ever seen him, though she was still digesting her own personal news.

"Forgive me for interrupting," Josef said, his tone rather grave.

"Of course, General Bauer. Is there something we can help you with?" Amalie asked.

"No, ma'am. I, however, come with some troubling news." Josef paused for a moment before continuing. "An incident has occurred between the Chieftain of Clan Ulrich and the Chieftain of Clan Drakos, and they are both missing."

The scream that ripped from Ilaria's throat startled the entire room. Her world spun more than it ever had, before everything went dark.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Sebastian didn't know what hurt more: the bruise on his cheek, the unrelenting pounding headache, the throbbing of the rudimentary wrapped stab wound in his side, or his pride. He also had no idea where he was. It was too dark. The only light was coming from a small crack in the wooden wall. However, the rhythmic swaying back and forth was a comforting feeling he knew all too well.

He groaned, trying to get up, but was laden down by the weight of a heavy chain around his wrists and ankles. With what little strength he had, he yanked it and realized he was secured to the floor.

Fuck. This was bad.

Not only did he have no idea where he was, he couldn't quite remember how he got here. He did have a very vivid recollection of Maxim showing up at his door with Isobel. There wasn't a time he had been so scared and so angry at the same time. But seeing a man who he knew abused his own younger siblings there with his daughter was enough to make him see red. But calm heads prevailed—at least his did.

Sebastian remembered taking Maxim to see Antony and not even making it that far. Not before Maxim turned on him and stabbed him. Which, in Sebastian's opinion, was uncalled for. He wasn't actually leading him nowhere; it did take a decent amount of time to reach the corner Antony was hidden in.

His head hit the wall behind him, wondering how long he had actually been in this tiny space. Ilaria was probably already awake and wanting to know where he disappeared to. At least Isobel would be with her; that brought him some semblance of comfort. And his mother would be there too.

But first, he had to figure out where he was and how the hell to get out of it.

Sebastian didn't have to wait long until the door to his little space was opening, streams of sunlight burning his eyes. He held up a hand, enough to cover as much as he could, but there was no mistaking the figure in the doorway.

Maxim Devarik leaned against the door frame; a lit cigarette pinched between his fingers.

Sebastian had half a thought to throw himself at Maxim, but knew the chains would not allow that much movement. Instead, he waited there in silence.

"Someone is rather silent for being so mouthy last night," Maxim commented.

"Why am I here?" Sebastian asked through clenched teeth.

Maxim cocked his head to the side, bringing the cigarette up to his lips. "I would think that would be quite obvious. You

have stolen something of mine.”

“How is taking me going to get you what you want?”

The smoke curled out of Maxim’s nose and reminded Sebastian of a dragon.

“I know my sister. As stupid and lovesick as she might be, she knows what’s best for her. When she realizes you are gone, she will come crawling back to me to save you.”

“You think too highly of me, I’m not worth much to her.” Sebastian tried to remain calm so the lies that slipped from his tongue were easier to wield. “She used me to get away from you.”

“Be that as it may, I know she will not tolerate losing a second husband. Her first one died all too easily, so I hope you have a little more spirit in you.”

“Killing me will not endear her to you,” Sebastian hissed.

“Maybe not, but when she comes crawling back, that’s all that matters.”

“Also, killing me would bring down the wrath of not only my Clan, but the other three as well. Natasha Petrovitch Velenskyy would do anything to see your head on a spike.”

Maxim chuckled, standing more upright and brushing some invisible dust off his jacket. “You really think I’m scared of that witch? Natasha Petrovitch Velenskyy will mind her own business, as she always has.”

“Even when you murdered her brother?” Sebastian pushed.


“I don’t really care what she thinks. Ilaria will come home to me, which is all that matters. In the meantime,” Maxim paused, reaching into his jacket pocket and pulling out a new candle. “You might want this, since it does get rather dark down here, and you will get only enough food to keep you alive. We will reach Drakos in three days.”

Sebastian caught the candle Maxim threw before it could hit him in the face. He wanted to ask Maxim how in the world he expected him to light the damn thing. But when Maxim flicked his half-burned cigarette in Sebastian’s direction, he got the hint.

The door slammed shut behind him, leaving Sebastian in the dark once more.

The glowing ember was just within reach. With great care, Sebastian held it to the candle’s wick, watching as it slowly started to melt the wax. After some coaxing and gentle blowing, Sebastian managed to get the candle lit. It didn’t add much light to the room, but it helped not to be in complete darkness. He had to be careful to not have the thing blow out, since there was no other way to get it lit again.

Sebastian leaned back against the wall again, lost to his own thoughts, hoping the three days would go by rather quickly. Then he would have to find a way back home—to his wife.

image-placeholder

It had only been a couple of hours, but Ilaria was already tired of people walking on eggshells around her.

She was pregnant, not dying.

She leaned back heavily on the pillows in her bed, where they had stuck her after she fainted. Sophie came to watch after her and was tittering about. Amalie promised to return as soon as Ilaria was feeling better. Which was a good thing, because she had so many questions.

A ghost of a smile touched her lips as she ran her hands over stomach. After all these years, it finally happened, and she knew what an amazing father Sebastian already was.

Isobel hadn't left her side, despite Amalie's attempts for the little girl to leave her alone. But Ilaria insisted she stayed, wanting the company. And to keep Sophie from being a total nuisance, even if she meant well. Ilaria had too many memories of being ill as a child and Sophie never leaving her alone.

"Here, drink this," Sophie said, shoving a cup of lukewarm tea into Ilaria's hand. "Peppermint and chamomile should help ease your stomach."

"Thank you" Ilaria murmured, taking a small sip from the cup.

"Are you really going to have a baby?" Isobel piped up from her side of the bed.

"Your grandmama is convinced I will."

The little girl curled into her side and Ilaria draped her arm over her shoulders. "Uncle Bash is going to be so happy."

"I hope so."

They were quiet for a few minutes, Ilaria drinking her tea and Isobel twisting the blanket between her fingers.

“Aunt Ilaria? When do you think Uncle Bash is coming back?”

“I don’t know, sweetheart.”

Ilaria tried to not think about it too much. The thought that Sebastian went somewhere with Maxim, and now neither of them could be found, didn’t sit well with her. Maxim was reckless and impulsive; Sebastian was not. Maybe they had gone somewhere private to talk. That’s what she hoped at least, even if Josef had mentioned an incident.

As if on cue, there was a knock at the bedroom door. Sophie scurried over to answer it. Josef stuck his head in a moment later.

“I hope I have not caught you at a bad time,” Josef said.

“Of course not, General Bauer. Please come in. I trust you have more news,” Ilaria replied.

Josef’s eyes moved from Ilaria to Isobel and back again. Ilaria got the subtle hint. Since neither of them had breakfast, Ilaria sent Isobel off to Sophie, first to find Amalie and then food. This left her alone with the General.

She smoothed the blanket over her lap as she had pushed herself more upright. Josef took a nearby chair when Ilaria offered it to him.

“Now, tell me the truth, General Bauer. Should we be concerned for Sebastian’s safety?” Ilaria asked, carefully

selecting her words.

Josef pressed his lips into a thin line. “Possibly. It seems your brother, the Chieftain of Clan Drakos, has already left Ulrich on the ship he arrived on. The rooms prepared for him were never touched.”

Ilaria frowned. “What are you not telling me, General Bauer?”

“When I was bringing your brother, Antony, his breakfast this morning. I noticed on my way that there was blood on the floor, which insinuates some sort of altercation.” Josef paused, leaning his elbows on his knees and rubbing his hands together. “I’m of a mind that when Maxim Devarik left so suddenly in the middle of the night, he took Captain Hartmann with him.”

This was her worst fear coming out of his mouth—Sebastian in Maxim’s clutches. She didn’t even want to start thinking about what Sebastian might be going through. But there was a fire burning in the pit of her stomach. She couldn’t—she wouldn’t—let Maxim get away with this, especially after everything he put her through with Dimitri. Her nightmares would not become real. She would save him.

Sebastian was a Chieftain just as Maxim was, and he deserved better than to be kidnapped. And dammit, she wanted to tell him she loved him and about the baby.

She leveled Josef with a fierce gaze.

“Then we just have to go get him back.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

It took a little bit of prodding, but eventually, Josef gave into her half-formulated plan. Ilaria was sure he didn't particularly love this idea, but it was the only one they had. Also, if anyone was going to help convince the rest of the Council that this was the only way to get Sebastian back, Josef had to be on her side.

The General returned a few minutes later with Tobias Victarian in tow. The messenger from Drakos never left, which begged the question if he even knew Maxim arrived at all.

Josef left Tobias in the doorway before going off to his next errand.

"Please, have a seat," Ilaria said, gesturing to a chair beside the couch she was perched upon.

It had taken her several more hours to get out of bed, where she didn't feel like the world was moving out from under her feet. But finally getting back into the sitting room helped a little bit.

Tobias took the offered seat.

“Is there anything you want to tell me?” Ilaria started, trying to see if Tobias would tell her the truth.

“Ma’am?”

Ilaria tried another tactic. “Why have you not left to return home?”

Tobias rested his hands on his knees, smoothing them over the coarse fabric of his trousers.

“I was instructed to either return with you or not bother returning at all. Failure is not acceptable in Maxim Devarik’s eyes, as I am sure you are well aware.”

“Indeed.” Ilaria pressed her lips together. “Were you aware of any other deviation to the task you were sent to accomplish?”

“No, Ma’am.”

“I trust you are being completely honest with me.”

“Of course, ma’am. I have no more love for Maxim Devarik than the next soldier. My loyalty was always to Antony. Forgive me for saying it, but he would have been a much better Chieftain.”

There was a light tap on the door before it creaked open again. Josef stuck his head in. Ilaria made eye contact with him and gave a slight nod of her head.

“You might be able to prove that loyalty,” Ilaria replied.

Tobias frowned, his brow furrowing together. All Ilaria could do was give him a small smile before tilting her head

back towards the door.

