



queen  
takes  
blood

THEIR VAMPIRE QUEEN

JOELY SUE BURKHART

# QUEEN TAKES BLOOD

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A THEIR VAMPIRE QUEEN PREQUEL

# JOELY SUE BURKHART



*For my beloved sis*

*Thank you to Sherri Meyer for all your late night editing.*

*Lastly, thank YOU.*

*I'm so grateful for my readers. Thank you for opening up your hearts and letting in Shara and her Blood. For sticking with me through a rocky couple of years.*

*You have been my light in the darkness.*

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Adult Reading Material

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# QUEEN TAKES BLOOD

**Before they belonged to House Isador... these Blood were fighting their own battles to stay alive.**

While the last Templar knight was struggling to stay out of the queen of Rome's clutches, the king kraken's own mother sent him into captivity with the Triune queen. Leviathan lay chained for thousands of years, while the silent silver wolf assassinated other queens at his queen's command and Vivian fought to escape Heliopolis.

Read each Blood's backstory right up to the moment that they heard Shara Isador's call.

Play the Their Vampire Queen Spotify [playlist](#)



**QUEEN TAKES... ALRIK  
HYRROKKIN & DAIRE DEVANA**



Songs: Warriors by Imagine Dragons, Take It Out On Me by  
Bohnes



# ALRIK

The stench of death told me that we were on the right track.

I squatted beside the remains to try and read what had happened. The gray, putrid flesh was falling off the human skeleton—though this thrall had ceased being a human long ago. Most of the rotted, jagged teeth had fallen out of the skull, leaving only the sharp incisors. A mockery of what we were.

Aima fed on blood, sure. By definition, we were vampires. Generally, we only fed on each other, unless the unthinkable happened and we lost our queen.

Though the current queen I served wasn't *mine*. I hadn't sworn my blood to her. Yet.

Every passing second, my heart hammered the beat like a sledgehammer with increasing urgency. *We're running out of time.*

Correction. *I* was running out of time. If I didn't find a way to escape House Skye, then I'd soon find myself on the queen's menu. She particularly enjoyed young, strong alphas. *The better to survive all the torture, my dear.*

Slipping his phone into his jeans pocket as he neared, Daire's usually flippant, teasing manner was somber. "Any luck?"

Bad news then. Sighing, I shook my head and pushed to my feet. "Nope. I don't know what I'm looking for anyway. Who was it?"

“Ezra gave me a heads up that the other teams are getting called back to New York City.”

My jaw tightened. “Already? For this trip, we’re supposed to have until the New Year.”

Daire leaned against me and wrapped his arms around my waist. “Let’s just say that if Vega calls, we don’t have reception here. Which is actually true the deeper we go. I didn’t think much of these Arkansas mountains from a distance, but now that we’re here, they definitely do a good job of blocking annoying phone calls.”

Vega was the queen’s female alpha. All orders came through her.

If she called us back to New York City...

I had the distinct feeling that I wouldn’t be allowed to leave again. I’d be dead, and Daire wouldn’t have anyone to protect him from the rest of the Skye clan. Ezra would try, but he was no alpha. He and Daire had a history before he’d been sent to foster at House Skye. I didn’t mind if Daire sometimes found himself in the other man’s bed instead of mine. I had no doubts about his loyalty.

I was his alpha. As long as I didn’t get called down to the queen’s torture chamber.

“Talk to me.” Daire nuzzled my neck, trying to ease some of the worry straining in my shoulders. “Tell me your theory again. Maybe something new will come to you.”

We’d been roaming aimlessly off and on for years, but for this trip, I’d decided on a new tactic. “Queens are protected by their Blood. When the queen dies, some Blood go rogue and start feeding on humans instead of their queen.”

“Which turns the human victims into thralls like this poor bastard. But why are we here looking at another dead one?”

“What killed it?” I asked softly. “Not another Blood, because there’s no recognized queen in the entire Midwest.”

“It could have been a lone Aima passing between courts.”

I nodded, using the tip of my boot to nudge the skull away from the spine. “Maybe. But this is the fourth dead thrall we’ve found in the span of what, two months? The trail isn’t straight at all, and it sure doesn’t lead to either coast. The spine isn’t severed and the skeleton’s intact. There’s no apparent cause of death, though granted, it’s hard to tell once it’s been picked at by scavengers.”

“So you don’t think a Blood or warrior is doing the killing.”

“Exactly. And there’s no known court in this area, so what are the thralls even after? Why are they here? What do thralls —” Chills crept down my spine and my nerves tingled throughout my body, lighting up like a Christmas tree. “No. What does the thralls’ *master* want above all?”

“To be Blood again,” Daire replied immediately.

“Thralls where no queens are known to live. Following some trail that only they can sense. They’re leading us somewhere.” I closed my eyes, letting my head fall back. I took a deep breath, ignoring the stench of the rotting thrall, and let it out slowly, relaxing my body as my senses stretched outward. Searching for a clue, a hint of a direction, no matter how elusive.

There was no X to mark the spot. No subtle tug deep in my gut, drawing me onward toward the one thing I wanted above all.

A queen. *My* queen. A queen in need of an alpha and his teasing sidekick.

There was a vague sense of purpose in the meandering path. As if the thralls’ target didn’t have a specific place in mind—but instinctively avoided larger cities. The last dead thrall had been to east and north in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, but nothing near St. Louis, Nashville, or Little Rock. Too big. Too many people.

Opening my eyes, I scanned the surrounding area. Rather than dropping down toward Memphis, I’d taken us on a twisting, narrow series of two-lane blacktop highways across

Arkansas. Nothing but trees, hills, curvy roads, and a run-down shabby motel just outside of Mountain Home.

“I still don’t get why a queen would be here in the middle of nowhere with no one to protect her,” Daire said. “That would never happen in a million years, even if she’s the weakest queen ever born.”

“Yet Keisha Skye sent four small groups of unBlooded warriors out across the United States to see if they just happened to find a young queen ripe for House Skye to bring into the fold. She must know there’s someone to find.”

“Wait a fucking second.” Daire’s arms tightened around me, his voice ringing with a sharper edge. “You think we were sent out to find some young, lost queen and bring her back to New York? To *her*? Fuck that shit. No inexperienced queen is going to be able to stand up to Keisha Skye.”

“Which is why we don’t go back,” I replied softly. “If—*when*—we find our queen, we keep her as far away from New York City as possible.”

Daire might love me as much as I loved him, but we craved more. A queen of our own. Generous with her blood. Ripe with power. The kind of queen who could fell the mightiest warrior with a single look.

“A lost queen in the middle of bumfuck Arkansas,” Daire mused. “I sure hope you’re right.”

“I’m right. I know it.” I turned to face him and gripped his nape, letting my arm weigh heavily on his shoulder, my fingers unrelenting as I lowered my head to whisper against his lips. “And we’re going to find her.”



## ALRIK

We could have kept rolling through the night, trying to find the next mysterious kill that would confirm we were on some kind of trail. But the dead thrall was at least a couple of weeks old. The elusive queen that I hoped to find wasn't going to suddenly slip away if we didn't find her tonight.

What was slipping away all too quickly was my time with Daire.

I burned to find our queen. That would never change. Becoming her Blood would be a dream come true, even though I had no idea what kind of queen she would truly be. For instance, whether she would be a jealous queen.

Or if she'd encourage her Blood to love one another as much as we loved her.

Daire was the only bright spot in the hell of Skye Tower. He'd been my first true friend outside of my own House. Some might have said that he saw my potential as a future alpha Blood and attached himself to me, hoping to elevate his own status accordingly. But Daire could have attached himself to anyone. There were certainly many other alphas who would have taken him under their wing and protected him. His easy smile complete with dimples and witty charm made him a popular date, whether male or female.

He could have had anyone, yet he'd chosen me. He followed where I went. While I hoped and prayed to the Great Mother for a generous, loving queen, I'd seen the darker side of power all too often. If I led us to a cruel or selfish queen...



Every single time we fucked, I couldn't help but fear it might be our last time together.

I got us a room in the cheap hotel at the kill site. Places like this didn't ask too many questions and generally didn't have elaborate security cameras. For the most part, Aima moved through this world the same as any human. I had a New York driver's license that said I was twenty eight, though that was off from my actual age by sixty years. Daire looked like he was barely nineteen rather than sixty nine.

I'd have to leave a hefty tip in the morning to make up for the mess we were about to make. Because when Aima fed... we also fucked. And this crappy room was about to get fucking messy.

I'd barely shut the flimsy door, and Daire started stripping his clothes off. Flashing a smoldering smile over his shoulder, he made sure to shake his ass and swing his dick for my approval. We'd been together—and lived long enough—to have played all the sex games and then some. We knew each other inside and out.

Daire was a brat. A tease. He liked me to show some force. Rough him up. Even hurt him. He loved it, and most of the time, I loved testing my alpha control just as much as he did. I would need every ounce of that control once I found our future queen so I could please her in all the ways she asked without hesitation.

But lately, I couldn't help but feel that edge of desperation crossing over into my relationship with Daire. I had to find our queen. Soon.

Even though it meant that I would lose him.

Would I be able to serve at our queen's side and see him day in and day out but never touch him again? Never taste the unique spice of his blood. Smell the warmth of his scent, the softness of his throat against my lips. The tender skin of his groin where the blood was so close to the surface, just begging to fill my mouth.

Lust thickened my voice. “How many times can I bite you before you come?”

He stretched out on the bed in a casual sprawl of sleek, lean muscle. A magnificent jungle cat draped over a limb, lazily watching his prey creep closer. When he gained his Blood form, I had no doubt that he’d shift into some kind of big cat. “As many times as you want.”

Which was both a lie and a challenge. Biting was just another kind of delicious penetration for us, so he sure wouldn’t be able to last long.

Me neither. My fangs ached, my dick was rock hard, and a low, hungry growl escaped my throat. My control was already slipping, and I hadn’t even touched him yet. I tried to take my time stripping off my clothes, but he made a soft little panting moan as I shoved my jeans and boxers down my thighs. I tossed the shirt as I dove for the bed. For him.

My face in the crease of his thigh, my arms around his hips. I sucked in a deep breath, taking in as much of his scent as possible. I could almost smell his beast’s fur, the animal trapped inside his body, waiting for a queen’s blood to set him free.

I could feed on him for days and never get my fill. Would I feel the same—or even more—for my queen? Goddess, I hoped so.

*:She’ll be all that we’ve dreamed of and more,:* he said inside my head.

Sharing blood formed a deep bond that allowed us to also share our thoughts. A wave of paralyzing terror washed through me. He knew everything. All my fears. The sense of loss gnawing away at my heart. The desperation burning in my veins. The countless doubts.

I’d already wasted too much time hunting dead thralls that might have absolutely nothing to do with a queen. I might have already led us too far astray from the destined path that would take us to her.

He trusted me, and I’d failed us both.

Fisting his hand in my hair, he jerked my face up so he could glare down at me. “You haven’t failed. Ever. I don’t trust anyone like I trust you. No fucking queen will ever change that.”

But she would inevitably change us. Everything would change. Some good, wonderful, even. We would never be the same. The power of a goddess’s daughter would flow in our veins.

But if I lost him, did I really want a queen?

Yes. Which only made me feel like shit.

“I want to be Blood as badly as you, you know.” Despite the fierce grip of his fingers in my hair, his body remained loose and lax beneath me. He didn’t want to challenge the alpha into a bloody fight. Only a bloody fuck. “We were born to be Blood. We’ve trained our entire life to protect our future queen. You never mislead me in that regard.”

Then why did rage strangle me? I wanted to slam my fists against the flimsy walls until the entire hotel lay in shambles around us. Tear the furniture apart. Overturn the vehicles parked outside. Heave them like a child’s toy down the side of the mountain and roar as they exploded into fireballs. Fury crawled through my veins, a simmering, roiling storm that threatened to level everything in its path.

Including our hopes and dreams. He was right. We’d trained our entire life to serve our queen.

Yet I had to fight down the urge to throw all that away just to have him to myself.

“Hey,” he whispered, giving my hair a playful tug. “I can take it, big guy. You can’t break me.”

“Oh yeah?” I said gruffly, trying to be the fierce, hard alpha. When all I wanted to do was hug him fiercely and beg him to tell me that it would all work out for the best.

*Some fucking alpha I am.*



## DAIRE

EVERYONE THOUGHT IT WAS FUCKING GREAT TO BE THE ALPHA. The big boss in charge. The one who cracked heads together and somehow managed to remain stoic even when everything sucked balls.

Rik tried to pretend he was a stone-cold badass but I knew him better than anyone. Inside that rocky, stern exterior, he was fucking terrified.

Terrified of losing me. Terrified of having to go back to New York City and become the next torture project in the basement of Skye Tower. Terrified of never finding our own queen to love and treasure.

Terrified that we *would* find her, only to discover that our hopes and dreams were nothing but lies. That would hurt more than anything.

We'd spent years lying entwined together and dreaming of our future queen. Building her up to impossible levels. The most powerful queen in North America wouldn't be able to stand up to her, and the old queens that ruled us through the Triune would tremble with dread. Yet she would love us as much as we loved her and do anything to keep us safe by her side.

A fairytale for sure.

We knew all too well the dark, horrible stories of queens driven mad by their own power. Entire families and towns wiped out in jealousy or to consolidate their power bases. Let alone the awful things that tended to happen to her Blood when a queen was so casually cruel.

Blood were expendable. For every queen there were a thousand warriors just begging for the chance to become her Blood. The more we bled, the more powerful she became. It was nothing for a queen to go through dozens of Blood in her lifetime.

Used. Tossed aside, broken and empty. Yet somehow still smiling in death because we had served her well.

That fate was more my speed than Rik's. I liked being used and abused. Him, not so much.

A mountain of a man, he moved with single-minded purpose, radiating the kind of intensity that alphas possessed without even thinking about it. I'd taken one look at him striding down a random hallway in Skye Tower, a foot taller than all the other wanna-be Blood, his eyes chips of dark ice, his hands as big as dinner plates, and I was lost.

I wanted him to break me over those magnificent thighs and crack me wide open.

And he did exactly that. Repeatedly.

Yet he was the one breaking now.

With his massive muscles and broad shoulders, he'd always reminded me of giant boulders. Sheer granite walls. Smooth and unmoving, a silent, steady testament of enduring strength through rain, sleet and snow. A solid foundation that an entire legacy could be built upon.

Yet granite was surprisingly fragile if too much stress pressed on a weak spot. Mountains crumbled. Slabs of rock shifted toward a precarious cliff. The tiniest pebble could start a devastating landslide that would destroy us both.

Or... I could subtly encourage that pebble to roll in my direction and crush me beneath the mountain. Beneath Rik. Exactly where I wanted to be.

"I thought you were going to see how many times you could bite me before I gave in."

He let out a grunt. "You talk too much."

Though the look he flashed up at me had nothing to with disgust. Only gratitude. He knew my game, the same as I knew his. That was why we made such a good team. Together as Blood with a queen's power flowing through our veins, we'd be damned near unstoppable.

I rolled my eyes and huffed out a laugh meant to tweak the alpha's tail. "Then maybe you should shove something into my mouth and shut me up for good."



## DAIRE

I wanted his dick shoved down my throat. Instead, I found myself gagged with his T-shirt in my mouth, and my face shoved down into musty sheets. Effortlessly, he gripped both of my wrists in one big palm, trapping my hands in the small of my back.

I strained against his grip just to make him prove that he could hold me. Make him sweat a little. I bucked against him and twisted my wrists despite his crushing grip, earning more of his weight smashing me down into the thin mattress.

Ah, yes. Perfect.

Letting out a low growl, he pushed my wrists up higher along my spine, making my shoulders burn. Harder. Making it difficult to breathe against the strain. “Don’t make me grab my jeans to tie you up.”

*:If you’re going to wrap me up in denim, make sure your tree-trunk thighs are in those fucking jeans.:*

He sighed in my ear, his breath hot and heavy. “What’s the point of gagging you if you’re going to keep talking in our bond?”

*:Maybe the big, bad alpha should work harder at making me forget how to talk.:*

Deliberately, he dragged one of his fangs along the ridge of my ear. Goosebumps flared down my arms. My own fangs throbbled in the roof of my mouth, my stomach clenching with



hunger. Nothing tasted as good as he did. Nothing except maybe our future queen. *Goddess, let us find her soon.*

The sharp scratch of his fang teased down the side of my neck. Involuntarily, my entire body arched. My head tipped to the side. My neck bowed in invitation. Anticipation sang through me.

But the sharp white-hot pleasure of his fangs sinking into my throat didn't come.

“Instead of threatening to bite you repeatedly, I should have promised to only bite you when you beg me to put you out of your misery.” He jerked his head across my shoulder, letting his fangs scrape hard enough that I jumped. Though he didn't break the skin. “But that's too easy. You love to beg.”

*:You fucking love it when I beg.:*

*:I do.:* His bond flowed like a deep, still river. One moment, everything was fine. A nice, easy current pulling us along. Then the next, a raging whirlpool dragged me deep, a storm of emotion that made my heart thud heavily. *:I love you. I want you to always know how much. How hard it is to find her knowing—:*

*:I know,:* I replied quickly. *:I'll love our queen, but I loved you first. Please. Show me how much you love me. Make me bleed.:*

He released my wrists, only to press his forearm against my neck, keeping my head pinned flat. Straddling my hips, he dragged his fangs down my shoulder and bit the soft, tender underside of my arm. His fangs in my flesh, the flash of pain that promised pleasure. But not an ideal place for him to feed.

I jerked my arms up by my head, spreading myself out for his use.

Another bite on my lower trapezius just below my armpit. My other arm, the upper curve of my shoulder. His teeth working at the ridges of muscle running down my back, digging against my spine. Thin trails of blood trickled from the bites, tickling my skin. Delicious torture for us both. The scent

of blood stirred my hunger into a ravenous flame. The sharp, teasing pains only primed me for what I really wanted.

A harder bite in my flank, making me twitch and moan. Still not that deep strike in a vein but good just the same. Shifting his weight down toward my feet, he dragged both fangs in a teasing glide down my hamstring. A sharp nip just above the back of my knee made me groan. So tender. So good.

The rounded curve of my calf took the first deep strike. I flailed upward, jerking against his grip. His elbow dug into my lower back, forcing me back down. My balls throbbed, my dick pinned against my stomach in an awkward, painful angle. *:This cheap hotel bed is too thin for this.:*

Rik bit my other calf just as hard, and I felt the curve of his smile against my skin. *:Just a new kind of cock and ball torture.:*

Back up my other knee. Hamstring. No longer playful scratches but punctures that made me twitch and groan. More blood in the air. He licked the back of my other knee, and a deep, rattling growl vibrated his chest against the backs of my legs. “You taste so good.”

*:Then feed long and deep.:*

He sank his fangs deeply into my buttock, gripping my ass cheek in his mouth. I could feel the ring of his teeth digging into my flesh. Holding me. Tasting me. And yes, there was blood, but still not that rich, hot surge.

He rumbled through our bond, a landslide rocking through me. *:What do you want?:*

*:A fountain,:* I panted in my mind. *:Spray the walls with my blood. The bed. Drink me dry.:*

Pushing up to his knees, he gripped my nape and one leg, flipping me over effortlessly on my back. “Only if you drink as deeply from me.” He hesitated, his face crumpling from the stark, grim face of the alpha to a gentle-hearted lover who couldn’t bear to lose me. “We have to be strong. For her.”



## ALRIK

SITTING BACK ON MY KNEES, I STARED DOWN AT HIM, memorizing the way he looked right now. Eyes heavy-lidded, his pupils blown wide. Nostrils flaring with each rapid breath, his lips parted. He'd managed to ditch the shirt gag, which didn't surprise me in the slightest. If I'd wanted him gagged for real, then I should have tied the shirt around his head with his hair tangled up in the knot and made sure he couldn't use his hands.

His pulse hammered so hard that I could see the veins beckoning in his neck. Streams and rivers of blood coursing through his body to pool in his groin. The best place to feed. Hot with his lust, blazing with primal magic. Even better when he inevitably came, so I could mix the taste of blood and semen together.

Swallowing my own saliva before I choked myself, I slid my hand beneath his thigh and hooked his knee up over my shoulder.

“Yes.” Groaning, he fisted his hands in my hair and hugged his other thigh around me, pulling me into the heat of his body. “Finally.”

I sank my fangs deeply into his femoral artery and clamped my lips around the punctures. Gulping that first hot flood of coppery goodness, such a rush. Rich and dark, laced with hints of wine and chocolate and fur. I could feel his beast prowling just beneath the surface. A deep, resonant purr rolled through him, his hips arching up off the mattress. He shook against me, dislodging my fierce grip over the punctures.

Blood sprayed my face and shoulders, mixing with his cum as he shuddered and heaved beneath me. I pushed his knee flat against the mattress, letting the blood fountain from his artery so I could lick his skin clean. Salt and musk, blood

and sex, an intoxicating mix that went straight to my head. I smeared my hands in his blood, finger-painting his skin. Mine. Fisting my dick in bloody fingers while I sucked his spent cock for the last traces of semen.

He pulled on my hair, trying to hurry me along. “Rik.”

Instead, I turned my head and struck hard into his other thigh. I didn’t hit his femoral, but the deep bite made him convulse again. Moving up his body slowly, I nipped at his abs, pulling on the taut skin. A sharp rasp of fang on both of his nipples made him whimper my name again.

“Please.”

He didn’t want mercy. He didn’t plead for the chance to feed. But I wanted the words. “Tell me what you want.”

“Use me. Break me apart. Tear me up. Fuck me until I can’t move a muscle.”

He’d bled everywhere already but I smeared blood liberally over his asshole and my dick again. I pushed into him with a hard, deep stroke that made him jolt and quiver, even as he locked his legs around me. Gritting my teeth, I worked deeper, sweat rolling down my forehead. “Fuuuck. You feel so good.”

He made that rumbling purr again that vibrated through my belly like electronic fingers, tugging on my spinal cord. Hard. Making my nerves scream with sensation.

A rough grunt escaped my throat as I slid balls deep. “No quarter. Not for either of us.”

“Good.” And with that, he lunged up and sank his fangs into my throat.

For a moment, we were connected. One body. Me in him. Him in me. Everything stilled inside me. All the whirling thoughts and strategies. My plans, hopes, and dreams of finding a queen. My fears and doubts that I was wrong. That I’d fucked up and missed our chance already. Like dried up leaves, they crumpled into dust and blew away.

Leaving this. Daire. Me. Blood. Sex. The scent of his fur. The glide of our bodies. Pain and pleasure, give and take, flavored with blood. Sprinkled with magic. The power was there, latent in our blood.

All we needed was the spark from a queen to set our blood ablaze with power.

For a moment, I hovered in a shadowy place with the world rolling below like a contour map. I couldn't see our phantom queen. I couldn't smell her. But I could feel her essence. I could point in her direction. There. So close. A few mountains and hills to the west. Less than a hundred miles away. I was sure of it.

I could almost stretch out my hand and touch her. So fucking close. Why had we stopped for the night?

Then the map went dark.

Sensation slammed back into me, knocking the air out of my lungs. Daire's fangs in my throat. Our bodies locked together. Panting, I closed my eyes, trying to pinpoint the queen's location again, but the strange map was gone. I couldn't sense anything but the man in my arms.

A sound tore out of my throat. Loss. Fear that I was too late. Rage. At myself. If I hadn't wanted one last night with Daire...

I fisted my hands in the bedding, thrusting against him. Shoving deep, over and over, letting my rage boil up out of me. Trying to plow my way through his body. "*Break me*", he'd asked. "*Tear me up.*"

Yeah. Me too. I'd break my own fucking back trying to get deeper inside him.

*If she dies because I had to fuck him one last time...*

A burning fist tightened in my stomach. I didn't try to hold back. Fuck my control. I fanned the flames and threw myself headfirst over the cliff. Climax rocked through me, driving my hips harder, every muscle straining. I sank my fangs into his throat, locking him to me. Forever.

Chest heaving, I stilled against him, my face in his neck. He let out a pleased little hum, his fingers dancing down my spine. He still fed at my throat, filling up on hot alpha blood to replenish what I'd taken. What I'd allowed to spray all over us. I'd torn the sheet too, but the bed frame had survived.

"I saw her," I whispered. "Not her face, but her location."

His head jerked up, his eyes bright. "You did? Where? How far?"

"To the west. I can't feel her now. The map went dark. I think..." I swallowed hard, making myself hold his gaze. Braced to watch the light die in his eyes. "Maybe we're too late."

His head tipped to the side. "Why's that? Because you can't feel her location now? This entire trip has been an experiment because we had no idea where she was, or if we were even headed in the right direction. The way I see it, now we know. You were right, Rik. All along, you were right."

I flung myself over on my back, staring up at the dingy ceiling. "Don't you get it? It went dark. Like dead dark. Once we found that thrall, we should have kept riding through the night."

Despite the direness of our situation, he huffed out a laugh and curled against my side, his thigh and arm draped over me. "I think you're looking at this all wrong."

I shoved his thigh off me and sat up despite the pout on his tempting lips and the way he clung to me. A silent plea to stay in bed. Stay with him. "If our queen died because we stopped for the night, I'll never forgive myself."

Rolling his eyes, he sighed and sat up too, though only long enough to fluff up a pillow to lean against. "You're beating yourself up for no reason. We've been looking for years. One night isn't going to make a difference. You didn't hear the call, right? You didn't feel the compulsion to come to her side."

I ran a hand through my hair. "No. But maybe that brief moment of feeling her was the call, but it ended because we

were too far away. I don't know what a queen's call feels like. Maybe that was it."

"I call bullshit. A brief moment was no call. It's supposed to be earth shattering. A force of nature that knocks us on our asses. Not a brief wisp that's gone before you can even glimpse her."

I closed my eyes, my voice dropping to a gravelly whisper. "What if she's gone because I had to fuck you one last time?"

Silence stretched out, something unnatural and alarming. Daire was never quiet. Even gagged, he'd managed to tease me through our bond. I didn't want to see his face, stricken or wounded or worse, resentful. Full of hate because I'd fucked up our best chance of becoming Blood.

But it wasn't in me to avoid the consequences of my own actions. Steeling my resolve, I turned my head and looked into his eyes.

Soft, liquid warmth pooled in his golden-brown eyes. Not hatred or anger or regret. "Then I'm fucking glad we had tonight, and I'm even more glad that I'll have every day and night with you as long as we both stay alive."

"Which won't be long if we go back to New York City."

He reached up to cup my cheek, his thumb teasing over my bottom lip. "What if the only reason you were able to feel her location for that brief second was because we were together? That moment of passion opened up a window for you to see where no one else has been able to go. Love got us out of Skye Tower. Love brought us here. And love will take us to our queen."

My shoulders sagged with relief. I bowed my head, resting my chin on his forehead. "You're fucking incredible, do you know that?"

"Of fucking course." Laughing, he scrambled out of bed and began pulling on his clothes. "Though now that we know she's close, I think we should keep on going. How far away did she feel? Days? Hours?"

"A hundred miles or so."

“Fuck,” he breathed out, his eyes shining. “Let’s go get our queen.”





## DAIRE

We rode into Eureka Springs at dawn, our hope as bright as the rising sun. This was the first larger town we'd come to that was roughly the right distance away, though Rik couldn't say for sure this had been the location he'd sensed in that brief vision.

Evidently it was a summer tourist town because most every place was packed up tight for the winter. Only the main shops were open, decorated for last minute holiday shoppers. We dicked around for hours, riding our motorcycles up and down the narrow, twisty streets, taking in the sights. Waiting to feel some kind of tug or pull down an alley or into a shop.

By dusk, Rik was practically frothing at the mouth with frustration. Without any more clues to go on, I finally convinced him that we should eat some food. Yes, we're vampires, and I took every opportunity possible to drink Rik's blood, but even Aima warriors needed to eat. Blood needed to eat even more to be sure they were generating plenty of blood to fuel their queen's power.

When our queen finally called, I'd damned well be at full capacity even if Rik had to roll me to her side.

When most people saw his height, the width of his shoulders, and his bulging biceps, they assumed he'd be able to drink me under the table and carry me home for another round. And yeah, they weren't wrong on either count, though if anyone was "drinking under the table" it'd be me pleasuring

my alpha in the middle of the fucking restaurant. I didn't have an inhibited bone in my body.

Though if we were talking about human food and drink, I definitely put away way more than him. I might look like a runt beside him, but the server's pen ran out of ink before she got all of my order written down. The Rockin' Pig Saloon boasted about their BBQ and wood-fired pizza. On top of the appetizers, naturally I had to try the pulled pork and their pepperoni pizza. Two of my favorite foods in the world.

I was halfway through the pizza before I realized he hadn't even taken a single bite of his ribeye. Rare, of course, because was there any other way that a vampire would eat a steak?

"How is it?" I asked after a long pull on my beer.

He grunted sourly. "Good."

"Suuuuure it is. You haven't even taken a bite yet."

Giving me a heavy scowl, he picked up his utensils and attacked the steak like he would slice and dice an entire nest of thralls rather than a fork-tender ribeye. "Having second thoughts yet?"

"About eating? Not at all."

He jabbed the tip of the knife in my direction. "You know damned well what I'm talking about."

I did. Not that I'd give in to him. I refused to entertain his fears about being too late. "We're definitely in the right place. If we hadn't come to Eureka Springs, then I wouldn't have had the opportunity to try hot honey on a pepperoni pizza. What a fabulous combination!"

He rolled his eyes and stabbed a jagged piece of steak viciously. "Have you heard from Vega yet?"

"Nope." Never mind that I'd turned my phone off hours ago so no one would be calling from New York City anytime soon. Keeping my voice light, I said, "When the time is right, we'll know."

"I don't have time," he gritted out.

For a moment, the spicy sweet bite of pepperoni pizza tasted like ashes in my mouth. Dread tightened my throat, making it difficult for me to swallow. I took another long drink, forcing the lump to clear out and buying me a little time to pull myself together.

I couldn't bear to lose him. I couldn't bear the thought of him hurt. Dying. Screaming in pain in some dark, horrible place while the Skye queen fed on his suffering. Yet that was the fate awaiting him if we didn't find a way to leave House Skye forever.

Politics among Aima houses was a complicated game of multi-dimensional chess. Queens had all the power, and in this game, Rik and I were just pawns. Definitely not knights. Not yet.

"We've got to play this game smart." I caught the server's eye and lifted my glass, asking for another beer. "If we make a move out of desperation, we may fuck up the entire board."

Rik grunted. "I hate it when you use chess metaphors."

"It's the best way to talk about how courts work, though we're playing a game of life and death. Out of all the courts I could have been sent to for fostering, I ended up at House Skye with you. That wasn't a mistake. The last place I wanted to go was New York City. Queen Devana had arranged for me to spend time in Rome first but at the last minute, she changed her mind and—"

A loud crash stilled my words. Gaping, I stared as Rik staggered to his feet, accidentally flipping the table between us over on its side. His chair went flying backward so hard it burst against the wall into a pile of kindling. Hands fisted at his sides, eyes wild, he panted, chest heaving. He seemed to get bigger and bigger while I looked at him, his shoulders and arms swelling so suddenly that his T-shirt ripped.

"Whoa, dude, what the fuck?" I whispered, shaking my head slowly.

Our waitress dropped the glass she was holding, staring at him in shock. It was like he'd stepped out of a comic book—

though he wasn't turning green. Yet.

Veins popped on his forearms, shooting up his bulging shoulders. Even his neck seemed swollen, thick with new muscle and roped, pumped-up veins like he'd been throwing a thousand pounds in the gym. He made a strangled sound, his jaws working. Again. Like he couldn't speak through the 'roid-rage muscles.

*:Queen's. Call.:*

Holy shit. I jerked out my wallet and pressed a massive stack of bills into our server's trembling hands to cover the damage. Rik had already disappeared out the door. I raced after him, flying down the front steps. A massive gong thundered in my head, knocking me senseless. Everything went numb. I crashed down the rest of the steps and landed in a heap on the icy sidewalk, too stunned to get up.

I could feel her. Our queen. Barely a mile away. Danger. So much danger. Her fear sliced through me, gutting me. Tearing me into ribbons. Breaking my bones. Headfirst into a meat grinder.

Something was trying to kill her this very second. And we weren't fucking there to help her.

Crawl. I had to get to her. Now. My head spun, blood in my mouth. I pushed up on my hands and knees, scrambling toward her.

Rik's giant hand wrapped around my scruff and hauled me to my feet like I was a wobbly kitten. Threw me up on my bike. It took me a second try to remember how to start the fucking thing.

*Hold on. We're coming, my queen!*



# ALRIK

We flew down the snaky road, heedless of the ice and snow on the blacktop. Fuck, we'd been so close to her this whole time and hadn't even known. Thick woods on either side. The road curved away from her location. Fuck it.

Gunning the motorcycle, I tore off the road, bouncing and swerving through thick brush as far as the bike would take me. Almost to the top of the steep hill, my front tire caught on a stump and threw me sideways. I swung off the bike and managed to keep from barreling into a giant pine. Barely.

I jerked open the pannier and tugged on a set of ketars that I'd forged a lifetime ago. Steel gauntlets protected my wrists with sharp blades that extended eight inches past my knuckles. I'd forged Daire a pair too. Hoping. Waiting for this day to come. When we would ride to our queen's side, weapons at the ready.

The call clamored in my head, making it hard to think. To breathe. Shrill clarion alarms shrieked with every beat of my heart. I powered through the thicket and crested the hill, pausing a second for Daire to catch up.

Below, a thin sidewalk wound through the trees, dotted here and there with streetlights.

She stood in a small circle of light. A lone queen. Surrounded on all sides by bloodthirsty thralls. With a short knife in one hand and a rough club in the other, she swiped around her, trying to keep them back.

On the opposite side of the valley, I could feel the master thrall creeping closer. A foul shadow, tainting everything he encountered. A cursed, condemned Aima warrior who'd once been Blood. Determined to be Blood again.

Though if he tried to feed on her...

He'd only succeed in killing her. No queen, no matter how powerful, could save the likes of him.

I started down the hillside, sliding over treacherous ground. Dodging limbs. Leaping over fallen logs. Daire was right behind me.

I smelled the putrid blood of thralls on the air. She'd wounded some of them. Maybe she'd been the one killing them. Though I'd never heard of a queen killing thralls.

No queen should ever have to dirty her hands killing the monsters. Not when she had a dozen Blood eager to do her bidding.

She lifted her knife toward the watching master, as if she were waving at him. Taunting him.

But then she lifted the blade to the delicate skin at her own throat.

Sheer terror washed over me. She meant to end her life, not open a vein to let her power flow free.

To be this close and watch her die...

I could be her alpha. But not if I failed to save her.

"Stop!" I bellowed, straining to run faster. To put my body between hers and any threat. Even the blade in her own hand.

Slowly, her head turned towards us. Her face pale, her eyes huge and dark with fear. Confusion flickered across her features. Not recognition. Let alone relief to see Blood racing to her call.

Her heartbeat thundered in my head. Her fear strangled me. Yet she didn't seem to recognize what we were.

"Wait, my queen! We're here!"



I thought my words would help, but she only looked more confused, shaking her head as if she didn't understand me at all. At least she lowered the knife from her throat and whirled to slash at the thralls again.

A wave of relief flooded me, though I was just as confused. I waded into the fray, chopping into heads and limbs with the vicious blades. The stink of rotten flesh and death filled my nose, fueling my fury. These foul things had tried to touch my queen. Hurt her. Take her for their master.

Not on my fucking watch.

Though for dead humans, they were surprisingly agile. One of them managed to launch itself onto my back and tore at my side, trying to get to my tasty liver. Daire snagged the thing's hair and yanked its head back to expose its throat. With one slice of the ketar, he almost decapitated it. The rest scattered into the trees like the vermin they were.

Adrenaline pumped through me. Vicious glee and relief warred with my confusion, making me hesitate as I neared her. Instinct told me to drop to my knees. Offer her my throat. Swear my undying allegiance.

But she hadn't responded to "*my queen*" at all. Did she not know what we were? But how was that even possible?

Perhaps she didn't want us.

No, I refused to believe that. I could still feel her call pulsing through me, though the sharpness of immediate danger had eased. I was supposed to be here. I needed to be here. Now. No question in my mind. Even if *she* wasn't aware of the call she'd sent out for our help.

The drumming of her heartbeat steadied, still rapid but not as frantic. Trying to read the emotion flickering across her face, I couldn't help but think she reacted more like the human server at the restaurant than a powerful Aima queen. As if she was completely stunned to see warriors in action. As if none of this was real despite the evidence of dead thralls on the ground.

Thank the goddess she wasn't bleeding, or I didn't think I'd have been able to keep from throwing myself at her feet and pressing my mouth to her wounds.

*:A human queen?:* Daire asked, his mental voice as shaken as I felt.

*:Impossible,:* I replied. *:Though she doesn't seem to know what we are.:*

Her eyes were wide, as wary of me as the stinking thralls, but she didn't retreat. Her chin tipped up, her shoulders braced, her fingers tight on her meager weapons. She'd fight me if need be.

Me. An alpha more than twice her size. Who'd give a kidney just for the opportunity to kiss her hand.

Her gaze dropped to my side. And lingered. It took me a second to understand why.

My blood. Of course.

She might not know what I was, but her instincts were working overtime like mine. I stepped closer, keeping my movements slow and easy. "Do you have a safe place nearby?"

I had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach that I wouldn't like her answer. She'd laid a salt circle to keep the thralls at bay. Armed only with a ridiculously tiny knife and a clumsy club. Were these meager weapons all she had at her disposal? The only things that had kept her alive these past months until we'd finally found her?

She focused on my face, her eyes narrowed with suspicion. "Who are you?"

