



# RUTHLESS LOVE

THE VAMPYRES' SOURCE  BOOK 3

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS

R.L. CAULDER & M. SINCLAIR

RUTHLESS LOVE  
THE VAMPYRES' SOURCE  
BOOK THREE

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# WHITE RABBIT PUBLISHING

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# CHAPTER ONE

## KYELLA

The brisk morning air swept over my skin in a gentle caress as I stood on the balcony off Myrin's private study. Something about the featherlight embrace of the air empowered me, as if the land itself was telling me it supported me. Tilting my head back, I held my arms out, welcoming the breeze.

The first golden rays of the rising sun peeked above the horizon over the ocean, glinting off a patch of the cerulean water and warming the air ever so slightly with each passing minute. It signaled a new day, and with it, my first day as an Empress who must lead an empire into war. Taking a deep breath of the salty air, I closed my eyes and listened to the steady beat of my heart, each thump a reminder that this was a gift: to see another day, to live, and to fight for the future.

The dawn of a new era was upon us, and I would be damned if I didn't look fate in the eye and tell her to give me whatever she had. I wouldn't back down.

Dropping my arms to rest at my sides, I lowered my face and stared at the rows of buildings stretching beneath me. A sense of calm enveloped me as the city began to light up beneath the rays of the golden sunshine washing over it.

"I will uphold my vow to you all. We will be victorious," I whispered, hoping the wind would carry the power of my words to all the ears within these lands.

I hoped as they awoke they didn't feel hopeless from the loss of Myrin—I hoped they would allow me the time to earn



their respect and prove that I meant every single word I'd shared with them the night before. Today, I'd place one foot in front of the other, even if I trembled, because there was no other choice. I had to be a constant pillar of strength for them, much like the sun was to me today.

As my hand darted up to trace the thin gold chain of my necklace, I thought back to Myrin's words about the golden charm of the flower—the Evathrina—that lay in the center of my chest. She said someone must have gifted the necklace to my mother—someone who knew what I was or what was to come.

I'd refused my three vampyres' requests to come to bed after the ceremony concluded last night, knowing I needed to learn as much as I could about the two kingdoms' histories and my own, so that I didn't feel so in the dark. My brain refused to answer the tempting call of sleep. Instead, the incessant feeling that I was missing important details that could change the tide of this war pressed upon me.

Glancing back into the room, I couldn't help the half curve up of my lips at the sight of my three vampyres sleeping, scattered throughout the room on chairs and the couch, surrounding the table of journals we'd poured over all night. Myrin had kept detailed entries of her time as Empress and the mistakes she'd made along the way, with what she wished she would have done instead as well. She'd been the image of poise and confidence to us, yet the pages revealed a woman struggling to feel like she'd done enough each night when she laid her head down to sleep. While I hated that she ever doubted herself, I couldn't deny that it brought some semblance of peace to me, knowing that it was okay that I was struggling in the same way.

There was one passage that soothed my soul.

*I've come to realize that it is not weak of me to doubt myself. If anything, it shows my strength and my love for my people, to never be complacent in my role and to always strive to want to do better—to be better, for them. I would be appalled if one day I woke up thinking that I knew it all, for that is a stepping stone to the downfall of an empire. Conceit*

*and arrogance have no place in the mind of a true ruler, so I will feel the flutters of uncertainty in my stomach every day with pride.*

Reading her words only served as a reminder that I would no longer hear them aloud. I'd be a liar if I said the streaks of water that splattered against the pages, smearing the ink, weren't my own tears.

***Good morning, Empress.***

Barnabus' polite and regal voice washed through my mind, bringing my attention back to the railing I found him perched upon. While reading Myrin's journals, he'd crossed my mind many times. Nothing on the pages revealed who or what he was any further than what he'd told me last night, leaving me with more questions than I'd had prior.

Reaching back, I closed the French doors to provide a sound barrier between the sleeping lords and us. I didn't want to wake them, and after admitting they'd heard me talking to myself last night, it probably wouldn't take much for them to realize there was more to that matter. I knew that I couldn't keep my connection with Barnabus a secret for long—nor did I want to have secrets from them—but I needed answers from him before I was able to inform them of anything. As of right now, I wouldn't be able to explain much.

It was startling how little I knew of the strange bat that seemed to wield a power no animal should possess. A part of me was shocked and wrapped in my own grief when he'd come to me last night, so I'd taken most of what he told me at face value.

Dipping my head in greeting, I murmured, "Good morning, Barnabus. I'm glad you are here. Throughout the night, I began to read Myrin's old journals, hoping to glean more information on your connection to her for me to understand our own. However, I found nothing of use."

It wasn't that I didn't trust him, but I wouldn't be so foolish as to blindly listen to a being that no one could vouch for. How could I possibly trust the validity of his words being controlled by Malakai for so long.

His black eyes ran the length of me before his little head bobbed, satisfied with whatever he saw.

*Ask your questions, young one.*

Taking a few steps forward, I rested my hands upon the stone railing and looked over the city with him, trying to figure out how to word my questions without offending him.

I wasn't sure what magic allowed Barnabus to speak to me, let alone choose the next Empress, but it was clear that a power like that could be used for either good or evil. I needed to be sure which side he was on. If Myrin was truly the only who could speak with him, he would need to build the same rapport with me now. I could no longer afford to be naive about any subject pertaining to this world.

"I owe it to these people to be guarded and trust no one until it has been earned, but I also recognize that you seem to have their best interests at heart as well," I said slowly before glancing at the bat out of the corner of my eye, catching his eerily intense stare. "I need to know what and *who* you are, Barnabus, because it's obvious that you are not simply a bat. I'm sorry if I offend you with my suspicions, but I no longer have the time to beat around the bush or turn a blind eye."

My fingers tightened around the stone, and I held my breath in anticipation, bracing for whatever he might say in return. A large part of me assumed he would lash out at me for being an insufferable child given that he often acted as my elder. I did not wish to argue or lose him as an ally, if that is what he was. All I could do was hope that he respected where I was coming from.

For a moment, the silence that stretched between made me think he might refuse to answer me and take off instead. Just as I turned and opened my mouth, he responded.

*Normally, I would never divulge this information to you this soon, but we do not have the luxury of time. We must trust each other. What do you know of the old vampyre gods?*

Letting out a soft sigh, I shook my head lightly, feeling lost. "Not much. Malakai did not wish for his people to know

of beings that were stronger than him. Elijah was the one to bring them up to me. He said that the old gods were all very different. Some were driven by the light and others by darkness, and that they most likely had a hand in choosing the initial leaders of the two empires.”

As the final words tumbled out of my mouth, I immediately sucked in a sharp breath. *A hand in choosing the leaders...*

***I presume you're beginning to piece the mystery together based on the bewildered expression on your face.***

His tone was light, almost as if he were poking fun at me. It was in stark contrast to the more serious and somber demeanor that I'd experienced so far.

My eyes widened as I turned to face him fully, dropping my voice to barely a whisper as I asked, “You're an old god?”

The thought seemed...so incredibly crazy, but it instantly rang true in my mind.

He let out a few clicks that felt like chuffs of laughter and hopped a few steps closer to me before his wings extended out and flapped once, carrying him up onto my shoulder. Turning my gaze back over the city to give him enough room, I let out a soft gasp as his furry head bumped into my cheek.

***Don't worry, young one. I'm one of the good ones in history. I know that means nothing to you, as we have yet to have time to get to know one another, but in time, I will share the history of the old gods, as well as my thoughts of this war and what is happening in the Thaician Empire.***

Oddly enough, the coiled tension in my chest seemed to loosen with his affectionate head-butt and the candid honesty I heard in his voice. But that was crazy, right? He just confessed to being a powerful and old vampyre god, something that I'd only briefly heard of before. I should have felt a quiver of fear running through my body with this new knowledge.

Deep down, the ease with which he'd confessed to who he was meant so much to me, though. He wasn't playing games, instead taking a huge risk to expose himself to me, I presumed.

I was inclined to believe that the ease of his candor alone, earned a kernel of my trust.

“I appreciate your honesty, Barnabus,” I admitted, reaching up on instinct to scratch beneath his chin, not realizing I was petting a freaking old god until my fingers had already sunk into his fluffy fur. “Sorry,” I quickly rushed to say, dropping my hand before he let out a series of disapproving clicks.

***I didn't say to stop.***

An honest to gods laugh bubbled out of my chest at the thought of him being disgruntled with me for not rubbing his chin anymore. I thought I'd offended him with the move, but it seemed he was more inclined to lean into the affection than I'd assumed.

***Shh, or you'll wake the lords.***

Slapping my freehand over my mouth, I muffled my laughter and began to scratch his chin again.

***It's lonely, this life I've chosen to lead. Myrin was the only friend I had left; thus I hope we can build our own relationship in time. Your touch and the knowledge that I am not alone and chose someone willing to fight as she did brings me comfort in her passing.***

All mirth bled from me at the confession of his loneliness. Before coming to this empire, loneliness was something I was all too familiar with. “Are there no other gods walking the lands that you are friends with?”

He took a few small steps toward my neck, warmth brushing against my skin as he seemed to burrow in.

***There are only two of us left now. When the dhampyrs rose, the gods were a split group about how to handle a new species that threatened our power. Many began to hunt and exterminate the dhampyrs, creating fear in the minds of vampires and convincing them to assist the gods in their mission. Soon enough, a war brewed amongst the old gods, but only after the dhampyrs had been eradicated. There was an irrational fear of your kind because, what no one else***

***knows besides us, is that the Evathrina flower can kill us as well. The old gods viewed the dhampyrs having so many similarities to us as a threat to our power.***

I didn't have words for that admission. My mind was churning, trying to process the information. As if he sensed my inability to respond, Barnabus forged onward.

***The one who started the war against dhampyrs still remains: Lazarus. I believe he has taken refuge in the Thaician Empire for many, many years. The way of life there mirrors his own belief of the inferiority of humans and the desire to hunt down dhampyrs to kill or use for the Emperor's gain. It would not be a great surprise to find that he has assisted Malakai in his reign of terror.***

If that was the case, it would seem we both had an old god on our side.

My brow scrunched together with the thought, and a question instantly bubbled out of me. "What powers do the old gods possess that vampyres do not? How would he be helping Malakai? I need to know what we are up against when we bring this war to their lands."

***Each old god had a different power. You have seen mine, in my ability to transform into a bat and to call on those nearest me to act as an army when needed.***

So it was Barnabus who concocted the plan to save me from that ship.

***Lazarus was the only god to neither openly discuss nor show his power. It's what has always made him such a dangerous opponent.***

My heart sank into the pit of my stomach.

***But you will not face him alone, Kyella. I will go to war with you. We will face him together.***

I watched as the city stirred, people emerging from their homes and heading toward their various tasks for the day, and I knew our time to talk was ending. Before we set sail today, I needed to head into the council room with my men to finalize our plans.

“Can we defeat him, Barnabus?”

*That I cannot guarantee, Kyella.*

# CHAPTER TWO



## KYELLA

**A**fter bidding goodbye to Barnabus, with the promise to see him at the meeting this morning, I watched him fly off. His impressive wingspan allowed him to arc up and around a nearby tower, before sweeping out of sight.

The memory of the sense of freedom I felt while on the back of one of Barnabus' gigantic bat friends—flying over the water toward the city while the wind whipped around my body—swept over me. For a moment, I was envious that I couldn't fly and feel that heart stopping exhilaration again. The sound of someone moving around in the room behind me drew my focus away from the old god swooping away from me.

Turning and opening the balcony doors, my head fell back as I nearly walked into Kolvar's chest. His hazel eyes lit up upon seeing me, and he scooped me up, burying his nose against my neck while squeezing me.

"Morning," I whispered, chuckling at the affectionate greeting. His voice was muffled, but he said something that sounded very similar to 'good morning' in a sleep-tinged tone.

When he didn't let go right away, I allowed myself to melt into the embrace. With the chaos of change and grief saturating the very air around us, I didn't want to forget to savor the small moments like this. There was so much ahead of us and despite my determination, it had the potential to be overwhelming.

"Have you slept yet?" The deep, somewhat-grumpy voice had me peeking around Kolvar as he let my body slide down

his frame and out of his arms. I met Elijah's concerned gaze as he stood from the couch where he had fallen asleep looking over a journal.

"No," I admitted as he walked over, examining my expression closely.

Kolvar shifted behind me, allowing Elijah to cup my jaw and look down at me. He spoke softly, concern tinging his tone. "I know there is a lot going on, love, but when we have the time, *please* sleep. I need to know you're all right and that you're taken care of. I understand why you stayed up but promise me that at some point today you'll rest."

It was the 'please' coming from the usually bossy man that had me nodding immediately. I really did plan to sleep—hopefully wrapped up in their arms—eventually.

"*Please?*" Kolvar questioned, his voice rough from sleep. "Did you hear that? You know it's serious if he's willing to say *please*, darling. Although, I don't disagree with him."

I offered him a knowing smile as Elijah shook his head, a small smile playing on his lips at the playful comment. Glancing back to Elijah, I dipped my head in acknowledgement. "I will, I promise."

I knew all of us were emotionally raw following Myrin's wake the previous night, so to see the return of their smiles lightened my own mood. With that thought, I shifted from between them to look for Dakath.

"Where is he?" I asked, confused about when and why he would have slipped out without a word. When the main door opened and he stepped in, freshly dressed and his hair styled back and out of his face, I realized he'd gotten ready for the day.

"I stepped out to get ready," he offered easily as he approached. "I also grabbed you some tea as well as a few items from your room to get ready." He placed a kiss on my cheek, and I relished the sweet gesture before taking the tea from him.

“Thank you,” I murmured before taking a sip of the steaming tea. I knew the energy gained from the drink would help me get through this meeting.

“We should probably do the same,” Elijah admitted with a sigh, as if he hated the idea of leaving for even a moment to get cleaned up. Butterflies erupted in my stomach at the thought of the love we shared. I never thought I would experience such a thing, yet alone three times over with each of them.

“I will send word for everyone to gather in the council room once more—how long do you need to get ready, love?”

As I swallowed another sip of tea, I contemplated. “Maybe ten minutes,” I offered in return.

Considering I hadn’t slept, I knew a simple change of clothes, washing my face, and brushing my teeth would do. There was far too much to focus on, and I needed to know that we were ready to sail. I appreciated Dakath bringing me enough to get ready for the day. I didn’t want to waste any time at all, even just to go back to my room.

It was essential that we left today to maintain the element of surprise against the Thaician Empire. The time that Malakai would conclude that Holmeth and the rest of the crew were not returning with me in tow was fast approaching. I knew that realization would launch him into a new plan of attack, and we needed to beat him to the punch.

Which was how I was ready in a whopping *seven* minutes, not ten. As I walked into Myrin’s personal study, I found Dakath looking over one of the journals with a deep furrow between his brows.

Feet stilling, I paused with a thought. As Empress, was I expected to move into Myrin’s personal quarters? To make her space my own? I wasn’t sure how I felt about that. Shaking my head, I found myself glad that I wouldn’t have to worry about that until after the war.

“Something wrong?” I asked Dakath as I set the mostly finished cup of tea down.

“Nothing is wrong exactly,” Dakath closed the journal and stood, walking over to me and running a hand over my waist. “I want to make sure we are as prepared as possible for this.”

*Just wait until he finds out everything I've learned this morning...*

“We will be,” I promised, refusing to believe anything else. Determination and strength like I'd never experienced before coursed through me. Even when I tried escaping from Malakai, I hadn't felt like this. I knew the steely grit would fuel me through whatever we would face moving forward.

“Are we ready?” Elijah asked, unintentionally interrupting us. He and Kolvar stood in the doorway to the hall, dressed and ready. I nodded, walking toward the door before I came to a full stop.

“Wait!” I exclaimed, throwing my arms out as an important recollection came to me. I motioned for them to come back into the room. I had meant to tell all of them when we first woke up, but I'd forgotten until just now. Maybe I needed to sleep more than I thought. “Actually, come in here and close the doors. I don't want this to be overheard.”

“What's going on?” Kolvar asked, his brow dipping in concern as he sat on the arm of the couch.

Pacing the small space, I said, “Last night I was reading a few texts about dhampyrs, and I found something.”

“Something bad?” Dakath asked.

“No,” I rushed to reassure them. “At least I don't think so. Mind you, this text could be incorrect but considering the circumstances, I'm going to assume that it's true. Apparently, to stay immune to my bite, you have to continuously drink from me. It's not a one-time type of deal.”

Surprise and interest registered on Elijah's face. “Do we know the time frame for the immunity to wear off?”

“I couldn't find anything on that, but I think it would probably be best for both of you to drink from me often like Dakath, just in case the time frame is shorter than we would

expect it to be. I will keep looking to see if I can find specific information about that, though.”

“I will never say no to drinking from you,” Kolvar rumbled, his eyes heating on my frame before he offered a smile at the way my cheeks heated. Damn him.

Elijah pulled my attention away from Kolvar as he added, “You know we would love nothing more than that—I just want to make sure you don’t overdo it. There are three of us and one of you.”

“I don’t think it needs to be a lot, just enough to keep it in your systems.”

No need to point out to him that I was *very* aware that there were three of them. Three delicious vampyres who were completely devoted to me...How did I get so lucky?

“Then that’s what we’ll do.” Elijah nodded in agreement before his expression shifted to a more serious and thoughtful one. “But for now, we need to get to this meeting. If we want to sail today, there are a few things we need to discuss with the remaining council members. Once we’re on the open waters, it’ll be near impossible to do so with everyone split up amongst different ships.”

I hurried into the hall, leaving our quarters as we made our way across the castle toward the council room. It was a beautiful day, the sun shining in through the many windows, which stood in direct contrast to the somber and serious tone I felt hanging in the air of the castle.

When we neared the council room, it was to find a handful of lords and advisors waiting to be let in by the guards that only opened the doors once they saw us arriving. I met the eye of every man I passed as I strode into the council room confidently. I may have been a bit shaky yesterday, nervous, and somewhat overwhelmed, but not anymore.

As everyone joined us within the chamber, Kolvar and Dakath opened the windows to let in the morning breeze. Elijah motioned for some of the castle stewards to come

forward with several maps, indicating that they should be laid out on the table in front of me.

As I stood at the head of the table, I noted that Tristan and two other men had joined the group who was here the night before. The new men were trusted by my men, if the way they clapped them on the shoulder in a quiet welcome was any indication. I wasn't opposed to more allies—I would take any help we could find.

The guards moved to close the doors, but I held up my hand to halt them for a moment as I heard the distant noise of bat wings in the hall. Barnabus swooped in through the arch, circling the room as a few of the lords flinched. A small smile tilted my lips upward as the bat landed on my shoulder, briefly nuzzling my neck before settling.

Motioning for the guards to now close the doors, I decided to dive right in. Last night, I made myself clear about how I would rule, and these Lords had bent a knee to me. So if they also showed up this morning, I could only assume it was with the intention of listening and helping.

“Today is a new day, one that breaks after a night filled with tragedy.” I met each of their gazes, keeping my face schooled from the emotion I felt toward Myrin's loss. I knew I must show them the strength and control I could bring for our empire, so while I was still mourning, here and now wasn't the place for it.

“It is also a day met with war, which is why I have gathered all of you here. We will sail today as planned—”

One of the lords, a lanky tall man with a long gray ponytail, spoke up. His tone was patronizing as he asked, “Are you sure that's a wise choice? Are you comfortable leading our troops into battle? Do you believe our troops will trust your leadership so quickly?”

“Stop.” I commanded him calmly before he could go any further. “I wouldn't be pushing for this if I didn't think it was the *only* plan. As I said, I plan to follow Myrin's plans for this war, so we leave today. And while I do not owe you a further

explanation, I offer you the knowledge that what I lack in my own skill set, I am not afraid to ask for help with.”

I narrowed my eyes on him. “You are here because you pledged loyalty last night. That means helping this empire to the best of your ability, to aid in making decisions that will help our people, not hurt them. If you have decided differently on how you feel—”

“I have not,” he bit out, frustration contorting his features. “I just hope you understand why the idea of a new leader with no experience taking our troops into battle across a great sea concerns us.”

It was interesting how he spoke of an ‘us’, yet was the only one voicing this concern. Still, on the off chance that any supported his words in silence—I would make my intentions very clear once again. I may have been lenient in letting the disrespect from the established Lords go before without punishment as I easily could have done per Myrin’s wishes, but it was time to take a stand.

Considering his words, I nodded. “I do understand. I don’t plan on sitting idly by—I plan on going with the troops. I am putting my own life on the line because I believe this is necessary.”

The lord stared at me for a minute before nodding succinctly. “Understood.”

Good.

“Now,” I started as I looked over the rest of them. Many of the faces of the lords who had scoffed at me were more neutral, and I found myself wondering if my words had gotten through to them as well. “If we are to sail today, we need to make sure everything is ready. The plan must be finalized for what we are to do once we arrive. Elijah, I assume that there have been some ideas drafted?”

Taking the hint to take over the meeting, I took my seat as the room followed suit. Belatedly, I realized they had only been standing because of me. I wasn’t sure how long it would take for me to get used to that.

“I invited two of our naval commanders to discuss our fleet. Tristan is here as he has been part of crafting our strategy for approaching the Thaician Empire with his insider knowledge,” he explained before looking toward one of the men in question. “Commander Maz, are the fleets ready to leave today?”

An older man dressed in a tailored military uniform with several pins on his chest stood and offered me a respectful nod. “The ships are ready as instructed. We are prepared to launch a full-scale attack, and every recruited member has received instruction on which ship within the fleet they will be sailing on. We have ensured that the crews are divided evenly with more experienced sailors and less—as well as seasoned captains, all of whom have been instructed to report to the harbor to begin preparation for leaving.”

“With over three hundred vessels, are we sure we have enough experienced members to go out onto the Cursed Divide? I don’t want to lose lives simply because we were trying to send out as many ships as possible with new recruits.”

“The captains have been vetted. Outside of our military captains are recruited sailors who usually run large fishing boats, and they’re used to being off the coast within the waters of the Cursed Divide,” he explained, seeming to understand my concern. “We were quite lucky to have many volunteers from the coastal regions.”

I nodded in understanding, feeling a sense of relief at his words, as Elijah motioned for Commander Maz to sit down before looking toward the man next to him. “Thank you, Maz. Commander Striker, how are our elite teams faring?”

“Ready to leave ahead of the fleet,” he said as he stood, offering me the same inclination of the head that Commander Maz had. “They will scout the waters ahead of us to ensure smooth sailing.”

“Thank you.” Elijah nodded before looking toward the rest of the room and then down at me. “It appears that we have



smooth sailing ahead of us. The skies are currently clear, and there hasn't been any sign of approaching storms."

"And if they aren't clear? If the skies don't stay calm?" One of the Lords asked with a huff of breath. "The Cursed Divide isn't known for its pleasant weather."

"If we run into bad weather," Elijah started as he looked at him, "there are plenty of options, depending on how bad the storm is. Hopefully, we will be able to see any storm coming, especially without obstacles on the horizon. If that's the case, we can try to evade it. Also, our ships are constructed for sailing rough waters for long periods of time. I have no doubt they will be fine, but we will keep our eyes on the skies."

"It sounds like we have most everything ready to go," I said, drawing everyone's attention. "What is our plan once we arrive?"

"Tristan has an idea." Elijah motioned to the man in question. "While drafting plans, he pointed out that the harbor is the easiest access into the kingdom, and even though it's a straightforward attack, it will allow for several important aspects to come into play. Tristan if you would like to explain your thoughts."

Tristan offered me a small nod and motioned toward one of the maps on the table. "If we attack directly at the harbor, not only do we have direct access to the castle, but our ships have nothing blocking them from pulling right into the harbor. It also stops the opportunity for someone like Malakai to try to escape. It is likely that he will send all his troops running toward the shoreline for a fight, and our hope is that the people who don't want to fight will run out of the city and away from the battle, so they won't get hurt."

Suddenly Barnabus' voice sounded in my head. ***Is that him? The one you have chosen for your right hand.***

I couldn't respond but offered a singular nod that I hoped would come off as me answering his question as well as paying attention to the conversation.

*I like his priorities. They are focused around saving lives, not ending them.*

I was thrilled that Barnabus seemed to have a good impression of Tristan.

“I think we need to work out a way to aid those individuals,” I suggested before adding, “but I understand that it will be hard to fully get a scope on how to do that until we arrive. I merely want to emphasize to everyone here that this is, as Myrin said, a rescue mission as well as a war. There are people who have suffered under Malakai’s hand for far too long that are not aiding him willingly. It’s our job to end this tyranny.”

Tristan gave a brisk nod and continued, “While we are sailing, I will try to fill in any of the blanks on this map from what I can remember. I am hoping we can find a place that will allow for an easy exit for all of those wishing to leave the Thaician Empire.”

“Thank you, Tristan,” I offered a grateful smile. “That would be extremely helpful.”

I turned to look at Elijah then, who stood next to me watching all the lords with a critical eye. If I had to guess, it was something that my two other men were probably doing as well.

“Is there anything else we need to cover before leaving?”

I had no problem openly asking for guidance and help in these meetings. Remembering Myrin’s journal entry lent me much strength in showing that it was okay to not know everything. Arrogance and conceit had no place in my mind.

“Not that I can think of,” Elijah responded.

“I have a question.” My gaze snapped to the same portly man from yesterday—the one who was ridiculously condescending. I almost wished he hadn’t bent the knee, just so we could get rid of him.

“And what is that?” I asked dryly.

“Our Empire has just lost their ruler. There are plenty of trusted officials staying here while you are gone pursuing this war. Who will lead in your stead?” It was a good question, and something that I had all but decided on—although I probably needed to confirm that the individual was interested in the opportunity.

Before I could respond, Tristan’s face contorted in concern at the sound of crying from out in the hall. Instantly, he was at the doors, throwing them open as Rina practically flew across the room and into his arms.

My chest squeezed as she hugged him fiercely, tears flowing down her face, and I could just make out her saying something about not wanting him to leave. It wasn’t her words that truly upset me, though. No, what upset me was some of the lords watching the interaction with distinct disapproval.

Their distaste only seemed to grow as Bailey strode into the room, offering me an apologetic smile. “I’m so sorry, Empress,” she said as she dipped her chin. “Rina found out that you were sailing today and wanted to see him.”

“Do not apologize for that.” I made my opinion as clear as possible on the situation, hating how formal she felt like she had to be to me in front of others—even if it was a sign of respect. Bailey was one of the strongest women I had ever met—having made the decision to cross the Cursed Divide and risk everything for her family—she was an empress in her own right even if she didn’t wear a crown.

Which brought me back to the question at hand.

“Actually, Bailey, I’m glad you’re here.” I looked toward the lord who had asked the earlier question about who would rule in my absence. “If she is willing, this is the woman who will lead and take on the daily responsibilities of being Empress in my absence. She will hold the position as we go to war, and she will be treated and respected as if she wears the crown herself.”

I looked back at Bailey and offered her a small smile. “If you’re willing, that is.”

Before she could respond, her shocked silence was broken by the lord flying out of his chair, nearly breaking it as it toppled to the floor behind him. “What?! Her! Why not one of us? Why not me?”

“I have plenty of reasons for that,” I said evenly, even as his face turned a furious shade of red.

“This is ridiculous, I will not let you pass the temporary duties of the ruler of an entire realm to some weak woman that will fold under—”

“Weak?” Bailey hissed as her eyes narrowed on the lord. We watched as she rounded the table, stopping me stepping forward to snap the bastard’s neck, as she stopped right in his space—nearly chest to chest—her gaze darkening with disgust.

“You think I’m weak? I risked *everything* to leave the Thaician Empire for a mere chance to come to an unknown land in hopes that it would be better for my family. I am brave, far braver than many men I have known, and I do not balk in the face of danger. I will protect the people here like I would my own family. Tell me what you have done that tested your strength of character.”

The man gaped at her, shock evident on his purpling face. “I do not need to explain myself to *you*.”

Which meant he knew he had no qualifications to lead. Hell, he probably shouldn’t even be a lord.

“But you should explain yourself to me,” I demanded softly. “And because she will lead in my place, you should do the same for her. Let me ask you something. Why are you here? What have you brought to this discussion besides dissent, blatant disregard for women, and negativity? I have no room in my empire for those who want to bring it to the ground.”

A sneer took over his face as he looked to the other lords. “This! This is the problem with having a woman as our—”

Dakath interrupted the man by grabbing the back of his neck and nearly tossing him out of the room, dropping his ass

on the hallway floor and ordering a harsh command to the guards there. “Take him to the dungeons.”

The guards didn’t hesitate after I nodded my confirmation.

Sounds of surprise came from the other lords as some of them paled and others looked down toward the table in abject fear. It was clear that they believed it was his actions that led him to being put there. I would have thought the same if Elijah, at that moment, hadn’t spoken up.

“From the moment of Myrin’s death, he has been doing his best to incite the rage of those around him,” Elijah pointed out. “As you know we have been on watch for the traitor that somehow assisted Malakai’s men in getting into the castle to kidnap Kyella and to kill Myrin. This feat could not have occurred without inside help. While we don’t know that it’s him, his hostility, and the actions that he has taken so far would lead us to believe he’s a suspect for questioning.”

“How do we know it’s not for simply disagreeing with you, Empress?” One of the other Lords asked, despite looking nervous.

“I could have done a lot of things if I wanted to punish him,” I drew out. “I could have stripped him of lands and titles, but questioning him? That isn’t a punishment if he’s done nothing wrong.”

The Lord looked unconvinced so I continued, “Tell me, can any of you vouch for his character? Can any of you assure me that he wouldn’t do something like that for his own gain?”

None of them said a word and I nodded, knowing that it was the right move.

If he was responsible, I would have his head, but I wasn’t against making him wait in the dungeon the entire time we were at war and giving him his fate after. If it turned out he wasn’t the traitor, a bit of time in jail would be good for his ego if nothing else.

I couldn’t help but feel satisfied at the turn of events and the possibility of gaining a lead to finding out who assisted in

setting up my abduction and Myrin's death as the doors shut once again.

"Right," I started as I stood and looked at the rest of them. "Now, if we have no other problems or matters to discuss, I think we are done here. We sail in an hour. Be ready."

With murmurs of agreement, the room cleared, none of the other lords vocalizing any of their shared beliefs with the ass we kicked out. When Bailey suddenly approached me, she offered me a small smile, her eyes tinted with concern.

"I didn't mean to cause a problem..." She hesitated, wringing her hands in front of her as she eyed me. "Are you sure this is what you want, Kyella?"

"Hey, no doubts anymore," I said confidently. "You just proved to everyone in this room that you won't back down. You possess compassion and an inner strength that will be needed to help me in this matter while I'm away."

Seeing the hesitation still in her eyes, I added, "Plus, I will ensure that we leave a group of trusted guards, chosen by my men, to stay behind to protect you. Also, you will have the previous human advisor that Myrin had at her side and has so far shown loyalty to this change of rule. I wouldn't leave you alone in this task, Bailey—I will ensure that you have an entire team behind you."

Her eyes filled with the same determination I felt as she nodded. "I will lead with honor, Kyella. I won't do the job justice the way you do, or Myrin did, but I will do my best."

"I know." I reached out and squeezed her shoulder, checking that Rina wasn't listening to my words. "Now, go spend some time with your family. I know the separation will be hard."

When she walked over to Tristan and Rina, my gaze moved to the window, seeing the clear skies and fleet waiting in the harbor.

It was time to sail the Cursed Divide.

# CHAPTER THREE

## DAKATH

**A**s we all waved to Bailey and Rina at the edge of the dock our massive ship was departing from, I glanced to my right at Tristan, whose jaw clenched tighter and tighter the further we drew away from his family.

*Should I console him? Would it upset him?*

We didn't necessarily have the rapport of friends, but we were brothers in arms, and I knew I wouldn't want to feel alone in his position if our places were swapped right now. Knowing that, I took a chance as I reached out and set my hand on his shoulder, squeezing lightly to show my silent support.

I hoped he didn't see it as me pitying him or seeing him as weak because that was about as far from the truth as it got. I had respected the hell out of him ever since he approached us during the ball for the chance to get his family out of the Thaician Empire. It was a ballsy move, which could have easily ended in his death if Malakai heard about his offer to break his prized possession out of the castle along with abandoning his post. He did it all for his family, and now he was risking it all again for families that weren't his own. Families like my own that were killed or lived in terror of Malakai's reign.

The least I could do was show him that he wasn't alone, even with his family staying behind.

He kept his hand up and a smile plastered over his face, waving at Bailey and Rina until they were just small dots in



the distance. Eventually he dropped his hand, and his shoulders sagged forward. His head fell as they disappeared completely. I kept my hand on his shoulder as Kyella shot me a look of concern, tears misting her golden eyes.

Elijah and Kolvar instinctively flanked her and ran their hands along her arm as she wiped at her eyes and shook her shoulders, as if she could shake off her emotions with the simple move. I knew not only was she sad to leave them behind, but I knew that her true suffering came from watching Tristan's own. She was empathetic through and through, and it was one of the purest things about her. The way she grieved and fought for others because she could always see a situation from someone else's perspective was commendable, but it hurt her.

Her love for their family was clear as day, and the bonds had strengthened tremendously in a short amount of time, like our own with Kyella. Some may find it disingenuous or impossible, but the thing about found family and love, was that when your soul found others that vibrated on that same frequency as your own, social constructs and what was deemed acceptable faded away. All that was left was the overflowing feeling that you would do anything to see those people smile and protect them at all costs. That was what we had all found, despite a cursed divide separating us for so long.

Tristan lifted a hand to lightly rest over mine as he choked out, "Thank you."

"Of course," I murmured, half-shocked by his thanks.

He was struggling to hold it together now that he didn't need to show them how strong and confident he felt so that they wouldn't worry as much—especially Rina. Bailey was wise enough to know all the different ways this could end, but Rina needed to see that her dad was a warrior and would come back to them.

My own throat clogged with thick emotion as I swallowed and added, "You don't need to thank me. We are all a family now. This is what we do for each other."

His head bobbed as his hand slipped away, and I took it as a sign that he might want some space alone. Lifting my own, I took a step back, and Kyella instantly threaded her fingers with my own as she came to my side and offered kind words to the stoic vampyre looking back over the water we'd crossed.

“We are here for you, Tristan. Always. We will see them again soon.”

Glancing over his shoulder, his silver eyes shone in the light of the early-afternoon sun as he forced a tight smile back to his face. “Thank you, Kyella. You should get some rest while you can. Elijah told me you were up all night reading journals and old texts. I will keep an eye on everything up here and alert you if we need you.”

Gently tugging Kyella away from Tristan to give him some time to work through his emotions, I nodded at him as she said her goodbyes. Navigating along the deck of the ship didn't prove to be as difficult as I thought, despite more than fifty people either working or chatting together amicably in the space. As we approached, the crowd parted for Kyella and the chattering died down to pure silence, only the whistling wind audible as people averted their gaze and bowed their heads in what I knew they meant as a sign of respect. We'd personally picked every crew member aboard our ship, and their intentions were pure.

However, knowing Kyella, she wouldn't like this at all.

As soon as the thought crossed my mind, she came to a halt in the middle of the deck and glanced around with confusion knitting her brow together. I watched as her lips thinned, and she huffed quietly before placing her hands on her hips. “All right, listen up!” she yelled, dragging all their eyes off the deck and onto her.

“I may have been named Empress, and while I can't tell you how much I appreciate your respect and acceptance of me,” she began, turning around slowly to look each crew member in the eye as she spoke, “I don't want you to think that we aren't equals, because we are. We all chose to be here

fighting side by side in this war, so please, do not feel like you must tiptoe around me. We are comrades, and you have my respect as well.”

I couldn't help but chuckle as many eyes widened at her request to treat her as their equal. This is exactly how I pictured her as the Empress when we first learned that Myrin named Kyella her successor. She would never think of herself above others or wish to be treated differently, unless it was a self-righteous prick of a lord that tried to question her character and ability to lead.

The looks of awe turned into full smiles and nods in her direction as they returned to their groups or tasks. Perhaps one day they would feel brave enough to speak with her, but this was a good start.

Once we descended the stairs below deck to the level that housed the sleeping quarters, she all but collapsed onto the bed in her cabin and sighed. “Maybe I should have listened to you all and slept last night,” she admitted with the same tinkling laugh that made my heart soar each time I heard it.

Kolvar quickly crouched at the edge of the mattress and began to take her boots off, spurring Kyella to sit up and try to bat his hands away. “You don't need to fuss over me,” she grumbled.

“Now, now, what have we told you before?” he countered, easily grabbing her hands with one of his and continuing to unlace her shoes with the other. “It makes us happy to take care of you, so just let us, darling. It doesn't make you weak.”

It was interesting to hear him say that when I had just been thinking that about Tristan. He and Kyella were always wearing a mask of strength, even when it was clear they were hurting inside. Honestly, I could say the same about myself ever since I'd fled the Thaician Empire many, many years ago.

Perhaps it was the mark of a survivor—to show everyone else around you that you were okay even when you weren't. Because being weak or asking for help wasn't an option when you were barely getting by. All it would take is one person to exploit your weakness, or to see that they could control you

with the guise of a helpful hand, before twisting it for their own gain. You just kept going with that facade until one day it became a permanent part of you—like a shield no one should have to wield.

I was lost in my thoughts as I gazed at Kolvar rubbing her feet and Elijah biting into his wrist to press it to Ky's full lips, her eyes narrowing at him.

Eventually her voice pulled me from my thoughts. "Dakath?"

Blinking rapidly, I refocused and found Elijah and Kolvar both drinking from her wrist, the sight making my cock instantly hard. Clearing my throat and shifting around, I responded, "Yes, Ky?"

Her lower lip jutted out slightly in a pout as her eyes traced my face with concern etched into the golden depths, her brows furrowed. "Will you come drink from me? After reading that passage last night, I don't think I can go to sleep until I know you've all done so. I know I'll need to feed from you all in the coming days."

I wasn't sure if she realized yet that asking me to drink from her was like asking me to feast on her pussy. Pure bliss accompanied both of those tasks, and nothing could ever come close to them.

The guys pulled back from her and pushed themselves toward the top of the bed, giving me space to sit on either side of her. A thought came to mind, and I nodded at her as I crossed the short distance between us to stand between her legs. Dropping to my knees, I grabbed the hem of her dress and looked up at her from beneath my lashes. "I will, but only if you come on my tongue first. I promise your sleep will be even better after that, baby."

Her pink tongue darted out to wet her lips as she nodded. I didn't waste a second in dragging the material of her dress up to her stomach as she tilted her hips up to assist. Kolvar and Elijah reached down to grip underneath her arms and drag her up to half lay on each of them as she spread her legs wide for me.

Crawling onto the bed, my fangs protruded as I lowered my nose to slowly scrape against the inside of her thigh until my mouth hovered just above her clit. Inhaling deeply, my eyes rolled back in ecstasy as my tongue began to lap at her wet core. “Fuck,” I growled out against her, careful to not nick her with the tips of my fangs. “If my head were ripped from my body right now, I’d die with a fucking smile for having the taste of you on my lips, baby.”

She moaned in response, and I felt a quiver run through her legs as I pushed my tongue inside of her.

“Do you love his tongue lapping at your pussy, darling?” Kolvar’s voice floated through the air roughly.

Her hips bucked up, making me snarl slightly at her being tugged away from me while I was trying to feast. My hands quickly latched onto the swell of her hips, holding her down as my tongue flicked over her clit rapidly.

“Ah, ah,” Elijah tutted. “We want to hear you respond. Nodding won’t suffice, love. Tell us.”

“Yes!” she cried, and I couldn’t help but bring a hand down to tease her entrance with my fingers in reward. “I love Dakath’s tongue on my cunt.”

A feral growl slipped out of me, and I shoved my fingers into her, pumping them in and out, loving the way her arousal coated my fingers with ease. Rolling my tongue around her swollen bud, I drove her into a frenzy of need, knowing I wasn’t giving her enough to unravel for me just yet.

“Good girl,” Elijah praised, and I took that moment to look up, finding the two of them palming her breasts and teasing her nipples. Kolvar kissed along the side of her throat, scraping his fangs along the sensitive skin there.

Her walls clenched with the praise, and a new wave of slickness accompanied it. I smiled against her in a sick satisfaction, wondering just how wet we could get our girl.

I wasn’t sure what it was about my rampant desire to provide Kyella pleasure, but it consumed me every day. Maybe it was because I felt like I owed her so fucking much

for erasing the shadows that lurked in my mind prior to her coming into my life. Each day before her felt like I had to convince myself to carry on, and then I saw her chained to that damn throne. That was the last day I felt like I was wandering the world without a purpose.

I didn't want to say that life wasn't worth living without her, but she damn sure gave me a reason to smile each day when I opened my eyes. Everything felt more vibrant and alive with her in it. I knew she didn't want me to feel like I owed her anything, so I'd never voice that to her, but I'd make sure she felt that same vibrancy as me—and I felt like orgasms were a damn good start.

Her breathing was short and gasping. "Feed from me," she begged.

I was a weak man, unable to deny her request for even a second. Keeping my fingers in their rhythm of pumping in and out of her, I turned my head toward the throbbing vein running through the inside of her thigh and shut my eyes as my fangs pierced her.

Liquid honey flowed through my mouth. The way her blood lit up my body with energy, the way it coursed through me like fire...the closest thing I could describe it to was like drinking from the sun itself.

