

ANN H. FOX

The magic that condemns
them may be the only
way to save them...



THE
BLOOD
HOURS

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First published in the United States of America March, 2023 by Lake Country Press & Reviews

Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file with the Library of Congress.

Author website: www.annfoxauthor.com

Publisher website: <https://www.lakecountrypress.com>

Editor: Borbala Branch

Cover: Emily's World of Design

Internal Formatting: Dawn Lucous of Yours Truly Book Services

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Hello Readers,

The Blood Hours is a dark fantasy, and as you travel through the city of Toeska by Sayer's side, things will get brutal. Please be aware this novel tackles graphic and traumatic content, which may be distressing to some. My wish is to bring you a story that heals as much as it hurts, but your mental health, my dear readers, is the most important thing of all. With that said, please consider the list of triggers below (may contain spoilers) and keep looking out for what's best for you.

Wishing you good reading and happy(ish) endings,

Ann

Content/ Trigger warnings:

- Death of partner
- Death of family (siblings, parents, etc.)
- Death of children
- Suicidal thoughts and ideation
- Religious fanaticism
- Persecution of magic users
- Violent death/ violence
- Explicit sexual content

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*To A, D, and L, for loving me (daggers, darkness, and all)
Also to C and K, for devotedly keeping my lap warm and my
keyboard furry*

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CHAPTER ONE

Desperation and midnight is always a dangerous mix, and never more so than tonight. This is the last night before the Blood Hours begin—the last night I have to kill someone.

The alley cloaks us in darkness, shadows seeping from the high walls on either side to pool at my feet. *Just one more time*, I promise myself, steeling my pounding heart against the muffled panic of the man struggling in my hold. I grit my teeth, utter one last apology, and pull the blade across.

A wet, strangled sound escapes as the man tries to gasp, my knife catching on skin and flesh. Warm blood gushes down his neck, his shirt, gathering in the crease between his body and the arm I have wrapped around his chest. It spills over my skin, the red, thick ichor dripping from my fingers.

He stills, and I stumble with the sagging weight, dropping him to the cobblestones. A final breath heaves from his mouth; the remaining black tally mark fades from his arm as it lands with a shallow splash in his own blood.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper again, panting against the guilt. But I am not sorry enough. Have not been sorry enough to keep me from killing again and again. Not sorry enough to keep me from robbing this man of another year.

Monsters with good intentions are still monsters, after all.

Normally, I try to find people whose bare arm tells me they don’t have long, who will be entering the Blood Hours in

months or weeks or days. He had an entire year's worth of memories to make, but desperation has driven me to do things I never thought myself capable of.

I scrape the last of my resolve together and turn, letting my steps spill me out the alley's mouth. A breeze brings winter-fresh air curling through the narrow street, chasing off the metal and salt tang lingering in my nose. Away from the dim shade between buildings, the moonlight slants across worn cobblestones, bathing the world in muted silvers and frost blues.

When I glance down, my skin glows ghastly pale around the still slick blood and the last black line still on my arm. Like my victim before I took his life, only one tally remains.

Once there were rows and rows of them—the most the gods had given any ebber in Toeska's history. My mother cried joyful tears at my naming ceremony, thinking seventy-two years would make for a long and happy life.

As if a long life has ever held any meaning in this city.

The onyx slash on my arm stares back at me, like a gash rending my skin, exposing the blackness of my soul beneath. My name, like my little sister's, came with a promise—a promise of death once all seventy-two lines were gone. I've carried these tallies with me since I was a month old, and done terrible, horrific things to make them disappear. One by one, over the last few years, they have.

All at the expense of the people I've killed, like the man whose blood is spidering in red rivulets through the cracks in the road behind me.

You're doing this for Ena, I remind myself, gulping in a mouthful of sharp night air. Every sullied knife and tortured gasp for the past two years has led to this moment, the culmination of this desperate plan to save her. I have become more monster than man, but I have my reasons.

I refuse to let Ena die like our older sisters before us.

My stare drills into my forearm, willing the punishment magic to take effect. The city knows I've committed murder,

but as long as there are enough ebbers to bring to slaughter during the Blood Hours, no one cares that I've killed one of my people. With the Blood King's sentient magic in the city to exact punishment, the sun guards won't bother with me.

Fucking hypocrites. They hate us for ebbing, but worship a man, more tyrant than king, whose power runs through Toeska's very bones.

My thoughts are derailed as searing pain flashes like a dagger, carving up the inside of my forearm. Although I've experienced this sensation over seventy times now, the shock does not lessen. I hiss, mouth stretching into a grimace. The pallor of my skin bleeds through the black, eats at it, until the line is gone completely. As if it were never there.

Relief and fear and guilt coat my throat as I curl my fingers into my palm, flexing the muscles and veins that move like water in the pale moonlight. Nothing mars my forearm, the expanse smooth and whole.

There suddenly isn't enough oxygen in the air. I drop my arm and lean into the nearest wall, the light snow that began to fall when I left the house now tumbling in dizzying spirals around my head. Pressing my back against the rough stone, I slide down until I reach the ground and hang my head between my knees. The leather of my jacket rides up and exposes my spine to the bone chilling night, but I don't care, focusing on not adding my stomach's contents to the muck along the street's edge.

My tallies are gone. My years are gone. Seventy-two years promised, but only twenty-one lived. So many lives extinguished for the chance for ours to remain.

I can protect Ena. Or by tomorrow, we both could be dead.

I realize I'm still clutching the knife and let it fall to the road with a soft clatter. I concentrate on breathing, pulling the frigid air into my lungs and exhaling a cloud of misty smoke around my head. Without thinking, I push my hands back into my thick hair.

It's only after I pull them away that I realize the right one is still covered in blood. Sickness roils at the tacky sensation, but at least the color won't show against the dark strands that flop over my forehead. I do my best to wipe the worst of it from the shorter sides with my shirt. I can only hope Ena will be sound asleep when I get home; I don't want to scare her.

My magic calls to me, and more than anything, I wish I could ebb right now. But the energy so close to the alley is full of terror and blood and death, not the calming energy I seek.

Another wave of dizziness hits me when I glance at my forearm again, so I roughly pull my jacket sleeve down to cover the eerily empty skin.

I try to shake off the feeling of my knife biting through flesh, of my victim's final death throes against my hold. Better to go like this than the way the city's priests would have taken him down, hunted like prey for holy glory. A sacrifice for silent gods.