"Alrik and Daire. We're yours, my queen. If you'll have us."

"Why do you keep calling me a queen?"

I glanced over at Daire. *:Unfucking believable. Who the fuck do I get to kill to find out who allowed this travesty to happen?:*

*:Has a queen ever been raised with humans?:*

*:Not to my knowledge.:* Aloud, I replied, “We will explain everything, once you’re safe. A master thrall still watches to the east. I’d rather get you into shelter before we answer any questions you will have.”

She spared a quick glance in the direction of the master, so she’d been able to sense him. She wasn’t completely unaware of her power, though her eyes remained cautious and veiled with distrust when she looked back at us.

A killer blow straight to my heart. Goddess, her eyes gleamed like dark, shining pools of magic. I wanted her trust more than I needed to breathe.

*:Perhaps she’s concerned about the weapons,:* Daire suggested.

With a mental shrug, I pulled off the ketars and hooked them on either hip. If a thrall tried to come for her again, I’d take great pleasure in ripping it apart with my bare hands.

“Can you not cross the circle?” Her voice quivered slightly, catching on a soft inhale as I looked back into her face.

My heart surged with a multitude of emotions. Joy. Relief. Desire. She might not know what we were, but she wasn’t unaffected by our presence. My blood was on the air, stirring her hunger. Once she tasted me...

She’d know. She’d have full access to my thoughts. My mind would be open to her. My heart laid bare.

*:If she doesn’t know what we are, she might not have ever fed.:*

I swallowed hard. Goddess, what a fucking mess. I needed to know what had happened to her, so I could make sure that it never happened again.

I just needed her to take a swallow. One taste. A tiny sip. She’d want more. The same way I’d been unable to stop biting Daire last night. Inwardly, I shuddered with ecstasy at the thought of giving her my blood. All my blood. Whatever she wanted, she’d have.

Holding her gaze, I took another step so that I crossed her salt barrier, but I resisted the urge to touch her. Too soon. She didn't trust me yet. Her scent filled my nostrils, sweet night blooming jasmine and something dark and lush. Forbidden fruits, fur, silk and sex, all wrapped up together.

My dick throbbed, my fangs crested, and my blood shifted inside me, rising to the surface of my skin. Rushing to the wound, an easy way to offer myself to my queen. "I only thought to be polite."

She reached out and dragged her finger through the blood dripping from my side. I shuddered at the slight touch, my heart leaping, drumming against my ribcage. Yes. So close. *Taste me, my queen.*

She wavered, her eyes locked to my blood. Her head moved closer, her eyes fluttering shut. But then she jerked back a step as if shocked by her own reaction. Her lips parted, her breath a soft pant of desire despite her hesitation. Her heartbeat pounded in my head, the call intensifying. She needed to taste me. She needed to take me as Blood. Even if she didn't know what that meant.

Ever so gently, I caught her elbow and tugged her closer. Letting her feel my heat. My strength. While also showing her how carefully I would touch her. How we would treasure her. Always.

"Take what you want from me, my queen."



Shara takes Alrik & Daire as her Blood in [Queen Takes Knights](#).

There are also bonus short stories, "Queen Takes Alpha," and "Queen Takes It Out On Me" available in [Queen Takes More](#).

# QUEEN TAKES... GUILLAUME DE PAYNE



Song: Who Wants to Live Forever by The Tenors & Lindsey  
Stirling



# GUILLAUME

No honorable deed was ever done in a dark, stinking alley at midnight. Yet here I stood, leaning against the rear of my car, waiting to see if my contact would show. If I was still sane, I would have left half an hour ago. Late sellers were never a good sign.

But I had crossed the line toward insanity long ago.

I would stay on the barest chance that this human possessed what he claimed to have. And if he would not sell it to me as we'd agreed...

Well. I had killed too many to count, for much less of a reason.

Finally, a sleek, black luxury car approached slowly through the trash-strewn narrow passageway. Two men got out of the car, one clearly the muscle, the other man in a business suit. Arms crossed over my chest, my manner casual, I didn't move a muscle as they walked closer.

"I apologize for the delay. The last deal took a bit longer than expected." The businessman gave me an ingratiating smile. "Are you Hugh Troyes?"

Not my true name but one I used for human affairs. Nodding, I reached into my front jeans pocket.

With a low hiss, the muscle man whipped out a gun. "No funny business."

Arching a sardonic brow at the man, I slowly pulled out my business card, holding it up between my curled knuckle

and thumb. “Just business.”

The other man jerked his head in my direction. Muscle man stepped close enough to snatch the card. Without reading it, he passed it to his boss.

“I’ve never heard of *The Hell Horse Collector*.”

I shrugged. “The business has been around for nearly a hundred years.”

What else would a former knight do in his spare time than collect ancient weapons?

Still doubtful, the man looked me and my car over. I didn’t give a damn about appearances. I wore faded, comfortable jeans and a white long-sleeved Oxford shirt. My Doc Martens were scuffed and well worn. Though he couldn’t say shit about my mint white and red 1967 GT500 Mustang. “Do you have the cash?”

I pushed up from my casual stance and opened the trunk. A single black case lay on top, with the rest of my treasures covered with tarps. They didn’t need to know *all* my business. I unlocked the case and flipped it open so the man could see the neatly stacked rows of bills. “Show me the goods. I need to authenticate.”

He turned back to the car and called out, “Bring the Templar case.”

A third man climbed out from the rear seat carrying a long black case. “Where do you want me to open it?”

My heartbeat quickened. The case was at least the appropriate size, though that didn’t mean much of anything. He could have a dozen shitty replicas inside that case and not even have a clue that they were fake.

The businessman gestured to the hood of his car. “Do you need better light? We can move to the end of the street—”

“No, this is fine.” Anticipation surged through me, though I tried to temper that hope with a healthy dose of reality. I’d been looking for decades. The chance that I’d find my prize in a back alley behind the Indianapolis stadium...



The third man set the case down on the hood of the car without concern for its paint job. He flipped the case open and stepped back.

Pulling his phone out, the businessman turned on the flash and scanned over the case to illuminate its contents. A smaller, slim black-velvet case lay inside. He opened it as well, proudly shining the light over the carved ivory handle. It was a lovely dagger and sheath, marked with the red Templar cross on the blade. A very nice specimen, probably from the late eighteenth century and made for a Masonic lodge. In our communications, I'd allowed him to assume that I was more interested in the ornamental dagger, but it was the older blade below it that had led me to contact him.

Dark with age and corrosion, the sword looked to be the right length and general design, the same as the pictures that had caught my attention. Octagonal pommel for balance, distinctive cruciform hilt, simple, functional blade. Naturally, the leather wrapping around the hilt had rotted away.

I'd seen way too many expertly made replicas to assume it was authentic. I needed to handle it to be sure. "May I?"

"Of course."

As soon as I stretched out my hand and opened my fingers, I felt the surge of their curiosity and alarm. Every bent finger on both of my hands had been very obviously and badly broken. Repeatedly.

Muscle man muttered, "Jesus."

"Jesus had little to do with it," I said lightly. Wrapping my warped fingers around the bare hilt, I reverently lifted the blade. As soon as I touched it, I knew that it was real. The weight was correct. My body and strength were severely depleted, but my muscles and bones still remembered the feel of a twelfth-century Templar sword in my palm.

Whether it was *mine*...

Eyes closed, I held the sword flat before me and ran my fingertips down the blade. Two fullers rather than one, unique for sword design in that era but not enough to be conclusive.

My heart thudded, a slow, ponderous beat, my blood sluggish. Letters were etched down the blade. Corroded with dirt and rust but still there.

*Payens*. An old spelling of the family name that I had used as a young, eager Templar knight centuries ago. Full of pride and still believing in honor. No one had questioned why I'd managed to survive so many battles with injuries that should have killed me. When I needed to "die" I returned home to Troyes for a time and came back as my son for another tour.

Until King Philip put an end to the Knights Templar and had me and many of my brethren thrown into prison as heretics. The torture that I'd endured in Domme paled in comparison to the torment that came when Desideria freed me. She'd entrapped me as her Blood, bound by my solemn oath to never lift a hand against her in violence. I'd killed thousands at her command—but not with *this* sword.

This sword had ever only known honor. The very same sword upon which I'd sworn my oaths to the Order, and the first thing the king's dogs had stripped from me.

"Well?" The businessman asked.

I smoothed my thumb over its edge, remembering how sharp it had once been. "It's authentic, though in rough shape." I laid it back in the case and picked up the ornamental dagger. "This one's not quite as old but pristine with an imminently collectable appeal."

"As I told you on the phone, it's a package deal."

"I'm satisfied with their authenticity. I'll take the set for twenty-five grand as we agreed."

"I've got a buyer flying in from Israel who'll pay double that."

Inwardly, I sighed. Why, oh why, did humans have to be so fucking greedy? With a shrug, I turned back toward my car. "Do what you've got to do. If you've got access to more authentic blades, I have plenty of buyers."

That was a lie. The only buyer was me. But I was a sure thing if the blade was well made.

“Tell you what. For forty thousand, it’s yours.”

I turned around slowly, my face smooth, my arms loose at my sides. “Tell *you* what. Sell me the blades for the price we agreed upon before I drove all this way, and you live to see the sunrise.”

Muscle man let out a rough laugh and pointed the gun—that he apparently was very eager to use—at my chest. “You sure about that, old man?”

Letting my breath out slowly, I allowed my lips twitch into a brief smile. Then I blurred. I lunged forward and seized the ivory dagger so quickly that no one managed to move before I had the tip of the blade pressed beneath the man’s chin. “Yes, in fact, I am.”

Muscle man twitched and fired a round off, but the gun wasn’t even pointed at me any longer. Toe to toe with him, I stared into his eyes and let him see the real me.

The Executioner.

Outwardly, my body appeared to be a grizzled old man with warped, ruined hands. He couldn’t see the scars that laced every inch of my body. Or the thick loop around my neck—where I’d been beheaded. I wasn’t even as tall as him, and he probably had five or six stone on me. But it didn’t matter.

I could kill him with my thumb before he could even blink.

I’d killed a thousand and more before him.

I no longer served the dead queen. She could no longer compel me to kill in her name. But if I chose to kill this human, there was absolutely nothing that he could do to prevent it.

“Wh—what are you?”

Lowering the dagger, I smiled, watching the way the blood drained from his face. “Just a collector determined to uphold a bargain made in good faith.” I turned my head, keeping the pleasant smile for the businessman. “Will you keep your word? Or will you die? Your choice.”

Pale, he blinked rapidly, no doubt running through his options. In the distance, a police siren warbled through the night. That seemed to assist his decision-making process. "Fine."

I blurred again, snagging the money briefcase and holding it out to him. "Very good. I did include a five-thousand-dollar bonus for a smooth transaction."

Sweat trickled down his face and his hand trembled as he reached out to accept the case. I set the dagger back into its display and tucked the larger case into my trunk before they even moved. "Excellent doing business with you."



# GUILLAUME

I drove west out of Indianapolis with no set destination in mind. Driving into the night, blissfully alone. The roar of the engine wasn't as good as horse hooves pounding in a steady gallop, but delightful just the same. I couldn't shift into my hell horse now anyway. I was too weak.

After centuries of service to the most powerful Triune queen, I relished my years of freedom, even as I slowly withered away without her power to sustain me. I'd lasted decades longer without a queen than I'd expected, though it'd taken all my skills to evade capture until I could escape Europe.

Every Aima queen had been setting nets to ensnare me, but especially Marne Ceresa, queen of Rome. She and my former dead queen had been rivals for centuries. Naturally she thought to bring the Executioner to her side to further her position.

Here in America, as long as I avoided the coasts, I had been safe enough. The queen of New York City didn't know that I was here. The queen of San Fransisco had disbanded her court and retired back to China. Supposedly there was another queen in New Orleans and possibly another in Mexico. Easy enough places to avoid with plenty of land to roam in between.

My existence had narrowed to my collection. Driving to expand my collection. Dozing while I waited for a new item to hit the market that I wanted for my collection. There was

nothing else to do to pass the time, and I'd never been allowed to sleep during centuries of service.

Blood had no need to sleep. We were powered by our queen's blood alone. Without a queen to feed me, I was a shell of the formidable Blood that I had once been. Sleep came easily to me now, though I always kept some part of my senses alert. I'd even started paying for my room weeks at a time, just to enjoy uninterrupted rest.

*Fucking human, calling me an old man.*

Though he was right. The burst of speed that I'd used to demonstrate my ability had drained my reserves. Fucking worth it. No question.

The one blade that I had feared to never add to my collection now laid across my thighs as I drove. My collection was complete.

*It's time for me to die.*

Soon enough, I'd be too weak to drive. If I couldn't move my location, then eventually, I'd be found. A queen would manage to track me down. She'd pry my dead, cold lips apart and force her blood down my throat, bringing me back to life. Chaining me to her side for another eternity. I had no one to trust who could dispose of my body in fire, and even then, I wasn't entirely sure that a queen couldn't call me back.

I was the headless knight. I could not be killed.

My heart pounded an uneven beat, pushing sluggish blood through shriveled veins. Swollen and twisted beyond repair, my damaged fingers clutched the steering wheel. I had to find a way to die before that could happen, even if that meant walking into an inferno and hoping for the best.

I pulled off the road on the Missouri side of the Mississippi River. Another cheap hotel, paid in cash for a month. Just in case I dozed for a few weeks. I didn't unpack much. My favorite blades. Mineral oil. An old shirt to polish the blades. My cleaning kit to see if I could restore my Templar sword to its former glory.

But first, the sunrise. I loved to watch the night sky give way to day. A joke, perhaps, a nod to the legendary vampires of yore who burst into flame with the first touch of light. If only that were possible. My infernal existence would finally be at an end.

Leaning against the hood of the Mustang, I faced the east. City lights dimmed the stars, but there were still a few diamonds sprinkled across the dark velvet sky. With the river below and the bridge arching across, I waited for the sun's first rays to break the horizon.

My nape prickled. The hell horse's ears would have been twitching back and forth, straining to hear a threat. I didn't turn my head but opened my senses. Breathed deeply. Nothing approached, at least nothing that I could sense. But the prickle increased.

An itch spread down my spine. Burning my skin. Every scar. Lit up. The ragged loop around my neck. The sword marks. Arrow and spear punctures. Bites. Slices from furious claws as I hacked another head for my queen. Burning irons pressed to the soles of my feet. The rack tearing my joints apart. The sledgehammer breaking my fingers. Every bone in my body.

Panting, I turned my head. There. To the west. The sky glowed red like a forge.

A fucking queen. Calling. *Me*.

Blistering fire washed over me and then drained away, leaving me shaking, my skin steaming in the chill air. Squeezing my hands into fists despite my throbbing, painful fingers, I gritted out, "I will not be compelled."

The red glow dimmed, though I could still feel her. A startlingly young queen. I'd wager not even thirty years old. A queen born... Here. In a land not known for queens at all. In a world where fewer queens were born each year.

Calling the Executioner.

I'd never been called by a queen before. Desideria had found me trapped and desperate in the Domme prison. She'd



taken my oath to serve before she offered her blood. I'd been forced to choose between endless torture at the hands of the king's dogs, and endless killing at the command of my queen.

Not much of a choice. Though in hindsight...

I still would have chosen to serve the queen. Even knowing what she would force me to do.

I was the Executioner for a reason. It was my nature. My strength. My born instincts had led me to join the most elite killing squad of my time for dozens of tours all around the globe before ever tasting a queen's power.

I could choose to ignore this new queen's call. Already, it was fading, though my scars still felt tight and tender at the memory of her call burning through me. I could go inside, lie down on the thin, worn mattress, and drift undisturbed for weeks. Only to hope that I roused again. That I still had strength to drive and change my location before a queen with fewer scruples might choose to come investigate.

Or I could serve this young queen, where no queen should exist. My interest was definitely piqued. What manner of queen would she be? What court? How strong would she be?

Strong enough to call the Executioner, when even the queen of Rome had not been able to compel me.

The hell horse snorted inside me, eager to run. Ready to charge to war and carry a new queen's standard. Battle, killing, and blood.

*"You sure about that, old man?"*

The human's threat echoed through my head as the call faded to a gentle whisper. She was a very young queen, and I was so very, very old. Did I even have it in me to give my oath to her?

Something poked me hard enough in the chest that I grunted. A very strong queen—with a very strong alpha. Also young and raw by the feel of him, though it was hard to tell without the queen's blood strengthening my gift.

Fucking hell. The Executioner refused to play nursemaid to a wet-behind-the-ears Blood and a child queen.

An image of her flashed through me, searing my mind to ash. She was no child but a woman grown. A queen more than happy to have two Blood wrapped around her in bed. Her laughter rippled through me, lush and sensual like velvet, trailing over my skin and then withdrawing into the distance. Only hours away.

My hell horse let out a strident neigh that cracked my spine, and then softer, a warm, low nicker. Stallion to mare.

I'd fucked plenty of queens and queens' Blood in my day. But I had never fucked *my* queen. Desideria had never wanted me like that, thank the goddess.

Before my heart beat again I was inside the cheap room. Shoving my blades into their hiding places all over my body. Snagging up the newly-purchased case and the rest of my gear. The Templar blade would have to wait to be cleaned another day.

After I claimed my place at my queen's side.



# GUILLAUME

**T**hirst blazed, my fangs throbbing in agony.

I hadn't tasted a queen's blood in a hundred years. Ironically, I hadn't even thought about it. My only concern had been escaping the queen of Rome and then concealing my location while I hunted for my lost sword. At the prospect of joining this new, young queen, my hunger roared to life and raged like it would never be quenched again.

I drove so hard up the interstate that the Mustang shimmied beneath me. Weaving in and out of traffic, the engine at an all-out roar like my thirst, my foot pressing the pedal to the floor. Luckily, I'd filled up the tank before getting the hotel room. It was going to be close, but I was pretty sure that I could reach her without having to stop for gas.

Hours crept by, giving me time to reflect, both upon my past service and what this new queen might ask of me. The complications that I brought with me. She and her Blood were too young to have even been alive when I was still the Executioner of the Triune, though I could only imagine the tales they'd heard. None of them would be pleasant.

If she could bring me back to some semblance of my former strength, her alpha was probably shitting his pants if he knew anything about me at all. Desideria had delighted in sending me to her rivals, letting me get close and personal with anyone and everyone in the court.

Until the killing began.

Inevitably, the alpha had to be killed first. The rest of the Blood were then easy to pick off one by one. Then Desideria would make her grand entrance and overtake the queen's entire court, forcing the weaker queen to bend knee and offer throat to her.

Over and over and over.

I'd have to be careful entering this queen's court without antagonizing her alpha. I was too weak to fight any Blood, let alone him.

As I roared up the road toward a gothic-looking mansion in a peaceful country neighborhood outside of Kansas City, I had a moment to wonder if this was the end. If this alpha would be the one to finally kill me with his young, upstart queen. It wouldn't take much to bring me to my knees.

If this queen had the gift of fire... I couldn't stop her from turning me into a pile of sooty ash.

*My collection's complete. My Templar sword's back in my hand where it belongs. At least this way I'll die with honor.*

I strode up the sidewalk, braced to feel the boundary of the queen's blood circle, but I made it all the way to the front door. Which only infuriated me even more. A queen with no nest? No blood circle to keep her safe? What the fuck was this young cub doing with his vulnerable queen? Did he not know better?

No wonder the goddess had seen fit to send me to this daughter's side. She needed help, serious help, if this was all the protection that her alpha could offer.

I pounded on the door, my thirst driving me mad. A few flimsy walls were all that prevented me from sinking fang into the queen's throat. That, and my honor, of course. In all my existence, I'd never approached any queen without her permission—unless Desideria had ordered it.

No queen commanded me now.

Only this blazing thirst dragged me to my new queen's feet.

A woman opened the door. Not Blood, not even Aima, though her eyes flared wide with recognition. She inclined her head politely and stepped aside. “Welcome to House Isador, Sir Guillaume.”

Isador. That name meant something. It resonated deep inside me. Something pushed up from the depths of my memory, a vague black hood, but when I tried to recall, it dissipated like wisps of smoke. My fangs ached, my throat dry as dust, but I bowed my head. “Thank you, my lady.”

“The queen awaits you in the next room.” She raised her voice slightly. “I have a few ideas for our other human visitor. By your leave, Your Majesty, I’ll make a few calls.”

I’d wager the ivory-handled dagger that she was the Isador consiliarius.

“Of course, thank you, Gina,” the queen said.

My heart stuttered, a fluttering, trembling creature of desperate hope and need. I stepped into the living room, my gaze immediately pulled to the queen. Achingly young and beautiful with long dark hair and eyes like a starry night reflecting the light of the full moon. The big alpha swallowed her up, his arms and thighs cradling her against him. Another, even younger, Blood sat on the floor at her feet, a snarl twisting his face.

They didn’t like me much. Not that I expected otherwise.

If the consiliarius recognized me, then it was likely they knew the Executioner had entered House Isador as well. So no fucking wonder they were frothing at the mouth to eliminate the threat to their queen. If I were at her side...

I’d have never allowed a Blood like me to set one foot inside the door.

Thinking fast, I decided on the most startling and significant gesture that I could make to any queen. I would treat her with the utmost respect as if she sat on the Triune. I dropped to my knees and then prostrated myself before her. “My queen, I come in peace in answer to your call.”

She sucked in a loud breath. “What are you doing? Get up. I don’t require such... Please. You don’t have to do that. Who are you?”

The mystery around this queen deepened. If I wasn’t maddened with thirst, I’m sure that I would have been more appalled at her apparent lack of understanding High Court etiquette. Keeping my gaze on the floor, I lifted my head slightly. “Guillaume de Payne, Your Majesty.”

The young Blood let out a vicious growl, his claws raking the wooden floor.

“Daire,” she warned, quieting him. “What’s wrong?”

As I feared, she knew little of court life, or she would have recognized me by name alone. Though her Blood certainly recognized the threat. “I see my reputation precedes me. As I said, Blood, I come in peace. I come to her call.” I put emphasis on the next part, weighing each word with intent. “No queen commands me.”

Still at ease, she combed her fingers through the youngest Blood’s hair. “What reputation?”

Settling enough to purr, he replied, “He has a reputation for wooing a queen long enough to kill her alpha.”

The queen shoved the younger Blood off her lap and leaped to her feet. Her eyes blazed with fury, her delicate jaw set with determination. Her power rose, filling the air with massive boulders, making it difficult to breathe. She didn’t even bleed, but her power was fucking immense.

Too immense, honestly. An avalanche of raw power that she apparently didn’t even realize she wielded. That kind of power would burn her out, crack open the foundations of the world, and destroy all she held dear if she didn’t learn to control it.

Triune-level power. My impulsive gesture of ultimate homage was entirely earned.

Warfare clamored in my mind. The whisper of drawn steel. Clanging swords. Neighing horses and pounding hooves.

Screams of the dying. Rivers of blood. I had been called to serve another Triune queen.

*Against another Triune queen.*

The queen of Rome would not be pleased in the slightest to learn another queen had called the Executioner as Blood.

Holy fuck. If she took me as Blood, this war might very well rival the Last Crusade.

With a small pocketknife in her hand, she gestured to the door. “Get. Out.”

“My queen—”

Her eyes burned hotter, black holes sucking the stars to their destruction. She could crush me with a thought—if she only knew it. “I’m not your queen! You won’t have him. Do you hear me? You won’t lay a finger on him. You’ll turn around and march straight out my door.”

Standing, her alpha was easily the biggest Blood I’d ever seen, even without shifting. Though that wouldn’t have stopped me from killing him in my former life. “You should hear him out.”

Her mouth dropped open with shock. “You want me to accept him? Even if he kills you?”

Still on my stomach, I replied quickly, “I’ll swear any oath you ask of me, my queen. I’ll swear to never touch your alpha, any of your Blood, whatever you wish. If you only allow me to stay in your service.”

“Fuck you and fuck your oaths. Why should I trust you, a man I don’t know, just because you swear you won’t hurt my Blood? Why?”

Knives twisted in my stomach. The little amount of blood that I still possessed iced in my veins. If she didn’t understand what I offered... “You question my honor?”

Her alpha stepped closer and bent down, offering me his hand. “She doesn’t know who or what you are, since she wasn’t raised in a nest among us. I would not question your honor nor your word.”



A brave Blood, I'd give him that. He didn't have my oath yet. I took his hand and stood, though I didn't release him. So fucking young, but strong, pumped up with massive muscles and blazing power. The queen had fed him deeply and well. I could only hope her blood could do as much for me. Even if she returned me to a shadow of my former strength, I'd serve her. Gladly.

"Alrik Isador," the alpha said.

I would have liked to know his birth House's name as well, but it wasn't my place to correct him. Yet. Though I would demonstrate the appropriate way for a younger Blood to meet an older Blood. "Guillaume de Payne, born of House Ashere."

Nodding, he turned to the queen and held his hand out to her. Gripping his hand, she came closer, her eyes narrowed, her lips a harsh slant. "My queen, Shara Isador."

She still held the knife in her right hand. "I thought all Blood took their queen's house name."

This close to her, my hunger flared and hammered inside me, demanding to be quenched. It took all my considerable years to keep myself under control. "They do, unless they're me. I've never taken a queen's name, but I'm willing for you."

"Why?"

Another flash of respect sliced through me. I loved that she didn't pretend to be anything that she wasn't. She knew she didn't know and didn't care that we knew of that ignorance. Her honesty was refreshing—though it would get us crucified in Rome. "Because no queen commands me to come to you. I come freely to your call. I'll accept your name. I'll accept your alpha."

She focused that impressive power on me. "Why?"

My knees trembled, my bones crumbling beneath her force. Such power. Goddess. Every breath brought her power into my lungs. Her scent. My eyelids fluttered. Blowing desert sands, a pyramid in the distance, her blood a sweet oasis, quenching...

Her blood. I inhaled again, breathing that scent deeper, particles of her blood already sinking into my starved cells. She wasn't injured yet her blood was on the air. My eyes flared wide, and I focused on her alpha. "She's breeding. Young, yet laden with power, without a nest of her own, and only two inexperienced Blood to guard her. And you haven't killed me on sight? You're either a fool, or..."

I couldn't say it aloud. He certainly wasn't a fool.

I was the fool. I had actually hesitated in coming to this queen's side. This young Triune-level queen who was already unconsciously displaying her ability to produce an Isador heir. If Marne Ceresa knew...

She would destroy Shara. Now. Before she could gain any more power. Before she could even think to take her rightful seat at the Triune.

Or... knock Marne Ceresa out of her chair for good.

Shara Isador needed the Executioner at her side, or she'd be dead before she could even build her own nest.

My honor didn't impress her. Nor did my age, name, or reputation. She would stand against me to defend her impressive alpha with a tiny knife in her hand. That spoke of love and loyalty the likes of which I had never known.

Perhaps she needed a larger demonstration of what I offered. A grand gesture that would show her what kind of Blood I could be for her. I was in no shape to kill her enemies, not yet. But if she drank from me...

Even a swallow of my blood, and she'd gain the headless knight's imperviousness to injury and death. A gift that she would desperately need in the Triune Crusade.

I lunged toward her. Not to touch her, though I ached to cup her cheeks in my busted hands and fall into her endless eyes. I thrust myself onto the blade in her hand, taking the short knife into my body. The steel slid eagerly into my flank, as eager as I was to feel her fangs in my throat.

"My queen. Take me. I'm yours."



Shara takes Guillaume as her Blood in Queen Takes King.

# QUEEN TAKES... WU TIEN XIN



Song: Wolves by Sam Tinnesz



## XIN

A lone wolf howled in the wintery night.

I sat on my haunches waiting to hear a reply, though I wasn't surprised when none of my kindred answered. There were no natural wolves in Arkansas.

Just me.

I tipped my nose to the east, my destination, but the winds blew from the north. Filtering through the thousands of scents automatically, I gazed up at the crescent moon. I should not be here.

But I couldn't find it in me to continue my journey.

New York City wasn't so far from San Francisco that it would take me fifty years to make the journey, even on four paws. Yet the years passed one by one, and I still had not made it to House Skye. Either something held me here that I couldn't sense—or compelled me to stay far away from New York City. My wolf knew better than to question such guidance.

If the many years of my existence had taught me anything at all, it was patience. Fifty years compared to a thousand were nothing. Nothing at all.

Besides, I was in no rush to swear my blade to a new queen. I liked the quiet. The peace. An end to the killing. These mountains weren't the home of my birthplace, but I found solace here after the city. Pristine snow, untouched by humans. A silence so great that I could hear the gentle plops of

snowflakes as they struck the ground. The only thing I missed were other wolves. Perhaps I should go north, rather than the coast. Somewhere that I could run with a pack...

My nose twitched, my focus shifting to a scent that didn't belong in these remote mountains. Three scents, actually. Aima. Here. In the middle of the country where no court existed.

Two Blood. Another deep breath. *And their queen.*

Padding through snow without leaving a single track, I followed the scents. Down the mountain and through the pine to a ramshackle building. I paused in the parking lot, smelling where she had stood just hours before. Motorcycles. Two of them. Headed north. I would follow, but first...

There was something else here. Something I needed to know.

Still as my wolf, I passed into the building unseen as a human opened the entry door. The queen's scent was thicker here in the hallway. She'd passed back and forth among these rooms several times over the past week. Maybe two. But the two Blood had only been here recently. How was that possible?

A queen... without her Blood.

Her trail led me to the end of a dark hallway. She had touched this door handle several times. I shifted to my human form so I could more easily force the door open. One hard kick placed at the handle, and the frame splintered, allowing the flimsy door to swing open.

The door was not the only thing destroyed in this room. The bed frame had been cracked in half, the mattress on the floor. Torn bedding that smelled of sex and blood, though she'd called the blood back to avoid leaving a trail for thralls or other Aima to follow.

But I wasn't like other Aima. I had learned to track my target as a three-year-old child. Born to be Blood, I'd been honed to a viciously cold blade from an early age. Now that I had her scent...

I would find her. Anywhere. Whether she left a blood trail or not.

*To what end?*

I stood in the empty room, letting images fill my mind of what had happened here. A queen alone, where no queen should be, and then two Aima. She'd taken them as Blood right here in this room. Her first Blood. This wasn't a nest. There'd been no blood circle, though it wouldn't have been able to keep me out.

I smelled fur and iron. Something feline and... stone. I'd never encountered their lineage, so I couldn't identify their houses. Could they have been from House Skye? Here? But why?

Something caught my gaze. One long dark strand of hair. I plucked it from the pillow, closed my eyes, and inhaled. Blood. Sex. Not surprising from the torn sheets and broken bed. Sand. Some kind of desert lineage? The delicate scent of night blooming jasmine.

A whiff of death.

Now she had my complete and utter interest.

Someone had died in this room.

I pressed my face to the pillow, taking in her scent. She had died. The queen. Right here beneath the stone Blood. The alpha, I'd hazard to guess.

Then she'd climbed on a motorcycle and rode away with her two *new* Blood.

In a flash, I was loping down the winding asphalt road. Headed north, not east.

Perhaps this new queen would have need of a silent, silver wolf.





## XIN

I smelled trouble as I neared the queen's nest. Correction, her living quarters since she didn't have a blood circle up yet. I picked up the scent of another Aima who smelled of horse and sulfur and jingled like chainmail. She must have called a third Blood.

Would I be her fourth?

Pausing outside the iron fence that ringed her house, I considered my options. No nest, no blood circle. That was a concerning lack. Worse, there were humans making regular rounds through the property. She didn't possess enough Blood to patrol her own grounds.

If she were a new queen, as I'd guessed, perhaps she didn't intend to make this house her nest.

Or perhaps she was too weak to care.

I didn't mind serving a weak queen—with ambition. My blade would eagerly make her position stronger, as long as she had that drive to win. Not all queens cared about how high their court sat on the board, while others were constantly evaluating their position and how best to rise toward the Triune.

I had only one use. If she couldn't wield me appropriately...

I would be better off back in the mountains until I found a queen willing to kill to expand her powerbase.

House Skye waited to the east. The queen of New York City would certainly know how to use me to her gain. Yet I had to consider why I'd not been compelled to her side in the fifty plus years of my freedom, while here I stood outside this new queen's house hours after finding her trail.

There would be no queen's call for me. I'd lost that opportunity long ago, my punishment well deserved. Yet I could still serve. If...

She wanted a killing blade.

I slipped through the humans easily. I entered her house just as easily. No one even guarded the front door. I heard thumps and deep voices above. As I padded up the stairs, my nose worked overtime. Lots of blood. No surprise for a newly fledged queen. She had a massive appetite. Good. That spoke of strength and power.

A dry, scaly scent had my ruff rising, fur prickling down my spine. Snake. I hadn't caught the scent of another Aima entering the house.

I crept into the queen's room, taking in the scene. A massive black cobra coiled around a large Blood on the bed. Queen and alpha, respectively. He didn't look good, not with her venom pumping through his veins. His skin sagged loose and oddly wet, as if he was dissolving from the inside out. Two other Blood waited nearby. One, younger and crying, the feline I'd scented, on his knees, leaning against a much older Blood for support.

I didn't understand the young one's tears. His queen was magnificent, her power incredible. Her alpha served her well.

The Blood who smelled of horse said, "I lived through it. He'll pull through just fine."

"Right," the younger one growled. "So says the knight who had his head chopped off."

The cobra's tail rattled, her body undulating around her alpha. She struck, sucking his poisoned blood. She was too enraptured with her prey to notice me. Yet.

“Her venom changes the blood,” the knight said. “If you or I were to feed on him right now, we’d die. Even me.”

“Why is she doing it, though?”

Again, I couldn’t help but shake my head. A Blood who asked why his queen did anything was not fit to serve. At least the older one seemed intriguing, especially if the other’s words about him being beheaded were true. I’d heard of such a knight in the Triune High Court, but that had been a hundred years ago. Surely some other queen had snatched him up already.

“She’s using him to make herself, and him, and eventually us, indirectly, poisonous.”

The younger Blood shuddered. “Will she bite us too?”

I couldn’t abide his fears any longer. “Undoubtedly.”

The knight whirled toward me, a knife suddenly in his hand. A nice play, that. He must have blades tucked up beneath his sleeves in wrist sheaths. He swung at me smoothly. Razor-sharp steel flashed for my throat with enough force behind it to easily hack through my spine. Perhaps he was the infamous Executioner after all.

No matter. I leaned aside, letting his blade whisper past my throat unchecked. “Is that how you greet all her Blood?”

The younger Blood jumped to his feet, claws sprouting from his hands. “How the fuck did you get in?”

“I’m surprised it was so easy to approach her. But I suppose you are a bit... distracted at the moment.”

The knight stared at me, no doubt straining his senses to understand how I’d breached the queen’s meager protections without his notice. Not that he’d see much through my gift, especially if the queen didn’t bond me.

Meanwhile, his alpha died. The labored, wet sounds of his breathing slowed while his queen drained him to a shell. His heart struggled weakly. “Good. Welcome. Help. Them.”

An alpha worthy of respect. Keeping an eye on the feeding cobra, I neared the bed and dropped down beside him. The

alpha offered his hand, so I clasped his fingers in mine, warrior to warrior. “I will help them and you in any way I can, alpha.”

Though my oath would be to the queen, not her alpha. I watched as she began transforming, scales rippling beneath her skin to reveal her true form. Her hair as black as her scales. Her curves as lush and sinuous as the cobra’s coils. Power rippled and swirled around her, eddies and riptide currents of which she didn’t seem to be aware. So fucking powerful. I’d not heard of a queen able to shift like this since... A cobra queen...

Cool, soft gray fog blanketed my mind.

The young Blood scrambled closer, jerked the alpha’s hand from mine, and hugged the alpha’s limp arm to his chest. “Shara, please. You have to save him. Shara!”

Blood dripping from her lips, she stretched as if waking from a dream. Dark, shining eyes sliced through me, a death knell that I could not avoid as easily as the knight’s lightning-fast strike.

Felled. Struck down. For a moment, my heart stuttered to a stop the same as her dead alpha. I had no defense against this queen. Not one.

“Shara!” The young Blood repeated.

She jerked her gaze away from me down to her alpha, releasing me from her deadly hold. My heart leaped into a frantic rhythm. Sweat beaded on my forehead and my fangs throbbed, startling me so badly that I couldn’t hold back a soft sound of distress. Luckily no one heard, or if they did, they spared me the shame of their notice.

Physical reactions in a queen’s presence had been beaten and drilled out of me long ago. I must be severely out of practice to allow such a crack in my reserves.

Desperate, I sought the peace and quiet of the mountains in my mind. The snow softly falling. My wolf’s soft fur, his mournful howl on the still night.

But it was too late. *Her* eyes stared back at me, even in my own mind. A burning darkness that seared me to ash.

She slashed her wrist and pressed her arm to the alpha's mouth. Blood trickled from his cold lips and he didn't respond, so she dripped blood over the brutal punctures in his stomach. Lightning crackled around her, enough power to light up all of San Francisco.

The alpha took a gasping breath and he lurched up to sink his fangs in her throat. She held him, stroking his back, crying while he fed.

*More fucking tears.*

I was not used to so much open, unreserved emotion. At all. But especially from a queen. No wonder my control over my own reactions had suffered.

Emotion was a weakness that others could exploit. A queen didn't love. She didn't feel. Or if she did, she only showed precious, trusted few such emotion in privacy. I had never been included in that company.

Yet this queen, Shara, openly wept before me, a stranger. She held her Blood close in her arms. He drank directly from her throat, nuzzling her bare, gleaming skin. It was so intimate and raw that I had to look away to compose myself.

I had never felt more like an intruder, in a place in which I certainly didn't belong, yet simultaneously finding myself incapable of taking one step to withdraw.