Blood trickled down her leg and coated my chin as I sucked it down. I knew I needed to be careful with how much I pulled from her, so before long I forced myself to retract my fangs and focused once more on her glistening pussy, knowing the blood on my face would bring her to new heights and make her shatter for us.

When I first used the blood on her, I worried she'd think I was a monster for it, but it was clear each time that she loved the heightened arousal it brought to her by the way her pussy became slick with need.

I heard Kolvar and Elijah faintly whispering dirty things to her as her moans echoed around us, but I couldn't focus on them, intent on bringing Kyella to her peak and soaking up every minute of being between her legs.

Within seconds, muffled screams sounded, signaling her release and her pussy spasmed around my fingers. I barely restrained my smug smirk of satisfaction that she'd probably pulled a pillow over her mouth to try to quiet her cry of pleasure.

A lazy smile pulled my lips up as I pulled my fingers from her and moved to stand off the bed and find something to clean the blood up with. Spying a towel and bucket of water, I quickly wiped at my chin to stop the blood from dripping across the wooden planks as I walked.

After cleaning her off, I dropped the soaked towel to the ground, and she pushed to sit on the bed, smoothing her dress over her legs.

“While we have a moment of time alone and nowhere to be, I need to catch you all up to date on what I’ve learned about Barnabus,” she hedged, looking a bit uncomfortable as we all shared looks of confusion.

“Barnabus?” Elijah questioned in bewilderment.

“Yeah, I have a lot to tell you, but I promise I’ll sleep after that.”

And so she told us of how a bat that had been around us for as long as we’d be working for Myrin was an old vampyre god that could shift into that form.

And here I thought I’d heard it all.

# CHAPTER FOUR



## KYELLA

Looking skyward, I watched Barnabus complete a loop for almost the fifth time before landing on the crow's nest. It was located on the main mast, where one of the sailors kept a look out through our travels. I could tell that Barnabus was enjoying the fresh air as much as myself, making me feel only that much more exhilarated and awake.

That nap had been exactly what I'd needed.

It should have been obvious I would be tired after not sleeping the previous night, but I hadn't realized how exhausted I was until my eyes fell shut, surrounded by my men. I slept dreamlessly for hours, only to finally be woken by the sound of waves crashing against the porthole of our sleeping quarters.

Once we all woke, we decided to come above deck, and I was taking the moment to enjoy the scent of brine that was carried by the occasional splash of water from the waves hitting the side of the ship.

Leaving the Tridian Empire was hard. Not because I was hesitant moving forward with our plan, but because just like many, I was leaving my home. A home that I would fight to the death for, but still my heart was heavy with all the emotions that came with that. I knew many on the ship felt the same.

Of course, if I felt this way, I couldn't imagine what those who had lived in the Tridian Empire for decades were experiencing. I wanted the opportunity to know that type of

loyalty and love for the empire—one forged through years of living there and growing into a life I never expected to have. I feared with this war that I would never return and see it again.

Now that we were sailing, I noticed a shift in energy throughout the ship. There seemed to be an energized air to the people we came across, and I assumed it was because we had done one of the hardest things already: *leave*.

***You look deep in thought, young one.***

Barnabus' voice rang through my head as he flew back down and landed on the railing next to me. While there were a few people on the quarter deck where I stood—located further toward the back of the ship and elevated from the main deck—nearly all were on the latter. Plus, the wind was whipping in the opposite direction of everyone, allowing me to respond to Barnabus freely without the fear of being overheard.

Elijah stood the closest, around ten feet away near the stairs that led to the main deck, talking to one of the sailors. Kolvar had gone to get me a jacket, despite telling him I wasn't cold. Vampyres weren't inclined to feel temperature changes, and neither were dhampyrs. It was sweet, though, and his concern had overridden my words, and he'd gone to get it anyway. Dakath had gone to talk to the cooks on board.

While *we* didn't need to eat normal food, there were humans here, and I wanted to ensure that they were fed as much as they needed to maintain the level of strength they would need going into this war. I was positive the crew had already considered that while preparing, but it never hurt to check. I remembered very clearly the pain of being hungry and how it zapped every ounce of energy.

"I am," I admitted to Barnabus. "Not in a bad way, just thoughtful about leaving home and everything to come."

Barnabus made a series of clicks that I had come to understand were meant to be a sound of understanding, before once again flying off the railing and soaring over the deck. A smile pressed onto my face. While he might not admit it, I think he was having a lot of fun flying over the ocean compared to the kingdom. Every time there was a strong wind,

he seemed to try to fly against it, as if testing himself—like some type of game.

“Darling,” Kolvar appeared behind me, as his heavy oversized jacket slid around my shoulders. “Sorry I took so long, I was helping one of the crew members go from cabin to cabin, ensuring that everyone had what they needed.”

And that was one of the many things I loved about Kolvar—the compassion he showed others.

“Thank you,” I tipped my head back and offered him a small smile as he dropped a kiss to the top of my head. “I’ve been so distracted watching Barnabus that I hadn’t even realized it had been a bit.”

Kolvar’s gaze moved to the skies above in thought where he flew, a curious look filling his gaze. “What you told us about him...It’s insane to think about. In a way, it’s easy to believe because Myrin used to talk to him as if he was another person in the room, but I have to admit, it was a twist that I hadn’t expected.”

I don’t think we expected more than half of what had happened recently.

“You’re telling me. Imagine how I felt when his voice just appeared in my head,” I pointed out as Kolvar chuckled softly. I continued, “I like it, though. In such hard times, it makes me feel like I have even more help than I assumed. His insight is helpful.”

Kolvar tilted his head in thought. “He *could* be part of the meetings if he wanted though.”

“What do you mean?” I asked curiously. While I had told him about his ability to communicate with me, I didn’t think it was a good idea to tell others. His history and identity felt like a trusted secret that I should protect, only telling those who I trusted the most.

“You told us it was his power to be able to shift, so technically he doesn’t need to stay in that form,” Kolvar explained, keeping his voice low. “While yes, he does live as a

bat, he could be *human* once again and advise you in a more traditional sense—it would just mean revealing his identity.”

Well, shit.

My eyes widened in realization as I spoke in a hushed tone. “Honestly, I hadn’t even considered that. The fact that he could transform into a human form hadn’t really occurred to me.”

I felt so dense for not even thinking of that when I knew he could shift into the bat we all know him as. Obviously that meant he had another form...

My gaze moved to where he perched the crow’s nest, and I found myself wanting to ask what he looked like, when he had last transformed, as well as a million other questions...I couldn’t even imagine him in human form—the thought of it was wild.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t call up to him without drawing attention, so the questions would have to wait.

“Kolvar!” Elijah called out, pulling both of our attention away from the old god perched on the crow’s nest. “Can I have your help for a minute?”

I had no idea what they were discussing, having tuned them out to an extent, but I had a feeling it was for tonight. I’d heard Elijah briefly mention something about holding a gathering on deck to focus on the unity of the crew since there were people from so many different parts of the Tridian Empire that likely hadn’t had a chance to meet before. I thought it was a fantastic idea.

When Barnabus landed next to me on the railing once again, my attention was pulled to the question I had for him.

***Yes, I can turn into a human—he’s correct.***

Damn, he had some excellent hearing having heard our conversation while being in the clutches of the wind so high in the sky.

Well, that answered that. I held in my barrage of other questions because I noticed that despite trying to keep his tone

light, it seemed a bit guarded, so I wasn't sure how he would react to my question.

"If you don't mind me asking..." I hesitated for just a second, not wanting to offend him.

***Why don't I ever shift?***

"Yes." I nodded, glad that he didn't seem aggravated with my question. "Also, what do you look like? I'm trying to imagine it and can't."

***I'm far better looking than all these other men...Which is why I don't shift; I wouldn't want to show any of them up.***

I couldn't help it, I snorted, surprised by his joking, haughty tone. I covered my mouth, shoulders shaking with laughter.

Barnabus made a sound that came across as laughter as I tried to talk through my own. "Of course, I'm sure that would cause quite the problem. After all, that is such an important element of a naval fleet—how good looking everyone is. Wouldn't want to cause any problems in the established hierarchy."

***Fortunately for them, I won't be shifting anytime soon, so it won't be a problem.*** His tone, while humorous, was tinted with a bit of sadness. I felt my smile morphing into a more serious expression.

"Why?" I asked softly.

For a long moment, Barnabus didn't say anything. When he did speak again, there was a rueful tone to the sound of his voice in my head.

***I haven't been in my human form in more than a hundred years. I wouldn't know how to interact with those of this age and era. I have spent so long in this form, with my brethren of bats and advising Myrin in private, that I don't think I would feel truly comfortable amongst the normal populace.***

"Understandable, but just know that if you ever want to shift, whether temporarily or more permanently, I will fully

support it. No matter how you wanted to go about it.”

Rather than responding, he took off, flying away as the sound of boots scraping against the deck filled my ears. I turned to find Tristan walking across the deck, offering me a sharp nod of greeting. I wondered if he had taken a nap himself but based on the bags under his eyes and the slump of his shoulders, I had a feeling he hadn't.

No doubt his mind was preoccupied with leaving Bailey and Rina.

“You talk to him like she did.”

“I do. Barnabus has a personality all his own with his clicks and body movements, so it's easy to talk to him like I would anyone else.”

Joining me at the railing, we looked out over the water as he nodded, not seeming to question my thought process on it. Then again, didn't people often talk to their animals? It wasn't like anyone else knew he could respond.

After a long moment, I looked over at him. “How are you doing, Tristan? I know it was hard to leave. I can't imagine how you must be feeling.”

A slow exhale left him as he ran a hand through his hair and nodded, not bothering to deny it or rebuff my question.

“I'm okay, not good, but okay. Of course, I'm focused on what we need to do, but my thoughts are on them while traveling toward an empire we worked so damn hard to leave. The idea of what could happen before I get back to them worries me. Not for my own safety or what could happen to them back home, but because I don't want them to worry about my well-being or stress about what could happen during battle.

“I know it's unavoidable, and Bailey is more than strong enough to handle the time apart and anything that comes her way, but Rina...I could see how scared she is, and despite knowing this is the right move, there is a part of me that feels wrong for leaving her after fighting so hard for the freedom to live our lives as we wanted. To be together all the time.”

“And you’re still fighting for freedom, but this time for others,” I pointed out. “I can only imagine how hard it was, especially because of Rina. Which is why we are going to do this and get everyone back home safely. We know how this bastard thinks—we can do this.”

Tristan nodded sharply before offering me a dry, sad smile. “Honestly, I never thought we would be heading back here.”

“Same,” I breathed out. “Every time the memories of the life I had there begin to creep in and ignite my fear of returning, I think about all of those who are still suffering through what we did. It gives me the motivation and bravery to push forward.”

“I have no idea what is going to happen to his lands after we win this war,” Tristan said, his tone confident about our success despite his concerns. “But now that we have experienced the freedom of the Tridian Empire, I can’t imagine not bringing that to others.”

“I agree. I want that to be how all of us live, to have equality for every single human and vampyre.”

“Exactly,” Tristan spoke evenly.

Dakath suddenly appeared next to me, sliding his large hand over my waist before kissing the side of my head. Clearly having heard what we were talking about, he added, “The Thaician Empire has been plagued with the darkness of Malakai’s rule for too long. It is going to require serious effort to change a culture that is accustomed to cruelty and inequality.”

“And we will put that effort in.” I looked up at Dakath, his gaze filled with heavy emotion, no doubt remembering his own past and how much he suffered when he lost his parents. “So that no child fears the death of their parents at the hand of their monarch. So that no parent worries about their children being targeted for being human. So that every single citizen can go to bed knowing that they have the most basic of rights—freedom.”

Staring back out to the ocean, as if I could see the approaching empire, I made a vow to myself that I would do exactly that. Until I completed that, *my job wouldn't be done.*

I wasn't sure how long we stood there in a companionable silence, gazing out at the open expanse of water, but eventually the sun sank beneath the horizon and the sound of voices rose on the main deck, drawing my attention. Tristan walked over to the railing to look over it as I offered Dakath a curious look, a smile playing on his lips.

"I believe they are holding some fun contests," Dakath explained, excitement tinging his voice.

"I heard Elijah mention something about a night to bring everyone together?" I questioned curiously as we walked over there together, his hand intertwined with my own.

"Oh, I have a feeling this will do that," Dakath chuckled as I realized that there were groups of men gathering around large barrels and crates that had been set up for different games. From here, I could see everything from dice to cards—but the one that really caught my attention?

*Arm wrestling.*

"Let's get closer to watch," I suggested.

No longer did the crew seem to feel nervous with me being there, friendly smiles being offered as we walked down the steps onto the main deck. The two men who were arm wrestling both laughed as people cheered around them, and I couldn't help but smile at the sound of so many enjoying themselves. There were even three men that had instruments, playing an upbeat, fun tune that filled the air.

"Darling," Kolvar appeared next to us, "interested in arm wrestling?"

I flashed a smile, not even hesitating. "No, I wouldn't want to kick your butt in front of everyone."

Kolvar barked out a laugh that had people looking over at us and drawing Elijah's attention as he walked toward us from where he had been refereeing the match. "I'm pretty sure you owe me a match, Kolvar."



Kolvar narrowed his eyes in amusement. “You’re on.”

The crew around us broke into applause as I followed, wanting to see the match. I noticed people cleared space for me, and Dakath nudged me forward, clearly wanting me to take Elijah’s position to run the match. The two of them rested their arms on a massive barrel, facing across from one another, and I couldn’t help the way my smile grew, looking back and forth between them.

“All right,” I said as I raised my hand up as a signal. “Ready. Set. Start!”

The two of them immediately put pressure against one another, their grips turning white-knuckled as they focused on beating each other, their expressions serious. Dakath had an arm wrapped around me and everyone else around us was cheering and calling out different names in excitement.

I had to stop myself from bouncing on my toes and nearly jumping as Kolvar began to take the lead, pushing Elijah’s arm down slightly. I knew I shouldn’t cheer for either of them, but it was so damn exciting. I couldn’t help but get into it and began clapping for Kolvar.

Then Elijah did a sharp push back and slammed Kolvar’s arm down.

The entire deck—people who I didn’t think were even paying attention—exploded into cheers as I watched Kolvar offer him a massive grin. Shaking his head, I heard him say something about doing pretty good for an old guy to Elijah. I couldn’t help but laugh as Elijah walked around the barrel and stole me from Dakath, who went to take his place.

“Good job, handsome,” I cooed up at him as I tilted my head back.

Elijah winked at me, his mood damn near jovial, likely amped up from the competition. “Couldn’t let him win in front of all these guys. I’m supposed to be their commanding officer. They’d never take me seriously if I lost.”

After an hour or two of competitions that I had no doubt would continue into the night, with fires being lit to keep the

humans amongst us warm and to light up the main deck, I made my way toward a nearby bench that lined the starboard side of the ship. Letting out a small breath, I sat, feeling glad everyone was enjoying themselves. While the thought of what would come tomorrow or the next day weighed on me, I knew this merrymaking was beneficial to the crew.

“Empress.”

My head snapped toward a young man offering me a nervous and somewhat awkward smile. Considering everyone seemed hesitant to talk to me, I was impressed by his bravery, so I offered him a smile back.

“Still getting used to that,” I pointed out, trying to put him at ease. He quirked an eyebrow, so I clarified, “Being called the Empress.”

“I imagine.” He nodded eagerly in understanding. “I don’t want to bother you, but I just wanted to let you know that the speech you gave last night... Well, it was so inspiring. I’m sure you’ve heard that from a million people, but you brought my mom to tears. My little brother, despite being too young to join, considered sneaking onto the ships because of everything you said. He wanted to be a part of such great change. To help however he could.”

My eyes widened, and I tried to not let emotion overtake my expression. He might think I was upset if I started tearing up, and I didn’t want that at all. “Thank you for telling me that. I’m glad my words resonated with all of you.”

“Resonated with *everyone*,” he corrected instantly. “All I have heard today is whispers of how strong you are and how impressed they are with our new empress. I just wanted to let you know that so many already support and celebrate your rule.”

*Dammit.* Emotion clogged my throat as I tried to find the words to express how I felt but realized I didn’t have any. At least, not any I could express to him. Instead, I simply said, “I will continue to be as strong as I can for the entire empire, no matter what.”

“I believe that.” He smiled widely before offering a small head bow. “I will leave you to your night but thank you for stepping up and leading us in such an important time, Empress.”

Offering a small nod of dismissal, he walked away. I turned back out to the sea with a shuddering breath, hoping to hide the emotion choking me up. I knew I needed to be strong for everyone, and I would be, but his words really hit home.

I wanted to tell him that my strength came from Myrin, from her belief in me, and the belief she taught me to have in myself. Instead, I thanked her for everything she had given me to help in my efforts to lead these people.

To be the Empress our empire needed.

# CHAPTER FIVE

## KYELLA

**M**ead and wine flowed freely amongst the crew, and laughter filled the air with ease. Covering my yawn with my hand, I wondered how long they were going to be at it, completely impressed with their stamina.

I sounded like an old lady, despite being younger than likely half of those on board.

A thick arm came around my waist, pressing me into a hard chest. Breathing in the eucalyptus scent, I relaxed into Elijah's embrace.

"How are you still awake old man?" I joked, poking his side lightly, "I'm halfway asleep standing here."

A deep chuckle came from him in return before he swept me into his arms, and I sighed with contentment.

"Despite getting a nap earlier, you still didn't sleep nearly enough, love," he chided before nuzzling his nose against my cheek. "Do you want to head down to bed? I'm sure the party will continue for another few hours."

My eyes grew heavier at the mere suggestion of going to bed, and I instantly nodded before yawning. "Yeah, that sounds great. Let's find Dakath and Kolvar, though. They don't have to come with us, but I want to at least let them know we're leaving."

His mouth moved from my cheek and down to my neck as he murmured, "I think I might need to taste you before bed, love. You know, to keep my immunity up..." he trailed off, the

sexual undertones making it clear that was not why he wanted to taste me.

Hitting his chest lightly as I saw others begin to look our way, I whispered, "Put me down, please."

He did as I asked before dropping a kiss to my head and entwining our hands. "Ashamed of me, love?" he asked in a joking manner.

My cheeks heated, and I dipped my head before murmuring, "No, I just don't want to cross that line in front of them. I know that I don't want to keep my life and who I love a secret, but there are some boundaries that need to be kept in place."

It hit me then, exactly who I was talking to. The man who objected to his feelings for me due to duty and honor. He of all people should understand.

My eyes snapped up to his, and now that I looked closely, there did seem to be a slight haze there. As my lips split into a smile, I gasped dramatically. "Elijah, are you drunk?"

A sweet aroma spilled from his lips, overriding his natural scent as he cocked a single eyebrow at me and teased, "Tipsy, not drunk. Just enough to get the edge off to enjoy myself for once."

True laughter rolled through me as Kolvar and Dakath joined us, mirth dancing in their eyes as well.

"I see the shots he had to take are starting to hit the old man," Kolvar joked, punching Elijah's shoulder lightly.

My brows raised in shock as I echoed, "Shots?"

Elijah groaned at the same time Dakath chuffed out, "Oh yeah. He thought he could drink his cup of mead faster than me. Multiple times. The loser had to take a shot."

Kolvar leaned into my left side and lowered his mouth to my ear. "Vampyres process alcohol much faster than humans. He will be good as new in about thirty minutes. He wouldn't risk being impaired in any way for a long period of time."

The dramatic roll of Elijah's eyes didn't escape me, making my mouth twitch with a smile.

I knew he would never drink so much as to not be able to function, and he did seem relatively normal—just a more relaxed normal. I kind of liked seeing this side of him. He always carried so much on his shoulders.

“We were just coming to find you both,” I said, swiftly changing subjects. “We're going to head down to our sleeping quarters, but you don't have to come if you want to hang out for longer up here.”

A little yelp of surprise came from me as Kolvar hoisted me up over his shoulder and sped toward the stairs. Within seconds, we were in our room and falling backward onto the bed. He positioned himself until he was beneath me, and I straddled him. He smirked up at me victoriously.

“And why would I want to stay up there when the activities down here are so much more enticing?” he asked, heat simmering in his hazel eyes as he looked up at me from beneath dark, long lashes.

“Not fair!” Elijah growled as he entered the room and tried to grab me, but Kolvar was quicker, pulling me down and pressing me to his chest.

Dakath's chuckle filled the room, letting me know he'd joined us as well. “Children, children,” he chided, “sharing is caring.”

It was honestly a hilarious moment, and I found that my heart was so full of happiness and love. I was so grateful Elijah had thought to bring everyone together tonight and that so much laughter and joy had been felt by all, it seemed.

Pushing up from Kolvar's chest, I lightly booped the tip of his nose. “There's enough of me to go around,” I reminded them, letting my voice drop to what I hoped was a seductive tone.

Sleep had been on my mind just minutes ago, but my thoughts had quickly shifted to a different subject now. While they'd ensured I was satisfied prior to my nap, I found my

body craving more from them. More of them. I needed to feel them inside of me.

Just as my hands dipped to pull my dress up, the ship rocked violently to one side, and I briefly wondered if we were going to capsize as we were thrown completely off guard. Kolvar and I rolled off the bed and onto the floor into a heap, and I heard the impact of Elijah and Dakath smacking into the wood-planked wall.

“What the hell?” Elijah roared as the ship righted itself.

I was surrounded by the three of them immediately as Kolvar helped me to my feet.

“Are you—”

His question was cut off as Barnabus yelled into my mind, taking all my attention with his alarmed tone.

***Kyella! You must come to the deck, now!***

Shooting to my feet, I looked around at my guys in alarm. “We have to get to the upper deck. Now.”

As soon as we arrived, we found that the jovial energy that had been floating through the air minutes before had been replaced with chaos and screams as the sound of a ship cracking and splintering in the distance echoed through the air. The lights on their deck went out, and an eerie creaking sound came seconds before shouts of alarm began again.

*What the hell was going on?* Had Malakai’s forces sailed out to declare war on us?

I hadn’t heard any cannons firing, but something strong enough to take down ships was out there. That thought alone had my stomach tightening with unease.

“The ship capsized!”

“Something destroyed it!”

Our boat rocked, and my initial assumption was that the motion was from the force of the fallen ship capsizing in the water. But after the severe rock our ship had felt while I was below deck with my men, I wasn’t so sure.



Horror churned in my stomach at the thought of our people going down with the ship. I felt paralyzed, at a complete loss of how to size up our opponent when I had no idea who or what it was in the dark.

I could barely hear my own thoughts above the panic, but thankfully Barnabus cut through it all as he landed on my shoulder and spoke to me.

***Kyella, do you remember the monster you saw while captured by Holmeth?***

The large eye and tentacles immediately surfaced in my memory. *Holy shit.*

“Yes!” I yelled above the chaos. “It took down the ship with its tentacles! Are you saying that’s the same monster that is here now?”

I didn’t care if anyone heard me at this point. We didn’t have the luxury of privacy right now, and we needed to make a plan immediately.

If this was that same creature, I didn’t have the slightest clue how to defeat it. I hadn’t seen it in its entirety, even in the daylight, but what I had seen was terrifying. Without a doubt, it could destroy these ships like I could break a glass in my hand—effortlessly.

***Yes, I’m sensing the same energy as I did then. What I couldn’t tell you then was that this creature had lain dormant for over a millennium. The creature was that of myths...until it resurfaced when you were captured. The Kraken.***

I felt myself tuning him out as cries for help sounded around us. I heard the commands from captains to deploy the smaller ships secured to the sides for rescue missions, but I feared that would be the worst option, putting more at risk in the unsafe waters.

“Barnabus, can you call the bats to help those stuck in the water?” I rushed to ask. Their screams were echoing through my mind, leaving me feeling sick.

***No, we are much too far for them to get here quickly enough to help. But you need to listen to me, Kyella. It can't be a coincidence that it has appeared twice now where you are, especially with such a vast distance between where it was first sighted until now.***

I felt like a complete idiot, not even thinking of the creature after I'd been rescued by Barnabus and the bats. How had I not considered the possibility of having to face this foe again?

"Shit!" Dakath yelled, quickly grabbing me as our boat heaved once more. He anchored us to the mast in the middle of the deck, with his arm locked around the wood.

Elijah and Kolvar stumbled to the ground before quickly righting themselves.

"What is he saying, Ky?" Dakath asked in my ear. "We must do something before it takes us, or the entire fleet, out."

"I don't know what to do yet!" I admitted dejectedly. "Hold on!"

***Kyella, your blood was spilled the first time this creature appeared, was it not?***

"Yes!" I quickly answered, remembering the brutal torture I'd been put through. "A lot of my blood!"

***Has your blood been spilled since coming on this ship?***

My face screwed up in confusion. "My blood? No! How would my blood have been spilled on this trip already?"

Dakath's hand gripped my upper arm as he spun me to face him, eyes wide as he yelled, "Your blood was spilled, Ky! When we fed from you and I used a rag to clean it up. I tossed it onto the floor after wiping it up."

***That confirms my thoughts. The Kraken was rumored to be drawn to powerful blood, often appearing in naval battles and destroying those who had dhampyrs on their side. It was so long ago that I wasn't sure if I was remembering it correctly, but that must be it. It's drawn to you, Kyella.***

*Shit.* That would make sense for why it hadn't appeared the first time I'd sailed the Cursed Divide after escaping Malakai. We hadn't known what I was at the time, and I had only consumed others' blood. Mine had never been spilled.

My stomach churned violently at the thought of how much danger Bailey and Rina had been in being on the same ship as me without any of us knowing.

It was like death followed my every step—that anyone I surrounded myself with would never be safe. Guilt wrapped around my heart in a vice-like grip, squeezing until I felt breathless.

The ship directly to our right could be seen faintly with our enhanced sight and the glow from our lanterns and ours. From the water between us rose three massive tentacles that were as thick as our ships were, curling up out of the water dramatically and staying high in the air for the span of a few breaths right before crashing down onto the ship, splitting it directly down the center.

Tears streamed down my face as my knees wobbled. Why was I always met with so much death and destruction? I had vowed to bring back every single soul that I could to their homes. Yet we weren't even facing our true enemy yet and lives were being lost.

I was failing them.

“Kyella!” Tristan yelled, running at us in a blur until he stood with our group. “Two ships have been capsized. We must do something. We've all readied our cannons, but we don't want to risk shooting in the dark for fear of hitting our own ships since we can't see the creature well.”

“Barnabus!” I screamed, “How do I kill it?”

I had to end this. I had to save them.

The creature was massive and lived beneath the water. How the hell was I supposed to kill it when I couldn't see it well and couldn't even swim?

For the first time, a feeling of helplessness seeped through me.

# CHAPTER SIX

## KYELLA

**F**or a second, I felt paralyzed by fear.

Not of the Kraken—although that would have been reasonable right now—but rather the fear that I wouldn't be able to vanquish this new enemy and keep my people safe. A feeling that was only enhanced by the knowledge that I had failed so many of them already. The screams from the ships being cracked in half rang in my ear as the tentacles disappeared under water once more.

I had to fix this. Now. I would not let my fear, or this creature, be our downfall.

“Hold steady! Wait for my command!” Elijah roared out to the men crowding the ships' main deck, easily controlling the chaos of the situation. It seemed all traces of the alcohol in his system had evaporated with the adrenaline suddenly pumping through his veins.

On the ships closest to ours, I could hear similar orders being given. Luckily, no one had acted rashly yet.

Running to the railing of the ship, I watched the water from where the creature had last appeared, trying to focus on it in hope of predicting its movement and finding a way to target it. Using my enhanced vision to seek out the shadow of its movement in the dark water, I realized that it was... *everywhere*.

Below, the gigantic creature seemed to be one with the violent sea, making me wonder just how big it really was.

***Between its eyes!*** Barnabus' voice had me snapping my head up as he circled above, no doubt trying to get a view of the creature as well. ***There is a particularly soft spot between its eyes, it's one of the Kraken's only vulnerabilities. The rest of the skin is scale like, so that is where you need to target!***

“By its eyes?!” I shouted in shock. “How am I supposed to get close enough to do that?”

Before he could answer, another two tentacles rose into the air before they came down in a hard slap against the surface of the water. I gripped the railing as a tidal wave slammed into our ship as we rocked so badly I felt like we would tip over.

Shit. If we didn't handle this, it was going to sink our entire fleet and kill everyone from the force of its hits alone.

Elijah appeared next to me, his gaze sharp and focused. “What is he saying?”

“Its eyes. I need to stab between—” I noticed the Kraken's appendages rising to the surface once more. “Hold tight! It's going to do it again!”

Except it wasn't just the tentacles that surfaced.

As if hearing our words, the water began to churn in front of us, and a dark blue, bulbous head began to surface, an inhuman sound vibrating through the air. People yelled in warning as our ship rocked dangerously, the colossal creature's action sending all the ships back with the force of the waves it created.

I watched in horror as the moon shone down on a creature of myths and nightmares...*The Kraken.*

As high as one of the masts, its skin was indeed dark and scaled, and its bulbous head nearly blocked out the sky as its set of four glowing-blue eyes locked onto the closest ship, which happened to be to our right. It let out an ear-piercing bellow, and I watched as four tentacles rose and churned the sea into a violent storm—one that could easily sink a ship.

***Here is your chance!***

Barnabus' voice echoed through my head, but I was already in action—refusing to let the creature take down another damn ship. Doing what made the most sense to me, I broke away from my men and used my speed to sprint up to the elevated quarter deck before unsheathing one of my daggers.

I didn't hesitate to cut my hand in a quick sharp movement before raising it high to gain the attention of the creature, sliding my weapon back into place, securing it until I could get close enough to sink it into the monster's most vulnerable spot. One that I could now see clearly—there was a split between the kraken's four eyes, an open fissure that seemed to contain a pulsating neon-blue organ that I instinctively knew was my target.

If my blood is what the monster wanted, then I was more than happy to use it to draw its attention to get what I wanted, the hot liquid dripping down my hand and wrist.

The creature paused its pursuit of the other ship, twisting swiftly in the water and nearly hitting the other vessel in the process as its gaze landed on me. My jaw tightened as I steeled myself, its form moving through the sea like it was nothing, far quicker than I could have thought possible. I examined the Kraken as it approached, evaluating the best way to get close to it.

I had a feeling that unless I wanted the ship to sink, it wasn't going to be from here.

“Kyella!” Kolvar roared my name as he followed me onto the quarter deck. I could hear Dakath and Elijah commanding the men on the main deck, no doubt keeping an eye on the threat at hand.

“Try to have the other ships move away as much as possible!” I yelled out over the sound of crashing waves and wind hitting the sails. “I'm going to handle this.”

Because no other option was acceptable.

As the creature neared us, I used every ounce of my strength to catapult myself over the ship's railing and through

the air with a battle cry. I tried to throw my body as close to the Kraken as possible, planning to latch onto it and use its body to save myself from the icy depths of the waiting ocean. I was taking a huge fucking risk since I couldn't swim, but my actions would keep the creature from the others, and that was all that mattered.

A tentacle hit me off course, and I slammed into the cold depths of the Cursed Divide.

Survival instincts kicked in, and I pushed myself to the surface. With a ragged breath, I surfaced right as the limb came down and hit the water with the force of a tsunami. The force threw my body into a large wave, the turbulent sea around us like a whirlpool, pulling me into the body of the massive creature with crushing force.

Acting purely on instinct, I reached out to grip the creature—trying to grasp onto anything that would stop me from being submerged within the icy depths of the sea—but my grip slipped easily, unable to gain any traction on the slippery surface. *Shit.*

The creature didn't hesitate to raise its tentacle again, and I immediately grabbed at one of my daggers, lodging it into the scaly surface. I hissed in surprise as the tentacle shot into the air, pulling me up and out of the water, a bellow of fury filling the space—the Kraken no doubt realizing that I'd been lost to the chaos around it but still smelling my blood.

I didn't think for a minute that its cry was in pain—there was no way my dagger had actually hurt it.

Luckily, I managed to secure myself on the part of the tentacle that served as the apex joint between the limb and its large frame while out of the water, so while the cold sea water caused me to shiver, my ability to breathe growing harder by the moment, I could at least use the large limb to stabilize myself. Looking up, I saw that the tentacle I was latched onto led up to its head, putting me at a manageable distance from its eyes. The spot that Barnabus mentioned, my target, was a place that he could reach, so I needed to somehow get above them to do an attack from where it couldn't easily see me...



Turning sharply, I dislodged my weapon and used the tentacle that had risen into the air to climb, utilizing both daggers to secure myself in the process. It felt like I'd been submerged in pure chaos as waves crashed over me, making it harder to achieve my goal. I was faster, stronger, and far more agile than I had ever been before, and yet I still struggled to scale the mountain-like limb. The only thing I could hope for was that he was so damn big that it would be harder for him to detect me and pull me from his body.

When screams sounded, I realized that one of its other tentacles had crashed into the water nearby. I had to pray it hadn't cracked another ship in half, but I couldn't see that far. The night air filled with the panicked yelling of my people, and that noise pushed me even harder. I hoped the scent of my blood would keep the creature distracted despite not being able to see me.

Reaching high enough in the air that the vertical angle of the limb became too much for me to continue, I turned to face the Kraken head on—my breath catching at just how close I was to its face. Its glowing blue eyes were fixated on me, and I suddenly felt like a bug on a human's finger, tiny and miniscule. With a sharp movement, it began to move the limb I was on toward the split between its two front tentacles...and its beak filled with razor sharp teeth. The action spurred me to immediately jump and soar through the air in an attempt to land on its head.

Another tentacle rose and hit me out of the air, and I let out a scream of frustration as I was thrown back into the sea. This time I sank further, the temperature causing my limbs to freeze up, and I had to work twice as hard to push toward the surface. My eyes widened at the sight of the creature from underneath, stomach bottoming out at the sight of how many other tentacles it had, allowing for its agile movement through the water.

*How was I supposed to defeat something like this?*

As I broke the surface, talons tugged the back of my shirt before I was suddenly airborne. *What the...* My head snapped

up to find Barnabus, shifted and in a larger form like his bat brethren back home, swinging me upward.

“Thanks!” I called out.

***Don't thank me yet, young one! You still need to kill the ugly bastard.***

He was right, and I would have laughed at his description if the task ahead of me wasn't so damn daunting. We soared through the air, and the Kraken tracked us as Barnabus brought us out further from the ships in a move that would no doubt save a few of them from being capsized. The air ripped against my skin as I flexed my fingers, knowing I would need them to be warm enough to use.

“Drop me on top of its head!”

Barnabus suddenly dived and did exactly that, dropping me within two feet of the bulbous top. Almost instantly, I began sliding toward its face, and for a horrifying moment, I was afraid I was going to slide over the scaly surface and right back into the sea.

*Shit.*

I took one of my daggers and turned, lodging it into the scaly skin to keep me planted in place. I dangled, almost vertically, as the creature began to shift violently. My stomach swooped as I fought to hang on. Tentacles reached toward me, and I jerked the dagger back, sliding a little further down before slamming into it once more. The creature didn't even twitch, likely not even able to feel the dagger digging into its flesh. I was stable, but I likely wasn't doing any damage.

I knelt on top of the creature as it screeched, immediately turning my focus to what I needed to do—knowing that it would be able to reach me even at this placement. I used one dagger to keep my hold while taking the other out. Leaning forward, to the point that I felt like I was going to fall into the icy depths below me, I located the pulsating, glowing organ between its eyes.

With a cry, I surged forward and embedded my dagger into it as hard as I could.

The screeching sound it let out was like nothing I'd ever heard, and the monster began to twist and turn, trying to shake me loose. I held tight with all my strength and pushed the dagger even further in, blood gushing out and spraying over me and into the water. I hissed as I pushed *even* further in, my forearm following my weapon as the sensation and sound nearly made me sick to my stomach. Between the squelching sound of tearing through their insides and the heat surrounding my arm, I knew I would never forget this.

I couldn't deny that some part of me hated even having to do this to the creature. I didn't relish in killing any being, be it human, vampyre, or animal. The feeling unfortunately paled in comparison to my need to ensure this threat was eliminated, though. I couldn't allow it to take down my fleet.

It's bellow of agony cut through to my heart, making me falter ever so slightly.

*End this now, Kyella. Try to make it as quick as you can for this creature.*

Pulling my stabilization piece out, I immediately lodged the weapon right back into the creature, its positioning closer to my frame this time so I could lean further down and off the kraken—pushing my embedded dagger so deep that I was in up to my shoulder.

I cried out in surprise as a tentacle swiped at me, trying to throw me off, but I managed to duck in time.

When the creature began to slam its head forward and back, I decided it was time for me to get the hell out of here and hope I'd done enough. The movements were thrashing and instantly I was looking around for a way to get off it—

***Empress! Jump, I will catch you—do it now, or you'll be taken down with the force of its body.***

Snapping my head up, I pulled my dagger out of the hopefully lethal wound and tried to right myself while continuing to use the other to hold me in place. Using my feet to try to push off the creature and toward Barnabus, I dislodged the final dagger from it. I didn't even have a chance

to jump, though, because right at that moment, its thrashing movement catapulted me through the air. My entire body tensed, preparing to hit the icy water once more.

I exhaled in relief as Barnabus caught me by the back of the shirt by his talons, my head spinning as I drew in a ragged breath. I watched as the creature's tentacles reached skyward toward us before it released a final bellow and sank below the surface—the limbs falling lifelessly before being dragged under the surface of the sea.

*I'd killed it.*

Sagging in Barnabus' taloned grip, I let him fly me toward the ship, closing my eyes as I inhaled and then let out a controlled exhale. I'd done it...I'd fucking done it.

*I'd saved our fleet.*

That was when I heard it—cheers of victory, a roar of them that echoed over the seas. My head snapped up.

***For you, young one.***

As we neared the ship, Barnabus flew toward the main deck, and I could see my three men watching me in shock. When he gently set me down, everything exploded into noise.

The entire crowd of men on deck joined in a loud cheer that echoed from the other ships. They stomped their boots and called out my name, and I thrust my fist into the air as a sign of victory, unable to help the smile from splitting over my face. I may have been soaking wet, covered in blood, and exhausted but...I'd ensured the nightmarish monster couldn't hurt anyone else. I didn't know how much damage the creature had caused but I needed to find out—my priority would always be keeping my people safe.

Dakath appeared in front of me, his eyes wide as he cupped my jaw. "Kyella, that was..."

"Insane," Kolvar joined him, running a hand through his hair, looking a bit off-kilter. "That was amazing, but I am going to have nightmares about you facing off with that creature alone for the rest of my life."

Dakath spoke softly, "I already knew you were the Empress for this kingdom, but you just proved that to every single one of them."

As I looked out over the crew and saw the trust in each of their eyes, I promised myself I would do everything in my power to continue giving them reasons to trust me going into battle.

When Elijah suddenly appeared behind me, squeezing my hip, I turned my head up to look at him. His gaze was dark and filled with worry. "We need to talk."

# CHAPTER SEVEN

## KYELLA

“Thank you for grabbing that,” I said to Dakath as he took away the dirty washcloths and pot of boiling water I’d used to clean up and rinse my hair. It was without a doubt the best I would get on the ship, and it had done the trick to return warmth to my limbs and get the strong stench of the salty brine from the sea off me.

Raising my arm up to my nose, I gave a sniff to make sure.

“Kyella,” Elijah called out, pushing off the wall he’d been all but glued to while I’d cleaned up, intensely watching my every move.

I’d been waiting for him to broach his issue the entire time I washed, and by now my heart was practically in my throat as concern bubbled up over what he was going to say.

“What you did was undeniably incredible, since it worked in our favor, but I can’t get it out of my head that you’re taking such gigantic risks without even consulting us first.”

His words rang true with the thoughts that had already been swirling just on the edge of my mind while cleaning up and reflecting on the insanity that had occurred.

I heaved a deep sigh and nodded as he sat on the bed in front of me and reached out to grab my hand, rubbing his thumb across the top gently. The alcohol had left his system entirely, all signs of the previously relaxed Elijah gone, and left in its place, the stoic and duty-bound man I’d come to love.

I couldn't deny that when I'd returned to the ship and the crews of our ship and others cheered for me, I didn't see anything wrong with what I'd done. It had worked, and that was all that mattered, right? Wrong.

What would have happened if I'd been killed in the fight? Without a doubt in my soul, I knew that my three vampyres wouldn't have been able to continue this war with my death at the forefront of their minds. Who would lead the army in our war and ensure that in light of a win, the wrongs of the Thaician Empire were righted?

While my intentions were pure, I had to take a step back from my emotional reactions and think logically.

"It isn't that I want to control you, or for you to think that you can't do anything without telling us," he continued, trailing off as his eyes rested on the wall behind me. His mouth opened and closed multiple times, like he was struggling to find the right words.

I wanted to tell him I understood, but I didn't want to interrupt him when he felt he had more he needed to say.

As his piercing green eyes settled upon my own once more, his shoulders sagged forward. "I just want you to remember that we are all in this together. You don't need to do things alone anymore. We have a lot of experience between the three of us, and we can lend an ear and offer advice to come up with a strategy that will produce our desired outcome, all while keeping you as safe as possible."

I could tell this was just eating away at him now, and I wanted to soothe his concerns. Smiling softly and nodding, I cut him off before he could continue. "I know. You're right," I agreed, squeezing his hand in reassurance. "As the Empress, yes, it is my job to protect these people to the best of my ability. I also owe it to them to be logical, and what I did was based purely on emotional instinct. I knew that I needed to end it and didn't have long to figure a plan out without the possibility of losing more lives."