At least, that is what I tell myself. But the remnants of his muffled scream still clatter against my skull.

I shudder, but even amongst the horror and disgust at my own deeds, I can't make myself regret it. I know what I face in just a few hours, what I have given up fifty-one years of my life to do.

What I committed fifty-one murders to protect.

Finding a controlled rhythm for my breathing, I push myself to my feet. I collect the dagger from the ground, its ornate hilt crusted with blood, and sheath it silently. It sticks a little going in. *Isaac wouldn't have liked that*—the thought comes unbidden, and I push it away. I can't afford to think about him right now.

Forcing myself to return to the body would be the right thing to do—to honor this man's sacrifice, to pray to Nidaos and make sure his spirit is received into the gods' graces. But I never could bring myself to pray to divinities who demand my death simply because I was born with magic in my blood, cursed by the gift of a ruined Goddess.

I turn on heel and stride south, away from rowdy bars and tidy homes in this part of the city. As I walk, I pull up my sleeve and peek at the blank spot once again. My skin looks nearly silver in the faint moonlight reflecting off the gathering snow, the larger of our two moons a tiny crescent nearly at its zenith in the night sky. Tomorrow, the red moon will join it, and the Blood Hours will begin.

It's hard to believe it's really happening.

Seventy-two lines, reduced to none. Fifty-one murders. Many people have asked me why I've given up the years the gods gifted me, ticked off the marks on my arm like they represented minutes rather than the long expanse my life could have been. And there is really only one answer.

Because they gave my sister *ten*.

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CHAPTER TWO

There isn't much further to go—only a few more blocks, then a sharp right turn down a narrow but well-lit street, empty save for a stray cat scurrying along a garden wall. No one up to any good is out at this hour. I'm proof of that dark fact.

The cobbles turn rough here, but the space is cheered by glass firelights strung overhead between me and the star-flecked sky. The walls are a mix of yellows and blues and greens as I pass by each small townhouse, turf dotted across the pitched roofs to keep in much needed heat, especially tonight. Piercing cold has trapped the usually waving fronds of half-dead grass into stillness under carapaces of frost, leaving an eerie silence only broken by the muffled echo of my boots between the notched clapboards.

I stop in front of a yellow house with a wooden fence sitting waist high around the tiny front garden. Winter lays heavy over the ground, where dead skeleton bushes whisper in the soft wind and a little dove statue Ena put among them sits with a cap of blue-white snow. I notice the paint on the door is chipping again as I open the gate and approach our small porch, fitting the key into the old brass lock.

When I push the door open, the smooth glide of the hinges comes to a halt after only six inches. I curse, already knowing the problem, then kick at the small boot wedged in the door's path. It flies backward and into the wall with a thump. Hopefully, Ena is deep asleep and didn't hear it. I ease inside and shut the door with a click, then reach for Ena's boots and

arrange them neatly along the wall. She never remembers to pick them up—just dumps them and takes off into the house. It's been like that since she was old enough to walk.

The smile sneaking its way onto my lips disintegrates. My stomach hollows out. Tomorrow, there may not be any more boots strewn in front of the door. Tomorrow, those boots will walk out of this house, and they may not come back.

Ignoring the wrench in my gut, I slip off my own shoes and set them in the wooden bin I made for them a few years ago. Ena spotted the blood on them once, and the sight shook her for days. She had nightmares, even after I lied and told her it was from an animal—my official profession is hunting, after all. She is a kind soul, and though she's grown tougher in the last few years since Avaria and Ahnica died, I still don't want her to see that again.

Even I don't want to see the blood anymore, the crimson drying in brown-red stains on my shirt. I strip it off along with my jacket, rolling them into a ball and dumping them into the bin too. As much as I'd rather leave them there, I should clean the jacket tonight—I'll need it when we head into the wilderness. And Isaac's dagger.

Satisfied that I've removed the worst of the stained garments, I pad down the hall, not bothering to turn on any firelights as I go.

There's still a light on in Ena's room when I reach the secondary hallway branching off the entry in our small house. Ducking under the doorframe, which has smacked me in the forehead more times than I can count, I reach for the handle. As the door cracks, a buttery sliver of firelight slants into the dark hall.

A book is draped across Ena's chest, rising and falling in time with her breaths. The title obscured by her hand could be any number of well-loved tomes she keeps heaped on the rickety bedside table.

The other table holds the glass firelight; the magic keeps it lit, swirling in patterns strewn with pink and gold. The lamp is probably the most expensive thing in the entire house—a gift

from me to the girls years ago. Once, my three sisters shared the light and the low-ceilinged room. Now, it's only Ena who stays up at night, giggling and reading by its glow.

I should step in and turn the light off, but I don't want to risk waking Ena. She might catch the blood in my hair, the remnants I couldn't clean from under my nails, or the haunted look in my eyes she's noticed too many times before. She's gotten more observant as she's grown, more watchful. I've tried to be a good brother, tried to protect her from the realities of our world. But our family's deaths have touched her, and me, more than I'd like them to.

Of course, the creak of the door when I start to slide it closed gives me away. Eyes like soot and hazy wood smoke crack open. They widen when she sees my own dark gray gaze staring back from the gloomy hallway. She sits up, the book falling open onto her lap.

“Sayer?”

“Who else, silly?” I say with a sigh. I can't leave now.

I enter, avoiding the clothes and few meager toys strewn across the floor, and take a seat on the edge of her bed. The small mattress gives under my weight, sliding her closer to me. She giggles as I pull her in to kiss the top of her unruly hair, the firelight catching the coppers mixed into the light, curly red.

“Did you just get home?” Her narrowed eyes peer up at me like she's caught me doing something wrong. She picked that up from Ahnica, who used the same shrewd expression on me too often.

“Did you fall asleep reading?” I counter, thumbing the book in her lap. She snaps it closed and snatches it away from my hand, setting it precariously on top of the pile with the others. “You know you were supposed to go to bed hours ago.”

Ena ducks her head, reaching out a hand for mine. I give her my left, so she doesn't notice the blood under the nails of my right.

“It’s hard to sleep when you’re not here,” she says, slipping back into the little girl I know. Sometimes she tries to act older, braver, than she is. I kiss her crown again.