"I'm so sorry. I thought it was a dream. I killed you. I can't believe... I fucking killed you."

Another shocking revelation that rocked me back on my heels. A queen never apologized for her actions. She needed. Her Blood provided whatever that need might be, even unto death. Bewildered, I glanced quickly at the knight, the next oldest in the room, only to be further shocked when he stepped closer and dropped to his knees beside me.

*And fucking pressed his forehead to her bare thigh.*

“Your power is great, my queen. The cost is high. But we willingly pay that cost to be here with you.”

At least I could agree with his words, though the casual physical intimacy still had me reeling. I wasn't clear of their hierarchy, because it honestly made no sense. Sure, the alpha was big and strong but still a pup. Compared to the medieval knight, there was no question who should have the queen's back. Especially if he was truly the Triune Executioner.

No Triune queen would cuddle and stroke her Blood like this. Cry over them. Love them. So openly.

“Was it my stupid oath that did this?” She asked. “Because if Rik had to die to give me fangs, then I would have rather done without.”

“I don't think so, my queen,” the knight replied, lifting his head. “I've seen this happen before.”

“When?”

“When your mother came to me.”

She gasped softly, her eyes flaring. “But you said you didn't know her name.”

“I didn't. I still don't. Even though you gave me her name last night, I cannot pull it up in my mind. But when I saw your cobra, I remembered another cobra queen. I remember being envenomed like Rik. And that is how I was finally freed from Desideria. She drank from me and died of the poison my blood carried.”

Holy fuck. He truly was the Executioner. How the fuck had he managed to stay free of Marne Ceresa to wind up here, kneeling beside this young queen's bed?

His words tickled that foggy mist inside my own head. The cobra seemed familiar, somehow, though I couldn't recall. Other than Wu Tien, I had killed every queen I ever came into contact with. So I surely hadn't ever met her mother.

“Why didn't your blood kill me then?” Shara asked.

“Because Desideria drank me to the point of death. Luckily for me, she died before she could finish me off.”

The alpha lifted his head, fully healed and dare I say, even bigger and badder than ever. “So I’m poisonous now?”

“To anyone who doesn’t carry our queen’s blood, yes,” the knight replied. “Her blood has the anti-venom that will counteract the poison.” He looked at me, the corners of his eyes crinkling slightly. “If our new friend here tries to drink from you before our queen, he’ll die and it won’t be a pretty, easy death.”

The alpha leveled a hard glare in my direction with a mental shove that would have made me involuntarily take a step backwards if I wasn’t already on my knees. But that look paled in comparison to the blistering stare he turned on the other two Blood. Perhaps he did indeed carry enough power to dominate the elder knight. “I’m glad to have another Blood, but do either of you care to tell me how you allowed him so deeply into our queen’s home?”

I quickly said, “It’s not their fault. My gift is invisibility.”

To demonstrate, I wrapped myself in the cold fog that I carried. Still on my knees, unmoving, I completely disappeared. No scent, no sound, nothing remained to betray my presence. I could leap to my feet and slit the queen’s throat before any of them moved.

The strangled look of consternation on the knight’s face almost made me laugh. Out loud.

Me. The silent, deadly blade. Stunned, I could only shake my head. This court was already starting to infect me with their emotion, and I hadn’t even sworn to their queen. Unease crawled through me, another facet of weakness. Doubt gnawed in the pit of my stomach. A queen shouldn’t weaken her Blood. Her Blood shouldn’t weaken her, especially with their love. Devotion seemed innocent enough...

Until another queen twisted that knife in your back.

“I can still see you,” Shara said.

I unwrapped the fog so that the other Blood could see me once more. “Of course. You’re my queen.” Pausing, I blinked, stunned at how quickly the words had come from my throat



despite the turmoil boiling inside me. “I could never hide my presence from you.”

“Who are you?”

I bowed my head. “Xin, my queen. Forgive me for not introducing myself sooner, but you were otherwise occupied.”

For a moment, a haunted, grim frown of dismay twisted her lips. “Such a nice way of saying that I was too busy killing my alpha to notice a new Blood. I don’t mean to be rude, Xin, G, but could we have some time alone?”

“Of course, my queen.” The knight stood and held out his hand to me. “I’m Guillaume de Payne. Let’s go make some breakfast.”

Shaking my head, I let out a low whistle of appreciation. The Triune Executioner, shaking my hand. What were the odds that the only other Blood who’d become famous for killing would be here in this court? Though I was far from famous. Mostly because no one lived to tell about the silent silver wolf who came to execute his mark.

“I’ve heard of you, Payne. I usually go for the stab in the back myself.”

The knight flashed a broad smile and slapped me on the back. We headed to the door, but I couldn’t help a quick glance back at the queen. So young. So powerful. A queen of death... and resurrection.

I still wasn’t sure of her house, but that wouldn’t matter.

If she would use me.

To kill.



Shara takes Xin as her Blood in [Queen Takes King](#).

There’s also a bonus short story, [“Queen Takes A Life,”](#) featuring Xin.

**QUEEN TAKES... MEHEN  
GORGON (LEVIATHAN)**



Songs: I'm Not Sorry by Royal & the Serpent; Bodies by  
Drowning Pool

*Special thanks to Colette Elliott for recommending Bodies!*



# MEHEN

**F**uck it all. Burn it all down.

*I'll fucking destroy. Every. Last. Fucking. Thing.*

*Rend and tear. Gobble you whole. Feast on your blood. Wallow in your entrails. Crunch on your bones. Smash your pretty little skull.*

Starting with this fucking Aima queen who dared intrude in my prison.

So sly with her lies, so clever with her platitudes. Granted, I wasn't easy to find. My prison lay beyond the veil, a place outside of time and space with only glimpses of the earthly world from which she came.

I'd been trapped here for so fucking long that I wasn't even sure that I was awake. Time was meaningless, whether I was awake or asleep. A million years became a day. A second. And I couldn't tell the fucking difference. I had no way to mark the passage of time other than the occasional rat that wandered into my lair.

And I didn't speak of four-legged vermin.

Creeping closer, she whispered soothingly, "I'm here to free you."

They all said that.

*They who?* The thought flickered like puffs of smoke. Queens. Aima queens. I remembered what they'd done. Fuck

that shit. I'd never *forget* what they'd done. What *she'd* fucking done to me.

Hatred sparked in the blackest corner of my heart. "I'll kill you like I killed my mother and her entire House."

"Who was your mother?"

As if I would tell another queen anything. Truth became a weapon to slice and rend.

Cracking open one eye the barest slit, I watched her slide into my trap. Hunger sparked to life, quickly blazing to a murderous conflagration. A feast awaited. And maybe...

A way out.

*It's been so fucking long.*

Endless hunger tormented me, but I lay still and quiet on the ledge above the bone-littered floor of the cave. Eating her in one gulp would be fucking delicious, but I needed her alive.

For now.

Though any motherfucking queen was imminently dangerous. She had one purpose only for coming here, and it sure the fuck wasn't to free me.

"Come forth, Leviathan, King of the Depths."

Rage curled through me, a smoldering river of molten hate. "No one commands me."

She laughed softly. "Are you sure about that?"

I smelled her blood, and then the entire cave lit up as bright as day, searing my eyes that hadn't seen the sun in a thousand years. "I'll pluck out my own fucking eyeballs and throw them at you before I obey the likes of you."

"I can make it even brighter if I must, though I'd rather not cause you that kind of pain. Light bright enough to melt your scales and char your flesh."

I couldn't help but chuckle. "Not even hellfire would melt my scales, though you're welcome to try."

Her light brightened, glinting like the noonday sun on a polished silver shield. And yeah, my fucking eyes bled but I could still fucking see well enough to drop my impressive bulk on the bitch.

Gripping her throat in my claws, I tipped my head to the side. “What was that about melting my scales?”

She fumbled for a necklace tangled in my claws. Light poured out of a clear crystal in the center of a golden disc on an equally tacky gold chain around her neck. With a twitch of my talon, I broke the chain and tossed the necklace aside, softening the brutal light.

Eyes wide, she stared up at me, her chin trembling. “Darkness flees the light of day.”

“*This* darkness flees from nothing. Whoever sold you that bauble sent you to be my very tasty snack.”

“But— but—,” she stammered. “Impossible. She wouldn’t.”

I licked my own blood from my cheeks, letting her get a real good look at my teeth. “*They* would sell their own daughters to get another step closer to the Triune.”

Her jaw flexed. Her throat worked. She averted her face, biting her lip. Flashing a little fang at me. Disgust curled in my stomach. That might work on one of her so-called Blood but never me.

Surging up against my claws, she fought and thrashed. Her magic rose, making my scales itch. She pummeled at me frantically, whipping with air and arcs of lightning.

I let her blast at me with everything she had before I started to laugh, thought my chuckle echoed with a sharp edge of despair. *Not fucking strong enough. Not even close.*

*This torment will never end.*

“That’s all you’ve got?” I snarled in her face. “Great fucking Mother, how far Your blessed daughters have fallen if this is all the power this one can call.”

She'd torn her throat open on my claws trying to break free. My own hunger hurt more than anything she could manage to do, but I resisted the urge to feed.

If she couldn't free me... Then first, I needed information. Though I couldn't help but lap the spilled blood pooling beneath her head.

Panting, she finally went limp, gripping a talon in each of her hands. As if she thought she could pry my foot off her neck with her puny little fingers.

“Ready to talk yet?”

She shuddered. “We can help each other.”

I snorted out a plume of smoke that made her cough. Blood spurted from the punctures. “You'd best heal yourself if you don't want to bleed out. I feast either way.”

“If you're only going to kill me anyway, pray tell why would I heal myself?”

“I've been told that the torment of thirst as you bleed out is worse than anything I can possibly do to you.” I shrugged, lifting one wing casually. “It takes Aima queens a very long time to die. Your choice.”

“Are you always such an insufferable asshole?”

Again, I couldn't help but laugh. I knew her game all too well. “Indeed, I am, especially to young fools like you.”

“I'm not—” Her sharp retort fell off when she realized the truth of my words.

Even if she'd lived hundreds of years, to me, she was but a blink of an eye. “So, let's get the preliminaries out of the way. What's your name and house?”

Her eyes narrowed, her mouth clamped shut tightly. No matter.

There were two ways this could go. I had fun either way.

I ran my tongue over the dripping wounds in her throat. Probing the slashes. Making the blood run faster. She whimpered, evidently not a fan of the sandpaper roughness of

my tongue. Not that I gave a fuck. I didn't need her pain to enjoy the feast, though she certainly would scream. Eventually.

"I'll bond you." She tried to make it a threat, but her voice trembled with unease. "You're mine now. You've had my blood."

I tightened my claws and gave her a rough shake that jolted her teeth together so hard that she slashed up her lips on her fangs. "You're not fucking strong enough to bond me."

"But a queen's blood..." Her heart pitter-pattered frantically, a tiny, pitiful creature desperate to escape its cage. "You're mine now."

I lifted my head, running my tongue over my jaws luxuriously. "Do you think so? Delve into my head, if you dare. I'll allow it." I tipped my head to the side so I could glare at her with one massive eye. "Try to command me, oh great one."

To her credit, she did attempt to push her psyche into mine. I felt the gnat of her presence tickle in my head. A tiny firefly against the darkness of my rage. A spark that immediately sputtered and died.

She fucking wept at that small touch. "Mother, help me."

*Me too. Madness spreads throughout me now.*

"There's no help here. Not for you, and certainly not for me."

"Please," she whimpered, staring up at me with huge eyes shimmering with tears. "Let me go. I'll find someone stronger who can free you. I swear it."

I pretended to consider her offer. I even sat back on my haunches—though I didn't release her neck. "Who?"

"K—Keisha Skye, the queen of New York City. She's the strongest queen in America."

"She's the one who gave you the necklace, huh?"



Her eyes flared wide, and she shook her head. “No, not at all. I got that from... uh... an obscure house in Tuscany. A solar house. Marne Ceresa had them eliminated.”

I still didn't believe her but ultimately it didn't matter. “Do you have any idea where that kind of magic comes from? Perhaps if you knew, you'd have hesitated to use a tool created by the God of Light to render Aima queens powerless so he can add you to his torture harem.”

She still had a little bite in her. She shot a narrowed look up at me. “How would you know that if you've been trapped here for millennia?”

“There are some benefits to being trapped beyond the veil. It's amazing how much information has flowed to me over the years. I see everything from up here. Down here. However you want to think of it. And I have nothing else to do but watch, listen, and learn from all the lives that play out like stories all around me. For instance...” I closed my eyes for a moment, savoring her blood on my tongue. “I taste Arthurian literature in your power. Distant—and weak—enough to tell me that you're not descended from the White Enchantress. I'm guessing you're one of Ygraine's grand or great-grand daughters.”

Still with my eyes closed, I lowered my snout and sniffed at her chest. Listened to the throb of her heart, surging to an all-out gallop. “A hint of dragon does still burn in you. You're one of Arthur's spawn. Perhaps House Pendragon has claimed you.”

“I'm Clarrisant of House Avalon,” she spat back at me as if I'd insulted her. Perhaps I had. I might be an asshole but I wasn't the king who'd locked his beloved queen in a tower and burned her alive to keep her from her lover.

*All I did was murder my mother and her entire house, and I'm not sorry. Not at all.*

“That's the reason I'm here,” she said, drawing me back from my unsavory childhood. “I want an Avalon heir, of course, but one with Leviathan's power. A dragon heir strong enough to defeat Arthur once and for all.”

“That fucking idiot is still alive?” I blew out a grunt of disgust. “You do realize that family trees are supposed to have more than one branch, right? He’s been trying to sire dragon queens for a thousand years with his own damned daughters in a futile attempt to bring back his beloved white dragon.”

“I can—”

I snapped my jaws in a clanging crash a hair’s breadth from her face. “You’re nothing. There’s not enough dragon in you for even Arthur to fuck. Let alone me.”

Staring down into her eyes swimming with tears, I watched the flurry of emotions flickering through her. Plan A to Plan B to Plan Z and still no way out. She had nothing to offer me for her freedom. She’d come in search of power and fame, hoping to be the queen who’d finally freed the King of the Depths—so she could bind me to her will.

She’d have used me to breed her dragon daughters and kept me chained at her feet like a fucking lap dog.

Only now did she finally realize that she was nothing but meat.

*That I will devour.*

At last, she began to scream.



# MEHEN

*If you sleep long enough, and dream hard enough, eventually you can't tell when you're awake. Let alone fucking dead.*

Until something tugged ever so faintly on a gossamer thread that had never been there before.

I didn't know what it meant. Only that something had changed. Grains of sand began draining away in my mind. A subtle urgency began to tighten inside me.

*Time's up, bitch.*

Thank fucking goddess. Finally. An end to this misery. If I couldn't be free, then I couldn't fucking wait to die. Though I knew all too fucking well that it wouldn't be an easy death. Not for me.

I sure the fuck wouldn't go down easily.

My instrument of death—or escape—started talking to me in the mists. Another fucking queen. Whispering the same bullshit as all the others.

*"It's alright. I'm here to free you."*

She stood on the other side of a rusted iron gate locked with thick chains, and I felt that visceral tug again. Even thousands of miles away, I could have flown straight to her and charred her flesh down to the bone.

If I wasn't fucking trapped. Buried in a mountain outside of time and space.

Snarling and snapping, I shook my head, trying to wake myself the fuck up. Enduring never-ending thirst would be better than this. Even in a dream, she bled for me—yet bound me in chains. Sweetest torment, her blood blazing like droplets of liquid rubies scattered on the snow. Such power.

She might be the one. The one to free me.

After thousands of years, she might carry enough power to break me the fuck out.

*If I drain every last fucking drop of blood in her body.*

She probably wouldn't be the last queen that I killed, unless she managed to kill me first. Impossible, surely. Though I had to reconsider that likelihood when she managed to penetrate my dreams to stand before me without physically entering my prison at all. Misty fog swirled around her, but I could see her face. So fucking regal. Shining eyes that brimmed with ridiculous hope and naivety.

Too fucking young. Wearing her fucking heart on her sleeve for me to devour.

*Woo her. Lure her to my trap. It's the only way to break free.*

*She still believes in love.*

*I fucking hate her.*

Though I knew it was a lie.

“It's you again.” I put rumbling menace into each syllable. “What do you want with me this time? Did you come to torment me with what I cannot have, while I lie chained another thousand years?”

She held out her hand with a gleaming ball of golden light. “I have a gift for you.”

I scanned my lair to see if the necklace the Avalon queen had tried to use sparked in response to solar magic, but I must have buried it beneath bones over the centuries since she'd tried to bond me. “You stink of Ra. Get the fuck away from me before I eat you.”

“Ra tried to kill me.”

If the God of Light had taken notice of her power, then I was even more keen to taste her. Though I couldn't help but chuckle. Did this fledgling queen honestly expect me to believe that she'd managed to escape from Ra's clutches? “Yet you're still here. Either you're very good, or the stick-up-his-butt sun god is getting lazy in his old age.”

“I prefer the first,” she said with a sultry lilt in her voice.

Of fucking course she'd be cocky. Too young to know any better. A blink of my fucking eye. “Maybe. Maybe not.”

“Maybe you'll find out for yourself.”

“Maybe sooooo,” I hissed. “Or, like I said, maybe I'll eat you. It's been a fucking long time since I had anything but rats and worms to sustain me.”

She lifted her hand, and the ball of light floated toward me. “Which is why I'm bringing you this. Is this enough to free you?”

Braced to find a nasty Trojan horse, I swallowed the golden ball, trusting my fire to deal with any trap she might have laid inside. Yet only sweet pure light flashed through me. Fucking revolting in its purity and stinking of Heliopolis piety—but power just the same.

Power she gave freely. *To me*. Even though it didn't stand a snowball's chance in hell of turning back the darkness waiting to engorge on her blood.

I let out a harsh laugh to cover the niggling unease worming in my gut. “You think this is enough to free me? That was a taste. Just another torment you've brought me.”

“What will free you?”

I couldn't resist testing her courage—and the strength of her chains. I scrambled toward her, raking the stone walls of the dream with my claws. Her eyes flared and she trembled as I clanked and strained against her hold, snapping my jaws in her face. Her hair fluttered back with the force of my breath, but she didn't flinch or back away.

She most certainly didn't run, even in a dream with the King of the Depths panting in her face.

"You." I strained harder, stretching against her chains. "You will free me."

She licked her lips, her voice quivering. "How?"

The lie came easily. "The fuck if I know."

I knew all too well. I hungered. I would feast on her blood, wallow in her power, and fly free of this prison once and for all. I'd toss her shell of a body aside to lie like a crown jewel on a heap of rotten old bones. All my kills. The random animals who'd wandered through the veil and murdering queens alike.

Like that Avalon bitch. Just the thought of being bound to her, forced to sire her dragon daughters, made my blood boil.

Though siring dragons on this fledgling queen might not be a fate worse than death. If she could free me... and somehow not die.

Both were impossible. Everyone had failed. For millennia. This one would be no different.

Fuck me, but this was the realest dream I'd ever endured. So close, I could smell the sweet, rich blood flowing through her. Magnificent power waiting to fountain from her arteries. I sensed an injury in her leg, a pain that penetrated even her dream, yet she'd come to gift me the ball of solar power which would have easily healed her. Power that she'd wrestled from the God of Light himself.

What the fuck had happened to let her escape with only a slight injury?

I should have been watching.

To learn her methods. To see how she'd escaped so I could be prepared.

Nothing else.

Fucking hell. The lies came so easily. Even to myself.

I strained my neck out further and barely managed to brush her stomach with the tip of my muzzle. No dragon in her scent. She wasn't another of Arthur's daughters at least. But so fucking young. I hadn't noticed any queens being born in decades. Who was her mother? Her house?

She stank too much of Heliopolis magic for me to tell.

“Give me some of this power and that might be enough to allow me to shake the foundations of the world.”

I meant for her to come find me. To physically pierce the veil and slide down into my trap like an unsuspecting rat.

Instead, she closed her eyes and seemed to reach backwards through time and space. Back to her body, no doubt sleeping surrounded by her Blood. Her jaw tightened, her lips compressed tightly. My scales itched as her power rose. My spine tingled. My vulnerable wings clamped tighter to my body to protect them. I didn't think she could blast me in a dream, but I braced for her attack. Another light weapon, perhaps, fresh from the cursed bright halls of Heliopolis? Or something worse?

Power slammed into me. Blood power. Hers, mixed with some of her Aima warriors' blood, and more I couldn't even identify. Blood that burned like the hottest heart of my flame. Blood that sang to the darkest core within me.

Blood that embraced Leviathan, King of the Depths. Not to bind me. But to—

I thrashed in denial. I slammed my tail against the stone walls and chains and shredded at the wisps of her dream that clung to my scales. But it was too late. She sank deeper into the depths.

Into me.

A speck against the overwhelming dread of my darkness. And she didn't turn away. She didn't cower or run or wail or cry. Instead, she started to slide into sleep.

Even tangled up in the raw edges of my madness. The sinking sands poured faster, sucking us both down like a bottomless whirlpool. Time was meaningless—until it ran out.



“What is your name?” I whispered.

“Shara.”

I didn't recognize it. She didn't tell me her house. An accident? Or a deliberate omission? Did it matter in the end if she could free me? “Come and find me. Now, Shara. I won't last much longer, even with that sweet dollop of power melting on my tongue. You must come soon or all is lost.”

I must have been convincing because she asked, “How long do we have?”

I let her sense the rapidly draining sands of the hourglass in my head. “Hours. Days. No more.”

“Why? Why are you dying now?”

It seemed so clear to me now. So obvious. The gossamer thread that had been tugging on me was here. Her. Shara. The sands blowing away were appropriate in her lineage, even though I didn't know her house. “I felt the moment you took the first breath on this earth and the countdown started.”

Her chains wound tighter around me. Pinning my wings. Strangling me. Dragging me down to familiar darkness.

At least this time, I wasn't alone.



## MEHEN

*S*he's here.

Not even fully awake, I lifted my head and cracked my mouth open to inhale deeply. Muzzle tipped up toward the treacherous chute that would deliver my prey directly to my lair. A faint ripple spiraled through the air to kiss my scales, perfumed with her luscious scent.

No more fucking dreams.

No more fucking chains.

One of us was dying, and I didn't intend it to be me.

Many have wandered into my tunnel and found their way to me. Animals seeking shelter. The occasional lost tourist. And of course, queens with full knowledge of who—what—lay in wait.

Leviathan. King of the Depths.

Determined to bring me to heel. To force me to *serve* like a chained lapdog.

I stoked my rage, embraced my hatred, and welcomed the coming darkness. I would need it all to defeat her.

Her name echoed through the black depths. *Shara*.

She carefully inched down the tunnel, tracing her hand over the rocky wall. I could almost feel her fingertips gliding over my scales. Feel the trembling strain in her muscles as she fought to keep her footing as the treacherous tunnel dipped.

The passage of no return. Too steep for her to turn back. Too slippery to climb back out.

Much to my disappointment, she made it to the bottom of the channel without falling. I preferred the quick rush and glide, the reckless tumble into the pile of bones. Though her fear tasted delicious, drawing out my anticipation. I lay still and quiet on the ledge, watching her strain to see. Stretching her foot out to see if she could guess how far down the drop might be.

She hadn't called her power yet. I wasn't sure why. A silly matter of pride, perhaps. She was bleeding. I could smell the tantalizing coppery goodness on the air. Or perhaps a deliberate attempt to force me to reveal myself.

Because my hunger stirred to a raging inferno.

*Soon*, I whispered, crouched low in the shadows.

She lifted her hand and called enough light to illuminate the upper dome of the cavern. Peering over the edge, she studied the refuse littering the floor, as if trying to estimate how many creatures that I'd killed over the centuries.

Too many to fucking count.

Her gaze focused on one very human skull near the top. Crunched open so I could suck out the brains but still identifiable.

"The last was two years ago." I relished the way she flinched at my voice, her head jerking up to scan the ledge.

I crept out of my lair, my manner slow and easy. She couldn't escape. I had plenty of time to play with my food. Though I couldn't help but think of the dreams. The way she'd given power to me so generously.

To me. The monster who slithered in her dreams and would now drink every drop of her power to be free.

I glided in a lazy spiral toward the floor, pretending complete disinterest. I didn't hiss or attack, even though my scales itched with urgency. Power curled around her, tendrils of magic that could attack at any moment. Thick black

tentacles of ultraviolet shadow. The soft pearly glow of a full moon on water. The golden warmth of the sun. The crackle and heat of fire. Even the flash of brutal fangs, a black hood rising over her shoulders like a massive cobra.

*So much power.*

*Enough to free me from this never-ending prison.*

*Why doesn't she strike?*

At the last possible moment, I swept my tail out, lashed around her ankles, and dragged her off the ledge. I slammed her down hard enough beneath me that her breath rushed out, but I didn't hurt her. Not yet.

*Plenty of time. Enjoy the chase. In case this is the last time...*

"Shara." I drew her name out in a long hiss. "So kind of you to visit me in person this time."

Eyes wide, she tried to scramble away, slipping in the bone pile. I pinned her easily, claws digging into the tender meat of her belly. Ready to tear her apart if she so much as twitched.

Yet she still didn't strike.

Blood dripped from her hand, a siren song of lust threatening to drag me down to the bottomless depths of madness that had been stewing inside me for thousands of years.

"Seems as though I forgot the key for your chains. Oh wait..." She let the sentence end with a wry quirk of her lips.

As if *she* hadn't bound me in those very same chains.

Head cocked, I fought down the raging thirst to study her. I still didn't understand her game. Why she didn't attack me with all this magnificent power pulsing over my scales. Filling up my nostrils with the scents of a lush oasis in the middle of a burning desert. It made no sense. Was she so young that she didn't even understand her power yet? Perhaps she assumed that *I* was powerful enough to control her dreams.

If so, I would eat her up at the end of a regretfully quick chase.

“That was a nice touch in your dreams, wasn’t it?” I let out a smug chuckle, watching emotion flicker over her face. “I thought you might feel safer approaching me if you thought I was bound.”

Her lips cracked open, betraying her own hunger. She thought to feast on *me*. When she was the tender morsel. Good fucking luck getting those puny fangs through my hide.

I couldn’t help but laugh as I lowered my head closer to inhale her lush scent. “Do you have any idea how long I’ve waited for you?”

“It couldn’t be that long. I’m only twenty-two.”

Fucking hell. Even younger than I thought. I refused to feel even an ounce of remorse. My rage burned too hot to care about one too-fucking-young idiot queen. I snarled and snapped in her face, making her flinch. “Not *you* in particular, but any Aima queen stupid enough to try and free me.”

“So you don’t want to be free?”

Ah, here it came. Her inevitable attempt at a fool’s bargain that made me gnash my teeth with fury. “Not if my freedom comes with the kind of hooks that queens try and put into me. I’d rather be here than chained to obey like those morons you call Blood. I don’t live to *serve*,” I sneered. “I don’t live to protect. I don’t give a fuck about you.”

“Fair enough. I don’t give a fuck about you either.” She gave a little shrug though her voice deepened with slumberous, sultry tones. “I already have Blood to feed and protect me.”

A young queen ripe with power. Taking everything her Blood would give. It disgusted me how much the thought lingered in my head. It’d been a very long time since I’d fucked. Especially as a man. “And fuck you.”

“Of course.” She deliberately widened her eyes slightly, trying to look innocent. “So if you don’t want your freedom, I’ll be on my way.”

I snorted out a plume of smoke. No fucking way she was getting back up that tunnel—unless she could transform herself into something with wings. “I want my freedom more than anything, but I won’t trade one prison for another.”

“I wouldn’t—”

Throwing my head back with a roar, I blasted the ceiling with flames. “Don’t lie to me! You would. All queens would.”

“You don’t know me.” She softened her voice, still playing the innocent, young queen who was too naive to slide into a better position on the Triune board no matter how many pawns it might cost. “You don’t know what I want.”

It was all I could do not to bite her head off in one delightful crunch. “Queens want the same thing.”

“What do you want? Why did you want me to come here, if not to free you?”

Tightening my grip on her stomach, I lowered my head to the side so she could enjoy the full impact of my baleful glare. “Oh, I never said you weren’t going to free me. But it will be on *my* terms.”

She didn’t seem alarmed by six-inch-long claws threatening to tangle in her intestines. “Let me guess.”

“I need queen’s blood to leave this plane, but I refuse to be bound to a queen. So what does that mean, *Your Majesty?*” I drawled out the title, making it a slur.

Her eyes flickered, her mind firing from Plan A to Plan B... exactly as the last queen to threaten me. Her face smoothed, heart-wrenchingly lovely despite the grim resignation etched on her features. If I still had a fucking heart.

No, not resignation. Fucking acceptance. She knew I was going to hurt her. Badly. And she wanted me to believe that she wasn’t going to fight back to protect herself.

She wanted to fuck around and find out exactly what Leviathan was capable of. So be it.

I crunched down on her injured hand, engulfing most of her lower arm in my jaws. Blood hit my tongue, and I

shuddered with ecstasy. It would have been so easy to jerk my head back and take her entire arm. Throw the broken limb down the back of my gullet while the stump sprayed me with blood.

Despite my ravenous thirst, I wanted to draw out the feast as long as possible. The longer she bled, the more power she'd release. The higher her emotions, the greater her power, and I needed all that explosive power to escape. So I resisted the urge to bury my muzzle in her soft belly. I licked her paper-thin skin, opening up the wounds even more. So good. Flavored with a scream that made the mountain tremble around us.

Or perhaps that was her Blood. Pounding against the veil behind the stone facade of the mountain. Unable to penetrate without their precious queen. How rich. How sweet. How fucking futile.

Braced for her attack, I waited for her to lash with her power. To struggle against my hold. To wail and bargain and swear to find some way to help me like all the others before. She flowed into me, a glowing ember against the stifling darkness. Riding the river of blood winding through my mind. Glowing brighter, straining to shine against endless night.

I would have laughed if it didn't break me a little more inside. Just another reminder of the nightmare I had become, where a queen of this tremendous strength still had no hope against me.

A few gulps of her blood, and I swore a goddess breathed a warning on my neck. Yet there was nothing Her daughter could do to prevent me from killing her.

I curled closer, relishing the glide of my scales against her power. Soaking in everything. Her scent. Heat. Magic. Her blood flowed inside me like molten honey, mixing with my fire. Building toward a cataclysmic explosion. Higher. My wings rippled with the urge to fly. To soar straight toward the shimmering veil in my mind's eye.

So many times, I'd rushed up that tunnel. Gathering my strength. Laser focused on flying free of this prison. Only to



crash against the invisible barrier. I'd even tried to bash my brains out on the veil. Better dead than trapped here. Starving. Slowly withering. Feeding only on my rage and the occasional scrap to stumble through to a fucking nightmare.

Not this time.

More power. More blood. I tightened my jaws on her arm. Shredding her skin a little more. Fighting temptation. Fighting hunger. Fighting—

Something jabbed up in the delicate hollow behind my foreleg. I barely even felt it, though I glared down at her. A silent warning. If I lost concentration even for a moment...

*I'll be feasting on more than your blood.*

*I'll rip you limb from limb. Bathe in the rush of blood and roar toward the barrier...*

*Free. Free at last. It has to—*

She lifted her bloody hand toward her mouth. Spilled my tainted blood down over her face.

*—be enough.*

*She's fucking feeding. On me...*

Impossible. No queen. Had ever. Why, for fuck's sake? She had Blood to feed her. She didn't need me.

Motherfucker.

No.

Not me.

*Never!*

She lurched up, locked her good arm around my neck with sudden impossible strength, and sank fangs into my throat as if I didn't have thick, impervious dragon hide. Those fangs burned like white-hot knives in my flesh. Too deep for Aima fangs.

*Too deep. She's in me too deep.*

Her blood blazed in the darkest, deepest depths like crystal cold moonlight.

Looping.

Locked.

Around my neck.

A bond that nothing could break.

No fire would melt these chains. No darkness would squelch her light. Not fueled by a blood bond. I couldn't even kill her now. Her power sheared through my mind, slicing and dicing my plans and thoughts effortlessly. She pressed too closely to me now. Inside and out. I couldn't rip her free. I couldn't tear her limb from limb.

She. Refused. To allow it.

She. Controlled. Me.

When all else fails, dragons fly.

I tore up the tunnel. Claws scrambling frantically. Wings tight to my body. I needed to fly. I need to soar free. Of this prison. This queen. This nightmare existence. But I'd failed so many times. Queens had bled and died trying to conquer me. To free me.

This queen bled. But with her fangs still anchored in my hide, she fed on my ancient, powerful blood. The strongest queen I'd ever seen—growing stronger with every passing second.

The veil shimmered ahead. Freedom—from this prison. Only to be enslaved to this queen. For the first time ever in my very long imprisonment, I wanted to fail.

Her bond severed through my mind. *:I will not fail you.:*



Shara takes Mehen as her Blood in [Queen Takes King](#).

**QUEEN TAKES... NEVARRE  
MORRIGAN**



Song: Bring Me to Life by Evanescence



# NEVARRE

Warriors of the Morrigan's bloodline weren't used to the bitter taste of failure.

I sat on a rocky outcrop, staring out at the choppy waters of the firth, not sure why I was here. Let alone still alive.

My heart was a dull, empty hole in my chest. When I remembered all that I'd lost, it didn't even hurt any longer, which was a blessing I didn't deserve. I watched as fishing boats moved out into the deeper waters with the dawn. I envied their hustle and purpose, setting out like generations of fishermen before to provide for their families.

Ah. The region of my heart wasn't entirely dead after all. A pang of loss rippled through me.

*My family's gone. Our legacy, destroyed.*

"Are you thirsty?" A woman asked.

Startled, I whirled around, looking down into a crack among the rocks. So deep in my heartache, I hadn't heard her approach. *Some Blood I am...*

I closed my eyes, a sharp breath cutting through my lungs. *I'm Blood no more. There's no queen. No nest. No magic.*

She laughed softly. "I didn't mean to startle you. You look weary. A drink from this spring may heal what ails you."

No mere mortal water would ever heal me but I didn't have to be rude to this human. She meant well, despite not knowing what I was. Or at least what I used to be. I had a

difficult time estimating a mortal's age—they died so quickly—but she couldn't be more than thirty years old. A blink of an eye. Her red hair was long enough that she'd wrapped the braids around her head in an intricate design. She wore simple loose pants and a linen shirt. Worker's clothes. Though I caught the flash and glitter of beads and charms around her neck and wrists.

I climbed down from the upper rocks to where she squatted, filling up a leather flask. "It's probably contaminated by the sea."

Shaking her head, she smiled. "Even when the tide rolls in, the spring is strong enough that I've seen cattle drinking from it. The locals believe it'll heal cholera and other illnesses."

I filled my cupped palms from the cold pool and splashed my face, washing away some of the grime of old tears, smoke, and dirt. Then I wiped my face with the hem of my plaid and accepted a battered tin cup of water she offered.

"Drink," she encouraged. "It's best from the source."

Sighing, I took a long drink of water and offered the cup back to her. "Thank you, miss."

"Not miss, just Brigid." She waved her hand in a "go on with you" gesture to finish the cup. "I've got some porridge on the stove at home. By the looks of you, you could use a good meal."

I didn't intend to fuel this body any longer. I had no queen who needed my blood ripe and pumping. What did it matter if I lost a few stone?

No queen would ever want a broken Blood from a dishonored and destroyed house.

"Not true, son of Morrigan."

I recoiled a step, my hand immediately reaching over my shoulder to the sword strapped on my back.

The seemingly ordinary mortal woman stared at me—but beyond and through me as if I didn't stand before her. Her blue eyes soft and unfocused, her voice echoed as if she spoke from

a great distance. “Another queen will call your name. You must be ready.”

I tightened my fingers on the leather-wrapped hilt. “How do you know this? What are you, woman?”

She blinked several times and gave herself a little shake. Her face had paled enough that a sprinkling of freckles stood out on her cheeks like Gaia had brushed her with holy fingertips. Tears dripped down her cheeks.

I fell to my knees at the look of sorrow in her eyes. Sorrow for me.

“Och, the trees. You came from the grove. I’m so sorry, sir. I mourn them with you.”

I swallowed the cold lump of grief in my throat. “You know the grove? How?”

“Morrigan’s tree.” Lightly, she reached out and touched the brooch on my chest that held the plaid in place over my right shoulder. “I’m a druid. I’ll take you to my tree if you’d like. She would love to welcome you beneath her shade until your heart is eased.” She stood, holding her hand out to me. “Come, son of Morrigan. Let us soothe your soul until it’s your time to fly once more.”

Numbly, I took her hand and allowed her to lead where she chose.

After all, I had no other place to be.





# NEVARRE

**O**n my knees, my forehead pressed to rough bark, I wept for all that I had lost. The human, Brigid, witnessed my grief and shared my tears. Her small hand circled on my back while she sang a lament that wasn't words as much as tone and melody accompanied by the gentle rattle of leaves and the scrape of limbs in the breeze.

Several hundred years old, the hoary oak had sent roots deep into the earth. The filigree of roots spread like sensitive antenna through the terrain, broadcasting and receiving messages. Every tree on the isle knew what had happened to the south. Across the land, trees were dropping leaves and going dormant early. There'd be few apples this fall. It'd be a lean year for the wildlife and people alike who depended on the trees for sustenance.

Especially the flocks of ravens that had always lived in our grove.

Many innocents would suffer. My throat tightened with shame. I had failed so many lives.

"Would it help to talk about it?" Brigid asked.

Weary in my soul, I turned around and sat with my back against the tree. "My family is directly descended from the Morrigan through my mother, Queen Muirín. When I was three years old, she moved our family home from Ireland to Fortingall and tended a grove of magical trees given to us by the Battle Goddess Herself."