His head dipped, but not before I saw his eyes misting with tears.



Wait a second. Was...was Elijah *crying*?

My voice came out breathless as I reached out to tilt his chin back up. "Elijah..."

Dakath and Kolvar were at his side in a minute, standing behind him with supportive hands on his shoulders, squeezing lightly.

His voice was raspy and choked as his eyes met mine. "I... I know that I must let you be free to be the Empress now, but you can't forget that you were *ours* before you were the Empire's. It will always be our job to love you and protect you, no matter the path our lives take. And all I could think of as I watched you on that beast was..." He trailed off, and a sharp intake of breath permeated his next thought. "...Was how you thought you had to handle it without us."

My heart squeezed at his admission but practically shattered at the sight of a lone tear falling from his eye as he asked, "Is it because I had a few drinks? I promise I will never fail you again, Kyella."

My own eyes began to burn as tears pooled in them, and I launched myself into his lap, wrapping myself around his center and nuzzling my face into his chest. I breathed in his clean scent as I gripped his shirt tightly.

"No," I choked out. "No, you have never failed me. None of you have ever failed me."

For him to even question that destroyed me.

They'd saved me when I wasn't strong enough to do it myself.

They'd supported me while I traversed a new path and gave me the room I needed to grow at the same time.

They'd shown me that there is so much strength in admitting when you aren't okay and need help.

His warmth engulfed me as he held me tightly, like he was afraid of letting me go.

The bed tipped down on either side of us, and I lifted my head to glance at Dakath and Kolvar. The latter reached out to

wipe a few fallen tears from my cheeks as he said, “We’re so proud of you, darling, no matter what.”

Their support, as well as their fear of losing me, wrapped around me like a thick fog and threatened to consume me. All I could think about was how I needed to connect with them and show them that I was here, and I wasn’t going anywhere. That I needed them, always.

Elijah’s arms loosened around me enough for me to pull back and stare up at him before sealing our lips together as more tears fell, tinging our kiss with the salty moisture. It was perhaps the most intimate moment I’d ever shared with them, not because we were sharing a moment of physical intimacy, because it felt like for the first time, that all four of our souls were completely on display—no walls, no fear of rejection, no trepidation of something that felt all consuming like this love between us was.

“I’m here,” I whispered against his lips as I kept my eyes closed, soaking in the energy. “I’m okay, and I will always need all three of you. Always.”

His hands slowly trailed down my back to the curve of my ass as his voice dropped an octave. “Promise?” he asked gruffly, voice thick with emotion but straying into one of need.

Suddenly, there was a very hard cock resting beneath me, rubbing deliciously against my naked core. I brought extra clothes with me, but I’d opted for one of Kolvar’s huge shirts that draped to my knees when I wore it.

On instinct, my hips rolled, putting tantalizing pressure against my clit, and sent sparks of pleasure shooting through my core.

“I promise,” I vowed huskily as I opened my eyes to see his own burning with an intoxicating mixture of love and desire.

As his hands squeezed my ass, I couldn’t help but let my hips roll once more, his hands guiding me into a steady rhythm.

“We will always ensure you are protected,” Elijah swore. “Your body and your heart, Kyella.”

A second later, I was weightless, flying toward the top of the massive bed. A huff came out of me as I landed amongst the pillows. Pushing up to my elbows, I saw all three of them lined up at the foot of the bed, eyeing me like I was the last meal they might ever have.

There was something intimidating about the depth of our feelings for each other. Our connection was instantaneous ever since our eyes met in Malakai’s throne room, and I was a goner even then. Feeling overpowering emotions for one stranger was scary, feeling that way for three was damn near overwhelming. But I was so fucking thankful every day that none of us had run away from it, despite having no idea if it would end in heartbreak.

They converged on me at once, as if they could read each other’s minds in the way they seamlessly worked together. While I loved that they always put my pleasure before their own, I felt an overwhelming need to devour them.

Putting on a burst of speed as they surrounded me, I flipped to sitting on my knees as I licked my lips. “I want to please you all,” I admitted before dragging my bottom lip between my teeth a bit nervously and nibbling.

While I’d shared plenty of intimate moments with each of them, there was still something intimidating about having them all at once. I was always concerned about not dividing up my attention and body evenly between them all. The last thing I wanted was any of them feeling left out or less desired.

After my admission, they quickly discarded their clothes and stood waiting for me to make a move, stroking their hard cocks as they did. Toying with the hem of my shirt, I came to a decision for what I wanted out of this moment. Lifting it over my head, I discarded it onto the floor.

I had been trying to work up the nerve to ask for something from my men, and it felt like there was no better time than the present.

“I want all of you in me at once,” I announced, confidence filling me with my request and pussy clenching at the thought of it.

“Darling, we don’t want to hurt you,” Kolvar answered, drawing my attention away from their cocks and to his face.

Crawling on my hands and knees to the left side of the bed where they stood, I dropped to my elbows, leaving my ass on display in the air. Looking up at him from beneath my lashes as I reached out for his cock and stroked it, I smirked.

“I can decide what I can take,” I argued back before taking the tip of his cock into my mouth and swirling my tongue ever so lightly around it.

He grunted as his hips flexed, trying to push himself deeper into my mouth, but I pulled back, toying with his tip more. Sucking lightly, I increased the pace of my hand at the base of his cock, and I felt fingers trailing lightly over my ass.

“If that’s truly something you want, Ky, we need to get you ready for it,” Dakath purred from behind me as his fingers trailed to dip into my core, making me moan around Kolvar’s cock.

With how wet I was, his fingers slid easily in, and I couldn’t help but rock back each time he plunged them into me, matching his pace perfectly. My eyes rolled back as he curled the tips of his fingers, hitting that spot within me that had my walls contracting as a new flood of wetness coated me.

I couldn’t help but gasp around the cock in my mouth as he pulled his fingers out and swirled my slickness around my asshole and began to lightly tease me with one finger.

When I felt the swell of his first knuckle push through the tight ring of muscle, I tensed up slightly.

The end of the bed dipped as Elijah climbed onto it with me, approaching my right side quickly. His hand delved between my thighs to play with my clit, giving me the exact pleasure I needed to relax and let Dakath sink into me completely.

The deep timber of Elijah's voice made my stomach flutter as he said, "We can't ensure that it will be completely painless—at least at first—but we will make sure you're dripping with desire and begging to be filled thoroughly, love."

Kolvar's hips thrust forward at that statement, and he bottomed out in my throat, making me gag slightly as I adjusted. Moving my hand to cup his balls, I bobbed my head back and forth, letting my throat relax as he groaned his pleasure.

"I need to add another finger, Ky," Dakath warned, and my stomach fluttered with anticipation. "If you want to take one of our cocks into you, I need to stretch you a bit so you can adjust more easily."

I couldn't answer with a cock shoved down my throat, so I hummed in response. The vibrations must have felt great to Kolvar because he cursed, "Fuck, that felt way too fucking good. If you keep doing that, I won't last."

As the tip of Dakath's second finger began to press in, I couldn't help but tense again despite telling myself to relax. Elijah instinctively increased the pressure and speed on my clit and Dakath was quick to remember how much I loved dirty talk.

"I can't stop thinking about how fucking beautiful you're going to look with a cock in your ass and pussy at the same time, Ky," he groaned out, and I felt the bed moving near him in a rhythm that suggested he was stroking his cock with his free hand. "There will just be the thinnest barrier between the two. It will make it feel like cocks are rubbing against each other inside of you."

I hadn't even thought about that, but the image forming in my head was fucking sinful and exactly what I wanted.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## KYELLA

**T**hat image that his words provoked was exactly what my body needed to relax enough to take the second finger, and he stretched me further, gently pumping them in and out rhythmically.

“Just like that, love,” Elijah praised as he trailed soft kisses down the back of my shoulder, making my skin pebble in delight.

A frustrated growl bubbled up my throat as a burning, overwhelming need pulsed through me. It was like someone dangling your favorite dessert right in front of you, but just a touch too far out of reach.

While I loved everything about this moment, my body needed more.

Looking up through my lashes at Kolvar, I tried my best to pout with his cock in my mouth. I wasn't sure how he understood what I was doing, but I was so thankful as he growled out, “Our girl needs more. Dakath, why don't you go ahead and fuck that pretty pussy for her while you're working her ass?”

*Yes. Yes, fucking please.*

Dakath's answering voice rumbled as he shifted closer and teasingly rubbed the tip of his cock over my pussy, “You want my cock in you, baby?”

I wanted it so damn badly.

Trying my best to hum my agreement, Kolvar let out a hiss when the vibrations wrapped around him. Sucking his teeth, he pulled his cock away from me.

“Your mouth is dangerous, darling,” he explained, exchanging a look with Elijah who took his hand away and turned to get off the bed.

Before I could pout about the loss of Elijah’s fingers on my clit or demand Kolvar put his cock back in my mouth, Kolvar dropped to his knees in front of me, putting our faces on the same level. His lips were on mine in an instant, consuming me completely. Opening my mouth to him, his tongue tangled with mine while Dakath pushed into me completely with one, long thrust, pulling a whimper from me.

My eyes fluttered open briefly before closing back in bliss as he set a slow, yet deep pace. It felt like every damn thrust was meant to hit the most sensitive spot within me with intention. As I heard a scuffle of feet in front of me, my eyes popped back open to find Elijah stroking his cock as he bit his lip and grunted, watching Dakath fuck me from behind.

I remembered a time when I was terrified that Elijah wouldn’t be able to share in these moments with us. No words could describe my elation and desire that pulsed with the knowledge that he now was enjoying the show.

A smirk tugged my lips up right before Kolvar pulled away, pressing a kiss to my forehead before moving out of the way for Elijah to take over.

“What’s that smirk for, love?” he asked in amusement, eyes dancing with challenge.

Did he think I would be too shy to explain what I wanted? Perhaps the Kyella they rescued from Malakai’s castle would have been. But this Kyella? Absolutely not.

There was something invigorating and freeing about owning your sexual desires and not being ashamed of them—whatever they may be. And owning my desires felt like such an important part of accepting and loving myself.



Letting out a soft moan as Dakath thrust deep behind me, my smirk pulled into a full smile when I noticed that Elijah couldn't help but glance back at the movement.

"I love that you enjoy watching me be fucked," I finally said, drawing his eyes back to mine.

Cocking a single brow, he shrugged slyly before his voice dropped an octave with his response. "You make me love a lot of new things, Kyella—I can't deny that. It's as if my entire life was spent waiting for you to enter it and show me just how incredible every day can be."

My heart squeezed at his affectionate words.

The bed dipped as Kolvar took Elijah's previous spot on my right, just as Dakath pulled his fingers from my ass.

"If you don't like this, darling, just let me know," Kolvar said, piquing my interest at what was about to happen.

His large hands spread my ass as Dakath continued to slowly fuck me, teasing my body with the promise of what was to come. A wet tongue ran along the tight ring of muscle, making me jolt slightly with surprise.

He immediately stopped, but my voice came out breathy and a bit flustered as I said, "Don't stop. I was just surprised at the feeling."

His tongue returned, and my pussy clenched as he began to push it inside of me in the same rhythm as Dakath's cock.

"Yeah, she likes that," Dakath purred, likely using the way my pussy constricted around him as a source of affirmation.

A moan puffed out of my lips as my lashes fluttered, "Yes, I do."

Relaxing into the rhythm and with the new pleasure coursing through me, I reached for Elijah's cock and opened my mouth. Batting my eyes at him, I waited for him to move close enough for me to work his cock as I had Kolvar. I should have known better than to think that he'd ever do what I expected.

His hands wrapped in my hair as he pushed his cock pushed into my mouth, not stopping until his length was deep in my throat, making my eyes water as I fought the urge to gag.

“Breathe through your nose and relax that throat, love,” he instructed in a deep timber that made my pussy flutter with arousal.

My thoughts were hazy with the pleasure coursing through me, leaving me feeling off-kilter and like I was floating in the depths of an ocean of swirling, insistent heat. Dakath’s and Kolvar’s tandem movements pushed me closer toward the peak of pleasure, and impatience for the orgasm that had slowly been building swirled within me. I wanted to shatter for them. Badly.

I relaxed my throat, breathing through my nose as Elijah pulled his hips back before he thrust into my throat, steadily increasing his pace as he began to fuck my throat in earnest. Tears fell from the corner of my eyes, but it wasn’t sadness that filled me.

I wanted this.

I wanted more.

I wanted everything they had to give me.

Moments later, my screams of my pleasure were only muffled by Elijah’s cock as my orgasm roared through me, turning my body to a tingling mess. He pulled out seconds before Dakath sped up, pounding into me as his grip on my hips tightened.

“Fuck,” Dakath roared out, “I’m going to cum in your pussy, baby.”

My eyes rolled back in my head at the sound of his crude words bristling past his lips. If it was wrong of me to enjoy this so much... Well, I didn’t ever want to be right.

“Yes,” I moaned out, lost entirely to my pleasure. “Finish in me.”

Groans sounded from all three men at my words.

Dakath thrusted twice more before stilling, his cock pumping his release into me.

A sigh of content slipped from my lips as he pulled out, but my breath hitched a moment later as I felt fingers pulsing inside of me, making my hips jerk. I was so sensitive from my orgasm that the fingers pumping inside of me were a slight over-stimulation, but he wasn't letting me get away that easily.

He draped an arm over my waist, holding me firmly down. A shiver raced down my spine as he murmured, "Can't waste any of this." I bit my lip, swallowing a groan as he pumped his cum that was dripping out of me back into me with his fingers.

"Shit," I huffed out as I felt my body coming alive once more.

There was something so fucking sexy about him pushing it back inside of me over and over that I let out a cry of disapproval when he stopped. A chuckle came from him before he soothed me, "We've got you, Ky. We're not done yet."

My body felt light as a feather and ready for so much more. I wasn't sure entirely what they had in store for me next, but I knew I wanted it. Whatever it was.

Hands scooped me up from where I'd practically melted into the bed, positioning me on my knees as Elijah made himself comfortable in front of me. He was lying on his back, shooting an infuriatingly sexy smirk my way.

Curling a single finger at me, he ordered, "Come here, love."

I wasn't sure where my brattiness came from, but I crossed my hands over my chest and smirked back. "Make me."

A sting of tingling, pleasure-filled pain blossomed on my ass as a crack echoed through our room.

Had I just been spanked?

"Don't be a bad girl, Ky," Dakath purred in my ear before dropping his lips to my neck. "Bad girls don't get orgasms."

A whimper that I desperately wished I could shove back down my throat escaped me.

His fangs scraped along the sensitive skin beneath my ear, and I found myself pleading softly, "Bite me. Please."

I was a goner in their hands. No part of me could resist them.

His fingers wrapped around my throat, squeezing lightly as his tongue darted out to trail back up my neck to my ear. "If you get on Elijah's cock, I'll bite you."

He didn't have to tell me twice.

After he released his hold on my neck, I crawled on my hands and knees to straddle Elijah, who looked at me with so much hunger in his eyes that I audibly gasped. If there was ever a doubt in my mind about how much these men loved me and wanted to ravish me, it would be eviscerated with that single look.

His fingers trailed softly up my thighs before one came to rest on my hip, guiding me up a few inches as his other hand lined his cock up for me to sink down onto. Lowering myself, I relished the way his jaw went tight and his eyelids fluttered as I took him into my pussy.

The fact that Dakath's cum was lubricant for me now on Elijah's cock was something I never knew would turn me on so much.

"Now that's a good girl," Dakath murmured, suddenly pressed against my side. His hand wrapped around my throat and tilted it to the side for him to access.

"Yes," I moaned as Elijah's hips rocked up, meeting me with a tantalizing slap of skin.

Fangs pierced my neck, and I cried out in pleasure as warm blood trickled down my throat and over my breast. Dakath growled at my throat, the animalistic sound making me moan in response.

Someone's hand came up to swirl the blood around my nipple before pinching it just hard enough to throw me back

into a vortex of hazy pleasure. Before I knew it, Kolvar was on my other side with his mouth firmly wrapped around my nipple, sucking and flicking it with his tongue.

I felt the scrape of his fangs on my breast, and before I could question it, they pierced me. I thought being bitten there would be painful, but I was so, so fucking wrong. It was euphoria like no other, completely heightening the feeling of pleasure around my nipple and shooting pleasure straight to my clit.

“So fucking beautiful,” Elijah murmured, bringing my eyes to him as Kolvar and Dakath fed from me.

His hand dropped from my breast, and he brought his fingers to his lips, sucking off the blood from his fingers one by one. The haziness only got that much worse as he increased the pace of his hips.

An orgasm slammed into me from out of nowhere, making me cry out, “Fuck!”

Seconds later, Kolvar released my breast from his mouth as he shuffled to press against my back instead, straddling Elijah’s legs beneath him.

“Tell me when to stop,” he murmured in a deep voice, as if he could barely restrain himself. “I’m using blood to enhance your pleasure, and I’ll go as slow as you need.”

I hummed in response, letting my eyelids flutter shut as my mouth parted with a moan at the sensation of the fingers playing with my clit. Dakath’s fangs retracted as hands repositioned me, bending me at the waist more, causing my nipples to brush against Elijah’s chest.

I felt the head of Kolvar’s cock pushing against my ass, and despite all the pleasure I was feeling elsewhere, I couldn’t help my hiss of pain as the thick tip pushed inside.

Forcing myself to breathe, I focused on the pleasure I felt from Elijah’s cock and the fingers lightly pinching my clit.

Dakath’s mouth found my ear quickly as he murmured, “You’re doing so good, baby. You look so fucking beautiful right now.”

I felt anything but beautiful as Kolvar continued to push in as Elijah stilled his movements completely. Thankfully, with Elijah halting his thrusting, the new sensation didn't feel as painful as Kolvar continued.

"You okay, love?" Elijah whispered as his hands came to cup my face tenderly, thumbs brushing along my cheeks lovingly as his eyes shone with concern.

Opening my eyes, my lips thinned as I nodded and murmured, "I'm okay. It's just an adjustment."

I knew this would hurt, no matter how much they tried to ensure it wouldn't. But I also knew that it would eventually get a little easier. I just needed to push through and trust them.

I wasn't sure how far Kolvar got, but as he pulled out completely, I felt relief. A second later, his cock was pressing back in, but it felt like he'd put more lubricant on it, sinking into me a bit easier this time. He slowly began rocking his hips lightly in and out, the pain began to recede. The gentle motion began to light a new feeling of pleasure I wasn't familiar with as he hit a new spot within me.

"Oh," I breathed out, eyes going wide in shock.

Kolvar groaned from behind me as his hands squeezed my ass. "Darling, tell me you're okay."

If he'd asked me that a minute earlier, my answer would have been completely different. But as it was, I found my body naturally beginning to relax, letting him enter further.

"I'm okay," I answered before pointing my words toward Elijah. "You can move."

When he did, the feeling of them rocking at the same time caused stars to explode behind my eyes. Moans and grunts of pleasure coursed through the air, signaling our enjoyment, but there was one voice missing. I needed Dakath to be a part still, so I reached out with my hand to stroke his once again erect cock.

"Feed from me more," I begged, tilting my head to the right and exposing my neck.

He was on me in an instant, leaning down at my level as he kissed the skin of my neck almost reverently before whispering in my ear. “You were made for us, Ky. I love you so much. You are our everything.”

His fangs sank into me once more, and between all the sensations wracking my body, I was a complete goner. It was like all the nerve endings in my body were tingling and building up an incessant buzz within me. This was everything I didn’t know I needed—didn’t know I could even take.

The way these three men always gave me a safe place to be me—whether that be exploring new desires, bearing my heart to them, or confiding in them when things were too heavy to carry alone—made me wake up every damn day thankful for them and their love.

I never knew that a love like this existed, and now that I had it, I was never letting go.

Elijah and Kolvar’s pace increased at the same time, and I felt myself flying through the stars as my orgasm came hurtling at me.

“I’m going to come,” Kolvar grunted. “You feel too fucking good to be able to hold it off any longer, darling.”

“Come for us, love,” Elijah demanded before melding our lips together, our tongues tangling.

Dakath’s moans at my throat told me he was close, and I increased my pace on his cock as Elijah’s hips began to buck wildly, sending me to the exact heights I needed.

I cried out my release, breaking our kiss as everything within me coiled and exploded simultaneously.

Dakath’s release spilled into my hand as I felt Kolvar and Elijah’s hot spurts within me, signaling that they had been right behind me.

I wanted to tell them how much I loved that experience, how much I loved them, but sleep pulled at my eyes as my body tingled with the aftershocks of my last, explosive orgasm.

“We’ve got you, Ky,” Dakath murmured as I was gently pulled against a chest before sleep won out.



# CHAPTER NINE

## KOLVAR

From the moment I woke up and went above deck, following a deep, dreamless night of sleep, I'd immediately recognized a subtle but noticeable shift in the energy of everyone on board. Like an undercurrent affecting everything, there was a sense of optimism and renewed strength that seemed to fill the space as soldiers went about their normal jobs.

Of course those elements had been there before to an extent, but now it felt different—it felt energized. *Charged.*

I knew it was partly due to it being a new day, most soldiers having gotten some rest following the pure chaos that had erupted the previous night, and the news that we had only lost two ships and no casualties in such an event had brought major relief to all.

More than anything though, I had a feeling the change had more to do with Kyella and the bravery she had shown.

There was no doubt in my mind that our woman had proven to everyone that she was worthy of her title.

Of course, we had known that, and Myrin had known that, but I could see that her position was set in stone in the eyes of the people by her courage and ruthlessness when it came to vanquishing the threat to our fleet.

In my mind, she hadn't needed to prove anything, but I could see a difference in how others regarded her. I picked up the sounds of the light conversations showcasing the change, the respect that had been established from her speech the night

of Myrin's wake only growing in admiration with each passing hour.

While I agreed with Elijah, and I hoped that Kyella understood she could depend on us and ask for help, it was clear that her efforts were far from wasted.

My gaze moved to the woman standing in front of me, looking out past the front of the ship with her eyes on the horizon, as if she could see the approaching empire. It wouldn't be very long before she finally would see it once more. The weather had been exceptionally good, and outside of our run-in with the sea monster, our journey was passing quickly. We would reach the coast of the Thaician Empire all too soon.

An empire that we had fled only a short while ago, stealing Kyella away in the cover of darkness before sailing across the Cursed Divide. It was so odd to think that we were now returning willingly.

The difference this time was that Kyella was returning as an Empress in a fearless effort to free those who were still under Malakai's rule. She would show him that any threat to our new homeland was a cause for war.

Admittedly, there was a part of me that didn't want her coming within a mile or more of the damn place. I was beyond protective over her, and I didn't want to risk losing her to the place she was held captive for so long. Something about the place felt ominous, like it was the one place that stood a threat to everything we had in store for our future together. I shook myself from my worried thoughts, maintaining the belief that we would be sailing back in no time, victorious and free from the threat of Malakai.

*If I steadfastly believed it, it had to come true, right?*

"The winds are stronger today," Kyella commented, tilting her head back. Some of her dark hair had pulled free from her braid, whipping around, and highlighting a face that was filled with determination. Strength emanated from her, and I had little doubt that anyone who looked at Kyella would view her as a symbol for strength, hope, and a reason to fight.

“They are,” I agreed. “The navigators said we’re traveling at top speed. We should be there by late evening, which is ideal since we don’t want to approach unless it’s under the cover of darkness.”

She nodded in understanding, her attention momentarily snagged by an upbeat song that carried across the ship’s deck, several of the sailors singing the tune. It was clearly one that was well known, despite not being familiar to me.

Kyella’s gaze lit with interest, and her soft expression made me want to lean down and place a kiss on her plush, parted lips. I knew several people were watching us, and I wanted to respect Kyella’s wishes to keep our displays of affection to a minimum in front of others, so I pulled away quickly. I didn’t like it because I wanted to kiss my beauty, but I understood it.

It was probably for the best because what I wanted to do with Kyella wouldn’t be possible on this ship. No, I would need to be patient until we were back home. Then I could have her exactly how I wanted her.

“How are you feeling, darling?” She turned her gaze to me, her golden eyes lighting with a flame of heat that only intensified their nature. A coy smile pulled at her lips as her gaze darted over my shoulder, no doubt checking to see how close people were.

“Feeling? I feel amazing, Kolvar. Although, I’m sure that doesn’t surprise you.”

I felt my chest inflate with pride, and a deep, primal sound nearly broke from my throat at the desire that flashed in her gaze. I loved that we had made her feel that way. Though I did want to know if she was sore. It was something I was concerned about, especially after she took us so damn well.

*Last night was something else.*

I felt more connected to her than ever, my fingers toying with her braid as her gaze moved back to the horizon, knowing that we couldn’t say more than that right now. But I could think about it. I could think about the appreciation and

affection I felt toward Kyella. Last night only drew my attention to how close we had grown as a unit.

Kyella completed us—made us the family we were meant to be—and she had been the piece missing from everything we had been building. It was almost as if we had been waiting for her to arrive without ever really knowing it.

She was the center of our world and our future, and I would fight like hell to protect that.

My thoughts lingered on all the things I would be willing to do to ensure we all came back home, but as the late morning turned to afternoon, we made our way from the front of the ship toward the back. Elijah and Dakath joined us as we spoke, patrolling with ease and allowing us to remain available for anyone who might have questions.

We were only occasionally interrupted, allowing us to take the moment of solitude and peace to relax. It felt necessary, as I had no doubt that we had a tough battle ahead of us.

Despite our strategy and planning, we had no idea what to expect when we arrived at the Thaician Empire.

Throughout the afternoon, I noticed that Kyella was people watching as men scurried back and forth across the deck, her brow furrowed slightly in thought as she listened to the men's lively conversations.

“How large is the Tridian empire exactly?” She asked curiously. “I’ve seen maps of it, but I haven’t had a chance to leave the capital city. How many small communities are there?”

“Large,” I immediately answered. “There are farming communities and a lot of land, but no other large cities, just small communities. The way it is laid out makes it seem much larger because it is so spread out.”

“Is that why people didn’t hesitate to travel into the capital city to volunteer? From what I could tell at the market, it seems like quite a journey many of them make to trade.”

I nodded in agreement. “It is a very familiar route for many, traveling at least once a month with their goods and

crops.”

“The Tridian empire seems heavily based in commerce—trading and the like.” She pointed out.

“Exactly,” Dakath agreed. “We’re not militaristic in nature.”

Elijah added in his opinion. “The vast majority of our land is utilized for farming.”

Kyella considered our words before nodding. “When we return home, I want to travel through the empire. Not only to thank each family that sacrificed what they did to make this possible, but to connect with each community and show them that I’m not focused on only those who live in the city.”

“Every few years Myrin made a similar trip, wanting to check in on the people herself rather than relying solely on the lords to report,” Elijah added. Kyella nodded as if the decision was made, and I couldn’t help but smile with that knowledge that when we came home, our girl would slip into her position as Empress flawlessly.

*We just had to get to that point.*

The concept of traveling the countryside with Kyella was enticing as I knew it would allow us more privacy outside of the castle. But what I loved even more was the idea of visiting the small town I’d grown up in—where my family lived before they passed. I’d always loved the thought of having my own family, and now that I’d found Kyella, the idea of walking those same streets with her and sharing with her the memories I always looked fondly to—was an appealing one.

There was so much I wanted to do with Kyella, but it felt like Malakai was a fucking wall between us and our future. And that wall was one I would relish in destroying.



**T**he skies darkened as late evening shifted into night, the optimistic energy turning into something darker, quieter, and more determined. I could sense that the soldiers

were preparing themselves to sail into the Thaician Empire's water. Our fleet was more than ready for war, but the mindset required for going into battle was something far different than the logistics of preparing for it.

The reality of everything we were about to do seemed to be hitting everyone and as we extinguished any torches, the lively nature of the ships quieted to near silence.

I had never taken part in anything more serious than a skirmish, but I felt that I was ready for what we were to face in the Thaician Empire. Though there was sadness and tightness in my chest with the knowledge that there would be some who didn't make it home to their families. Death was an unavoidable tragedy of war, though that didn't make the thought of facing it any easier.

I watched as the navy skies deepened to black, showcasing a gorgeous sky blanketed with stars and a nearly full moon. The clear, cloudless night would allow us to take advantage of the moonlight once we reached the harbor.

The navigators assured us that we were close to approaching, and Kyella, Elijah, and I stood gathered at the front of the ship. Dakath had left to retrieve Tristan, who had spent a great deal of his day building rapport with the soldiers, working shoulder-to-shoulder with them and fortifying the sense of comradery amongst the crew.

"I know we will be taking Malakai by surprise," Kyella said, drawing my attention away from the sky. "But I can't help feeling cautious. It always felt like he knew everything that was going on, like he could see everything."

I opened my mouth to respond, but she continued quickly, "I know that isn't the case—more of a by-product from the abuse and fear I suffered under him, but it's making me uneasy. The last thing we need right now is a surprise."

"We've acted fast, so he won't see the attack coming," I assured her, hoping like hell I wouldn't be made a liar. We couldn't predict everything, but it wasn't possible for him to know our plans.

Everyone that could have told him was dead, and the bastard we suspected as the possible traitor had been apprehended and was being questioned. He hadn't set sail, otherwise we would have come across his fleet, the route we chose was the shortest and most efficient path to reach the other side of the Cursed Divide.

Kyella nodded in agreement as Tristan joined us on deck, the five of us easily slipping into quiet conversation about what we planned to do, with Elijah taking the lead.

“We attack directly at the harbor, which allows direct access into the city. Hopefully, the opportunity for innocents to escape away from the chaos of war and into the countryside will present itself with our full-frontal assault. I don't want them caught in the crosshairs of what is sure to be a bloody event.”

“I don't know if that will be enough.” Kyella frowned, concern lingering in her gaze. “We may need to find a way to fully remove them from the situation. Malakai is the type of bastard who would actively *want* them to die. He doesn't care about innocents or bystanders. If he thinks we want to protect them, he will want them slaughtered.”

I fucking believed that, the bastard.

“Maybe we can put together a better plan of how to filter them to a safer place once we draw closer to shore and get eyes on it,” Dakath suggested.

“That is the ideal situation...”

Kyella's words trailed off, and we turned to see what had caught her attention. The darkened shoreline of the Thaician Empire was highlighted by the light of the moon, pinpricks of light glowing from the city.

It was a beautiful land, and I remembered thinking the same thing the last time we approached it. The kingdom was a dark spot on an otherwise plentiful and large expanse of land. Or maybe my interpretation of that was because I knew the toxic shit that lived within that castle, of the lords that ruled over these lands, infecting everything with their darkness and



depravity. They were the problem here, not the place itself, which meant all of them would have to die. There was no other damn option.

“...but an *ideal situation* that may not be possible.”

Kyella wasn't wrong about that. We had a problem.

The Thaician fleet sat openly in the harbor, as if they were preparing to launch their own attack. I felt a momentary surge of adrenaline, wondering if we needed to prepare for the onslaught of battle...only to realize that it appeared the harbor and ships were empty.

Of course, I couldn't be sure, but I didn't see any sign of movement, nor were any torches lit. Instead, the vessels seemed to be simply anchored, facing the open sea as if waiting for orders to leave.

I surveyed the ships, prepared and ready to attack our lands. Anger ran through me at the realization, but there was a bigger issue at hand.

The ships blocked the entrance to the harbor, making it impossible for us to dock and launch our attack.

# CHAPTER TEN

## KYELLA

“We expected a few ships to be docked in their harbor for fishermen and merchants,” Tristan muttered while rubbing his chin roughly. “But we foolishly didn’t anticipate them launching their own full-scale attack so soon after having sent their scouts to take Kyella and bring her back.”

Thankfully, we were able to stealthily push our fleet back enough to be safe to use a few torches to illuminate the large map resting in the middle of our table. We had to form a new plan—quickly. Gathering each of the captains and leaders on our ships hadn’t taken too long, using the smaller boats tied to our large ships to gather for the emergency meeting.

I knew I needed to focus on where our ships would dock, but I struggled to force myself to think of anything besides the miscalculation on our part. We had been so methodical in our plans.

If Malakai had given the order to Holmeth not to return until they had vital information on the Tridian Empire, that could have taken days to obtain. *Then* there would have still been two days of travel back to him across the Cursed Divide. There was no way they would have known for sure that something was wrong yet.

A thought came to me, and I murmured it out loud before I had even fully processed it myself. “They never intended on letting Holmeth and his crew come back with me. It was a guise.”

My eyelashes fluttered as my breathing grew erratic and the reality of the situation sank in. *Fuck*. How had I not seen that until now? I felt like such an idiot. I had spent years in Malakai's grasp, witnessing first-hand how important I was to him for his own gain.

The chatter about where we could dock our boats died down at my words. An eerie silence permeated the air, only broken up by the lapping of the waves against the siding of the ship and creaking of wood as we rocked with it.

Elijah's gruff tone brought me to present as he asked, "What do you mean, Kyella?"

The wheels in my brain were spinning as I pieced it together. Flicking my eyes up to him, I explained my thought process. "I thought it was so strange that they said Malakai gave them orders not to return until they had useful information to share about the Tridian Empire. If I was his prized possession, wouldn't he want them to take me back to him immediately?"

Kolvar's boots scuffed against the floor as he kicked absentmindedly, mulling over my words before nodding in agreement with me. "All I was worried about was getting you back, and when we did, I never gave it a second thought, but you're right. It doesn't make sense that he would value information about the Empire over returning you to him."

Elijah's eyes sparked in realization as he seemed to catch up to my train of thought. "It was a ploy," he breathed out as his hands curled around the top of the chair in front of him, cracking the wood effortlessly.

Crossing my arms against my chest, I took a deep breath before blowing it out and adding on, "It was. They always intended on launching their fleet into a war against us, and they wanted us focused on a single ship...on my capture by Holmeth. They didn't want us focused on the fleet that would be sailing toward us. I was merely bait. They must have begun to gather their forces the day after we left this wretched land."

"Fuck," Dakath grunted before smacking the table hard in his frustration before stepping back to pace. "We played right

into his hand! They were likely just going to keep you at sea until Malakai arrived and took you onto his ship, not drawing any focus back to their lands until it was too late.”

While I understood his anger and frustration, I knew this setback wasn't the end for our strategy. Or for us. I refused for it to be.

Letting my voice rise, I infused every ounce of calming energy I could into my words. “Initially, we may not have seen his intentions, but not all hope is lost. We still came to their lands before they could launch their attack, giving us the upper hand. It is still true that he is a prideful, arrogant man who likely expected us to cower after Myrin's death. But did we?”

“Nos” were mumbled, but the paltry response wasn't good enough for me.

“I said,” I paused for emphasis as I looked around. I met their eyes, shoulders pushed back as I stood tall. I clenched my jaw and drew a deep breath before continuing, “He thought we would cower in fear. DID WE?” I yelled in sharp demand, staring each man and woman in the room in the eye, daring them to cower even now.

“No!”

“No, we didn't!”

The energy of the mood instantly turned from somber and dejected to one of fizzling energy. It permeated the air, almost tangible, like I could wrap my hands around it and feel a jolt in my bones. It was infectious, and I knew it was enough to use in our plans.

Focusing back on the map, I laid my hands against the wooden table and squinted at every little detail as I mulled over our options. There was an empty patch, beige in tone near the water that had nothing written on it. Pointing to it, I looked at Tristan on my right and asked, “What is this?”

His brow furrowed, a contemplative look on his face before a smile lit up his entire face. “That, my friend, is our new dock.”

Smirking at his jovial attitude, I asked, “Care to inform the rest of us of your brilliant plan?”

His chuckle permeated the air before he said, “Don’t mind if I do.” His smile was devilish as he turned and yelled, “Listen up! Plans have changed. We will be splitting into two groups moving forward: a stealth team and the main force.”

I raised an eyebrow in question and a devious glint flickered in his gaze as he smirked.

“Let’s use his own ideas against him. The main force will draw their eye to the harbor and send all abled bodies to fight there. Our stealth group will dock at the beach you pointed out and will travel through the towns on the outskirts until it reaches the back of the capital city.”

“Brilliant,” Elijah murmured. “We’ll trap their forces between our two in a pincer movement, and it’ll expose their backs to us.”

Barnabus fluttered down from the wooden beam he’d been watching from quietly and landed on my shoulder.

***This is the perfect opportunity to evacuate the towns as you go.***

Reiterating what Barnabus said, I was pleased that everyone was seemingly in agreement with this new plan, however, there was one small snag. “How are we going to get the main forces docked at the harbor?”

With a grunt, Tristan glanced at my three men, who’d gathered at my back, before admitting, “Our stealth team needs to take the small boats to the harbor and light their ships on fire before the masses wake and the daylight gives us away.”

Dakath’s voice dropped dangerously, vibrating as he asked, “And why do you look like we’re going to kill you for this plan?”

That was an easy assumption. There was only one thing that would rile all three of them up so quickly.

Standing to my full height, I announced, “Because I’ll be leading the stealth group, and Tristan will lead the main forces on our ships.”

Reaching up to scratch Barnabus beneath the chin, I hoped my guys would understand the advantage of him being able to scour the sky and scout ahead for us while relaying anything he found into my mind. We had to use every single advantage we had if we were going to pull this off, and with Tristan noting the way I interacted with Barnabus, I had a suspicion he was beginning to wonder about our connection.

Turning around to face them, I hoped they saw the earnestness on my face and heard it in my tone. “You three will be coming with me, along with a few others, to light as many ships as we can on fire quickly enough before retreating to safety. I will not be doing this alone, nor even attempting to,” I vowed.

“We’re honored to fight at your side, Empress,” Kolvar responded, bowing his head.

Dakath clasped his hands in front of him and nodded in agreement, a small curve tilting the corner of his lips up.

Elijah’s eyes all but bore into my own, peering into my soul as he whispered, “Thank you.”

Smiling softly at them all, I nodded and turned back to the table and Tristan.

“If we’re to light their ships on fire, it’s likely the docks will also catch,” my right hand surmised. “We need to focus the fire on the ships that are anchored in the water instead of tied to the docks. They’re out of reach of the docks and have nowhere to go, with the anchor lodging them in place. The ships will crumble in place, scattering amongst the water before sinking once they’re lit.”

A thought occurred to me at that moment, and I piped in. “But there will be guards watching the harbor, undoubtedly. If they’re concerned about the fire spreading amongst the ships and to the docks themselves, would they not send the burning ships out to sea and away from them? They need to protect

their own assets. It could handle our issues completely: clearing out the ships in the harbor and keeping the docks intact for our arrival.”

“Smart,” Elijah praised. “But you will need to order all our ships to retreat even further so we are not spotted. If we’re spotted, the true battle will begin. If we want to bide time until the morning, we must have the stealth team row back to one lone ship waiting to take us back to safety. With how much we need to navigate, the rest of our fleet needs to immediately begin moving back when this meeting is over.”

Tristan gave a sharp nod. “Agreed. This ship will stay until you return. Empress, do you agree with these plans?”

With the weight of the room looking at me, I lifted my chin and spoke. “I do. Commence them at once. Move the remainder of the ships back, and we’ll gather our torches and oil into the rowboats heading for the harbor. I want eight bodies total, so find four more that you believe is a good fit.”

“On it,” Kolvar and Dakath echoed.

“We will reconvene after this,” I told Tristan as he dismissed the captains and leaders to their ships with their instructions to retreat. “We must discuss the next steps for our land invasion further.”

“Yes, Empress,” he agreed, tipping his head down.

As I turned to help gather supplies for my team, he called out, “Kyella.”

Pausing and glancing over my shoulder, I raised an eyebrow in question. “Yes?”

His lips thinned and his jaw clenched, eyes dropping to the ground as he said, “Be careful and come back in one piece. Rina and Bailey would never forgive me if I let you get hurt or captured, and I’d...” he trailed off before finally looking me in the eyes. “I’d never forgive myself either. So come back, okay?”

My heart warmed at the sentiment from the man who seemed so stoic outside of his interactions with his wife and daughter.



“I’ve got this,” I promised, offering a full smile as I turned forward and left the room.

Before long, we were climbing down the rope ladder from the side of the ship and settling into the small rowboat that would carry our team toward the docks. We were split into two small vessels, with the instructions for the second team of four to head for the right side while we head for the left.

“Remember,” I whispered-yelled as our boats began to drift opposite ways, “light as many as you can, but do not risk your life. Get out of there if anything goes wrong.”

*You sound like a mother hen watching after her hatchlings.*

I held in my answering snort and snuggled into Elijah’s side as we sat in the middle of the boat guarding the torches, oil, and reserves of animal fat with Dakath and Kolvar rowing on either end of it.

We didn’t speak a single word as we trekked across the open water and finally came upon the first of their warships anchored far out in the harbor. I all but held my breath as we slowly passed one, as if there was going to be someone on board that spotted us and gave us away. The goal was to light the ones closest to the docks first and then to hit some of the ones that were closer to the open sea on our way out, so we didn’t trap ourselves amongst burning ships.

My shoulders sagged in relief when no one appeared on the ship we passed, but I knew the real test was about to come: How quickly would the guards watching the harbor react when they saw torches being lit and the first ship set on fire?