“Ma’am—”

“Tobias Victarian?” The question was a shocked whisper.

Tobias was out of his chair in a heartbeat and whipped around.

“Antony? You’re alive?”

Antony was across the space in several long steps before he pulled the shorter man into a tight embrace.

“Forgive me, my friend.”

Tobias pulled away first, the surprise still clear in his face. He lightly punched Antony in the shoulder.

“After all these years, how the fuck are you alive?”

Antony chuckled. “It’s a long story.”

“I have time,” Tobias remarked, dropping down into his chair.

“I’m sure Ilaria doesn’t want to have to hear this again.” Antony took the seat next to her when she patted it for him.

“Do I want to relive what you went through? No, not really. However, Tobias needs to hear it and so does General Bauer,” Ilaria said.

Antony gazed around for a moment, his one eye wandering the room. “Where is that husband of yours?”

Ilaria sighed, resting her head up on his shoulder. “That’s more than half the reason we are here.”

Josef pulled up a chair and joined the trio. Rubbing his hands together, he started, “I have talked with Mistress Ilaria at length, but we have brought the four of us together to discuss it. It appears Maxim Devarik has physically taken the Captain—”

“Wait a second!” Antony interjected. “Maxim was here? And no one told me about it?”

“We’re telling you now,” Ilaria replied. “There was no time last night before he stormed out of the meeting he had with Sebastian and me.”

Tobias turned his eyes to Ilaria and when he spoke, she heard the sincerity in his words. “I had no idea he followed that closely behind me, or that he had followed at all.”

“Sebastian and I knew you were the warning. Maxim has always been unpredictable.” Ilaria paused with a shake of her head. “We can’t change what happened, but we change how it ends. I cannot, and I will not accept anything less than bringing Sebastian home.”

“Have you seen anything different?” Antony asked, patting his sister’s hand.

“No.” Ilaria shook her head. “There is one other small complication.”

Antony frowned. “What could possibly make this more complicated?”

Ilaria fought the slow smile that spread across her face. “I’m pregnant.”

The three other pairs of eyes in the room snapped up to hers.

“Does he know?” Josef was the first to recover.

“No,” Ilaria said with a shake of her head. “Amalie only figured it out this morning.”

“We will have to consider that,” Josef commented. “But let’s start at the beginning. Antony, if you don’t mind.”

So, they settled in for a long story.

Ilaria already heard a lot of this from Antony over the last couple of weeks, but it would be helpful to hear it all together and at once. Tobias was able to interject his own insights from when they were younger. It brought Ilaria a certain level of comfort to know that Antony hadn’t suffered totally alone.

“How old were we?” Tobias asked. “Nineteen, twenty? When you came back with that pulled shoulder?”

Antony shuddered. “Eighteen, actually. I only remember since it was a month after Ilaria’s wedding. Damn thing hurt for a long time after that.”

“I recall you telling me it was a training injury,” Ilaria interjected.

“Hardly,” Antony replied with a snort. “Maxim had my arm twisted so far behind my back that I was sure it was going to dislocate.”

“Why would he do that?” Ilaria’s question wasn’t loud, but Antony still heard it.

“Our darling brother took pleasure in my pain. The more he hurt me,” Antony paused, biting his lower lip. “It doesn’t matter anymore. Because he will not hurt me or you like that ever again. At the time, he told me it was to toughen me up. He knew you were my weakness.”

“But that doesn’t really answer why,” Ilaria persisted.

“I was his heir. In many regards I still am, technically, even if he were to leave me for dead. You would only inherit in the event that I do die,” Antony explained.

“But if the two of you are here and alive, what does Maxim Devarik have to gain by taking Captain Hartmann?” Josef asked. He kept mostly quiet while Antony talked and answered questions from Ilaria and Tobias.

“To get us to follow.” Ilaria blurted out the statement even before it could even sink in. “He saw Sebastian and I together last night. He saw the bond we already have. Maxim isn’t stupid, he knows that if Sebastian were to disappear that I would be right behind him. It’s his way of getting me back without having to steal me away. Stealing me would only make Sebastian follow, which would not end the way he wants. This way gets him what he wants.”

“This might sound insensitive,” Tobias said. “Why would he want you if Antony is still alive?”

“He probably thinks I’m legitimately dead.” Antony ran his hand through his curls. “I have had zero contact with him after the fire, since I’ve been here. Obviously, Ilaria and Sebastian

did not bring up my name in their meeting with Maxim last night.”

“Which will be incredibly helpful,” Josef said. He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. “What is the end goal here, though? Are we out to simply save Captain Hartmann, or do you two also wish to depose your brother?”

Silence reigned after Josef’s question. It wasn’t something Ilaria had entirely considered. Her mind had been solely focused on getting Sebastian back— for herself, for their child. However, finding a way to get rid of Maxim would allow them to live in peace and not to have to constantly look over her shoulder. That also meant that Antony had to be ready to take his place. Ilaria wasn’t sure if he was prepared to make that kind of drastic step.

“For what it’s worth,” Tobias finally broke the silence, turning his attention to Antony. “If it is your desire to depose Maxim, and as a result, hold him accountable for the crimes against you, against your sister, even against Clan Ulrich, you would have the support of more than three quarters of the military.”

Antony blanched. “How? If I’ve been presumed dead for the last five years?”

“You had the support years ago, you simply chose not to see it. My father warned me when I enlisted at fifteen. He also had served, but for your father, Artem Devarik, who he said was fair and just, even if he was tough. Maxim does not have those qualities, and people serve out of fear rather than out of

loyalty.” Tobias reached out and grabbed hold of Antony’s hand. “You, Antony, have those qualities, and the men would follow you to whatever end.”

“Thank you,” Antony’s voice broke. “That means more than you can imagine.”


Ilaria rested her hand on Antony’s shoulder. “Are you wanting to do this?”

Antony took in a deep breath and let it out. “I think so.” He gazed over at Josef. “Do you think I can get the support of Clan Ulrich in this endeavor?”

Josef nodded. “I will have to call an emergency meeting of the Council, which none of them will like, but it’s doable. You will have to present your case. However, knowing that the main goal is to retrieve our Chieftain and install a new one of Clan Drakos, they should be pursued. The primary question is: will you hold Maxim Devarik accountable for his crimes?”

Antony set his jaw, giving a firm nod. “I will.”

Ilaria had never been prouder of him.

image-placeholder

The last time she waited in this hallway, she was trying to convince them to let her marry Sebastian. Now it was to convince them to help save his life. Ilaria still couldn’t quite wrap her head around everything that had happened in the last month. She needed to get her husband back, and she would do anything to do so.

Glancing over at Antony, he was erratically pacing the floor. With the help of Josef, they had managed to find a fairly acceptable set of new clothes for him. Though they were a little big, since he still hadn't quite filled out like he was, but anything helped to make him look reasonably presentable. Tobias sat beside her, watching Antony.

"What are the chances we can get him to sit down?" Tobias whispered to her.

Ilaria chuckled. "Not very likely."

"You know I can hear you," Antony remarked.

"Then come sit with us. Josef said it would be at least twenty minutes, once they go through their regular procedures." Ilaria patted the spot next to her.

Antony grumbled as he came over and dropped down next to her. "I thought this was supposed to be an emergency, which in my mind requires a higher level of urgency."

"It will only be a few more minutes, I'm sure, but I'm going in before you," Ilaria said.

"How did you let me talk me into this again?"

Ilaria patted his knee. "I didn't talk you into anything, but you will be fine. We will be fine, and maybe you and I can finally live normal lives."

Antony snorted with a forced laugh. "What's normal?"

They only had to wait a couple more minutes before Josef stuck his head out. Ilaria gave Antony's knee one final squeeze

before standing up. She smoothed her hands over the front of her dress and took a deep breath. She could do this. She had to do this. Sebastian depended on her.

With her head held high, Ilaria walked into the council room, six pairs of eyes following her. She stood behind the seat she had taken the last time she was there. The empty chair felt like a prominent loss. Sebastian would have his seat back again.

When someone encouraged her to sit, she politely declined.

“Thank you, but I’d much rather stand,” Ilaria replied, her fingers tightening around the back of the chair. It was better to have something solid to hold on to. “I want to thank you all for heeding General Bauer’s call for an emergency meeting. I know this is unprecedented, but the matter is far too serious to put off. I’m sure General Bauer has filled you all in on the particulars. However, I wanted to make a personal appeal to you myself.”

“Please feel free to speak freely, Mistress,” Georg Wagner said clearly.

“Thank you, Chief Justice,” Ilaria replied. She took a long, deep breath before continuing with words that had been rolling around in her head for the last several hours. This needed to be perfect. “I wanted to speak with you all personally in this matter. Captain Hartmann means everything to me. The last time I was here, you all asked me how I would support our Chieftain. This is how. To ensure his safe return to us. My brother, the Chieftain of Clan Drakos, has committed multiple

crimes against myself, Captain Hartmann, and by extension, Clan Ulrich. He is responsible for the fire that took the life of Rudolf Hartmann, a needless tragedy. He murdered my first husband, Dimitri Petrovitch. He has stolen Captain Hartmann from us unfairly and unjustly. For this and many other things against myself personally, Maxim Devarik needs to be held accountable by this Council. I have already sent letters to Ianov, Bakken and Medici, expressing these same views. I have hope that they will also support us.”

“And how exactly do you propose this situation be handled?” Frederick Gunrich inquired.

“Maxim Devarik cannot stay in his current position.”

“You are his heir, are you not?” Paul Hesse asked.

“No. I never was. My twin brother, Antony Devarik, has been the heir and will take Maxim’s place.”

Karl Muller shook his head, his brow furrowing together. “Antony Devarik has been dead for five years.”

Ilaria didn’t immediately reply as she headed towards the door, opening it and ushering the pair into the room.

“Gentlemen, let me introduce Tobias Victarian, a messenger from Clan Drakos, and my twin brother, Antony Devarik.”