I paused, waiting for her incredulous questions and rightful doubts. My kind had been careful to keep our existence a secret to the humans populating the world. We moved among them when necessary—but kept ourselves apart as much as possible. Surely my claim to be a child of the Morrigan would earn Brigid’s skepticism.

Yet she didn’t look at me with doubt or concern for my mental stability. “I’ve never heard of Queen Muirín, but I’ve seen the trees, from a distance, of course. Every practicing druid in the land has probably quietly crept as closely as possible to see such a marvel. She moved here when you were only three, yet those trees are thousands of years old. How is that possible?”

One corner of my mouth twitched toward a wry grin. “I’m not so old as that but I’m definitely older than I may appear to your eyes. Though the trees have not been here that long.” I caught myself with a grimace. “Rather, they *had* not been here that long. They sprouted in a matter of hours and bore the markings of living thousands of years because they were magical.”

“Are you saying your mum was somehow able to grow a thousand-year-old tree overnight? Not just one but many? How is that possible?”

“Sacrifice,” I whispered, remembering her screams. “She gave the trees her own blood and grow they did, thousands of years in a matter of hours. She tended the grove, and in exchange, the trees protected our family.”

“How long had your family lived in Ireland then?”

I slowly shook my head. “Thousands of years. We... we live a very long time, Brigid.” I braced for her reaction. “I’m not... human.”

She threw her head back and laughed. “So I gathered, sir. No other laddies be running about claiming to be born of the Morrigan.”

“Nevarre,” I said firmly. “Not sir.”

She held out her hand. “I’m very pleased to meet you, Nevarre.”

I took her hand and bowed my head, pressing her knuckles to my forehead. “You’re an interesting lady, Brigid.”

A blush bloomed on her cheeks and she pulled her hand back, primly clasping her hands in her lap. In the face of such beauty, I couldn’t help but feel a lightness spreading through my chest. If she hadn’t happened to walk past that spring this morning...

Would I have found a way to join my mother on the other side of eternity?

“What happened to your grove?”

An avalanche shifted inside me, bulging with the surge of rage and regret boiling inside me. Most likely, she wouldn’t understand much of anything if I told her. She had no idea Aima existed, let alone what it meant to be a part of a house or court. Yet it would be a relief to tell someone the truth, even though there was nothing I could change now.

“My mother never had an heir, a daughter, who could inherit the Morrigan’s legacy. While the grove protected our family home, we were slowly dying out. When she died, there’d be no one left to tend the grove. The trees need a queen to power the magic. My blood would do them no good, though I would have given them every single drop.”

I sighed, aimlessly smoothing the plaid over my knees. “Mother decided a move was necessary to ally with another court. She pledged me to Queen Elspeth to unite our houses.”

Brigid’s eyes narrowed. “Another so-called queen I’ve not heard of before.”

“She’s reigned over her court near Edinburgh for over a thousand years and her family founded an important academy that many of my kind go to for training.”

“This is so fascinating. What kind of training? What’s the name of the academy? Would it be a name that’s familiar to me?”

If Mother was still aware in the afterlife, she was probably horrified that I was sharing so many Aima secrets. I honestly didn't care. I had nothing left to lose. "We trained to be guards in service of our queens. I doubt you would know it, but among my kind, it's known as the Academy of Blood."

"Blood," she whispered, her eyes getting that soft, distant look again. "Of course. You said sacrifice before."

"I served as Queen Elspeth's Blood, her guard, only a short while. She released me from my oath and took back her bond when we lost the grove." My lips twisted into a grimace. "I wasn't worth keeping in her court without the magic of the grove behind me."

"Were you there?" Brigid asked softly.

My eyes closed, my throat tightening. "I was in Edinburgh at my queen's court. Mother called me home as quickly as possible. The grove was under attack. But I couldn't leave without my queen's approval, and Elspeth..."

I quivered, shimmering with the tension between honor and duty, family and love. "I swore a blood oath to obey my queen's every command. Yet I couldn't obey the most important one. She never forgave me."

"What command?"

My shoulders drooped and I opened my eyes, meeting the clear blue sky shining in Brigid's gaze. "To love her as much as I loved my clan and the grove. I couldn't. I served with honor, but I couldn't love her. When she wouldn't release me to go to my mother's call..."

A low growl tore from my throat. "I hated her. She trapped me. She refused to let me leave her court, while my clan burned to the ground. When she finally released me, she took back her bond. I was free—but it was too late."

My voice cracked with emotion and my eyes burned, dry and hot with rage. Silently, Brigid handed the flask to me, and I took another long drink of the cool spring water. She was right. It'd tasted better fresh from the source, but even now it felt like a soothing balm sliding through my depleted body.

My physical strength waned after days—weeks, I’d lost count—of traveling on foot without food or water or rest. I had no queen to fuel my magic now. I wouldn’t fly as the Morrigan’s Shadow ever again.

Something plopped against my head, startling me. An acorn. Another. Directly to my skull, thudding even harder.

An image popped into my head of a limb crashing down on me next.

“Bloody hell,” I muttered, tipping my head back to glare up at the limbs stretched overhead. “Message received, loud and clear. I got it. You don’t have to crack my thick skull open.”

Brigid made a low noise. I suspected that she was laughing at me, but when I turned a suspicious look on her, she covered her mouth with her hand and cleared her throat. “Did you learn what happened to the grove? Who was to blame?”

“My mother’s consiliarius—or advisor—worked out some deal behind my mother’s back with a developer to sell the land. She wielded the full legal power of our house and even arranged for Mother to be away visiting another queen near Glastonbury Tor. She welcomed the encroachers into our lands and when the first tree fell...”

A tremor rocked through me. Crushing pain and terror. Mother’s scream echoing through our blood bond.

Brigid laid her hand over mine. “You felt it.”

“Every blow,” I whispered hoarsely. “Every splinter and crack. The lick of flames. The bitter taste of ash in my mouth. They used bulldozers to knock down thousand-year-old trees in a matter of hours. By the time Mother made it home, only one tree was left, and it’s so damaged that I don’t know that it’ll survive.”

“It will.” Power rumbled through Brigid’s voice like low thunder. “It may be damaged but it has deep roots. It will survive, and one day it will thrive again. As will you.”



# NEVARRE

Her words echoed all around me in the darkness. Everything she'd ever said to me, from simple good mornings to the deep, meaningful messages that she'd passed on from Gaia or the Morrigan. They both spoke through her, even though she was only human.

*My lovely human druid witch. How I miss you.*

*I'm dead. She's dead. Everything I've ever loved is gone.*

*Why am I still here?*

I existed in a land of nothingness. I sensed the flow of time around me but whether it was a second or a thousand years I wasn't sure. Only that I still had a purpose. I couldn't step into the next life beyond the veil. Not yet.

Even though my Brigid was gone, and the grove was but a pleasant memory of my childhood.

Phantom pain rippled through me. So much loss. I didn't know that I would ever be able to smile or laugh again. Let alone love.

I had but one hope to hold in my memory.

*"Another queen will call your name. You must be ready."*

A shell of the former mighty Morrigan warrior that I'd once been, I began to despair.

Until something tugged me through time and space. A shimmering vortex of energy sucked me down, dragging me closer, a force of nature that couldn't be denied. I flew again as

the Morrigan's raven. Wind rushed beneath my wings, coasting through waves of power.

So much power.

A shining star pulled me from the darkness back toward vibrant warmth and life.

Swooping low, I dropped to the ground into a blazing ring of blood that wiped away the black feathers of the Morrigan's gift. It should have been impossible for me to shift. I remembered dying. Brigid. Blood dripping down her forehead. The spark blowing out of her eyes. Trapped. Then nothing but the cold, empty in between.

Wreathed in flames of magic, a queen threw her head back and screamed as power flared brighter. A shining beacon that pulled me toward her, along with her other Blood.

*It doesn't make sense. I can't be Blood. I'm dead.*

The compulsion thrummed through my cold limbs. A call so strong that it had pulled me back from the land of the dead.

Dazed, it took me a few minutes to understand the situation unfolding before me. This queen was shockingly young despite her immense power. There was some discord among her Blood and alpha, and if I wasn't mistaken, she'd just laid down a fresh blood circle for her nest.

No fucking wonder she'd been able to draw me back to the mortal plane. Though I was still dead and cold. I couldn't imagine that she'd have much use for a Blood who couldn't even feed her. Though as I watched her work her way through her Blood one by one...

I was certainly willing to give her anything that she wished, though I didn't have much to offer.

“Nevarre.”

My eyes flared. She knew my name.

Jaws clenched, I fought back a wave of grief. Brigid had promised this day would come. I dropped to my knees before the queen and bowed my head. “I'm sorry, my queen. Forgive me. I'm not worthy of your service. I have no blood to offer.”



She cupped my cheek with her bleeding hand, and my stomach clenched with a vicious stab of hunger.

I hadn't tasted Aima blood in decades. Let alone a queen's.

Softly, she pressed her lips to mine and the vortex caught me again, sucking me down in a whirling spiral of power. The raven's wings beat frantically in my head, feathers raining down, shrieking raucous cries. Lost in the pull of her kiss.

For one brief moment, I hovered on the edge of a precipice, staring down into an endless maw. I could throw myself back from the edge. I could save myself.

Why, though? To go back to the empty, cold land of the dead?

Perhaps I'd existed in the nothingness long enough for this queen to call my name, simply to allow her to inherit the Morrigan's gift. She must have great need of Her shadowed wings. More than me.

I let myself fall into the vortex. *Take what you need. Take it all.*

The brief spark of life that had brought me to her side dimmed. My limbs were heavy and cold. Darkness closed. At last, I soared. Lighter than a feather, I didn't need wings now.

*Brigid.*

The bluest eyes in the world. Her blazing sunset hair braided into a complex design around her head. Freckles sprinkled by the goddess across her cheeks. She smiled, her eyes shining like brilliant jewels lit by the noonday sun. A bright green field stretched out behind her and familiar branches arched over her head. Her tree, where she'd taught me to live again.

“Your queen calls.”

Startled, I looked back over my shoulder. The dark-haired queen held my limp body across her lap. My hair spilled around her like ink. I turned back to Brigid. “I'm dead.”

“That you are.” She nodded, her lips curving to reveal dimples in her cheeks. “Though you can live again. She's

powerful enough to call you back from death itself.”

“But—” I stared at her, shaken off balance by the calm, easy joy shining in her eyes. “I thought you were waiting for me.”

“Och, love, I am waiting beneath my tree just as I promised. Though there’s no hurry to fly to me. Not when you could serve a queen again.”

Guilt shredded me, even though part of my heart leaped at the thought of serving a queen again. Let alone a queen powerful enough to resurrect a dead Blood. “I love you.”

“And I love you, Nevarre. I always will. You’ll love her too, and I’ll love her simply because she makes you smile.”

The queen tugged on an invisible thread, reminding me of her power.

I could break that thread if I truly wanted to be free. I could stay here with Brigid.

Or I could wake in this queen’s arms and embrace the power she offered. Power the likes of which I’d never known.

Standing here with Brigid with one foot beyond the veil, I knew that I would love this queen. I would love her as much as Brigid, the woman who’d taken me in at my lowest hour and taught me how to live again. The queen’s heart blazed with certainty. She would only take Blood that she loved.

And she would love me. A love so strong that she could call me back from the grave and the other woman I loved.

Which felt wrong. A betrayal of all the love Brigid had given to me.

She laughed, her eyes shining even brighter like twin blue flames. “Pure love is never a betrayal. Go, son of Morrigan. Spread your wings and soar. I’ll still be here waiting for you.”

I stretched out my hand toward Brigid, intending to touch her one last time. But she was further away, slipping between my fingers like wisps of smoke. “I’ll meet you here again.”

The queen smeared her blood on my lips, sparking a fiery thirst that couldn't be denied. "Fly back to me, Nevarre. Your queen has need of you."



Shara takes Nevarre as her Blood in Queen Takes King.

# QUEEN TAKES... EZRA URSULA



Song: idfc by blackbear



# EZRA

I rapped on the door so hard the entire wall shook. Again. But Daire didn't fucking answer.

I was too late. He'd already left.

My shoulders slumped and I gripped a handful of my beard, tugging while I tried to think through my options. Surely he hadn't already left the tower. He wouldn't leave without saying goodbye to me.

Would he?

It wasn't the first time he'd left the Skye nest with Alrik but this time felt... final. Every bone in my body insisted that I needed to see him.

One last time.

I knocked again, fighting back the urge to tear the fucking door down. Evidently he had no problem whatsoever leaving without a single word. My eyes burned, my chest so tight I couldn't breathe. He was fucking gone. The only one of House Skye's bunch who'd ever stooped enough to feed the outsider with a mean attitude.

The only one I'd ever cared about in this entire fucking world.

Now I was alone in this hellhole.

"There you are."

I jerked my head around, relief surging through me so hard that my heart tried to explode out of my chest. Daire strolled

up and casually leaned against the wall, one hip cocked, eyes plotting mischief. With a sassy smile curving his lips, he tossed his head, throwing a long fall of tawny hair back over his shoulder. Baring the long, strong column of his throat. A deliberate taunt to make my mouth water.

My fucking dick ached like the big man beside him had stomped me in the groin. I didn't know Alrik too well. I didn't get along with alphas in general, let alone the one who'd claimed Daire's full attention so effortlessly.

I couldn't fucking blame either of them. Daire was one tasty snack, and he needed serious protection, especially since he'd come to foster with House Skye. An alpha like Rik could protect him far better than a nobody like me.

Though my gruff heart couldn't quite comprehend the fact that Daire loved the big guy as much—if not more—than me. Especially when he was leaving the tower with him, perhaps never to return.

I felt like the biggest motherfucking fool in the world standing here with eyes burning, already missing Daire, and he didn't even have a fucking clue.

Rik gave me a cursory nod and walked on past. "I'll be waiting in the garage."

"He's in a hurry to leave," Daire said in a low voice. "He's afraid the queen might change her mind before we can leave the nest."

"Yeah. Good plan." I stared at him, trying to think of something else to say that didn't sound pitiful. "Be careful."

"We will. He's got a plan."

"Of fucking course he does." Bitterness laced my words, a sharp acidic taste on my tongue. "Does his fucking plan include who's going to feed me once you're gone?"

I didn't care about that. Not really.

I only cared that he'd be gone. He wouldn't be here to stay the occasional night with me when Rik was busy. Fucking sucked being his second choice. Taking his leftovers.

Starving for more.

Daire stepped closer, laying his hand on my arm. “I’m sorry, I didn’t even think of it. I should have come by last night.” He tipped his head to the side, leaning closer. “I’m glad to feed you now, Ezra. Take what you need to tide you over until we’re back.”

“You’re not fucking coming back here. Ever.” The words came out rougher than I intended, vibrating with intensity.

“Sure I am. We’re only approved to be gone for a few months.”

“That’s not what I meant.” I raked a hand through his long, silky hair, giving him a firm enough tug that his eyes smoldered. “Don’t fucking come back. Get out while you can.”

He cast a quick look around, searching for eavesdroppers who might take this conversation to the queen. “If all goes well, we won’t.”

I clenched my jaws and gave him a stiff nod. “Damned straight. He’ll take good care of you.”

Daire stepped closer, draping himself against me up and personal. “So you should feed.”

The little fucker started to purr, a deep rumble from his belly that made me yearn to crush him beneath me. My mouth watered but I shook my head. “A quick taste isn’t worth my fucking time.”

“You could join us later, you know. If we’re successful.”

“Humph. As if Rik would let me tag along.”

“He would, if you bent that stubborn neck a little and did what he said.”

I let out a wry chuckle and hooked my arm around his shoulders, pulling him in for a full bear hug. Closing my eyes, I breathed in his scent. Silky fur and wild cat. Purring and cuddling—with razor sharp fangs and claws to shred my heart into bits. “You know I can’t obey anybody, let alone him. If I hear anything, I’ll let you know.”



He bumped his head against me, rubbing his temples against my throat as if he could mark me. Or maybe he just wanted a bit of my scent on him. Surely wishful thinking on my part. “You be safe. Stay low and out of trouble for once.”

Releasing me, he headed down the hallway, his step picking up with eagerness. Ready to go on his adventure. Ready to ride with his alpha.

He didn't look back at me once.

I know. Because I watched his back disappear out the door.



## EZRA

For months, I kept my ear to the ground like I'd always done, though I wasn't sure what good it would do. I didn't have anyone I could pass along the tidbits of gossip that I picked up here and there. Even when I did call Daire to warn him that I'd overheard the queen telling her alpha, Vega, to start calling the smaller groups back to New York City, he didn't call me back.

In fact, the little fucker turned his phone off completely.

I couldn't fucking blame him. If I'd gotten away from Skye Tower, I sure as fuck wouldn't pick up a phone call from someone still inside.

I had to assume that meant they'd been successful. He'd only fed from me one sweet time, no matter how many times I offered, so he didn't carry much of my blood. The bond was weak enough that I couldn't access his mind directly. Whether it was Alrik—or a new queen—shielding him, I couldn't tell. If they'd found a queen, I hoped to goddess she was strong enough to stand up against Keisha Skye.

Because the queen of New York City was losing her fucking mind.

Sitting in the shadows cast by the hundred-plus-story skyscraper ran by House Skye, I didn't even have to strain to hear her voice.

"I don't know who the fuck she thinks she is." The way her voice floated back and forth made me think she was pacing

on her private balcony a few stories overhead. “How dare she kill one of my Blood!”

My heart skipped a beat. I immediately felt for Daire’s bond. Granted, he wasn’t Skye Blood, but I had to be sure. I could feel his thread curled up inside me like a sleeping kitten, stretched and thin but still there. My shoulders sagged with relief. *He’s still alive.*

“Shara Isador,” Keisha spat out the queen’s name.

Daire’s queen name resonated through me like a church bell on a clear, crisp winter morning. Sounded like fucking trouble to me.

“What do we know about House Isador?” Vega asked. “I’ve never heard of her.”

“Her mother dissolved her nest and left her Blood for a human.” I could hear the sneer of disdain in Keisha’s voice. “No one knew she had an heir. Though how a half-human queen could be so...” She let out a rough growl. “Leave. I need to make a few calls.”

How a half-human queen could be so... *strong?*

“My queen.” Vega sounded fucking relieved to escape unscathed.

My skin itched. A furious, desperate queen was a serious threat. Let alone one with a streak of evil that was a fucking mile wide. Keisha Skye had a taste for torture. She especially loved to torture alpha males—because they lived so fucking long. I fucking hated that Daire had become so engrossed in Rik rather than me, but I wouldn’t wish that fate on anyone.

“Get Devana on the phone,” Keisha said, likely to her consiliarius, though I couldn’t hear her response over the pounding of rushing blood in my ears.

Both Daire and I came from House Devana. Why would Keisha want to talk to our former queen?

Their voices softened and I couldn’t make out their words. *Stay fucking outside. I need to know what you’re fucking saying to my queen!*

“Christabel.” Keisha’s voice rang out clearly. “Thank you for taking my call.”

Relief surged through me and I breathed a little easier. Skye was still on the balcony. Though we were in fucking New York City, and evidently there was a five-alarm fire somewhere nearby because every fire engine in the city converged down the block. I stood up, pressing my back against the building, straining to my full height. Ear tipped up, pulling on my senses.

The wildness of the forest. A predator stalking his prey. Block out the sound of sirens. Focus on the softer notes of the queen’s voice.

“What are they worth to you?” Keisha asked, her voice almost sweet.

They who? I’d give my left arm to hear my former queen’s reply.

“They’ve fostered here for decades. The young cub is especially amiable and has learned everything you hoped he would in my court.”

Fostered. Cub.

The bitch was talking about Daire. They—so she included me too. Not that I fucking cared.

Christabel Devana wouldn’t fucking care about what happened to me. I was a nobody from a minor sib house. I wasn’t even offended, not really. The last thing I wanted was to be forced to serve some snooty high-level queen. Bowing and scraping went against every grumpy bone in my body.

Everybody fucking loved Daire, and he had a talent for making friends and keeping track of the “Who’s Who” of the Aima courts. Which queens were sibs to other queens, which ones had ties to Triune queens. All of it was Greek to me.

But to a queen who had a thirst for ambition and her eye on the empty Triune seat...

He was worth his weight in blood.

Keisha Skye made it no secret that she intended to win the Triune seat between the queen of Rome and the mysterious Dauphine. This new half-human queen that Daire had found didn't stand a fucking chance against them.

Fucking hell. I was a fool. A fucking, useless fool.

“It's simple, really.” The dulcet tone of Keisha Skye's voice made my blood run cold. “Support my bid for the Triune, and your fosters remain safe and sound in House Skye. Otherwise, I regret to inform you that your silly young cubs might have made a mistake that put them in harm's way.”

I was already moving. Running. Which for me, was quite the fucking feat. Bulky men my size don't run for fun. I didn't even go back up to my shitty cubbyhole room to pack a bag. I didn't have anything I cared about.

Except Daire.

*I have to get to him. Warn him.*

*He can't ever fucking come back where Keisha Skye can touch him.*



## EZRA

Fuck me sideways. This fucking hike into the middle of fucking nowhere had better be fucking worth it. I hated New York City, but at least there was public transportation. Here in Bumfuck Arkansas it was hitchhike, walk, or steal some wheels. All of which I did to reach Daire, until I couldn't stay on a road.

*He's close.*

I felt him a mile or two away. Little fucker still wouldn't answer me, even though I kept thumping on his bond, demanding he listen to me.

At fucking last, I crept out of the ring of trees around what I assumed to be the new half-human queen's nest.

*She's fucking waiting for me.*

Jerking to a halt, I stared back at the little group, fighting not to let my gaze lock onto Daire and fuck everyone else. The queen sat on the back of a warhorse while a cat almost as big wound around the horse's legs. Alrik had always been a big alpha but fuck me, he was the size of a fucking mountain now. The queen's blood had jacked him up to giant status.

There wasn't a single doubt in my mind the cat was Daire. He'd always had a sassy, purring personality, just like I hoped I'd be a grizzly. If I ever...

*If I ever swear to become a queen's Blood. Of fucking course.*



Stunned, I stood there a moment while the idea exploded in my mind like a nuclear detonation. Daire and Alrik had found a way out of House Skye.

*And there's no fucking reason I can't take the same fucking route.*

All I had to do was swear to this queen, who'd deliberately made her fucking nest in the middle of nowhere. That didn't seem like something a hoity-toity queen would do.

I'd be close to Daire all the time. I'd see him anytime I wanted. I'd know he was alright. That's all I really wanted in the end. And if Keisha Skye was fucking worried about this queen's strength, then hell yeah. Sign me the fuck up. I'd make her even stronger.

*If she's willing to take me.*

I straightened my shoulders and put a fucking lock on my tongue. "Your Majesty, I'm—"

"Ezra Skye," she broke in before I could go through the formalities. "Let's skip to the threats, yes?"

*I fucking hate Skye,* I snarled in my mind, trying my best to keep my face smooth. The smell of her blood was on the air, thick and sweet, a taunt I hadn't expected. "I prefer Ezra Ursula Devana because Skye did me no favors. You've only got three Blood. Want another?"

Idiot. Too fast. Too rough. I clenched my jaws, fighting down the surge of cursing that wanted to bubble out of my mouth. Even Daire bristled and he fucking knew me. The real me.

*Fucking hell. This'll never work. I can't pretend to be something I'm not for long.*

"Sure," the queen nodded. "But not you."

Huh. I honestly didn't expect her to reject me so quickly, especially when I was actually fucking trying to be civilized. "Why's that?"

"You carry Keisha Skye's blood."

“So do they,” I retorted, jerking my head in Daire’s direction. “The cat can vouch for me.

Daire fucking hissed and turned his back on me.

“You little fucker,” I growled. “I need help. You’d turn your back on family?”

*:You’re in danger, you idiot!:* I roared through our bond, but I wasn’t sure that he heard me. He didn’t acknowledge our former connection at all.

And that fucking wrecked me. Not that I’d ever allow him to know.

“What help are you asking for?” She asked.

“You don’t know?” Some fucking queen if she didn’t understand how Aima courts worked. Not that I was much better, but at least I knew that a sib from one house wouldn’t reach out to another queen and offer himself as Blood without his queen’s permission. Not without a damned good reason.

The trees rustled but there wasn’t any hint of wind. I lifted my head, opening my ears, listening for anything amiss. I tried scenting the air but the queen’s blood was too overwhelming. Fuck me but she smelled fucking delicious. Why the fuck was she bleeding so much?

“No, I guess I don’t,” she replied.

“Skye.” I barely bit back the urge to hack a loogie on the ground. “She’s trying to force Devana to support her bid for the Triune, by using me, and indirectly Daire, as hostages.”

Daire’s tail stiffened, fur prickling down his long, gangly spine. He got it. Hopefully he could explain court politics shit to his queen.

But I couldn’t fucking think. Not with her so close. The blood circle shimmered in front of me, mocking me. Forcing me to keep my distance. Would she be more willing to consider me if I went to my knees? Nah. She didn’t fucking know me enough to realize I didn’t do that shit willingly.

But I would for her.

As good as she smelled...

I'd fucking beg on my belly and lick her blood from the ground. From the horse's hooves and legs if need be.

Shit. She'd dripped blood all down her other Blood's side, and she swayed, leaning on Rik's massive shoulder to keep upright.

"I'm too late," I let out a disgusted grunt. Should've ran my ass up that last mountain rather than trudge along sweating and huffing. "She already hurt you."

"You came to warn me?"

I nodded, but my conscience insisted I add, "And Daire." He was the real reason I'd come, but if I kept his queen alive, then hopefully she'd protect him as well. "He ought to know."

"You want me to believe that Keisha Skye didn't send you."

"Nope."

Rik let out a rumble that sounded like a crashing avalanche. "Don't ever fucking lie to her, Ezra. Your queen could command you back to New York City with a thought."

I couldn't help but laugh at that one. "You think so? First of all, she's stretched too far to use one drop of her blood to force me to do anything against my will. I've always been strong in that regard. Second of all, she's got bigger fish to fry than an obstinate, unruly sib with the penchant for roaming. Besides, few in her court would ever feed me. I've probably got less of her sib blood in me than those two."

She blew out a weary sigh that wrung my crusty, cold heart. "Did you ever feed from Keisha Skye directly?"

"Fuck, no. The males who feed from her throat die quickly. You know the truth of that better than anyone, Rik."

He narrowed a hard gaze on me, somehow pumping himself up even bigger. "Things are different in the Isador court."

"I should goddamn hope so."

Growling, he lowered his head and turned on full alpha glare. “You won’t be leaving this nest on a whim and wandering around the countryside causing problems.”

“Who says so?” I couldn’t help but smart back, though his words made my chest ache with hope. He wouldn’t be trying to boss me around if she really didn’t want me as Blood.

“Me.”

He stared at me levelly. Other than his size and stare, he didn’t pull any other alpha shit on me. He didn’t attack. A lot of alphas would’ve ripped my fucking head off as soon as I gave one out-of-pocket response. I had to consider Daire too. He loved the shit out of this fucking alpha. That counted more than anything else.

She gasped in pain and our staring contest abruptly ended. Rik tore open his wrist and pressed the wound to her mouth, but a terrible feeling gouged me straight in the gut. They’d been fighting some serious shit already. Enough that she was still bleeding, weak, and in pain. I knew him well enough to know he would have already fed her. Daire too.

Yet it wasn’t enough.

Plus the fucking trees were weirding me out. The branches rubbed together, whispering something that I could almost understand. Danger. Some bad shit was heading here. Not tomorrow. Now.

Her name echoed through my head like a gong. Shara Isador fucking needed me.

*And I’m fucking locked outside this goddamned nest.*

Letting out a roar, I pressed against the blood circle, pounding my fists against it even though I knew there was nothing I could do to get inside. “Let me in! Daire, you little bastard! Get that furry ass over here and bring me through! She needs me!”

Finally he sauntered over and clamped his jaws down on my fucking arm. I didn’t bitch one word because he took me straight to her.

Well, to her alpha. Rik stared at me evenly, fierce eyes glowing like a forge. He didn't need to threaten me with words. I got it. If I ever failed her, he'd crack me in half over his thigh and toss me aside like a fucking piece of garbage.

He was alpha enough to do it.

Because she was fucking queen enough to power him.

Long live the fucking queen.



Shara Isador takes Ezra as Blood in [Queen Takes Queen](#).

# QUEEN TAKES... ITZTLI & TLACEL ZANIYAH



Songs: Villain by MISSIO and How We Do It by Royal  
Deluxe



# TLACEL

The ancient ruin of Teotihuacan appeared to be empty to the humans living nearby. Standing at the head of the Avenue of the Dead, I could feel something evil waiting in the shadows. The compulsion to leave was strong. A warning of impending doom. For them. Not for us.

The twin sons of Citla Zaniyah had come for vengeance.

We demanded answers. We demanded the truth. And then, we demanded blood.

I fought to keep my rage buried. My brother needed me to be his steady rock. At my shoulder, he quivered with barely leashed fury. If I succumbed to the same emotion, we'd end up killing the people who might be able to give us the answers we sought. Minimally, we had to gain access to the nest before the killing started.

*:Remember the plan,:* I whispered to him through our sibling bond.

*:Fuck the plan. Don't you feel it?:* Something snarled and howled in his bond, a rabid animal gnawing its own leg off to escape the trap. *:Evil lives here.:*

Not only had our beautiful mother suffered at its hands... but we'd been spawned here. We carried the same evil.

A vicious blade of darkness twisted in my gut, welcoming us home.

My brother had always thought he was cursed, but my darkness was more subtle. Where he was a howling, furious



beast—I was poisoned water and a storm of destruction. Pressure built inside me. Lightning crackled in my blood. My heart thundered like a vicious storm. Yet the power we both carried couldn't be released.

Not without a queen's blood.

If a queen still held court here...

Our plan was simple. Find her. Give ourselves to her as Blood.

And then kill her, whatever it took.

*:Once she takes me, she's dead,: Itztli growled. :Now I'm grateful for the monster that lives inside me, for I can't wait to unleash this darkness upon her entire House.:*

Neither of us expected to return to Valle de Zaniyah, but Mama might find some peace if the queen who hurt her was gone from this earth.

Stepping in unison without conscious thought, we walked down the main stone avenue into the city. Teotihuacan had been a ruin long before the Spaniards sacked Tenochtitlan, but time had not diminished the much older city's grandeur. Pyramids rose like mountains. Abandoned apartments, palaces, and plazas lined the avenue as far as I could see.

Once, over one hundred thousand people had lived and prospered here under the rule of House Tocatl. Though when Queen Oxomo died, her heirs fought over who should rule Teotihuacan. Some of her daughters traveled south and set up new nests deep in the jungles, but the once-great city never recovered from the turmoil. Later, humans would blame the city's fall on a terrible winter brought on by volcanic activity, warfare, or failing crops and famine.

The truth was nothing they could understand. A vampire queen's entire house went to war against themselves. Because her four daughters weren't happy sharing the immense power they inherited from their queen mother's legacy founded in blood, which included thousands of human sacrifices.

Even now, every stone in this place pulsed with blood magic and the heavy darkness of pain.

*:The same legacy that lives in me,:* Itztli whispered.  
*:Darkness, suffering, and death. Now I know where it comes from.:*

It was hard to imagine Grandmama willingly sending her daughter to this place. Though weakened greatly after those initial wars for supremacy, House Tocatl had still been prominent enough that an offer to foster with Queen Theresa had been an honor. Mama went hoping to step fully into her power and come home with her first Blood.

Instead, she came home so damaged that she was no longer capable of talking or basic tasks. She couldn't tell Grandmama what happened. Let alone who our fathers were. The only words she ever said to either of us were, "black sun, red spiral," over and over again.

We might be twins, but it was clear that Itztli and I had different fathers, both in appearance and temperament. His eyes and complexion were darker, his body thicker and more muscular. A fine warrior, his skills with the macuahuitl and atlatl were unmatched. He could sniff out his quarry, whether thrall or deer, from kilometers away. There was no doubt in my mind that he'd be a formidable alpha once he swore to a queen.

In comparison, I was no great warrior. With my lithe, slender body, I was light and fast on my feet, but I couldn't match his physical strength. He was fire and war. I was water and harmony. Unless I could release the poisoned hurricane brewing inside me.

"Justice for Mama," Itztli ground out, his voice so rough that his words were garbled. "But don't let me slaughter innocents."

"I promise." I didn't ask how I would stop him. *I will find a way.*



ITZTLI

AS A YOUNG AIMA WARRIOR STEPPING INTO MY PRIME, I yearned to know where I came from. Walking up the Avenue of the Dead, I had my answer.

The same vicious thirst for pain and blood that burned in me also echoed through this vast ruin. I'd given up feeding even from my family unless I had no other choice for fear the darkness would rise up in me and destroy everyone I loved. I'd rather weaken to a withered husk and blow away like dust on the winds of time than ever hurt my twin or Grandmama. She had enough worries in her life, caring for our mother.

*I will find who hurt you, Mama, and they will rue the day they created this monster.*

Our footsteps echoed through the empty walls and buildings. Nothing stirred, not even a stray dog or a bird in the sky. We'd come at dusk, hoping to avoid curious human eyes. I tipped my head back slightly and cracked my lips, letting the air flow through my nose and mouth so I could smell our quarry. Somewhere in this ancient city, the remnants of an equally ancient Aima House knew what had happened to Citla Zaniyah. *Goddess, let me learn the truth before I kill them all.*

The smell of death and sacrifice were so thick that I couldn't pick up any other scent trace. Blood upon blood upon blood for centuries. So much death. I couldn't wait to splash the rocks with a fresh offering.

*:Where are they?:* Tlcel whispered in our bond. *:Do you feel any hint of a blood circle?:*

*:Not yet. I'd hazard to guess they set up court in the largest structure, the Pyramid of the Sun.:* Though as we passed the man-made mountain on our right, I didn't sense any hint of people, whether Aima or human.

*:There's a cave beneath the pyramid,:* Tlcel said. *:I sense water but no people.:*

As we neared the end of the Avenue of the Dead, it widened into a paved plaza surrounded by low, pyramidal walls. The Pyramid of the Moon was symbolically positioned directly in front of Cerro Gordo. I could only imagine how

many people had once gathered here to watch a ballgame. Or, more likely, to witness the river of blood from many sacrifices to flow down the steps of the pyramid, just like they believed rivers of life flowed down from the looming mountain in the background.

Our house descended from Coatlicue, the Mother of the Gods, and Her holy mountain was called Coatepec—or Snake Mountain—but we otherwise shared many of the same beliefs. The people of Teotihuacan had venerated a goddess whose name had been lost on the winds of time, though the whispers of Her legacy remained. Little was known about the Great Goddess of Teotihuacan. Even Grandmama hadn't been able to tell us more, other than to beware the spiders. Mama still feared even the most innocuous garden weaver to this day.

Pausing at the base of the pyramid's steps, we bowed our heads to honor Her.

“Great Goddess, please hear our plea,” Tlancel said in a soft, sing-song voice that echoed off the stone walls as he unsheathed his knife. “Your sons have returned home. Please accept this small sacrifice.”

I didn't open my eyes but smelled his blood on the air. Razors sliced through my stomach. I was used to the hunger. I only risked feeding if I needed serious healing, and luckily, our House had enjoyed peace ever since Grandmama had moved the nest to Valle de Zaniyah. Hopefully the scent of fresh blood would draw out any Aima in the city. Especially a hungry queen.

Though perhaps she had plenty of Blood to serve her. We wouldn't know until she revealed herself.

The faintest scrape of material against stone warned me of someone's approach. Not human, I was sure of it, though I couldn't feel their power to assess their strength. *:I sense one, likely Blood, not the queen.:*

Tlancel moved beside me, his arm cutting through the air as he slung his blood across the stairs. *:Let's pretend we don't know they're watching.:*

As one, we turned back the way we'd come. We'd barely walked three steps before the watcher called after us. "Why didn't you both offer sacrifice?"

The deep and velvety male voice rumbled with power, though he made no move to strike. Since he spoke about me, I paused, turning my head back over my shoulder. "When I bleed, it creates a vicious hunger that can't be quenched. It's best not to wake that beast unless I have enemies to slaughter."

Truth, and a veiled threat.

Dressed in the simple trousers and tunic of a worker, the man laughed. "That sounds familiar. You must be one of *his*."

I wasn't sure what he meant but I took it to be an insult. I bristled enough that Tlancel stepped in front of me, drawing the man's attention to him instead. "We're from House Zaniyah. We come in search of Queen Theresa of House Tocatl."

"Twins," the man said slowly, shaking his head. Though I wasn't sure how he knew. "Which one do you belong to, I wonder? What's your power, lad?"

Straightening his shoulders, head high, Tlancel replied, "We haven't sworn to a queen, so we have no idea what form our powers will take."

The man guffawed, shaking his head. "Well, this should be interesting. Come along, lads. Let's see which one will claim you. House Zaniyah, you say? We haven't had any young queens in decades."

It was all I could do to refrain from seizing the man by the throat and demanding answers. My temper screeched and howled like a clawing, fevered, rabid beast. Biting back a retort, I silently followed my brother like a shadow, allowing him to do the talking as we'd agreed.

"We're only thirty-one years old," Tlancel said in an even, amiable voice. "We would have come sooner, but Grandmama refused to tell us where we were sired until Mama passed away."

A small white lie. Mama was still very much alive, though I'd hardly call her day-to-day routine living. She mostly lay in

bed or outside on a blanket on nice days. Grandmama tended to her every need.

“Fine, young, strapping lads,” the man nodded approvingly. “Her Majesty might like you very much indeed. I’m Seti, by the way.”