“I know. It’s okay. I’m home now.” I ruffle her hair, and I’m rewarded with her wriggling from my grasp.

“Go to sleep, Ena,” I whisper.

As she snuggles back into her bed, I pull the rough comforter up to her chin. It’s not the nicest thing, a bit homespun, but Avaria embroidered flowers around the edges, making it prettier than most we own. I tuck the stuffed dove Mother knitted her under her chin, then smooth her hair down behind her ears.

“I want to say goodnight,” she pipes up, always finding a way to avoid sleep.

But this is part of our normal ritual, so I oblige her, leaning forward to grab the white wood picture frame from her nightstand. Delicate purple flowers lace the edges, drawn by Lennon’s surprisingly steady hand. My heart lurches at the sight of it, like it always does no matter how many nights we do this.

I hand her the painting and watch her trace the faces staring back at her from under the glass.

“Good night, Ma, Da,” she whispers, her fingers leaving streaks across their faces in the photo. She repeats the same for our sisters, Ahnica and Avaria.

“I love you.” A kiss follows, leaving the glass sticky with a perfect print of her lips before she hands the picture to me to wipe off.

Usually, I rub the glass with my shirt and set it back on her nightstand, but tonight, my clothes lie in a bloodstained heap with my boots. With no way to clean it, and our usual routine interrupted, I can’t stop my gaze from catching on the faces of my dead family, their eyes watching me.

The frame reflects my own face, a boy I hardly recognize, standing in the middle of my family. I’m looking at my father,

who is emphatically pointing at the artist, an exasperated expression stretching across his sharp features.

My mother just smiles, looking straight ahead and propping a baby Ena on her hip. It's easy to tell Ena is my mother's daughter—same tousled red-gold hair and pale skin, same bright, intelligent eyes. I don't let my eyes linger too long, forcing them to wander to Ahnica, who is sticking her tongue out from under my mom's other arm. Her skin sports an uneven sunburn like mine, her head crowned with my father's dark, curly hair. Avaria, identical to her sister in every way except her smooth complexion, is leaning from her position of hugging my dad to kiss her twin on the cheek. My Uncle Cam, red haired like his sister, stands behind us all, laughing. The artist has managed to capture a flash of the chaotic happiness we once lived in.

My eyes begin to swim, then blur, and quickly turn away from Ena to wipe the glass with the corner of her blanket. Furiously, I blink, willing the tears back into my eyes. I do not cry in front of Ena. I don't want her to be more afraid than she already has to be.

“Sayer?” she asks when I don't turn around.

I swivel, trying to keep the pain from my expression, and plaster on a smile. Without a word, I reach forward and flick the switch on the firelight, dousing the room with a wave of moon-pierced darkness. There is just enough light to make out Ena's face as she watches me set the frame back on her nightstand.

“Good night, little one,” I say, giving her a last kiss on the forehead. She snuggles back into her pillow, letting her eyes drift closed. I think she must be asleep before I reach the door, but a small voice calls my gaze back to her just as I begin to slip out.

“Love you, Say,” she mumbles, without opening her eyes.

The tears come again, fast and hard, but I manage to choke the words out around the tightness in my throat.

“Love you, Ena.”

I shut the door behind me and make my way to our kitchen, half falling into one of the two chairs around the now too large table. It was made by my father to seat seven and barely fits in the corner I've shoved it into. Seeing the rest of the chairs was too painful, so I took them out one by one as my family members were murdered.

The kitchen takes up the entire back half of the house. I tilt my head back and stare at the crowded yellow walls, drained to gray in the thin moonlight streaming in through the small window over the sink. Pots and pans hung from hooks throw grotesque shadows over clusters of white cabinets. I close my eyes and take a deep, filling breath, which only catches a little as my throat unwinds.

A spark of color runs along my eyelids, and I pry them open. Across the worn wooden floors, a dazzle of green dances, followed by yellow flash. Outside, the beginnings of the aurora flicker in the sky, and I wonder not for the first time if there could be any merit to the legends.

Not the ones that claim the aurora is a reflection of the lesser gods' armor as they ride to defend Helena—the Dark Goddess is afforded no such protection, cast out for the curse she gave us. No, I wonder about the other myths—wonder if those taken from us dance there in the colors floating along the night. If it's just the old maids like they say, or if it is young and old alike waving from the skies while we eke out a living in the nightmare left behind. I wonder if my mother is watching all the things I've done to try to keep Ena from our fate.

My nails dig into my palm, perhaps hard enough to draw blood, but the pain only clears my head of nonsense legends and hopes which will never come true.

Ena knows the Blood Hours are coming. She knows it's her turn. I didn't keep that from her—couldn't even if I wanted to, what with the lines disappearing one by one on her skin. The final one vanished a few months ago. She knew what it meant—the schools and city inform us at every turn we are slated for death. Though their verbiage, calling it 'noble

martyrdom', makes it sound much more peaceful and grand than it is.

If you believe those legends, our curse is nothing more than a goddess's punishment.

If you believe the royal priests, our death is a holy sacrifice.

But I don't know what to believe, myths or legends or scripture. All I know is tomorrow, Ena and I will be hunted, mercilessly run down, and slaughtered like deer thrown to the wolves. Our 'holy duty' is to die as a sacrifice to the Light God, Nidaos, for our king and our city, to help Toeska 'continue to thrive and prosper'.

Fuck that. Fuck legends that sell us the lie of something better after death. I glance down at my bare arm resting on the table. I was supposed to have a long life. The people I killed, whether it was I or the Blood Hours that took them, should have had one too. I can't let all that be for nothing.

Fuck the gods like Helena, whose curse runs in my veins, and Nidaos, who demands retribution. Fuck the king and this whole forsaken city.

We are going to survive. We are going to win.

But my fingers begin to tremble, and a black sickness rises in my gut. Despite my rage, my skills, my dark deeds, and everything I have done to prepare myself for the Blood Hours, by tomorrow night, Ena and I will most likely be dead.

Overcome, I rush to the sink. Grasping the sides hard enough the ceramic might crack, I hurl the contents of my stomach into the basin. Again and again the gorge rises, the images of Ena's dead body splayed in the snow, my blood spilling down my chest from a slit in my throat, just like the ones I've given my victims. I will die like everyone else in the Blood Hours, all the death on my hands meaning absolutely nothing.