The announcement of Antony’s name caused a larger uproar than Ilaria imagined. It took both her and Josef several minutes to get everyone to settle back down again. Antony simply stood there and waited, as if he expected such a reaction, which Ilaria could not fault him for. Everyone believed him to

be dead for so long that for him to be in the same room was a shock. Ilaria also thought the eyepatch had something to do with it, since it gave his face a much more angular appearance, and it was much harder to read someone with only one eye.

Once they got everybody settled back down again, Antony stepped up to take Ilaria's place at the table. When he spoke, his voice held none of the nerves that had caused him to pace outside the door. Ilaria could not have been prouder.

“Thank you, gentleman, for agreeing to meet with me. I know my presence may come as a shock to many, but I am obviously not dead.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Shortly after dinner, Ilaria sat down with Amalie again. She hadn't eaten much as her stomach was still a little queasy, but not nearly as much as that morning. The discussions of the afternoon were productive, and they would leave first thing the next morning.

“How are you feeling, my dear?” Amalie asked, settling down beside Ilaria on the small sofa.

Ilaria still mindlessly sipped her tea. “Better. I think the double shock of the day is finally wearing off.”

“Are you happy about the news?” Amalie patted Ilaria's knee.

Ilaria smiled, wrapping her arms around her middle. “Of the prospect of finally having the baby I always wanted: yes. Of my husband being kidnapped: definitely not.”

“Is there reason to be concerned about him?” Amalie asked next.

Ilaria gave a stiff shake of her head, her lips pressed together. “I trust Sebastian's survival skills and know Maxim

will not do anything drastic, unless given a reason to do so. It's me he wants, so he will not harm his one bargaining chip."

"Sebastian will do anything to get back to you." Amalie wrapped an arm around Ilaria's shoulders.

"I know," Ilaria whispered. "I simply hope that it doesn't make him reckless. At the absolute most, we will only be a day behind them."

"Do you think it wise for you to go?"

"It isn't so much a question of wanting to go. I have to go. For the first time in my life, I have to stand up for myself and for him. Ever since my father died, twenty years ago, Maxim has controlled and therefore ruined my life. I cannot take it anymore. Sebastian made me realize how much more there is to life, to love. He has given me so much. He pulled me out of that damn fire when he owed me nothing. I can't leave him to suffer because of me."

Ilaria didn't even realize she was crying until Amalie wiped a few stray tears from her cheek.

"My son is very lucky to have you."

"I'm the lucky one," Ilaria whispered. "And I will bring him home for the both of us."

image-placeholder

The sun was still rising over the horizon long after they set sail. Everyone was too anxious to get moving to wait any longer than was necessary.

Josef had taken care of all the details. He reached out to Mathias, who by a stroke of fate, still happened to be in port. Taking Sebastian's ship to Drakos was the most logical thing to do, since it wouldn't necessarily be recognized and Mathias would take whatever direction from Josef.

Ilaria was comforted in knowing that there was a shipload of men and his own friends, who would do literally anything for Sebastian. He probably wouldn't even believe it himself, and that was endearing. He did so much for everyone else without expecting anything in return. It was one of the long list of things Ilaria realized she loved most about him. His dedication, his selflessness. Without those qualities, Isobel wouldn't even exist.

Standing at the railing staring out to sea, Ilaria couldn't stop thinking about him. It was strange to be in this place that was so familiar and comforting to them. They met here, they married here, and if Ilaria figured the timing out right, there was a really good chance they conceived their first child here. Even if she didn't want to admit it, this place was special. And for him not to be there hurt more than she imagined.

Ilaria rubbed her hands together, suddenly feeling rather cold and shivered.

"Everything alright?" Antony asked as he slipped up next to her, draping his arm over her shoulder.

Ilaria leaned into him. "It's strange being here without him. Like going to visit someone and they are not home, but you still stay."

“I suppose,” Antony responded. “But when this is all over, he will be back.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Let’s call it cautiously optimistic. We have a solid plan, and as long as it is executed carefully, we should be successful.”

“But don’t you think that Maxim won’t suspect the trap?” Ilaria murmured.

“No.” The word was spoken with such confidence that Ilaria couldn’t doubt his word. “Maxim is cunning, but we have the strength in numbers. Yes, there are those who will still be loyal to him. But if Tobias is to be believed, I have more.”

“You trust Tobias.” It wasn’t a question.

There was an implacable gleam in Antony’s eye. “With my life.”

“But what if—”

Antony pressed a finger to her lips to get her to stop talking. “We could stand here all day asking these sorts of questions. Yes, there are things you don’t know and you can’t know. For your safety and the success of the mission.”

Ilaria grabbed his wrist and pulled his hand away. “I know, but it doesn’t make it any easier.”

They fell into a comfortable silence for several long minutes before Antony suggested she lay down. “Can’t have you too worn out.”

Wrapping her arms around her middle, she nodded. “Seems to be sucking out all my energy.”

Ilaria allowed Antony to lead her across the deck and down into her room. It was strange to think about it like that. Stepping through the doorway, she looked around the room that had always been hers and Sebastian’s. Very few of his belongings littered the various surfaces, with his desk almost completely bare.

She ran her fingers over the smooth wood. The memories came unbidden of the last time they were here. A small smile touched her lips with a quiet chuckle. There was a good chance there wasn’t a surface in that room they hadn’t fucked on. Not that it mattered overly much, but she couldn’t look at anything in that room without memories of him coming back to her. Not even the piano where they had played together for the first time.

Her heart clenched in her chest, the pain escalating from a dull ache to a pulsating throb. Her breathing grew shallow as she stumbled over to the bed. Even grabbing hold of the bedpost to keep herself upright brought back a vivid recollection of that first day. Tears burned the back of her eyes and she choked back on a sob.

This pain was all too familiar. Where every nerve ending strained, where every pound of her heart felt like it was going to be the last. The scream that ripped from her felt almost like someone had taken a knife to her back. She couldn’t do this again. She couldn’t suffer through this fear and anger and

sadness. This is why she closed herself off after Dimitri died. Falling in love was too painful and too tragic.

The sound of pounding feet rushing to her door barely registered in her ears as she sobbed uncontrollably. Strong arms wrapped around her and tugged her over to the bed. In the deep recesses of her mind, she knew it was not Sebastian, no matter how much she wanted it to be. She fought for every breath in between her tears.

“Hush,” the whisper of a voice slowly penetrated her mind. She turned her wet eyes to find herself cradled in Antony’s arms. This forced a fresh wave of tears to spring forth.

“Don’t ever leave me again,” her words were lost in his shirt.

“I’m not going anywhere. I only left you for half a minute.” Though Ilaria felt the humor he tried to interject, it didn’t help overly much.

“Why does love have to hurt so much?” she asked.

Antony brushed the hair away from her face. “You are asking the wrong person, sister. You are the only one I have ever loved and probably the only one I ever will.”

“Antony...” She didn’t really know how to respond to that, even as she sniffed.

“Seeing how much it has hurt you, I think I’m better off anyway. Besides, you really can’t get yourself worked up like this. Sophie told me to keep you calm. Maybe we should have brought her after all.”

Ilaria shook her head. She had been the one to insist that Sophie stay behind. Being in the ship the first time was more than enough for the poor woman's stomach. While Antony's words were also intended to be comforting, Ilaria felt a new wave of panic course through her.

"How am I supposed to be calm when I don't know what our terror of a brother is doing to my husband? To the father of my baby?" The words came flooding out of her and there was no stopping it. "I can't do this alone. Our mother didn't do well."

"Our mother had twins. Hopefully you are not."

"Spirits preserve me, what if it is twins?" That thought was more terrifying than she had even imagined.

"Even if it is, you will be fine," Antony reasoned.

"You can't know that!"

A figure appeared in the doorway, Tobias sticking his head through. "If it comforts you, my mother had six."

Ilaria felt the color drain from her face. "Six?"

Tobias chuckled with a shake of his head, stepping inside. "Not at once. I'm the fourth of six children, and the only boy. My mother always said she enjoyed being pregnant too much."

Ilaria sat up straighter and wiped her cheeks. "Somehow that makes me feel better."

“If you want,” Tobias offered, “she still lives in the lower town and I could introduce you. She should be able to answer more of your questions.”

Ilaria nodded enthusiastically. “That would be wonderful. Let’s just get through our mission and then I would love to meet her. Thank you, Tobias.”

“Of course, ma’am. Always happy to help,” Tobias replied.

“See,” Antony said. “It’s not that bad.”

“It’s still bad, but I have to keep a clear head if we are to be successful. Just stay with me, for as long as we can. I can’t be in this room alone.” Ilaria hoped Antony understood without asking too many questions.

Antony gave her hand a comforting squeeze. “I won’t leave you.”

The weight of the sentence settled on her. He didn’t mean just for the next couple of days, but always. If there was anyone she could rely on no matter the circumstances, it was Antony.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Antony pressed a light kiss to Ilaria's cheek before adjusting the cloak over her head. He fastened the thistle pin holding the cloak together. Ilaria wished she had her own—the gift from her father—to give her strength. However, Sebastian had it hidden away and no matter how hard she looked, she couldn't find it.

“You are going to do great,” Antony whispered to her.

Ilaria pursed her lips and nodded. The mask of indifference slowly crept over her features. She knew the role she had to play; the person she had to return to being. Even all these months later, slipping back into that embodiment of sadness and aloofness was almost too easy.

“I will see you in the morning,” Ilaria murmured back.

She made quick eye contact with Josef and Tobias, both of whom gave her a stiff nod.

Thankfully, the dock wasn't far from the palace and she remembered the way back. Stepping down off the gangplank, she headed in that direction. With every step forward, Ilaria

felt increasingly sick to her stomach. She wondered as to the state she would find Sebastian, knowing Maxim's cruelty. Alive and, hopefully, relatively unharmed. Sebastian was the bigger of the two, if only marginally. All Ilaria could hope for was that it played in his favor. Sebastian was a survivor.