“I’m Tlacel, and this is my brother, Itztli. Forgive our ignorance but we know very little about House Tocatl. Is this a large court?”

Seti grunted. “No, there’s just a handful of us. Her Majesty prefers to remain hidden, even among our own kind. If you hadn’t offered blood to honor her, then I wouldn’t have revealed myself.”

I clenched my jaw, fighting back another urge to say something harsh. Tlacel hadn’t offered the *queen* his blood. He meant to honor her goddess—and prepare the way for our full sacrifice. No goddess would look kindly on the elimination of Her heir, even one who allowed other vulnerable queens to be hurt and damaged.

We had no intention of leaving Teotihuacan alive.



# TLACEL

**S**eti led us across the courtyard to a complex southwest of the Pyramid of the Moon. As we walked up the short flight of stairs, my skin prickled like I'd rolled in a fire ant hill. White columns marked the entrance to what had once been a grand palace. Another man waited just inside the roofed entrance, dressed in the same unassuming clothing.

In contrast, we'd worn our very best traditional Mexica attire of hand-dyed leathers with colorful beads, shells, and feathers. They had to be Blood, likely very old and powerful. I didn't understand why they didn't celebrate our heritage but chose to dress like colonizers. Perhaps they simply wanted to blend in, hiding in plain sight in case humans wandered into the city. Though with the building sense of dread squeezing my heart, I couldn't imagine a human risking coming so deep into the ruin.

With each step up toward the columns, the sense of foreboding increased, making it nearly impossible to move my body forward. I couldn't draw a deep breath, nor focus enough to touch Itztli's bond to see how he fared. My nerves burned and muscles twitched, making my movements stiffer. My fingers twitched, itching with the urge to lay my hand on a weapon. Though I suspected the two Blood would cut me down in a heartbeat if I reached for even a knife on my hip.

*Danger. Leave. Turn back now.*

The compulsion buzzed in my veins. No wonder House Tocatl had been able to remain hidden and safe here.



Itztli ground his jaws together so hard I could hear his teeth clanking. Sweat beaded my forehead, my stomach a hard, cold pit of iron. It took all my will to take that last step onto the veranda. Immediately, the weight of dread dissipated, leaving me staggering to catch my step.

Seti chuckled, giving the waiting man a wink. “Very good, lads. That’s the hardest part. This is Tecuani, alpha of House Tocatl.”

My eyes flared and I barely avoided letting a sound of surprise escape. Alpha? He was barely as big as me, let alone Itztli. He didn’t radiate strength and dominance, and other than giving him the title, Seti didn’t show any deference to the man. Granted, I’d never been to a nest outside of my own, and Zaniyah had always been more of an extended family than a political court, but nothing made sense here.

To be safe, I bowed to the man, hand over my heart. “Alpha, this is my brother, Itztli, and I am Tlancel of House Zaniyah.”

Without a word, the man turned and walked away. Maybe to report to his queen? But why not use his Blood bond? Or maybe he just didn’t care.

Seti patted my shoulder like we’d been friends my entire life. “Not to worry, lad. Not just anyone gets into Tocatl nowadays. What was your mother’s name?”

“Citla Zaniyah. She fostered here thirty-two years ago.”

“From Tenochtitlan?”

“Yes, though Grandmama moved our court to the countryside outside the city shortly before its fall.”

Throwing his head back, Seti laughed as if I’d told him a joke. “We’re practically neighbors, lad. I had no idea anyone from Tenochtitlan had survived. Your Grandmama must be one hell of a woman.”

“Tocih Zaniyah, daughter of Coatlique, is one hell of a fucking queen,” Itztli growled.

Seti laughed again, shaking his head. “I mean no offense, lad. She wouldn’t make the trek with you to meet her neighbors?”

Wide-eyed, I cast a quick glance at Itztli. *:Why would they want her to come along too? So they could form an alliance?:*

*:Or, more likely, kill her and destroy our entire house.:*

I was spared from having to provide a response by Tecuani’s curt, “Bring them.”

Seti stepped aside and swept his hand toward the alpha. “Welcome to House Tocatl.”

I hesitated, trying to decide if this was a test. I didn’t want to insult their hospitality. I hadn’t been to any other queens’ nests in my short life, but the queen’s blood circle would keep anyone not of her blood outside the nest. Had Mama fed from the queen’s own throat when she was here? I wasn’t sure that would be enough to gain us entry without a physical touch from one of the Tocatl Blood.

Itztli brushed past my shoulder and strode after the alpha with easy confidence. He didn’t strike any barrier. *:I don’t feel the tingle of magic either.:*

I followed him, still braced to feel the slap of angry blood magic but nothing happened. Seti winked at me and leaned closer to whisper, “The blood circle is tied to the stairs. That’s why it was so hard to cross on your own. But it verifies you are who you say you are.”

I couldn’t imagine how much blood the queen must have laid down over the centuries to cover all of those stairs. Was it a true circle around the entire palace? “That’s truly astounding. I didn’t know that was possible. Your queen must be very powerful.”

He shrugged. “The blood circle was laid long before she was born. She simply had to tie her own blood to her ancestors’ circle.”

Still no minor feat. I also couldn’t help but notice he didn’t confirm or deny that his queen was extremely powerful. Though given her alpha’s diminutive size, I had to wonder.

Alphas didn't have to be the biggest Blood, but they possessed the intense strength of will to bend other powerful Aima to their will. Perhaps I was biased, but Itztli vibrated with way more intensity than Tecuani. My brother's strength of will radiated from him. He was a natural leader and a born warrior.

I'd certainly follow him anywhere. Even unto death.



## ITZTLI

*I COULD TAKE HIM. NOW. KILL THE ALPHA AND THE REST WILL follow.*

It was tempting. My fingers brushed over the hilt of the blade I wore on my hip. But I didn't unsheathe the knife. Something in my gut told me to wait. We still didn't know the truth about what had happened to Mama while she was here. I couldn't imagine that this so-called alpha had sired me or Tlcel.

Grandmama's alpha had more intimidation in his smallest toe than this fool.

*:Perhaps it's all a show,: Tlcel said in our bond. :He could be a decoy to protect the true alpha. Or maybe a formal hierarchy isn't important to them.:*

*:No true alpha would be willing to let a decoy take his place. Though I agree, something smells off.:* I just couldn't put my finger on what it was. There was a sense of wrongness about everything we'd seen and everyone we'd encountered so far. Even the blood circle had been nothing like I'd ever heard of.

I found it utterly revolting that the queen's blood magic had recognized me. I didn't want to belong to this horrible place, though I couldn't help but admire its beauty. The walls of this temple were brightly painted with jaguars, birds, and butterflies. We passed through a small entry room to a larger courtyard surrounded with more apartments. The inner courtyard was also framed by columns, though these were

thicker and covered with carvings, set off by a red-painted roof. The stones were all hand cut and varied in color and even texture, though everything fit together perfectly.

A large cast-iron pan sat over a fire, with several wooden stumps carved into seats positioned around it. Four seats, all empty except one. A brooding man sat with his legs stretched out before him, his arms crossed, his chin down on his chest. Tecuani sat beside him without a word.

“This is Itzcoatl,” Seti said as he sat on the man’s other side.

My heartbeat quickened. At least his name was close to mine, though I wasn’t sure whether Mama or Grandmama had chosen our names.

The third man lifted his head, scanned both of us, and then dropped his head with a grunt.

Seti let out a sharp-edged cackle. “We saved the best for last, lads. He’ll be along soon. He’s hunting for tonight’s entertainment.” He waved his hand at the remaining seat. “We have pulque if you’d like a drink.”

The last thing I wanted to do was cloud my thinking with alcohol. Let alone sit around a fire with these strangers, when there was a queen nearby. Who’d allowed my mother to be harmed.

I shook my head, but Tlancel took the offered seat. He waved off the cup Seti offered him. “Could you tell us more about House Tocatl?”

Seti grinned, a sly curve of his lips that set my teeth on edge. “Itzcoatl’s the storyteller. Why don’t you tell the lads about their heritage?”

The man’s upper lip curled with disdain. “These children know nothing.”

I wanted to slit the man’s throat simply for his bad attitude. My brother had more tolerance. “Sadly, you’re correct. We know very little about Teotihuacan or House Tocatl, other than the founding queen had four daughters.”

“Queen Oxomo was cursed by her success.” Itzcoatl sighed. “Some believe she nursed from the Great Goddess Herself as Her first heir, and her daughters were sired by the oldest, most powerful gods. Gods so old we don’t know their names any longer, though remnants of their power live on in Huitzilopochtli, Quetzalcoatl, Tlaloc, and Xipe Totec.”

“Our ancestors too,” Seti said. “Four gods. Four Blood. So it has been in House Tocatl since the beginning of Teotihuacan.”

Four queens, sired by the sun god, the feathered serpent god, the rain god, and the life-death-rebirth god. I had a feeling I wasn’t going to like the rest of this story. At all.

“I’m descended from the sun god,” Seti continued. “From his name, you can probably guess that Itzcoatl is descended from the feathered serpent god. Tecuani’s line is blurred. Tlaloc is a rain god, but Tecuani’s sweet personality definitely comes from a predator. Specifically, a jaguar. Evidently his ancestor had elements of both Tlaloc and Tezcatlipoca.”

The alpha grunted sourly, making Seti laugh.

Tlancel held himself very still, carefully not looking at me. He had to be fathered by either Itzcoatl or Tecuani. House Zaniyah always called jaguars, so I could see the jaguar-aspect god responding to that gift in Mama’s bloodline. He also felt like water to me. A cool, clear spring that bubbled up from the earth with joy and grace. Sometimes a sinuous river, winding and weaving as he danced, other times a deep, silent lake that could pull a man down to the depths without a sound.

I ignored the frantic, shrill screech deep inside me. The voice demanding I admit to what I am. Who must have sired me.

I wasn’t bright and warm like the sun, nor graceful and sinuous like the feathered god, nor blessed with water or storms or even a jaguar’s stealth.

Unbidden, the words I’d said to my brother just moments before reverberated through my skull like a gong.

*I am darkness, pain, and death.*

I was sired by Xipe Totec. The god who wore a flayed human skin.

*Goddess, help me.*

Seti let out another knowing chuckle. “Ah, here comes our fourth now. Behold the Night Drinker, Our Lord Flayed.”

I didn't want to look, for fear that I would see my own features staring back at me. I heard a man's heavy footsteps as he strode into the courtyard with confidence. My nose twitched, automatically cataloging scents before my brain even caught up. Rotten meat. Decaying flesh.

A human, fresh and still very much alive, weeping softly, a light, fearful step. Feminine.

My heart beat a heavy, slow beat that reverberated through my skull. Slowly, I turned my head and looked at my sire. Bare-chested, he wore only a pair of simple, loose trousers. A piece of torn leather flapped over his head and around his shoulders. Rotting, falling apart. Not leather. Skin. Human skin. The piece strained across his much wider shoulders. Thin strips dangled at his sides and beneath his arms. His victim's empty limbs flapping uselessly in the breeze.

His hand was fisted in the hair of a woman, his fingers palming her head effortlessly. She tore at his arm, crying and muttering curses at him, but he didn't even acknowledge her struggles.

No. That wasn't true at all. His eyes burned with a vicious madness that chilled my blood. He liked the pain of her nails raking his arms. He allowed it because he enjoyed it. He could have slit her throat when he saw her and slung her lifeless body over his shoulder.

He liked that he bled. Very much indeed. His eyes burned like black pits, eager for suffering and blood. No Blood with a living queen would drink a human's blood, but even a powerful queen couldn't quench all of his thirsts.

He intended to feast on the human's pain.

*And this same mad glee lives in me.*



# TLACEL

Oh, my brother. My heart wept for him. Horror leaked through his bond before he managed to lock his emotions down tightly.

Looking at this fourth Blood, he saw everything that he feared in himself come to life. A monster who lived to torture innocents.

Tension strained through me. One of the other three Blood had sired me. I wanted to know for sure before we killed them. I wanted to look into my father's eyes as his life bled away.

"We have guests, Zuma," Seti said. "A little family reunion. Meet your long lost son, Itztli Zaniyah, and his brother, Tlacel."

Zuma hacked a glob of phlegm on the pavers, glaring at my brother and then me. "I refuse to step down. I won't lose my position."

I jumped up from the seat—afraid that I'd taken his place at the fire—and backed closer to Itztli. "My apologies, Blood. I'm not familiar with your hierarchy or protocol."

Tecuani snorted. "He doesn't give a shit about protocol. None of us do. He's afraid his son will take his place at our queen's side."

"She can't have more than four Blood," Itzcoatl muttered, sparing a sharp look up at me and then his alpha. Trying to decide which one of them had fathered me. "If she doesn't kill one of us outright, we'll duel for the right to stand at her side."



That quickly, the tension straining in my shoulders eased into grim acceptance. I was no warrior. I wouldn't embarrass myself in hand-to-hand combat, not after practicing with Itztli my entire life, but I had no hope of defeating an older, more experienced warrior.

*So I need to make sure the queen kills my sire before she takes me.*

"Then let us take this issue to your queen."

"Your *issue* doesn't involve me." Zuma jerked his arm side to side, making the woman he clutched scream. "Besides, I have unfinished business." He grinned at Itztli, baring stained, jagged teeth that had been filed to points to match his fangs. "You're welcome to stay. When I'm finished with her, we can duel, if you haven't already run home with your tail tucked between your legs."

"I'll stay," Itztli said in a flat, hard voice that I didn't recognize. "I've always been curious about this side of me."

Zuma's eyes flared with surprise and he nodded, smacking his lips over those sharp teeth. "We can hunt together unless Her Majesty decides she's ready to replace me. Though you won't have near my power until you're Blood."

"I'll never be Blood." Itztli didn't look at me, but his bond shimmered like an obsidian blade. Viciously sharp and brittle—but so beautiful. *:Stay alive, brother. I'll find you once he's dead.:*

So confident and sure in his ability. A thirty-year-old fledgling Aima warrior against a centuries-old Blood descended from the most feared gods of our people. I didn't tell him to stay alive. I could feel his certainty in his bond. He refused to ever be like Zuma, and if a queen claimed him, she'd release the same darkness.

Instead, I said the only thing I could think of. The one thing we had from Mama, who'd lived to escape this place. *:Black sun. Red spiral.:*

"Are you sure about this, lad?" Seti had moved close enough to drape his arm over my shoulder, lowering his voice

to a conspiratorial whisper. “Our queen isn’t friendly to newcomers. She’ll most likely rip you limb from limb as soon as she sees you.”

Shoulders squared, I looked the other two men in the eye back and forth. “One of you fathered me. I’d like to know which before I ask my next question.”

With heavy sighs, the other two Blood pushed to their feet.

Tecuani, the alpha, jerked his head back the way we’d come. “Let’s go, then. You already gave Queen Tocatl a taste of your blood, so she’s aware of your presence. She lives beneath the Pyramid of the Moon.”

I found it interesting that he referred to her by her House name, which meant spider. In fact, I couldn’t recall any of them referring to their queen as a person or by her name. A cold, heavy pit spread in my stomach.

Something told me that I was about to learn why Mama was so terrified of spiders.



## ITZTLI

WITH ALL THE CALM ASSURANCE I COULD MUSTER, I SAT down on the nearest stump seat in a deliberate, casual sprawl. As if I had nothing more on my mind than watching an entertaining show.

Zuma tossed the human woman down on the ground at my feet. “Don’t let her run off. A chase sets my blood on fire like nothing else, and I need a new skin. There won’t be enough left of her if she runs.”

“Noted.” I bit the word off, resisting the urge to drag the woman to her feet, push her toward the exit, and unsheathe my blade. Not yet. Not until I knew exactly what he’d done to Mama.

So I could make him pay for every transgression tenfold.

Zuma pulled the tattered skin off his shoulders and tossed it on the fire. The putrid, oily smell of cooking rotten meat made my stomach heave. Some of the skin had dried onto Zuma's bald scalp. As he peeled and scratched at those patches, he revealed lesions and scabs. I wasn't sure if he was pulling off his own skin and making wounds—or if the rotten human skin had caused the sores.

“Look at her, lad. What do you think of my captive?”

Steeling myself, I looked down into the woman's terrified eyes. She sobbed, her eyes glazed with sheer terror, silently pleading for help. Painfully thin and young, she was barely more than a child. She wore a simple white linen shift, as if he'd dragged her from her bed. “I don't see how you'll get much skin from her.”

The flare of accusation in her eyes cut me to the bone.

I'd seen the same horrified condemnation in another woman's eyes the first time I'd tried to feed from someone not family. She'd been Aima, not human, yet I'd still almost killed her. *Some things can't be forgiven, no matter how much regret I carry. All I can do is eliminate this evil—and myself at the same time.*

Zuma cackled. “Aye, she's thin and small but she'll be tasty enough to get me by a night or two.”

I decided to keep asking questions—until he was offended enough to attack me. Either way, I'd gain knowledge before I died, which might help my brother stay alive. “Your queen doesn't feed you?”

He cast a quick look over his shoulder toward the pyramid outside. If I wasn't mistaken, it was a look of fear. What could make a man who wore a tattered, rotten human skin afraid? “Queen Tocatl only rarely feeds. I haven't seen her since she took me as Blood.”

My mind raced with a thousand questions. “I didn't realize Blood could exist so long without feeding from their queen.”

“Truth be told, I've never fed from her.” He unsheathed a beautifully carved obsidian blade. “She stung me. That was

enough to wake my power. Now I sustain myself.”

Stung...? Dread thickened my voice. “Tocatl. She’s a spider.” *:Beware,:* I told Tlacel. *:I don’t think the queen has a human form.:*

Zuma stepped closer, his hand snaking out to tangle in the woman’s hair. She cried out, flinching away, but she didn’t have anywhere to go, not when me before her and him at her back. “House Tocatl is thousands of years old. We were ancient before your people were planting maize on Lake Texcoco. Our power is incomprehensible even to one such as you.” He stroked the flat of his blade over the woman’s cheek. “Let alone this pitiful human. They know to avoid Teotihuacan. They’ve heard the legends. Yet they remain close enough for me to feast whenever I want.”

He pressed the pad of his thumb against the razor-sharp blade. The scent of his blood bloomed in the night air. “I find it incomprehensible that Aima now rely solely on blood to sustain them, when there are other more entertaining options.”

As much as I hated to admit it, my mouth watered. My fangs ached. I hadn’t fed in years, and his blood was ripe with power.

“So it begins.” His head fell back on a rattling sigh. “I call upon the Flayed God whose blood burns in me and my son, who bears witness to this sacrifice tonight.”

“Please,” the woman cried, twisting frantically in his grip. She tore at his side, leaving long, bleeding scratches in his flesh.

His breath caught on a soft moan of arousal.

A sound that stabbed me like a thousand vicious spears. Blood. Pain. Yes. The same need lived in me.

I hated it. I hated him. I hated myself so much my fingers locked around the hilt of my knife. I partially drew the blade before catching myself.

Zuma—my sire—stared at me with eyes that glistened like black oil in the moonlight. Pupils dilated, nostrils flaring, erection straining at the thin pants. “Pain flavors the power.

Hers. Mine. Yours. I'll feast on it all tonight, and it'll make me stronger than ever. I don't need a queen's blood to be invincible."

His arm whipped downward. The woman didn't even cry out. The blade was so sharp she didn't feel it at first. A long cut opened on her cheek, deep enough the skin gaped open and the corner of her mouth sagged. He must have cut some of the nerves or tendons.

"Better than pain," he whispered in a surprisingly tender voice, "Is the horror. The fear. The dread. These are the spices that make the pain sweeter than anything you've ever tasted in your life."

A sound tore out of her throat. The bleat of an injured lamb. The shriek of a wounded rabbit. My stomach churned, my palms clammy, my thighs trembling with the urge to leap into battle. Strike him down. Even run. Anything was better than sitting here and allowing such an atrocity to happen. *Answers. I need the truth first.*

"My mother," I whispered, my voice cracking with strain. "Did you feed on her like this?"

"Ahhhh, sweet little star. I remember her well."

Releasing the human's hair, he seized her right arm with his other hand and jerked her wrist up over her head. He dug the tip of the blade into the fleshy, underneath part of her arm just above her pit. Ever so slowly, he drew a long red bleeding line to her inner elbow. The woman's scream cut through the night just as sharply, a high-pitched keen.

"If you somehow survive this night, lad, let me teach you one thing above anything else. While you can survive on a human's pain and fear, they're far too delicate. They die too quickly. You have to hunt at least once a week to sustain your power. Even then, the need will only grow over time until you want to hunt every single day. But a queen..."

With exquisite precision, he twisted her arm in his grip and continued the cut across her forearm to her wrist. The rest of her body flailed and quivered, but he held her arm perfectly

still for his blade. “You can keep a queen alive for weeks. Maybe even months. Especially a young, ripe fledgling without any Blood of her own. A queen who has a wealth of power—that she doesn’t know how to wield yet. That power will keep her alive for a very long time.”

“Say it,” I rasped out. My stomach heaved, bile burning up my throat. I tightened my fingers on the blade. “Tell me what you did to my mother.”

Dipping his head, he licked up the cut in the woman’s arm while she thrashed against him. “Fear and horror and pain, lad. They feed our power like nothing else. I’m the Blood I am today because I fed on her suffering while my three brothers fucked her as often as they wished.”

My ribcage ached, bones popping in my back beneath the strain of holding myself still. “You raped her too.”

He laughed, a soft, velvety chuckle. “Of course, *son*. Though I waited until she was nearly dead. I like my meat well tenderized. It was all I could do not to kill her and revel in that incredible rush of power as her soul fluttered in my hand.”

I quivered on a razor’s edge of violence. “Why? Just to feed on her?”

“Not at all. Feeding on her was merely a bonus. House Tocatl needs a new queen to bring us back to our former glory. She wasn’t meant to ever leave Teotihuacan.”

My jaw ached, my teeth grinding to dust. My chest heaved, air sawing in and out of my lungs. “She wasn’t of Tocatl blood. How could she be your queen?”

Ignoring me, Zuma cut a circle around the human’s wrist and then moved to her other arm. His breathing was quicker, too, though with lust, not with the strain of containing a volcanic eruption of rage. “We hoped one of us could sire a queen on her. But if not, our queen has her ways. She isn’t just tocatl. She’s papalotl too, and I’m descended from the god of rebirth. There’s a reason I know how to take off the skin so easily.”

Papalotl. Butterfly. A symbol of transformation.

Mama had never been supposed to leave this place.

Instead, she was supposed to become the next Tocatl queen of Teotihuacan.





## TLACEL

As before, I stood at the base of the steps leading up the Pyramid of the Moon, though this time, Tecuani stood on my right and Itzcoatl on my left. My blood was still bright against the steep steps, wet and glowing like gems in the moonlight. Gazing up at the slender crescent shining in the black-velvet sky, I lifted my right fist to my heart in a silent salute.

Tecuani lifted his wrist to his mouth and tore open his skin. Itzcoatl cut his palm open on a blade. Hands down at their side, they stared straight ahead up the tiers.

“We walk as one,” Tecuani said in a flat, even voice. “Whoever reaches the altar with you is your sire. He’ll take it from there.”

They didn’t say it was necessary, but I made a fresh cut on my hand so that I was bleeding again too. Mentally, I did a quick tally of my weapons—and theirs. I hadn’t noticed a blade on the alpha. Itzcoatl wore a leather belt around his waist but only one sheath. Neither carried a larger macuahuitl. I was lighter than either of them but not significantly so. Hopefully I was faster. *I might actually have a chance if it comes to a duel, even against the alpha. Itzli prepared me well.* “I understand.”

Together, we began climbing the first steep flight of stairs. Five square tiers marked the bottom portion of the pyramid, but there were at least two additional flights of stairs above the first platform. It was hard to tell for sure how high the steps

ran into the dark. Steep and tight, the stairs were treacherous, making my thighs burn. I focused on each step, letting my thoughts tumble away with each drop of blood.

Calm. Centered. No matter how I had been fathered, I carried the blood of Coatlicue, Mother of the Gods. Jaguars prowled in my spirit. Life-giving water flowed in my veins. The powerful rage of a thunderstorm boomed in my soul. I would be victorious tonight. For Mama.

Itztli's whispered warning reverberated through my head. *:Beware. I don't think the queen has a human form.:*

A queen's power often manifested in her bloodline, so a spider wasn't surprising. Though I'd never seen Mama or Grandmama shift into jaguars. There was much of their lives as queens in which I didn't participate.

Breathing hard, I took the last step onto the platform midway up the side of the pyramid. I lifted my head and realized the man on my right was gone. Making Itzcoatl my sire.

"This isn't the altar," he said gruffly, refusing to meet my gaze. "We must keep climbing."

I didn't reply but concentrated on breathing deeply, keeping my pace measured as we started up the next flight of steps. I'd hoped that knowing which man had sired me might give me some closure or deeper understanding into my own nature, but I felt the same. No, I felt worse. Numb. I couldn't—didn't want to—comprehend what these four men had done to my mother. Rape and torture didn't even occur to me as a viable option, even to my worst enemy. Even Itztli, who hated everything about his vicious nature, would never voluntarily rape or torture an innocent.

Let alone a queen, a precious daughter of a goddess.

It seemed to take hours to reach the top of the pyramid, though it wasn't the highest structure in Teotihuacan. Even the air felt thin and insubstantial, as if we were climbing into another dimension. Pressure built in my ears, a high buzzing drone. If Itzcoatl said anything else to me, I couldn't hear his

words. Mist swirled around my feet as if we'd climbed into the clouds. I couldn't see the steps any longer. Cold fog seeped through my leathers, damp and chill on my skin. Darkness blotted the sky.

I reached for Itztli's bond, but the humming vibration echoing in my head dulled my senses. I couldn't feel him. I couldn't even be sure that he was still alive. *Please still be alive. Take care of yourself, brother. We need you. We love you.*

The air changed again, still damp but heavy. Close. Dank with the smell of earth and roots and stone so old it might have been the bones of the Creator-gods. Sweat chilled on my skin. I couldn't see anything but complete darkness. No stars or moon in the sky. Not even the creeping mists or the man who'd sired me.

I heard a harsh clank and sparks blazed in the darkness. Another flash as Itzcoatl struck the flint again and a torch caught the flame, illuminating some kind of cave. Correction, a tunnel made from perfectly cut stones placed tightly together. Gray, red, and beige blocks of varying minerals covered even the floor and ceiling.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"The Great Goddess's realm. We lost its name. We lost *Her* name. All we have left is Her daughter, Queen Tocatl." He stared at me a moment, eyes tight, lips a harsh slant. Sweat trickled down his forehead. A lot of sweat.

Yes, it'd been a hard climb and I still breathed deeply, my heart thumping, but his simple shirt clung to his chest. He was absolutely drenched.

It dawned on me. *He's afraid. Of his queen. If she's a spider...* "How did she take you as Blood?"

Wheeling on his heel, he strode down the tunnel without another word. Which was an answer in itself.

I followed him, trying to keep my mind clear, my senses sharp. Could we be inside the pyramid itself? Beneath the ground and a mountain of stone? I'd sensed a tunnel beneath the other larger pyramid but had been too absorbed with

meeting Seti to see if the Pyramid of the Moon had the same access.

Itzcoatl swung the torch from side to side, casting wild shadows on the stone walls. Sparks flew down the tunnel, zapping and sparking with vivid flames though they quickly burned out. At first, I thought he was trying to illuminate the corners or ignite other torches. I lengthened my step to catch up, so I could see what he was doing.

Cobwebs. Lots of them. And they were extremely flammable. They sparked quickly, flashing like blazing lightning.

Despite my best effort at remaining calm, my heartbeat quickened. I scrubbed my clammy palms on my hips but I didn't unsheathe my blade. Something tickled my nape, the bare skin of my neck beneath my hair. My skin crawled with the prickle of a thousand insect legs. I couldn't help a quick swipe to make sure a spider didn't crawl on me. My fingers brushed through my hair, over my neck and shoulder, but I didn't feel anything. Only my imagination. Though the crawling continued, making goosebumps flare down my arms.

Curtains of webbing thickened on the stone walls. Every few steps, we'd pause while he burned the next batch of cobwebs away. Our breathing was harsh in the silence. As much as I hated the man who'd sired me, I was tempted to press closer to him. Maybe even lay a hand on his shoulder, making sure I didn't get left behind in the darkness.

The webs formed a sea of white flowing beneath a non-existent wind. Almost like the tunnel was breathing. Burned in a flash to leave black streaks on the stone.

Itzcoatl lit another torch braced in the wall, illuminating a circular room completely draped in white webbing. It billowed like clouds from the ceiling and down the walls, blanketing the room in white. He set it ablaze, and I had to whip my face aside, shielding my eyes as the cobwebs erupted into searing flames. With our backs against the tunnel on either side, we waited for the flames to die out. The smoke smelled like

burning cloth mixed with copal, though perhaps bowls of incense had been left in the room to honor the goddess.

Once the flames died down, he went around the room, lighting other torches on the walls. A stone statue squatted in the center of the room. As he illuminated the chamber, I could make out more of the statue's features. She wore a huge feathered headdress with a bird head on Her forehead. Her mouth gaped open with three protruding fangs. Stone spiders crawled out of her huge mouth and ran down her outstretched arms. Her palms faced up, ready to accept an offering—or, more likely, to offer life-giving water or blood to Her people.

Itzcoatl knelt before the statue, his hands gripping his thighs. Silently, I mirrored him, staring up at Her gaping mouth. Hungry. So hungry. Why did She have three fangs?

“Great Goddess, we honor you this night. I am Itzcoatl, son of Quetzalcoatl, *Blood* of Queen Tocatl.”

His jaw flexed, the muscles twitching in his cheek. I could almost feel his indignance in having to kneel beside me, subjecting himself to this test.

“Great Goddess, we honor you this night. I am Tlancel Zaniyah, son of Citla Zaniyah, daughter of Coatlicue, Mother of the Gods.”

Bowing his head, he leaned forward, bracing his palms on the floor, directly beneath the statue's outstretched right hand. I closed my eyes and reached for Itztli's bond. I still couldn't feel him but I whispered, *:I love you, brother. Itzcoatl is my sire. I will see him dead.:*

Then I bowed my head beneath the statue's other hand.

Heart pounding, I strained to hear anything that would indicate what would happen next. I could hear the man's heavy pant beside me. Heat rolled off his body, his scent thick and sharp with fear. He'd done this before and survived. I would survive it too.

A crash behind us made me quiver, every muscle braced for battle. My fingers dug into a faint seam between stones as I fought the urge to unsheathe my knife. I turned my head

enough to see that a massive stone now blocked the doorway back to the tunnel. My heart leaped into a frantic gallop, thumping against my ribcage. Trapped. Deep in the earth in some inaccessible realm of the goddess.

Something heavy and hard clubbed me in the head. Lightning cracked through my vision, my temple exploding in pain. The blow grazed down my forehead toward my ear rather than hitting me directly on the back of the skull. Dazed, I wasn't sure if turning my head had saved me—or killed me. Crushed. Weight against my head. My shoulders. Back. Pinning me to the floor.

A fresh layer of wet, sticky web dropped down over my face. Filling my mouth. Blocking my nostrils. Sucking into my body with every frantic breath. Wheezing, fighting to breathe.

Then Itzcoatl began to scream, a deep bellow of agony that went on and on and on.



# ITZTLI

I stared at the creature who'd sired me. This wasn't a man, a warrior, not even a queen's Blood. Only a monster, so engrossed in torturing this poor human that he ignored me completely. She'd thankfully passed out, so at least she was no longer aware. Though that made it easier for him to begin making the incisions up the inner curve of her legs.

In the distance, I heard the faint murmur of voices, likely the other two Blood returning. Which meant Tlcel knew who his sire was and was headed toward the queen. He'd need help against such a powerful foe, assuming I could even find a way to reach him.

Zuma lifted his head from his work. "Do you feel it?"

I started to shake my head but he pointed the obsidian blade, wet with blood, at my chest.

"Open the door, lad. It's there, hidden in the darkness of your soul. Let it out to play."

At his words, something swelled inside me. My chest expanded as if I'd taken a deep inhale, deeper still, filling my lungs beyond normal capacity. My ribcage ached, my heart straining to beat against the fullness inside my chest.

"Look where you fear to see," he whispered. "It's there. It's always there. Peering back at you."

Pain sliced through me sharply enough I sucked in a harsh breath. Razor-sharp claws scraped inside me, tearing at the bounds of my body. Something thrashed inside me, rending



my organs. I staggered to my feet, arms clenched around my midsection. Trying to hold myself together.

“Impossible,” I panted. “No queen has called me.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “As I said before, lad, you’ve never seen anything as ancient and powerful as Teotihuacan magic. You inherited Xipe Totec in your blood, regardless of whatever Zaniyah magic you might have. When I kill you, I’m going to pull that power back inside me where it belongs. I’ll be even more powerful.”

My bones felt brittle and weak, as if a sudden movement would shatter me open and release the monster threatening to crawl out of my ribcage. Breathing shallowly, I hunched over, letting my hair fall down across my face. Shielding me while I assessed my enemy and plotted the best way to defeat him.

Slowly, he straightened, standing over the bleeding woman. He still needed to make the cut up her midsection but then he’d be able to peel her skin away. I didn’t know if she could survive the wounds she already bore, but if I had any hope of saving her, I needed to do it now. Especially before the other Blood arrived.

He’d want pain and blood—which would only make him stronger, and he was already Blood. I had to assume he’d be difficult to kill, so I needed to incapacitate him with one blow. The knife I carried was too short to remove his head. Besides, he expected me to attack with my only weapon. He’d be able to counter it easily. He didn’t look like a formidable Blood but I had to assume he had skills and power beyond my own. He had too many centuries of service to a queen to not be more powerful than me.

It went against every bone in my body but I allowed my shoulders to hunch, as if the pain was too great for me to bear. Even though I would allow every single bone in my body to shatter if that meant I gained Mama any peace in retribution. I even fell down on one knee, drooping forward to brace myself on my left hand. My right arm curled around my stomach. The knife untouched on my hip.

“No,” I gritted out harshly. “Never.”

The reek of rotting flesh floated closer. His bare feet stepped into my line of sight, the tattered hem of his trousers. Droplets of blood splattered his legs. Even now, the smell of his blood made my fangs ache with hunger. Though I'd never touch one foul drop of his tainted blood, even if that meant I would wither and die.

Drawing in his scent, I allowed the trail of droplets on the air to guide me. I shoved my right hand up into his side, digging my fingers into the wound the human had made in her struggles. Twisting my wrist up, jamming my hand deeper into his chest cavity. The dark glitter of obsidian came down toward my chest. My heart an easy target for his blade.

I seized his pounding heart in my hand and twisted myself to the side, throwing my weight backward. His blade cut deeply across my left shoulder, but my bodyweight and momentum was enough to drag his still beating organ out of his chest.

Spinning in midair, I rolled toward the fire pit, tossed his heart onto the flames, and regained my feet. Knife in hand, I braced for his attack. With my blood dripping down my arm, all my senses vibrated with intensity. The red glow of his blood, a darker stain of pain and suffering that clouded the air like ink spilled into water. The human's weak pulse, the faint rise of her chest. The scent of the other two Blood as they neared the palace, telling me exactly who Tlacen's sire was by Itzcoatl's absence.

Eyes wide, Zuma stared at me, still on his feet. His mouth opened but it took him several tries to speak. "That was... unexpected."

The volume of the other Bloods' voices rose, their footsteps echoing on the steps where the queen's blood circle lay. Before they could intervene, I lunged forward and jammed my blade through Zuma's eye directly into his brain. I didn't think he could survive without a heart but I'd heard stories of fabled Blood who could live without a head. I'd rather be safe than regret the assumption.

His entire body quivered but he didn't collapse. His mouth opened repeatedly but without any words. His fingers went slack, and the obsidian blade slid free of his grip.

I caught the blade and added it to his other eye, giving it an extra shove and twist to push him backward. Without a sound, he stumbled back, tripped over the woman's legs, and finally toppled to the ground. As the two Blood entered the courtyard, I turned to face them with the distinctive obsidian blade in my hand.

They drew up short, eying their dead companion.

Seti let out a low whistle. "Too bad we didn't return a few moments earlier. I'd have loved to see that fight."

"It wasn't much of a fight." I drew myself up to my full height, shoulders and chest pumped. Eyes blazing with rising hunger, I stared the alpha directly in the eye. "I challenge you."

Tecuani snorted and shook his head. "That's not the way Teotihuacan works, lad."

I rushed toward him so fast that he didn't even react as the blade swiped through his throat cleanly, so deeply the white of his spine gleamed in the wound. "That's the way Zaniyah works, *alpha*."

Grabbing at his throat, Tecuani fell to his knees.

Vicious exhilaration rolled through me. The obsidian felt so right in my hand, a missing part of me that had come home. The creature inside me recognized the blade and wanted more more more. More blood. More pain. More screams. Agony. All the better.

Slicing up these three Blood would only be the beginning.

I'd run up the pyramid steps in a single bound and kill the queen and Itzcoatl. Find my brother.

In the grip of this ravenous lust for suffering, would I hurt my own twin?

I shuddered, fighting down the compulsion. Denying the hunger that crawled through my veins. I refused to feed if it

hurt others.

Seti had no such compunction. He dropped to the ground and locked his mouth over the gaping wound in his alpha's throat, pushing him back onto the ground. He growled and mewled like a feeding animal. Even when Tecuani released a death rattle and stared blankly up at the night sky.

I seized the back of Seti's tunic and dragged him away from the other Blood, giving him a hard shake. "He's dead. Aima don't feed on the dead or you might as well be a thrall."