So much for bravado, I think dryly. I turn the water on and let it wash the bile into the drain, then push the lock of hair still crusted with drying blood out of my eyes.

One thought settles into my bones, turning my insides to ice and raising the dark hairs running along my arms. A feeling I hadn't let myself wrestle with until tonight. Until this moment.

I am so gods-damned scared.

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CHAPTER THREE

Isaac gasps as he leans forward. My arm slides down his back in surprise, and his whiskey glass shatters on the ground far below before I remember how to move. His left hand wraps around his right wrist tightly, his knucklebones a stark, bony outline in the night.

The tally mark on his arm, the very last black line, is filling with speckles of creamy skin. His small moan is all teeth and agony when he sucks in a breath, and together, we watch in horror as the last marker of his life ripples, then fades into nothing.

Even though I knew it was coming, even though there was a reason we were downing whiskey, the blood drains from my face. His bare arm looks foreign, glowing fair and too smooth. He sits back, leaning into me, and tilts his head back towards the sky.

“I hate that feeling,” he sighs, and then reaches across my lap to grab the whiskey bottle itself. I say nothing while he takes a deep swig, swallowing several times. “It feels like bees are trying to break through my skin.”

“More like angry hornets,” I amend, accepting the bottle he passes to me.

I take a direct swig too, even though the glass sitting next to my hip is still half full. I haven’t been drinking as much as he has—I’m already feeling helpless and out of control. But then again, I’d probably be drinking like that too on the last birthday of my life.

I sneak a sideways glance at him as I hand the bottle back, admiring the long, blonde hair brushing his shoulders and his sensually curved half-smile. Though the smile is sardonic tonight. A mockery of his usual humor.

A single tear rolls down the apple of his cheek, either from pain or fear. I reach to brush it away, and he turns his face into my palm, leaning into my warmth though the night air has only just turned cold.

My stomach drops, and I almost laugh. We haven't been intimate in weeks, and now of all times is when heat burns through my veins. He senses my humor and looks up, bright blue eyes curious despite the despair seated there.

“What could you possibly find funny?”

Now I do laugh, the sound vibrating in my chest, and pull him close to my side. It's the first time I've really laughed in a long while—since the twins died, meaning at least six months. The thought sobers me as Isaac lays his head on my shoulder, and we take a breath to not speak, letting our feet dangle over the roof's edge while the stars overhead wink into the ebony sky.

“Sayer.” I look down at him, his face turned up to me. His gaze is serious, all moments of laughter set aside. “I've decided.”

“Decided what?”

“You remember that idea you talked about? A few months ago?”

Of course I remember. It took me years to put the pieces together—to realize the potential in all the death. I still toy with the thought even now and have every single day since the twins left for their Blood Hours. I still remember the words Ahnica murmured to me when she kissed my forehead one last time. “Save her.”

But I would never really do it. I could never do something so horrific.

“I think...” Isaac's voice trails off as he gazes down at his arm again. He pulls away, then reaches up and takes my face

in his hand. "I think I should be the first one."

My shock is so deep, I nearly fall off the roof. I try to pull my face away from him, but his hand holds firm, keeping my chin in place.

"No. Absolutely fucking not," I gasp out. "I was never going to go through with it. I'd die before I did that, especially to you."

"No, you wouldn't. You're all Ena has left."

This time I do pull back, hauling myself to my feet. I pace, wanting some distance between myself and his insanity.

"Isaac, you don't know what you're saying. There is no gods-damned way I am going to kill you. Or anyone." The words leave a bitter, burning taste on my tongue. "No way in any of the eight hells, including this one."

Isaac turns his head away, and I don't need to see his eyes to know the pain there. I collapse on my knees beside him, this time turning his head into my hand. There are tears gathering in his eyes. I wipe them away with my thumbs.

"You can't ask me to do that, Isaac. I can't."

"I just don't want my death to be a waste, Sayer."

"You're not going to—" I start but there is no truthful way to finish. The next blood moon is in five months. And Isaac will die in it.

"If you don't do it, I will," Isaac whispers, his eyes wandering out over the edge. I take his shoulders and shake him until he looks at me again.

"Don't say that." My voice is raw. I am raw. One of the people I loved has already died to give me this idea in the first place. I cannot lose him that way too.

"If you don't kill me, I will kill myself," he clarifies, not looking away.

He reaches up and pulls back my sleeve with a jerk, exposing the ugly dark rows of tallies. Fifty-two voids marring

my skin. I cower away, dropping the arm and pulling my sleeve down to cover them. I look up to meet his gaze again.

“You need to get rid of those if you want to protect Ena. And I am going to die, one way or another, before the Blood Hours begin. I will not be a sacrifice for the leech who calls himself King.” He doesn’t break my gaze. “Let my life mean something. Let me help you. Let my death matter.”

I stare into the dazzling sapphire eyes of my best friend, the man I love. A man who is asking me to kill him.



My body heaves forward, waking tangled in blankets, panting with panic and sorrow. I lean back on one arm and wipe the sweat from my brow, letting the dread drain from my limbs.

The next part of the dream is worse. Those moments haunt me almost every night—the slight give as the knife finds a way between Isaac’s ribs, the hot blood spilling out onto my hands, the salt slick tears streaming down my face. It wasn’t painless, or clean. Nearly two and a half years later, and I still can’t get his agonized gasp out of my skull.

Dawn has barely turned the night to blue-gray morning by the time I roll out of bed, trying to forget the dream and what today is. The outfit laid out on the rickety chair in the corner of my barren bedroom won’t let that happen.

The pants are supple but thick leather, insulated with fur along the inside to protect from the cold. A dark green shirt, woolen and warm, lies beneath the black leather jerkin made to go over it. Strapped across the center, where it will nestle snug between my shoulder blades, is a holster, wide enough for a few hunting spears. A familiar dagger belt finishes the ensemble, the blade within cleaned of my last victim’s blood.

I stare at the gear I’ve been assembling for years. Normally, I’d have no way to buy all this with my hunter’s

salary, but dead men and women don't really need their coin. I was already a murderer—adding thief to that list really couldn't hurt much.

When I muddle my way into the kitchen, my weapons clinking too loudly in the quiet house, I find Ena already there. She's frying eggs in a pan over the open flame on our stovetop just the way I taught her to, humming as she goes. Her tiny version of my own outfit nearly stops my heart.