Maxim, on the other hand, she hoped to find in a much more pleasant disposition. Though those were rare, so it was best she didn't get her hopes up. She always thought she was the one who knew Maxim best and could anticipate his moods. However, after the more recent revelations from Antony, she felt like she didn't know Maxim at all anymore. He had treated her well enough, even if he made some questionable choices in the past, but he never hit her. Not like Antony.

But would he start now?

The question ran through her mind so fast she didn't have a chance to stop it. She almost stumbled over her feet. The thought was terrifying, but she had to remind herself that that couldn't happen, it wouldn't happen. They were saving Sebastian and putting Antony in Maxim's place.

Even as she neared the gate, a certain sense of calm washed over her. Though the panic was simmering right below the surface, she swallowed it down.

The gate was locked, which was to be expected at this time of night. Ilaria knocked on the door to the guard's room, the light of a single lantern hanging above the doorway. Usually there were two guards on duty at all times.

"No visitors!"

Ilaria knocked again, but harder.

“I said, no visitors!” The door was thrown open and Ilaria jumped back so she wouldn’t get hit.

“I want to see the Chieftain.” She kept her words careful and even.

“Now listen here, miss. I can’t be letting anyone through the gate at this time of night. You will have to come back tomorrow,” the guard replied with gritted teeth.

Ilaria rolled her eyes behind her hood before she yanked it back, angling her face to catch the light of the lantern. She might not recognize this guard, but he would no doubt recognize her.

“You will take me to my brother.”

The guard gapped and started to stammer. “M-miss, I’m so sorry. Forgive me, please.”

Ilaria grabbed a handful of his jacket and yanked him down until he was at eye level. When she spoke again, she made sure to enunciate each word. “You will take me to my brother, now!”

The guard yelled back into the room at his partner. Not waiting for an answer, he slammed the door shut again. He continued to mutter some inane babble of apologies as he led the way into the palace.

This place was as cold and dark as she remembered. A sense of dread echoed behind every click of her shoes against the stone floor. There wasn’t a crevice that she hadn’t explored

in her youth. Every twist and turn were as familiar to her as her own reflection. She didn't need the guard to lead her anywhere, since she could have found her own way, but every step was thought out and calculated. There couldn't be a single foot out of line.

Ilaria did wonder where the guard would take her—to Maxim's office, where he normally received visitors, the sitting room of his own personal chambers, or even just straight to a jail cell. The last possibility wouldn't have surprised her, since that felt like instructions he would leave. While the hour was late, Ilaria did expect for him to still be awake.

When they made a hard left down a particular hallway, Ilaria was pleasantly surprised to be taken in the direction of Maxim's rooms. They were only a short distance from her own. If there was any sort of comfort to be had, it would be back in her old rooms. The only place she could have called her own for twenty-six years.

The guard knocked on the door.

“Go the fuck away,” Maxim shouted from the other side.

The guard went to knock again, but Ilaria cut him off with a yell.

“Max!”

The door was yanked open a couple seconds later, a glowering Maxim filling the doorway. Ilaria didn't think she had ever been more terrified of him in her life.

A slow, sardonic smile crept over his face.

“Little sister.” He grabbed hold of her upper arm and yanked her into the room, slamming the door in the guard’s face before he could utter another word. “I’m so glad you have come to your senses and have come back home.”

Ilaria pulled her arm from his grasp, and tried for a pleasant smile. “Of course, this has been my only home and I have missed it.” It wasn’t a hard lie to tell. She would have been happier to never see this place again.

“Come sit, we have much to discuss,” Maxim said, gesturing to one of the small couches in front of the fireplace.

“What is there to talk about?” Ilaria asked, pulling off her cloak and settling down. “I have returned, haven’t I? You have what you want.”

Maxim sat in the chair across from her. “You would have me believe you came alone?”

“Naturally.” Ilaria sat up straighter and squared her shoulders. “I’m not a child, Max. I haven’t been for a long time. I am more than capable of traveling on my own.”

“Then what have you come to bargain with for the safe return of your precious Captain?” Maxim asked with a sneer. “I’m not stupid enough to believe you came here with nothing and wanting nothing. You were practically inconsolable for two days after I took Dimitri away from you the first time.”

Ilaria was prepared for this line of questioning. Antony had drilled them into her head over the last three days. There could

be no mistakes.

“Am I not enough for you? Isobel told me what you told Captain Hartmann that night. You want me, you have me. All I would ask is for Captain Hartmann to be sent back to his own clan, where he belongs.”

“Why? So, he can rally the other clans against me and press charges for kidnapping him? I don’t think so.” Maxim pushed out of his seat and grabbed hold of her arm again. He started dragging her towards the door. “No, no, little sister. That’s not how this is going to work.”

Ilaria tried to dig her heels into the stone but could find no purchase. “What are you going to do to him?”

He stopped abruptly and Ilaria almost hit him in the back. “If you are going to come back and stay here, then you need to follow my rules and suffer the consequences for your disobedience.”

When Sebastian had threatened her with rules and punishments, there had been a certain level of thrill. But Maxim’s only stirred more fear and dread.

“What are you going to do to him?” Ilaria repeated the question, though the panic was starting to seep through.

His bright green eyes seemed to glow in the darkness as he gazed down at her. “That all depends on you, my dear. If you’re bad, he gets your punishments. So, the more you fight me, the more it will hurt for him. But tomorrow will begin his penance.”

“For what?” Ilaria asked. “I just got here.”

“Oh, it starts with him stealing what is rightfully mine. Then for you running away and marrying without my permission. For your back talk the last time I saw you. Shall I go on? He will suffer greatly, and you only have yourself to blame.” The pure venom dripped off his words.

Ilaria was stunned into silence. She wasn't expecting this. Antony hadn't prepared her for this. So, she did the most careful thing she could—she kept her mouth shut.

When Maxim realized she would say no more, he gave her that twisted smile again and touched her cheek. “You are a good girl when you want to be.”

This time when he continued to drag her down the hall, she fought to keep up with his long strides. It wasn't long before they reached a door, which was not her own, but one she immediately recognized.

“Antony,” she whispered, touching the door for a moment before Maxim yanked it open.

“You will stay here tonight.” He shoved her through the doorway.

Ilaria stumbled to keep from pitching forward and falling down. She grabbed a nearby table to help steady herself.

The door shut and the lock clicked into place before Ilaria could even say another word.

Being in Antony's old room without him was strange and disconcerting. It was the same as it had always been—the

same worn, blue carpet over the stone floor, the same dark wood furniture. It became increasingly obvious to her that Maxim was expecting someone to stay there. The room was free of dust that would have no doubt accumulated over five years, and a small oil lamp sat on a table with only the faintest of flames. Going over to it, Ilaria turned up the flame, illuminating most of the room.


Her eyes immediately found the door that separated Antony's rooms from her own. Her feet took her there before she could even think about it. She turned down the handle.

Locked.

After Antony's supposed death, she stopped carrying the key to that door, hiding it away in a desk drawer. Ilaria wondered for a moment if it was still there, but even if it was, it was on the other side of a locked door. Instead, she ran her hand over the wood, remembering the curves and swirls of the engravings.

Forcing herself away from the door, she headed into the bedchamber. The linens were fresh when she unceremoniously dropped down into them. She curled into herself, grabbing hold of a pillow and resting a hand on her stomach.

"I promise you; I will save him."

image-placeholder

The streams of early sunlight seeped past the thin gap in the curtains. Of course, it had to streak right across his eyelid.

Sebastian pulled the blanket higher over his head and rolled over. In an instant he regretted that choice, and pushed himself up instead. His side still ached from where he'd been stabbed. Thankfully, he had gotten it properly treated so it would not become infected, but it still hurt. His stomach grumbled angrily next. Maxim wasn't kidding when he said that it was only going to be enough food to keep him alive.

Not that Sebastian considered the jug of milk, slice of bread, and an apple enough food for anyone. As a result, he felt incredibly weak. He was practically winded by the time he forced himself to sit up. He was grateful for actually having a bed, even if it smelled of honey and lavender. It smelled of her.

Sebastian was convinced Maxim put him in Ilaria's room to torment him. To surround him with everything that made Sebastian think of her. Then again, he could have been literally anywhere else and he would still think of her. He hadn't stopped thinking about her. All he could hope for was that she was far away and safe.

A light tapping reached his ears and he perked up. The guards who would come with his food or to check on him never knocked. Sebastian frowned, reaching for his shirt and pulling it over his head, instantly regretting the choice as it rubbed against the red welts in his chest. His feet hit the stone floor when he slipped out of bed. On unsteady legs, he stumbled across the bedroom to the sitting room.

The tapping had grown a little louder, and Sebastian followed it to another door in the room. He always assumed it

was the one that led to Antony's room, but it was locked and he had no way of getting it open.

He staggered across the floor and realized as he leaned against the door that it wasn't an arbitrary tapping. It was the beat to a song.

A song he knew all too well.

Sebastian slid down the door until he was on the floor, pressing his ear up against the cool wood. He heard a small voice and some softly muttered words.

Through the darkness, I will search for you

My heart will follow yours until we stand

In the light of day

Seeing the fire in your eyes

I can see the love from deep in your heart

For it is reflected in mine and will forever burn like the sun

His heart swelled and ached in equal measure. He rested his hand on the door. There was a part of him that thought he was hallucinating the sound of her voice as the first step of starvation. He wanted it to be real so badly, just to be near her again. Though, things would not bode well if she was there.

When she suddenly stopped singing, he picked up where she trailed off. He kept the song soft and sweet, almost like he was singing it as a lullaby.

To find our destiny beside each other

Then everything will be clear

The night will end and the sun will rise

Rise on a new day, a new life

Where we will stand in the light of day

The final words slowly trailed off. Sebastian sucked in a deep breath, trying to quiet his thundering heart.

“Ilaria.” Her name slipped from his lips.

There was a long pause.

“Sebastian? Are you there?” The question filtered through the door.

“I’m here,” Sebastian replied. “What are you doing here, pretty girl?”