Without a doubt, our mission was risky, and it would only become more so if multiple guards converged on us. The goal was to not fight at all and get away before they could see how we escaped if they did notice us, so splitting up once we docked and lighting at the same time would ensure as little time as possible between guards noticing and us escaping. We didn’t want our faces to be seen, and we did not want them seeing that we escaped on the water and headed out to the sea.

As we approached the dock, Elijah and I began to prepare the first torch, and at that moment, I didn't feel an ounce of fear. It was finally time to strike back at Malakai.

The battle started now.

All it would take was one strike of flint to light the path to victory, and I planned on sparking it right now.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## ELIJAH

**A**rriving at the dock, Kyella and I finished preparing the first torch. We used a flint to light the oil-dipped torch, the combustible liquid guaranteeing that it would burn as strongly as possible as it sailed through the air before landing on our intended target.

In order to avoid capsizing such a small vessel, I knew all of us needed to keep our center of gravity as low as possible, especially considering how large the three of us were compared to her. So when Kolvar began to lean forward slightly to secure our boat to a post at the end of the dock, I tried to shift my own weight back to ensure we wouldn't flip over.

Once the boat was secured, I spoke quietly, "Each of us will take two torches onto the docks, and when I give the signal, we will throw them."

All of them nodded in understanding, and I knew there was no need to emphasize how important it was that we moved as quickly and as quietly as possible. Our goal was to hit these first eight boats, hoping the fires would spread from there to clear out this half of the harbor. There wasn't time for anything more than that.

Kolvar exited the boat, easily stepping up onto the dock before lifting Kyella from onto it as well. Dakath aided in the process, countering my weight and helping me prepare the next three torches before handing them off to the other two. Despite moving as quickly as we could, I couldn't help the paranoia that filled me at the idea of someone seeing us.

I easily swung myself up onto the dock as Dakath moved toward the center of the boat and prepared four more torches. When he disembarked the vessel and joined us, I let out a small breath of relief.

We quickly spread out along the dock, keeping the torches as close as possible to try to shield a bit of the glow they were emitting. When I reached my targets, I looked down at the torch in my hand.

It was a bit surreal—holding the torch that would set the first vessel ablaze. The torch that would continue a war that had been ignited the moment we first took Kyella from Malakai. Back when my love took the bold and brave step to trust us before stepping foot onto a ship that would carry her across the Cursed Divide to a new foreign land.

Kyella was so damn brave—my gaze moving over to where she stood, positioning herself between two large vessels. Even in this moment, in the shadow of an empire that caused so much pain, she didn't hesitate, determination radiating through each and every part of her. When she looked over at me, I offered a sharp nod.

I brought my arm back, knowing that, despite our enhanced strength, we would need momentum and the right angle for the torch to land exactly where we needed it to.

Letting out a sharp low whistle to signal to the others, I sent the torch flying through the air.

Its arc over the ship railing was so damn satisfying to watch, and the others followed, moving into action and throwing their first torches before we threw our seconds. I watched for just a moment, to ensure our attempts to light the ships were successful.

The others rushed past me toward the boat, and Kyella tugged on my arm as she whispered, "Come on!"

I nodded sharply, turning to follow as smoke began to swirl up from the main deck, only illuminated by the faintest of light. Quickly, the sound of wood popping and crackling was caught by my enhanced hearing.

As we got back into the boat, Dakath and Kolvar began to row out of the convoluted maze of ships that filled the harbor. When I noticed the first ship was starting to emit a stronger glow from the flames, I knew that our window of opportunity was closing.

When I heard Kyella let out a curse, everything came to a halt, my gaze darting to her. Immediately, I examined my love to see what was wrong, worried she had burnt herself while throwing one of the torches, only to realize her focus was past me, all the way to the right.

“What?” I asked, my voice as quiet as possible, wanting to ensure that no level of enhanced hearing would be able to detect it. When she didn’t say anything immediately and her eyes narrowed as if trying to focus on something, my gaze followed hers toward the far right. I would have expected to see the light of ships burning like our own side.

Instead, there was only darkness.

*Shit.* Why the hell weren’t there any ships on fire yet? I couldn’t even see the fire from the torches sailing through the night air. I saw nothing, and my hearing only picked up the sound of waves lapping at the ships, offering no indication of what was happening.

“What are they doing?” Dakath growled in frustration.

“They should have at least as many ships as ourselves going,” Kolvar agreed, looking undecided on how to handle this as his brow furrowed. Especially since there was no good way to communicate what had happened.

Barnabus appeared out of seemingly nowhere, sweeping down from the sky and batting his wings in the air in front of Kyella. He made a series of clicks in a tone that I swear held an air of urgency. When Kyella’s eyes widened, concern coating her expression, I knew I was correct.

“We have a problem,” Kyella hissed, her entire body tight with tension. “The other team got their torches wet, which is why they haven’t been able to light any of them. Barnabus was

flying overhead, keeping tabs on everything, so he saw it happen.”

That was a fucking problem, because outside of going back to the main vessel, there was no way for them to get new torches.

“Did they have any extras with them?” Kyella asked.

“Yes, but I assume those are wet as well,” I murmured, as I quickly formulated a plan to tackle the problem at hand.

“Okay, this is what we’re going to do,” I said as I met the other two’s gazes before looking at my love. “We’re going to row over and light their targets from our boat. It’s that simple, and while not as effective as our original plan, we don’t have time to overthink this. We have to move fast, and we cannot be caught.”

“Agreed,” Kyella said, determination setting her brow in a heavy line. “We need to act. Now.”

Dakath and Kolvar nodded their agreement as they sprang into action. Rowing us silently but quickly through the water and toward the left grouping of the ships that blocked the harbor. As they rowed, my gaze ran over the torches we had left, and I found myself feeling grateful that we had brought extras.

As we passed through some of the first vessels on the left side, knowing we needed to get as close to the dock as possible without getting off the vessel, we came across the other team, looking relieved to see us.

Kyella commanded, “Go back to the ship and update Tristan. After we handle these ships, we’ll head back as well, but we should have as few people in the water as possible. Understand?”

“Yes, Empress,” one of them answered, and they disappeared easily into the darkness as we turned our attention back to the task at hand.

We worked efficiently to hit as many of the warships as possible in a few minutes, working our way through the water from the ships closer to the dock to those toward the open sea.

I hoped that any we missed would catch fire because of the inferno surrounding them.

In the short amount of time that had passed, the fires had grown extremely hot. We were surrounded by burning ships, embers floating through the air as the hiss and pop of crackling wood filled my ears. In the distance, I heard something crash, most likely a mast, and I couldn't help but smile, knowing that plan was working.

But the moment I began to hear raised voices above the chaos, we stopped lighting torches, not wanting to risk being seen. Sitting down, I spoke quietly, "Let's head back to the ship, I think we've lit all that we can."

"We got most of them," Kyella pointed out, nodding as if satisfied by that. Kolvar and Dakath began rowing us toward the main ship, the vessel waiting for us under the cover of night.

There were no lights illuminating the ship as it appeared out of nowhere, the sound of waves hitting against it the only sign that it was present, lurking and watching the chaos on shore.

Platoons of guards flooded the docks as we approached the vessel, moving as quickly and quietly as possible, to not risk attracting attention.

"They're searching the areas around the docks," Dakath pointed out as relief surged through me. He was right, the guards weren't getting on ships or trying to search the water, rather they were spreading through the nearest streets—no doubt looking for the culprit.

"I'm positive it's not that far of a stretch to imagine that someone from their own land chose to burn the ships as a sign of treason," Kolvar bit out, and I knew in my gut that he wasn't wrong. I merely hoped it took the guards a bit too long to realize that the ships that were attacked weren't docked, making it impossible to have lit them from shore.

When we reached the side of our ship, a rope ladder was let down, allowing us to ascend the side of the warship. Kyella



went first, the rest of us worked to attach the rowboat near the one used by the other team, before following her up.

When we reached the main deck, we were greeted immediately by Tristan, the rest of his team hanging back for a moment. I ran a hand over Kyella's back as she leaned against me, her face set with determination and a sense of satisfaction as she watched the shoreline. Like me, I'm sure she was imagining Malakai's reaction to the news of his fleet being attacked.

The ship moved quietly through the water, sailing to meet the rest of our fleet, beyond the range of sight of anyone on shore.

We would wait until the morning until the next part of our plan could take place.

The four of us stood on the main deck as we navigated through the water away from the Thaician Empire. Ships, lit with blazing flames, were being pushed out to sea, and the panic of the guards in the harbor filled the air. The inferno glowing behind us felt like a victory despite the war being far from over.

After a long moment, Kyella spoke softly, "Let's gather everyone. We need to talk about what to do next. With how many moving parts there are, I want every leader to be part of the discussion. Can we arrange that?"

"Of course," I said as Dakath nodded, striding toward one of the other crew members to give the order while Kolvar moved in Tristan's direction.

I pressed my nose against Kyella's hair as she melted against me, allowing myself to savor the feeling of having her in my arms. I knew I wouldn't have a chance to hold her like this again soon—possibly not until this damn war was over.

A short time later, once we joined the fleet and the other captains and leaders had been brought onto our ship, we gathered over a table once more, using only a few torches to illuminate the map spread before us.

“We need to figure this out as quickly as possible,” Kyella said in a commanding tone, standing with her shoulders squared as she considered the group studying the map. “I don’t want to risk having the torches light longer than necessary, especially because we have managed to come this far without detection.”

“Absolutely,” Tristan voiced his agreement.

At the earlier meeting, I’d been impressed by Tristan and it was clear that he was a natural leader. I wasn’t positive what his position or rank was under Malakai’s rule, but I could tell that he was suited to leadership. It could only fare well for us in this war, with him leading the main forces into battle.

“Tonight was nothing but a taste of the upcoming battle we face,” Kyella began, her finger pointing at the docks that we had hopefully managed to clear. “Tomorrow begins the true war. Tristan, you will be leading our main force in the land attack, ideally drawing Malakai’s attention and military forces there.”

I added, “I think you’ll find that your efforts to draw everyone there, even soldiers from the outskirts of the city, will work well. Tonight’s fire seemed to gain a vast amount of attention, so that alone may have done half of the job for us.”

At least that was the hope.

“That would be ideal,” Kolvar pointed out.

“What about our stealth group?” Dakath questioned, and my stomach tightened with the thought of Kyella joining us. I knew I couldn’t always protect her, but that didn’t mean I was happy about her insistence of putting herself in harm’s way.

“We will travel along the coastline, bypassing the sea wall.” She traced the coastline on the map before coming to an unmarked beige patch, “Then we’ll dock here. Hopefully, this will allow us to rescue those who aren’t part of this war before surrounding Malakai from all sides.”

It was a brilliant plan, but there were other factors to consider.

“Assuming we take a number of ships down the coastline,” I started. “What other factors should we consider?”

“My main concern is the guards that are posted overlooking the sea, so you will need to try to stay as close as possible to the sea wall.”

“The guards aren’t your biggest concern then,” a voice drew out, pulling my gaze to the captain of our own ship, his eyes darkened on the map. “I didn’t see the cliffs in detail today since it was already dark, but from my experience, we’ll be dealing with waves that could easily turn deadly if we aren’t careful. The last thing we want is to sail too close and end up being smashed against the rocks.”

Shit. He was absolutely right.

Kyella nodded in understanding. “Do you think we will be able to do it without detection? Of course, I look to all of you to make the right decision while sailing in such dangerous conditions, but our element of surprise will be taken away if they see us sailing in that direction.”

The captain studied the map further, pointing toward the middle of the sea wall, where it seemed to dip in just slightly. “Our biggest struggle will come in this middle section where the force of the waves will grow, but I think we can do it. At least, we are going to damn well try. We want to get these people out of there, and with the dock being attacked, there will be no other way.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do,” Kyella said with a sharp nod before looking back down at the map. “I am still concerned about the guards, however. Tristan, do we know exactly where they’re posted?”

“I do not,” Tristan admitted. “To an extent, I can assume they’re laid out fairly evenly, but I was never put on duty there. If I had to guess, there aren’t many. Malakai didn’t see a need in the first place, claiming that no one would ever attack us.”

Look how fucking wrong he was.

“Plus, the current and seas are known to be rough, so it isn’t an ideal post,” he added.

“I hope that won’t scare people away from wanting to get onto the ship to escape,” Kyella pointed out.

“I think you will find most people immediately jumping at the opportunity to flee onto the ships no matter what, as terrifying as the ocean is—a war between two vast empires is far more intimidating,” Dakath said quietly, his frame still and tense.

“Plus,” I drew out, “the ships will stay docked there as we invade from that direction, so they may never need to go out to sea. Unless we aren’t successful in our endeavor and need to ensure they truly escape, they may be able to get right off the boat following all of this and return to their homes.”

Kyella spoke softly but with a hard tone, “We won’t allow him to use his people as pawns in such a dangerous war.” *Exactly.* Pride filled my chest at the sight of Kyella’s words inspiring those gathered around us to nod in agreement.

I looked up at the sky. “We have a few hours before dawn. If you agree, Empress, I think it would be good to have the stealth group prepared to leave before first light. We shouldn’t risk the potential of anyone seeing us.”

“Agreed.” Kyella’s voice was filled with fire, her eyes narrowing dangerously. “By that point the boats should have drifted out to sea and burnt, so the frontal attack will be able to move in as well. Tristan, we will be taking this ship, so we must ensure that everything you need is transferred to a different one.”

“Will do,” he said, nodding sharply.

“Everyone should try to get a few hours of rest,” I added. “We have a long day ahead of us.”

As people began to talk in smaller groups, Kyella looked at the three of us and exhaled, “Everyone *should* get some rest, I’m just not sure I can sleep after something like this.”

I understood that very well. “How about we sit on the deck, and if you fall asleep, we can rest while still keeping an

eye on everything?”

After a long moment of thought, she agreed and our much smaller group found our way on the front of the ship, our eyes focused on the blazing glory of the Thaician shores. Wrapping a blanket around Kyella for comfort, she laid her head against my shoulder, and I met the gaze of both Dakath and Kolvar who had been watching her.

I was glad she was resting because come dawn, we would be fully submerged in a war that only had one end: *Malakai's death*.

# CHAPTER TWELVE

## KYELLA

The dawn greeted me as I stood at the front of the ship, my eyes on the sea wall, apprehension turning my gut.

There was so much potential for catastrophe here, and I couldn't help but hold my breath as I clasped my hands on the railing before me.

Before there was any light in the sky, we started to move away from the rest of the fleet and out of sight of the main harbor. I didn't want to risk anyone seeing us and figuring out what we had planned, especially since there were so many lives at stake. There were so many innocent lives that we could save if we could only get to where we needed to be.

The vessel we were navigating through these testy waters was run by the crew we'd been with the entire time. It was a group of familiar faces, all set in determination of what we needed to do today. The captain of our ship seemed confident he could navigate along the sea wall successfully, as did the sailors, so I was hanging onto the hope that maybe this wouldn't be as much of a problem as I first thought.

My concern wasn't only about our ship, though. No, there were others behind me that I was worried about. The group consisted of ships that had split off from the main forces with two goals in mind: aiding us in our rescue mission as well as closing in on Malakai from the other side when the time came. We hadn't split the fleet in half, only taking a small group of stealth ships, because anything larger would have been too noticeable in the water.

As my gaze ran across the sky, the sea wall seeming to grow in front of us, the sky lightened from navy to periwinkle, the sun giving birth to a new day. I was glad we were nearly hidden to avoid being spotted in the exposed lighting. It was a clear day with high winds, and it was the kind of day that would have been beautiful if not for the impending battle. And as we reached the seawall, shifting our vessel to sail parallel to it, I knew that my hope for a calm, safe journey was unlikely. The waves that crashed against the rocky cliffside were significantly larger than most we had faced so far.

“Hold steady!” The captain shouted from the wheel, Elijah standing nearby with his gaze locked on the sea wall. “Don’t let our ship give into the waves, men! Keep it steady, and we will get her out of this.”

I gripped the rail, eyes focused on the turbulent sea. Waves crashed loudly where we had tucked ourselves against the rocky cliffside, but I had no doubt it was going to get much, much worse, especially the further we got away from the harbor and shore where the waves could gently dissipate.

When Dakath’s large hands came on either side of the rail I was leaning against, I tilted my head back and examined his hard-set expression.

I spoke quietly, “Are you okay?” I doubted anyone was paying attention to us, let alone listening to us, but I understood that he might not want to talk about what bothered him. I knew better than anyone that being in the Thaician Empire was a nightmare. Literally.

But I wasn’t afraid. No, I would never be afraid of Malakai again.

“I’m all right.” He paused, seeming to mull over his words before continuing, “I’m not positive those are the right words. I’m more *ready* than anything. I am ready to see everything this bastard has built up, alongside his ego, be destroyed. He has hurt far too many. There is no other option but to see him destroyed.”

“We will ensure that happens,” I agreed softly, feeling a darkness settle over me. There was no way Malakai was



walking out alive. No matter what he said or did, even if he begged for his life...No, I just wouldn't trust it. I had watched him break too many promises, so many times, that I knew nothing he said could be taken as truth.

“More than anything, though, I want to make sure that we save as many as we can. I don't want any more families separated.”

Like both of our families had been.

“We won't let his arrogance, ego, and greed be the reason for any more deaths.” Kolvar's words had both of us looking toward him as he approached.

As he strode toward us purposefully, the boat rocked heavily, and he stumbled a step before righting himself. I braced myself, tightening my grip on the railing as my gaze darted back to the cliffside. My stomach dropped. The waves had already doubled in size. *Shit*. This was about to get so much worse—I could feel it. While the captain and crew were doing a good job of holding steady, the ship was beginning to rock violently.

“Don't worry, darling, it would take a lot to sink a ship of this size. Outside of crashing directly into the cliffs, there aren't many ways it can happen,” Kolvar explained, despite the edge of tension in his tone.

After everything we'd been through and my hard-earned knowledge of the ship's overall durability, I gathered that he was right about that. Wind and waves may rock the ship, but to angle a ship of this size enough so that waves could crash onto the deck and provide enough weight to sink it, was highly unlikely. I had been assured that the Tridian ships were made with quality and strength in mind, so unless the ship was damaged against the seawall, allowing water in, sinking it was unlikely as Kolvar mentioned.

It didn't stop me from worrying, not completely.

“There are several ships traveling this dangerous path,” I pointed out as I turned, looking toward the outline of the ships following our lead.

“With a lot of experienced captains.” Dakath assured me.

The wind whistled against the sails, and I looked upward beyond the sails and masts to keep an eye on the top of the cliffs. I’d yet to see a guard post, which hopefully meant we were tucked in enough that they couldn’t see us either. The skies were light enough now that it would not only ruin our advantage along the sea wall, but no doubt reveal the entire fleet that was moving into the harbor as well.

“They’re going to attack soon,” I continued, and both men nodded their agreement. “I left Barnabus with Tristan. When the battle starts, he’s going to fly to us to let us know. I’m hoping the beginning of the battle lines up with us getting to where we want to dock.”

We had to make it past this damn sea wall first, which was becoming considerably more dangerous by the moment.

It had only taken minutes for the waves to transform from large and dangerous to outright chaotic and more lethal. My men spread out by the masts of the ship to help hold everything steady, and still I stood near the front of the ship, my eyes on the rocky sea wall, watching as we grew ever closer to it in the deadly current.

The wind was heavier as well, churning up massive waves that hit the wall causing water to spray back, hitting us with icy drops before the sound of them crashing echoed like the violent shattering of glass. The ship was being pulled roughly toward the wall, and it was only by the navigation of those on board that we were able to continue to keep it away. I worried how long everyone would be able to maintain the same level of control.

I looked back from my position at the front to keep an eye on our fleet, knowing that we were getting the worst of it first. While I knew it wouldn’t, I was somehow hoping that our position closest to the cliffs would lessen the problem for them. I was proven wrong moments later when I found myself sprinting across the deck to the back quarter deck.

“Fuck!” I hissed out as one of the ships behind us slammed into the cliffside wall. Instantly, I heard the cracking of wood,

and Elijah appeared by my side, a curse slipping from his lips.

The other ship careened toward the starboard side, the warship moving out from the cliffside in a diagonal direction. That was when I saw the damage that had been done—a massive gaping hole in the side of the ship, causing water to flood in. The ship would sink at any moment, and I looked to Elijah, feeling raw panic in my gut.

“We can’t let them sink,” I growled out. “We need to save them—”

“Watch.” He nodded back, and I jerked around to see that while the ship had pulled away from the cliffside, it wasn’t the only one. The ship behind the damaged vessel followed closely.

“What are they doing?”

“It’s a fucking risk and exposes them, but the other ship is going to evacuate them and take the sailors on board,” Elijah explained. Fascinated, I watched exactly that happen, sailors abandoning ship as they used ropes and ladders to board the other ship, the soldiers on it helping them up. It wasn’t ideal, but I would take it rather than lose any lives like this.

When a wave crashed against the wall and repelled back over us, I was stunned momentarily by the cold water. All that filled my mind now was the way our ship had suddenly been thrown into chaos and turmoil.

Through howling wind, cold gigantic waves, rocking ships, and dangerous the tide that continued to try to pull us forward, I held on for dear life, getting soaked to the bone. We navigated ourselves down to the main deck where it was a bit more stable, and I clung to the main mast, the sailors working in a uniformed effort to pull a series of ropes that controlled the sails and kept us narrowly from slamming into the rock wall. I could hear the captain shouting orders, and while visibility was horrible because of the spray, I was in awe of their ability to navigate this.

I just had to hope like hell there wasn’t a line of sunken vessels behind us.

Unlike with the Kraken, I couldn't do anything to protect my people here. We were at the mercy of nature herself, and she was fucking angry at our ships. I cursed as waves hit us from the port side and sent us rocking far to starboard, water crashing up onto the deck.

My body was wrenched from the mast, and I went sliding across the deck. I caught myself on a length rope as the ship straightened itself out, Kolvar appearing next to me and cursing up a storm as he nearly lost his footing.

He quickly pinned me against the main mast as the waves roared, drowning out everything except for the sound of something like an explosion behind us. Without looking, I knew another ship had crashed into the sea wall. I fucking knew it. My chest tightened, but I couldn't move, gritting my teeth in frustration. We had not come this fucking far only to be destroyed by some damn waves.

Then all at once, it stopped.

We broke past the sea wall, our ship dipping into an alcove that was no longer lined with a cliffside, instead a sandy outlet greeted us. I swore, nearly slumping against the mast in relief, as the sailors congratulated one another—clearly feeling victorious over navigating the seawall.

But I didn't feel victorious.

Instead, I sped up the quarter deck staircase and stood at the back of the ship, my gaze running over the cliffside—not noticing any guard posts before moving my attention down to the ships following us.

Off to the side, I spotted a sinking ship, but it appeared that everyone had been evacuated like the first time. I sucked in a deep breath and concluded that it must be part of our navy's protocol to handle a sinking ship like that. It was a system they seemed to have down, and I was beyond thankful for it.

“The minute we pull ashore, I want to ensure we haven't lost any lives despite having lost two ships.” I turned to face my men, who joined me on the quarter deck. “I need to know if someone won't be returning home.”

With a sharp nod from Elijah, I turned my attention to a group of men getting into the water and dragging ropes, tying, and securing them to the land to anchor the ship. Not all the vessels would be able to pull as close as this one, some having to anchor in the water, but we were able to get close.

Deciding to go ashore as the other ships followed our lead, I used the ladder to make it halfway down the side of the ship before dropping down, bending my knees. Twisting out my hair to remove any extra moisture, I turned back to examine the ships, noticing that most of them had taken only minimal damage.

Good. We needed them strong and ready for whatever would greet us moving forward.

***Empress.***

Barnabus' voice had me snapping my gaze upward as his familiar form swept down in front of me. ***The attack has started.***

“Please keep an eye on them and update me on whatever happens,” I instructed, and he immediately flew off, not questioning the order. I knew Tristan had the attack handled, but I couldn't help but think of those on the front line, an essential but extremely dangerous position.

“The attack has started.” I announced, knowing that even if it wasn't loud enough for everyone to hear they would pass the message on. “We need to be prepared to load people onboard, so I want half of you to stay here by the ships in case of an attack, and the rest of us will begin to gather individuals. Understood?”

Calls of ‘yes’ and ‘understood’ had me turning toward the pathway between two trees, my men joining me. I kept an eye out, looking back up at the cliffside and still noting the absence of guards. I wasn't sure if that was normal or if our plan had worked to lure all of them toward the docks with the frontal attack.

Either way, it meant that we could focus on our main priority right now: *saving lives*.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## KYELLA

“Do you think they ever had guards stationed there?” I asked Elijah, keeping my voice low as we moved through the thick forest that overtook the deserted beach we’d landed on.

As much as I wanted to speed through here and get to the first town as quickly as possible, Elijah had cautioned that just because the cliffs hadn’t been guarded, didn’t mean the areas surrounding the nearest towns would be the same.

“Hard to say,” he mused as his eyes flicked around the dense foliage. Tension lined his features, his body taut and ready to spring into action. “If it was our empire, without a doubt, there would be guards there. Malakai has shown his arrogance time and time again, so I’d venture a guess that he thinks no one would be foolish enough to pass the sea wall with how dangerous it is. Honestly, he probably also doesn’t care about the safety of the small towns near his capital. His food source is in the capital. We’re simply moving slowly as a precaution.”

A huff came from Dakath, and as I glanced at him on my right, I found him shaking his head in disgust, his lip curled. “He’s shown no empathy or regard for human life, even within the capital.”

It was like a hand reached inside my chest and squeezed my heart in a vice. We were one in the same, losing our family at Malakai’s hand. If there was one thing Malakai had made clear, it was that the depravity of his mind and his malicious actions knew no bounds.

Kolvar's voice carried back to us with the wind from his position ahead of us, "I don't think with the battle having just started, they would have had time to carry the word to forces out here to return to the capital *and* for those forces to have made it there already."

While I knew our team would defer to my orders, I was truly counting on my men and their expertise to make the right call. Elijah was correct when he said that they had much to offer and could help greatly in formulating plans. I was more thankful than I could ever put into words for having them at my side as sources of emotional support...as well as their sound expertise.

"All right," Elijah barked out loudly enough for our entire team to hear as he came to a halt. "It's time to increase our pace. Kolvar will halt the moment he hears a noise at the front, so despite us running now, you must pay attention and be ready to stop with a second's notice. Ears open and eyes wide, team."

The pace of my beating heart quickened at his words. While I feared what was to come, purely due to the unknown, I couldn't deny that there was a thrill creeping beneath my skin at finally being able to make a difference. It wasn't just all talk and hope for a better future anymore. It was time to make those dreams become a reality.

With an affirmative nod, we quickly set into a run, keeping pace with the humans on our team so no one was separated. I was so thankful that the armor that had been made for me felt light as a feather and didn't weigh me down or make me uncomfortable despite having been made from the blue steel I had chosen in the smithy. Ross had truly outdone himself—it felt like he'd perfectly molded the metal to fit my frame.

The only odd thing was not being able to strap my daggers to my thighs anymore. Now, they rested in leather holsters wrapped around my waist, with multiple lighter throwing daggers residing in a closed pouch. When Ross had asked me my preferred weapon and I'd told him daggers, he'd had the forethought to create feather-light and perfectly balanced throwing daggers that I could use for longer range targets. It



was comforting not having to worry about losing my beloved daggers Elijah had gifted me.

We'd also discussed my defensive capabilities, which were slim to none since I didn't carry a shield. I'd have to rely on my speed and agility to dance out of the threat of my attacker. I was hesitant to test out whether Ross boasting about the metal around my arms being strong enough to act as a shield was true or not. I could only hope that it didn't come to that because that was a lot of faith to place in him and his armor. Otherwise, I'd be sans an arm and potentially my life.

The further we ran through the forest, with no sight or sound of another being besides our group, the more I began to feel a sense of nostalgia washing over me.

There was a distinct scent of primrose filling the air and tickling my senses, which reminded me of the area that surrounded my village growing up. Despite having been on the outskirts of our town and on the opposite side of where the plant grew, there was always that sweet, but slightly tangy scent in the air.

It smelled like home. My very first home.

"What's wrong?" Dakath asked, his voice gruff with concern as he glanced over in time to see me wipe a stray tear from my eye.

While it seemed silly to tell him that the smell of the flower was causing my emotion, I couldn't deny that it sent a pang of sadness through me, causing my lips to thin and my eyes to burn as the memories of my childhood washed over me. When my father and aunt were still alive.

The strange thing about grief is that, at first, it felt so heavy to carry for so long, and then suddenly, one day, it began to lighten. With each passing day, those small movements built upon each other until it didn't feel like a thick fog was weighing down your mind and body anymore. But then when that pain came back, sparked by a memory, place, smell, or whatever it may be, it was like you were transported right back to the first day that it felt impossible to

move, to even breathe, without pain permeating every particle of your being all the way down to your soul.

“Just thinking about the past,” I admitted quietly between heavy breaths as we continued to run.

I knew he wouldn't push unless I wanted to offer up more. There had always been a mutual understanding and level of trust between us, and it meant that just because we understood the pain that the other was going through, we didn't pry. There was comfort in knowing he understood and was simply at my side while I processed it.

As the trees began to thin, Kolvar came to a halt, holding a hand up for us to still.

As we pulled to a stop, my ears strained to pick up what he'd heard. After a short moment, I heard the squealing laughter of children. *That* was one thing I couldn't relate to in my memories—playing with other children.

In order to have enough land to farm we were fairly removed from the center of town. While some might have thought that was a lonely way to lead their life, I'd never lacked happiness or love while running through our fields and soaking in the sunshine alone before returning home to help my aunt with dinner. The few times we had gone to the market that came together once every few months in the village, I'd never felt welcomed by the other children there. I was the unknown recluse, and after one attempt at joining in on their game of knucklebones while my father set up our stall, I'd never tried again.

I'd never forget that sick feeling at the pit of my stomach when they'd visibly sneered at me and let their silence deafen the air in response to my attempt to join them.

It was a horrid feeling, being ostracized, but perhaps I could attribute the fire that had never been able to be squelched within me to that very moment. I remember running back to my father, tears streaming down my face, and him kneeling to look me in the eye. He wiped the tears from my eyes, and after I managed to choke out the explanation for why

I was so upset, he asked me, *“Do you feel like your life is less now because of what they did?”*

Being so young, it had taken me a while to think of an answer. Eventually, I told him no, that it just hurt my feelings. He'd placed his hand over my heart and said, *“It's okay to feel sad or hurt by the actions of others, but you will always have the power to decide how you react to it. Those reactions can give them power and control over your life. If you choose to focus on the good in your life, then they didn't win, did they?”*

Warmth bled into my hands, bringing me back to the present, with Dakath and Elijah gently squeezing my hands. Sniffing lightly, I shot them both smiles to reassure them that I was okay...because I always would be. Even despite the horrible things I'd be through, my dad was right. They'd never win. That knowledge had gotten me through my darkest times and my only regret that he wasn't here to see how much he'd help me.

A knot loosened at my chest at the thought. It had been bothering me deep down ever since Myrin told me that he likely wasn't my biological dad, with it taking a vampyre father and human mother to create a dhampyr, but at this moment...I finally realized it didn't matter who biologically held that title. My dad was still my dad and nothing would ever take that from me. He'd cherished me, loved me, and protected me like a father would.

The Evathrina charm felt like it burned against my skin where it lay tucked against my chest beneath my armor, reminding me of my mother. I wished my entire family was here to see the woman I'd become.

Centering my emotions and collecting myself, I let go of their hands and roughly brushed any lingering wetness from my eyes as Kolvar approached us and whispered, *“From what I can see and hear, this is a village with no guards, but there is always a possibility that they could be hiding. How do you want to move forward?”*

Their three sets of eyes turned to me, and I quickly answered, *“We can't all appear out of the brush at once, or we*

will scare them. Kolvar and I will venture into their village alone and try to reason with them. If there are any guards, this tactic will give us the element of surprise since they won't know that we have forces waiting on the outskirts of the village."

Nods of agreement came from all, and Kolvar and I trekked through the dense brush to a trodden dirt path and set down it toward the children's voices. Nerves fluttered in my stomach, but I tried to ignore it and hope for the best.

"We've got this," Kolvar whispered, eerily sensing my mood without any indication from me.

Inhaling deeply, I nodded and offered a soft smile to him as I breathed out. Walking around the bend in the road, we entered what appeared to be the center of a deserted marketplace where we found two young boys playing with dice.

Glancing around, I took in the stalls that seemed to have been left unattended with goods still overflowing their tables and carts. A few wooden houses stood in the near distance, and it was there that I spotted a group of adults gathering.

As we approached the boys, I let out a soft, "Hey there," and came to a stop a few feet from them. They whipped around with wide eyes.

I expected them to be terrified of strangers touting armor and weapons, but as soon as their gazes fell on Kolvar, they lit up. Exuberant energy filled them as they jumped up and asked, "Can I touch your armor, sir? You're like a big warrior that they're talking about!"

Kolvar and I exchanged confused glances but leaned into their excitement to try to establish trust. As he kneeled down to them, his voice oozed a comforting warmth. "Of course, but be careful of the sharp side of the ax, okay?"

Excited gasps came from the boys, and they rushed to run their fingers over his armor. A genuine smile tugged his lips apart, white teeth on full display. It was like watching him come to life with these children around him.

“Hey, boys,” I said as I glanced up at the crowd in the distance. “Are you supposed to be out here alone, or should you be with everyone else over there?”

I’d venture to guess they were supposed to be with them, especially if there were talks of warriors going around. Someone’s parents were going to be very upset and afraid when they couldn’t find these two.

The smaller of the two with long, golden blonde hair turned his eyes on me and shrugged. “Mom said to stay inside with the other kids, but we got bored.”

As he mentioned the other children, the taller boy, with raven-black hair and stunning sharp features, made a look as if he’d had the brightest idea come to mind and announced, “Let’s bring them back to everyone! Everyone’s going to be so jealous we met warriors.”

“Yeah,” Kolvar agreed easily, standing up and chuckling as the boy with the wonderful idea grabbed his hand and began to drag the large vampyre behind him like they were new best friends.

The remaining boy reached for my hand, seemingly not wanting to be shown up. “Come on, Miss!”

A scream of alarm sounded from a woman as we approached, being towed by the children.

“Get away from my son!” A petite woman, with hair the color of straw, came darting toward us from the crowd, fury in her eyes.

The courage and love of a mother truly knew no bounds. It was incredible to see what could be awoken in a woman when her children were at risk. They were caregivers, home makers, and warriors, but many forgot that they even embodied that last facet.

“Mom, stop!” the boy holding my hand shouted back as his grip tightened. “They’re our new friends! They haven’t hurt us.”

Her heart-shaped face was the shade of a ripe tomato as her nostrils flared. “Matthew, get over here right now,” she

ground out between clenched teeth as she came to a halt a few feet away from me, as if I was going to attack her.

Knowing I needed to step in, I lowered to my knees and tugged lightly on the boy's hand to get his attention. "Hey, your mom is just worried about your safety. Go back to her, okay? I'm right here."

His lips pursed like he was in deep contemplation before he sighed heavily and dropped my hand. "Fine," he muttered, scuffing his feet in the dirt as he begrudgingly walked back to his mom.

She was quick to snatch him into her side, placing a protective arm around him as her eyes darted to the other boy holding Kolvar's hand. "You too, Jace! Just because your father was called to the capital doesn't mean you don't need to follow the rules anymore."

With a groan of annoyance, he followed suit.

At the mention of the boy's father being called to the capital, I glanced around at the silent crowd that was staring at us in fear. It was mainly a group of women of all ages and older men. There were no strong, able-bodied men who could defend them if there was an outbreak of fighting here.

"Why are you here?" she spat at me, her voice shaking ever so slightly, despite her raised chin and the defiance bleeding from her posture. "We were warned by the royal guards of a battle at the harbor, so why are you here in our village? We've done nothing wrong. Leave us in peace."

Deciding to put a bit more distance between us in hope they would all relax a bit, I stepped back to Kolvar and steeled myself to try to sway her to believe my words.

"We're here to evacuate those in these lands away from the war," I started, trying as hard as I could to infuse my voice with genuine concern. "Yes, we are from an empire across the Cursed Divide, but I am originally from this empire. I was a prisoner to the Emperor for years after he slaughtered my family for control of me."

Her face contorted quickly from that of indignant rebellion to shock and confusion. “Why should we believe that? We don’t know you. Either of you.”

I felt Kolvar’s hand settle on my back, pressing against my armor in a show of silent support.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I pushed on. “I cannot force you to believe us or to evacuate with my people. If no one wishes to evacuate, we will move on from this village to the next one. I just ask that you consider our offer. We have ships docked at the deserted beach nearby.”

An elderly woman came forward through the crowd, using a beautifully crafted wooden cane to assist her. “And what if we did go with you? Would we be prisoners of war?”

“No!” I was quick to rebut. “Never prisoners. You may board our ships to ensure that you are away from the dangers of war, and my crew will make sure you are cared for until it has come to an end. At that point, you may return here to continue your lives if that is what you wish, or my Empire...” I trailed off at saying that out loud for the first time. Recovering quickly, I continued, “I’m the Empress of the Tridian Empire, and my home is open to any who wish to escape Malakai’s tyrannical rule.”

Skepticism blanketed the elder woman’s face as her eyes narrowed and her lips thinned. “How is it any different than here?”

Genuine warmth bled through me as I recalled my own shock at seeing such a different land. *This* was a very easy question to answer.

“Humans and vampyres are equals,” I began, not shocked by the gasps and murmurs of disbelief that sounded from the group. “I could hardly believe it myself at first, but it’s true. The Tridian Empire is built on equality and respect. We can all coexist peacefully and not live in fear of being subject to the wrath of vampyres and a vile Emperor who encourages the oppression of humans.”

Kolvar spoke up, adding on, “But if you wish to come back to these lands after the war is over, you will be more than welcome to. However, we will not leave you behind to be subjected to that type of ruler ever again. Our mission is to depose your Emperor and help usher in an era of peace like we have in our own lands.”

The silence that followed my exclamation was heavy with the weight of their judgmental gazes.

All I could do was hope that they could hear the truth and honesty in our words.

“I will go with you,” the elderly woman announced, stepping closer to me as she nodded her head ever so slightly. “In all my years, I never thought freedom from this oppression would be possible for me or the generations to come.”

As she came to a stop, she leaned heavily on the cane while extending her free hand for me to shake. As I placed my palm against hers, wrapping my fingers around her warm skin, I couldn’t help the smile that tugged my lips up as she said, “I’m willing to put faith in you for the hope that those dreams are possible now.”



# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

## DAKATH

I considered myself a patient individual, but not when it came to Kyella. Especially not when she walked into a village that might possibly host hostile forces lying in wait. Our senses were honed, and we were on tenterhooks as we waited. I refused to risk her and Kolvar being ambushed because we weren't paying close enough attention.

Kyella was growing more skilled with each passing day, and she was capable of handling herself on the battlefield, but I couldn't help but worry about her. The entire Thaician Empire reminded me of pain and loss, so my protective urges were even more intense than usual.

The only thing keeping me tethered to the current moment was the fact that I could hear Kyella's faint voice. While I couldn't tell exactly what she was saying, her pitch seemed controlled and even. I heard the low murmur of other voices as well, and a woman's panic-filled outburst from moments before would have worried me more if it hadn't calmed quickly after.

I wanted to be part of the conversation, at least to watch and ensure everything was going smoothly, but I knew we couldn't afford to move around the bend without scaring the villagers. At least not yet.

I paced back and forth; Elijah and I having moved to the front of the group in the absence of Kolvar and Kyella. I could feel eyes on me, but I ignored them, unable to help the nervous energy filling me.

I knew this war was necessary, but there was a part of me that regretted it. A part of me that wanted to put Kyella back on that damn boat and sail home. Away from any potential threat of losing her.

When a hand suddenly came down on my shoulder, pausing my repetitive movement, I offered Elijah a questioning look. He spoke evenly and quietly, “You are making others nervous. I know you’re worried about her, but I don’t want anyone more on edge than they already are—that’s how mistakes are made.”

Mistakes were something we couldn’t afford.

I nodded sharply before looking toward that damn bend they had disappeared around. When would they be back? Did we need to follow at some point if they didn’t return? I needed to see her, hearing the low murmur of her voice wasn’t enough for me. Not when I was so on edge.

Almost as if I had willed her into existence, Kyella appeared around the bend of the road, a look of determination and happiness on her face. I couldn’t help that my eyes ran over the way her armor molded to her body perfectly, loving that she wore something we had made for her. I shouldn’t have let the sight of her distract me, especially having already watched her all morning, but being able to provide her with something that could aid in her achieving her dreams left me with a sense of happiness.

“What happened?” Elijah asked in a rush, his gaze darting over her shoulder.

Kyella explained evenly, “He’s gathering the elders of the town together as others prepare themselves and their belongings for the ships. We’re instructing them to bring enough for a lengthy stay, just in case”

It was smart—we had no idea how long this battle would last or if these Thaician citizens would need to go out to sea to avoid an attack.

Kyella raised her voice to direct the rest of her comments to the soldiers behind us. “We need a group of vampyres to

help get both the elders and the young children whose parents have been called to the capital to the boats. The other villagers will make their way down the path and toward the boat. We want to expedite this process as much as possible, and we must move quickly. We most likely have several villages to go to and many lives to protect before we even come close to the capital.”

“Report to Commander Kolvar.” I issued the order to a group of vampyres to my left.