Panting, the man sat back on his heels, his shoulders slumped. He looked up at me, blood smeared over his face. His pupils were blown wide and dazed, his voice slurred as if he'd been eating the hallucinogenic mushrooms used by the human priests. "I've never fed on Aima blood. Couldn't. I don't have fangs. None of us do except Tecuani. That's why he's alpha. *Was* alpha. Fuck."

I shook my head slowly. Queen's Blood—who never fed on each other or her. For centuries. I wasn't sure how many generations of Tocatl queens had ruled Teotihuacan but I couldn't comprehend living like this, even if they hadn't resorted to torturing humans and raping unprotected queens.

How did they excuse serving such a queen, or following such an alpha whose only mark of power was fucking *fangs*? When *all* Aima had been blessed by the creators with the gift of their goddesses' blood, and the fangs to share in that wealth? Feeding honored our bloodlines and continued to serve and respect our ancient beliefs in a world that cared less and less about the foundational mythologies of the first peoples.

No wonder House Tocatl had fallen so low. Where even Blood didn't have fangs and couldn't feed on each other to increase their power. Who never saw or served their queen once she stung them into her service. The only Blood who had been regularly feeding himself was Zuma, and he'd only done so by torturing humans.

Giving Seti another hard shake, I demanded, "Where is my brother?"

“He’s with Queen Tocatl.”

“Take me to him.”

“I cannot. It’s not permitted.” I lowered the obsidian blade toward his throat. Paling, he babbled, “There’s only one way into her lair, and it’s not of this world. There’s some kind of portal on the pyramid. Once the ritual starts, the way into the chamber is blocked until Queen Tocatl makes her choice.”

Probably to make sure no one could escape her evil clutches.

My jaw tightened with determination. I might be tainted with Xipe Totec’s dark hunger but I would see my brother alive and well, free of Teotihuacan, its spider queen.

And me.



# TLACEL

I jerked awake, not sure what had happened. Pain throbbed through my head with every beat of my heart. A scraping sound echoed around me. I tried to move, sit up, turn, but I was pinned. I remembered a crushing weight falling onto me. A massive stone crashing down to block the exit. Itzcoatl screaming.

Evidently, Queen Tocatl had made her choice.

I tried to do a mental check through my body to see where I was injured but my head hurt too badly to focus. *Did she feed on me? Am I Blood now? Why can't I move?*

Actually, I was moving, just slowly. My head wobbled, a slight bump that rolled me to the side enough to see a lump beside me. Tangled in glowing white ropes and cloth that fluttered across my face.

I stared, blinking, trying to make the connection in my throbbing head.

Not ropes. There wasn't any kind of braid, just smooth strands and wispy, billowing clouds of white. The lump was round. Ropes trailed alongside me.

Around me.

*I'm bound. That's why I can't move. I'm not paralyzed from the statue falling on me and crushing my skull or spine.*

I became more aware of slight jerks. The pull on my body. A faint scrape and drag against my back as I glided along the ground. I might be mistaken but it didn't feel like smooth

stone against my back. More like packed earth. Faint ridges and bumps. Roots?

I managed to turn my head a bit more, staring intently at the round thing so close. Another bump, more significant. Enough to dislodge the fluttering cloth.

Itzcoatl stared back at me. Eyes wide, mouth strained open on a silent scream. Blood streaked his face, forever frozen in a grimace. Only his head. What had the queen done with the rest of him?

A harder bump jostled me, sending another flash of lightning tearing across my vision. Everything went dark, my head echoing like a hollow drum. Panic pulsed through me in waves, growing in intensity. I needed to free myself. I had to get away. Before she could do the same to me.

Or worse.

Because honestly I'd rather be a head bouncing along the ground like Itzcoatl than ever serve as the kind of Blood who'd willingly destroy a young queen like Mama.

I couldn't move my arms. My legs. I managed to flop a little, arching my back, but nothing else. I couldn't wriggle my fingers, let alone slide my hand down to the knife on my hip, even if it was still there. I felt another larger bump gliding beneath my body, so I used it to help me lift my head, trying to see around me, but it was too dark.

Barely, I managed to keep my head from jouncing even harder on the downward slope.

Heart pounding and head swimming, I closed my eyes. I couldn't see much anyway. I breathed as deeply as the bonds allowed, trying to filter through the various scents like Itztli did. Other than the dank earthy scent, I couldn't pick up any other identifiable smells.

I focused on my ears. The soft scrape of cobwebs along the ground, whisper of silk rubbing against my body and the roots. A deeper, rhythmic rasp. Something hard scuttling along the ground. Likely the queen's legs as she pulled me deeper into



her nest. I could still breathe, though I could feel the soft flutter of silk across my lips and face.

It felt like a deep, dark tunnel stuffed with thick, sticky webs. She was big enough to pull a full-grown Aima warrior along the ground like a dead weight. Maybe two, though Itzcoatl was in pieces. All too easily, I could imagine her monstrous form. Hairy legs spread from ceiling to floor of the tunnel, her bulbous abdomen heaving me along the trail. *How do I even begin to kill such a queen?*

No way out. Bound. Helpless. Even if I managed to free myself, how would I escape the goddess's realm? Or find my way out from beneath the pyramid—if that's even where the queen was located? Itztli might need help with the other three Blood.

Her other Blood had survived the ritual. They'd escaped—or been allowed out to live above in the city of Teotihuacan. How, though? My thoughts whirled and rattled inside me like a rat trapped in a cage, gnawing helplessly at its own leg to try and escape. My breathing came quicker, shallower, frantic little pants that weren't drawing enough air. My chest banded with pain, a tightness that had nothing to do with the ropes of web wrapped around me.

*No. I won't go down like this. Frantic and desperate and terrified.*

I sank deeper into myself. My core. The deep, silent river that rippled inside me. There was peace in accepting that I was not in control. I couldn't do anything in this moment, so I would wait for a better moment to be revealed.

I would endure. I would pay whatever price required to gain justice for Mama. To keep another young queen from being hurt like her.

*Never again. I swear it, Mama.*

She survived much worse than being torn apart by a spider queen, and her blood, honor, and courage flowed in my veins.

My body jerked to a halt. It felt like the webbing around me had snagged on something. I still couldn't see much with

the silken sheet billowing over my face. It seemed a bit lighter, or perhaps my eyes had finally adjusted to the darkness. I sensed more air and space around us, so we were out of the tunnel. I could smell water nearby, thick with minerals. Slow, steady plopping drops as water seeped through the earth above.

Something tickled my mind, a faint itch. Itztli? Hope swelled in my heart and I reached for that sensation, but it wasn't my brother's bond.

*:Tasty.:* A voice scratched in my head. *:Hunger. So long.:*

I held myself very still, barely breathing. I sensed movement around me, a dark shape looming nearby, moving softly and lightly despite its size.

*Her size. The queen.*

My heart thudded heavily as she came closer. A hairy limb moved just a handspan away, near my head. As thick as a sapling. Soft silk ripped apart.

I didn't dare move a muscle to turn my head. Through the fluttering silk covering my face, I saw two of her legs rising off the ground. Holding something round. Itzcoatl's head. *:Pretty. Trophy.:*

She scurried away, the faint scuttle of her legs helping me judge how large the cavern was. A faint melodic sound filled my head, almost like she was humming with pleasure as she decorated her lair with her new trophy.

While she was occupied, I squirmed frantically, testing the bonds pinning my arms. Something poked into my back, a hard gnarled bump in a root. Silk tangled on the barb, shifting some of the loops around my arms. I could wriggle my fingers, working my hand free of the strands. I risked a bigger flop, using my whole body like a worm on a hook, pulling at the thicker web wrapped around me. When I finally felt air on my bare arm, it was all I could do not to weep with relief.

I twisted to the side, feeling down my hip, working my fingers beneath the sticky web. My knife was still in its sheath. It took another eternity to get the blade free.

I'd never been so fucking glad to feel the carved wooden hilt on my palm.

The humming came closer, warning me of her return. I froze, pressing my arm tightly against my side. I wasn't sure if she'd notice whether the webbing covered me or not, but I assumed any movement would draw her attention.

*:Feast.:*

The hairy leg was back in sight, making my heart quiver in my ribcage. I tightened my grip on the blade, desperately trying to pinpoint a target through the fluttering silk. Striking her leg wouldn't kill her. It wouldn't even cripple her, not when she had seven others. Her abdomen would probably be the best place for a killing blow, though I didn't think she'd let me get that close to her vital organs. Not when she intended to eat me. Maybe one of her eyes? Would that kill her? How many eyes did spiders even have?

Tearing silk, stretching apart and pulling. I could feel the vibration in the strands wrapped around me but my body didn't move. She lifted something again from the tangled webbing, but I wasn't sure what it was. Until I heard the sound of crunching.

*:Bone. Blood. Good.:*

Evidently Itzcoatl's head was for decorating. His body was for eating.

More ripping. My stomach heaved, my mind all too easily filling in images of her tearing into his soft belly. Though something fell, fluttering back and forth like a leaf. Another piece. His clothing, I guessed, confirmed when something heavier fell across my chest. A leather belt. Knife and sheath still attached. But that wasn't what held my attention.

A pouch was tied to the leather.

Thoughts flickered through me rapid-fire. He'd lit a torch. Using something quicker than a fire drill. Flint. Two hard strikes.

*Burn the webs.*

She would likely be able to survive any kind of blow I could deliver with my knife. It just wasn't big enough to do serious damage to something so big and powerful as her. But fire...

If she didn't have a way out of this cave, and the webbing was as flammable as the cobwebs out in the main tunnel, then I could burn her to a crisp. I wouldn't even have to work my entire body free. Just my other arm. Enough to strike the flint.

Ever so slowly, I lay the blade down beside me and eased my right hand up my body, minimizing my movement. I worked the pouch open and felt its contents. Cold metal. A chunk of flint, one edge sharp enough to cut.

With the same slow, incremental movements, I shifted my other arm free of the webbing. The loops and strands fell away more quickly now that I had my other arm out. I wrapped my left hand around the flint, easing the chunk around so the sharp edge faced my other hand. Metal in my right. Both arms folded gently over my chest, almost like I was sleeping.

I pictured the movements I needed in my mind. Remembering the sound of the flint being struck. A harsh blow. Sparks flying. I wanted them to go downward to light the webbing around my body. She'd pulled me along the tunnel—so those ropes might still be connected to her body, or at least close to where she was feeding. Itzcoatl had struck the flint twice. I might need to do it several times. Hard, quick strikes. As many times as it took. I wouldn't have long.

Was there enough webbing in this room to ensure she went up in flames? I couldn't really tell but the outer tunnel had been thick with webs. If this was her lair, her safe place, then I had to assume she'd wrapped the whole chamber in silk.

The crunching stopped. Heart pounding, I strained my senses, listening for the faint rasp of her legs. Movement, a dark shape looming near. Something tapped lightly at my feet. Up my legs to my knees. My thighs. My stomach. Hairy legs on either side of me.

*Goddess, help me. Guide my hands. Help me light the flames of destruction to bring vengeance to House Tocatl.*

Faint tickle along my arms. The brush of fine hairs. Something tugged on me hard enough to lift my back from the ground. *Closer*, I gritted out in my mind. *I can't let her escape. One shot.*

I heard short clicks, and the silk wrapped around my chest fell away in a soft whispering glide. She'd cut me partially free rather than tearing her web. Another layer, thicker cording cut loose. A gentle tapping continued along my midsection. Almost like she was stroking me. Soothing me.

The silken layer over my face slowly dragged away, revealing Queen Tocatl crouched over me. It was too dark for me to see much beyond her immense size. Two small arm-like appendages around a darker spot I could only assume was her mouth. Something glittered higher on the mountainous slope above me. Eyes, I assumed. Too far away for me to try and stab them if that had been my goal.

The black hole opened briefly, revealing a third arm-like thing in the center. Fangs. Three of them. Just like the goddess statue.

My heart stuttered in my chest, an eternity between beats. I took a breath, filling my lungs fully to power my muscles. My legs were still tightly bound, which helped center me. I couldn't run or fight yet. I wasn't hurt. I needed her to come as close as possible.

How long would I still be able to move if she injected me with venom? I had to assume it would incapacitate me almost immediately. She couldn't see my hands beneath her, so I lifted my arms into position, my hands ready to strike as soon as she moved.

*:Blood.:* One of her legs reached up and touched my cheek. A bristly graze that made me shudder. *:Mine.:*

If she was trying to communicate with me... Could she understand words? "Your Majesty," I rasped out, my voice cracking with strain. I couldn't bring myself to call her *my* queen, or to even offer myself willingly to her service. "Queen Tocatl."

She stroked me again, her upper portion nodding in agreement. *:Eggs.:*

I blinked, not sure what she meant. “Eggs?”

Rearing back, she lifted her upper section away, showing me her rounded bottom abdomen. Thankfully, it was too dark for me to begin to see anything but the vague outline of her shape.

*:Heirs.:*

Dread tightened my throat. She wanted me to fucking *mate* with her?

*:Not four. Many. Rise again.:*

Evidently this time she meant to spawn many heirs and bring Teotihuacan back to its former glory. Even disregarding her spider form, the last thing I’d ever want would be to see a bunch of baby spider queens running through the jungle, spreading the horror of House Tocatl through Mexica and beyond.

*:Nest.:* She dropped back down over me, her smaller front leg tapping along my body again. She touched my arm and I braced for her to feel the flint in my hand, but she moved on up to my shoulder. *:Sac.:*

Hopefully that meant she had a lot of webbing in this chamber. I couldn’t imagine any male being able to maintain an erection long enough to climax with a giant, monstrous spider looming over him. Had Itzcoatl lived through a spider mating? Perhaps that’s why he was so terrified to come back to her altar. “You have other Blood. Weren’t they able to sire your heirs?”

Her furry leg touched my bare throat. In the darkness, I could only imagine the giant hole of her mouth looming over my head. Her fangs and pinchers ready to decapitate me like Itzcoatl.

*:Afraid.:* A surge of emotion flooded her tenuous bond. Disgust. Impatience. *:You. No struggle. Listen.:*

Only because I had an ulterior motive. Or because I'd been able to calm myself despite being trapped. Not everyone could have endured being helpless, wrapped in a cocoon of spider silk. She'd cut some of the strands open so I had less of a target, and I'd never used flint to start a fire. Hopefully there was enough webbing to still ignite.

Her tapping continued, more of her legs touching me. Two on my shoulders. Two on my thighs. A rhythm back and forth, almost soothing. I eased my arms along my sides, mounding up the sliced cobwebs against my body. "Are you going to kill me too?"

*:Mate.:*

"Spiders eat their mates."

She let out a screechy hum, almost a laugh. The sound of pleasure she made while she'd hung Itzcoatl's head in her web.

*:Babies.:*

Not a promise, and I certainly didn't want to loose a bunch of baby spiders. Though that made me think there must be a way out of this place. Not that it mattered.

Closing my eyes, I held myself very still as she touched my cheek again. She was closer, the hairs tickling my shoulders. *I blaze for you, Mama.*

I lifted my hands a few inches above my body and cracked the metal against the flint. Very few sparks. At least she couldn't see them—and evidently she didn't hear the distinctive sound. I let my body tremble to disguise my movements, listening to the soft humming and taps. Again. My breathing came too fast, too shallow, my palms sweaty. Itzcoatl had made fire so easily. *Fucking hell, it can't be that hard. Again!*

A brighter cascade of sparks exploded with the strike. Heat flashed on my chest. Ropes of silk caught fire, blazing around me. I was too relieved to feel any pain.

Though with the blaze of light, I could see more of her monstrous shape. Her three fangs, fully distended, ready to pump me with venom. Short leg-like pinchers that were wet

with the other man's blood. She reared back, extending to her full height. Throwing herself back from the fire.

Crackling and snapping, the ropes of web caught fire, a racing red wave that swirled higher to the cave's ceiling. Faster, circling down to a point above her head. A spiral of fire.

*Red spiral. Oh, Mama.*





## ITZTLI

“Your brother’s not of this world any longer,” Seti insisted in a shrill, high voice. “When she’s done, she’ll send him back. If he survives.”

I teased the wicked-sharp blade over his flesh, fighting the urge to see exactly how little pressure would be required to slice him open. “How? Where will he be?”

“I don’t know how. When I regained consciousness, I was in a dark place underground. I crawled for days, it seemed, until I found my way out.”

“Where?” I bit off, though I lowered the blade from his neck. A little threatening I didn’t mind, especially when he’d been a party to the atrocities committed on my mother. But I didn’t dare get too used to Zuma’s knife in my hand. “Show me.”

I glanced over at the human, silently checking to see that she was still alive. Her pulse was steadier. I hoped that she would live to see the dawn. Once I saw to Tlancel, I’d come back for her and at least make sure she escaped the ruins. I turned back to Seti, and found him staring at me, his cheeks wet with tears.

“Your mother...”

My eyes narrowed to slits and I lifted the knife back toward his face, wrapping my other hand around his nape. “Be very careful what you say, tlapalantli.” *Filth.*

“We never learned how she escaped.”

I moved the tip of the blade closer to his eye. “I’m listening.”

Seti gulped. “We kept her here at first. This is the best palace in the entire city, even now as it decays. But we were only allowed to...” He breathed shallowly, rapidly, his eyes flickering from the knife to my face and back. “Keep her. Until the full moon. Then she was supposed to transform.”

Urgency hammered in my skull. I didn’t have time for a horrible history lesson of how they kidnapped, raped, and tortured queens, but if there was something that could help me save Tlacel... “Zuma said your queen is also papalotl.”

“Queen Oxomo’s line failed to have an heir of her blood long ago, but the Great Goddess’s power lives on in Teotihuacan. She can transform any queen into a queen of her line, but in exchange, she lives as Queen Tocatl, unable to shift back to her prior form. It’s been done many times. Zuma knew exactly what we needed to do, though I had never actually seen it done. We were supposed to impregnate her, either with an heir or future Blood of our line, and then the current Queen Tocatl was supposed to take the sacrifice into her lair. None of us knew what happened after that, but Zuma said he found me as a baby crying on top of the Pyramid of the Sun. He sent me to a local village to foster with humans. I’m not sure where Tecuani or Izitcoatl fostered.”

“So there’s access to the Tocatl realm via the Pyramid of the Sun.” I lowered the blade and gave him a shove toward the exit back down to the plaza. “Let’s go.”

“Of course, alpha, but you can’t access it.”

I gritted my teeth, fighting down the urge to send his head rolling down the stairs. “I’m not your fucking alpha. Sacrifice should open any portal or gateway. Let’s see if your heart on the stones will open the way.”

“Your mother disappeared.” Seti stumbled along ahead of me, though he paused at the edge of the courtyard, pointing back over his shoulder. “From over there. The Palace of Quetzalpapalotl. She didn’t come through the courtyard to escape or we would have seen her.”

Papalotl. Again. “Show me.”

Seti hurried back across the courtyard toward one of the many doorways, only to reveal steps down into a subterranean level. He paused at the bottom of the steps to light a torch. His hands were shaking so much it took him several tries of striking flint while I ground my teeth to dust. I could see well enough in the darkness to find my way but if he didn't have fangs, maybe his vision was subpar as well.

Finally, he managed to light the torch and used it to illuminate the walls as we walked deeper into the series of rooms. As with many other cities in Mexica, one palace had been built on top of another older one, which backed up against the massive pyramid that had been expanded over the centuries to cover it all. Protected from the elements, the air was stale and dry, which had preserved the vibrant murals. Large owls and quetzals were carved into the stone with chips of obsidian for eyes. Every inch of the walls were carved and painted with green feathers, conch shells, and butterflies.

In the next chamber, Seti lowered the torch to better illuminate red-painted panels along the floor. “I wanted to show you this.”

In the flickering torchlight, the painted jaguars almost seemed to prowl around the room with plumes of blood curling from their mouths.

“She slept in this room,” Seti said. “There's no way out except back the way we came in.”

I squatted down in front of the painted panel to get a closer look at the other elements. Along the top edge, a border of two repeated images drew my attention. One looked like a green feathered royal headdress. Given the other elements in the room, probably a symbol of their Great Feathered Serpent god similar to Quetzalcoatl.

The other was a black-painted face with bulging eyes and distended fangs on top of a star set inside a yellow circle. It might have been a reference to their earlier version of Tlaloc, but with the black paint, it made me think of Tezcatlipoca, Smoking Mirror. He was often pictured with obsidian mirrors,

and in many stories, he and Quetzalcoatl were twins. Two sides of the same coin. One bright and treasured. One darker and feared.

Like my brother and I.

Black sun and red spiral. Just as Mama had said.

Straightening, I scanned the floor, looking for any markings or stonework that might indicate a hidden altar Mama might have used or even created, but the floor was smooth plaster. I drew the obsidian blade over my left palm.

“What are you doing?” Seti asked.

Ignoring him, I walked around the room in a spiral, sprinkling blood on the floor until I felt a rush of energy. Magic flared on my skin, lifting the fine hairs on my nape like a warm summer breeze. The air changed, fresh and floral with all the scents of the jungle. I could almost hear the low warning cough of a jaguar pacing closer.

The other man dropped to his knees beside me. “Such magic. I had no idea it could be like this.”

“This is what true goddess-blessed magic feels like. The kind of magic that honors the gifts our ancestors have passed down through centuries in our blood. Not built on torture and rape.”

“Your people slaughtered thousands in Tenochtitlan too,” he retorted. “The pyramids ran red with the blood of innocents.”

I seized a handful of his hair and tugged his head back, straining his throat in an arc. “We never imprisoned young queens in a subterranean prison and raped them until they carried our young.”

I expected him to struggle or deny the truth of his crimes, but he surprised me. His face smoothed out with resignation and his shoulders relaxed. He sat back on his heels and simply looked up at me. “I committed violence against Her Majesty Citla Zaniyah in this very room. May her goddess forgive me.”

I slit his throat, leaning his body forward to spill his blood onto the floor with mine. The torch dropped from his fingers, spluttering and dimming but still lit. “Your goddess may forgive you but mine won’t.”

Our blood mingled on the dusty floor, shimmering with a deep red glow that flowed into defined lines and curves before my eyes. A crudely drawn symbol in blood but easily recognizable. Two snakes facing each other, their noses pressed together. Two hands pressed heel to heel beneath them with the fingers pointing outward.

Coatlicue’s sigil. Tears burned my eyes, imagining Mama as a young girl, barely sixteen years old, traumatized, terrified, and desperate to escape. Drawing our goddess’s symbol in her own blood. Calling on the Mother of the Gods to save her.

I shoved her rapist’s limp body aside and dropped to my knees beneath the goddess’s hands. “Coatlicue, Teteoh Innan, Mother of the Gods, please hear my plea as you heard my mother’s, Your daughter, Citla Zaniyah.”



# ITZTLI

The jaguar panels began to move. Tails swishing, ears flickering, their obsidian eyes flashed in the sputtering torch. Two cats jumped down from the wall, growing into huge jaguars, one black and one gold. Crouched down on the opposite side of the symbol, they stared at me. Pressure built inside my ribcage as if a mighty hand squeezed around me. Weighing my heart and judging my sins.

And finding me lacking.

Throat tight, I bowed forward and pressed my forehead to the floor. I knew all too well how tainted I am. I'd seen the darker side of my true nature tonight. How that thirst for pain and blood could be corrupted, turning me into a man like my sire. I'd rather slit my throat now than ever be like him. The only thing stilling my hand was my desire to see my brother safe first.

A deep, resonant voice came from a distance like the rumble of thunder. "Son of Zaniyah, I hear your plea."

Heart pounding like a mighty drum, I slowly lifted my head. Two glowing wispy blood-red snakes wavered in the air before me, growing larger and more substantial like the jaguars until they formed the back of a massive throne. As the goddess' form began to materialize, I dropped forward flat on my belly. "Thank you, goddess. I'm not worthy to see Your face."

"You are more worthy than you realize, son of Zaniyah. Rise and let me look upon my obsidian blade."



I'd forgotten all about Zuma's cursed blade. Scrambling up to my knees but keeping my head bowed, I laid the knife on the ground between Her sandaled feet.

"That's not the blade of which I speak," She chided, lightly touching the back of my head. "*You* are the obsidian blade of Zaniyah."

My jaws clenched and I lifted my head slightly though I didn't dare look into Her face. Red and jade snakes swirled around Her thighs, some lifting their heads to look at me while others curled around Her legs. "I'm hewn from the black blood of the Flayed One."

She hummed softly but so deeply that the floor of the palace rumbled beneath my knees. "And Tezcatlipoca. They're both aspects of the same darkness revealed through different facets. But you're also a twin to Quetzalcoatl, twin sons of my line, which makes you closer to Xolotl than the Flayed One. Will you accompany your brother on his journey through the underworld?"

"Without question. I'll find him without delay and bring him to safety."

"Your brother burns in the Tocatl realm." Her voice weighed heavier with grief, and I heard the soft lilting lament of a wooden flute in Her words. The two jaguars pressed closer to Her knees. "Even if I open the way for you to reach him, you may not be able to save him. You may both perish in my sister's fury. Not only has she lost her queen but also the last sons of her beloved gods."

"If there's any chance at all that I can save him, I beg that you send me to the Tocatl realm and let me burn in his place."

She sat in silence for so long that I finally dared to lift my gaze to Her face. Her skin was blue, Her eyes both dark and bright, a night sky shining with a multitude of stars and colorful streaks like blazing comets. Mother of the Gods, Mother of all, She had born many children—and watched them die. Oftentimes at Her own hand. She embodied both creation and destruction. "What price will you pay to save your brother?"

“My very life,” I said without hesitation. “I beg you to save him and let me die before I become a monster like my sire.”

Her head tipped to the side, Her hands stroking over the jaguars’ heads. “For every light there is darkness. For every morning there must be night.”

Shame choked me, my words thick with pain. “I don’t want to be a darkness he must endure. He’ll never have a decent life because he won’t leave me, and I dare not swear to any queen.”

“You are both destined to be a queen’s Blood. You in particular carry many gifts your queen will need, and he balances you perfectly.”

Shuddering, I closed my eyes. Trying not to remember what it’d been like to taste a woman’s blood during sex. How crazed it had made me. How vicious. It’d taken Tlacel and all of Grandmama’s Blood to pull me off Anacaona, and she hadn’t even been a queen. “I dare not risk it.”

“You would refuse a queen’s call in her hour of need?”

I couldn’t breathe, torn between pride and horror, lust and fear, honor and desperation. Every young Aima warrior dreamed of becoming Blood to a powerful queen. If I dared allow myself to dream of hearing a queen’s call, I could see myself as her alpha. Big and strong enough to quell any disagreements. Vicious enough to kill her enemies without pause. Dangerous enough other queens’ Blood would fear my wrath.

Unable to taste her blood without wishing for pain too. Hers. Mine. Unable to trust myself to touch her, even to protect her. If I were her alpha, who’d be able to stop me if I lost control?

I didn’t expect Coatlicue to laugh. Her deep, amused chuckle made my cheeks burn even as my spine stiffened.

“Oh, to be so young and arrogant.” She patted my shoulder, taking some of the sting out of her words. “Trust in me, my obsidian blade. When I send you to answer your

destined queen's call, she'll be queen enough to sheathe your blade all by herself."

"I can't bear—" My voice cracked and I squeezed my thighs tightly, trying to hold myself together. "I can't bear to hurt another woman. Let alone my queen. I would rather die now."

"I have a purpose for you, son of Zaniyah. I have need of you yet."

Resignation weighed heavy and cold in my stomach. She didn't promise I wouldn't hurt this destined queen, only that She would send me when it was time. "I hear and obey, goddess. Send me wherever you have need of me."

She remained silent for a few moments. I listened to the rhythmic pant of Her jaguars. The faint rustle of Her skirt of snakes, their jeweled scales moving sinuously in a hypnotic dance. Finally, She let out a long, slow sigh. "As with the creation of the Fifth Sun, if you wish to reach your brother, you must be willing to jump into a raging bonfire. The price is high, my obsidian blade. I require your heart—served with the weapon you laid between my feet."

A fitting payment since I'd ripped my sire's heart from his chest and taken his blade. I crossed my arms over my chest and bowed my head. "My heart is yours, Great Mother."

Her hand rested heavily on my head, the weight of responsibility and honor, regret and grief. A mother's love for her wayward child. She didn't say anything else. There was no need.

Searing heat flared on my face, a blast of hot, dry air that swept my hair off my forehead and stole my breath. I lifted my head, not surprised to see that Her throne and the jaguars were gone. A hole shimmered in the floor, a flaming inferno. A high-pitched shriek stabbed my ears and grated my nerves. If that cry was Tlancel's...

Without hesitation, I scooped up the obsidian blade and dove headfirst into the fire.



# TLACEL

The air was thick with smoke that smelled like burning cloth and copal. Almost peaceful. A reverent sacrifice to the gods.

Curtains of webbing rippled in the firestorm, pulling away from the ceiling of the cave and falling down on top of the monstrous spider queen. Tangled in her own web, she shrieked and thrashed, trying to cut away the flaming strands, but her struggles only tightened the flaming sheets around her. Pillows of thick, cottony webs exploded with eager flames, sending a rippling blast of heat through the chamber.

Ropes of fire blasted over my head and down the tunnel. So hot. My lungs seared, crisped and shriveled in the heat. My skin felt tender and tight as if I was cooking from the inside out. The image of a blackened piglet filled my mind, skin splitting open.

Her howling screech rose in intensity until a detonation rocked the cave. Bits and blobs of fluid splashed the walls, dousing some of the flames. Her screams ended. Queen Tocatl was no more.

Relieved, I closed my eyes, waiting for the flames to finish me off. *Thank you, Coatlicue, Great Mother, for allowing me to avenge Mama and stop the horror of Tocatl.*

A thud shook the ground beneath me. Curious, I opened my eyes and turned my head in time to see my brother roll to his feet and begin running through the flames. Eyes blazing with intensity, a knife gripped in his teeth, his hands reached

for me. His hair whipped around his shoulders, glowing with cinders and sparks. Another thick web wafted up between us, flaming almost to the ceiling. Without faltering a step, he lunged through the wall of fire, falling toward me.

He landed on top of me, smothering the lingering flames from the remains of my clothing. Wrapping his arms around me, he rolled, taking me with him. I wasn't sure where. I couldn't focus enough to tell him about the tunnel. I didn't think it was passable. He'd suffocate on the smoke even if the flames were out. He wouldn't make it at all if he had to drag me.

Water hit my skin and I screamed at the intensity. So cold against the burns. Steaming. Shaking. Water closed over my head, not that it mattered if I could breathe or not. My lungs didn't work now.

So much water. An underground lake, perhaps? A cenote? Itztli shifted me to his left side, one arm crooked around my neck so he could use his other arm to swim with strong strokes and kicks despite my dead weight. Soothing darkness wrapped me close, and I had to smile even as I drifted away.

My brother, such a warrior. So strong and courageous. Not that I ever had a single doubt about his honor, no matter who his father might be.

Blood brought me back. Itztli's. I would know his taste and scent anywhere. Though I couldn't comprehend how I was still alive, even as his blood flowed down my damaged throat and began to heal me from the inside out.

"They're all dead," he assured me, stretched out beside me with his wrist in my mouth. "Though before we leave Teotihuacan, we should burn their bodies to be sure they can't rise again."

As the sky lightened above, I realized where we were. He'd managed to bring us through the water back to Teotihuacan, but rather than ending up beneath the Pyramid of the Sun where I'd sensed water before, we lay on the very top of the mighty peak. A fitting place to watch the break of dawn after never expecting to see the sun again.

*:Queen Tocatl is dead. She exploded in the flames. Hopefully her egg sac burned too.:*

Itztli's jaw flexed. "The last thing we need is a horde of hungry spider queens. Though Coatlicue confirmed we have eliminated the last of the Blood that were descended from the original gods of this cursed city."

*:You spoke to our goddess?:*

He didn't tell me the vision. Instead, he allowed the memory to play out in his head, sharing it with me directly. Distressed at the cost he paid to save me, I rolled closer to him and managed to get my arm around his shoulders. *:You should have allowed me to die. I was ready to go.:*

Resting his head against mine, he hugged me back, a rare display of affection that made my heart ache. *:You missed the most important part of the vision. We have a destined queen who will someday call us as Blood.:* He didn't say the last part as words, but I heard the reverberation in his bond. *Even me.*

Lifting his head, he pulled back slightly. There was a mark on his cheek that hadn't been there before. It looked like an inked tattoo, but when I touched the mark, it felt like part of his skin. *:Black sun.:*

*:Red spiral.:* He touched my cheek and let me see the red mark swirling on my cheek that had nothing to do with the burns that his blood was healing. *:Mama is finally free.:*





# ITZTLI

*F*our hundred and sixty-five years later

House Zaniyah rarely held formal court. This time, we prepared for a complete takeover. Whether it would be hostile or peaceful was yet to be determined.

Mama had passed from this world, but before her death, she gave us an heir, though even Grandmama couldn't—or wouldn't—say who Mayte's sire was. My sister now sat at the head of the table as queen of Zaniyah, though Grandmama sat at her right hand, frail but still sharp as a whip. On Mayte's other side, her jaguar god, Tepeyollotl, sat bouncing my niece, Xochitl, on his knee. The true treasure of Zaniyah that we'd all willingly die to keep safe.

Mayte's other four Blood stood around the room with Grandmama's aged alpha. Other than myself and my brother, the only other person present was our consiliarius, Bianca.

"Tell us what you can about House Isador," Mayte ordered.

"House Isador was presumed dead with no remaining queen when Selena disbanded her nest in London." Bianca scanned her notes. "No one knew she had managed to have an heir, let alone with a human. Her consiliarius said to expect a party of nine. I'm assuming that will include Gina herself, leaving seven Blood. I don't know much about any of them but the rumors are flying. Especially since the Christmas miracle has been running all over the news. That had to be some type of dragon that Shara Isador called as Blood."

“Seven,” Mayte whispered, biting her lip. “Can we handle that many if things go badly?”

“You doubt us, my heart?” Tepeyollotl’s words rumbled with a thread of malice that wormed through my gut, stirring my own darkness. As the jaguar god, he was also an aspect of Tezcatlipoca, Smoking Mirror. The dark side of the coin. Like me.

Though I cut sharper and deeper than any obsidian mirror. “I recommend you keep me and Tlacel as your secret reserve, at least until the formal procession. We can observe her Blood from a distance, and if needed, we’ll take out her alpha.”

My sister feared greatly for her daughter, but when she met my gaze, I saw Coatlicue’s eyes staring back at me. The eyes of a mother who’d destroy anything and anyone who threatened her child. “You can handle her alpha?”

I clenched my jaws, biting back the sharp retort. Tact was not one of my strengths, and I didn’t care to upset my sister more than she already was with her child at risk.

Tlacel didn’t posture with a weapon or bristle but he shook his head slightly to toss his hair back off his shoulders, making sure everyone could see the spiral tattoo he’d brought home from Teotihuacan. “We eliminated the oldest Aima House on this continent without issue, including their queen, and that was well over four hundred years ago. We’re even stronger now. Between the two of us, this alpha should be wary.”

“So we keep Xochitl hidden with Tepeyollotl as her closest protection. My brothers will devise a plan of attack to eliminate the alpha if we have to fight. And our Blood will keep Grandmama and I alive as long as possible. Worst case, we abandon the nest and take Xochitl south as quickly as possible. We can disappear into the jungle and regroup.”

“That’s assuming this queen is even strong enough to break Skye’s geas on the nest.” Grandmama grunted softly, shaking her head. “How young is she? A bare twinkle of her mother’s eye and half human at that. I don’t think it’s likely at all. That’s a nasty piece of work that even the two of us

haven't been able to unravel, and I've put my best magic at it for decades."

"My calculation puts Shara Isador between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-three," Bianca added. "But she's strong enough that every major house in Europe has been calling us since the news report ran. They know she had to go through us to get to Venezuela."

Mayte grimaced. "Which means Keisha Skye must know I have contact with a new queen. That I might beg her assistance with the geas." She sighed heavily and met my gaze again, her eyes troubled. "What if she claims you both as Blood before we're able to come to a peaceful agreement?"

Despite her very justified concerns, I couldn't help the immediate traitorous leap of my heart at the thought of finally being called as Blood. When Keisha Skye had come to the nest, I'd hoped she might be our destined queen. Though I'd felt nothing but unease as I watched her not-so veiled threats and blatant, one-sided commands, as if my sister wasn't queen of a long and honorable tradition in her own right.

Plus my nose had sensed something not right in Keisha Skye, regardless of her claimed status as the strongest North American queen. Not as overt as the sense of death and wrongness in Teotihuacan, but I'd rather the goddess take my heart now than ever risk allowing such a queen to call me as Blood.

"I haven't sensed any indication from Coatlicue that we should respond to this queen."

Though perhaps I had misunderstood Coatlicue's vision. It had been so long ago, and we'd been waiting for centuries. I certainly didn't feel a queen's call rolling in advance of the Isador contingent coming to our nest.

Bianca looked up from her phone, her hand trembling. "Gina texted that they're approximately fifteen minutes away."

I inhaled deeply, trying to understand the woman's nerves. She hadn't acted so anxious when Keisha Skye had visited us forty or so years ago, and Skye was the queen of New York

City. Granted, we did have a lot riding on this young queen. Even Mayte's nerves were wound tight as she kissed her daughter one last time before Tepeyollotl took her to the protected hidden room in the old wine cellars beneath the house.

Tlcel touched my shoulder. "If we hurry, we can probably get to the pyramid for a glimpse of them before they approach the blood circle."

Not a bad idea, though that would put us at the furthest edge of the nest if Mayte ran into any trouble. Plus, we could offer a sacrifice to Coatlicue, and She might offer a vision or sign that would help us. "Let's go."