“I’ve come to save you, Captain. Do you trust me?” she asked.

“With my heart and my life.” There was no hesitation in Sebastian’s answer.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when he felt something brush against his thigh. Staring down, he saw the tips of some of her fingers peeking out from under the door. The gap between the floor and the door was wide enough, and Sebastian slipped his hand under. His fingers brushed up

against the side of hers and somehow, with that simple contact, he felt calmer than he had in days.

“I’ve missed you so much,” her voice was barely audible through the wood.

“And I you.”

“I promise you that after today, we will never be apart again.”

“Ilaria—”

Sebastian was cut off when the door to his room creaked open. He yanked his hand back, losing contact with her, but still knowing she was there gave him comfort. The two guards that came into the room stopped when they saw him on the floor. One Sebastian recognized as the one who came once a day with his food, but today he had no tray. The second one made Sebastian blink several times to make sure he was seeing it correctly.

The guard looked remarkably like the messenger they had received in Ulrich. Tobias Victarian. Who, as far as Sebastian knew, had not left Ulrich.

He opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out. Tobias stood behind the other guard so he could not be seen by him as he made eye contact with Sebastian and raised a finger to his lips.

Too many thoughts raced through Sebastian’s mind all at once. If Ilaria was there and now Tobias, did that mean Antony was there too? What about Josef, who would not have let the

three leave without him? More importantly, how had they gotten to Drakos so quickly?

The first guard came over to Sebastian and helped haul him to his feet.

“The Chieftain wants to see you, now,” he said with a stiff tone.

Sebastian pressed his lips together with a nod.

He only hoped that whatever scheme they had was going to work.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

The courtyard was small, three sides surrounded by the walls of the palace and the fourth by a large hedge that concealed a metal gate. It was private and secluded, with almost no windows facing this direction. The morning air was still cool as it brushed up against her skin, sending a shiver down her spine.

Ilaria leaned heavily against one of the walls, trying to keep her breathing even so she wouldn't start to panic. She knew this place that was so wholly ingrained in her very subconscious. Every rock, every blade of grass, she remembered. The feel of the small stone path as it scraped against her knees. It was almost like she could hear the screams still echoing off the walls.

She had run down to this very spot once before, finding a bloodied and broken body waiting for her. The dark eyes staring up, unseeing into the morning sky, the pain forever etched into his face. She had screamed until she was hoarse and cried until there was not a single tear left in her body as she cradled the battered corpse in her arms. It was only then,

when she was on the verge of passing out, that there was a hand on her arm, pulling her away.

“Enough now.” Maxim’s words echoed in her ears as he wrapped an arm around her waist and practically hauled her back inside. “He betrayed us, never forget that.”

For more than a year she believed that. For more than a year, she wouldn’t know why the husband she loved had turned his back on her. For more than a year, she was left wondering if it could have ended any other way.

Ilaria stared at that center stone in the walkway, all the memories flashing through her mind. She didn’t know if she was strong enough to survive this a second time. She didn’t know if she had the resolve to not completely crumble like she had a year ago. However, she had to remind herself that she wasn’t the same scared little girl she was then. She no longer could be persuaded with lies that the older brother, who was supposed to love her, had told her. No, now she had to be strong; stronger than she had ever been in her entire life. For herself, for Antony, for Sebastian, for the little life that fluttered, for Dimitri.

Maxim had her dragged down here and left here for a reason. To torment her further before everything else. He had left her to stand in a place that was more painful than anywhere else.

Ilaria nearly jumped out of her skin when the far gate creaked open. She forced herself more upright and squared her shoulders. No one was going to see her fear.

Maxim stepped through the gate and held his hand out towards her without a single word. Ilaria forced her feet to move as she crossed that wretched space, laying her hand in his. She felt cold and clammy next to him, but she still tipped her chin up a little higher.

“This is an interesting choice,” Maxim remarked, gesturing to her dress.

A year ago, she wore all black and covered her face with a veil. This time she did nothing to hide the growing emotions on her face.

After Sebastian was hauled out of her room, someone came to unlock the door between them. Somehow, she had managed to find, deep in the recesses of her wardrobe, a dark burgundy, silk dress. She couldn't even remember what she had even worn it for in the past, but that didn't matter. The dark burgundy was a color of Clan Ulrich, a fact that was not lost on Maxim.

“This old thing,” Ilaria commented, trying to keep her voice light and unaffected. “I just thought it was pretty. Do you not like it?”

Maxim snorted as he leaned down to her ear. “It's a very bold color choice.”

Ilaria simply raised a single shoulder.

With a shake of his head, Maxim tugged her forward through the gate. In the other side was a more open garden space that was still fairly secluded.

Ilaria had mentally prepared for this moment, but seeing a shirtless Sebastian on his knees, arms extended, with a rope around each wrist held by a guard on either side of him, was more than she imagined. Just like Dimitri. Just like her nightmare.

Their gazes locked and his deep, blue-grey eyes were more turbulent than she had ever seen them. Four days of growth covered his cheeks, and was a couple shades darker than his hair. Ilaria would have done anything to run her fingers through it and feel it rub up against her skin. The long, red welts crisscrossing his muscled chest stood out in sharp contrast to his tanned skin. But it was the white bandages around his waist that concerned her more than anything else.

She bit her lower lip to keep from calling out to him, since she definitely couldn't throw herself at him with Maxim attached to her arm. Instead, she forced her gaze away from him to look at the two guards at his sides. Her heart went into overdrive when she saw Tobias there beside him.

As far as she knew, he wasn't supposed to be here at this point. There must have been a change somewhere in the plans, but having Tobias there at this point gave her a certain level of comfort.

More importantly, she kept her mouth shut. The more of a protest or argument she put up, the worse off it would be for Sebastian, and she knew that. She just hoped that Sebastian understood why it looked like she wasn't going to defend him

in any way. Daring to look him in the face again, his eyes had softened and somehow, she knew he was going to be okay.

Without warning, Maxim shoved her to another guard who caught her easily around the waist before she hit the ground.

“I’m going to enjoy watching you squirm,” Maxim said, but didn’t even turn to look at her.

Ilaria struggled against the hold of the guard, his arms tightly around her, pinning her arms to her sides. His hot breath brushed the back of her neck, making the hairs there stand on end.

“For Antony.” The two whispered words barely slipped through her ears. She immediately stopped struggling. “He is here.”

Ilaria’s eyes frantically looked around the small clearing, hoping for a glimpse of something but finding nothing. Aside from the two holding Sebastian and the one holding her, there were seven other guards present. She wondered how many of them were loyal to Antony instead of Maxim. They had a whole night to figure this out. And the location of this only made the most sense, since this was where Dimitri also died.

But Ilaria realized that’s where the similarities ended. Her nightmares had shown her Sebastian’s death being identical to Dimitri’s. However, this was different—it felt different. She hadn’t been held back the first time, nor was Dimitri restrained the way Sebastian was now. Dimitri had his own personal tormentor while Maxim seemed to take that role for himself now.

Her heart skittered in her chest. Could this possibly not end the same way? Would Sebastian be able to go home with her like Dimitri never did?

“I have nothing to say to you.” Sebastian’s hiss permeated through her thoughts. “I have been increasingly clear that I am leaving here with my wife.”

Maxim struck him across the face, jerking Sebastian’s head to the side. “She is my sister. You have no claim to her.”

“She believes otherwise,” Sebastian shot back, even if he didn’t move his head back to look at Maxim.

“I don’t give a shit what she believes. She belongs to me. She has for twenty years.”

“I’m not a possession to be owned,” Ilaria spat out before she could stop herself. Her mouth moved faster than her brain could keep up. “For twenty years, you have treated me like a fucking mindless toy, something to barter with, something to be played with, and then cast aside when you were bored. I am a fucking person like everyone else, with a mind and a heart that you can no longer break.”

The laugh that followed sent chills down her spine. Maxim whipped around, that infernal smirk still on his face. “You think your life means anything? No, little sister, you only matter because I give you value. Because you carry our family name, even if a second one is attached to it. Otherwise, would he want anything to do with you?”

“I don’t give a shit what her name is, nor am I afraid of yours. It confuses me that someone as sweet as her is related to an asshole like you.”

This time it was not the back of his hand, but a balled-up fist that hit Sebastian’s jaw. He only winced for a moment before spitting the blood in his mouth at Maxim’s feet.

“You will regret that. Both of you fucking will,” Maxim paused, shooting a glare at Ilaria. There was a sinister gleam in his eye that she didn’t like when he turned back to Sebastian. “Do you know what kind of whore your wife is?”

Ilaria felt her heart skip a beat, the surprise stuck in her throat with the gasp she tried to swallow. That was one of the last things she expected to come out of Maxim’s mouth. However, Sebastian knew about her other lovers, but it didn’t matter to him.

The chuckle that slipped from Sebastian was no less startling. “The best kind, actually. She is really good at su—”

Maxim’s fist struck Sebastian right in the side, exactly where his bandages were.

Sebastian let out a whoosh of breath.

“You will never say that,” Maxim growled.

“Say what?” Sebastian asked, his grimace turning into a smile. “That she’s the best cock sucker I’ve ever met?”

Maxim delivered several more powerful blows to Sebastian’s face and body, but it didn’t stop Sebastian from continuing to taunt him. And he continued to get hit with

every passing sentence. “Or the first night we met, I fucked her bent over a table? Or that she has the sweetest pussy I’ve ever tasted?”

Ilaria was convinced that every drop of blood in her body was rushing to her face. Yes, they had done everything Sebastian said, but it was so much dirtier coming out of his mouth. She wanted the ground to open up and swallow her whole. But once she finally actually thought about what was going on, it settled over her like a heavy blanket.

Sebastian was purposefully saying everything to piss off Maxim more. Because really, what brother wanted to hear about the things their younger sister got up to in the bedroom? Obviously, Sebastian was trying to provoke him and push Maxim to his limits. To see just how far he would go to punish them both. But more importantly, to have witnesses to Maxim’s brutality.