The majority of those who had accompanied us from the boats were vampyres, allowing us the speed and strength to move villagers quickly to safety as well as face any threat on the battlefield. Seasoned and trained human warriors were with us as well, but many of the humans were leading the front on the ship, ready to aid those we were rescuing. It was our hope that being surrounded by humans rather than vampyres would put the evacuees at ease.

The group moved to follow my command, quickly disappearing around the bend, and Kyella watched them with slight concern marring her features.

“Let’s follow them for now, but we need to prepare to go to the next village as soon as we can!” Kyella said as we flanked her, taking protective stances as we started our trek.

“I hope they don’t get scared by the influx of vampyres,” she breathed out, quieter this time. “The town isn’t massive, but there are several dozen individuals, nearly all women, children, and elders. I assume it will be much the same at other villages we go to.

“They informed me that all men, fit for battle, were taken by the guards to the capital. Malakai clearly wanted to boost the number of members he had in his military force”—*or he wanted to boost the number of bodies between him and the enemy. That was far more likely.*

Kyella continued, her body tight with tension as she shook her head in disgust, “That’s why there are children left without parents to watch over them right now.”

“Bastard.” I spat. Not only was Malakai forcing humans to fight for him, creating a shield of individuals that probably had no training or preparation, but he had forced children to watch their fathers, uncles, and brothers be dragged off today. It didn’t escape me that there was the possibility that the children would never see them again.

I could not wait to slaughter Malakai—for everything he’s already done and everything he would continue to do if left unchecked. He didn’t deserve to live in this world any longer. He left only disaster and misery in his wake.

“Which means that many of those humans who are fighting are doing so unwillingly,” Elijah bit out.

“Exactly,” She whispered, anger clouding her features as her eyes narrowed and she shook her head. “I have to assume it’s happening to vampyres as well, at least to an extent—where he’s forcing someone in a position like Tristan was in to fight for him. Of course, when it comes to other vampyres, he has more allies than not, but I think we should still make an active effort to take as few lives as possible. I know it’s not possible to save everyone, but we can still try.”

And we damn well would. I didn’t take pleasure in the idea of killing those caught fighting in a battle that they didn’t care for, that they were being forced to be part of.

“It could be difficult to tell who is in a forced position and who is not, but you’re right, the preservation of life is one of the reasons we made the journey here.”

We couldn’t slaughter those who truly needed saving.

As we rounded the bend, a large gathering of people in the center of the village distracting me, Kyella spoke quietly, “It doesn’t help that none of them are aware we are here to save them and their loved ones. These villagers feared us before we could explain. I don’t blame them, of course, but I just hope fear doesn’t stop anyone from taking the shelter necessary to survive this.”

Unfortunately, there was a chance the fear would make people so leery of us that they wouldn’t accept assistance.

Being conditioned to be afraid was something that embedded itself deep inside of you.

The next ten minutes were spent assuring that anyone who wanted to leave could do so as quickly as possible. Thankfully, no one from the village decided to risk staying. It seemed that, though they may not trust vampyres, they would at least take the opportunity to escape to protect their families from the terrifying reality of war.

I hoped when they made it to the ships, they would find comfort in the abundance of humans present and see examples of the equality that Kyella patiently continued to emphasize and assure them of.

I watched as the villagers studied the human and vampyre soldiers interacting with one another, surprise and shock coating their features at the easy, respectful interactions. It also helped that Kyella's calm and controlled ability to respond to any of their concerns was like an anchor to them—the comfort it brought in such a hard time was clear in their expressions.

As they began to leave the village, Kyella turned her gaze to the road ahead, her features morphing into a far more serious expression. We couldn't see the capital city from here, but the road would take us through multiple villages, allowing us to send them toward the ships and to safety.

“The forces showing them to the boats will be able to quickly catch up to us. I think we can push forward toward the next village and start to prepare those who want to leave. I have no idea how many villages we will come across, but once we do reach the capital, we should wait until our forces have rejoined us to attack, ensuring we are fully prepared,” Elijah suggested.

Kyella nodded sharply. “Can we make sure everyone is aware of the plan?”

“Yes,” Kolvar confirmed before leaving to share our strategy with the soldiers. I looked around the deserted village, relief flooding my being at the sight of it. One down and... Well, I had no idea how many to go.

As we traveled, we came across several more villages on the direct path toward the capital going inland. Luckily, the second next village, despite facing the same confusion and panic at our appearance as the first, quickly decided that evacuation was the best possible way to handle the situation.

The same could not be said about the third village. The people there decided to wait it out, not believing the threat was as real as we assured them it was.

With the realization that they wouldn't bend, we quickly moved on, hitting two more villages, and transporting those needing to evacuate. The fear of us was far less here because of the battle that was taking place so close to them—close enough that we could hear it with our enhanced hearing as we left the last village, marching over a hill and coming within sight of our target: Malakai's castle.

Kyella stood frozen next to me as she stared at the castle, where she had been imprisoned for so damn long and where all of this had started. I could feel myself hardening emotionally, thinking about the bloodshed that would need to take place—hell, the blood shed that *had* taken place. No matter how hard we tried, lives would be lost, but I would do my damn best to make sure it wasn't the wrong ones.

“Kyella,” I intertwined our hands, looking down at her as she met my gaze. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Her eyes shone with a fierce determination as Kolvar squeezed her hip gently from where he stood behind her and Elijah dropped a kiss on top of her head. She kept her gaze forward but spoke in a soft tone, “I love all of you so much. When this is done, I can't wait to go back home. *Together.*”

And we would, I would make sure of it.

*We were about to enter the real battle and there was only one true way out: victory.*

From the moment we hit the outskirts of the capital, we were thrown into chaos. The battle taking place, through every city street, storefront, and darkened corner, was violent and

volatile in nature. Properties had been destroyed in the process of fighting, and while I knew deaths had taken place, it seemed our forces were holding strong.

We didn't hesitate as we stormed through the streets and threw ourselves into the heat of the battle, a rage-filled cry leaving Kyella's lips as I felt my own surge of adrenaline. I snapped into a mode that had been honed from years of training, using my enhanced speed and strength to meet the enemy head on.

The first vampyre to surge toward me was one basking in the violence; he was covered in blood and smiling maniacally. I didn't hesitate to draw out my sword and dart toward him, taking him down in seconds.

The castle loomed over our battle and the chaos taking place, the sound of swords hitting one another paired with angry and agony-filled cries that echoed through the air. Bodies and severed limbs were piling up, beheaded vampyre corpses and mortally wounded humans bleeding out and painting the streets with their carnage. I watched vampyres clash with one another using their full strength, their weapons, and instruments of death as they tried to pierce through the hearts of their opponents.

A bloody scream was cut off as a vampyre from Malakai's camp ripped off the head of a human, lobbing it toward a pile of massacred bodies.

"Move toward the castle!" Kyella ordered, my sword arcing through the air and defending her from an attack that came out of fucking nowhere. I knew her armor was durable, but I hated the idea of anyone coming for my woman. I slammed my sword into the vampyre bastard's chest, not caring if he was forced to fight or doing it willingly. If he was a threat to Kyella, then he died.

Kyella grabbed my arm, pulling me away from him and navigating us through the city streets turned into a battlefield, following Kolvar's. Elijah held the rear. I noted that there were many humans here and that they were far less eager to fight, trying to stay on the sidelines and out of conflict unless forced.



None of our forces were targeting them unless provoked. In the mix of terror and bloodshed, I hoped some were slipping away to leave the city. It would be the smart thing to do because Malakai was creating a mass grave with the number of humans he was trying to barricade his castle with. The truth of his plan revealed itself as we neared the castle and met more and more humans.

“Watch it!” I called out to Kolvar as a human man, looking terrified, was shoved forward by a vampyre. The human was forced to run at Kolvar, a sword raised above his head in an untrained move. Without hurting him, Kolvar knocked the weapon from his hands so we could carry on, and the human man dropped to his knees, looking as if he might cry in relief.

*Until the soldier who had pushed him forward stabbed him.*

The human’s face blossomed with horror, anguish coating his features as he looked down at the sword that had sliced cleanly through his chest. The flimsy armor they had given him, probably the standard for humans, did nothing against the force of his attacker. When he looked up at me, I felt momentarily frozen at the despair filling his expression.

The cackle from the soldier who killed him filled the air as he spit on the dying human. “Useless—they’re all absolutely fucking useless.”

My gaze darted around briefly, and my stomach turned with the realization that many of the dead humans may have been killed by bastards like this. It was likely there were some thralls fighting for their masters, but most of these individuals were being thrown into the line of fire as fucking shields. If they couldn’t accomplish that, they were irreverently disposed of.

The fury I felt seemed to roll over me in a deadly wave. I drew my sword and sliced off the soldier’s head easily, not hesitating for a single moment. Scum like that didn’t deserve to live.

Trying to push myself past the moment as we reached the castle gates, my eyes went immediately to where my parents

were brutally executed. I felt a snarl slip from my mouth as memories flashed in my head, and I realized with horror that there were corpses there even now.

*Not just soldiers*, but innocents. I blinked, seeing a child's lifeless body. Horror washed over me at the sight. Without a doubt there would be casualties in war...but a child? That should have never happened.

I knew our forces wouldn't have killed a child, which meant there was only one other option. *Malakai's vampyres were killing children*. Children who probably lived in the city, either from families or street orphans who someone like Malakai would assume wouldn't be missed.

It couldn't matter to someone like Malakai what their age was or if they were even capable of fighting. The only thing that mattered was that their lives could be forfeited to protect his own.

*Everything went dark as rage roared through my veins.*

Memories from the day my parents were unduly executed eclipsed me, and suddenly it felt like I couldn't breathe. My chest tightened, searing with pain, and I was left feeling like it was on the precipice of exploding. My eyes burned with unshed tears, the sound of my parents begging me to run rattling my brain. *Fuck*.

Crimson coated my vision; reality having faded completely to black and leaving me in a dark-red void. I was drowning in the memories, unable to focus on anything except all the children who had been slaughtered. All the families that would be broken apart by this. All the deaths.

So many bodies...so many that we couldn't save—

“Dakath!”

At the sound of Kyella screaming my name, my eyes snapped open, and I cursed. Drawing my sword, I barely had time to position it defensively as a soldier barreled toward me. I gritted my teeth, plunging my sword toward him and watched as he embedded himself on my sharp blade. Blood dripped down the metal to my gauntlets seeping between the

interconnected metal and burning into my skin with the realization that I had allowed myself a moment of vulnerability at a time when it could not be afforded. “Fuck.”

“Sorry,” I hissed to her as she grabbed my arm, looking panicked.

“We are fighting for every single child that is *still* alive, Dakath,” Kyella said gently, her eyes soft before they filled with a fierce light. “We are fighting to stop that from happening to any more of them. We *cannot* let memories of the past stop us from helping them in the present.”

Her words ignited my hunger for retribution. I yearned to obliterate every vampyre who thought it was okay to take the life of an innocent.

Before I could respond, Kyella’s head snapped up, like her name had been called and drew her attention. On either side of us, Elijah and Kolvar fought their own small hordes of soldiers, but Kyella’s focus turned to Barnabus, who flew ahead of us.

“Shit,” Kyella bit out. “We must get into the castle. Barnabus said Malakai is trying to escape.”

Our priority had always been saving as many innocent lives as possible, but we simply could not allow Malakai to escape. Turning our attention away from the battle in the shadows of his castle was the only way to ensure more lives wouldn’t be lost because of his continued, tyrannical reign.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

## KYELLA

I groaned as I considered our current problem. It seemed the highest concentration of human's being used as shields were at the castle's doors, exactly where we needed to go.

Breathing in deeply, I glanced at my men, silently questioning how we were going to tackle this problem. Getting through them would prove harder than I wanted, and we did *not* have the time to delay.

*Hurry, Empress! I cannot guide you further, but he was in the throne room during my last inspection. A bigger threat is presenting itself that I must focus on—I can feel Lazarus' energy and need to search for him while you handle Malakai.*

“Shit,” I hissed with a heavy breath at the mention of the possibility of the old vampyre god being nearby. “Barnabus is leaving to search for Lazarus. Malakai was last seen in the throne room—we need to get there. Now.”

Foolishly, Lazarus hadn't been on my mind at all, not with my focus on saving lives and ending Malakai's. I was simply trying to face one threat at a time for now, or else it would feel overwhelming and unattainable, so I put it out of my mind for now.

“Let me try something,” Dakath muttered before walking toward the humans who held shaking swords pointed in our direction. “Guard our backs,” he instructed, yelling the command over his shoulder.

Elijah and Kolvar had already turned to do exactly that, so I kept my gaze on Dakath, unsure of if this was going to blow up in our faces. If he needed any help, I would be there in an instant. I had no idea what his plan was and was still concerned over him falling into trance not long ago, but I would trust in him as he would me.

I barely contained a strangled cry as he sheathed his long sword and held his hands up to the nervous group of humans.

“We do not wish to hurt you,” he stated in a very calm, yet strong, voice. “We just spent the last few hours evacuating the nearest villages that would accept our help. They told us how you were forced to come here. You are not our enemy.”

Some of the human men immediately sagged in relief, lowering their swords ever so slightly, though a select few remained guarded, albeit shaking still.

“The humans that aren’t fighting for Malakai are being slaughtered by his vampyres,” Dakath acknowledged, likely highlighting their fear and why they were so shaky. “I’m sure you know that too, so I’m going to ask you very quickly to help us all get to where we need to be. It could save your lives. Do you know if there are guards behind that door?”

At first, I thought no one would answer him, but one young man slowly pushed his way forward to speak. “Not to our knowledge. Everyone was ordered to defend either the harbor or perimeter of the castle.”

That was a small miracle that I would take gratefully.

The battle still raged on around us, and our time crunch was only highlighted by the sounds of Kolvar’s and Elijah’s grunts as they faced attackers behind me. Tightening my grip on my daggers, I glanced back to ensure they had it handled as Dakath engaged the humans blocking the doors.

“I need you all, as a group, to back toward the doors slowly as we advance,” he explained. “Being fearful of vampyres will make this look normal, but ensure you keep your weapons raised toward us as you protect the door. Once you are upon the doors, open them and rush inside. We will

follow directly behind you, so immediately begin to shut the door after all of you make it in.”

“We need to go!” Kolvar growled as he pierced the heart of his opponent before kicking on his chest to dislodge him from his weapon, sending the vampyre crashing to the ground.

Whipping my head back to Dakath, I was pleased to see the humans doing as he instructed. As soon as I heard the large doors creak, I yelled, “Let’s go!” to my men.

Putting on a quick burst of speed, I sheathed my daggers as we crossed the threshold while their last members were entering the castle. Using our speed and strength, we rushed to help close the heavy doors as shouts of alarm sounded from the outside.

“Grab the beam!” I shouted, my eyes locking on the massive wooden block nearby.

My three men groaned at the weight of it, which at least meant that it would not be easily broken. The doors heaved against my shoulder as I gritted my teeth and dug my feet into the floor along with the humans who helped to hold it shut against the opposing forces.

Finally, the beam was navigated into its metal holdings against the door, helping barricade us in for now.

“That won’t last for long if they get enough vampyres,” Elijah warned, his mind clearly turning with possible solutions. “If we want a fair shot at taking Malakai out, these have to stay closed.”

The human who stepped forward to Dakath earlier spoke up once more as he brushed the dark hair from his eyes. “I will stay here and fight them if they break through. You helped our families when you didn’t have to. I will repay that debt now.”

My heart constricted at his valiant display of his character.

“As will I,” a man with a speckled red and white beard added as he stepped forward.

And just like that, each man who previously stood in fear of us, shaking and forced to serve their Emperor, showed that

they were in fact courageous and strong. It was beautiful, the way our strength bolstered when we fought for who and what we loved...What we believed in.

“It’s too dangerous,” Dakath quickly rebutted, shaking his head. “It’ll be their slaughter.”

Glancing in the direction of the throne room at the end of this long corridor, a plan began quickly formulating in my mind. It was necessary that these doors remained shut, to give me the time to find Malakai and face off with him without help coming to his aid. Without a doubt, the humans couldn’t hold the door shut or face off with a unit of vampyre guards if they managed to break through.

I needed my men to stay behind to help them and give me a fighting chance, but I wasn’t sure how to ask them to let me face Malakai alone. I didn’t want them to think I didn’t need them—because I did. But these men needed them more.

Elijah seemed to be on the exact same page as me, though. I let out a strangled breath of relief as his words echoed through the hall.

“We will stay here and help you defend the door. We will fight beside you if any of these soldiers break through the door or come around from the other hallways,” he announced before his emerald eyes swung to land on me. “Go find him, Kyella. End this.”

I knew this wasn’t the time to get choked up, but damn was it hard when I was faced with the determination and love burning in his gaze as he told me in such few words that he trusted me and believed I could do this without them. He believed I was strong enough to face my abuser and end this pain and suffering for all of Malakai’s victims.

It was a heavy emotion, but one I needed to get me through this.

“I love you all,” I breathed out, making eye contact with each of them before quickly turning on my heel and sprinting down the long hall.



As I raced toward the room and closed my hands around the hilts of my daggers, I couldn't help but remember the memories this room had bestowed upon me.

How my heart had raced when I thought I was steps away from freedom as I cowered in this room moments before making a break for it.

How Malakai had beheaded my guard before introducing Tristan to me.

How I'd been shackled to that damn throne as his Lords fed upon me, covering my arms in bite marks.

Countless horrors that this room produced in so many memories.

I would be the first to create a good memory within the confines of those cursed walls: Malakai's death.

A snarl of disgust and pent-up rage emitted from me as I kicked the doors open, using the momentum of my speed and strength to crack through whatever flimsy lock held them closed from the inside.

The doors slammed against the walls as they sprang open, and I rushed in, zeroing in on the hunched figure near the throne at the back of the room. The long, greasy curls of Malakai's hair gleamed beneath the flickering light of the innumerable candles lining the walls, illuminating the room as clearly as if daylight streamed through a window.

His head snapped back at my entrance, lips curled, and fangs extended as he tried to look as menacing as possible to whoever dared enter.

It was fascinating to see such an ugly sneer on his face, showing Malakai in the seconds before his face morphed into the mask I'd so quickly come to know over my years here. A false smile plastered over his face as he widened his eyes and threw his arms out in welcome. "You've returned to me, just as I knew you would!"

The second his voice washed over me, nausea pooled in my stomach and my heart thumped all the way up in my

throat. It felt as if I was glued to the floor suddenly, unable to take a step toward him.

Presenting his back to me once more, he continued to shove gold from a hole in the ground beneath his throne into the bags sitting open in the seat of it.

He didn't even regard me as a threat.

Did he think I was too weak? Too soft to end someone's life? Or did he truly think he'd brainwashed me so thoroughly that I wouldn't think to raise a finger to hurt him?

His blatant disregard was the exact shock I needed to snap me out of my momentary stillness. Grabbing the thick wood used to barricade the door, I snapped it into place to hopefully fend off any guards that might come to help him.

A feral growl fell from my lips as I launched myself across the room toward him, pulling my arms back to get enough momentum to shove my daggers through the back of his neck and decapitate him.

At the last moment, as I began to arch the weapons toward him as if in slow motion, he turned, revealing a short sword pointed directly at me. As he thrust it toward my midsection, I twisted in the air at the last possible second, doing a barrel roll away from him. Falling toward the ground, I barely managed to find my center before landing on my feet.

"I have returned," I seethed, letting my voice drop an octave and drip with my hatred for him as he stood to his full height and sneered. "I've returned to end your reign of terror for good. I won't let you hurt anyone else, Malakai."

"I own you, girl!" he snapped, heat rising in his cheeks to paint them red as spittle flew from between his blubbing lips. "Your blood runs through *my* veins. You won't defeat me in combat, and even if you manage to bite me during it, I'm immune to your venom, *dhampyr*. My guards will be here any minute to take you back to the dungeon beneath my feet, exactly where you belong."

It felt as if he was bluffing, boasting about his immunity to me as if I didn't know there was a time limit on the protection

if you didn't continue to drink from me. Or perhaps he truly didn't know that himself.

The way he lobbed that last word at me, though, as if I was something to be ashamed of or disgusted by, made a chuckle come from my center and bubble up my throat.

"You are so incredibly blinded by your arrogance," I mused as I lifted my daggers at the ready and planted my feet, prepared for a defensive strike. Undoubtedly, a blow to his ego would force his instincts into attacking me, which I was counting on. "Your guards aren't coming. You were out strategized, Malakai. You're tucking your tail and running like a child because even someone with a brain as small as yours realizes this is over for you."

On cue, the blow to his ego was like snapping the thin strand of control he maintained.

Digging my back heel in, I quickly took in the thick and gaudy gold chains hanging around his neck as he launched himself at me. I'd have to attack him in a way he'd never suspect to have enough time to bite him and jump away in case my venom didn't work as expected.

For once, I turned my brain off and simply reacted, believing in my gut-instincts.

Dropping my daggers to the ground, I pulled myself out of my defensive stance, standing still in an offering to him. I saw the hesitation enter his eyes as he watched my movement with a beady-eyed intensity. The stilted moment was the split-second signal I needed as he slowed, so I put a burst of my own speed on. As I closed the distance between us, I ran toward his right, opposite the sword in his left hand. Reaching toward the gold chains, I slipped my hand under them and grabbed as many as I could as I continued to run.

Keeping a firm grasp on them, I quickly brought up my right hand and dropped to my knees, pulling the chains tight against his neck in one quick movement and using his momentum against him as they strangled him. I groaned in pain as the metal dug into the flesh of my palms but refused to let go.

Using his weight as his body jolted backward, I dropped my shoulder until his body began to fly over it and then surged upward, flipping him over me completely. I was on him before he could even crash to the ground, letting go of the necklaces and grabbing his flailing right hand as he arced through the air.

My daggers were too far away for me to grab and pierce through his heart, but I trusted my gut, and it told me that my bite would be enough. He was blind to his weaknesses, and luckily for me, that spot was his arrogance and belief that he was untouchable. I was banking on the assumption that he thought himself too untouchable to train or stay in fighting-shape. I didn't doubt that he would be rusty in combat and not have the quick thinking of someone who had to think outside of the box in training scenarios if they wanted to win.

Sinking my fangs into his skin, I prayed to whatever being out there that there was nothing more needed to inject my venom into his bloodstream and that he wouldn't have immunity anymore.

As I felt his blood flowing from the puncture wounds, I quickly dropped his hand and sprang backward, spitting out what little of the crimson liquid remained in my mouth. I didn't want a single fucking drop of blood from this man within me.

“You bitch!” he spluttered as he landed roughly on his knees before quickly shoving himself to his feet. “I'm going to paint the fucking walls of this room red with your blood. I will drain you just enough to keep you from entering death. When I'm done with you, you will be nothing more than a fucking husk of the useless woman you already are.”

He took a single menacing step forward, mirroring my own step backward.

How long would it take for the venom to hurt him? Did I not inject enough with just one bite?

“Do you really think you're special merely because three vampires saved you like some damsel in distress?” he questioned, skepticism thickly coating his tone. Cocking a single eyebrow at me, he paused as if he was truly waiting for

my response. When I gave him none, he clutched his stomach as laughter shook his body. “My girl, you really think they care for you? Oh, how naive you are, child. They only care about the pussy between your legs and the blood in your veins.”

He was trying to goad me, but I wouldn't fall prey to such base words and actions.

“You don't know a single thing about those men,” I hissed. “And you definitely don't know a single thing about the woman I am now.”

His laughing didn't stop at my words. No...the declaration only seemed to further his amusement. Until suddenly his laughter faltered, instead turning into a coughing fit that had him gasping for air as his eyes bugged out and he looked around wildly.

My heart rate spiked. Was the venom finally working?

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

## KYELLA

“**H**elp me,” he croaked as he fell to his knees, swaying harshly back and forth like he might keel over at any moment. Throwing his hands out in front of him, he fell onto all fours and stayed there for a few moments, alternating between wheezing and sounding like he was trying to clear his throat of a blockage.

This had to be the venom.

I knew I should have killed him the second he showed a moment of weakness, but the truth was I hadn't made peace with the atrocities he'd committed. I *wanted* him to hurt. Offering him a swift death wasn't an option. I wanted to bring him so much pain that he begged me to end his life. I wanted him to know how much a person could hurt all the way down to their soul when they thought that being dead was an act of mercy over staying alive to face their agony.

Striding toward my daggers, I quickly grabbed them before facing him once more, looking for any signs of a ploy to lure me, but found none. As I stood above him, relishing in his slumped body being at *my* feet now, I found the hand I'd bitten rotting away like it had fallen victim to a flesh-eating bacteria.

A pungent scent accompanied it as it slowly crawled toward his wrist and forearm, oozing a yellow-green liquid as the healthy skin slowly melted and peeled away.

The wound had to hurt fiercely, but it wasn't enough to quell the anger battering my soul. Not even a little bit.

I couldn't see how quickly the venom was eating away at him or if it had spread to any part of his body hidden by his clothes, but it had to have spread viciously through his blood stream, hitting his organs first before the physical decay had set in on his hand. Without a doubt, it was going to kill him, so I needed to make my peace now.

Pulling my foot back, I slammed it into his stomach hard enough to cause him to collapse completely. His arms gave out beneath him as he curled into a ball on his side. His moans of pain as he clutched his stomach were like music to my ears, and I was just getting started.

"That," I yelled, "is for my family!"

"This," I murmured before sheathing a single dagger and crouching bent over at the waist, "is for all of the families you've hurt." As my hand wound back, I released a feral scream before it cracked against his cheek. I felt the bones of his face crunching beneath the force of the blow, and my knuckles split with the contact.

The floor cracked beneath where his face lay, a pool of blood dripping from his mouth. The blood of a monarch in their throne room...just like what he'd ensured happened to Myrin.

"This is for Myrin," I seethed between gritted teeth and tightened my grip on the lone dagger I had out. Crouching down, I saw him forcing a fucking smile to his face as I held the tip of the blade to the side of his throat.

How did he not realize that I was his demise, finally? How could he continue to act like this was a game that he was winning?

My chest heaved and tightened as angry tears began to spill from my eyes. I had planned on cutting through his neck to be done with him, but now he'd renewed the white-hot anger that coiled like an angry snake in my chest.

"I hate you!" I screamed before dropping my second dagger and doling out hit after hit to his face. I fell into a trance, mindlessly smashing my fist into him rhythmically,



waiting for the pain I'd been carrying around for so long to be lifted.

There was squelching and the crunch of bones snapping, and flesh being pulverized, but beyond that I couldn't make out anything. Those sounds were all I was focused on, pushing my thoughts past anything other than ensuring his pain continued.

If guards were to flood the room, coming to rescue this useless waste of space of a man, I would be at their mercy, but I would have at least ensured there was nothing left of him to save.

I wanted the blows to heal something within me. I wanted them to make me feel better, but all it did was enrage me further.

I wanted to be free of this fucking pain. From the memories. From him.

My vision was completely obscured with the tears that stung my eyes, and my breathing grew labored as my sobs overtook me.

Eventually, my fists halted their assault and his face lay mangled beneath them, but I wasn't done. I *couldn't* be done. He hadn't paid enough.

Lifting my bloodstained hand, I curled my fingers into the hair on top of his head and pushed to my feet. Placing my foot against his shoulder as I added my other hand to his hair, I cried for the girl I was before.

I cried for the girl who I was before he killed my family.

I cried for the girl who had fallen for the lies he'd spun with his pretty words, believing that he would be my family and that I wouldn't be alone.

I cried for the girl who had to wonder every moment of the day if she was going to be preyed upon.

I cried for the girl who had guarded that last flickering ember of hope within her, even when the shadows threatened to engulf it further with each passing night.

Closing my eyes, I realized that if I wanted to be free of this torment, only I had the power to do that. I had to make the decision to let go of the pain.

*“It’s okay to feel sad or hurt by the actions of others, but you will always have the power to decide how you react to it. Those reactions can give them power and control over your life based upon that. If you choose to focus on the good in your life still, then they didn’t win, did they?”*

*You’re right, Dad.*

“This is for *me*,” I whispered as the salty tears flooded my mouth.

It was as if I heard the metal click of the mental shackles he’d clasped on me unlocking.

With one swift yank backward, I pulled his head from his body before immediately throwing it back to the ground. My shoulders sagged as I took a stumbling step backward, eyes glued to the mess of his body I’d left in the wake of my rage.

I wasn’t sure exactly when he’d died or if the venom had done the job or if it had been when I pulled his head from his shoulders. For *me*, he died now—in this moment as I gained my freedom, truly.

I was killing the control I’d given him through my reactions and emotions.

Malakai’s life wouldn’t continue in my memories. I wouldn’t give him the fucking satisfaction.

With that, the shackles dissipated for good, untethering me from him.

“Goodbye, Malakai,” I murmured and turned away from the bloody, pulpy mess of his body on the floor, bending to grab my dagger as I prepared to go back to help my men and those brave humans.

A loud clap cracked through the room out of nowhere, bouncing off the walls in a never-ending echo. Chills raced down my spine at the sound, and I quickly unsheathed my second dagger, dropping into a fighting stance.

“Well, well, well,” a deep voice purred. “What do we have here, little dhampyr?”

My head whipped around as I tried to pinpoint where the voice was coming from. It felt as if it was close and far at the same time.

“That was a lovely show you put on,” the voice praised, and my skin crawled, feeling as if the person it belonged to was wrapping around my mind in a caress.

Why did I feel this sudden invasion of privacy?

Pain lanced in my head, and I hissed, squinting against the sudden searing lance. It felt like claws were digging around in my brain, trying to carve a pathway to my consciousness.

“Just let me in,” the voice soothed as I cried out in pain when the stabbing probe continued. “It’ll be so much better when you do. We can accomplish so much more than I ever could with that pathetic, self-proclaimed Emperor.”

Hearing them talk poorly of Malakai caused me to falter in my fight against them for a moment before I processed the rest of their words. The owner of this voice had been working with Malakai, and that relationship hadn’t gotten him what he wanted.

One person instantly came to mind.

The fight over my mind ceased the second I whispered, “Lazarus.”

The pain cleared in an instant, and I was able to unclench my eyes and glance around furtively for the old god.

It was as if he was one with the shadows, the way he emerged from a recessed corner. He was immaculately dressed from head to toe and looked like the highest Lord of the lands might. He had short, slicked black hair and cheek and jaw lines that looked as sharp as the edges of paper.

“You know of me?” he asked in a seductive tone, his crimson eyes flaring with interest as they ran the length of my body.

I couldn't help the disgust that blanketed my entire being to the invasive stare. My nostrils flared as my upper lip curled, and I answered, "Yes, I knew you'd be here."

I didn't want to give away that Barnabus was here and on my side, so I was going to keep the specifics of my knowledge to myself for now.

*Shit!* What if he'd already met Barnabus and hurt him?

*Calm down, Kyella. Focus on the now.*

I halted all thoughts headed in that direction as Lazarus spread his arms in a welcoming gesture, like the one Malakai had given me when I broke into the room.

"Well, that makes this all so much easier!" he exclaimed as he slowly prowled toward me. "You know then that you won't be able to kill me and that resisting me is futile. How lovely this is turning out to be."

My eyes narrowed as I snapped, "I would never be on your side. I'd rather die than be a puppet for you to control."

Mid-step he halted, the jovial mood he'd exhibited souring as his fists shook at his sides. Those red orbs for eyes seemed to burn with flames as he cocked his head to the side and smiled, sighing wistfully as he muttered, "How nostalgic. Those are the exact words your mother whispered to me on her deathbed."

The fire burning through me instantly chilled, my body filled with ice at the shock of his statement.

He'd managed to completely catch me off guard, and I stuttered, "Wha...What do you mean? How did you know my mother?"

On instinct, my hand raised, reaching for the necklace she'd left me, but I stopped, knowing I had daggers in my hand and the gold flower was covered by my armor.

His gaze followed my movement, and his lips split, revealing a fanged smile now. "Still wearing the necklace I left for you? How easy it was to slip it around your neck right after

I ensured your mother's death looked as if she'd simply bled out while giving birth to you."

Myrin's words echoed in my mind. "*Your mother was gifted the necklace by someone who knew of what was to come.*"

Bile rose in my throat as I resisted the urge to rip the armor off me to stop the necklace from touching me.

He was lying. He had to be. How had he been with my mother in her last moments?

My teeth ground together before I finally spat back, "You're a good liar, I'll give you that, but I'm not falling for your shit."

A dark chuckle permeated the air as he shook his head and gave me a searching look. "I would have given you and your mother the world. I loved Katarina, but she refused to be mine," he sighed. "Therefore, I ensured she could not be anyone else's by killing your father and her."

He killed my biological father and my mother...and the way he intimately uttered my mother's name, coupled with the pain that flashed through his eyes as he mentioned her refusal...It felt so real...but no, this couldn't be true.

"She had no clue the power she was birthing, but I'm old enough to remember the creatures I spent countless years eliminating from this world," he tossed out as he ran a hand through his hair. "I thought that maybe you would be different. You could be the best of Katarina, and I could mold you into what she lacked. It's the only reason I didn't kill you as she clutched you to her bosom."

"You're fucking sick," I seethed in disgust. "If what you're saying is true and you loved my mother, how could you ever kill her and think that her child could simply replace her? She was her own person, with a past full of an accumulation of moments that made her exactly who she was. That could *never* be replicated. We aren't alive for your amusement, despite thinking yourself a god."

“That’s where you are so very wrong, dear,” he rebutted, a wicked glint gleaming in his eyes as he took another step toward me. “Your entire life has been purely for my amusement. I let you live. I marked you with the flower, and I whispered into Malakai’s mind about the power you held inside of you.”

Everything that had happened...was because of the influence of Lazarus?

Tossing his hands up in the air almost jovially, he added, “I was the one who placed you with your mother’s closest friends to be raised by after her death! I did that for you to have a normal life that wouldn’t harden you before you were of a ripe enough age for me to have Malakai fetch. Truly, you should be on your knees thanking me for all the time you had with them as your surrogate family.”

It took every ounce of self-control I could muster to not be provoked by his words. It was as if he knew every single trigger within me and was simultaneously pressing upon each of them to break me down.

There was so much to unpack in his words.

If I was to believe Lazarus, that’s how I came to be with my dad and aunt. They were my mother’s best friends...the childhood stories my aunt told me must have still been true. It brought me an immense amount of relief to know that they hadn’t made up any bit of information they’d told me about her.

Just because neither of their titles as my dad or aunt came from a biological tie, didn’t strip away the sixteen years of love and memories that lent them those positions in my life.

I clung to my father’s advice. I wouldn’t be controlled. My reactions were my own. I’d let myself truly soak in this new information after I’d killed Lazarus.

“It was far too easy to control your life every step of the way, but I suppose I truly must thank that spineless vampyre you just beheaded. He was such a great pawn to move across my chess board. I could control his mind as easily as I could

breathe, which aided me spectacularly in feeding him thoughts about the knowledge of dhampyrs and how he was in danger unless he had one under his thumb to feed from. It created a beautiful, frenzied fear of his mortality, even as a vampyre.”

I stopped him there. “If you wanted to mold me yourself, why leave it to Malakai to do?”

A tutting sound came from his mouth as he raised a finger and wagged it back and forth. “You’re not listening to me, dear. I inhabited his mind countless times until my own thoughts and desire slowly became his own, even when I wasn’t in control. His mind was pliable, just like the countless vampyres and humans I’ve used in the past to get what I want. But dhampyrs...” he spat the word, venom dripping from his voice. “You’re the only creatures that time and again seem to refuse my influence.”

Mind control. That’s what he was trying to do when the pain seared through my head? *That* had to be the individual power that Lazarus held that Barnabus never knew. Who would think of such a power when all vampyres had the power to subtly influence and control those who drank their blood?

It seemed that he didn’t need his blood to be involved at all, however. Everyone was susceptible to his thrall, with the lone exception of dhampyrs. No wonder he’d led a crusade against my kind. We were the only ones who stood to oppose him.

It was like watching multiple personalities flash across his face the way he flipped between disgust, love, spite, and then calm.

“Don’t fight me,” he pleaded. “I don’t wish to hurt you. I’m the one who ensured Malakai believed you weren’t to be touched, ever, in a sexual manner—not even by him. I helped ensure you remained pure for me.”

My stomach churned at that revelation, unsure of how to process those words and the intention behind them.

“Now that we can be together, I can open your eyes to how incredible this life can be as we rule together,” he whispered

almost reverently, reaching out a hand toward me. “I will remain in the shadows as I always have, but finally we will be able to accomplish all my dreams together. Every piece of land will be owned by us.”

Spreading my feet, I fell into a defensive stance as I held my head high and prepared to enrage an old god.

“I’ve been shown how incredible this life can be by others already,” I announced proudly, thinking not only of my three men, but all those who had welcomed me with open arms to the Tridian empire, as well as those within this empire who still chose to fight for their freedom even when their arms shook with fear.

As I thought of the way my men had lavished my body and opened my mind to new experiences and pleasure, I couldn’t help but smirk in satisfaction as I added, “And I most definitely am not pure for you, you piece of shit. Much like my mother, my heart is spoken for and so is my body. I will follow her to the grave before I give up any of that.”



# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

## KYELLA

I knew my words would enrage him, but what I hadn't realized was how quickly he would react. I thought my increased speed would keep me prepared—*wrong*. In the split second after he processed my admission, Lazarus was on me.

In an instant, my body was thrown against the wall, my head snapping back with the force of the movement, slamming into the stone hard enough that I felt the vibration through my teeth. A hiss slipped past my lips, the only sound I could get out before his hand wrapped around my throat and squeezed.

A wheeze left me as his grip tightened, suffocating me as I wondered if he was going to crush my esophagus or try to rip my damn throat out. I had a feeling neither would be that hard for him to accomplish. My body spasmed with the force and sudden loss of air, my grip loosening my hold on my daggers as my hands reflexively went to try to pry his hand off. Panic seared through me as I heard my weapons pinging and clattering against the floor.

*Do something, Kyella.*

Out of desperation I thrashed against him, trying to kick my legs out and clawing at the hand that pinned me to the wall, but to no avail.

The look of smug arrogance on his face at my inability to fight him off only made me double down on my efforts.

A crack echoed through the room as he slapped my face hard enough that I felt my teeth cut into the inside of my

cheek, filling my mouth with hot blood. The hit was humiliating and hurt like hell, making my head bounce against the wall once more and adding to the feeling that my brains were scrambled and hazy.

“Weak, you’re so weak,” Lazarus sneered in a voice laced with venom as he released my throat just enough for me to suck in as much oxygen as possible.

I blinked, black dots filling the space around me. They cleared with each desperate draw of oxygen I took, and I was exposed to the pure fury that painted every inch of his expression. His eyes radiated malice, and his wrath poured from him like a living thing, attempting to wrap itself around me and crush me into submission.

Fear surged forward from my very center—a true primal fear of a creature so strong cornering me—and the threat of true death lingered before me. He could easily kill me, I knew that, but I wouldn’t submit to him. Not now. Not ever.

Redoubling my effort, I grunted, bringing my knees up to try to get enough leverage to kick him off me, but he slammed against me, keeping me pinned to the wall with no room between us. My skin crawled, disgust filling me at the closeness of our bodies.

“Do not fight me, little dhampyr. I have very little patience for you right now,” Lazarus hissed, his body vibrating with his barely contained rage. Burning pain radiated from the top of my skull as his free hand snapped up to thread his fingers through the hair there, tugging on it so hard that I wouldn’t be surprised if he pulled away with a chunk of my scalp in his hand. “Tell me that you’re lying about not being pure. Tell me—*now!*”

He roared his words, and with ringing ears, I dug my nails into the hand wrapped around my throat. But before I could attempt anything else, I was floating through the air, tossed aside like a rag doll before crashing in a heap on the marble floors with a heavy thud.

Rolling onto my side, I grunted as pain radiated everywhere all at once through my body. All I could do was

hope my accelerated healing kicked in quickly as I continued to try to fight him. Pushing to my feet, I swayed slightly before taking a deep breath and fighting to calm my racing heart as I let my fangs extend once more.

His expression morphed from anger to amusement as he let out a maniacal laugh. “Oh sweetheart, do you still think you can fight me? What you experienced was merely a quarter of the speed and strength I possess.”

My breathing was even, and though I could feel that my throat was bruised, I still managed to bite out the truth with a slight rasp to my tone. “I’ve freely given my body of my own accord. You don’t own me, contrary to what you might believe.”

Lazarus’ expression transformed into one of pure, exalted amusement, and his light chuckle had me wavering in confusion. “You and Katarina...You’re so much the same. Giving away what wasn’t yours to do so with.”

Already braced for an attack, I was less surprised but still pissed off when my legs were knocked out from beneath me and my body was pinned to the floor. I groaned at the reverberation of hitting the ground, and I felt a panic surface through me. How did he move so damn fast?

He wasn’t like any other vampyre I’d dealt with in the past. I suppose I shouldn’t have been so surprised, as he was an old god.

His hand squeezed my jaw as he leaned down, crimson eyes sparkling with anger before he trailed his tongue along my neck, making my stomach pool with bile. His lips brushed against the skin as he whispered, “Do you know how honored you should feel? How honored both of you should have felt? That a god like myself wants a creature like you?”

“I’d feel honored if you’d get off me—” I grunted as he pulled back and hit me right in the stomach in a hard full fist punch. I swear I felt something crack but I refused to cry out, to give him that satisfaction, instead tightening my jaw and sealing my lips shut. I hoped it was just the armor concaving and not my ribs.