We trotted outside through the back entrance and Grandmama's gardens to the trees that backed up to our home. Light and graceful, Tlcel set a quick pace up the familiar trail that had our hearts pounding and blood flowing. From a distance, the pyramid we'd built to honor Coatlicue looked more like a pile of stones on an overground hill than anything like the fine buildings in Teotihuacan or Tenochtitlan. The top wasn't nearly as high as the Pyramid of the Sun but it would provide a perfect view of the road that wound around to the front entrance of Valle de Zaniyah.

By the time we climbed to the top, I dripped with sweat. Tlcel unsheathed his blade and cut his palm, sprinkling blood on the main altar stone. "Coatlicue, Mother of the Gods, please accept our sacrifice."

My stomach tightened as I unsheathed the obsidian knife I had taken from my sire in Teotihuacan. I still carried it—as a reminder of what I could be if my control ever slipped for a second. If we had to kill the Isador alpha, then I'd need the monster ready at the forefront. It was worth the risk to offer sacrifice to our goddess in our time of need. "Teteoh Innan, guide us with Your will."

The knife slid eagerly through my flesh as if it hungered for blood, even my own. I added my blood to Tlcel's and started to drop to my knees. We'd need to be low to avoid being seen from the road. But something struck me across the

shoulders and back of the head so hard it almost knocked me out. My controlled kneel turned into a graceless slump and tumble flat on my stomach, my chin rebounding on the stone with a loud crack.

“Itztli? What’s wrong?”

He sounded a million miles away. My body lay limp and disconnected from my mind but my senses shot into overdrive. I heard the distant rumble of a Hummer’s engine. The clamor of deep voices inside making their plans, assuring their queen. I felt her anxiety like an ice-cold blade twisting in the base of my skull. She was so fucking young and desperately worried about making a mistake. Of offending Mayte.

Which even I knew was ridiculous. *We* needed Isador’s help to break the geas set by House Skye. But *she* didn’t know this. She didn’t know us at all.

Still incapacitated and unable to move, I could see her. The elegant gown she wore, royal purple fading to soft lavender-gray and silver. Shining black hair wrapped around her head with a heavy golden crown of horns holding a red sun disc. The curve of her lips when she smiled. The sparkle of her eyes—very much goddess eyes both dark and light, a midnight sky filled with glorious stars. I smelled the sultry perfume of night blooming jasmine in her scent mixed with desert sands and crystal water.

Coatlicue’s voice whispered in my head, deep and ancient like the earth itself. *:This queen is powerful enough to use—and sheathe—the obsidian blade of Zaniyah.:*

A graceful foot appeared just inches from my face, clad in a purple slipper. A matching ribbon wrapped around her ankle. A fairytale shoe fit for a princess. That stomped down viciously on a platter-sized tarantula, grinding it beneath her delicate heel.

Quivering, I opened my eyes. Tlancel cradled my head in his lap, his bleeding hand hovering nearby, ready to press to my mouth. He knew my reluctance to feed all too well—though he feared he might need to heal me despite the monster his blood might release.

I rolled away, snapping to my feet. Grabbing his arm, I dragged him along beside me stumbling down the pyramid steps. I panted out, “Our destined queen.”

Now he was the one hauling me back down the trail to the house. In his bond, a single thought hammered with every beat of our hearts. *:We’re here, my queen!:*



Shara takes Itztli and Tlcel as her Blood in [Queen Takes Queen](#).

There’s also a bonus short story, “Queen Takes Twins,” available in [Queen Takes More](#).

# QUEEN TAKES... LLEWELLYN ISADOR



Songs: Dangerous and I'm Back

by Royal Deluxe

*Special thanks to Galadriel Johnson for naming Thierry*





# LLEWELLYN

Silent and grim, I stood against the wall and watched my queen say her final goodbyes to her Blood.

To an outsider, it might have appeared to be an innocent enough scene. At first glance, a woman sat on a low chaise while her close acquaintances brushed her hair. A simple, domestic task that still managed to be intimate.

But nothing involving Esetta Isador was ever simple.

Dressed in a white silk negligee, she reclined over the arm of the chaise, her dark hair spread out like a thick mantle. So much hair that eight Blood had their hands in those tresses, stroking brushes, combs, their fingers, and even their faces through every magnificent lock.

Such hair didn't exist on a mortal woman. Shining like liquid silk, as thick and soft as fur, each strand glistened with power, floating around her body with a mind of its own. Some of her hair was braided into cords as thick as my wrist, dotted with shining jewels and gold. Other sections of her hair rippled to the floor, flowing like a treacherous river. Even when she was standing, her hair dragged behind her like a royal train unless she wore it up, and its weight would drag a normal woman to her knees.

Though Esetta never even inclined her head.

She carried more power in her hair than most queens ever wielded in the entirety of their very long lives. As her Blood, we guarded every precious strand as keenly as her blood.

The knowledge of what she intended to do made me so physically ill that I had to drop my gaze to the floor until I could compose myself. The other Blood dampened her hair with their tears, but her alpha didn't have that luxury.

One by one, she kissed them, whispering something to each Blood that even I couldn't hear. No one kept secrets better than her. Even from me, her closest Blood and the one who held a large portion of her heart, though she loved many.

I couldn't keep bitterness from leaking through our bond. The fury that made me tremble and pant for breath. The dread that made my stomach churn and iced her blood in my veins. Not for myself. I couldn't care less about what happened to me.

For her. I didn't even know all that she intended to do, not fully. Only that she planned to sacrifice everything. Her power. Her very life. So she could have a daughter. An Isador heir. The one thing I had failed to give her.

Finally, the last Blood left her side. My second-in-command, Thierry hesitated at the door, gripped my arm briefly, his eyes grim, and then left me alone with her.

Turning her head toward me, she wrecked me with a single look. Agony pooled in her gleaming midnight eyes but she didn't weep. Not this queen.

I fell on my knees beside her and buried my face in her lap. She stroked her fingers over my head and face, lightly brushing her fingertips over my eyes and lips, the pulse hammering in my throat.

"I made arrangements for each of them with clear instructions. Not one of my beloved will turn thrall once I'm gone."

When a queen died unexpectedly, her Blood often went insane without her and turned to killing and feeding on humans. Thralls were the movie vampires that humans feared, twisted creatures bent on killing, desperate to find a queen.

I lifted my head, locking my furious, anguished gaze with hers. "What would you have your alpha do, my beloved

queen?”

She gave me a sad, twisted smile. “You’ll hate me before this is over.”

“No. I hate *her*, this daughter you’re determined to have. This daughter who’ll kill you.”

“Oh, Lew, don’t think that way. She’s not killing me. She doesn’t even exist yet. I’m gladly sacrificing my life so that she might live.”

I still didn’t understand. Why would she be so willing to destroy the house she’d worked to strengthen for centuries and abandon us after we’d dedicated our lives to her? Only to give it all up and walk away. “But why? Why must we lose *you* for *her*?”

She turned her head slightly, her gaze on some future I couldn’t see, even with my eyes that could record everything I saw like a modern-day video recorder.

“I had a vision, a dream from Isis. She showed me two paths. Not just two ways that I might have a daughter of my own, but also what my child would be able to accomplish. On one path, I would see her born and raise her myself. House Isador would continue as we always have. Our queendom slowly diminishing, not in wealth, but in blood. She—we—would have a wonderful life, though all Aima houses would continue the slow decline into oblivion.”

“And the other path?”

“She would take not only House Isador, but also the Triune. She would rule the world, strengthened by immense power made possible by the greatest sacrifice a mother can make for her daughter. House Isador would soar in prominence, and she’d bring strong, vibrant Aima blood back to the world. We would have an immense impact on the future for generations to come, rather than slowly withering into nothing.”

Goddess. To hear her say it aloud turned my heart into stone-cold iron. “So you chose fame over us.” Over *me*.

Turning back to me, she stared without a word though her chin rose slightly. Absolutely nothing slipped through her bond. Not a single flicker of emotion or command, even though she could have ordered me to cease breathing, slit my own throat, or run on foot all the way to Rome stark naked and throw myself at Marne Ceresa's feet.

But I knew my queen better than anyone, and the flash of sapphire blue lightening her dark eyes betrayed her hurt. I bowed my head. "Forgive me, my queen."

Lightly, her fingers stroked over my hair. "A queen must make hard choices for the house and the future of the world. Would I rather live in happiness with my beloved Blood and my daughter? Of course. You know my heart, Lew. The cost is high. So terribly high. But that's what makes this sacrifice all the greater. That's what will power my intention and magic into the life of my daughter. She'll be a force to be reckoned with. Even the Triune will tremble as she rises. And yes, it's with immense pride and joy that I know my sacrifice makes this possible. Not just for us, for House Isador, but for the Great One who will walk on this earth once more through Her chosen avatar."

She tipped my face back up to hers, and the power gleaming in her eyes clutched my heart in razor talons.

"You know the plan I have set forth, Llewellyn Isador. But if you'd rather have peace, I will give it to you. You will never suffer what lies ahead, but neither will you live to serve another Isador queen."

A coward's way out. If she could live with this pain—and die with grace to fulfill her goddess' plans—then I could do no less. "I will always serve House Isador. I am ready and willing to carry out my queen's bidding, no matter what it is."

Her shining eyes softened, letting me see how much my words both pleased—and wrecked—her. "Then this message is for my daughter, Shara Isador, the daughter yet to come. The Great One has dreamed of you for millennia. She has great hopes and plans for you, sweet child. She has waited with perfect patience for the right time and queen willing to

sacrifice everything in order to give you life. For the right queen to give you shelter away from the courts so that you can determine your own path free of the rigid traditions Aima hold so dear. The very same traditions that have crippled us.

“Don’t be afraid to break free of these traditions, Daughter. Isis wants you to tear down the walls and rebuild the courts in Her image. In *your* image. For Isis walks and breathes in you. Long live the greatest Aima queen yet to come and ever to be, Shara Isador.”

Hoarsely, I replied, “Long live House Isador.”

Her serene queenly mask slipped enough that she clutched my face in her hands and pressed her forehead to mine. “I can’t see how long you must wait for her to free you. I only know that she *will* come. Skye Tower must fall, and you’ll be instrumental in her success from that moment forward.” Her breath caught in her throat, a soft sigh of pain and regret that for any other woman would have been a wail of agony. “The cost, Lew. I wish that I could spare you what is to come.”

“I will pay any cost, my very life, to see your dreams achieved. Even if I’m the last Blood standing, House Skye will beg for mercy when Isador is done with them.”

Even her hair clung to me. Thick silken tresses slipped over her shoulder to caress my neck and tickle my face. Closing my eyes, I breathed in deeply, holding her scent inside me. Etching her in my soul. Red sandalwood and dragon’s blood incense sprinkled with blue lotus petals. Blowing desert sands, a secret oasis glistening beneath a full moon in the shadow of a pyramid.

Letting out a shuddering breath, I gave her everything that burned in my gryphon. Pride, strength, rage, regret, hunger, and most of all, my love. “Use me as you see fit, my queen. What would you have me do?”

Her eyes flashed to clear, sharp blue, a midnight sky torn open with lightning that didn’t fade. “I ask that you go to House Skye and offer yourself to Keisha. Do whatever is necessary to convince her to take you. Endure whatever torture and pain she commits for the sake of House Isador’s future

heir and queen. Watch and wait for her. Be my daughter's eyes in the darkness and help her topple Skye Tower once and for all."

Every word slammed into me like foot-long spikes, nailing me to her will. Binding me to complete the task she set for me. "I hear and obey, my queen."

Stiffly, I started to rise, but she laid her hand on my shoulder, stilling me with a touch. With her other hand, she picked up a pair of heavy shears, large enough to snap through a limb. "You carry my blood, Llewellyn Isador, but more, you carry my love." She snipped a piece of her glorious hair, and the strands tightened around my throat, braiding into a thick choker. "Now you carry a memento of my power, too."

Startled, I opened my mouth to object but it was too late. Tears trickled down my cheeks, even as I let my head drop back for a moment, relishing the feel of her collar on my throat. The smell of incense and lotus in every strand reminding me of her scent. Remembering the velvety spread of her hair over my chest or trailing over my thighs. "It's too precious, my queen."

"Which is why you must carry a piece of it with you." She cupped my cheeks in both hands and pressed her mouth to mine. A voracious, anguished kiss, her tongue tangling with mine one last time. "Now fly, my love, before I fail to accomplish the Great One's plans in order to keep you."

Every muscle in my body rebelled. My bones ached, threatening to shatter in objection. But I stood. Bowed low to my queen. And then strode to the door. My gryphon shrieked, rending me with vicious talons, unable to bear the loss. But she had set me to a task, and I would never fail her.

Though I couldn't help but pause at the door, looking back at her one last time. "I may be mated to House Isador, but I love *you*, Esetta. Unto death and beyond, forever."

She lifted the shears back to her hair. "And I love you, Lew. Unto death and beyond, forever. May we be reunited at Isis' feet."

A thick hank of her shining hair fell to the floor. Another.

The entire building quivered around us, as if it could feel the loss of every single strand and knew exactly what it represented. Usually her skin gleamed like pearly moonlight, but now her shining moon dimmed. The glossy strands shorn from her head lay limp and dull. Just a pile of discarded clippings.

Piece by piece, she dismantled everything Esetta—and House Isador—stood for.

And I couldn't bear to watch.





# LLEWELLYN

I ran on foot down the streets of Manhattan as if a horde of Triune queens were after me. Unable to linger outside the Isador mansion for fear the entire building would sink into the earth or burst into flame. Terrified to feel what would come next.

Esetta still lived. I could still feel her bond, though she had muted it so much that I couldn't access her mind at all. Rather than the flaming river of power that usually gleamed in my mind, her bond shrank to a small dark corner. A mere crack in the earth, revealing only a faint glow of molten rock deep below the surface.

*She won't die for at least nine months. Long enough for her heir to be conceived and delivered. I still have time.*

Skye Tower dominated the skyline, just blocks away from Esetta's house. She'd never minded the size difference between the hundred-plus-story residential tower and her much smaller building that had once been an exclusive hotel on the edge of Central Park. Deep down, I think she loved to rub Keisha's nose in her presence as often as possible over the years as she renovated the property to suit her. Esetta followed perfect Triune protocol and always notified House Skye of her desire to be inside the other queen's territory. Again and again and again.

Funny enough, Keisha Skye never refused her, either. It would have been seen by the other queens as a grave insult to the much older and more prominent house. Though in all the

trips we'd made between London and New York City, we'd never actually gone to Skye Tower.

Two guards stood at the exterior door. I would have simply blurred past them if they were human. They looked up—way up—and gulped when they met my eyes. I must look as deranged as I felt, my eyes burning up in my skull, my beast thrashing inside me with anguished horror at what Esetta was doing.

“I have a message for Her Majesty Keisha Skye,” I forced the words out, my throat raw as if the choker of my queen's hair was strangling me.

“From who?” One of the guards asked.

Some kind of cat from his scent. He wasn't impressive, either in power or muscle. If I didn't need to see his queen as quickly as possible, I'd simply gut the man and be done. “House Isador. It's urgent.”

“Fuck,” the other guard muttered, giving me a dark look. Wolf, I thought. Also not very strong. I'd wager neither of them were Blood. “Who are you?”

“Llewellyn Isador.”

They didn't seem to know me by name, which made my gryphon shriek at the insult. A queen's alpha came in person to see their queen, and they didn't have the barest knowledge of court politics to even recognize me or understand what that meant.

The cat's eyes flickered as he passed along my name and request to a higher sib through his bond. Hopefully a Blood. Someone who could actually get me into the queen's court.

His eyes widened. “Vega's coming down to talk to you.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. I would expect no less than the queen's alpha to come down and talk to me personally. I would have done the same if she'd come to House Isador for some reason. It wasn't common for an alpha to be away from their queen for any reason.

I'd never met Vega personally though I'd seen her from afar. Short, choppy dark hair buzzed tight around her ears. Silver piercings in her eyebrow, nostril, and bottom lip. Broad shouldered, she was a tall woman at almost six feet.

But I was a foot taller and carried the prestige of House Isador and my queen's powerful blood. I could have played a staring game with her—and won easily—but I needed to get inside without pissing her off.

“What do you want?” Vega asked without any introduction or preamble.

Though it burned like acid in my gut, I inclined my head to her as politely as possible and avoided meeting her gaze, allowing her to think she had the upper hand. “I have an urgent message for Her Majesty.”

“From your queen?”

My jaw worked, my teeth grinding together. I still wasn't entirely sure how Esetta planned for me to talk my way into Skye court. Other than some whispered gossip about disappearing male alphas, I didn't have much to go on. “Not exactly.”

Turning on her heel, Vega gave a disgusted huff and started to head back inside. “Fuck off.”

“I hear your queen likes males now.”

Jerking to a halt, she gave me an ugly sneer over her shoulder. “Not in her Blood.”

I shrugged. “I'm already Blood.”

“Exactly. So why the fuck are you here? Go home to your queen.”

“I can't.” My voice cracked with strain, hopefully giving her the impression that I was near my breaking point. I was—but not for the reason she'd guess. “My queen sent me here.”

“Why the fuck would she do that?”

“She ordered me to present myself to Her Majesty Keisha Skye without delay.” Swallowing hard, I closed my eyes,

allowing my face to twist with rage. “Please.”

Eyes narrowed, Vega stared at me, no doubt waiting for her queen to respond. When she finally jerked her head toward the door, I breathed a sigh of relief. The first hurdle.

*Take it one step at a time.*

*Get into the building. Check.*

*Now get into the blood circle.*

Sweat trickled down my face, my eyes burning with fever. Without another word, Vega escorted me to an elevator for a short ride up to the fourth floor. My heart pounded as we walked down the hallway toward another elevator. I could feel the warning buzz of the queen’s blood circle.

“I’ll take your oath first,” Vega said. “On your queen’s blood, swear no harm to anyone in House Skye.”

The gryphon surged inside me, demanding freedom. I’d snap off her head with one bite. Gut the two fools down at the door. Tear this whole fucking place apart brick by brick. Shatter every glass window. Shit on the spotless white marble.

To what end? I wouldn’t be able to get inside the main tower where the queen was. Though I could almost hear Esetta’s voice in my head. *Be careful with the wording, Lew.*

I clenched fists at my sides, digging my fingernails into my palms. “I, Llewellyn Isador, swear that I will not harm anyone inside House Skye as long as my queen, Esetta Isador, lives.”

Vega laid her hand on my arm and walked me into the warded elevator. I shivered but not only because of the tingling wash of magic along my skin as we passed through the Skye blood circle. Success—yet another reminder that my queen’s days were limited.

I couldn’t help but pray even though I knew my plea wouldn’t change either Esetta’s heart or Isis’ plans for Her house. *Goddess, please, don’t take her away from me. Even if that damns me to an eternity of torture trapped in Skye Tower.*

Pushing open a door, Vega gestured for me to proceed ahead of her. Dumb move, even with my oath. *Harm* was such

a very broad word with many definitions. I could all too easily convince myself a killing was necessary, even beneficial in the right circumstances. For instance, I'd certainly rather be dead than live without my queen—though not if that meant I failed to complete her orders.

I stepped into an executive conference room. Automatically I took in the details in a quick scan. One whole wall of glass with a standard business table and enough chairs for ten people. Papers and files were strewn across the table in no apparent order or system. On the opposite end of the room, several chairs were arranged in front of a decorative fireplace. Six women stood around the room. One queen. Three Blood. A human, likely the consiliarius.

The other woman I couldn't immediately classify. Either she was a very weak queen, Keisha Skye had become so powerful that I couldn't feel her power at all, or she was a sib not Blood. A large owl sat on the woman's shoulder, so I leaned toward weak queen. I blinked my eyes three times rapidly to the owl, a sign of respect but also a silent signal, raptor to raptor. The owl gave me a long, sleepy blink back in acknowledgment. Interesting. I sensed goddess intent behind that slow blink, despite the queen's insignificant power.

Focusing on the seated queen, I stopped several paces away and dropped to my knees before her, a subordinate pose she would appreciate. Keisha Skye was definitely more powerful than I remembered. Staring back at me coolly, she held her power at the ready, prepared to blast me into a smear with a bolt of her fabled lightning. Her arms were casually draped along the padded arms of the chair, though she tapped long lacquered nails as if bored. Or nervous. The air smelled like burning ozone, heavy with the threat of a looming storm.

I inclined my head, keeping my hands still at my sides. "Your Majesty, thank you for seeing me."

"Vega says you have an urgent message for me. Why has Esetta sent you to House Skye?"

So fucking hot inside, a volcano ready to explode. My shirt clung to me, sweat running in rivulets down my face and neck.

Wings beat inside me so hard I couldn't manage a deep breath. My ribs creaked. My muscles twitched and strained. One slip and the gryphon would rise out of me, screaming a challenge. All would be lost.

*Focus, damn it! Failure isn't an option. You're fucking alpha of House Isador. Fucking act like it.*

"Esetta Isador sends you a prize, Your Majesty. An alpha male for you to do with as you please."

Her eyes widened. "You want me to believe that the Isador queen sent me *her* alpha? Why?"

I ground my teeth together, letting her see my anguish. My rage. The beast hovering inside, threatening to demolish everything I held dear. "She has no further use for me, Your Majesty. She dismissed me."

"You still carry Isador blood."

*Always. She'll always be a part of me, no matter what happens.* "I do. But I'm no longer..." I gulped. Growled. Sucked in a noisy breath of rage. "Hers."

Her eyes gleamed like burnished gold coins. "I already have an alpha and my Furies. Male Blood—especially alphas—don't fare well in my court."

"So I hear," I panted. "Yet here I am."

She tapped her nails for several long moments, watching me through narrowed eyes. I couldn't help but quiver and shake with every breath. Fighting every instinct I possessed to blaze into battle. Fight. Rend. Tear. Never surrender. Never kneel here and give myself to another queen. A queen I didn't love. Would never love. I didn't even—

My gryphon fell silent. Dead silent. No more talons and screams of fury. Its wings folded up tight. Beak forever closed.

Shrinking. Withering away to nothing.

Cold dread choked me. *No. She's not dead. This can't be happening. It's too soon!*

I fell forward, bracing on my hands and knees. Trying to hold on to the tenuous bond in my head. Cradling the now tiny creature in mental palms, shielding its flame from the bitter blizzard of despair.

In my head, I saw Esetta again. Sitting on the chaise, her face buried in her hands. Her shorn hair lay in piles around her. Weeping, her back heaving with the force of her sobs. My beloved queen. She never cried.

I tried to reach her. Hold her. She must have felt me brush against her bond for she looked up, her eyes red and swollen, her mouth twisted open with her distress, gigantic fangs flashing as if even now, she hungered. Her hair was chopped shorter than Vega's and in awkward, uneven clumps. Still the most beautiful woman who'd ever existed in this world.

The piles of hair began to disintegrate into fragile wisps of smoke, blowing away like dried up leaves. Dissolving into thin air. The choker of her hair around my throat loosened. Fell away. Gone. Her face wavered, her hands reaching toward me, even as her fingers began to fragment into dust and sand. Blowing away, lost on the winds of time. Her mouth opened. Her lips forming my name. *Lew*.

*:Es—*: I strained toward her so hard I felt something tear inside me. I didn't fucking care. Her face blurred. Her eyes dimmed. The spark blown out like a candle. *:E—*:

I couldn't say her name. It was gone. Her face wiped away, even in my memory. I couldn't see her. I couldn't hear her. Feel her. Anywhere.

“No!” I bellowed and thrashed, heaving desperately against the weight on my back. Something pinned me against the floor.

“Hold him! Grab his fucking legs.”

More weight. I arched my back so hard I bucked someone off. Punching. Biting. I still had fangs. I still had big fucking hands and long fucking legs to punch and kick. A hard head good for bashing. Though I ended up slamming my own head over and over again on the floor. Trying to crack my skull

open. Desperate to follow her. *Even unto death. Forever. You promised!*

Lost in insanity. Or maybe I managed to knock myself out for a moment. Slowly, I came back into my battered body. My brain had splintered into a thousand pieces, slivers of glass that stabbed and sliced every time I tried to remember. *My queen. Isador. Her name... Why can't I fucking remember?*

“What the fuck happened?” That was Vega’s voice. Close to my head. Skye’s alpha. I could remember her. But my queen...

An avalanche of broken glass shifted inside me, making my entire body twitch like a live wire jolted me with a million bolts.

“Whose Blood is he?” Keisha fucking Skye asked.

I bared my fangs and shredded my lip with rage. *I can remember her fucking name but not my queen's.*

“He said Isador.”

“That’s very interesting,” Keisha said slowly, drawing each word out. “A former Blood from a dead court.”

Dying inside. *She's not dead. My queen. She can't be.*

Gingerly, I felt around inside my mind, trying to find her bond. I remembered touching her Blood bond before. Gliding like a deep velvet river, sinuous curves winding through my every thought. Now, only emptiness stretched inside me. Hallways littered with broken glass and sand blowing into a deserted, abandoned house.

Someone jerked my face up off the floor by a handful of my hair. Straining my neck tight, a hard claw digging into my skin. “Should I kill him?”

“He’s an alpha, right? I might have use for him.”

Savagely, I jerked my head, tearing my throat open on the claw before Vega could react. Blood pooled on the cold marble floor, and I suddenly regretted losing a single drop. My queen’s blood was blended with mine. I’d never taste her again.



*What did you taste like, my queen? Can't I keep even that small memory?*

Vega dropped my head, and I licked my blood up, desperate to regain every precious drop of Isador blood. Though I still couldn't taste my queen, I knew she was there. I carried her inside me. I had a purpose.

Even if I couldn't remember what it was.

“He's too fucking dangerous.” Vega grunted with disgust, though at least she took her knee off my back. I still felt weight on my legs and my right arm, but I didn't bother trying to shake them off. “Let me finish him off, my queen. I'll never trust a former Isador Blood in our ranks.”

“I agree,” Keisha said. “Take him to one of the basement holding cells. I'll take care of him personally.”

Finality rang in her words. Resignation tasted bitter and foul on my tongue despite the blood filling my mouth. I couldn't die. My queen needed me. *Goddess, help me remember. I need something to hold inside me. Some hope.*

Sand pooled in the corners of my mind, trickling through the holes and broken pieces. Falling into darkness. I let myself slide deeper. Falling beneath the sprinkling crystals. Dunes crafted by the blowing winds sparkled beneath a full moon, though the sky was completely dark. I crouched like a broken, forgotten statue as sand buried me. A sphinx in the desert, guarding...

“Triune,” a different voice said loudly. I assumed the weaker queen I'd seen when I first walked in. Her owl squawked and whirred and clicked. Instinctively, I translated the meaning. *Watch. Wait. For her.*

For who?

“Not now, Carys,” Keisha retorted.

“One hundred percent,” the woman said, ignoring the stronger queen. “Whoever has him at her side will take her seat at the Triune.”

“Ohhhh,” Keisha whispered, a sly smile sharpening that soft sound. “That’s a different story entirely. For now, the Furies can have some fun with our new friend, but he can’t be killed or maimed.”

Vega grumbled agreement though I felt her disgust radiating from her, as if I’d personally spat in her face. She and another Blood hauled me to my feet, but I looked for the owl. I remembered seeing it before the bomb detonated in my head and rattled the world off its foundations into a new reality that didn’t make sense.

The owl—she—still sat on the woman’s shoulder. Large orange eyes stared back at me. Blink. Blink blink. Blink. Another deep whir that I felt in my gut.

*Sorrow. Remember. Time.*

She sorrowed with me. I would remember more over time.

A long, slow blink that made chills race down my spine. A *long* time.

So be it.



**LLEWELLYN**

TWENTY-THREE YEARS LATER

**H**ooded and chained, I crouched in the shadows against the back wall of the formal presentation hall. I'd gotten very good at being so still and silent that people forgot I was present. I might not be able to see or move freely but my other senses were alpha sharp. The two Furies in charge of monitoring me today reeked of fear, and no wonder.

A fucking lightning bolt had blasted so close that my exposed skin felt tender. I'd almost been able to see the strike—even though they'd taken my eyes long ago.

Something major was going down in Skye Tower. Even Keisha Skye smelled... scorched. Since my face was covered, I allowed a wide, mean smile to twist my mouth. *Oh yes. Be very afraid, Skye. Vengeance is coming. My queen promised.*

Watch. Wait. For her.

Could it be time? Had Isador come for me at last?

I hadn't heard any formal announcements and the crowd was too large—and unruly—for me to hear names before the presentation. In the shocked silence since the blast, I heard only crazed laughter. Keisha's power was storms—and someone had been powerful enough to twist her strike into a return-to-sender blast. My heartbeat thundered so loudly I couldn't hear anything but pounding drums. I shook my head a little, wincing at the clank of chains. Drawing attention to myself. Hopefully my keepers were still too engrossed in the presentation to pay any attention to me.

“Well, well, well.” Keisha paused her laughter. “Your mother always did love to fuck the monsters. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that you’re just like her.”

Senses wide open, I strained to pick up a scent. Any clue to who this queen must be. *Mother*:

*Could it be...?*

The owl had been right. Over the years, I’d slowly started to remember more as my shattered mind healed. I couldn’t remember my queen’s name. What had happened to her, why I was here, what she might have said to me. But I’d served her for centuries. I’d loved her with my entire being. That kind of love didn’t just wither away and die. In fact, it flowed into all the cracks and splinters and helped smooth them over. Holding me together. And one thing I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt.

My former queen had loved to fuck her monsters. Especially me.

I might have lost my beast when I lost her Blood bond, but I knew that I was a gryphon. Males mated for life, and I was mated to House Isador. The Furies had learned what that meant over the years when they couldn’t arouse me no matter what they did.

I tracked the rustle of clothing as Keisha moved closer to her throne. I hadn’t been able to see the presentation hall for decades, but my eyes had recorded the layout perfectly before they’d blinded me. I turned my head slowly so the chains didn’t jingle, mentally counting steps toward where I would guess a visiting queen would stand. Too much ozone and smoke in the air yet for me to pick up her scent.

“Oh, yes. My very good friend and Triune queen, Marne Ceresa, was only too kind to warn me that you were not quite what we first thought. I’m sure I would have recognized the truth as soon as I saw you, but I’m grateful she passed along that little tidbit. Now that we have crossed swords and tested each other’s strength, let me lay the truth bare between us.

“*Your mother,*” she spat the words like a curse. “Was my closest friend and ally at one time. Until she stabbed me in the back and crawled into the depths of hell to spawn you.”

If this queen who’d managed to turn Keisha’s blast back on herself was descended from Isador, my queen, then Keisha lied. My queen had never been a close friend or ally with House Skye. I may not be able to recall my queen’s name, but my heart remembered her personality. Her power. Her sense of right and wrong. And there was nothing right about Keisha Skye.

My nose twitched, picking up the faintest trace of blood through the leather hood. I filled my lungs completely, holding that scent inside my body.

Sparks fired in my bloodstream. Molecules long dormant flocked to those faint particles in the air. Blood called to blood. *Isador.*

I pushed away from the wall and shuffled as quickly as I could in the chains straight to the visiting queen. Letting the call of her blood pull me unerringly to her side.

“Isador?” I rasped out, breathing deeply again. I couldn’t be sure what my former queen had smelled like, but this scent was familiar. Like walking into your birthplace and realizing you were home, even though everything looked different. Blowing sands, a desert oasis, bloody flowers blooming beneath a full moon.

My heart stuttered, my ribs cracking beneath the strain of emotion swelling through me. Hope. Relief. Joy.

I would know Isador blood anywhere. Even if I’d been waiting for millennia. “It is. My queen. You’ve come for me.”



Shara takes Llewellyn as her Blood in [Queen Takes Rook](#).

**QUEEN TAKES... VIVIAN  
HELIOS**



Song: Street Fight by Adam Jensen





# VIVIAN

**I**n Heliopolis, the eternal sun burned everything it touched, turning Ra's city into a golden hell. No night. No shade, not even a fucking roof. No peace from the blazing, punishing sun.

I couldn't fucking wait to escape once and for all. I'd do anything to get it out. Anything at all. Even participate in one of Ra's gladiator games. Winners were given a boon from the god. Whatever they wanted, except the death of one of his precious few solar queens.

I wanted a one-way ticket out of this hellhole.

I had no hope of winning against a Soldier of Light, but that didn't stop me from trying. He'd resurrected the finest warriors of all time to his imperial guard, though he didn't give them flesh and blood bodies. The soldiers marched the golden streets as skeletons armed with painfully bright swords and shields. Just looking at them too long could scald your eyeballs.

It wasn't their punishing brightness, weapons, or even their legendary reputations that made them invincible, but their sunfires, blazing demons of molten solar energy. Ra captured them eons ago and forced them to serve his Soldiers of Light, giving them fiery energy that manifested in countless ways, from flaming swords to blazing horses of fire.

I had a sunfire too, but Smoak was different. *We* were different.

I wasn't a Soldier of Light, and I was Ra's own fucking daughter.

I didn't know who my unfortunate mother was, but she must have been a solar queen of Aima blood that he kidnapped and raped until she was pregnant. None of Ra's offspring were born easily. In fact, I couldn't name a single mother who'd lived through the trauma. Not that he gave a fuck. All he wanted was a solar queen of his own bloodline. The rest of us spawn were left to survive as best as we could among the sunfires and soldiers.

Smoak had always been with me, so I guessed that I was born with her. Gender wasn't something sunfires really cared about, but her energy felt more feminine to me, at least here. So far, she'd managed to keep me alive. The sunfires recognized Smoak and left me alone for the most part, but there were a handful of Soldiers of Light that delighted in tormenting everybody they were allowed to mess with, which was pretty much anybody. Even Ra's captured queens suffered under Sepdet's solar lash when the god decided they needed to be punished.

A blaring blast of light stabbed through my mind. A wave of molten sun that instantly chapped my lips, shriveled my lungs, and burned my thoughts to ash. *:Assemble.:*

Time for another fucking game. My stomach quivered, a mess of queasy anticipation. I'd been drilling regularly with one of the Soldiers of Light who hadn't outright tried to behead me as soon as I asked for training. I had no idea of his history on earth, but the soldier known as the Impaler possessed the kind of twisted fighting instincts that would gut a man simply so he could strangle him with his own intestines.

Exactly the kind of skills I needed to win. Assuming Ra ever let me fight.

I volunteered every time he called an assembly, even though he set impossible challenges. His Soldiers of Light were immortal skeletons, for fuck's sake. They didn't bleed and couldn't die again. At worst, I might be able to stomp a skull into dust, but I'd have to chop the skeleton up to even get that far, against warriors famous for the battles and strategies they'd developed hundreds and thousands of years ago.

I might be some kind of demigod but the only warfare I knew was survival in the breeding grounds where females were treated like meat. Ra fucked like a demon-god possessed, working his way through every female at his disposal like nothing would ever satisfy him, but even he had some limits. He left me alone—though I was fair game for Sepdet and Aurelian’s Sol Invictus legion. Sepdet was my fucking half-brother, though that didn’t stop the disgusting piece of offal from touching me.

Aurelian used his sunfire to torture me and Smoak both, which hurt more than anything else. The sunfires shared a collective consciousness, so one being hurt made them all hurt. It was fucking sick—and he loved every fucking minute of it. *We have to get out of this place, and winning one of the games is the only way.*

The denizens of Heliopolis gathered in the open-air temple surrounded by golden columns. White linens hung from the columns, the only softness in the entire space, though they didn’t provide any shade from the brutal sun. With a golden floor, the temple reflected all the sun right back up, magnifying the heat and brightness into pure misery. Naturally Ra loved making us all gather for his entertainment. Sometimes just so he could watch those of us with living bodies suffer in his never-ending sun.

The various legions of the Soldiers of Light formed into perfect lines before the Sun Throne positioned between two gold obelisks that stabbed the sky. I never really knew where to stand. I wasn’t one of the elite guard, and there wasn’t a section just for spawn. As the Impaler walked by, he lightly tapped my shoulder with the head of his spear, though he didn’t pause his step. With a shrug, I followed him, though I regretted that decision when he walked to the very front of the gathered legions. Without a word, he made room for me to stand on his left on the edge of the center aisle.

Thunder rolled in a cloudless sky and the sun boiled brighter, a punishing wave of heat and light. “All hail mighty Ra,” the High Priest called out loudly. Frankincense and myrrh incense wafted in the air as he walked down the aisle. “Lord of

Sun, Radiant Majesty of the Heaven, Maker of All, King of the Gods, Exalted One, He Who Rules, Lord of Heliopolis.”

The temple trembled beneath the force of Ra’s footsteps. Molten gold dripped from the tips of his fingers and he left puddles in his wake. At least this time he’d wrapped a long white cloth around his hips, but it was quickly coated in hardening clumps of gold. He sat on his throne and gave his assembled guard a benevolent smile—that immediately made my stomach clench with dread. The god of light was never kind or merciful.

“Bring my witches.” His voice boomed, rocking the temple enough that the obelisks swayed like masts on a mighty ship.

I locked my knees and jaws tight, determined to not show any emotion, regardless of who he brought out or what happened to them. It was impossible to count days or years in a place where the sun never set, but I hadn’t been to the breeding grounds in quite some time. Not since I’d been practicing my own weapons skills and hanging around with the more tolerant soldiers.

Ra especially liked to capture young queens. The younger the better.

*Please, please don’t march out a bunch of children. I can’t bear it.*

Shockingly, only two women walked up the center aisle with priests before and after them. The red-headed woman, Karmen, had been a girl of ten or twelve when she was first brought with her mother to Heliopolis. The other woman, Dawn, had been here before I was born and bore the title “God’s Wife,” Ra’s current favorite. Honestly, I was shocked she was still alive, though the brittle look in her eyes and the tension singing in her slight frame told me she was near her breaking point. Who wouldn’t be?