Tobias must have said something to Sebastian on their way down here, otherwise, Ilaria wouldn’t understand why he would bring this misery unto himself. The angrier Maxim got, the worse Sebastian’s beating became, blood trailing from his nose down his chin. Until finally, Maxim wrapped both hands around Sebastian’s neck and squeezed.

“I will fucking end you right now,” Maxim snapped.

“Do it,” Sebastian continued to instigate, even as he wheezed for breath. “Show the world what kind of vicious monster you are. Bring the wrath of my clan down upon your head and forever lose the love of your sister.”

There was not a shred of love left in Ilaria's heart for Maxim, but that didn't need to be said now. As long as Maxim believed it was still possible.

Sebastian really began to sputter when a loud yell broke through the small gathering.

“Maxim Devarik! Unhand him at once!”

Ilaria almost let out an audible sigh at the sound of Josef's voice.

Josef stepped through from the same small courtyard connected to the palace. He was a sight to behold; the thunderous expression on his face not one to be missed.

Maxim didn't loosen his grip. “Who the fuck are you?”

“Josef Bauer,” he replied with a slight bow. “Commander General of Clan Ulrich, and you are choking my Chieftain.”

Maxim's grip loosened enough for Sebastian to suck in a deep breath.

“Did you really have to wait so long?” Sebastian gasped out.

Josef shrugged.

Maxim stared between the two, his hands still on Sebastian's neck, but watching the exchange with growing suspicion on his face.

“Hello, brother.”

The color drained from Maxim's face. “Antony?”

Antony stepped through. “Miss me?”

“You’re supposed to be dead,” Maxim hissed.

“When? A month ago? Five years ago? You’ve been trying to kill me since I was ten years old, and yet, somehow you keep failing,” Antony replied. “But it ends here and now. Seize him.”

Everything happened all at once. As soon as the guard holding her released his grip, Ilaria darted over to Sebastian and wrapped him in her arms, not caring at all that the blood on his face was getting all over her skin and dress. Sebastian’s bonds were dropped and he returned her embrace, his nose in her hair.

“Oh, Bash,” she sighed, squeezing him tighter.

“Thank you,” he whispered for her ears only.

Ilaria wanted to tell him at that moment that she loved him like she should have done all those days ago. She wanted to tell him about their own little miracle. However, it was going to have to wait.

Her head jerked up when she heard the scuffle, followed by Maxim cursing them all quite loudly.

It appeared that every guard in that space was on Antony's side.

“What the fuck is this?” Maxim shouted, struggling against the three men who were holding him back.

Antony spread out his arms. “It seems like your own guards have turned against you. And as your heir, I have a right to

extend my influence. This appears to be a transition of authority.”

“You cannot take this from me!”

“Oh, but I can, and I have,” Antony’s words were light, but there was still a bite. He straightened up to his full height and squared his shoulders, his long, lanky frame now appearing so much bigger. “Maxim Devarik, you are hereby removed as the Chieftain of Clan Drakos, and under arrest.”

Maxim gnashed his teeth together. “I have a right to know what the charges are.”

“For the kidnapping and torment of the Chieftain of Clan Ulrich. For ordering the fire that killed Rudolf Hartmann, the former Chieftain of Clan Ulrich,” Josef spoke first.

“For the physical and emotional abuse I suffered as a child,” Antony added. “For your continued abuse, even once I became an adult, which resulted in the loss of an eye.”

Ilaria gave Sebastian a final tight hug before standing up to face her older brother. Any amount of pity she might have felt for him evaporated the moment he hit Sebastian. Instead, she was looking into a face she no longer recognized. Gone was the brother she knew, and in his place was a monster she didn’t.

“For the neglect you showed me for the last twenty years. For the unjust murder of Dimitri Petrovitch,” Ilaria continued the running list. She stared at him, hoping to see anything

other than the blackness behind his eyes. “Do you even feel any remorse for all the things you have done?”

Maxim glared back at her, and with no feeling, remarked, “The only thing I regret is not smothering the both of you the night I did the same to our father.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

An uncomfortable silence fell in the courtyard after Maxim's pronouncement. Sebastian saw the tension creep up Ilaria's shoulders and the way Antony balled his hands at his sides.

Before anyone knew what was happening, Ilaria closed the last couple steps between her and Maxim. She smacked him so hard across the face that Sebastian winced at the sound, but he had never been prouder of her for standing up for herself.

Ilaria spit at Maxim's feet. "I regret ever calling you my brother."

With a wordless nod from Antony, the guards dragged Maxim off, who still refused to shut up.

"I do hope you enjoy your accommodations," Antony called after him. Turning to Ilaria and Sebastian, he winked. "I found the most disgusting cell for him. Decidedly worse than the one he kept me in for six months."

"Antony," Ilaria started but stopped when he shook his head.

“It’s all in the past now, which cannot be changed no matter how much we wish we could. There is a lot I have to sort out in my own head, but with time and reflection. For now, I can finally rest easy knowing that he won’t be breathing down my neck,” Antony said, crossing his arms.

“What will happen next?” Sebastian asked, rising to his feet. His hand sought out Ilaria’s and she squeezed it tight. He also took a handkerchief from Josef to wipe the blood from his face.

“We have to call a Tribunal of the Five Clans. Josef talked about it on the way here,” Antony explained. “It seems like the only reasonable course of action. As a result, I would ask for you two to remain until that happens.”

“I understand the principle of the Tribunal. However, I cannot sit on the Tribunal since I’m technically also a victim of a crime he will be punished for. And honestly, stealing other clan’s Chieftains should not be a practice to condone,” Sebastian asked.

Antony nodded slowly. “Neither can I, if I want him punished for my abuse.”

“How do we play this since every clan must have a representative?” Ilaria asked.

“We thought of that too,” Tobias interjected, moving to stand beside Antony.

Josef stepped towards Sebastian and with an incline of his head, said, “With your permission, Bash, I’d offer to take your

place. I'm a member of your Council and am not related to anyone else present. And you know I will do everything to get you justice."

Sebastian had no doubt in his mind that Josef would be more than adequate in this endeavor. He clasped the other man on the shoulder.

"There could be no one better." Sebastian gave him a small smile.

"But," Ilaria started, turning her attention to Antony. "What about us? For the same reasons, neither you nor I can do it. I also don't trust anyone who sat on Maxim's council."

Antony chuckled. "No, indeed. This is why they are all getting replaced as soon as I possibly can have it achieved. In the meantime, Tobias will act in my stead on the Tribunal."

Tobias started, staring at Antony with the shock written clear across his face. "I thought—"

Antony swung an arm around his shoulders. "There is no one I trust more at the moment than you to handle this for me."

"And Natasha? Will you tell her to bring a proxy for the Tribunal too?" Ilaria asked.

Antony gave an almost diabolical chuckle. "No. I'm going to let Natasha's rage loose. Maxim will be charged with Dimitri's death as your husband, not as her brother. So, she is free to sit in judgment."

“Do you think Medici and Bakken will stand on our side?” Tobias wondered.

Sebastian tightened his arm around Ilaria, pulling her closer to his side. Having her there gave him the strength to get through this. “Even if we don’t, we will still have the majority vote. Tobias, Josef and Natasha will side with us. Giovanni Rossini is a fairly logical person. Lars Eklund will be the true question, since he has never sided with anyone. But it almost doesn’t matter as long as he is present.”

“Indeed.” Antony clapped, rubbing his hands together. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have councils to fire and letters to write.”

With a few more words, the crowd dispersed, off to do their respective duties.

Ilaria smiled, grabbing Sebastian’s hand and dragging him back inside. He would gladly follow her wherever she felt like taking him. There was something different, he noticed. An added sparkle in her eyes, mayhap, or the dazzling smile that didn’t leave her face. If he wasn’t already deeply in love with this woman, he would be now.

Going to Ilaria’s room with her this time was a little stranger than Sebastian had anticipated. He wasn’t quite sure why. Maybe because he had spent enough time there without her or that this was her personal private place.

He hesitated in the doorway, forcing her to turn around. His eyes searched hers for any indication that she didn’t want him there, but saw nothing.

“Are you sure?” Sebastian asked simply.

Ilaria brought his hand to her lips, kissing the palm. His fingers curled around her cheek.

“I have never been more certain about anything in my life. I want you here, I need you here. These last few days without you have been so much harder than I thought they would be. With you, I have never felt more alive.”

Sebastian smiled, leaning down to give her a kiss that quickly dissolved into a fit of heaving breath and tangled tongues. His arms grabbed her just underneath her ass and lifted her into the air. Her back hit the door as it slammed shut behind them and her fingers tangled into his hair.

Everything hurt, Sebastian realized. His muscles were sore and stiff, the wound in his side began to throb anew, and his jaw ached. But he didn't care; having her in his arms again was worth any of the discomfort.

“Let me take care of you,” Ilaria whispered against his mouth.

Sebastian pulled back far enough to look into her eyes, a smirk twitching on his lips. He brushed some of the loose hair from her face, tucking it behind her ear. “The last time you said that, you ended up on your knees with my cock in your mouth.”

“Put me down,” she murmured.

Sebastian complied with her wishes, even if he wanted to keep holding her. No sooner were her feet on the ground, she

had him pressed against a nearby wall.

He groaned when she pressed her lips to his neck, gently sucking on the soft skin. She kissed down his chest, purposely avoiding some of the darker marks, and across his stomach. He was panting and rock hard by the time she was on her knees. He felt her hands tugging at the waistband of his pants, and glancing down at her, Sebastian was quite sure he was dead.

The deep cut of her dress gave him the perfect view of her heaving breasts from his vantage point. She looked up at him with those big eyes, biting her lower lip. She paused, not because she was hesitating, but because she was waiting for permission. He could read it clearly across her face. Only the slightest of nods had her undoing the closure in record pace. There was barely time to register that his cock was even out of his pants before she sucked him down whole.