My loud entrance doesn't go unnoticed, and she turns to find me standing in the doorway, a mixture of emotions on my face even I can't sort through. She smiles, her radiant happiness apparent on even this terrible day, and gestures to the food in the pan. "You didn't tell me you bought eggs!"

"I bought eggs," I say, trying to return the smile.

It's hard not to add *because it's the last day we might be alive, and I figured you should have your favorite meal*, but I hold back. I have been concealing the horrors of the world from her as much as possible for years. Hopefully, I'll be able to shield her from the worst of what we are about to endure.

She turns to scrape the eggs onto two plates, accompanied by the last of our apple juice in a single tall, wooden cup. These are the luxuries we allow ourselves for the first day of the Blood Hours.

We sit and eat in relative peace, Ena's bright voice chattering happily as if this is any normal morning, like I'm about to go off to work and she to school. It's only when the plates empty and the cup is drained that she grows quiet.

After she's been silent for a few minutes, I look up to find her staring down at the final bite of egg on her spoon. She's avoiding eating it, knowing it means the end of any normalcy we have.

"Hey." I reach over and nudge her elbow, causing the eggs to slide back to her plate. She smiles a little and shoves back playfully, though not with the usual vigor she puts into our elbow-wrestling matches. "Everything is going to be fine. I'll be with you."

“I know.” She looks down again, the humor fading from her slate eyes.

“You remember what I told you? We have a haven waiting for us. I made it up special, brought a bunch of blankets and pillows. It’s very well hidden. I even brought games for us to play. It’ll be like an adventure, camping, just you and me.”

She peeks up under her lashes at me, a little hope in her expression. “What kind of games?”

“Cards. And chess. You always beat me at chess.” I let her win, but she doesn’t need to know that. Excitement replaces the fear, her competitive nature breaking through.

“I do!” she crows in excitement. The shadows fade from her face. I’d give anything to keep them at bay. Anything in the world.

She cleans up the dishes, talking me through the new strategies she’s learned since we played last. I’ve never met a smarter, brighter kid than my Ena.

“Got your bag packed?” I ask as she finishes up. I am kneeling by my own bag, double-checking the contents.

When I get no response, I swivel to see what’s wrong. Ena is staring at her bag with wide eyes, her hands trembling. I slide over to her, still on one knee, and wrap her in a tight hug.

“Shh, Ena. It’s okay. I’m not going to let anything happen to you. Promise.” Her tiny arms come around my waist, gripping me with bone white fingers that clash with her cheeks, reddening with tears.

“I’m scared,” she whispers, so quiet, I almost don’t hear her. What’s left of my heart stutters, burns.

“I know, love,” I soothe, not able to offer anything more. “I know.”

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CHAPTER FOUR

“**Y**ou made it.”

Of course, he found us. *Dark Goddess damn him.* The old man never listens.

“Lennon!” Ena squeals, tugging me around by the hand to face him.

The short, older man is not quite smiling, an expression that only changes when Ena sprints from my side to wrap his waist in a hug. He pats her on the head absentmindedly, his brown eyes focused on me.

“Hello, little one.” He smiles down at her, real affection on his face.

I sigh, trailing behind Ena. The black-brown skin of Lennon’s dimples pucker as he tousles my sister’s hair. Lennon is one of the few people who emigrated here from outside Toeska—and as a citizen, it makes sense. Why wouldn’t you want to move here, where non-magic users are treated well? What I’ve never understood was his affection for us—the ebbers Toeskans hate so vehemently. Those with the ability to pull energy into their veins, but with little ability to control it. There is a reason most people despise us. A reason I hate myself.

We are dangerous.

His gaze returns to me, the edges of his mouth weighed down. “Sayer.”

“Lennon,” I acknowledge. My eyes narrow. “I told you not to come.”

“I came anyway,” he responds. I roll my eyes as he leans down and says to Ena, “Why don’t you go and buy a treat for yourself? I need to talk to your brother for a second.”

He hands her a small silver coin, and giddy with excitement, Ena dashes to the cart he indicated, a vendor selling small cakes and candies covered in drizzles of chocolate that cost more than our meals for a week.

“You shouldn’t do that,” I snap, the argument familiar in my throat.

“What? Give a little girl sweets?”

Bile rises as I glare at him.

“You know today is not just the average walk through the city, Lennon. Leaving is hard enough. Why did you have to make it harder for her?” My eyes wander in her direction, finding a head of red curls bouncing impatiently in the long line.

“Because I needed to tell you something. And since you’ve been avoiding me for weeks, I had to take matters into my own hands.”

Lennon takes a step closer, gesturing me down to his level with wizened, brown fingers. Sighing, I lean down, my six-foot frame seeming monstrous next to his small height. It’s hard not to obey the man who has become a father, a grandfather, in many ways. Or he was. Until I decided to do what I had to, to protect Ena. Lennon isn’t a fan of my tactics.

“Ask for what you want.”

His voice is a whisper, barely audible in the swelling crowd. We aren’t far from the gates, where the citizens of the city gather to watch us be herded into the slaughterhouse, and the babbling of excited voices makes me nauseous. They can’t wait to see us off to our deaths.

I whip back to process his words. “What the hell does that mean, Len? You come all this way and cause Ena all this grief

for that?" I snap, sputtering.

"You should listen to your elders more," Lennon says, waving his cane at me.

It's a nice one, one of the few shows of his wealth he allows for himself, all glossy wood and silver accents. Though there have been many days I regret turning down the money he tries to send us every month, and though I cave sometimes, I am glad for my stubbornness right now. I do not want to be in Lennon's debt any more than I already am. And even money couldn't save Ena from the fate waiting for us. He taps the cane against the side of my head, my jerk backward not fast enough.

"Listen and remember. It's the only way you and your sister will make it out. What do you want more than anything else?"

I shake my head at him, backing away. Ena must be almost out of line. He needs to be gone before she gets back. "Go away, Lennon. I'm grateful for everything you've done for us, but she shouldn't have to face this right now. And I need to think about how to get us home."

The skin around Lennon's eyes pulls, the wrinkles and years dragging down his face. He is not an ebber; he was never given a limited number of years to live. He may be a family friend, may have helped put food on our table in hard times and taken my father in at a young age after his parents went to the Hours—but he will never understand what we go through, what Ena and I are about to face.

"Don't come home, Sayer. Not here. Ask for what you want and don't come home."