The two women were dressed like royalty in fine white linen and beautiful jewels around their necks and wrists. Dawn wore a golden crown with long sun-ray spikes above her flowing platinum hair. As God’s Wife, she usually sat on the

lower portion of the throne at Ra's feet, but the High Priest blocked her path. Standing shoulder to shoulder, the two women clutched each other's hands.

"We have an interesting new challenge today." Ra lounged casually in his throne, still smiling despite the thunder booming in his voice. "Step forward, Dawn Aos, and receive your instructions."

Dawn turned her head toward Karmen with a quick shared look of desperation that I felt in my bones. Goddess, I knew that look of panic. That sick feeling of dread. I'd felt it so many times myself. It was never a good thing for your name to be on Ra's foul lips.

The priests herded Karmen over to stand by the High Priest facing the assembled troops. I had a feeling he'd be seating her in the God's Wife position next, especially if Dawn didn't fare well in the challenge.

Casually, Ra turned his head, allowing his gaze to move over his troops. *To land on me in the front fucking row.* "Vivian Helios, step forward."

*Fuck, fuck, fuck.* I clenched my hands into fists, fighting the instant surge of terror and fury. Smoak hissed inside me, a shower of sparks and flame. Sudden doubt clawed my guts. Had the Impaler set me up? Befriended me for the sole reason of having a front-row seat to watch me squirm? I wouldn't call him a friend, exactly, but he'd taught me several dirty moves that I couldn't wait to try in a fight.

Thought what that had to do with Dawn, I had no idea.

"Roast her," the Impaler muttered softly.

Feeling a little better about his motivations, I stepped up to stand beside Dawn. Her head barely came to my shoulders. While she was dressed like royalty, I wore armor and leathers I'd stolen from the armory or scrounged from the piles of what once been Soldiers of Light who'd angered Ra or one of the commanders enough to be returned to dust and desiccated bones. None of which would help me against a queen, or a witch as Ra called them. She had goddess-level power in her

blood, though I doubted she'd dare use it in Heliopolis. Ra despised everything to do with Aima queens—although he couldn't slake his desire for them.

“I honored you, Dawn Aos.” Ra's upper lip curled with disappointment and distaste. “I elevated you to sit at my right hand. Yet you've failed to give me the one thing I want above all.” He sharpened his voice, slashing his words like a whip. “You failed to produce my solar queen heir.”

Dawn whimpered softly and I smelled her blood. I turned my head slightly to see a deep cut on her cheek.

And I learned something very important about myself.

My stomach rumbled like a ravenous beast, and all I could think about was licking that blood from her wounded cheek.





# VIVIAN

“**Y**ou had but one purpose, witch.”

Ra slammed his fist down on the ornate carving of a lion’s head on the arm of the Sun Throne, mashing the soft, malleable gold. His hand melded with the golden lump for a moment, distracting him. He pulled his fingers free and smoothed his palm back and forth over the lump, flattening it out almost lovingly.

As if he cared more about the fucking throne than the living, breathing woman shivering with dread beside me.

“Though perhaps I’ve misjudged the situation.” He continued in an amiable tone but when he looked up at us, his eyes burned white-hot. “Witches need blood to feed their power. Perhaps you simply need blood from some of your kind to bring your power back enough to conceive my heir.”

Gulp. Suddenly, I was pretty sure what this challenge was going to be, and I didn’t like it one bit. I was half her kind. Her blood stirred my hunger. Would mine feed her power?

Ra turned that blistering stare on me and my heart froze into a cold, shriveled lump. Smoak huddled deep inside me, curled into a tight ball. “You’ve been volunteering at every assembly, even though you can’t possibly win against Soldiers of Light. It’s time to prove your worth. Show me which gifts you inherited through your bloodline. Mine, or your witch mother that spawned you?”

Behind me, I heard whispers and a derisive scoff that made the skin on my back flinch and quiver. Remembering the sting

of Sepdet's sunfire lashes punishing me. Though since I'd been practicing with the Impaler, my foul half-brother had left me alone.

My chin inched up, my stance squared-up and proud. "What would you have us do, Your Imperial Majesty, Lord of Sun?"

His eyes narrowed and the blazing power in his eyes began to whiten his entire face. Not good. At all. Though I had no idea why he was so furious.

"If you're a true spawn of Helios, you'll kill this witch without a single weapon." He leveled that frost-burn glare on the woman beside me. "And if you're a true witch worthy of being God's Wife, you'll drain this half-blood Aima and power yourself into giving me an heir. This is the challenge I've set for the two of you."

How could I possibly kill a queen without a single weapon? My brain flickered through all the techniques and skills I'd picked up by watching the soldiers. Drilling with the Impaler. Practicing alone with Smoak. Everything involved a weapon. *There has to be a way.*

I didn't wish harm to Dawn. I barely knew her. But if killing her was my ticket out of here...

"And if I win?" I blurted out.

Ra's head whipped back to me, the icy heat of his gaze cutting me before he even spoke. I smelled my blood before I felt the pain. Three slashes on my right arm, deep enough that I wasn't sure I'd be able to lift it. Not that it mattered if I couldn't use a weapon.

"Win your challenge first. Then you may humble yourself before the Almighty God of Light to ask for your heart's desire."

Stiffly, I bowed at the waist, crossing my left arm over my chest. My right hung limply at my side. "I hear and obey." *Father.* I almost said it aloud just to piss him off. I'd never been a daughter to him. Just a disappointment. Female—but not a queen. Useless.

Before I straightened completely, Dawn slammed up against me, surprisingly strong despite her slight frame. She didn't attack me—only locked her mouth over the wound on my arm.

A strange feeling came over me. A dormant instinct roared to life. In a million years, I'd never have guessed that I wouldn't feel the urge to reach for a weapon to protect myself. Maybe it was the softness of her body against mine. The flow of her silken hair over my forearm. The strange but incredibly intimate feeling of her lips wrapped around my flesh. My blood in her mouth. Flowing down her throat. Her touch—without pain. I couldn't remember ever being touched before that didn't hurt.

In all the burning agony of Heliopolis, I'd never felt such peace. Allowing this queen to feed on my blood. As our goddesses intended.

Sharp fangs slid deeply into the muscle, making me groan. Not with pain, but arousal. In all the horrors I'd endured in the breeding grounds, I'd never felt like this. Like my body was melting into bliss. Even Smoak rippled inside me, basking in the luxurious sensations.

My knees buckled and Dawn followed me down to the ground. She hauled me across her lap, my arm still locked to her mouth. She smelled so good, a delicate flower blooming in the first light of day, glistening with droplets of morning dew. Soft white wings and clouds, lifting me up. Carrying me away from this horrible place. I would die like this. Gladly.

It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen or felt.

Until she groaned in pain.

I tried to lift my head but I didn't have the strength. My vision wavered and blurred no matter how hard I blinked. After unknown centuries of starvation, her hunger was so great that she'd nearly drained me. Heaviness suffused my limbs. Barely, I managed to roll my head toward her so I could see why she cried out.

Tracks of blood ran from her sky-blue eyes. Urgency sparked inside me, making me twitch. Urging me to struggle to my feet. Draw a weapon. Protect her. My instinct. I was hers now, right? I didn't know much about Aima or how queens typically fed but surely...

She lifted her head and let my blood spill from her mouth. Spitting it out like she was revolted, where just moments ago, she'd been happily draining me dry.

“What—” She croaked out, as if her throat was raw. “Did you. Do. To me?”

“Me? What's wrong?”

Falling forward on her hands and knees, she heaved and wretched, throwing up my blood.

Blood that smoked and flickered with molten flames on the golden floor.

My first thought was that she'd somehow sucked Smoak into her. But my sunfire still flickered deep inside me. *:What's wrong with her?:*

She sent me an image of flames licking inside Dawn. Charring her from the inside out.

Her back heaved. Wracking sobs tore out of her throat, the pitch rising to a punishing wail of pain. She surged up off the floor and white wings exploded from her back. Frantic, she rose up into the air, wings beating so mercilessly that feathers fell to litter the floor. I scrambled up to my knees, head tipped back, staring at her beautiful form in awe. I didn't know queens could transform.

With every beat of my heart, I willed her to fly higher. Escape the endless sun. Find the edges of Heliopolis and jump off into the cool darkness that must lie hidden somewhere.

For one sweet moment, her wings blocked the blazing might of Ra's sun.

More feathers rained down, along with droplets of blood. Mine, hers, both. Smoke curled around her. Her mouth gaped open on a never-ending scream laced with flames. I clapped

my hands over my ears, horrified but unable to look away. Her skin blackened into charred wisps that flaked off. More flames broke free of her body, yet her screams continued. High, shrill agony that went on and on.

Until my blood burned her into a sooty, misshapen lump that collapsed to the floor. Still smoking.



# VIVIAN

A white feather fluttered down to softly drop onto my thigh. I closed shaking fingers over it, hiding it from view. One unburned feather. For me.

My ears still echoed with the sound of her screams. As long as I lived, I would never forget the sound of her pain. The horror of knowing that *my* blood had done that to her.

Worse, though, was the absolute destruction of the most beautiful experience I'd ever had in my life. It would be forever tainted with her gruesome death. Her wings outstretched against the punishing sun of Ra, even as she burned into a black smear on the golden floor of his temple. Leaving behind a few blood-stained, scorched feathers and a misshapen crown, the sun rays melted into lumpy stubs.

Slumped on my knees, I stared at what was left of Dawn Aos. Sorrowing for what could have been. What *should* have been. My queen. Dead.

A slow, mocking clap echoed through the temple. Instantaneous fury blasted through me, pushing me to my feet. I crushed the feather in my good hand, resisting the urge to reach for the pommel of one of the swords I wore on my back. Smoak's flames licked inside me, stoking the fire.

Fire. Pumping through my veins. Ra's foul gift that had killed Dawn.

I was a fucking timebomb. Anytime a queen tried to take me...

Quivering, I fought to hold my scream of rage inside me. I wouldn't give him the fucking satisfaction of seeing me fall apart. My pain wasn't for his, or anyone's, entertainment.

I eased the crushing grip on the feather, sheltering it in my palm. Straightened my slumped shoulders. Lifted my chin. And met my father's brutal gaze head on.

He gave me a sardonic grin. His eyes had gone back to the molten gold color, the same as the rest of his body. His moment of insane rage passed as if it had never happened. "A true spawn of Helios. Come, beg your boon from the Almighty God of Light."

Fucking asshole. Every word he said was meant to poke my pride. To rub my nose in the fact that I was useless to him. I wasn't a queen of his line. So what if his fucking blood could burn the witches he hated so much into a crisp. So what if I learned from every Soldier of Light and became the best *living* warrior in Heliopolis.

Nothing would ever be enough for him.

Something deep inside me crumpled. Destroyed as easily as the lion head on his throne. But I refused to let him see how much I hurt.

Stiffly, I stepped closer to his throne. Making sure to give the blackened file of feathers a respectful berth, even as tears stormed inside me. Tears I dared not allow fall. He couldn't know that Dawn's death had destroyed something beautiful and fragile inside me. Instead of dropping to my knees—as he expected—I crossed my good arm over my chest and bowed at the waist like a soldier. "I have only one request, Your Imperial Majesty. I ask that I be allowed to leave Heliopolis."

I expected him to rage and bellow, melting the Sun Throne into a misshapen pile of melted gold. Tensed, I braced for a burning lash across my back. Another slash of his burning will.

Instead, he fucking laughed. A deep belly chuckle that drew my head up warily.



“Ah, Vivian, spawn of mine. You make your sire proud. When you return to Heliopolis, I look forward to hearing how many witches you’ve destroyed with your fiery blood.”

I fought to keep my face smooth without revealing the queasiness in my stomach at the thought. The disgust, horror, and finally, doubt.

Had I asked for exactly what he wanted? Goddess. I couldn’t bear watching another queen die like Dawn.

Even as I yearned to feel that bliss again. The sweet surrender of my blood feeding my queen.

“Sun Tzu, Keeper of Heaven’s Keys, come forward.”

A Soldier of Light stepped up beside me, the brilliant flash of his armor slicing my eyeballs.

“Give my spawn her heart’s desire and loose the wrath of Heliopolis on the human plane.”

With a sharp metallic rattle, the soldier inclined his head. “At once, Your Imperial Majesty.”

A low hum made my teeth ache. Power surged and blasts of fiery light shot from the two obelisks on either side of the Sun Throne, merging together into a shimmering pool of golden light and sunfire energy on the temple floor. Swirling like a whirlpool of solar flames, the puddle changed the floor into a fogged, misty mirror that shimmered into a hole through time and space. On the other side, I could see tall rectangles arranged in groupings that didn’t make sense at first glance. And *darkness*, sparkling with tiny lights.

I broke into a run, racing for that hole before Ra could change his mind. I’d dive through a lake of fire to escape.

Smoak flashed inside me, transmitting images rather than words. A spear tapping my shoulder. That was definitely the Impaler. A sword lifting in a soldier’s hand, a kind of salute. From Sun Tzu, the soldier who’d opened the portal. That didn’t make sense to me but I understood the message without words.

*Get the fuck out while the getting’s good.*

I plunged through the hole of darkness without hesitation.



# VIVIAN

I'd come to hate New York City almost as much as Heliopolis, but I couldn't make myself stay away. Always, the fucking city called me back, reeling me in closer and closer to my prey.

Keisha Skye, the queen of New York City. I could only imagine how pleased Ra would be if I managed to kill the strongest queen in the Americas. She even seemed to be the perfect queen to take me in. She preferred female Blood—and after I escaped Heliopolis, I killed any man who dared to lay a finger on me. Blood, sibling, human, it didn't matter.

*No man will ever touch me again.*

Smoak was still with me, my constant sunfire companion, though he had changed over the centuries too. More male here in the human plane, the only safe male I'd ever been near for any amount of time. Though sometimes Smoak felt more feminine too. We kept to ourselves and avoided courts as long as possible, trying to protect the queens. Though inevitably...

I found myself kneeling before a new queen.

Staring up at Skye Tower, I made myself admit the truth.

*I'm afraid.*

Afraid she'd be the one to survive if she drank from me.

Keisha Skye might be strong enough to break the curse of Ra's blood in my veins. But then...

I'd be forced to serve her every whim.

After growing up in the breeding grounds, I knew the signs of instability, insanity, and abuse. I read between the lines in all the whispered gossip about what was happening in House Skye, and I wanted no fucking part of it. I hated men, but that didn't mean I'd gleefully torture one just because I could.

Sure, let me have a go at Sepdet or Aurelian, the two motherfuckers who'd hurt me the most in Heliopolis. They deserved what they got. But some random alpha from an insignificant Aima house didn't deserve to die horribly simply because Skye got some kind of sick fulfillment from his torture.

The pull to be here was so fucking strong, though. Even Smoak flickered uneasily, flaring up at sudden, random moments to singe my liver. A hot enough surge that I paused, gasping for breath. Bent over, I held my abdomen a moment, breathing shallowly until the pain passed. *:What the fuck is wrong with you?:*

*:Queen.:* His communication skills had improved—or perhaps I'd simply gotten better at identifying the images he sent me. *:Close.:*

“Yeah, no shit,” I muttered out loud, giving a dirty glare up at the tower.

Determined to get a safe distance away, I turned around and headed down the street, walking as quickly as I could. Though I didn't make it more than a block or two before Smoak's antics drew me to a halt again. Panting, I leaned against a tree. *:Stop tumbling around. You're making me sick.:*

*:Queen,:* he said more insistently.

It felt like my intestines were being dragged out of me. Deep, visceral tugs that jolted my entire body. Sweat dripped into my eyes despite the snow on the ground. The cold didn't touch me but I didn't care for the fluffy white layer covering everything. It was too close to a city of glittering gold, while also reminding me of soft white feathers and the stench of scorched meat. Despite my care, Dawn's lone feather had crumpled to nothing long ago.

Shuddering, I pushed away from the tree and staggered another step down the sidewalk. I hadn't thought of her in forever. Let alone the other queens who'd tried to bond me over the years I'd roamed the mortal plane.

Desperate to feel that connection again. To be Blood. To serve a queen and feel that sense of hope and belonging again—only to fail and suffer the wretched guilt and remorse of killing yet another queen in Ra's fucking name.

Muttering a curse, I lifted my head and froze. Everything had changed. The streets of the City That Never Sleeps had gone still, hushed and quiet. Nothing moved. No sounds reached my ears, no honking horns or sirens in the distance. No wind. The sky was a black, empty canvas overhead, softened only by city lights.

A woman stood in the street, capturing my attention. Drawing me toward her like a moth to a flame. A shining pearly nimbus of power gleamed around her like a halo of moonlight. Long black hair hung about her shoulders. Her eyes gleamed like a deep, silent lake, her face a perfect dusky-marble sculpture. Starbursts shone in her eyes, promising—

I blinked and she was gone. My throat ached and I looked wildly up and down the street for her. Striding into the street where she'd been standing, I tipped my face up to the sky, opened my arms wide, and closed my eyes. *Where are you, my queen?*

The insistent jerk deep in the pit of my stomach pulled me toward an unassuming three-story house set off the street. It wasn't the biggest mansion on Park Avenue but there wasn't a single car on the street in front of the gleaming white building. I couldn't imagine a queen living here in the shadow of Skye Tower, but the pull dragged me closer. Down a side alley to an out-of-the-way covered entrance.

I rapped on the door, calling myself a fool but unable to leave. Smoak fizzed and popped inside me, bursting with nervous energy. He'd never reacted like this to a queen before. Neither had I, truth be told. I didn't think I could leave now,

even if I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt this queen would die if she tasted me.

I needed to know. I needed to know why she called me here. Why she lived so close to House Skye.

An elderly human male answered the door. “May I help you?”

“I’m sorry to bother you, but something pulled me here.” I resisted the urge to shove him aside and race inside. Up the stairs. I could feel her higher, overhead somewhere. So close. “I need to see...” I wanted to say, “*your queen*,” but that would sound crazy if I was at the wrong house. “Uh.. the lady of the house. Please. It’s urgent.”

A normal human would have told me to fuck off and called the cops. Especially in New York City. This man gave me a quick once over and opened the door despite my leathers and sword hilts crossed on my back. “Let me inquire if Her Majesty is available.”

Relieved that he knew what I was talking about, I spared a quick glance around the luxurious interior fit for a queen. Even the human carried himself like an old-world courtier, from his perfectly styled white hair, despite the lateness of the hour, to his elegant black-silk robe and matching pajamas. He picked up a phone and pressed a single button, waiting for several long moments.

Setting the phone back in its cradle, he gave me a wry quirk of his lips. “I’m afraid Her Majesty is indisposed. It’s been a very lively trip so far. If you could wait a few hours, one of her Blood will be up and about to speak to you.”

I held myself very still, though my eyes blinked rapidly as I tried to make sense of his words. Granted, I hadn’t been in many courts over the years. I wasn’t welcomed at all after word spread about Queen Ninan’s demise, the last queen who’d succumbed to the temptation of my blood.

A surge of guilt strangled me, my palms clammy at the thought of burning up another queen. The woman in the street had been so beautiful, her eyes promising everything I’d ever

dreamed of. Not just a place of belonging, but maybe... more. Her arms around me. Her soft body beneath me. Her eyes burning not with the unholy flames of Heliopolis but with desire.

*Goddess help me. If she dies—*

I gave myself a forceful shake to clear my head. “Her Blood aren’t up and about?”

“As I said, it’s been a very trying trip.”

My eyes narrowed, my temperature rising. A queen, made vulnerable in the fucking shadow of Skye Tower. Because all her Blood were fucking asleep? A disgusted grunt escaped my lips. “Then no fucking wonder the goddess sent me. Please, take me to her. She needs protection. Immediately.”

Sure enough, he guided me through the giant house and we encountered no one. Not a single sentry. Not even a blood circle. This queen might as well be sleeping outside in the elements for all her Blood were doing to keep her safe. Smoak shimmered white-hot, our rage building the closer we got to her.

The man knocked on a closed door. “Your Majesty? You have a visitor. She’s adamant that she needs to see you.”

A woman’s voice called back softly, as if she didn’t want to wake her lover. “Thank you, Winston. Vivian, come in.”

Fucking hell, she knew my name. How? Though once I stepped inside, I recognized her from the street. She sat up in bed with a huge Blood beside her. Her alpha, I presumed. He was at least awake. “Some alpha you are.” My voice rang with accusation, making me wince. Too late, I tried to curb my tongue. “She doesn’t even have a nest.”

“As you see, all her Blood are here.” The big Blood’s voice rumbled like gigantic boulders crashing together. “We’ll die to the man to keep her safe, so there’s no need for a guard at the door.”

Indeed, ten or so men were sleeping on the floor around the giant bed. The air reeked of power and sex. Fur and scale and claws, mixed with feral scents I couldn’t even identify.



Blood, so much blood. Surely that wasn't why they were all asleep. I'd never heard of a queen able to knock out every single one of her Blood just by feeding.

"I'll die to the woman too," I finally replied.

"Then you're welcome, Blood. Our queen needs you desperately."

No shit. I could barely cross the floor toward her without stepping on someone. Hope curled inside me, a fragile thing with scorched white feathers that didn't dare take wing. Even if the queen was willing to try and take me, I needed to be clear with my boundaries up front. "I don't do men. Not even alphas."

The big guy snorted derisively. "Good. I don't do women, other than my queen."

Up close, the queen was even more beautiful. Glowing with raw power, her eyes dragging me close with the inescapable force of a black hole. "I'd rather not do any women but our queen, either, but if you order me to fuck one of your queen sibs, I will."

She moved her leg and the other Blood sleeping across the foot of the bed grumbled a little and rolled over. Cat, from the constant purr. "In House Isador, no one is ordered to fuck anyone. Not even me."

The queen held her hand out to me. Holding my breath, I gripped her fingers. Her power surged, instantly numbing my entire arm. The tiny ball of feathers swelled in my chest. So much power. She might be strong enough. She might be able to take Ra's fire and...

What? Quench it? Endure it without dying?

My heart ached so badly I could barely breathe. *I have to warn her. At least a little.*

"You should know that Ra is my father. My full name is Vivian Helios, but I changed my name to Smoak when my power emerged."

"Would you rather I call you Smoak then?"

She didn't even react to the bombshell that Ra was my father. Wide-eyed, I flicked a quick look over at her alpha. Surely he would be concerned. Every house I'd visited whispered about disappearing queens, especially solar queens. "My queen can call me whatever the fuck she wants. You don't care that Ra sired me?"

The queen laughed softly, her thumb rubbing a circle on my palm that made my heart thud heavily. "When the Great One sends me a Blood, who am I to question Her gifts?"

The Great One...

An epithet for Isis. The one goddess Ra hated more than anything and anyone.

If anyone could break his curse that burned in my blood...

It would be Her fucking queen.



Shara takes Vivian as her Blood in [Queen Takes Checkmate](#).

There's also a bonus short story, "Queen Takes a Late Christmas," featuring Vivian and Mayte in [Queen Takes More](#).

**QUEEN TAKES... OKEANOS  
KETEА**



Song: Bottom of the Deep Blue Sea by MISSIO



# OKEANOS

The deepest blue of the sea beckoned below. Forever out of reach.

My mother knew exactly how to punish me.

In my reef cave, I could touch the water as the tide rolled in and out. I felt vibrations of life all around me, the calls of dolphins and other creatures. I added my song, hoping another of my kind might hear, but no one ever answered my lonely cry.

I caught the occasional fish to feed myself. But I couldn't swim or even move much beyond dangling tentacles into the water to lure my prey. In my loneliness, I resorted to leaving tidbits of choice fish heads and tails to bring the birds down to eat upon my rocks. Some of them saw me, their heads cocked warily or with interest. A few even chirped.

A much larger bird glided overhead, back and forth, ever lower. Blue feathers on its breast and stomach, with black wings so large it shielded my baking tentacles. It didn't flap its wings but simply floated over the currents as gracefully as a boat sliced through waves. Cracking open a long beak, it made a high-pitched shriek as it drifted north. I decided that call meant "*I'll be back to visit soon.*"

A fishing ship trolled past slowly while the humans on board conversed about the best place to drop their nets. It passed so closely that I could have touched the hull, or even snatched one of the humans from the deck and dragged him to the depths like the fabled monster, Cetus.

But they couldn't see me, and for all I knew, a Cetus descendant was my father. Undina Ketea, High Queen of the Skolos Triune and my mother, had never told me who sired me.

An orange cat with lovely emerald eyes perched on the deck, staring at me as if it could see me, even though the humans were oblivious. To thank it for its attention, I tossed it a bit of fish. It gave me a swish of its tail and accepted my offering. Perhaps I would see it again someday.

And so I passed year after year in my reef cage, close to the human world, but not a part of it. Not a part of any world. I couldn't see Undina's nest to the south, masked by her magic despite it being in the center of the Aegean Sea. I wondered if she'd rebuilt the fishing camps and docks on the shoreline after I'd destroyed them. Surely. It'd been years ago. Maybe decades. The days and nights blended into one endless eternity.

All I knew for certain was that I had grown too large for my prison. I couldn't pull all of my tentacles inside the shelter during the heat of the day. But I hated being in my human form. Feeling the salt drying on my exposed skin. The brutal thirst and hunger. At least as a kraken I could more easily feed, though even the fish seemed to have become wary of my prison. Or perhaps after so much time, I'd simply eaten them all.

My dangling tentacles picked up the vibrations of an engine. Usually the steamboats passed too far away for me to see much, sticking to the deeper channels. The rumble was deep, smooth, and fast. A pleasure ship of some kind, though not as large as a cargo ship. It approached from the south but House Ketea had no need for luxurious boats. Not when they could swim just as fast.

An elegant white yacht glided into view with sleek lines and polished teak. Even the smoke plumed from its stack like a fine lady's cape. The motor chugged, slowing the boat so it hovered in front of my cave. Rocking closer with the tide until I saw two women on the bow.

Two *queens*.

Power sculpted their features and echoed in their every gesture. They both wore beautiful gowns, shimmering with jewels and fine threads, but it was their eyes that proclaimed them daughters of a goddess. Eyes that sparkled with all the power of the universe.

It took me several long moments before I recognized my own mother. I couldn't recall the last time I'd seen her in human form.

Mouth gaping open, I froze, drawing all my tentacles up tightly to my body, squeezing myself as small as possible. Her blue-green hair was swept up into an elaborate design dotted with shells and flowers. Darker teal scales sprinkled her upper shoulders but she stood on two legs and wore a shimmering frothy gown of white and silver that reminded me of waves crashing against the beach.

My mother. At last. She came for me.

The kraken left me so suddenly that I flailed and struggled in the water, unable to remember how to work a human body. To breathe. Swim. Pull myself up out of the water. Gasping, I finally managed to pull myself up onto the rocky coral, slicing my hands and feet open. Not that it mattered. I'd gladly roll my entire body across the most vicious coral if that meant I could leave this cave.

I didn't even need to go home. Not if she didn't want me there. I just wanted to be out of here. Not alone. Not trapped.

"He's truly magnificent," the other woman said. "You've done well to keep him controlled for so long, Undina."

Sea water blurred my vision, wet hair slicked to my face. Lifting my head, I swiped at my eyes, trying to see. Undina stared back at me, her eyes flashing like iridescent scales in the moonlight. "You've grown."

I looked down at my body, not recognizing myself at all. I had a full-grown man's body. Large hands and feet, long hair slicked my body down to my waist, a muscled frame of tanned skin as if I'd baked in the sun for decades. I had—though it'd

never dawned on me that the sun would affect my human form.

The last time I'd walked on two legs, I'd been a mere child with thin arms and narrow shoulders. Though I'd still destroyed our clan's fishing camps and broken our ships like kindling. A child's tantrum when she'd refused to allow me to come home.

Now, I was a man. Decades old. Locked here. Suffering blazing thirst and endless loneliness. Quivering, I licked the cuts on my palms but it didn't slake the burning thirst at all.

"I'll care for him, Undina." The other queen lay her hand on my mother's arm. "He'll be safe."

"Free," I forced out, my voice raw and rough, crusted with sand, salt, and barnacles.

Undina's eyes narrowed, her lips tight in a harsh slant. "A king kraken will never be safe free."

At her words, the kraken boiled out of me with murderous rage, shifting back so hard and fast that waves splashed up over the elegant yacht's deck. I slammed my largest tentacles into the water, shoving another wave at them. Again. Taller. Water poured over the deck, wrecking their perfect hair and beautiful gowns.

Men scrambled across the deck, taking up guarding positions before their queen, some of them shifting to other forms. Weapons, claws, wings at the ready. Not that any of that could stop me.

My mother stood alone. She had no need for Blood. Not when the sirens swam at her back.

She stretched out her hand and opened her mouth, revealing the rows of razor-sharp teeth. Her song began, luring the beast to sleep at the bottom of the sea once more, but I could not be silenced.

*I will not be controlled!*

*I refuse to be caged!*



The other queen didn't move or lift her hand, but a fine trickle of blood from her mouth warned me that her magic was at the ready. I reared back, tentacles coiling and bulging, building up the energy to smash her pretty boat into smithereens. Mother could swim back to her precious nest. Perhaps this other queen could paddle back to—

A flashing ring of light was the only sign that she'd done anything at all, so fast that I didn't even see the colors or hear an explosion. The light shrank around me, compressing me smaller. Tentacles bulged and strained to no avail. The delicate light cut like wire netting, slicing me from my beast. The kraken deserted me just as rapidly as before, leaving me shaking and gasping at the shock of being back in human form.

The silver net of magic tightened around me. Arms and legs pinned. Drowning. Water flooded my mouth and nostrils. In the two-legged form, I couldn't breathe sea water.

I flopped desperately, enough to get my head out of the water for a moment. Choking out a curse at the queen before I sank again. Dripping wet, the queen held a cat in her arms, stroking it like a beloved friend.

A fucking cat. The same one I'd tossed a chunk of fish. A fat orange tabby.

I sank to the bottom of the cave, bound tightly by the queen's net. My blood clouded the water but at last I could see it below. Deep blue. Calling me home.



# OKEANOS

Something patted my cheek. “Come now, mighty kraken. It’s time to see your new home.”

I didn’t want to open my eyes. I didn’t want to return. No chains. No cage. Just endless beautiful blue.

“Die,” I rasped out. A plea.

“Don’t be silly, Okeanos Ketea. You’re a fine young specimen, powerful in your fury. I may have a use for a king such as you one day.”

My lungs worked again. I breathed fresh air that smelled different. Not tinged with the salt and sea. I didn’t think I would live long outside of the ocean. Perhaps I would escape in death after all.

I opened my eyes, not surprised to feel the queen’s net still cutting into my body. Head to toe, I couldn’t move a muscle beyond a shallow breath and a roll of my eyes. I stared up at the queen with all the rage and hate of a trapped monster.

She tipped her head to the side, her platinum hair shining in the sun. An amused smile curved her lips. “Do you know who I am?”

Lips tight, I refused to speak to her again. It was the one thing I could control.

“I’m Marne Ceresa.”

I closed my eyes. The Triune queen of Rome.

I was the same as dead.

She patted my cheek again. “I don’t want your death, kraken. As I said, I may have a purpose for you one day. I’ve prepared a lovely pond for you to enjoy during your stay with House Ceresa. Your mother assures me that you won’t need salt water to survive.”

She stepped back and several broad-shouldered men hefted me between them, moving me into a large metal box. Only when the bars closed, and the queen pressed her bleeding thumb to its lock, did she release the net holding me pinned.

Shaking and bleeding, I tried to sit up and take in as much of my surroundings as possible, though my body quaked with weakness. Hunger. Thirst. Worse than ever since I’d been injured. Goddess below, I needed to feed.

Horrors upon horrors. This cage reeked of man-made iron cursed with the queen’s own blood. As the box lowered into rank water thick with vegetation, I couldn’t help but welcome the kraken and test the fortitude of the iron bars, even though I knew it was futile. Even if I managed to crack open the bars or damage the metal, I still had the queen’s blood cursed into the cage to deal with. Then her many Blood, rumored to be near a hundred, all powered by one of the most powerful Triune queens. Even Undina feared the queen of Rome and kept her nest under tight security.

Tepid, swampy water filled my gills. Utterly revolting.

Fish swam in the murk around my cage. Not sleek, silver-blue flashes of wild fins and tails but the slow, lazy swirl of orange and white koi. Pet fish.

*I’m a pet as well, a monstrous amusement in a cage at the bottom of the queen of Rome’s pond.*

Fury crawled through me, making my tentacles undulate through the water, twitching with the need to rend and smash. I didn’t want to hurt pet fish who were as trapped as me. I stretched my longest tentacles up toward the surface, testing how deep the pond was. If I could snatch the queen if she wandered too closely.

A flash of orange flickered down through the thick water. Not a koi but the cursed cat, dangling its paw in the water. Taunting me. After I gave it a gift.

Betrayal boiled in my hearts. I snagged the wretched creature and dragged it into the pond, ignoring its yowl of fear and its pitiful claws. If I must eat pets, then let it be the queen's cat.

Pain sheared through the tentacle wrapped around the tabby, cutting off its tip. The frantic cat swam toward the edge, presumably to its queen. Nursing the injured tentacle, I still couldn't help but smile at the thought of stringy moss and green water smearing the queen's fine dress.

*Let her venture close enough for me to grab. I'll rip her apart even as she slices me into pieces.*



# OKEANOS

I dreamed to pass the unending time of my captivity.

Sometimes I was back in the reef cave, still trapped but at least I could feel the ocean moving around me. The massive bird with the striking blue feathers came to see me again. It didn't betray me like the wicked cat, even daring to hop closer to my gaping mouth. Head cocked, black eyes sharp and clever with knowledge. I sang to it, even if it couldn't understand. Once, it even brought me a twig with a flower on the end. Blood-red petals fell off into the water like droplets of blood.

Drifting into the deep blue.

Soul-deep longing dragged me down with those petals. Oh, to be free, wrapped in the sea's embrace. Deeper, ever deeper. It wouldn't matter if I were alone then.

Though the water was strangely warm here. Hot, even. Steam rose into warm, thick air. Rocks dark and slick around me. I touched those rocks curiously, not bound. Not trapped. But not sure why I was here. I'd never dreamed of such a place before.

The bird's beak opened but instead of bird sounds, it said words I could understand. "Keep singing until she hears."

She? Not the queen of Rome, but I wasn't sure who the bird meant. It picked up one of the petals in its beak and dropped it into the water. Another. Red petals drifting past iron bars and curling vines of moss.

“Sing. Your queen will hear. She will free you.”

Goddess below, let it be so.

*Sing.*



DRIFTING IN MY OWN SIREN SONG, I THOUGHT I MIGHT STILL be dreaming. Shadows flickered down through the vegetation. Someone, a woman, stood nearby the pool. Since I'd managed to grab the cat, the queen of Rome hadn't allowed anyone to get near me, though the cats couldn't resist taunting me.

I ignored them. I didn't want to lose even a tip of a tentacle's length in case...

*Your queen will hear. Sing.*

More alert, I deepened my call with all the desperate longing in my heart. *Hear me. See me. Free me. I'm here. Waiting for you.*

Shadows flickered closer. A delicate glitter of gold. *Can you hear me? Come closer, my queen.*

The golden glitter came closer, even for me to see thin straps wrapped around her ankle. A shoe fit for a queen. Yet still I hesitated. How would I know it was her, the queen who would free me, and not the queen of Rome? If I dared pull Marne Ceresa into the pool...

I'd better be prepared to kill her or find myself served at her next Triune meal.

In my head, I heard the large bird's screech. *Now.*

I slung my longest tentacle up through endless water and grabbed the queen's ankle, pulling her down through the murk. As soon as my suction cups tasted her skin, I knew it wasn't the queen of Rome. No, this queen tasted like the hot steamy waters, slick rocks, and blood-red petals of the dream. Carefully, I pulled her down, singing with all the hope of my heart.



Her dark hair floated around her shoulders, her eyes shining like stars far away in a midnight sky. I didn't sense any gills or water creature in her lineage, but she didn't flail and struggle against my hold. Her mouth didn't open in a silent scream of horror when she saw the dark bulk of my body squeezed in the cage. The many tentacles writhing with my desperation.

In fact, she wrapped her hands around the bars and tugged. Her mouth set with determination. Her power gleamed around her like a blazing full moon, humming sweeter like a delicate accompaniment to my siren song.

*You are mine.*



Shara takes Okeanos as her Blood in [Queen Takes Triune](#).

Don't miss "Queen Takes Tentacles," a bonus short story available in [Queen Takes More](#)

# QUEEN TAKES... ???



Song: Eat Your Young by Hozier



# UNKNOWN

**D**id you really think Shara fucking Isador would stop with only twelve Blood?

You don't know me yet. Even *she* doesn't know who I am. I have always been here. Watching and waiting. And I am not the only one.

*We are coming, my queen.*



Shara returns in *Queen's Crusade*,

the first book in

THEIR VAMPIRE QUEEN RETURNS.

Songs: Came For War by An Army of One; You've Created a Monster by Bohnes

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Shop](#) for book merchandise, sign up for Joely's [newsletter](#), and join the [Triune](#) for all of Joely's latest book news, fun giveaways, and upcoming projects! If you'd like to read along as she writes, Joely posts regular excerpts on [Patreon](#).



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QUEEN TAKES TRIUNE

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QUEEN TAKES CAMELOT

Mayte Zaniyah

QUEEN TAKES JAGUARS

Helayna Ironheart

QUEEN TAKES DARKNESS 1

QUEEN TAKES DARKNESS 2

QUEEN TAKES DARKNESS 3

Karmen Sunna

QUEEN TAKES SUNFIRES 1

QUEEN TAKES SUNFIRES 2

QUEEN TAKES SUNFIRES 3

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