“I shouldn’t be surprised by another disappointment,” he muttered as he pulled back to gaze at me. “I thought perhaps you would be different, what with the role I took in controlling your life, but you’re not. Pity that.”

Bringing my right knee up, I tried to put space between us, far less focused on his words than getting out from underneath him. He only pressed further against me before a sneer lifted his lips

“Now tell me, Kyella,” he purred as his eyes narrowed to slits, “who *took* your purity from you? Tell me and I will punish him—I will ensure that he is slaughtered so he never comes between us again.”

This bastard was psychotic.

My voice was rough, and I knew my next words would only make his attacks on me worse, but I refused to allow him to believe anything other than the absolute truth.

I would live my truth until the bitter end.

“When I left here, I promised myself that no one would ever control my life again,” I said roughly. “I gave myself to them freely, as I already said. No one took shit from me.”

For just a moment, he was silent before he removed his grip on me and I took the precious moment for the silver lining it was, sucking oxygen in desperately. His voice was filled with revulsion as he stood above me, staring down with visceral disgust. “Them?! There are multiple men? Fucking whore!”

“Three to be specific,” I spat out. I struggled to sit up as his narrowed eyes ran the length of my body.

His mouth popped open as his eyes widened, as if he’d suddenly found clarity on something.

“You poor child, I understand now. You must be confused,” he muttered, nodding to himself as if that made a lick of sense. “They made you believe that, made you believe that it was okay to give away what was already mine.”

*What the...*

I couldn't prevent the confusion from showing on my face as my brow furrowed and my lips thinned.

"I will forgive you, Kyella. You didn't know that you were promised to someone else. The blame can't possibly fall on you."

In a split-second decision, hoping to take him off guard, I hurled myself toward him, only to be thrown across the room. I slumped as I hit the wall, everything around me turning hazy as I heard his shoes moving across the floor in my direction.

I groaned as he lifted me up by the throat once more, dangling me in the air as he offered me a gleaming smile. "Now, now, let's stop this fighting, shall we? There is no way you will ever land a hit on me, let alone kill me. Your struggles are futile and are only leading to more pain for you, dear."

Defeat threatened to overtake me. How was I supposed to beat a man who seemed to be able to predict my every move?

***Empress! Hold on, I am coming to your aid!***

Barnabus' words crashed through my head, and I could feel my eyes widen at his voice.

Being an old god, I assumed Barnabus was strong beyond measure, but I had the sudden and desperate urge to scream that he needed to stay away.

The doors were thrown open, and though I tried to turn my head to look toward the entrance, I was unable to with Lazarus' tight grip on my neck. The anger on Lazarus' face disappeared, replaced by a look of unadulterated shock. As if in afterthought, the old god tossed me to the side. At least this time I managed to roll over my shoulder and come to rest in a crouching position. Trying to see who had opened the doors, I growled as I realized he was keeping me behind him, blocking my view entirely.

It wasn't lost on me that he had to regard me as nothing more than a nuisance to keep me at his back like this. He truly didn't consider me a threat.

Malakai had made the same mistake. Though I would readily admit that Lazarus was a far more dangerous opponent.

“Well, this is a surprise.” Lazarus chuckled, sounding amused as I heard the doors slam shut once more, blocking out any noise from the outside. My mind wanted to wonder if the noises were of my men fighting and whether they were okay, but I couldn’t let myself become distracted

***Kyella, are you okay?***

Surprise consumed me as my head swiveled, glancing toward the ceiling to see if I could spot my friend and confidant, but I couldn’t spot him. With a barely suppressed groan of pain, I shuffled to the side to get a view of the door where I spotted an unfamiliar man standing. Was that Barnabus? He was staring right at me, his question lingering in the air as if he had spoken it aloud.

“Barnabus?” I clarified; my voice choked on a whisper.

It had to be him, right? While this wasn’t the version of the old god I’d come to know, the appearance matched what I imagined my friend might look like in human form. He was elegant, tall, and refined, wearing an oddly formal, dark-colored outfit. Considering his personality and the distinguished air he held about him, it all somehow fit him perfectly.

His hair was very light, not quite cream but close enough to match the fur that I was used to seeing. It was styled away from his face, highlighting dark eyes, a heavy brow, and square jaw. He was handsome in a classical sort of way, looking every bit a caricature of old that was depicted in some of the more ancient art displayed around the palace at home in the Tridian Empire. His dark eyes held my gaze, concern coating his features.

Barnabus nodded sharply. “I have come to help you, Empress.”

“Empress?” Lazarus offered me an arched brow, his disposition easy and relaxed, though I thought I could catch a hint of intrigue in the way he held himself. “Impressive, little

dhampyr Perhaps you can still be of use to me. I can potentially forgive your transgressions.”

This man clearly couldn't make up his mind, unsure of whether he either wanted to keep me or kill me. Either way, it didn't matter because I was determined to end him.

A snarl broke from my lips. My voice was raspy as I spat, “Fuck you, Lazarus.”

He barked out a laugh, and I glanced back at Barnabus, who was stepping closer to Lazarus. I swallowed, feeling a wave of gratitude—of not him only coming to my aid...but of him shifting to his human form. He had said he didn't feel comfortable in that skin anymore...yet here he was, all to help me.

“I had hoped my suspicions about sensing you were a mistake,” Barnabus mused, pulling Lazarus' attention back to him as the tension spiked between them.

I could feel both of their hatred for each other saturating the air, and I forced myself to use the momentary distraction to think of a way I could attack Lazarus without him being able to predict my move. His strength and speed easily gave him the upper hand.

“I'm sure you would have loved that,” Lazarus taunted as he opened his arms wide, a beaming smile stretching his face almost comically. I might have laughed if I didn't know how dangerous he was. “But here I am, Barnabus. The bigger question, however, is where have you been all these years? I thought you were dead like the others, yet here you are, *alive* and coming to the aid of my Kyella.”

“Yours,” Barnabus snorted, as if amused, before his face contorted into one of disgust. “You were always this side of delusional, though, weren't you? Kyella is not yours.”

“She is!” Lazarus snarled.

The two of them were much closer now, circling one another with narrowed eyes. Barnabus' brow was pinched as Lazarus considered him with a clenched jaw and sneer. The tension in the room thickened, intensifying until I could



practically feel it billowing over my skin. I tried to edge myself closer to where Barnabus would circle around, but I could see Lazarus tracking my movements.

“Delusional,” Barnabus repeated before speaking to me. “Has he hurt you?”

Before I could respond, Lazarus’ face reddened as he seethed, “Her well-being shouldn’t matter to you.”

“Barnabus,” I spoke evenly and quietly, drawing his attention now that he was closer to me. “His power, we have to be careful, I figured out what it is—”

“In a way, though,” Lazarus spoke over me, flashing a dark smile, “I am glad you two seem to care for one another. It will make this next part all that much sweeter. I have a suspicion that her tears will taste so very sweet.”

***Stand back, Empress. Let me handle him.***

Barnabus took a threatening step toward the old god, his chin tilting up confidently as he said, “There is no next part for you, Lazarus. Your time is coming to an end.”

Lazarus’ smile turned sinister. “It’s no wonder none of my brethren stood a chance against me. After all this time, you still haven’t figured out what I can do, have you? So incredibly idiotic.”

Suddenly, Lazarus’ face tightened, his eyes boring into Barnabus, and I *knew* he was using his mind control on my friend. Barnabus jolted, pain exploding across his face as his eyes rolled back. His shoulders jerked back as a tremble went through his entire body. I jumped back as Barnabus let out a vicious snarl and turned toward me sharply, his sword raising in my direction.

“What are you doing?” I whispered, heart breaking at the sight of his sword pointed in my direction.

*No!*

He would never turn on me.

Any recognition or spark of affection was gone from his eyes. Instead, something akin to hatred seemed to be rolling

over him as a sneer lifted the corner of his lip.

*Shit.*

I knew within the depths of my soul that this wasn't happening by choice.

"He will do exactly as I tell him to," Lazarus drawled lazily, as if this display of mind control was as easy as breathing for him. "I have figured out your punishment for giving away what was mine, Kyella. It is clear Barnabus is one of the many that you seem to have given your heart to, so you must kill him. Either that, or he will kill you. Someone's blood will stain these floors."

"Absolutely not," I hissed, enraged as I stepped back. Barnabus moved forward, and despite his expression, his body moved with a jolting, rocking motion, as if fighting against Lazarus' control over his mind.

"You must earn back the honor of my affection."

Before I could say a word to Lazarus' ridiculous notion, Barnabus sprinted toward me, his sword pointed right toward my chest. I narrowly avoided the object by quickly diving to the side before springing to my feet. He came to a stop after passing me, turning sharply before launching himself at me again. His movements seemed much slower and strained than I assumed he was capable of in this form.

I dodged and avoided each of his repeated attacks as Lazarus shouted in the background. I couldn't afford to pay attention to him though, my entire concentration on Barnabus as our dance through the room became faster and faster. I saw him struggling to fight Lazarus' control, his skilled and agile movement interrupted by stunted and jerky stops. Barnabus' brow furrowed in concentration and pain.

"Barnabus, you have to fight it! I know you can!" I shouted, hoping to somehow get through to him.

All the sudden, Barnabus came to a complete standstill, his sword dropping to the floor. Lazarus approached, with his hands clasped behind his back, with a smug smile on his face. "He won't respond to you, Kyella."

Barnabus didn't respond or react physically, but his eyes were filled with pain and frustration. Could he still communicate like normal? We had to figure out some type of plan—we had to work together to defeat Lazarus. There was no other way.

“Do you see now, what I mean about power? About everything I can give you? Barnabus is an old god like me and look at him!” Lazarus motioned to the man frozen next to him. “It is all too easy to control him, which is why it was so easy to twist even my own kind to fight and wipe out the dhampyrs before forcing them to kill one another...”

A wave of fury crashed over me. I was angry over the lives lost, both dhampyrs and old gods alike. But beyond that, I was furious at the audacity of this vampyre, who seemed to believe he had the right to play with everyone, to bend them to his will without consequence.

He looked at Barnabus with curiosity. “When I turned the rest of my kind against each other, I assumed Barnabus had fallen as well. But no matter, this old fool is no threat to me.”

A defensive growl tore from my throat. “I will never hurt him.”

“You don't have a choice.” Lazarus barked out a laugh before offering me a taunting smile. “Not if you want to live.”

His words sent Barnabus into action, and my friend in front of me in a blur of speed I hadn't witnessed from him prior, gripping my throat and holding me off the ground with ease.

On pure instinct, I pulled my foot back and aimed a kick at his ribs with all the power I could muster. I didn't want to hurt him, but I had to do something. He grunted at the impact, surprisingly letting go as I sprang back and landed.

Was he trying to fight the control still? There was no way that kick had done enough damage to dislodge him.

He breathed hard as he jolted, moving forward once again.

***Trying so hard...he's too strong...you must leave, Ky.***

“Never,” I hissed through clenched teeth, relieved to hear his voice in my head. I would never leave him. It was clear from Lazarus’ laughter that he thought I was responding to him.

Barnabus attacked once more, throwing his body toward me, and I narrowly dodged him, his body hitting my shoulder hard enough that pain shot through it. Gritting my teeth, I turned to face him and realized his control was fading along with his ability to communicate mentally. His attacks were sharper and faster, as if he couldn’t hold back any longer. He lowered his shoulder before tackling me to the ground. I wheezed as he quickly scrambled on top of me to have his knee pressing into the concave part of my armor, pressing into my stomach painfully as his hand came up and wrapped around my throat.

***He will make me kill you. Please, listen to me.***

I reached up and grabbed his hand around my throat, knowing it would look like I was fighting but instead trying to support him as he struggled for words. Lazarus chuckled loudly as he watched me grappling with Barnabus. “Your efforts are futile, he’s entirely under my control.”

I refused to believe that though. I refused to believe I couldn’t get through to him.

As if hearing my thoughts, Barnabus’ voice sounded through my head. ***I have Evathrina with me.***

My eyes widened. What did he mean to do with that, *kill Lazarus?*

***He will make me kill you...I can’t keep fighting it...I will ingest the first dose to prevent him from using me.***

“No!” I growled, realizing with horror what he was saying.

He was going to kill himself, so that he couldn’t be used as a weapon against me.

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

## KYELLA

**D**read pooled in the depths of my stomach, thinking of how wrong this was going. When we had approached the Thaician Empire with our fleet, I firmly believed that good would prevail in all ways. After all, shouldn't fate be on the side of light? At this moment, I felt a sense of bitterness biting at my heart, feeling like that wasn't the case.

How was this fair?

*Use the other dose in my jacket on him once I'm gone.*

"No," I rasped once more, refusing to just go along with a plan that would end in his death.

Why couldn't we use it on him together? Why couldn't we fight this together? I craved to ask my pleading question aloud, but I knew any chance of catching Lazarus off guard with the Evathrina would be ruined if I did.

"You don't get to say no to me!" Lazarus screamed on my right, and I watched him throw his hand out like he was slapping the air seconds before Barnabus carried on the mimed action on me. The crack of his skin connecting with mine rang in my ears. "No one gets to say no to me!"

Barnabus' eyes misted with tears as my cheek throbbed from the blow.

This had to be tearing him apart inside, being used against his will and forced to dole out pain to someone you cared about. Tears of frustration and pain filled my eyes as I looked up at him. The regret and agony in his gaze were easy to spot,

but more than anything, determination was bleeding through. But it was not a determination that I could support. Lazarus was the only one in this room who deserved to die.

***He will use me against you—he will make me kill you. You must do this alone when I’m gone. It’s okay.***

I attempted to shake my head and move from under him, but his knee only pushed against my armor more, making me grit my teeth at the pinch of pain from the pressure pressing down on me.

“Your time to save yourself is running out,” Lazarus sang as his steps drew closer. He stilled when he stood to my right, giving him a close up of the agony that was sure to come.

***It’s the only way. I have lived a long life, Kyella, and there is nothing I would rather do than give my life for you to bring peace to the empires.***

His kind words only served to further tear me apart inside. How could someone so good and selfless be meant to meet such a horrible fate?

His grip loosened slightly, and hope filled me for a blind moment. For a short second, I believed that I could break away from him and gain the space I needed to breathe properly and attack Lazarus...until I felt the cold bite of steel pressing against my throat in place of the hand that had been there half a second before.

Malice radiated in his gaze as he bore his fangs with a hiss.

He was going to slit my throat—*Lazarus was going to make him slit my throat.*

“If you don’t fight him back, I will make him use your own weapon against you, love,” Lazarus taunted, glee dripping from each word as he watched how distraught this situation he’d put us in made me. Crouching down to be closer to my level, he reached out to brush a strand of my hair behind my ear.

I wanted to cut his fucking hand off.

Risking the blade against my throat, I snapped my head to the side in an attempt to bite his hand as I had done Malakai, but searing pain bloomed as the blade cut into my skin, deep enough for blood to pour across my neck, soaking into my hair.

Lazarus tsked at me as he yanked his hand back and pushed to his feet. “Ah, ah. That’s not the way to earn my love, Kyella.” His eyes narrowed to slits as he sneered down at me. “Truly, I’ve given you too many chances to prove your loyalty. Make your choice, now.”

Tears blurred my vision as dire reality set in. I couldn’t lay here and refuse to fight or do anything, any longer, but I couldn’t bring myself to hurt Barnabus or accept that he needed to ingest the Evathrina.

There had to be another way, I just needed more time to figure it out.

I knew the wound on my neck would heal. I could tell that the blade hadn’t nicked anything vital as the blood flow was already staunched, and I could feel the skin beginning to stitch back together.

***Prepare yourself...I’m going to focus all the energy I have left into one moment to break free. I will not hurt you anymore. I simply cannot bear it.***

My chest squeezed at his words. How could he expect me to just accept this?

“Please, no,” I pleaded hoarsely. Each word I forced out felt like choking on a rock with the way the delicate skin felt raw and bruised.

I knew Lazarus would think I was talking to him, but my words were for my companion. The friend who had steadfastly stood by my side and convinced me that I could accomplish the dream he, Myrin, and I had stood for.

While we hadn’t had the chance to spend many of our days together, in the short time I’d been gifted the ability to communicate with him, he’d become so dear to me. He saved



my life multiple times, and he thought now I would be able to watch as he ended his own?

I couldn't picture a world in which the dream ended in not having him and Myrin by my side. My heart couldn't bear losing another friend.

But time wasn't on my side, and just as helplessness washed over me at the crossroads I faced, Barnabus' gaze cleared of all the anger Lazarus had forced upon him. My old friend offered me a soft smile before he moved like lightning, dropping the dagger near my hand and hurling himself away from me.

It was as if I watched in slow motion as he pulled the Evathrina from his pocket in midair and put it in his mouth before he crashed to the ground on his side, staring directly at me with that same smile on his face.

I watched his throat bob as he swallowed.

A frenzied clap echoed through the room as Lazarus let out a maniacal laugh, "So, the trash took itself out. Splendid."

No.

No.

*No!*

"Barnabus!" I screamed, not caring about the pain flaring through my throat as I struggled to push myself up.

Nor did I care about Lazarus at that moment. All I cared about was getting to my friend's side as I stumbled to my feet and closed the distance between us. I collapsed on my knees in front of him, hands shaking as I reached for him. His body was completely still, as if he was paralyzed from the toxin before he began to spasm.

I rushed to cradle his head as it started to bang against the floor harshly, his body beginning to convulse. "Barnabus! No!" A sob hitched in my throat, nearly hyperventilating as I tried to think of all the ways to remove the flower from his system. "Tell me what to do! How do I fix this?! You can't die!"

Willing to try anything I tore into my wrist with my fangs to get my blood flowing to feed him, but his body suddenly stopped thrashing, completely calming as his eyes remained glued to my own.

“Barnabus,” I murmured, choked up by emotion as tears dripped from my eyes, onto his cheeks.

Was he okay? Why had his body stopped convulsing?

***Your blood can't heal me, nothing can. My body is slowly shutting down and will soon be unresponsive to even my own brain, so I can't be used against you now. I will pass in peace.***

“I can't lose you too,” I cried, slumping over him as my own body shook with sobs. “I can't.”

***You aren't losing me. Just like we never lost Myrin. The memories of our loved ones can never be stolen from us, not even by death herself. I have lived a life much too long, Kyella. As has Lazarus. Take the other flower in my pocket and end this. It is now in your hands to shape the future into that of the one we have fought and sacrificed for.***

Barnabus' words filled my head, soft and weak, and I realized that he was truly dying...*and there was nothing I could do.* I rushed to think through everything I had read about the flower, trying to find a solution...anything to fix this as I pushed myself off him and cradled his face in the palm of my hand.

“Thank you for believing in me,” I whispered softly as the light began to fade from his eyes. “I will not fail you or Myrin. These lands will know peace and equality.”

“Oh, what a fucking joke,” Lazarus scoffed, his voice closer than I remembered him standing, making my hackles rise.

Something within me awoke at the thought of him witnessing the end of my friend's life. The death he caused. Barnabus deserved privacy in his last moments, comforted by someone who cared for him.

Laughter echoed through the hall.

“Come, Kyella,” he called out in a strong, commanding tone, but I would never play by his rules.

Hot tears streamed down my face anew as Barnabus words echoed through my mind for a final time, so faint I could barely hear them.

*The only person who needs to believe in you now, is you.*

My body trembled as the focus in his eyes flickered, like he was staring through me...until all light from his eyes was gone.

He was dead.

Barnabus...was dead.

And there was one person to blame.

Lazarus' laugh only doubled, bringing out the blind fury that had come over me in the moments after Myrin's death. I gave into the cold, indifference. It was imperative that I let it wash over me, otherwise I'd never be able to fight through my sorrow.

Sliding my hand into Barnabus' jacket, I grabbed the flower and slipped it into the pouch at my waist. As Lazarus rounded us, moving around Barnabus' feet to stand on his other side, he looked down on him with pity and disgust clear in his gaze.

“What an idiotic fool, thinking he could take you from me,” he murmured, as if Barnabus and I shared anything other than the bond of family.

This man was beyond fucked in the brain, the way he thought of me as his possession and viewed the world in relation to me.

His words ran through my mind as the wheels began to turn, formulating the only plan I could think of that would get me close enough to the vile vampyre to end this.

It was risky—but I needed to believe in myself.

He could have killed me countless times over, but he chose to drag this out—to toy with me. He truly wasn't afraid of me,

but he did want me alive, and he wanted me all to himself. That much was crystal clear to me with the way he tried to make excuses for my actions that disgusted him, like he was trying to convince himself that he could get over them.

I was smart enough to know that I couldn't face off with him in hand-to-hand combat. He had the upper hand, but I would exploit the one weakness he had shown: me.

It felt like acid rose in my throat as I lifted my eyes to stare deep into his crimson ones, forcing any trace of malice from my gaze as I said, "You're right. No one else is strong enough for me to be with. You've proven your superiority, and I want to help you."

His eyebrows slammed together as he stared at me, slack-jawed at my admission.

I held my breath, waiting for him to call me out on my shit, and then I truly wouldn't have a plan. Seconds ticked by as I forced myself to remain calm. But once again, he showed how fucking unhinged he was as all malicious intent toward me seemed to melt away with the way his shoulders sagged in relief in tandem with his smile.

Walking toward me as I slowly moved Barnabus' head from my lap to rest on the floor, he offered me a hand. Placing my hand in his, I forced my lips not to curl up in disgust with the contact as he pulled me to my feet. Pushing down the shudder that wanted to overtake my body, I stood stock still as he raised his hand to brush against my cheek with a featherlight touch.

Adoration swam in his eyes as he tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, eyes seeming to drink my face in, murmuring, "I knew you'd realize it eventually. Even if I had to slaughter all those who tried to take you from me first."

Swallowing down the rage he stirred in me, I nodded and kept my tone soft as I responded. "None of them were strong enough to be my Emperor...but you are."

I hoped that was what he wanted to hear. I was completely winging it based on the drivel he'd spewed to me thus far.

With how powerful he was, I couldn't figure out why he hadn't just replaced Malakai to become the Emperor and rule how he wished. Why have a puppet leader when he could have achieved his goals more easily himself?

Something wasn't adding up to me, but I wasn't sure if he even knew his own mind, not if the swift emotional changes he'd displayed many times over were anything to go by.

His head jerked back before he chuckled and raised a brow. "Me, the Emperor? No."

I let surprise flutter across my face as I asked, "Why don't you want that? You're the most powerful man in all the lands."

I allowed my eyes to drop shut as he closed the distance between our faces, pressing a kiss to my forehead before murmuring against my skin, "We will find a new puppet to put in charge of our empires. I refuse to be held prisoner to one land to simply rule over idiots. We will ensure it is run as we see fit before traveling to find another land, conquering it, and implementing the same changes."

A small gasp fell from my lips, which I quickly rushed to cover with a cough, making him pull back as he looked me over in concern. "What's wrong, my love?"

Wincing at the use of the name Elijah used for me, I stammered out, "This armor is just hurting me. Would you mind if I took it off? I know you're strong enough to protect me if anyone tries to attack us."

His eyes heated as he nodded, allowing his hands to find the straps holding each piece in place. "Let me help you. I'm so glad to see this trust you're placing in me, Kyella. I know that you'll prove to me how right I was to choose you."

Forcing a pinched smile to my lips, I nodded, not trusting myself to say anything as I moved to take off the waistband holding the items I would so desperately need once this armor was off. It was a risky move, but I knew that he would be less suspicious with me willingly removing the defensive armor. I had to bide my time for the perfect moment, no matter how

much my fingers twitched to grab my daggers from the floor and plunge them into his neck.

Holding the belt in one hand, I turned my face to glance up at him as he let the metal on my arm and shoulder fall to the ground. What I hadn't expected was for his face to be so close to my own, leaving me no room to dodge the kiss he forced upon me.

I fought with everything in me to not bite his tongue when he shoved it into my mouth, realizing that this was my moment. He truly thought I was captivated by his strength and willing to stand by his side. All I had to do was continue to convince him of that for a few moments more.

Forcing my mouth to open, I kissed him back, not wanting to raise suspicion. Meanwhile, I slowly reached with both hands behind me to grab the soft, silky petal of the flower from within the pouch before dropping it to the ground. Carefully, I raised my hands to thread into his hair as he dipped me back, deepening the kiss. The flower lay between the palm of my hand and his hair, and I could hardly breathe as disgust at his kiss and anticipation for what I was about to attempt flowed through me in tandem.

As he pulled back slightly, breaking our kiss and rubbing his thumb across my jaw affectionately, I smiled a sickeningly sweet smile at him as I whispered, "I'm sorry, Lazarus."

"It's okay, Katarina," he breathed out affectionately, eyes completely clouded with love.

I almost halted at the use of my mother's name as he spoke to me. His mind was further warped than I had even imagined, but I used it to my advantage, pushing that belief upon him even more.

"I should have never denied you," I admitted wistfully, and his eyes began to pool with tears as he sniffled and nodded.

The moment he opened his mouth to answer me, I pulled my hand with the flower down and shoved it into his mouth, catching him by complete surprise in whatever trance he found himself in.

Using his shock to my advantage, I continued to shove my fingers further into his mouth and hit the back of his throat. Using the tips of my fingers I forced it down his throat until he gagged and swallowed reflexively.

I prepared myself for a blow as his brain caught back up with the present, but that didn't stop the swift blow to my already damaged breastplate from causing me to cry out in pain as he slammed the butt of his palm against me. I flew through the air once more.

Using the last semblance of energy I could find within my battered body, I recalled the tuck maneuver Myrin had taught me as we worked on tactics for fighting as a smaller woman. It was a little harder with the armor on, but I brought my knees to my chest and let the force of the move overtake my body, spinning upside down before letting myself untuck. Coming to the ground, my feet crashed into the floor, the impact rattling my heels and shins but leaving me standing as I prepared for another attack from Lazarus.

I knew his speed would have him upon me in a split second, but as I bent my knees, preparing to counter, I blinked rapidly at what I saw before me. His hands were clawing at his throat, and he began to convulse the same way Barnabus had, alerting me that the flower was working.

Not willing to leave this to chance, I quickly ran to grab my daggers off the floor before rounding to face him.

I couldn't believe the facade had worked. His sick obsession with my mother, something twisted and broken that had transferred to me, ended up being my saving grace. His sick delusion led to his downfall.

How could he be such an idiot, for all the years he'd spent cultivating his plans?

As he fell to his knees, his face turning a beautiful shade of purple, I called out, "Why my mother, Lazarus? Why me? You had everything else you wanted."

The last thing I expected was a real answer. But it seemed as if clarity entered his eyes for the first time as he choked out

in a wheezing breath, “What’s an Emperor without his Empress?”

I was stunned by the answer. He had no idea what it was like to love...and he thought he could force that connection.

Maybe it was the way he watched everyone around him find love as millennia passed by, that made him want it so badly that he allowed it to become his downfall. The one thing he couldn’t force someone to do was love him, truly. If he did, he’d still know that it wasn’t of their own free will...a false pretense.

As his body fell forward, face smashing against the floor before going completely still, I stood stock still, heart hammering in my chest.

Was this truly over?



# CHAPTER NINETEEN

## KYELLA

**E**ven in death, Barnabus somehow managed to look at peace.

That was the impression his familiar face left as I studied it through blurry eyes, my hand laying against his cheek as I knelt next to him. He had said he would pass in peace—that his brain would shut down following his body. While I wanted to believe him, his promises didn't stop my heart from weighing heavily in my chest with the knowledge that he suffered at all.

A storm of emotions rolled over me, everything from guilt to heartbreak infected every part of me. While I had avenged Barnabus, but the heavy sense of loss and mourning that seemed to suffocate my very being wasn't any less. The grief overwhelmed everything else as hot tears streamed down my face. Anger coiled within me, making me tremble as a sob nearly broke from my throat.

I would never again talk to Barnabus.

Everything around me seemed to exist within an odd, lulled state as I found myself frozen, unable to think or do anything beyond this moment. If I was to keep my promise I made to Myrin—one that Barnabus had sacrificed his life for—I had to move beyond my grief.

So why didn't I have the strength to stand? The strength to leave him after everything that he'd done?

“Kyella!” Elijah's voice echoed loudly as the door to the room slammed open.

“Fuck, where is she—” Dakath’s words cut off abruptly. My gaze was locked on Barnabus, and I swallowed thickly as I heard their rushed footsteps. A large shadow appeared across from me, and I found myself wondering what the room looked like to them.

My men were seeing everything from me hovering, grief-stricken over Barnabus, Lazarus’ corpse, and the bloodshed and carnage from Malakai’s slaughter. Somehow, his death now felt like it had happened a lifetime ago.

Kolvar crouched down and reached across Barnabus’ body, tilting my chin up and drawing my gaze away from my friend. A surge of anger washed through me as he pulled my eyes away from the old god’s corpse, and Kolvar’s eyes darkened with worry, brows furrowing as he studied my expression.

“Darling, are you okay?” Panic was evident in his voice, and I tried to steel myself. Desperately, I wanted to allow an icy sense of numbness to overrun my anger and heartbreak of the situation, so I could give them a proper answer.

“Malakai is dead,” I explained, my voice tinged with almost no emotion before my eyes flicked toward the other body. “Lazarus is dead.”

My hand gently laid on Barnabus’ chest as my throat became thick with emotion, “Barnabus...Barnabus is dead. They are all dead.”

“Who is Lazarus?” Elijah asked, coming to crouch down next to me, as Dakath’s hand came to rest on the back of my head in a gentle and comforting touch.

“Lazarus is an old god. Like Barnabus,” I drew out and swallowed, reciting my new knowledge. I shrugged their hands away, needing the space from the comforting touch I normally craved. I didn’t need comfort right now. I needed to stew in my fury. “He was influencing Malakai for some time, using him as a pawn to get what he wanted.”

After drawing a shaky breath, I continued, “He had been in love with my mother, and when she didn’t return his

affections, he killed my birth father and her after I was born. On that day, he marked me with the Evathrina necklace and had Malakai bring me to this castle after I turned sixteen to keep me under a watchful gaze—saving me for himself one day.”

As those words left my mouth, a vicious sound fell from Elijah’s lips in reaction. “It doesn’t matter anymore, though. He’s dead,” I said before Elijah could speak.

Silence filled the space around us before Kolvar hedged, “You said Barnabus died as well, if that is Lazarus over there, is this...?”

“Barnabus?” I nodded. “After I killed Malakai and Lazarus appeared, Barnabus came to my aid. Lazarus was far stronger than either of us—he had the ability to use mind control, and he tried to turn Barnabus against me.”

“You had to defend yourself,” Dakath presumed, his voice gentler than I had ever heard it.

“Yes, but I didn’t kill him—Barnabus took an Evathrina flower and ingested it. He killed himself, so he couldn’t be used to hurt me.”

The silence that followed was heavy. Breaking the silence, I continued in an even softer voice, “He gave his life to save mine and gave me a chance to kill Lazarus. Barnabus had another flower, and I shoved it down the bastard’s throat and killed him. I couldn’t have done any of this without Barnabus, but...”

Kolvar’s voice was rough with emotion as he said, “Barnabus did that willingly, Kyella, because of how much he cared. You can’t put that guilt on yourself.”

Angry tears swarmed my eyes. “It’s not just guilt I feel, it’s anger.”

Elijah pressed a kiss to the hand that he’d taken possession of, and the soft movement spurred me on. I knew if I gave into the comfort they were offering, I wouldn’t be able to do what I still needed to do.

“I can’t talk about this, not yet,” I murmured, hearing the distant sound of battle still going on outside. It was a blaring reminder that this battle wasn’t over—not yet. “I need to do something.”

It wasn’t that I didn’t want to be consoled, but I knew my resolve was weakening after everything that had happened. I couldn’t afford to drop further into my grief or into the many revelations I’d been told—not until the bloodshed was over.

*Not until this war was over.*

I stood shakily.

“Love—” Elijah’s voice was filled with worry.

“I need to do something,” I repeated myself. “I can’t have anyone else die today.”

Walking across the space, I grabbed my armor and Dakath appeared next to me, helping me silently fix the arm pieces that had been removed during the ruse with Lazarus. Once those were secure, I grabbed Malakai’s ripped off and pummeled head, turning toward my men who were all regarding the mutilated head with varied reactions. Elijah’s brows were raised in what I thought was shock, Kolvar’s eyes widened with surprise, and Dakath offered me a sharp nod, a hint of pride shining in his gaze. All the reactions were something I would have been able to enjoy far more if not for my current emotional state.

Nodding toward the door, I focused my attention on what needed to be done. Malakai’s head rested heavily in my hand, and I gripped his blood-soaked hair tightly as we passed the group of humans that helped us enter the castle. Their shocked gasps and murmurs as they took in the sight of the head I was holding only distantly reached my ears.

The door to the castle stood partially open, vampyres wearing Malakai’s insignia lying slaughtered in the entrance. I had a feeling my men were responsible for their bloody ends. I stepped past the slaughter; the sight of the death and destruction only motivated me. I had to see this ended.

Walking out the door, I looked upon the carnage and chaos of war.

Brick and stone lay in piles, the infrastructure wrecked from the impacts of vampyres raging unhindered against one another. Blood soaked the ground of the courtyard, and mixed with the debris and bodies, the ground looked like it couldn't even be walked upon.

The scent of blood filled the air, and my fingers tightened around the hilt in my grip as the guttural screams that accompanied the sound of swords hitting one another met my ears. The air seemed to vibrate with fury, and from a distance, I could see that our forces were continuing to push forward, overpowering Malakai's soldiers as they worked their way from the harbor inward.

We were on the verge of winning, taking the streets one by one as Malakai's forces yielded to ours. It didn't even seem to matter that I stood with their leader's head grasped in my hand. I should have felt a sense of victory in that, but all I wanted was for the fighting and bloodshed to stop.

"Stop!" I bellowed, lifting his head into the air, as my voice echoed through the space. "Emperor Malakai is dead—your ruler is no more! Stop fighting, now!"

Almost immediately, the humans who fought against our forces came to a halt, turning to look at me with shock. The Tridian soldiers responded immediately, looks of shock and awe on their faces for the few seconds they were able to glance in my direction. All over the courtyard, Malakai's vampyres continued fighting, doubling their efforts as my forces took up arms against them once more.

"Thaician Empire, your emperor has been killed!" I yelled over the din of the battle—stomach churning at the sight of the chaos greeting me. Everywhere I turned, my soldiers were beating back Malakai's, all of whom threw glances at the head dangling from my grip, until the fight bled from them entirely. "There is no need for violence; this war is over."

I continued, keeping my gaze on a soldier of Malakai's who stared at me with a fury that caused his face to turn red,

malice emanating from him. “Any further violence will be seen as a direct conflict with me. Either kneel or be slaughtered, those are your options.”

I wouldn’t hesitate to kill those who threatened everything we had worked for—everything that Barnabus had given his life for.

“We will never kneel to you!” A furious voice rang out from my left, and I glanced to see a shadow of movement charging toward me. The vampyre’s features were painted with malice and murder painted. Kolvar’s arm wrapped around my waist, but before he could move us, the man’s head was sliced clean off.

Relief filled me, not at the death of the unnamed soldier, but because while covered in blood and more than a bit beat up looking, Tristan was alive, breathing heavily with his sword falling to his side. The soldier’s head rolled in the dirt, and Tristan offered me a severe nod. He was alive, and this war was over.

Rina...Rina would see her father. I struggled to control the emotion that threatened to overwhelm me with that realization. Swallowing thickly and pushing past the urge to weep my gratitude, I held Malakai’s head higher and spoke to the crowd.

“Kneel or face the same fate!”

The easy slaughter of their comrade seemed to snap people into action. The humans kneeled first, followed by the vampyres. One by one, they took a knee, some with eyes glued to the ground, some with their eyes stuck on the head in my grip, and others still with eyes locked on my face. I stood above them, heart pounding in my chest and watching, hearing the fighting outside the castle courtyard slowly halting—the streets falling silent as word traveled beyond the courtyard and through the battleground.

My men stood around me, keeping me close, yet allowing me to stand on my own. With a heavy sigh, I spoke to Tristan as he approached. “You’re alright?” I kept my voice quiet,

though I never allowed my arm to slip, hoisting Malakai's head above me as I gazed at the crowd.

"We lost some men," he stated, his voice edged with frustration, "but we never stopped fighting."

"Have our soldiers begin to move those who are injured inside," I said as I observed the space around us. "We need to begin tending to injuries, especially those the humans have suffered. I know we have medical staff that we brought with us, and I'm sure Malakai had some on hand as well. Find them. We will need all the help we can get to ensure no more lives are lost."

"And what of those who have knelt and aren't injured?"

"They should aid in clean-up efforts as well as moving the bodies of the fallen."

"And those who continue to fight?"

I looked at my right hand, trusting and knowing that he would be able to carry out what was necessary to ensure this land was no longer threatened. "I will not have anyone threaten what we are doing here today. If they do not kneel, their choice is clear."

Tristian nodded sharply and began to shout directives to our soldiers. As he moved away from me, I took stock of those surrounding me in the courtyard. Many of the citizens of the Thaician Empire kept their gazes locked on me, an array of emotions flitting over their faces as my eyes flicked from one to another. With a resigned sigh, I lowered Malakai's head, realizing that I needed to speak to them directly, to hopefully provide some relief for those who never wanted to be here.

"For those who had family in the outskirt villages along the main road: many of your family have been taken to our ships for safety during the battle. Now that it is over, they will be able to return home. It was imperative to us that we ensured no innocents were injured or killed in the battle to end Malakai's reign."

The relief reflected in so many of the faces in the courtyard filled me with a sense of pride. We could have easily ignored



the civilians. We could have opted to do nothing to protect them. But as Myrin had once said, this was as much of a rescue mission as it was a war.

*The next hour felt like a blur.*

I felt like I was on autopilot in a frozen state of numbness as I spoke to humans and vampires alike. Those from Malakai's empire seemed to fear asking questions about their families and villages at first, so I did my best to comfort them, wishing nothing more than to provide them with the peace of mind that they were more than likely safe.

That had been the easy part. The hardest part, the part that threatened to shatter my icy walls, was watching how many children were carried away for a proper burial. I stared at the accumulating bodies, forcing myself to come to terms with the price of war.

A shaky breath left me, and I felt my knees going weak with the weight of everything that had happened today.

"Kyella." Kolvar blocked my view of the courtyard. My men had been aiding in the efforts to organize the chaos, but it didn't surprise me that one of them appeared the very moment I felt as if I couldn't go on.

"I'm fine," I promised, in a soft whisper.

"You aren't," Elijah hissed, appearing next to him as Dakath wrapped an arm around my waist. I opened my mouth to protest, but he shook his head, teeth bared as he emphasized, "You are not. Fucking. Fine."

The sensation of numbness, the one that had kept me going faded quickly as I stood, surrounded by the men I loved. Images of everything that had occurred flashed through my mind, from the bloodshed and destruction in the capital, the fear in the villager's expressions, to everything I had learned from Lazarus of what had happened to my mother. Of the fate that had befallen her.

I hadn't realized I was crying until I was wrapped in Kolvar's arms. Emotion overwhelmed me, and the world around me began to go hazy through the veil of my tears. I

choked down a hiccupping breath as Kolvar began pulling away from the courtyard.

Moments later, I stood in a large communal bathroom, nose stuffy and breaths shaky as Elijah helped me remove my armor. I sniffled and lurched, unsteady on my feet from the demands of the day.

“Dakath went to find us some fresh clothes while we wash up,” he said, fingers working deftly through the buckles and straps holding my armor in place. “Kolvar is standing guard at the door. I need some of this damn blood off you.”

I nodded in understanding, not able to form actual words, as he silently helped clean off the heavy blood from my face and hair. When Dakath returned with simple linen clothing, I helped Elijah wash off our armor as Kolvar and him and cleaned up. I moved on autopilot, mind hazy. With a groan, my body drooped, exhaustion hitting me suddenly.

“Fuck, we need to get her somewhere to feed.” Kolvar’s voice was thick with panic as I swayed on my feet. My head spun, stomach revolting at the idea of consuming blood, despite the necessity.

My body was lifted before I could dispute, and I decided to point them in the only direction I could think of to feed and rest for the night. It was the only place I had been able to call my own for so damn long.

*My old bedroom.*

The space was as simple as I remembered it, the large window showcasing the view of the sea. With a jolt, I realized it was the very window that had changed everything. The window that Tristan had pushed me from. I shook my head with the realization that, while it felt like Tristan had pushed me to my destiny a very long time ago, it hadn’t truly been that long at all.

I crawled onto the bed, my men joining me, and I didn’t hesitate or bother protesting when Kolvar offered his neck to me. I slid onto his lap and buried my fangs into the crook of

his neck, knowing that I needed to replenish my strength from the fights and wounds I sustained.

While the war was over, there was still work to be done. I had to be strong enough to not only lead my people, but to lead those of the Thaician Empire toward their new future as well.

# CHAPTER TWENTY

## KOLVAR

“Lord Hellrick, from the second village to the North, has formally refused the summons. Apparently, he was partial to Malakai as Emperor,” Dakath stated, shaking his head in disbelief as he read through the scroll that had just been delivered to us.

I wasn't surprised. Beyond himself, Malakai had given vampyre lords ultimate rule in the Thaician Empire. He handed them an entire section of society to use as they pleased, to subject to any of their twisted whims.