The rage is easy to reach for, much easier than the despair as I look at his face for probably the last time. He is a gentle, kind man. One who kept Ena alive when I might have failed. One who was like a second father to me, once. But he knows my darkness, my secrets. He knows who I really am.

"Nidaos curse you," I spit, knowing I don't mean it. But spite lances my words. "I'll protect her. I'll bring her home."

You'll see."

"Sayer, after, if he refuses you—there will be a ship—"

But I've stopped listening. I can't say goodbye to him.

I spin, my long legs eating up the ground between myself and the vendor cart, pushing through the crowd without hearing the outraged cries of those I bump into. It takes a moment, but I finally see Ena through the throng of people, coming toward me with three small chocolate cakes cupped in her hands.

"I bought one for Lennon too," she chirps when I reach her. I grab her arm gently, not letting my anger at Lennon spill onto her, and turn her away from where the old man was standing.

"I'm sorry, Ena. Lennon couldn't stay. He said he'd see you soon though."

Her face falls but picks back up again when I remind her she now has two cakes all to herself. She insists I take the third, but the first bite I take of the rich, warm pastry sticks like clay in my mouth. I wait until the sights of the city around us distract her before I dump it in the nearest bin.



The screening isn't as bad as I thought it would be.

Ena is distracted by the beautiful gates, gilded and flecked with silver along the edges. Delicate arches soar above symbols wrought into the metal, some spelling out different legends or depicting one of our many lesser gods and goddesses. Our mighty Blood King spares no expense to make our city appear beautiful. I don't look, not wanting the detailed filigree and sweeping carved murals to awaken the anger inside me again. Hundreds of people, ebber and citizen alike, starve and die with no help from our ruler so the gates to this infected pustule of a city can look *pretty*.

I need to focus. I shake the anger from my hands, wanting to ebb but knowing I absolutely cannot with these people around. Murder may be illegal until the moon rises, but I doubt this crowd would get any punishment at all if they killed me here and now.

Instead, I stare at the cobblestones, squeezing Ena's hand and keeping my head down. We're at the gates sooner than I thought. I try to keep my breathing even as I meet the gaze of the sun guard who calls us forward.

"Name." The word is bored and lazy, just like the man who spoke it. His cerulean uniform is neatly pressed, a scorching yellow sun embroidered with pickups of gold thread across his chest. Everything here is golden, all a tribute to the god of sun and light, Nidaos.

"Ena and Sayer Terrin," I mumble, but he doesn't seem to care. He consults a list, flipping a few pages before checking something off. *This is easier*, I tell myself—better to present ourselves here than to be thrown out the gates at dusk, where the priests wait to kill those who tried to hide from their fate.

"Arm." It's a command, not a request, and I grind my teeth as I comply.

I place my right forearm in his waiting hand. He scans it for signs of a tally mark. I'm not sure why they bother—why would anyone whose time isn't up willingly try to sneak into the Blood Hours?

He turns my arm over, his touch cold, and stretches out my fingers. On the inside of my index finger, in the webbing connecting it to my thumb, a small E is stamped in permanent ink. It's not the same magic as our tally marks, just a tattoo to separate us from the regular citizens. One that will only be removed by winning the Blood Hours and asking the king himself to take away the cursed magic from our veins.

Citizens are allowed to come and go, but we are locked in this hellscape, this city. Trade runs to and from Toeska using the wide Ipnes River to sail through the mountain passes. The river cuts through the city itself, and within the walls, it is heated, boats from all continents docked for the season. There

is no true road in or out of this city. Through these gates, the only street we have leads out to the woods around it, and nothing more.

The rest of the world leaves us here to be slaughtered. I don't know if there are ebbers in other places, if there are other Blood Hours like ours. If so, maybe they are watched over by a less cruel god.

Satisfied, the guard repeats the process with Ena brusquely. I'm thankful he doesn't speak because her trembling has returned, even though I murmur reassurances under my breath. Her left hand tightens around my right as he checks the E on her fingers, then drops her hand and calls the next person forward.

I hurry her along, following the marked pathways that lead through the gates.

When I glimpse the Enrane mountains beyond, the range circling Toeska's wide valley, I let out a held breath. The yearning to leave these walls behind aches in my chest; to crest those peaks, to find a safe place where ebbers aren't hunted. But with the Blood King's divine magic fueling the giant barrier stretching almost invisible into the sky, it is impossible. Once, rebels tried to leave—and rioted when they found they couldn't pass through the magical veil. Shudders ripple up and down my spine as I try to push the thoughts out of my mind before they bring on memories I don't want to relive.

Priests line the road on either side, offering prayers and blessings to the other people passing by, but I pull Ena to the middle of the flow and shield her from their hypocrisy.

“Holy blessings to you!” one priestess yells, throwing white flower petals over the stream of ebbers walking to their deaths.

Most avoid her, but the crowd forces one young woman into her space. She pushes to get away, but the priestess grabs her, pulling her closer.

“Beautiful soul, you walk the path to bring you closer to the gods! You are blessed to give your life in the sacred rite as Nidaos decreed in the ancient days! The cursed power given by the Dark Goddess will be left in your mortal blood, and you will ascend to paradise to join in the ranks of those before you, sacrificed for our beloved city!”

The priestess’s wailing drowns out the voices around her, and more than a few have stopped to stare, blocking the flow of traffic. Beneath her holy garb, a wolf head brooch glints when the priestess moves, marking her as one of those who go forward to do their holy duty by hunting us down like animals. Officially, they are the Wolves of Nidaos; we call them the bloodhounds.

Her white-blond hair is braided and glossed to a shine, swinging wildly around her face while she raves. The girl in her grasp hisses in pain as the woman’s nails dig into her skin with surprising strength.

On instinct, I push forward through the crowd, pulling Ena with me. Rage surges, pulses below my skin—I hate them. Ranting lunatics, the lot. But I stop short when I catch a better look at the woman’s face, and all the color drains from mine.

I know her.

In the face of this crazed priestess lie the lines of another, a familiar person who visits my dreams nearly every night. My knees weaken as she turns, the arch of her nose and the shape of her eyes much the same as his. The ghost of Isaac’s face haunts his sister’s features, and for a fleeting hopeful second, I imagine it’s him standing there, waiting for me.