“Oh fuck,” he growled. He gathered her hair back so it was out of the way, wrapping the dark strands around his fist. “You take my cock so well, pretty girl.”

Her hum of appreciation sent shockwaves down his spine. He was going to have to get beat up more often if this was going to be his reward. The feel of her hot, wet mouth was going to be his undoing. Not that he wasn't lost to her a long time ago. His heart was close to bursting, even if all the blood in his body was currently rushing to his throbbing dick.

Ilaria pulled back to let the tip of her tongue trail along the underside before pressing a few light kisses to the head. As

much as he wanted to finish in her mouth, he had other plans for her.

With her hair as leverage, he slowly pulled her off of him. She opened that pretty mouth like she was going to say something, but all that came out was a loud gasp. Hauling her back up to her feet, he spun her around until her front was pressed up against the wall. He tugged down the front of her dress enough to palm her breasts, rolling her nipples with his thumbs. It didn't take long before he had her moaning and shoving her hips back against him.

He nuzzled his nose behind her ear. "Hands on the wall, pretty girl, and don't move."

The thud of her hands on the wooden paneling made him chuckle. He gathered up her skirts, draping them around her waist. His hand trailed up the back of her thigh, feeling her shiver. She whimpered when he ran his thumb between her lips to gather the wetness and circle it around her clit.

Dropping down behind her and shouldering her legs a little wider, he affixed his mouth to her. He hadn't been lying when he said hers was the best pussy he ever tasted. The noises she made—every moan, every whimper—only spurred him on. He flicked his tongue back and forth over her clit before sucking it back into his mouth. He enjoyed how the rest of her pulsed and quivered when he slipped a finger inside.

"Oh shit," she cursed, as he rubbed that spot that he knew would have her seeing stars.

It didn't take long before she came crashing down. Sebastian chuckled against her thigh, giving her one more kiss before standing up. He wrapped his arms around her and held her to his chest.


“Now, that is the fastest I've made you come,” he said, kissing the top of her bare shoulder.

“No doubt,” she laughed. Turning her head so she could see him better, she rested a hand against his bearded cheek. “You are not allowed to shave this off ever.”

“Done.” He rubbed his cheek against her shoulder. “Now I need to have you.”

Before she could protest, he lifted her off her feet and carried her to one of the couches. He settled her down on her knees on the cushions and she grabbed onto the back. A deep growl erupted from his chest as he inched himself forward, until he was completely seated inside her. He ran his hands down her back, over the curve of her skin, even if she was still covered in that dark, red silk. Seeing her in his clan's colors turned him on more than he thought it would.

She was his. Now and always.

image-placeholder

Leaning forward, he kissed the back of her neck, rubbing his beard against her soft skin. It only amplified every tingling nerve ending. The beard was definitely going to stay.

Ilaria wiggled her hips to try and get him moving. She needed him to start moving. He rewarded her with a sudden snap of his hips.

“I’ve missed you,” he whispered against her neck.

“No more than I have you.” The words came out in short gasps.

There were so many things she needed to tell him, that she wanted to tell him. But the feeling of his cock sliding in and out of her was enough to wipe any logical thought from her mind. Not that she minded. He made her feel things she never thought possible.

Sebastian slid an arm around her middle and pulled her up so she was against his chest. A second hand wrapped around her throat; he didn’t apply much pressure, but she could feel him everywhere.

“Tell me who you belong to,” he growled in her ear, his pace becoming faster and erratic.

Shit, if that didn’t make her wetter then she already was.

“You, Captain,” she panted. “I will ever belong to you.”

She felt herself climbing again. She didn’t even think it possible after having his mouth all over her. Reaching back, she threaded her fingers through his hair, holding on tight. Her back bowed and she called out as the wave pulled her under again.

With a few more rough thrusts of his hips, he buried himself as deeply as he could. She could feel the warmth of him filling

her. He sighed, releasing her neck and leaning in to kiss her cheek.

He carefully pulled up the front of her dress before easing out of her. Ilaria could feel his eyes on her as she felt his cum trail down her inner thigh. She shuddered when he followed it up with his finger and gently pushed it back in.

“You don’t have to do that,” she whispered.

“I want to be able to give you everything you ever wanted.”

Ilaria was glad he couldn’t quite see the giant smile on her face. A more perfect moment couldn’t have presented itself.

“You already have.”

Before she knew it, she was pulled across Sebastian’s lap. She didn’t care that her skirts were everywhere. The way he held her close to him made everything else disappear. She found herself staring up into his eyes, so full of wonder and hope.

“You’re not,” his whisper barely reached her ears.

Ilaria bit her lip with a nod. Her heart was close to bursting. “I am.”

She could see the emotion swimming through his eyes.

“I didn’t think... it’s so soon... but you said...” all of his thoughts were coming out as jumbled sentences.

With a chuckle, Ilaria pressed a finger to his lips.

“Anything is possible. Maybe Dimitri and I weren’t meant to have children. But I’m so happy I can have them with you.”

She took his trembling hand and rested it against her stomach. “We made this baby, who will be loved and cherished beyond imagination.”

A tear tracked down his cheek, even if he had the biggest smile she had ever seen.

“I love you more than you will ever know.” He lightly pecked her lips.

“I love you, Bash. I’m sorry it took me so long to realize it.”

Sebastian grinned. “You do know what you just called me, don’t you?”

Ilaria’s brow furrowed as she cocked her head to the side. Then it finally clicked—she called him Bash. She hadn’t done that before.

“I won’t use that if you don’t want me to. I know it’s what your family calls you,” she whispered.

Sebastian reached up and took her face in his hands. “I want you to call me Bash. You are my family. We will be a family.”

Ilaria felt her heart close to bursting.

“I don’t think I’ve ever had that before. It was always just Antony and I against the world.”

“You still have Antony, and now me.” Sebastian smoothed his thumbs over her cheeks. “How did you figure it out?”

Ilaria snaked a hand around the back of his neck, resting her forehead against his. “Your mother, actually, the morning after you were taken. I hadn’t been feeling well, still don’t

sometimes, but you know your mother. She can look at you and know in an instant what is wrong.”

“Of course. Nothing gets by that woman.”

“Definitely not.”

“I think I’m still in shock,” Sebastian said as he buried his face in her neck.

Ilaria felt the wetness of his tears against her skin. It was as if the whole world was opened to them now. They were free to put the past behind them and move to a future with a family of their own.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

It had taken a little more than two weeks to get everyone gathered in Drakos for the Tribunal. It wasn't surprising that Medici and Bakken sent a reply and then took longer to show up in person. However, Natasha came almost instantly, since she had been craving some sort of retribution for over a year. She was practically giddy—if that level of happiness was even possible for that woman—when she found out that she would be able to sit in judgement.

While they waited for the two others, Sebastian and Josef were doing their best to help Antony. Antony, for his part, had taken to his new role far more naturally than Ilaria thought possible. Maybe Tobias was right when he said Antony was a much better leader. After firing his entire council, since they all sympathized with Maxim—the man was good at keeping those around who would always agree with him—Antony set about the task of electing a new one. This was a process that was going to take longer than any of them anticipated. But Ilaria was certain that with the help of his friends, Antony would get it done.

Once everything was in place and everyone was present, it only took two days to present all the accusations against Maxim. They started in the present with Sebastian's kidnapping and worked their way back to the death of Artem Devarik. Maxim only answered questions directed at him, never offering more, and only ever saying the bare minimum at best. Ilaria wondered why he wouldn't try harder to defend himself, but even Maxim knew this was all technicalities that had to be followed.

When asked why he killed his father, Maxim shrugged indifferently. "Why not?"

He refused to say any more than that.

Ilaria leaned heavily against Sebastian's side, feeling much like she'd been punched in the chest. She didn't understand it—any of it. How could he be so cold and unfeeling, even towards his own family? It was a question she would ask herself for a long time to come. She didn't know if she would ever have those answers.

They had adjourned for the rest of the afternoon, while those who sat in judgement could discuss the potential resolution.

Ilaria had to get out of the palace; she needed some air and some distance. Taking Sebastian's hand, she pulled him along with her.

The breeze was light and the late afternoon sun kept trying to peek out from behind the clouds. They walked in silence through one of the gardens, which was quieter this time of day.

There wasn't much to say, and Ilaria didn't particularly want to talk about what was happening with Maxim. All her words had been long exhausted when it came to him. Instead, she wanted to focus on the future. There was only one last thing she felt like she could do before being able to put it all behind her.

“There is somewhere I want to show you,” Ilaria whispered.

She gently tugged him along a path that wound around the back of the palace, where the space was bigger and more open with a grove of trees in the distance. After the initial four months, she forced herself to stagger her visits to this place. Even then she knew it would do no good for her. However, it wasn't until Sebastian that Ilaria truly could try to move on.

The tree was no different from the ones around it. It was no taller or shorter, no wider than the others, the leaves the same shade of yellowish-green. There was no stone or formal marker of any kind. There was simply the engraving in the bark, not far off the ground.

D+I

Ilaria knelt down in the grass, running her fingers over the letters. Sebastian settled beside her; she could feel his eyes on her instead of the tree.

“He carved this here for our fifth wedding anniversary,” Ilaria murmured. “When we thought there was still so much time left for us. I know now that he's not actually here, but it brings me a certain level of comfort to have even this small


thing of him.” Her head fell against Sebastian’s shoulder when he wrapped an arm around her waist. “I know you two could never meet, but I somehow thought this would be the second-best thing.”

“Thank you for bringing me here.” Sebastian ran the back of his fingers over her cheek.

She turned to him and gave him a real, genuine smile. “Dimitri is a part of my past, a piece of me that will never change. But you are my future, Sebastian, and I couldn’t be more excited to see what life has in store for us.”

“So am I. I never thought this would be my life. To have the most amazing wife and be able to build a family together. And none of that would be possible if he didn’t love you first.” Sebastian pressed his lips to her temple.