So no, it didn't surprise me that some didn't want to give that up in favor of a new rule. Not that they had much of an option.

Thankfully, it seemed the lords who would be problematic for us and our goals were few and far between. The rest had agreed to being summoned here to the capital as a show of respect for the new order. We didn't want to invoke any more unnecessary violence, which is why Lord Hellrick had put us in a difficult position.

Knowing how to deal with lords acting out in a violent nature was easy. Figuring out how to deal with them when they were just being bastards instead took a little more finesse. We couldn't simply harm someone for objecting to a leader, that would make us as bad as Malakai.

At the same time, however, we couldn't allow lords like Hellrick to be in positions of power when they were still aligned with Malakai's ideals. Hell, even the lords who had

kneeled to the new rule were under suspicion in my mind. I knew many of them pledged fealty merely to save themselves, making it our responsibility to ensure they didn't continue to treat the humans in the villages surrounding their lands as nothing better than livestock.

“He hasn't threatened violence,” Elijah pointed out, pulling me from my surly thoughts. I cocked an eyebrow in his direction, but his attention was fixed steadfastly on Kyella. “It's simply ego and stubbornness leading him. We can remove his lands and titles, but we need to ensure that his family doesn't suffer for his misgivings if they disagree with him. I have a feeling he will change his tune quickly once he realizes everything he might lose—the old man is trying to call our bluff.”

“Maybe we can move the family to the capital for the time being and put them up somewhere?” Kyella offered, glancing from Elijah's intense stare at Dakath before turning her attention to me. “He will likely follow them here, and then we can keep a closer eye on him. I'd prefer avoiding the large-scale fight we would have to put up to remove him from the estate.”

I nodded at her reasoning, offering her an encouraging smile. With each passing hour, she proved time and again *why* she was chosen as our Empress. “Once Hellrick is in the capital, we can decide where to go from there.”

*The number of things left hanging in the balance left an uneasy feeling in my gut.*

The truth was, there was nothing *easy* about this process. We had helped Myrin lead to an extent, but we had never done more than offer her advice, or our swords, in her endeavors. Entirely restructuring an empire that was forcibly taken during a war was complicated. And though we hadn't underestimated the amount of work it would take, perhaps we hadn't truly considered the intensity of the workload.

Sussing out the difference between the lords who were ready for change versus the ones who kneeled to save their necks was damn hard. At least some of the lords had the grace

to show their true colors, outright attacking our soldiers in the streets and paying with their lives in the process. There were others, still, who were rebelling but were not violent, working in the cover of night to undermine our efforts. Those lords sat in the dungeons, awaiting judgment.

Over the course of the past two days, we had all run ourselves ragged. Malakai's errant lords were only one item on what seemed to be a never-ending to-do list. We were leading an unfamiliar city through a period of grieving, holding nightly burials and burnings while also preparing the bodies of the warriors we'd lost to be returned to their loved ones in the Tridian Empire.

Rest hadn't come easy, especially after Kyella led us to the quarters she had occupied while imprisoned under Malakai's rule. I was disgusted, albeit amazed when she led us there, to the place where she'd endured so much. How she had held onto her will to live, her sense of freedom, was beyond me.

**E**ven now, despite the daunting tasks facing her, she exuded confidence and determination. She was strong and full of life. Our woman, our *leader*, was so damn resilient. And even though I'm not sure how or when it happened, Kyella seemed settled, like something inside of her had finally found peace.

**I** was certain the beginning and end of it was that both Malakai and Lazarus were dead at her hand. She was a warrior, someone who saw what was wrong with the world and full-heartedly chose the path of righteousness, of goodness. And even when that path was treacherous, putting her face-to-face with those who had abused and manipulated her, she persevered. Kyella *triumphed*, not only for herself but for the innocent as well.

My gaze strayed toward where she stood at the window, gazing at the land beyond the castle. Her shoulders were set in a hard

**M** line, but the edge of exhaustion we were all feeling was evident in the way she gripped the windowsill and braced her knees against the rough stone wall. She was tired, and while she wouldn't readily admit it, Barnabus' death had taken a toll on her.

**W**e had given him a funeral befitting an old god, sending him out to sea in a small boat laden with luxuries befitting his station. Watching the flaming arrow floating through the air to the boat had stung, and when she collapsed against me, shoulders shaking as the boat sank beneath the surface, my heart twinged in sympathy for her.

“**W**here is Tristan?” Kyella asked, pulling me unceremoniously from my thoughts.

“He left in the early-morning hours to lead an excursion to a nearby village,” Dakath muttered, and I glanced in his direction. He raised a challenging brow in my direction, and I inclined my head to him.

*To dispose of Malakai's and Lazarus' remains,* were the unspoken words hanging in the air between all of us. Kyella hadn't asked for specifics when we told her we would ensure proper and permanent disposal of the bastards, and we hadn't offered it to her.

Her shoulders sagged, and she turned away from the window. The dark circles beneath her eyes gave away more than her words ever would, but it was the small smile she offered us that set me at ease. “I'm not the only one who sees his potential, am I?”

“He's a natural leader, my love,” Elijah said, and I nodded my agreement.

The potential had always been there, otherwise Kyella would have never chosen him to be her Right Hand. He was, however, one of the people I was most impressed by—he was stepping up in unexpected ways each day and was proving to be an integral part of the recovery effort.



“People are willing to follow him,” I pointed out. “Human and vampyre alike.”

Everywhere he went, he commanded respect, simply by being a good, but tough, leader. I wasn't sure if the people of the Thaician Empire gravitated toward him simply out of a sense of familiarity or if they recognized him as the warrior who had valiantly stood and fought for them against those who would have used them as nothing more than shields.

Kyella hummed in the back of her throat as she turned her attention to me. “Do you think he realizes that the people here see him as a leader?”

“Not yet.” But he soon would, especially if Kyella got her way.

Something told me she would.

“Good morning, Empress.” Turning toward the door of the antechamber we waited in, I spotted Tristan standing with his arms clasped in front of him, head inclined respectfully. There was a determined set to the line of his shoulders, and when he finally glanced up, I saw the glint of possibility in his eyes.

**L**ike Kyella, he seemed to sense the potential of the spaces and people surrounding him. Whatever he'd experienced during his excursion had lit a fire within him, and as we stood, I knew in my gut that she had made the right decision—if she could just get him and the loyal vampyre lords to see her side.

**A**s we walked toward the door, Kyella extended a hand in Tristan's direction. She dropped it on his shoulder, squeezing briefly before offering him a short nod and jerking her head in the direction of the long corridor beyond the door.

t feels different today,” she observed as we moved through the castle. It was subtle, but she was right. Everything felt...

“**I** lighter. Sadness still permeated the atmosphere in places, but the anger had fizzled out somewhere along the way.

“**W**atch them,” Elijah commanded, and while I knew he was indicating to the people bowing their heads to Kyella respectfully, I couldn’t pull my eyes from her instead. Her mouth dropped open slightly, and the way her brows lifted toward her hairline was possibly the cutest fucking thing I’d seen so far today.

“**D**oes it truly surprise you that they respect you?” I asked as she returned several of the nods, a small smile tilting her lips upward. The subtle lift of her shoulders would have been easy to miss if I weren’t paying such close attention to her. As it was, I never seemed to be able to keep my eyes off her. “You’re an Empress, Kyella. You are powerful, and you are *kind*. Do not underestimate your impact. Ever.”

**S**he huffed as we entered the chamber where the meeting would be held, but as she glanced around the space, taking in those gathered, I didn’t miss the way her lips tilted up ever-so-slightly at the corners. There was my darling.

“Good morning!” she called, and silence fell, the full force of the gathered crowd’s attention on Kyella as she offered a small smile. “I know the past few days have been hard—” Her voice was softer, painted in sympathy as she glanced around the space. “I know you have had to say goodbye to not only comrades, but also friends and family as well.”

“I am also aware that many of you were forced to fight under Malakai’s rule,” she continued, hardness creeping into her tone as she spoke of their previous ruler. “I hope that you never fear that something like that will happen again. This is your life and your freedom. No ruler should be able to

determine your future for you, not like that. No ruler should be able to threaten your family like that. Ever.”

I brought all of you here today to discuss the necessity of choosing a new leader. I have called the community leaders from each village outside of the capital as well as their citizens; lords and their estate members; as well as the citizens living here throughout the capital because I want you to have a say in your future. Each of you should have the opportunity to decide how you want to structure your empire moving forward. This is your home, and I want each one of you, human and vampyre alike, to have a say in what happens next.”

“Human? Humans will get a say in what happens next?” A male voice questioned, and I glanced in his direction. He was young and human, and the way his eyebrows shot toward his hairline as his lips puckered in an “o” gave away his shock and awe.

Kyella’s face grew more serious, brows furrowing as she considered the young man. With a heavy sigh, she responded, “Malakai lied to every single one of you, maliciously, when he claimed that humans weren’t equal to vampyres. I didn’t think it was possible to live in a society where both thrived, but the Tridian Empire has shown me how incredibly wrong that perception is. Bringing that same level of equality and peace *here* is essential, which is why you must pick a leader who is able to facilitate that. A leader who can bring this empire into the future, instead of remaining in the pain-filled past.”

“And how do you suggest we do that? We have never chosen a ruler,” a woman called out from the middle of the group.

“We can help you run an election,” Kyella explained, though I knew she had her own opinions of who would make the best leader for the Thaician Empire. Luckily, I think the citizens saw the very same potential that she did.

“I know many of your loved ones and community leaders may have been injured or killed in the war, more so many are dealing with the losses within your villages,” she said,

sympathy lacing her tone as she dropped her chin for a short moment. “The weight of ruling an empire is heavy, so you should elect someone who is willing and eager to serve this empire and take on the responsibility of leading vampyres and humans alike. Being a ruler is not about ruling over people, it is about serving those who have placed their trust in you. Taking the time to choose the right person for that is essential.”

“What do you know of Malakai?”

My head whipped around, searching for the speaker as my hands fisted at my sides. Kyella’s soft, commanding tone eased the anger that burned in my gut at the insolent question. Her head tilted up as she said, “I was his Thrall before I escaped to the Tridian Empire.”

Soft gasps met her exclamation, but she pushed forward, the shadows in her eyes not as dark as they had once been when discussing her past. “But I escaped, and I became stronger. I realized that my past had been tainted with lies. That burden is now on each of you, and a small but meaningful step forward is choosing someone to lead you.”

“The decision will be yours to make, of course,” she said as several people throughout the room nodded. Relief pooled in my gut to see thoughtful looks on most of the faces surrounding us. “Elections take time to organize, and I will be leaving soon to return to the Tridian Empire. We will be leaving forces behind to defend your future until it is stabilized here, but during the interim, I believe we have a candidate who can lead you through these hard times if you are interested.”

“Yes.” A voice filled the space as everyone seemed to agree, looking cautious but curious.

“Commander Tristan,” Kyella called, turning toward her friend and confidant with a reassuring smile, “if you don’t mind, please join me.”

Bafflement filled Tristan’s face, lips turned slightly downward as he stepped forward to stand next to her. His head tilted slightly as tentative smiles met him from around the

room. Kyella offered a bright smile to the group of Thaician citizens.

“You may recognize Commander Tristan from the time he’s spent over the past few days helping with relief efforts. The compassion that he has shown to each and every person he has encountered speaks volumes to his character.”

“Kyella,” Tristan started, voice low as he stared at her, disbelief coloring his features.

“Tristan, like myself,” she said, voice rising with the emotion behind her words, “believed that liberating those under Malakai’s rule was the only option available to us. He chose to come back here with me, despite having escaped the Thaician Empire and Malakai’s tyrannical rule, because he believed in helping this empire. He wanted to free the families and individuals trapped here under Malakai’s rule, as he and his own family once were. Leaving his family in the Tridian Empire, he risked never seeing them again for the chance to free you.”

*Which is one of the many reasons we thought he would be a good leader.*

“This is your choice, however, and Tristan is only one potential candidate. You are choosing someone you can put your trust into for the future of your empire, for the future of your families, and generations yet to come. This is something you should discuss at length—”

“We put our trust in Commander Tristan.” Glancing up, I spotted a large man with his fist closed over his heart, a steady look in his eye as he stared with a look of hope and pride in Tristan’s direction.

“We second that,” another man, this one older and more refined, called from across the way.

“Tristan saved a group of children that were from our community,” a woman said, hands smoothing over the shoulders of a child standing in front of her. “The vampyre soldiers were trying to use them as a distraction by putting them in the line of fire. Commander Tristan saw through the

ruse and saved them. We would be honored to have him as our leader.”

Several more community leaders spoke up, one after another, until the entire group seemed to have come to the same conclusion: Tristan was the man for the job. Shock and overwhelming emotion painted his face, leaving his mouth gaping comically as he shook his head from side to side. His eyes were wide as he stared at Kyella.

She offered him a nod, resting her hand on his shoulder for a short, quiet moment. He murmured something so low that even I could not hear him, and she smiled gently in response. Nodding, she dropped her hand and took a step back, offering him a moment to speak to his crowd of supporters.

He heaved a heavy sigh, though a look of resigned determination knitted his brows together as he considered those gathered before him. His voice was steady and clear as he spoke. “I was born and raised in the Thaician Empire. I found the love of my life and had my daughter here. When I left, it was for their safety. I needed to guarantee their future. I am beyond humbled by the trust you place in me. Honored by it, even, but it is a decision I must make with my family.”

“Of course,” Kyella nodded, turning her attention to the crowd. She offered a bright smile, not at all perturbed by Tristan’s response, before offering, “Until Commander Tristan speaks with his family, we will continue just as we have been, restoring the empire and planning for its future!”

Tristan offered a short nod to the crowd, one that Kyella mirrored, before they stepped in our direction. Though Tristan stood square shouldered and steady, there was an air of overwhelm to him. Reaching out, I punched him lightly on the shoulder.

“These people respect you, Tristan.” Elijah’s voice brokered no argument as he spoke.

Kyella’s voice was soft as she added, “They need you.”

“I feel a calling to help these people,” he admitted, glancing over his shoulder at the hopeful faces staring back at

him. He seemed resigned as he turned to face us. “But I can’t make a decision like this without my family.”

“And when they inevitably support you?” I asked, knowing without a doubt that Bailey and Rina would move the heavens above to be with Tristan wherever, under any circumstances. Their family was a precious thing, something filled with love and respect. Compassion was core to who they were, and I didn’t doubt there was enough of that goodness between them to heal this entire empire given the opportunity.

“I would be honored to be the new emperor of the Thaician Empire.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



## KYELLA

I'd be a liar if I said that the sight of the large bats flying over the Tridian Empire in the distance didn't move me to tears. My fingers curled over the wooden railing of the ship as my lips thinned in an attempt to hold back sob within that threatened to spill past my trembling lips.

I'd never again see Barnabus flying with his friends in the skies, gliding through the air in graceful arcs like there wasn't a worry in the world besides being one with the wind.

A lone tear escaped, trailing down my cheek to drip off the edge of my jaw.

I thought that I had made peace with Barnabus' death, but the truth was that I didn't think I would ever feel at peace with any of the sacrifices or deaths that occurred due to this war. Going into the war, we knew there would be casualties, but I couldn't simply accept that sad fact with a smile on my face. I'd pledged to bring home as many soldiers as possible, but the thought of any family or friend hearing that their loved one wasn't one of the ones lucky enough to come back alive...I was sure the weight of that would press down upon my soul for the rest of time.

My men would tell me the guilt wasn't my burden to bear—but it was.

While I couldn't find peace in their sacrifices, I could at least find it in the knowledge that the next generation wouldn't know the touch of malice and death that came with Malakai's rule. That vile nastiness would simply be left in the stories

passed down from the generations unfortunate enough to have borne witness to his atrocities.

The energy on our ship was frenzied, shouts of excitement as we drew close to the docks filling the air. A mass of citizens awaited us in the harbor, cheering with joy for our return as they waved.

While I understood the excitement from both sides for us to be home, I couldn't stop thinking about the smiles of excitement that would soon turn to cries of anguish.

Most of the fleet hung back as the first wave we'd settled upon docking began their approach. Footsteps sounded behind me, and I was quick to brush my tears away, wanting to appear like I had my shit together.

"The kids are getting quite rambunctious below deck," Tristan mused as he came to stand beside me. "Are you sure you know what you're getting yourself into, taking them in?"

Somehow, he managed to bring up one of the main reasons I had to move forward and focus on the love I had within me to give instead of the sorrow I held deep in my heart.

While I couldn't bring fallen children or lost parents back from death, I *could* offer a home to the children who found themselves without family in the Thaician Empire. As soon as we'd assumed control of the capital, we sent trusted soldiers to each town throughout the empire to ensure that no child was left to fend for themselves after the war.

The children were brought to the capital for us to look after while we attempted to locate any of their family as well. While there was thankfully an abundant number of beautiful reunions, there were still a dozen children who had no one left and no home to return to.

"I'm glad to hear that their spirits have lifted," I answered, a genuine smile tugging my lips up. "I just hope that we're able to provide them with everything they deserve. I know we can't replace their families, but I do hope they always know that they won't be without love."

Taking the children as our wards wouldn't be easy—I would be a fool to think otherwise.

Tristan's elbow knocked into my own. "Raising a child is like jumping out of a certain window. You don't know how you're going to survive it, but if you have faith, there's something beautiful waiting for you at the bottom."

A laugh bubbled out of me as I threw my head back at his joke. "That was a horrible comparison," I rebutted, shaking my head with a smile. "But I do appreciate the sentiment. Though, I feel like I still owe you payback for that."

I loved the easy rapport Tristan and I had built together and hoped that my connection to him and his family wouldn't fade if they did decide to take up the helm in the Thaician Empire. They'd all become so dear to my heart, and I didn't want to lose that familial relationship with them.

After losing Myrin and Barnabus, it was more important to me than ever to foster the relationships I had left. We never knew how much time we have left with our loved ones, and I didn't want the ocean between us to dissolve those ties.

The smile fell from my face at the thought, and I took a deep breath before trying to exhale the fears from my body. Tristan tugged me into his side, wrapping an arm over my shoulder before leaning his head on top of mine. I apparently was not doing a good job at hiding my tumultuous emotions, but I was thankful that he was allowing me to feel it all and silently supporting me through it.

Leaning into his warmth, I sighed and accepted that I couldn't control what was to come, but I could hope for the best. "Thank you," I breathed out, as I wrapped my arm around his midsection and squeezed.

"What was it Dakath said to me when I was the one with a somber disposition as we were leaving here?" he mused before pausing, as if thinking the answer over carefully. "You don't need to thank me. We are all a family now—this is what we do for each other."

“Yes,” I agreed with emotion clogging my throat a bit. “We will always be family.”

“Are we missing out on the cuddle puddle?” Dakath called from behind us before forcing himself under Tristan’s other arm and cuddling into his side, making us all laugh.

The light moment was a much-needed lift to my mood, and just as my eyes glanced back toward the shore, I spotted two familiar faces beaming at us and waving.

“Look!” I shouted and pointed before waving back at them with my free hand. “It’s Bailey and Rina!”

Bailey was bouncing Rina on her hip and crying openly.

Instantly, Tristan’s arms fell from us as he waved at his girls, and I heard him clear his throat repeatedly. Glancing up, my heart melted at the sight of tears falling from his eyes.

We were moments away from docking, so I gave him his space, knowing he needed to go to them immediately. Turning back, I reached for Dakath’s hand, and we fell into step, heading toward the middle of the ship where everyone was gathering.

“You okay?” he asked quietly, squeezing my hand in his knowing way.

“I will be,” I answered truthfully, glancing up at him with a soft smile. “Even if it’s not today, one day I’ll be able to stop thinking of all the what-ifs that could have possibly saved more lives.”

His feet came to a halt before he turned to face me. Lifting his free hand to cup my jaw, I immediately leaned into the warmth of his touch and closed my eyes, soaking in his strength and support.

“Ky, I could stand here and tell you that everything will be okay and that one day the shadows tormenting your heart won’t be there anymore,” he breathed out before pressing a kiss to my forehead. The warmth of his breath pressing against my skin sent a shiver down my spine as he continued, “But we both know that isn’t true. What I can promise is that I will

always offer you a safe place to experience those emotions when they become overwhelming.”

His steady reassurance was exactly what I needed to hear, and I found myself nodding before going onto my tiptoes to press my lips to his. Melting into his embrace, we stayed tangled together for a few moments before Elijah and Kolvar pulled our focus.

“Damn, it feels good to be home,” the latter practically sang as he wrapped his arm over my shoulder. The anchor was dropped into place as he held me tight, and I watched as crew members jumped off to tie the ship to the dock.

Without preamble, Tristan jumped over the railing off the ship, running with ease toward Rina and Bailey. He fell to his knees, meeting Bailey as her knees hit the dock as well. Rina wriggled free from her mother’s arms and turned to throw herself into Tristan’s waiting embrace. She was pressed between her parents as Bailey leaned forward, wrapping her arms around them both—my heart ached sweetly at the sight of them family holding each other and crying in relief.

Elijah cleared his throat to my left, and I looked up to find him wiping at his eyes.

“Getting soft on us in your old age?” Kolvar asked, and I lightly ribbed him in jest.

“Don’t make fun of him!” I defended before cuddling up to Elijah’s side, looking up at him as he glared at Kolvar. “I, for one, find it incredibly sexy when a man is in touch with his emotions.”

His eyes dropped to mine as he quirked an eyebrow. “Oh yeah? If that’s the case, then—”

He was cut off by the sound of Rina squealing, “Ky!”

“Go see them,” Elijah suggested, steering me toward the small line to depart the ship. “I’m going to round up our wards from the lower levels to get ready to head into the castle.”

I found myself bouncing in excitement, standing on my tiptoes to give him a quick kiss before he disappeared once more.

“I don’t know if he can handle them all without his eyes blowing out of his face in frustration, so I’m going to help him,” Dakath announced with a laugh as Elijah flicked him off.

“This is going to be a big adjustment for us all,” I mused to Kolvar as we inched closer to the gangplank leading off the boat.

With a deep laugh, he admitted, “It sure is, but honestly, darling, I have trouble picturing a boring and easy life for us anymore. I just don’t think that’ll ever be in the cards for us.”

“I think you may be right,” I agreed before turning to leave the ship.

The second my feet hit the wooden dock, I heard the pounding of little feet running toward me. Turning to face them, I ran the distance between us and scooped Rina up into my arms as she giggled and put her hands on my cheeks like she couldn’t believe I was here.

“Ky! You’re home,” she squealed in delight before glancing behind me and tacking on, “Kol!”

His deep laughter sounded from behind us as he came to my side and gave her a hug. The little girl wrapped her arms tightly around my neck as we made our way to Tristan and Bailey, who were still wrapped in each other’s embrace.

“Thank you, Ky,” Rina chirped, surprising me.

“For what, silly?” I mused back, poking her in the side to make her giggle from the tickling.

Her laughter and smile lit my entire being up, her energy infectious.

Her little hands rested on my cheeks as she squeezed my face and said, “For keeping your promise! Daddy came back.”

Before I could get choked up by the sentiment, Bailey’s voice floated over to us.

“Yes, thank you, Kyella, and I’m so glad to see you again as well.”

Tristan reached out for Rina, and I moved to embrace Bailey.

“It is so good to see you as well, Bailey.”

I wanted to ask her how everything had been here since we left, but a cheer came from the gathered crowd of citizens at the end of the docks. A sea of faces met me when I turned, the crowd seemingly endless for how far away from the dock it stretched.

“Long live the Empress!”

“Long live the Empress!”

“Long live the Empress!”

The chant echoed, and I smiled, holding up a hand for it to stop. A palm rested against my back, and I glanced back to see that Kolvar and Elijah had joined us with the children we’d vowed to help find lives full of love and safety in our empire.

Some were bursting with excitement as they took in their new home and all those who had gathered, but a few of them hid behind Elijah’s large frame and glanced around nervously.

Giving them all encouraging smiles as Elijah dropped to his knees to hug them, I turned back to the silent crowd, speaking loudly enough for my voice to carry.

“Thank you for the warm greeting! While it is a wonderful feeling to be home, our return comes with the knowledge that not everyone made it home with us. We knew the risk of going into this war, but it doesn’t make the loss of lives any easier.”

A small hand gripped at my pants, and I looked down to find a young boy with dimples, deep blue eyes, and curly blonde hair trembling at my side. If I recalled correctly, his name was Landon. Bending to scoop him up onto my hip, I held him to my chest as he burrowed against my neck, all but hiding in my hair.

My heart constricted at the movement as I continued, “There has been much loss on both sides, leaving broken families in the war’s wake. With our return, we bring with us humans and vampyres, young and old alike, from the Thaician

Empire. They wished to start anew and find a new home here. I know I have already asked so much of you all, but I have one last request.”

Unable to hold back the waves of emotion crashing into me, I choked out my words.

“Can you find it in your hearts to welcome our new citizens? The lives they have lived are a far cry from the ones we know here. Some will be terrified, while others may instantly feel at home, but I ask that you all give them grace as we all learn to navigate this new era of freedom and peace between our two empires.”

Silence ensued for a few moments before someone yelled, “Welcome, new friends!”

And with those three words, I could no longer hold back the tears that fell from my eyes as the crowd went wild once more, cheering and welcoming the new citizens arriving on our shore.

At this moment, I knew all the heartache and pain had been worth it.

Never again would any empire know such a ruthless rule, only a ruthless love.



# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

## KYELLA

The morning breeze brushed across my bare skin, and a small smile tugged at my lips. *We were home*, and there was no better feeling than waking up with that thought pulsing through my system.

Blinking away the sleep from my eyes, I sighed with content at the feeling of Kolvar's warm chest resting beneath my cheek. Elijah's lean, muscled arm wrapped around me from behind, pulling me toward him and pressing my ass against his hard cock. Rolling my hips, I smiled as Elijah rumbled behind me with the realization that I was awake and ready to play. I wiggled between the two of them, trying to work my way up Kolvar's frame to kiss him.

The man in question opened his eyes to look down at me, smiling wickedly as he pressed, his hard length between us. I had to fight to resist the urge to wrap my hand around it, wanting to kiss him first.

When someone squeezed my hand, my eyes opened, watching as my hand was dragged over Kolvar's side. Dakath was propped up behind the bigger man, looking at me with a salacious smile.

"Kyella," he rumbled. "You should be careful."

"And why is that?" I asked, trying to keep my tone light and curious, but I failed miserably. My words came out breathy and high pitched.

Elijah groaned against my neck, hand tightening on my hip as I shifted to see Dakath better. Dakath's gaze darkened as he

flashed a dark smile in my direction. “Because you’re going to end up getting fucked if you aren’t.”

I bit my lip to keep from smirking at him. His idea of an *or else* was my idea of a *yes, please*.

When Elijah’s hand slid over my breast, a shiver broke over my skin. and a small, breathy moan escaped my lips. Kolvar capitalized on my distraction, tipping my chin up and kissing me deeply until I felt my core roiling with heat. I didn’t hesitate to wrap my hand around his cock, and he bit my lip with a punishing force. The taste of my blood on his lips as our tongues tangled only caused me to grow wetter.

“Fuck, I can smell your blood from here,” Dakath groaned, his hand running up the side of my leg before leaning forward fully, pushing his way between me and Kolvar.

Kolvar pulled back as Dakath gripped my jaw and kissed me hard, his tongue darting out to lick the blood off my lip. “You taste so good,” Kolvar groaned, clearly still tasting me himself.

Suddenly, Elijah’s hand impatiently raised the night shirt I wore, and I whimpered as my wet center was fully exposed to him. His fingers slid over my ass and ran across my slit, and the rough, hot sensation of his fingers against me pulled a whine of need from my lips. Kolvar’s cock pulsed in my hand, and I pushed away the blanket, thrilled to find him naked.

Dakath’s fingers trailed along the side of my body as he kissed me again, and my thighs pressed together. My pussy squeezed around Elijah’s fingers, pleasure building within me in small waves. I needed more, though—the need to feel all of them pulsed through me.

“Please,” I whimpered as I pulled my lips away from Dakath’s kiss, tilting my head back to look at Elijah. His cock was so damn close to being inside of me, and he chose to tease me instead of giving us each the pleasure we craved.

He pumped his fingers in and out of me as I stroked Kolvar’s cock to the same rhythm. Dakath’s hand teased my nipple, pinching and plucking the sensitive bud as my body

shook with need. My entire system was keyed up for the pleasure I knew only they could bring me.

“Please, what?” Dakath demanded, pulling my attention back toward his serious expression.

“Please, fuck me,” I moaned as Elijah bit down lightly on my shoulder causing my eyelids to flutter.

“Good girl,” Dakath growled out, suddenly lifting me from between them. “Look at how you soaked Elijah’s fingers.”

My gaze darted to where the man was licking his fingers, and I shivered, loving the way he seemed to savor the moment. I moaned, suddenly distracted, as Dakath positioned me sitting so I was on his lap but completely on display for the others. His fingers slid along my body, toying with my clit as his other hand rose to my breast. His cock was bare and pressed against my ass, and all I would need to do was lift myself up before sliding down on him. I grinded my ass back against him instead.

Kolvar groaned as he watched us, leaning against the headboard and stroking his cock as Elijah sprung forward suddenly and gripped my throat, pressing a hard kiss to my lips.

“Are you going to fuck him, love?”

“Yes,” I whimpered, raising my hips until I felt Dakath’s cock press against my entrance.

He didn’t hesitate for a single beat, and I cried out as he grabbed my hips and slammed me down onto him, taking his full length in one hard stroke. Pleasure exploded from my center outward, and I whimpered his name against Elijah’s lips. When Kolvar’s fingers began to roll my clit, the tightness from Dakath’s sudden entrance diminished, allowing me to roll my hips and take in his full length.

As I rode him, I could feel myself growing closer and closer to the edge of a thunderous climax; and when his lips ran against my throat before sinking his fangs into the sensitive skin there, I exploded. Euphoric pleasure slammed into me as I cried out his name.

He growled my name against my neck, not having drank from me but instead marking me with his bite, as he slammed up into me one last time. His cock pulsed within me as he filled me with his release. Tilting my head back, I kissed him, losing myself to the heady sensation of release until I was tugged forward and on top of Kolvar. My legs slid on either side of him as his massive hands ran over my waist. He groaned as he looked over me, my pussy resting right above his cock.

“You are so fucking beautiful, darling,” he hissed as I slid down his massive length, my legs widening to accommodate for his size.

When he began to thrust up into me, his pace becoming faster and far wilder, I loudly groaned my pleasure. Elijah cursed softly under his breath as he moved behind me. His hand grazed across my ass, and my eyes fell closed with the sensation. I could feel my body tensing to come again, almost as if I were on demand for these men.

Elijah stroked his length against my ass, keeping a hold on my waist as Kolvar thrust into me with driving force. Dakath appeared next to me, his fingers sliding between Kolvar and I to rub my clit, the friction causing me to grip Kolvar’s chest hard enough my nails nearly broke his skin.

“Fuck, I’m going to come,” Kolvar hissed.

“Come inside me,” I demanded as he groaned, pulling me down on him. I grinded my pelvis against his, gasping as he came inside of me, his climax triggering my own. I swear it felt like these men were going to split me in half with how they filled me.

“You look so fucking gorgeous,” Elijah groaned. “I can’t wait to get inside of you.”

“Then do it,” I teased, offering him a heated look. I was sure to be sore the next day, but I *needed* to have all three of them in me to feel complete.

When Kolvar pulled out, I collapsed against him, pressing my chest to his to catch my breath. Kissing the man

underneath me, I push to my knees, offering myself to Elijah. Kolvar's hands on my waist held me steady as Elijah ran his cock against my pussy. When he began to slide into me, I was glad Kolvar was holding me because I nearly went limp with pleasure.

As Elijah began to thrust into me, a heated flush broke over my skin as the other two teased my body. The entirety of my being felt on edge, as if I was constantly on the cliff of climaxing. Elijah's pace was reckless, hard, and fast, and I knew the cum from the other two made it even easier to thrust in and out of me.

I cried out their names, though my loud, breathy moans overtook their names as another orgasm barreled into me, sending me reeling. Elijah lost any semblance of control he was holding onto when I tightened around him, and he roared my name as he filled me.

Exhilarated. Sated. Sleepy. Happy. I collapsed against Kolvar's chest, the haze of pleasure wrapping me up entirely.

"That was one way to start the day," I murmured against Kolvar's chest.

Dakath groaned in agreement as I rolled over into the sheets. Elijah sat back, adjusting himself before rolling out of bed, likely grabbing something to clean up with. I was far too lazy to get up just yet, so I snuggled into the comfort of the sheets with a happy sigh.

"I love you all so damn much," I hummed, keeping my eyes closed.

"We love you too," Kolvar said as he pressed a kiss to the side of my head as he pulled a blanket over himself. The other two echoed the sentiment as I pulled more blankets around me. I knew I would need to clean up, but just for the moment, I wanted to lay there and enjoy the breeze coming through the window.

"I missed this place," I admitted, turning onto my stomach as I looked over each of them. Elijah sat on the edge of the bed, looking toward the window with a nod.

“It’s amazing here,” Kolvar said as he stifled a yawn.

“It’s the place, but it’s also the people,” I explained before tilting my head in thought. “Well, most of them...Did we ever get answers from the lord we suspected of treason?”

Dakath chuckled darkly. “The bastard admitted to being the traitor in the same breath that he asked for mercy.”

I put my head down in thought, staring at the bed sheets. “Well, that’s something, I suppose.” After another moment of quiet thought, I asked, “What do you think we should do?”

Elijah offered me a pensive look as I considered him. With a heavy sigh, he answered, “I would say we show him the mercy of allowing him to retain his head, but we should remove him from his lands and title. Perhaps we should place him in a small village. It would do him some good to be humbled. If he raises any cause for concern beyond that, we can reevaluate then. I just know I want him far away from our life here in the capital.”

I nodded in agreement. “It is more than he deserves, but I do think that’s a good idea. Mercy is not an easy thing to grant to him, but a person who cannot forgive, even the most egregious sins, is nothing more than a tyrant. We will keep him far, far away from our life and any seat of power.”

“Our life,” Dakath drew out, looking amused as he chewed over Elijah’s words. “A life that seems to include children now.”

I sat up, drawing the blankets with me to keep me warm. “It does, doesn’t it?”

Kolvar let out a small, amused sound. “I think it’s incredible. I’ve always wanted children, so the idea of helping so many find homes...I think that’s great.”

And I knew he was hoping—and I was hoping as well—that some would perhaps decide to stay with us.

“You know,” I started, brow dipping as I considered each man in turn. “It’s possible that when Tristan and Bailey go back to the Thaician Empire, they will find even more children, especially now that things will be slightly more

settled. We could offer for those children to come here if they wanted to. Offer them a fresh start.”

“I think that’s a great idea,” Elijah agreed. “Though, we need to ensure that we are diligent when finding them homes.”

“Or they could stay here,” I pointed out.

We’d give them a home full of warmth, happiness, and support, always.

Elijah offered me a smile. “Yes, or they could stay here with us. Either way, I think we need to really recognize first if they want to stay or go, and then if we are the right fit for them. I want to ensure we are as supportive as possible through this entire process. Our very first priority is finding welcoming and loving homes for them, whether that’s ours or someone else’s.”

“Of course,” Dakath agreed.

“As much as I would love to adopt all of them,” Kolvar offered a small grin, “I know that some of them are going to find amazing families elsewhere. Families that can give them each what they need, especially since we don’t know what they’ve been through.”

“We should invite families and couples to the castle to meet the kids,” I suggested.

“It will give them a good chance of finding the right fit,” Dakath agreed. “Maybe if they hit it off the first time, we can have a few meet ups like that to ensure they are really going to the right place.”

I loved how thoughtful they were being about all of this.

“And if they fit best with us...Well, I think they should stay. Are all of you okay with that idea?”

Elijah grunted, running a hand through his hair looking amused. “Little ones running around? We will never have quiet time again.”

Dakath chuckled at his words.



“Oh yeah, you seemed to really dislike all the laughter and fun they had during all the games you kept organizing for them,” Kolvar drew out, looking amused.

“Plus,” Dakath added. “Who knows, maybe one of them will be as serious as you, then we will have a little Elijah running around.”

“Oh no,” I murmured.

The man in question flashed me a narrowed gaze as I gave him a sassy smile. When I saw Dakath suddenly deflate, looking somewhat confused, I turned my attention to him.

“What’s wrong?” I asked softly.

“I just...I never really allowed myself to even think about becoming a dad before. I didn’t think it was in the cards for me until now, and I’m worried I won’t be a good one. What if I fuck it up?”

I couldn’t deny that the thought of not being a good mother to these children had run through my mind countless times. I’d never had the opportunity to grow up with mine, to know what exactly I was supposed to do in that position.

Those intrusive thoughts had led to a lot of soul searching about my past. I’d had some time alone to mull over everything Lazarus revealed about killing my mother *and* my biological father—that alone was enough to send me reeling. Knowing that he’d allowed me to live with my mother’s best friends, whom I’d thought were my father and aunt, felt like it should have been a lot to wrap my head around. I’d thought it would take time to process and come to terms with the information, but if anything, it only made me feel more love for my dad and aunt for stepping up to care for a child that truly wasn’t theirs by blood.

“You will be an amazing dad, and you won’t be in it alone; but if you need more time to think about it, that’s okay too,” I promised sincerely. “However, if you’re worried that you won’t be a good dad because they aren’t our own and that you didn’t have a father figure to teach you what to do, know that I completely understand how you feel. With everything I know

now, there isn't a doubt in my mind that we have all of the traits that it takes to be good parents. My dad and aunt were the perfect examples of that."

These men had so many strengths that I knew without a doubt that any children we raised would be amazing, but I didn't want them to feel rushed into making such an important decision.

"You and I will just be the fun ones," Kolvar flashed him a smile. "Seriously, Dakath, don't overthink it, those kids already think you're super cool."

"I can be fun," Elijah mumbled as his brow furrowed in deep concentration, making me snort. "Remember, I did plan all the games."

I blinked, swallowing around the nauseous feeling of butterflies swirling in my stomach. "Are we really considering doing this?"

"Becoming parents?" Kolvar yawned again before flashing me a smile.

"I think we are," Dakath murmured with a hint of awe in his tone.

Whatever we decided, I knew we'd be in it together—forever.

Looking out the window, I couldn't help the smile that lit up my face. When I'd been a prisoner in Malakai's castle, I'd never given up my hope for freedom, but never had I dared to picture a life such as this. I hadn't even known it was possible to experience a love like ours.

I was ready to expand that love to all those within our empire as well as any little ones who might choose us.

Closing my eyes, I exhaled deeply, sending my thoughts to the universe.

*Fate, you work in mysterious ways. While I won't ever understand or agree with why we had to lose so many incredible souls to get to this point, thank you. I'll never take a single day for granted.*

# EPILOGUE ONE

## KYELLA, 15 YEARS IN THE FUTURE...

“**M**om!” Landon’s voice echoed through our private quarters, ones that we had expanded over time to make room for our family. Dakath, who was sitting next to me on one of two balcony chairs, chuckled quietly while continuing to read over the plans for today’s journey.

I offered my husband a knowing look before bringing my tea cup to my lips, trying to hide a smile. *We knew this was coming.* Weeks ago, we’d placed bets on how long it would take for Landon to say that he didn’t want to come with us this year—he’d held out until the morning of our travels, which was far longer than any of us expected.

Normally, our son was much more outspoken about what he wanted, which led me to believe he was truly conflicted about what to do, especially since he knew how much we wanted him to come with us this year. Either that or he had spent his time trying to come up with a reason that would go over well with all four of us.

Landon was as stubborn as Elijah, though with more than a hint of Dakath’s broody nature, so I suppose that made a bit more sense.

“We need to at least hear his reasoning,” Dakath mused, and I nodded my agreement.

We did need to listen to him, even if I planned on him coming with us regardless. I didn’t fully understand *why* he didn’t want to go. I understood the thought behind the reason

he always gave us, but I just had a feeling that there was more to it that I could see.

“Out here!” I called out to our son, though I was sure he already knew that.

We sat out here most mornings, enjoying the view of the harbor and the city coming alive in the bright sunlight. This morning was no different, although with our travel plans in place, it was a bit more relaxing than most. The morning had even included some much-needed alone time with Kolvar until he decided to trek to the harbor to triple check our family’s quarters on the ship we would be sailing over the Cursed Divide on.

I hadn’t seen Elijah since very early when he had woken up to go talk to a few of the naval captains who would be traveling with us. While we didn’t require many soldiers, we always took some with us and the small fleet that sailed alongside our ship. The Cursed Divide may have been familiar, but I certainly wouldn’t call it friendly.

“I can’t go.”

I turned in my seat and offered my son a perplexed look as I realized he was far more worked up than I thought, frustration filling his gaze. The boy who had come to us as an orphan in the ruins of war was no more. Our son had grown into a man nearly as intense as his fathers. More than any of his siblings, he had also taken an interest in military strategy and leadership. At only twenty-two, he was already working his way up through the ranks. He hadn’t needed to, after all he was a prince, but he had told us that he wanted to start from the bottom like everyone else. He wanted to earn his station.

I swear Elijah had nearly cried at his words.

Landon was an amazing young man, but he could stand to lighten up. Which is why he needed to come with us!