But all thoughts of my beloved crumble when Isla spots me in the crowd. Unlike her brother, she is not an ebber. The fervor in her eyes sharpens to a dagger point, and the hate flooding her face transforms it into something so alien, I don’t understand how I just saw Isaac there. She stares at me, and when she opens her mouth to speak, an elbow seemingly out of nowhere slams into her face.

“Shut up!” The woman Isla was holding, the one she’d grabbed from the crowd, takes another swing with her fist this

time. Isla, who already was reeling from the first blow, goes down hard when the hand meets her cheek. Her grip slips from the girl's wrist, and she crumples to the ground.

I stare in wonder at the girl, who spits on Isla's fallen body for good measure. She stands, sweeping the sheet of dark brown, almost black hair out of her face. She's dressed all in tanned leather, which clings to her curves. Her body is not slender, but full and supple, with generous hips, an hourglass waist, and ample thighs. When she turns and finds me standing there, the sneer that carves her lips is anything but friendly.

“What? Do you have a problem?”

I'm frozen in place, but my eyes flick down to the unconscious priestess before meeting her gaze. There is ice in her amber eyes, unyielding and hard, as if daring me to condemn her actions.

“You'll bring sun guards down on us all with that kind of behavior,” I say evenly, measuring her reaction. I don't let myself look at Isla again. I hope she stays unconscious—I don't want her confronting me in front of Ena. The new girl's nose crinkles, small and perfect in a bronze face flecked with freckles, angry lines accentuating her mouth. It surprises me when she laughs, sharp and bitter, and I push Ena behind me again.

“What are they going to do? Kill me?” There is a rich, melodic sound to her laugh that slips just into the edge of manic. It's short lived, and when it dies out, she surveys me boldly from head to toe and back again with a long, stroking look.

Blood and stars. I will my cheeks not to warm as heat shoots through me.

“They're going to attempt that anyway,” she says when I don't answer. Her voice has just the edge of a clip to it, almost an accent but not quite, shaping the words into blades when they fall from her tongue. She glares at Isla on the ground before meeting my gaze again. “I'd like to see them try.”

Then she stalks off into the crowd. The rumble of people starts up as she disappears, and my breath comes out in a cloud, refracting in the sunlight. I turn to Ena, who stares up at me in confusion.

“Who was that?” she asks, and I am grateful to see her trembling has stopped, her eyes wide and curious rather than scared. I smile, trying to keep her distracted, almost grateful to the strange woman for taking Ena’s mind off what’s coming.

“I don’t know. But we need to get going.”

I’m glad she didn’t notice, or at least ask, about the priestess who hates me for taking her brother’s life. I have to say I’m impressed—not many could move up to the Wolves of Nidaos in just over two years, but Isla has managed it. Only the most blessed hunt during the Hours—only the most elite priests and priestesses are trained as murderers.

I pull Ena back into the flow of the crowd. Though the buzzing doesn’t stop, no sun guards come running, and the other priests are now helping the beaten woman to her feet. I am glad we blend into the crowd quickly enough to escape Isla’s wrath. She has every right to hate me.

“Will it take us long to get there?” Ena’s voice carries a note of excitement now that we have cleared the gates and the end of the marked pathway is in sight. Before I have the chance to answer, she’s moved on, already planning the flavors of snow cones we might make for dessert tonight and the series of make-believe games we will play. I nod along, half listening as her imagination runs wild. For her, I’ve made the Blood Hours seem like a month of adventure, something out of one of her cozy fantasy books. Not the nights of terror I’m sure are ahead.

We pass beyond the edge of the last rambling priests without incident, the people around us dispersing in a wide arc. Some run with purpose, some wander aimlessly, and some stand frozen with panic or indecision. By my guess, about fifty ebbers are being sent into the woods for this Blood Hours—some years are more, some less. There are children, men, women, the old and young all equally at risk to die.

When the blood moon rises, the killing begins.

A trickle of guilt knots my chest as I realize there would be more people here, fighting for their chance at a real life, if I hadn't murdered them.

"Come on, Ena. It's not far," I say, trying not to stare at the lost souls, what seem to be ghosts of those I've already killed flitting through the spaces between them.

We are going to survive. We have to survive.

The snowy reaches of the Mordesa Wood stretch out around us, white birch trees mixed in with sentinel pines that swallow the dazzling sunlight into their gray-green needles. As we leave behind the herd of people, heading due east to where the cave waits, our footsteps crunch softly in the muffled quiet of the abandoned wood.

"Sayer?" I look down to find Ena staring beyond the tops of the naked branches, at the mountains towering above us. "We're not climbing those, are we?"

Despite my tension, I find myself laughing at her trepidation, the sound absorbed into the thick snow. "You're not, little one. I'll be going out to hunt before the sun goes down, but you'll be snuggled up safe by the fire before then. I'll make sure to bring back a rabbit for you." As much as she avoids the reality of my hunting, she does love rabbit stew.

"Only if you skin it before coming back," she says, wrinkling her nose at the thought. I ruffle her hair and scoop her into my arms, making her giggle. I want to keep it light, keep her happy and smiling like this for as long as possible.

"Want a ride?" I ask, but don't wait for an answer before swinging her onto my back. She shrieks and I walk ahead, kicking up snow in a shower over our heads which makes her laugh even harder.

If only I could capture that sound, that happiness. Bottle it and sell it to everyone on the streets of Toeska.

There would never be a need for any other kind of magic again.

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CHAPTER FIVE

It doesn't take long for me to scale the side of the peak our cave is tucked beneath. The cliff above is a sheer wall with little to cling to. But I've been hunting in these woods for years now, and I know the way up to my favorite spot like the back of my hand.

The best thing about this wall is that it's on the eastern side of the mountain, where the sun hits it early. No ice hugs the top of the ledge as I reach my hand up, grasping my last hold and hauling myself over with one arm.

Standing, I dust myself off, and look around to make sure no other ebbers have somehow found themselves this far from the city. The vile place shines in the distance, the glittering gilded wall and spiraling tower it rings looking shockingly small amongst the sea of pines. How can anything so insignificant, so tiny in this vast world have such a hold on me? But the magic still lurking beneath the tattoo within the webbing of my fingers pulses in warning.

The cave I prepared is close to the barrier, the invisible but very much tangible boundary of the city's lands. I warned Ena it would be uncomfortable to be here, but she still scratched angry red marks into her skin within an hour of arriving—the barrier's closeness makes our magic itch. Still, her discomfort is worth the safety it may give us. We're not the only ones deterred from going this far out. Too much farther, and we would hit the enchanted wall keeping us from escape.