They stayed there for a little while longer before finally heading back to the palace. Ilaria felt lighter and happier. She didn’t realize how much she needed this. To bring her past and her future together in one space. To finally leave Dimitri to rest.

image-placeholder

The judgement of the Tribunal came as no surprise to anyone, least of all Maxim. Ilaria was glad for it, that the brother who was supposed to love them and protect them would finally be held accountable for all the damage he had dealt.

Only the night before, Ilaria, Sebastian, and Antony sat down and discussed what kind of punishment they would seek,

if the Tribunal did find Maxim guilty.

“As much as I would want to see him dead,” Antony started, rubbing a hand over his face. “I can’t. We can’t. It would make us no better than he is.”

Sebastian nodded. “I agree.”

“Left to rot in some hole would be nice,” Ilaria muttered.

Antony gave a full-bodied laugh. “Yes! That would do.”

As a result, it was agreed upon that Maxim would be sent away and held by Clan Bakken. Lars Eklund had made the suggestion himself, since he was in no way emotionally involved and his fortress in the mountains was the furthest away from everything anyway.

Once it was all said and done, Ilaria and Antony walked out of that chamber without so much as a glance back. They couldn’t let what happened to them hold them back anymore.

However, Ilaria only got a few feet before she was stopped by a tap on the shoulder.

Turning around, she came face to face with Natasha. Ilaria didn’t even get a word out before Natasha pulled her into a tight embrace.

“Thank you for getting justice for my brother,” Natasha whispered in her ear.

Ilaria eased back and gave Natasha a small smile, taking a hold of her hands. “I loved him. I had to make this right for

you and for me. I will never forget him, much like you will not either.”

“I also want to apologize for the way I’ve treated you over the years,” Natasha continued. “I didn’t realize sending Dimitri here was going to be one of the last times I would ever see him. But it brings me comfort to know he had someone who cared for him at his side.”

“I hope you and I can still be sisters,” Ilaria said.

Natasha snorted with a chuckle. “Let’s not push it. But I am in your debt, so feel free to call for me if you are ever in need of anything.”

“Thank you.”

Ilaria gave Natasha’s hands one more squeeze before pulling away. The older woman gave her a stiff nod before turning back to the Council room.

Sebastian was by her side in the next moment, wrapping an arm around her waist. He guided them back to her rooms in silence.

“How do you feel?” Sebastian asked once they returned.

Ilaria collapsed onto one of the couches. “Nauseous, but that’s nothing new. Raw, like I’ve been chewed up and spit out.”

Sebastian sat down beside her, pulling her into his lap. “What do you need?”

“Just this,” she whispered, burying her face in his neck. This is where she wanted to be, safe in his arms. “When can we go home?”

He kissed the top of her head. “Say the word and I will have the crew readied. Two hours maximum.”

Ilaria chuckled, leaning back to look into his eyes. “I know you would, too. But you promised to help Antony.”

“I promised him a month, so two weeks and then we can go home.”

“I like the sound of that.”

As she laid there in his arms, Sebastian sang to her. The words of their favorite song never rang truer.

*And my love for you burns brighter
than all the light of the sun.*

THE END

EPILOGUE

Listening to her scream and knowing there was nothing he could do to help her broke Sebastian's heart. He groaned, burying his face in his hands. No one would even let him be in the room, which felt counterintuitive to him. Shouldn't he be there to support his wife through one of the biggest moments of her life and of his? Shouldn't he be able to witness his own child being born?

No. He was stuck on the other side of a closed door.

Sebastian's only comfort was that his mother and Sophie were with her. If anyone was going to help her and keep her calm, it was Amalie. The three of them had talked about it any number of times, including just that morning.

However, that felt like a lifetime ago now. The sun was already starting to set, and yet he still waited.

Thankfully, Isobel decided to keep him company. Her small hand patted his shoulder every once and a while, when he knew he must have looked particularly in pain.

“It will be okay, Uncle Bash,” Isobel consoled him, laying her head on his shoulder with a big yawn.

“I hope you are right, sweetpea.” He wrapped an arm around her and pulled her closer.

“Uncle Bash?” She paused until he acknowledged her. “Were you waiting here with Papa when I was born?”

Why did this child always have to ask the hardest questions? But he learned long ago with her that honesty was always the easiest way to go.

“No, sweetpea, I wasn’t. I didn’t get to see you until you were almost two months old,” Sebastian explained.

“Oh. Were you out to sea?”

“I was. You came too early and I couldn’t be here.” Sebastian hoped that she understood that he wanted to be there, even if he couldn’t have been. And had he been selfish and left on purpose because he could no longer look at his brother’s pregnant wife? Also, yes. He would never tell Isobel that, though.

Sebastian shuddered when another prolonged scream ripped through the air. He didn’t know how much more of this he could take. A snort escaped him; this wasn’t about him and his fortitude, it was about her.

Watching Ilaria grow and embrace the changes in her body was amazing to see. The way she would whisper to and rub her growing bump when she didn’t think anyone was

watching. Sebastian saw it all and it just reinforced to him what a great mother she was going to be.

This time, the loud scream was followed by wailing cries.

Sebastian thought his heart had stopped. Isobel squealed, clapping her hands.

The cries continued for several more minutes before they slowly started to subside. And when they did, the door between their bedroom and the sitting room cracked open. Amalie poked her head out with a beaming smile and waved for Sebastian to join her.

Isobel pouted when Sebastian kissed her on the top of her head, leaving her out in the sitting room.

Stepping into their room, Sebastian saw her still laying there, only slightly propped up. Ilaria might have been sweaty and looked completely exhausted, but she still beamed. It was the tiny bundle wrapped in a blanket that caught his attention. Sebastian carefully sat down on the edge of the bed beside her, running the back of a single finger over the baby's cheek.

“Your son,” Ilaria whispered.

He lightly kissed her lips. “Our son.”

“Do you want to hold him?”

Sebastian couldn't stop the bright grin from crossing his face. She carefully laid the baby in his arms. The boy stirred, peering up at his father with the same blue-grey eyes, but it was the soft, red fuzz on his head that made Sebastian chuckle. He was a beautiful mix of the both of them.

Never in his wildest imagination did Sebastian ever think he would get to this point. But he was damn happy he had.

Ilaria groaned as she fell back against the pillows. Her brow furrowed together and her lips pursed.

“What the matter?” Sebastian asked, glancing down at her. She could clearly see the concern floating in his eyes.

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” Ilaria said.

However, the wince quickly became a grimace, and a loud groan from the back of her throat.

Sophie hurried over with a frown, resting her hand on the top of Ilaria’s still fairly distended stomach. A second joined the first. Her eyes grew wide for a moment before she called out to the midwife to come back.

The midwife had her bend her knees again and rested the sheet up higher.

“What’s wrong?” Ilaria panted, gritting her teeth.

Why did it have to hurt so much again? She was told that pushing the baby out was the hardest part; that whatever was to come out after wouldn’t be nearly as bad.

Amalie chuckled. “Nothing, my dear.”

“Then why does it feel like I’m going to give birth again?” She suppressed the urge to scream. Everything felt like it was bearing down again.

“Because you are,” the midwife said matter of factly.

She turned wild eyes to Sebastian, who still stood beside her, their son still firmly in his arms.

“No, no. It’s not possi—” The sentence was cut short by the yell that she couldn’t hold back anymore.

Her hand shot out, groping for Sebastian’s. The baby was carefully moved from his hold to Amalie’s. Sebastian sat down behind her, letting her lean back against his chest. Her fingers squeezed so tightly; she would have been surprised he wasn’t complaining.

“Look at me,” the midwife said from between Ilaria’s legs. “I know you’re tired, but you need to push this baby out.”

Ilaria’s tongue felt heavy in her mouth as the tears started to flow down her cheeks. When the next contraction hit, she pushed.

“You are doing so well, pretty girl.” Sebastian’s words were soft in her ear, his presence like a solid, warm wall behind her. His fingers brushed the sweat-soaked strands of hair from her forehead.

Several minutes later, there was a second wailing cry.

Ilaria collapsed against Sebastian, every bone in her body suddenly feeling like jelly. The tears flowed freely, even with a smile.

“Twins,” she whispered, peering up at Sebastian upside down. “I didn’t even want to consider it.”

“Just like their mama.” The pride was evident in Sebastian’s voice.

She lay there boneless for several long minutes as the second baby was cleaned up and checked out.

“Another perfect little boy,” the midwife said, laying the baby in Ilaria’s arms.

Amalie came over, giving their firstborn back to Sebastian.

“I can’t believe it,” Ilaria murmured.

The baby in her arms wiggled, blinking open soft, green eyes, the few strands of light hair sticking up everywhere.

“I can,” Sebastian chuckled. “We have never done anything in small measures.”

“Have you considered names?” Amalie asked, saddling up to Ilaria’s other side.

“We had a few ideas,” Sebastian said. “But things change now that there are two.”

Ilaria hummed low in her throat. “Why don’t I name one and you name the other? It’s only fair. We will decide and whisper the name to Mama so there is no competition. Then she can announce them.”

“We can do that,” Sebastian agreed.

Ilaria didn’t really even have to think about it. She knew exactly what she wanted for the little boy in her arms.

When Sebastian nodded that he had also made his choice, Amalie leaned down to both of them. The smile on her face grew with each name.

“Very good choices,” she replied. “So, then in order of birth, we have Artem and Leopold Hartmann.”

Sebastian and Ilaria stared at each other for a moment before they started to laugh.

“I can’t believe you picked my father’s name!” Ilaria exclaimed.

“You did the same for me,” Sebastian chuckled with a shake of his head.

Ilaria nodded in Artem’s direction. “He has my father’s hair. His was as robustly colored as Antony’s is.”

“And Leopold is colored like my family. Two perfect little boys.”

They wiggled at almost the same time before giving powerful wails.

“I think I need to feed them,” Ilaria chuckled.

With both of her children in her arms and her husband at her back, Ilaria was sure her life couldn’t be more complete.

Antony Devarik will return with a love story all his own.

Summer 2023

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