“Why?” I asked sincerely.

Once a year, we traveled to the Thaician Empire to celebrate our peace and unity with a feast and ball. It was something all our kids looked forward to, until about five

years ago when Landon had stopped attending, saying that he wanted to focus on learning about leading and ruling and locking himself away for hours with his tutors.

At first, I hadn't pushed it because I worried he stopped attending due to the fact that he was returning to a place that had only ever been filled with war and pain for him. Year after year, he insisted that wasn't the case. He claimed he was only seven at the time, so he barely remembered what happened. I'd been left questioning *why* ever since. I hoped to finally get my answer this year.

"I need to ensure our empire is protected and taken care of in your absence," he intoned, seriousness evident in the set of his jaw. "Even a short amount of time is long enough to leave us vulnerable for something to happen."

I had no idea what he was concerned about happening considering how peaceful our empire was, but I didn't want to discount his concern.

"You know we have an entire system in place," I pointed out. "We have several advisors, military leaders, and appointed citizens as delegates. Our empire could run itself if needed."

"What if there's an attack?"

I smiled softly. "Who is going to attack us? The only other empire is the one we are friendly with. I promise you there is nothing to worry about."

"I can't go." He ground out, running a hand over his face.

Dakath offered him a knowing look, his attention fully on our conversation even as he stared out over our beloved city. "Don't use that tone with your mother."

Our son offered a grunt, his ears turning red as he ran his hand over the back of his neck. "Sorry, Mom."

Dropping my cup of tea on the small table between my seat and Dakath's, I reached out to squeeze Landon's hand. "I know you're nervous, though I'm not sure why—"

"I'm not nervous."

“Landon, honey, you are the heir of this empire, the next leader of the Tridian Empire. If you want to be successful in your role, you will do so by gaining experience. You must understand and be part of the political landscape of both empires.”

While he was the oldest of our adopted children, his age wasn't the sole reason he was the heir to the Tridian throne. If any of the others had shown interest, we would have figured something out, but I think everyone could tell that leadership was Landon's calling.

“I already know Tristan and Bailey.”

“You know them as your aunt and uncle,” I reminded him softly as I leaned forward in my seat, fixing him with a serious stare. “You do not know them as leaders. You need to know how to work with them in that capacity as well.”

“Plus,” Dakath added from beside me as his head spun in our son's direction, “Rina is only two years younger than you, so it's not as if you won't have anyone to talk to.”

Landon's eyes darkened at the mention of her name, piquing my interest as Dakath chuckled under his breath. “Rina is a child.”

“Pretty sure she's twenty, like your father said. Five years ago, she may have seemed like a child to you, but she isn't anymore.”

Dakath nodded before adding, “When the time comes for her to get married, you will need to attend as a sign of respect. Surely, you want it to be on friendly terms—” Landon scoffed, throwing an incredulous look in Dakath's direction. “*What?*” Dakath asked, amusement tinging his tone—after so long with him, I could tell that he was up to something, though I couldn't quite tell what.

“*Married?*” Landon questioned, disgust evident in the way his nose curled. A second later, his jaw clenched, eyes narrowing as he considered Dakath. “Is Rina getting married?”

“I meant it hypothetically,” Dakath drew out, offering him an arched brow. “Why? Does that bother you?”

“She’s far too young to marry,” Landon growled.

“Not much younger than you,” I reminded him again. “Plus, twenty is a fine age to marry—no doubt this year’s ball will be filled with suitors.” If Tristan didn’t kill all of them. If I thought he’d been protective with Rina before, it was nothing compared to now. I agreed with Dakath regarding the possibility of marriage, but I knew a wedding was most likely *far* in the future.

Landon shook his head, staring out at the city below before grunting. “Fine. *Fine*. I’m coming with—when do we leave?”

“Oh good,” I said, offering a big smile. I wouldn’t hide my relief and excitement over him joining us—I hated the idea of leaving any of our children at home.

“Ten minutes,” Dakath offered.

He turned sharply, storming from the room as I picked up my cup of tea and offered my husband a look. “What was all that?”

“He likes Rina—it seems that it might go beyond simply just liking her, probably more than likes,” Dakath explained, and my eyes widened with the realization. “I think he has for a while, and it probably scared him when he first realized it, so he just decided to stay away from her.”

“For five years,” I whistled, shaking my head. “That’s crazy.”

“I have no idea if she’ll marry anytime soon, probably not with how protective Tristan is,” Dakath chuckled. “But at least now we will have all of the children with us.”

I nodded in agreement, taking another sip of tea as I thought of the children who had completed our family. Out of the twelve orphans who had been brought over the Cursed Divide, three of them had stayed with us—including Landon. Then when Tristan had returned to the Thaician Empire, four more had been brought back to us. Unlike the first group, none of them bonded to other families, instead wanting to stay with us and our growing family.



Adjusting to life with seven children hadn't been easy, especially with never having been a parent before, but now that they were all on their way to being adults, I couldn't be happier or prouder. I loved having a full castle, and these children had been an absolute blessing.

"We need to make sure the others are ready," I pointed out, realizing it was nearly time to leave. "Penelope is probably still sleeping."

Penelope was our second oldest, nearly twenty-one, and while she was a complete badass with combat, she *loved* her sleep and was almost always notoriously late. It was truly hilarious watching her dads try to wake her, especially when she was younger and still growing. More than once, she had fallen asleep at her desk with her tutor.

"Stella woke her," Elijah announced as he appeared in the doorway. Stella, much like Kolvar, was full of energy and sunshine.

"Good," I mused as Elijah, crouched in front of me, kissing the top of my hand with a gentle touch. "Landon has decided to accompany us, by the way."

"Really?" He asked with an arched brow.

Dakath smirked. "I'm fairly certain he likes Rina, and I casually mentioned that she would probably be finding a suitor at this ball, and now he's miraculously able to join us."

Elijah chuckled, his smile pulling my own to the surface before my attention was snagged by two large forms striding past our door. Julian and James were seventeen and absolute trouble. The way they spoke in hushed tones, glancing to make sure no one was in earshot told me that they were planning something that would no doubt piss Elijah off for the ball. Our youngest two were always getting in trouble, much to Elijah's chagrin.

Pouring one more cup of tea, I nearly dropped the pot as a screech of frustration sounded nearby. Out of nowhere, Rose appeared in the door, cheeks rosy and lips pinched as she breathed heavily. "Emilia won't give me back my overcoat."

“Wear one of the others?” Dakath suggested, looking puzzled.

Rose offered me a pleading look, knowing her fathers wouldn't understand. I barely understood, but then again, Emilia was always messing with Rose.

The redhead in question appeared behind Rose, offering me a delighted smile as she adjusted her plum-colored jacket, adding. “Come on, it looks way better on me—”

“*You,*” Rose hissed, turning as Emilia squeaked and sprinted away, being chased by her blonde-headed sister. I sighed happily, as I looked at Elijah and Dakath.

“I'm going to assume they will figure that out,” I mused as my two men shared a conspiratorial laugh. With a deep, contented sigh, I said “After I finish this cup of tea, I'll be good to head toward the dock. Kolvar is already down there.”

“We will make sure all of the children are ready,” Elijah said as he squeezed my knees gently. He dropped a quick kiss on my lips before standing and striding out.

Dakath approached, wrapped an arm around my waist, brushing our noses against one another as he laid a teasing kiss on my lips before going as well. I sat back down and smiled, wondering how I was blessed enough that this was truly my life.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted one of Barnabus' bat brethren arcing through the bright blue sky, disappearing as quickly as they had appeared. I loved that they were still around, constantly reminding me of my friend—one who had been a fundamental element in making this future possible.

Finishing my tea and slipping on my own coat, I looked out over my empire. In fifteen years, we had only grown and developed more and more. The commerce-centered capital had expanded, and we had placed more trading markets between small villages to ensure people could sell their goods without always having to travel so far. I was so incredibly proud of everything we had been able to accomplish in such a short period of time.

More than that, I was so incredibly proud of how far we'd come and the acceptance that the Tridian Empire had shown to those joining us from the Thaician Empire. With Bailey and Tristan ruling the empire on the other side of the Cursed Divide, these lands were experiencing a sense of unity like never before.

I had to wonder what Myrin would think of this—of the two empires being unified in creating a better world. *I hoped she would be proud.*

# EPILOGUE TWO

## RINA, TWO DAYS LATER...

“**J**ust suck in a little bit more.”

I inhaled sharply, appeasing the seamstress as my mother shook her head, the motion visible just outside of my line of peripheral vision. I smiled, knowing she didn't understand why I insisted on wearing this dress. Despite the effort required to get into the corset, I knew the result would make the lack of air worth it. I had worked for half the year with the seamstress to create the perfect dress for this event, so I would be wearing it.

Each year, I made it a priority to wear a more unique dress than the year prior—the art of fashion becoming one that I was deeply interested in. Sure, I wasn't a seamstress, but I loved the process of drawing my creations all the same.

As we adjusted the dress, finishing the last few laces, I squealed in satisfaction as I looked myself over. *This*. This was better than I could have even imagined!

This dress fit me like a glove, highlighting each one of my curves while maintaining elegance and decorum. The rose-colored dress was layered in satin and chiffon and looked ethereal, almost unreal even. It was the perfect dress for this time of year and paired with the delicately curled style I wore my hair in, the entire look was stunning.

“Sweetheart,” my mom started up as she held out a necklace with a rose-colored gem on it to me. I offered my palm, and as she gently curled my fingers around the necklace, she continued, “That looks so uncomfortable.”

“It’s not,” I promised her, taking in her glowing image of beauty itself. I swear she hadn’t aged. I mean, I knew she hadn’t physically aged—she had been turned into a vampyre around my tenth birthday—but even when she was a human, there had been an innate grace and beauty she had carried with her. I hoped that one day I would be able to achieve that.

“We made sure to leave enough room for her to move and dance,” Daniella, the seamstress, insisted. “The fit of the gown appears tighter because of the corset. Really, it’s just about making sure the material all sits in the right places on her body so she’s comfortable.”

I stepped back, twirling as I took in the dress. It looked elegant, edged with just a little sexiness, and I felt *different* than I normally did. At twenty years old, I was no longer a child, and I couldn’t allow myself to be looked at or treated as such, even if I was the princess of the Thaician Empire. I *wanted* to be looked at tonight, and this gown was sure to pull attention in my direction.

“Who knows who will be at the ball tonight, Mom. I have to look great.”

Because I was finally allowed to date!

“First of all, you are always beautiful,” my mom offered with a soft smile, “even in pajamas. But beyond that, you’re going to kill your father with that talk. When he said you could start dating, I don’t think he expected you to start dating the same next week he uttered the words.”

Daniella put the finishing touches on the gown, declaring me ready to go, so I stepped off the pedestal, and allowed my mother to fix the necklace around my neck. The smile that pulled my lips up at the corner threatened to split my face in half with its ferocity as I hooked arms with my mother. “All of these rules, Mom. Seriously, first it’s *no dating until you’re old enough*, then it’s *no turning into a vampyre until you’re twenty-five...*”

“A rule that is completely reasonable,” she offered me with a knowing smile. “It’s the same rules that the Tridian Empire follows—five years more is no time at all.”

Oh, I would disagree. The past five years, in some ways, felt impossibly long. Though for a far different reason.

Besides, I knew she was right—I just didn't like it. I had so much I wanted to do in my life, far more than I could accomplish in a human life span. Not to mention, I wanted hundreds of years with my family. It wasn't a question of *if* I wanted to become a vampyre—merely *when*.

“Speaking of the Tridian Empire,” I started as we continued to walk arm-in-arm, pushing down the butterflies threatening to turn my stomach. “When do they arrive?”

I missed Aunt Kyella so incredibly much, and I couldn't wait to see her. Our families tried to see one another every six months, but we had missed our last trip to the Tridian Empire because of a crop shortage that my father hadn't felt right leaving his people in while he was on vacation. He worked so hard, sometimes I worried the stress he subjected himself to would shave years off his life expectancy, despite being a vampyre.

“I imagine soon, dear.” My mom and I made our way down a large grand staircase. I could already hear music playing, and while I hadn't had a chance to look at the harbor yet, I could only assume that they had arrived if the castle workers felt they could begin festivities.

A brief, sad pang hit my heart. I was looking forward to seeing Aunt Kyella and her family, but I knew disappointment awaited me at the bottom of the stairs.

It had been five years since I had seen Landon since I had even been in the same room as him. Because even when we had visited the Tridian Empire over the past several years, he had conveniently been away on *hunting trips* or *military exercises*. His parents insisted it was poor scheduling, that he was too focused on learning more about ruling the empire to travel. It felt like more than that, though.

The last time I saw Landon, he seemed different. I didn't know how else to describe it, but something had changed between us. The way he looked at me had almost seemed... pained? But when I tried to talk to him, something should have

been normal since we were close friends growing up, he took any and every excuse to get away from me. After five years, I couldn't help but take his affront personally, and it hurt deeply.

“There they are!” My dad's voice filled the space as we got to the bottom of the staircase, and I smiled as he offered my mom a kiss to the lips before smiling down at me. “You are right on time—they are just disembarking the ship.”

I smiled in anticipation. Despite the awkwardness with Landon, his six siblings were here, and I was still very excited to see them. Following my parents into the ballroom, I was taken aback by the eyes I felt following my every move. Citizens of our empire greeted us as we strolled through the room, and we stopped every few feet to share words of warmth with them in return.

The space was decorated in the muted pastels of spring, with the windows open wide, allowing a fresh breeze to circle through the space. The marble floors were covered in petals, and light, happy music played through the space, complementing the quiet, happy murmur of the gathered crowd.

It was a great representation of what this place was like now, which, according to my mom, was a far cry from what it had been like before.

A year after my father had taken over, the castle had been rehabbed completely, removing any trace of the vile man who had ruled before my dad, hurting Kyella and this empire so badly. While I had never gotten the full details, it was clear from the way my parents discussed the past that it was nothing but bad.

“I can't wait to see them all,” I said, pushing the dark thoughts away when we finally reached the front of the throne room, where three large chairs were seated, one slightly smaller than the others. I stood next to my parents as the doorway of the room cleared, and we waited for the royals from the Tridian Empire to be announced. My stomach fluttered with excitement. I knew it would be any minute now.



“I’m sure they are excited to see you as well,” my dad said as he smiled at me warmly. “Plus, now I have your uncles here to help me with this pesky suitor problem.”

“Suitors?” I arched a brow as my mom stifled a laugh.

“Your father has been contacted—”

“Bothered,” he grunted, “*bothered*, by several families with proposals of marriage. As if any of their idiotic sons would ever be good enough for my daughter. I would respect a man more for coming in and asking me himself than insisting on these stupid formalities.”

I felt my mouth drop open in shock. What did he mean *suitors*? “What happened to freakin’ dating? These people just want to get married? That’s ridiculous.”

“I’m so glad you agree—I’ll reject them all,” my dad offered cheerfully, a big smile stretching over his face as my mom shook her head and laughed.

I stared at them with open-mouthed shock for a moment, blinking owlishly before shaking my head and turning my gaze back out at the room. Was that...was that still a thing? All the girls in the castle I knew, even from lords’ families, dated the men they were interested in. I knew my parents would never just marry me off, but was that what others expected of me? An arranged marriage for what...Power, wealth, and standing?

They were certainly setting themselves up for disappointment. I would *never*:

Suddenly, horns sounded, pulling my attention from my dour thoughts and toward a man dressed in the ceremonial attire of the Tridian Empire who stood by the door to the throne room. He stepped dramatically to the side, flourishing his arms.

“Announcing the Empress of the Tridian Empire and her three consorts!” he said loudly, and the room broke into polite applause.

As Kyella and her family stepped forward, I didn’t allow myself even a moment to consider royal decorum. Instead, I

walked right down the stairs and wrapped my arms around Aunt Kyella, pulling her toward me in the biggest hug imaginable.

She laughed and hugged me back as my parents joined the large group, conversation breaking out immediately. When I pulled back from Kyella, I offered her a big smile, “You’re all here. Oh, I’m so happy to see you!”

“Yes, all of us,” she assured me, eyes sparkling with mischief as she turned toward my mom. “Bailey! It’s been so long.”

Ducking under her arm as she reached for my mother, I hugged each of their kids, greeting them with equal levels of excitement, but Kyella’s words stuck to me. *All* of us. Clearly it wasn’t all of them...because Landon wouldn’t be here.

“Let’s get a drink!” Stella grabbed my hand as I nodded eagerly, breaking away from the large crowd.

“I adore your dress,” I said, loving how the sunflower color looked against her complexion. Her dark, coiled hair was piled on top of her head and decorated with daisies. It was a gorgeous look.

“You,” she pointed at my dress as we approached the long table where both wine and blood were being served, “should win an award or something for your clothes—they are exquisite.”

Shaking my head with an amused smile, I wrapped my arm around her waist and pulled her into a side hug. Stella was happiness and cheer personified. I couldn’t be any gladder to have my friend here with me after all this time. “I’m seriously so glad you’re here, I’ve missed you,” I told her, sincerity lacing my tone. “Do you guys plan to stay for a few days?”

“Oh yes, especially since Landon came with us this year. My parents won’t be in as much of a rush to get back with all of us here.”

“Landon came with...” I drew out in confusion, craning my neck around the space to catch a glance of him.

“He’s *checking* something with the ship’s captain,” Penelope said as she appeared out of nowhere, rolling her eyes. “So we came along without him. I swear, he gets odder by the year, Rina. You should be glad that he hasn’t been around.”

I swallowed, offering a small laugh. The truth was, I had never considered Landon odd—I’d considered him almost the exact opposite. I’d always felt drawn to his energy and the way our easy friendship lit my heart up.

“I’m grabbing a drink, and then we are dancing,” Penelope tossed out, pointing at me with sass in the way she popped her hip.

After getting drinks, we moved onto the dance floor. Usually, the dancing picked up after dinner, but there were already quite a few people on the floor. At first, we were just dancing with one another, but we were soon approached by several men our age. A fact that both Penelope and Stella loved. I wouldn’t lie, I liked being asked to dance, but something about it felt off knowing that my father had already received marriage proposals.

Were they even interested in me, or were they simply interested in my title? Had their fathers submitted proposals to mine?

As I danced with the first two men, their names going in one ear and out the other, I couldn’t shake the feeling of eyes on me. I knew I was having a hard time ignoring the fact that Landon was here in our empire, but I knew he wouldn’t come inside. If his parents had forced him to accompany them on this trip, he would probably stay on the ship the entire time.

After four dance partners, with dinner quickly approaching, I realized that I just needed to sit down. I was far too distracted to carry on a conversation. *I didn’t even know what we were talking about!*

“Cows,” the man chuckled awkwardly as he spun me under his arm. I winced realizing I had spoken aloud. He wrapped his arm around me, but when I looked up at him, I felt a surge of guilt. Yeah, I was the worst dance partner ever.

“I’m terrible company, I’m sorry. But I’m not feeling up for dancing—”

“One more?” He looked upset at the thought of letting me go.

“No.” The deep voice caused my feet to still for a moment before I spun sharply, spotting Landon approaching us. People naturally cleared out of his way as he stormed across the room, and I couldn’t blame them. Holy cow, he was huge now! I hardly recognized this man in front of me. The formal wear he wore fitted his form perfectly, and the way his dark blue eyes ran over me before narrowing menacingly on the man’s hand on my waist had my breath hitching.

“What?” The man’s grip tightened on me, and I fought the urge to squirm out of his hold.

“I said no,” he responded coolly as he closed the last of the distance between us. In a move I didn’t even understand, let alone track, he had me in his arms. I melted against him, staring up at his gorgeous face as he kept his gaze narrowed on my previous dance partner.

“We were still dancing,” the boy behind me insisted.

“No, you’re done here. Rina is not yours to dance with,” Landon said, his tone suddenly steeped in darkness as his arm wrapped around me possessively. My knees felt weak, and the heat of a flush crawled up my neck and onto my cheeks.

The man sputtered but took a step back, brows furrowing before he turned and walked away. Landon’s gaze moved down to mine, eyes filled with an intensity that hadn’t been there five years ago. I blinked up at him, realizing I had no idea what to say after all this time...

“Who should I be dancing with, if not him?” There were so many other questions swirling through my head, but somehow, this was the one that really stood out.

“Me, Princess—it will only be me now.”

**Turn the page for chapter one from two Dark Imaginarium  
books by the same authors:**

**Bite of Loyalty by R.L. Caulder & Blitz by M. Sinclair**

# BITE OF LOYALTY

## ALINA

Letting my hips gyrate to the pulsing bass of the music, my head tipped back as I closed my eyes and soaked in the moment. My body was buzzing with the steady flow of alcohol, making it easy to numb the unwelcome thoughts swirling in my head. I felt as close to the freedom I so desperately wanted as I'd probably ever get right now.

At this moment, I wasn't the sole Van Helsing heir.

I wasn't expected to take over the head of house position to govern all slayers.

I wasn't expected to find a suitable slayer to marry to continue our family legacy.

I was just a twenty-one-year-old girl, celebrating her birthday with friends. I would probably regret taking all those shots tomorrow morning, but that was for future Alina to worry about.

Right now I would focus on enjoying this time with my girls.

There weren't many places in Sanguis to celebrate my birthday at, with slayers owning only a small section of the vampire territory, but when you were a few drinks deep, anywhere could be a party with the right people at your side.

It was easy to sway the bartender to hook up my phone to their speakers so that my favorite playlist boomed through the empty establishment. I was more than thankful that all the slayers our age who were typically out this late were

seemingly at home resting, saving their livers for the “real” birthday party my parents were hosting at our estate tomorrow.

It was a little odd, seeing as slayers were typically the epitome of the human saying “YOLO”—you only live once. They lived each day like it was their last because it very well could be in our line of work. It came with the territory of being the supernatural police of the blood-suckers who couldn’t seem to keep their fangs to themselves and procreated like bunnies in heat.

But I supposed when they were all expected to be in the Van Helsing estate and in front of the leaders of our society, being presented to their daughter, they cared a little bit more about being in tip-top shape. Wouldn’t want to turn up to the “real” party looking disheveled because you partied too late the night before.

Blairily glancing at the clock on the wall, I rolled my eyes. Scratch that—the real party was today, seeing as it was near two a.m. now.

Another hour closer to being tied to a fate I didn’t want. *Yippie.*

An arm slid around my waist, and one of my best friend’s signature cherry blossom perfume wrapped around me. “I love you, Skye,” I mumbled as I enclosed her slight frame in a hug, making her sway to the music in time with me. She let me guide her as she giggled with her face in my chest.

She was fun-sized, and if I could fit her in my pocket and carry around her sunny disposition with me at all times, I totally would. She balanced my more bleak and reserved outlook on life.

“I love tipsy you, babe,” she yelled up at me, face squashed in my tits. “You’re so sweet when you’re like this, and you know I love your face times a million.”

Dropping my cheek to rest on the top of her head, I murmured, “I love you too,” as I squeezed her a little tighter.

I wasn’t one to be openly affectionate, either physically or with my words, so she was really getting the best version of



me.

“I can’t wait for the three of us to be spinster slayers who disappoint our parents for refusing a match.”

Her words were a minor buzzkill, but I tried to hold back the groan at the reminder of all of our fates. *If only being a spinster were a viable option.* I would take it in a heartbeat and even adopt a bunch of cats to complete the lifestyle.

It felt like such an archaic tradition for slayers to be married by twenty-one to ensure our kind lived on. Our population, while not large in comparison to the vampires’ ever-expanding one, was a highly skilled and trained group that was nowhere close to extinction.

And the thought that marriage equaled babies was ridiculous for multiple reasons. One being that not everyone wanted children and shouldn’t be pressured to have them, and two, people can fuck and have kids without marriage.

Complete shocker, I know.

While we were all gifted with the blood running through our veins, the minor drawback was that it was harder to get pregnant for slayer women than typical humans. So the logic of the elders who established our laws was that if they ensured a union at a young age, it would encourage the couple to start trying at a younger age, giving them many fertile years together.

It honestly disgusted me if I thought about it long enough. I was never one of those women who saw myself as a mother. Hell, I couldn’t even picture myself as a girlfriend to anyone right now. When I thought of the future, I imagined myself running point on missions and assisting my parents in leading the slayers. And in my down time, I’d be the really cool aunt to my best friends’ kids if they wanted them. That was enough for me.

Despite my best efforts, a frustrated groan bubbled out of me as I lifted my cheek off of her head. “Don’t remind me.”

I hoped I could bring some change to the archaic slayer traditions once I was head of our house. It was the only

positive part of taking on the role, in my opinion. I didn't care about the reverence or the power, but if it was going to be forced on me, I was going to use it for change.

The only part of the forced matching ceremony that I was thankful for was that we didn't follow the human tradition of the woman being taken in by the man's family and taking his last name. The slayer who was the most powerful would take their new partner into their House, no matter their gender.

I would, at the very least, be able to stay in my home and remain Alina Van Helsing. Nothing could take that from me. It was who I would remain until the day death came to hold me in its gnarled, cold grasp.

"I'm sorry, Alina. You know if I could change this for you, I would in a heartbeat," she answered. Her somber tone matched how my heart felt at its core, despite being in the best company a girl could ask for.

It felt like the end of my freedom was drawing nearer with what the party entailed. Eligible men from each of the Houses would present their hand in marriage to me. If any of them had a fucking spine and didn't bow to my every whim or desire because of who I was, perhaps that would be a welcome idea. If I was to be tied to someone for the rest of my life, I wanted a man who would challenge me if I was wrong. Who would help me grow as a person and bring out the best in me. I knew I was a handful, but as my grandmother once told me, "Never dim your shine for someone who thinks they're going to be burned by your greatness. The right person for you will put on sunglasses and bask in your glow."

Skye pulled back from my arms, her big silver eyes swirling with compassion. "You're going to have to choose one of the potential matches tomorrow, Alina. I know we joke about it, but if you don't decide, your parents will."

And therein lay the true problem. Tomorrow wasn't optional, no matter how many tears I shed. My parents tried to reassure me, saying there had to be at least one slayer I would get along with, and that perhaps it would be a whirlwind romance like their match had been.

My father was quite the bachelor and hadn't wanted to be tied down, but from the moment my mom approached him on his match day, he had eyes for only her. If I didn't see the love they held for each other every day, I would've said that shit only happened in fairy tales or romance books. But still, I was under no misguided notion that everyone could have that same dream ending.

"I think I need another shot," I announced, shaking my head to clear away the depressing thoughts, feeling my buzz beginning to wear off.

Jade sashayed toward us from the bar, returning after having announced she was paying our tab a few minutes ago. She threw her arms around both of our shoulders. "I think it's time to get her royal pain in the ass home."

Narrowing my eyes at my other best friend and letting out a menacing growl, I snapped my teeth at her as if I had vampire fangs, drawing laughs from both of them. Then I sighed heavily, letting some of my resentment bleed into my tone. "But that means I'm closer to going to sleep and waking up to the worst day of my life."

"Okay, Chomper," Jade relented, her bright blue eyes full of sadness. "A couple more songs but no more drinks. Fair?"

They both understood my position, seeing as their own matches were only a few months away. It had been us against the world for so long, and sure we'd had some passing flings here and there, but no one had held our attention for long.

"Fine," I huffed, disentangling myself from the girls who'd been by my side since we were first introduced at school.

Thankfully, slayers started training from a young age. As the only child in the Van Helsing home, I probably would've remained isolated and alone for far too much of my life otherwise. My parents were the youngest couple in our family, and I was doted on subsequently. While I loved my family, I still needed time away with friends.

There were numerous slayer family lines, but the Van Helsing House was the original and therefore ruling House.

With that came a wide berth from the other Houses, supposedly out of respect, but it always felt more like a mixture of fear and resentment to me.

Skye and Jade were the only kids who hadn't kept their distance or whispered about me behind my back on that first day, and we'd been inseparable ever since. I called them my best friends, but at this point, they were more like sisters.

Crossing over to the speakers, I grabbed my phone with the intention of finding one of my favorite songs, to end this night with a bang. But as the screen lit up, dozens of missed calls and text messages greeted me. Jade, Skye, and I had agreed to put our phones on "Do Not Disturb" so that our last hoorah before my doomsday would be uninterrupted.

Alarm bells went off in my head, and I called out sharply, "Guys! Check your phones!"

My mind was foggy from alcohol, struggling to understand the extent of what was happening, but two words stuck out that made all the blood in my body turn ice cold: *vampire attack*.

That sobered me up quickly, a rush of adrenaline replacing any remaining intoxication. Ripping the aux cord out of my phone, I ran toward the exit, heart pounding loudly in my ears. Skye and Jade called my name behind me, begging me to wait, to formulate a plan and meet up with other slayers, but I didn't stop. I couldn't. I had to get home. I had to do something.

How had the vampires broken through our wards? The witches from Carmina had put them up, and my parents paid an exorbitant amount of money each year to have them strengthened and maintained. It should've been tighter than a virgin asshole to get through. Like the veils between the planes of existence, it was set to only allow certain beings through it—with this one tied to slayer DNA.

Tears blurred my vision as I tried to call every family member in my home, screaming into the eerie silence of the night when no one picked up.

“Answer me!” I yelled, sobs choking me as the last ring sounded and my mom’s voicemail picked up again. Throwing my useless fucking phone to the ground, I sliced my nail into the palm of my hand, letting a tiny drop of blood spill as I called my soul sword to me. “*Devorare.*”

As slayers, our soul weapons were the only magic we were able to tap into. The weapons weren’t something we chose—they chose us. We received them in a coming-of-age ceremony where we spilled our blood and recited the ancient slayer code, swearing our fealty to the cause. The magic didn’t find everyone worthy of wielding a soul weapon, though those not chosen remained slayers nonetheless.

Those blessed with a weapon were revered for their skill in battle, with their history recorded for all future holders of their soul weapons to read and learn from. Each weapon could be wielded by only one slayer at a time, but when their life came to an end, it disappeared until it found the next worthy master.

My eyes flicked down to the flaming red sword. It burned brightly in the dark of night, and I worried about my lack of understanding of her. There was no recorded history of a sword with the name *Devour*, so I was flying blind trying to understand what exactly I wielded. I’d only had her for a week, and to say it wasn’t going well was an understatement.

I called to the piece of us that was tethered intrinsically, hoping she would hear my plea.

*Please, lend me your strength, Devorare. I need you now more than ever.*

The wrought iron fence surrounding my home came into view, and the sight of decapitated bodies displayed on it, spikes protruding from their chests and bellies, nearly brought me to my knees. A strangled cry tore from my throat as I passed through the open gate and toward the marble stairs leading into my home. Wrapping my hand around my hilt tightly, my mind cleared a fraction as I let myself fall into the slayer mindset that had been drilled into me since birth.

*Calm yourself. Tumultuous emotions can lead to your death and the deaths of those around you.*

*Focus. You cannot afford to become distracted for even one second, lest you give your enemy the opening they need.*

*Trust in your comrades to handle their part of the mission.*

I slowed as I passed through the once-white front doors, now splattered with blood, scanning the foyer and keeping my breathing light in an effort to calm my racing heart. If any vampires remained, the organ beating loudly in my chest would practically offer them a meal on a silver platter.

The creak of a door sounded on the second floor, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end as a chill crept through my body. Slowly ascending the steps, my body tensed in preparation of an attack, but none came as I reached the top. I swiveled my head around, scanning for any indication of where the sound came from.

“A—Alina...” my mother’s voice called, shattering my focus. I rushed toward the end of the hall, in the direction where the strangled word came from.

“Mom!” I cried as I dropped my sword to the ground, shoving away the splintered door that covered her body. Falling to my knees, I clutched her hand as I bit my bottom lip harshly. My eyes burned as tears fell, unable to hold them at bay as I took in the blood pouring from the gaping wound in her neck. A large chunk had been torn away by fangs, a death sentence for any slayer. We had some enhanced physical ability, with strength and sight topping that list, but we didn’t possess rapid healing capabilities.

My lips trembled as reality sunk in. My mother was seconds away from death, and there was nothing I could do about it.

I couldn’t wrap my brain around how this had happened. Never in the centuries that slayers had occupied Sanguis had an attack like this been successful. How had they been caught off guard? How many vampires had been here? How had we not seen any as they passed through the streets near where we were drinking to reach the houses?

While I had been drinking and feeling sorry for myself, they had been fighting for their lives.

Her inhale of breath was strangled and wet, squelching with the liquid filling her lungs. A deep rattling rose from her chest as she focused on the ceiling and rasped out, “Infected.”

My breathing stopped. Infected with poison or with vampire venom?

I was already shaking my head, trying to deny the second possibility, before she confirmed it with her next words. “Kill me.”

Part of our vow as slayers was that we would never allow one of our kind to be turned. It was a fate worse than death.

“I can’t, Mom,” I choked out. My body shook, and tears dropped onto her face as I leaned over her body, cradling her to my chest. I couldn’t picture a world without her in it.

“You...” she breathed out, her lips next to my ear, “must.”

My sobs of agony were no longer something I could contain as they ripped out of me, echoing through our home.

Her body convulsed in my arms. This was the last chance I had before her heart stopped and the venom changed her. I couldn’t fail her in her last moments—I couldn’t live with that guilt for the rest of my life. Slayers believed if we were changed through vampire venom, our souls would no longer be welcomed into our ancestral resting place.

With a scream of heartbreak, I laid her down and picked up my sword. I stood, placing the tip of my blade between her ribs and lining it up perfectly with her heart. “I love you, Mom,” I said between choked sobs. “I’m sorry.”

Sliding the sword into her chest, I saw the relief fill her eyes before they dulled, life leeching out of them completely.

My mother was dead.

I had driven my sword into her heart.

It was like switching into a cold trance and operating on autopilot. I checked out mentally, incapable of handling the

emotions crashing through me after losing her and all of those I'd seen slain outside.

Pulling my sword from her chest, I realized that if she had been infected, it was likely that more of my family had been as well. I stood no chance against them if they turned and I had to fight them alone.

I had to search our home for any survivors or victims, though. As the new head of the Van Helsing House, this was my duty. If any of them were on the edge, as my mother had been, I had to grant their souls peace in death.

As I looked over my shoulder to begin my search, my mouth opened to scream as three hooded figures stood before me. The closest figure gripped my face harshly enough to make me wince, my teeth drawing blood as they pressed into the insides of my cheeks. The other two figures grabbed my wrists, snapping them and making me cry out in pain as I dropped my sword.

“Dracula sends his regards,” a raspy voice announced before yanking my head to the side and sinking his fangs into my neck.

Searing, white-hot pain blossomed through me for a few agonizing moments until the world went dark.

**[Amazon link: mybook.to/bite1](https://mybook.to/bite1)**



BLITZ

## BEXLEY

*I was so cold.*

I'd never been this cold in my life...at least I didn't think I had. I honestly couldn't remember. My brain felt fuzzy, and everything hurt, right down to my frozen fingertips. As if that wasn't enough, my stomach kept cramping in pain.

I was so hungry. So incredibly hungry. It made the world spin around me as I tried to sort through the pile of discarded food at my feet where I was crouched.

How many days had I been out here alone?

I could only remember the past few hours, so there was really no way to tell. It felt like a long time though. More importantly, why couldn't I remember anything before that? How had I gotten here in the first place? Had someone left me?

I examined my shiny shoes, which laced up my ankles, and the sparkly skirt of my dress that fell to my knees. The material was expensive and looked practically brand new. I didn't think I lived on the streets. At least, not usually. I mean, why else would I be dressed like I was going to a party? I tried to think back to how I even knew that and slammed into a solid wall that caused pain to radiate through my temples.

A whimper slipped through my lips. *It wasn't worth it.* That was the silent whisper that slipped into my head, warning me that it would cause me far more pain to push through my memories than to simply let it go. I wanted to do that, I wanted

to believe that...but there was another part of me that knew this was wrong.

Something about this entire situation felt wrong.

When a cool, wet wind ran over my skin, my stomach made another sound of protest, insisting that we were hungry. Inspecting the food in front of me, I stared at the half-eaten sandwich that someone had thrown out.

*Like you.* Someone had thrown it out like they threw you out.

That painful reminder tugged at a part of me that had my eyes watering. I sniffed, trying to calm myself down as my mouth watered from staring at the piece of food. My hand moved forward to grab it but stopped short. I didn't want to eat this. I knew that. But I also knew I wouldn't be able to focus on figuring out where I was supposed to go, or what had happened, if I couldn't see straight because of hunger.

Before I could touch the sandwich, a loud screech sounded, and I immediately jolted up, looking toward the end of the alleyway. I blinked in confusion, wrapping my arms around myself, noticing a gorgeous black car that now blocked the entrance. I didn't feel panic at the intrusion; something about the vehicle was familiar. I took a hesitant step toward it before the door flew open and revealed a young boy who looked about my age, maybe slightly older. I stood still, not knowing if I should approach him, though something in my head and heart was urging me to do exactly that.

Then he called out, "Bexley? Is that you?"

*Bexley?* Was that my name? I hesitantly took a step toward him but froze as the front door of the car opened to reveal an older man. I looked between the two of them, realizing they looked startlingly similar. Maybe that was the boy's father?

Did I have a father? A mother? My temples pounded in pain, warning me that those thoughts were off-limits.

"Bex?" the boy said again in a softer voice, as if he was worried about scaring me. His voice was nice, welcoming, and almost familiar, echoing through the dirty alleyway.

“I...I don’t know who you are looking for. I don’t know my name,” I admitted softly. The boy was there then, right in front of me faster than the blink of an eye, looking both relieved and panicked. I stared at him, completely shocked to find such intense green eyes looking down at me as his arms wrapped around my own.

“I was so worried.” His voice was saturated with emotion, and tears filled his eyes. “I thought that you were gone forever. We couldn’t find you, and when we heard about—”

Pain detonated through my temples as he continued to talk to me, his words blurring together to become one stream of incoherent sounds. *Heard about what? What was he hearing about? What did that have to do with me?*

I whimpered, clinging to him tightly as tears streamed down my face, not knowing how else to deal with this level of pain. I knew he stopped talking when my head stopped hurting. When he said something about me being cold, he pulled back and wrapped a jacket around me, surrounding me in warmth.

His voice finally broke through the haze I was feeling when he shouted, “Dad, something is wrong with Bex! She’s crying!”

The older man appeared next to us, gently prying my hands away from my face as I tried to rub away the tears. “Bexley?”

I looked up at him, and something about my expression caused him to look concerned. He spoke softer this time. “Do you know who you are?”

“No,” I whispered, my voice filled with fear. “Is that my name? I can’t—I can’t remember anything. I’ve been out here for a day, I think? Maybe more.”

“Let’s get her in the car,” the boy’s father insisted. He was trying to remain calm, but I could see my fear mimicked in his gaze.

I nodded, and the boy put his arm around me and ushered me toward the large car, comfort and security suffusing me as I

leaned into him. I could feel that my eyes were still watering, but where I had felt fear moments ago, I now only felt exhaustion.

*How did these people know who I was?*

*What had happened to put me into this situation?*

My breathing went a bit rough, feeling the overwhelming enormity of this situation hit me as we neared the car. I was put into a large leather seat, the heat of the car blasting against my skin instantly filling me with relief. A large blanket was wrapped around my shoulders, over the jacket, and the father was shouting orders to someone at the front of the car before we even drove away. I kept my face buried against the boy's chest, not wanting to fully deal with whatever was going on.

“What’s your name?” I finally asked, tilting my head back.

Sadness filled his eyes, making me feel like I’d asked something horrible. “You don’t remember me?”

“I don’t remember anything.”

He hugged me fiercely. “I swear, Bex, we will figure out what happened. You’re safe now. I promise that you are completely safe. Dad, she’s safe, right? We are taking her back to the estate?”

“Yes,” his father promised, sounding tense and upset. “We are taking her back home. I am going to have a doctor brought in just to make sure she hasn’t been injured. Are you in pain at all, Bexley?”

“No,” I croaked. “My head just hurts... And I’m confused. What is going on?”

The boy’s father met my gaze, sadness radiating through his expression as he opened his mouth to speak. I couldn’t tell you what he said, though, because the minute he began talking, pain exploded through my head. Agony tore through me and I cried out, my entire body jolting. My eyes fell shut, and I fell into the darkness knowing that something terrible had happened...

I just couldn’t remember what.

<https://geni.us/StormDragonsMate1>

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## ABOUT R.L. CAULDER

R.L. Caulder is an International and USA Today bestselling author who lives in her writing cave away from the intense heat of the Florida sun with her husband and furry writing assistants, MeowMeow and Winrey. Life is never boring for R.L., who has hundreds of imaginary friends constantly vying for her attention and begging for their stories to be told.

If you're looking for ways to stay up to date on future books, win prizes, and interact with R.L., you can find her on Facebook in her group:

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## ABOUT M. SINCLAIR

## USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

M. Sinclair is a Chicago native, parent to 3 cats, and can be found writing almost every moment of the day. Despite being new to publishing, M. Sinclair has been writing for nearly 10 years now. Currently in love with the Reverse Harem genre, she plans to publish an array of works that are considered romance, suspense, and horror within the year. M. Sinclair lives by the notion that there is enough room for all types of heroines in this world, and being saved is as important as saving others. If you love fantasy romance, obsessive possessive alpha males, and tough FMCs, then M. Sinclair is for you!

Interested in teasers, special announcements, and cover reveals? Join M. Sinclair's facebook group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/loveandmadness>