The animals are plentiful this far east, miles from where most city-trained hunters search the milder Winterspoke Forest for their prey. That's why I always make my quota, sometimes a bit more, and am able to spend extra coin occasionally on butter or cheese or eggs. However, most of the extra money and much of my time allowed in the forest as a hunter went into preparing for this day.

The white dusted trees below look like a canvas someone forgot to finish painting. From this high up, the air is clear but icy cold, ripping through even the extra layers of scarf I have wrapped around my face and the leather jacket I've thrown on over my hunting clothes to bite at the skin beneath. I hurry into the trees, both too cold and too exposed on the open rock.

The bloodhounds, those that hunt us for the chance at holy glory during the Blood Hours, aren't legally allowed to begin until nightfall, though the rule doesn't stop some from sneaking out early. As long as they don't kill anyone before the horn sounds, they aren't punished. The daylight hours are relatively safe and should be enough time for me to hunt every few days to keep Ena and myself fed.

Some of my traps already have game snared in their jaws, a white rabbit hanging from the higher reaches of a tree. Luck and a lot of practice got me my profession as a hunter, and the privileges it provides are what allowed me to give us a real chance at survival out here.

I make quick work of pulling them down, grateful for the easy meat. Since I've still got a few hours until dusk, I decide to reset the traps, then hunt a bit more. The less often I go out, the less likely the priests and priestesses will find our hiding place. Daylight's safety does me no good if they follow me back to our cave, though I have a few more well-prepared places we can run to in an emergency.

The routine of setting the traps, preparing my weapons, and setting out on a hunt loosens the muscles beneath my skin, unravels the tension in my chest. The day almost feels normal—just me and the trees and the sky, the sting of the air on my reddened face and the muffled stillness of a winter's wood. I specifically do not let myself think about Lennon, or about the

horrible things I said to him before we left. Maybe hating me will help him get over our deaths faster if we do not survive.

I notice as I walk that there's no one in sight for miles, no sound of civilization. No cruelty and hate in these empty woods. A thought, almost a craving, pops into my mind. Pausing, my gaze slides over the dark pines, and my ears strain against the soft silence of snow. What could be out here to stop me? I've done this enough times that I shouldn't be afraid, but the fear spikes anyway.

The energy around me is already calling, tingling around my fingertips, until I can't ignore it any longer. I pull my glove off, inhaling sharply as the cold air latches onto the heat rippling from my hand. But everything, all the tightness and worry, leaves my muscles when I suck in a deep breath and allow the energy to burrow into my skin.

There's tension as I ebb the energy around me, tasting the flow with my fingertips. It's like dipping them into cool water, a relief as the magic eases into my veins. I pull a bit harder, tugging the energy up my arm, watching the map of arteries in my hand and my forearm glow with soft, pastel blue light, like my skin is made from glass.

A peace I only find in these woods, with this magic, settles into my bones. I release the breath from my body, closing my eyes and tilting my head back to the wane winter sun. The power and peace are heady in my blood. At times like this, I can see the beauty in it—the blessing rather than the curse.

I drop my hand, letting the energy reverse its path and join back in with the flow around me. With the magic's remnants still cooling my veins, I faintly see the colors swirling in the quiet forest. Light green and white blows from the trees in ripples and swirls, joining the ice blue of the woods. Warm colors of orange and red puff away as two squirrels chase each other over my head. I release the last of the magic and the image fades, leaving only the blue sky and pristine forest around me.

I never dare to do that in the city. Barely dare to do it here. My own magic still scares me after what happened. Which is

why, though it may not always seem that way, ebbing is a curse. But here, there aren't as many negative energies to influence me. Much less chance of losing control.

The ebbing has the usual effect, the reason I yearn for it so much. It quiets the dread lurching in my heart and the pound of adrenaline-laced blood in my ears. Staunches the flow of guilt and horror at the things I've done, and yet cannot find the strength to regret.

It lets me relax. Something I almost never manage to do.

I let my mind clear as I trek, the effects of the ebbing still loose in my joints. I find another trap high in a tree dangling a snow-white rabbit from its back paw.

Knowing Ena will be happy with the haul and not wanting to empty all my traps too early, I turn back. A quiet, contented hum works its way up my throat and buzzes in my mouth. Sometimes I wish I could just stay here forever, surrounded by nature and the peace woven into every tree and waxy pine needle.

The sun begins to dip a little too close to the mountains for my liking. My feet pick up the pace, hurrying back to my sister. There's no way I want to be out here when the sun fully sets. Too soon, the horns will blare, and the Blood Hours will begin.

Twenty-eight days. That's how many sunsets we will have to survive before the second moon, the blood moon called Sangua, or Helena's eye, finally leaves us in peace. Her cycle is longer than her sister moon, Elue, who is in our sky year-round but gives in to the black night every twenty-one days. With two moons in such turbulent orbits, it's no wonder few make a home near our oceans. The tides would swallow a city whole. One of the safest places is here in Toeska, in our protected mountain valley. It's the main reason people emigrate here, despite our customs. If you're not an ebber, they don't affect you too much.

Anger and fear spiral up from the pit the ebbing pushed them into, rising in my stomach, oily and slick. I don't ebb

again—not this close to Ena. I just can't risk it, though I long for the soothing touch of the forest's energy.

I'm almost to the cave when darkness settles into the snow, tamping down the glitter of the frosted branches and eating away at the last rays of golden sun. The mountain creates a false night before the true sunset. I shiver, knowing the moon will soon rise, and push my legs to slog faster through the drifts.

In sight of the cave entrance, I pull up short, remembering the rabbits I have dangling from my belt. It will upset Ena; maybe make her cry again if I bring them inside. *Gods-damn it.*

I didn't bring my pack, not wanting to weigh myself down if anything went wrong and I needed to get back quickly. Unable to hide them, I sigh, then sit down and begin skinning the wretched things. I'm half tempted to bring them in anyway, despite knowing what it will do to Ena. It grows darker seemingly by the second, and the hairs on the back of my neck are already standing on end.

But no, Ena has been through enough for one day. I can finish these fast and be in before Sangua paints the snow with her bloody light.

But the damn things are proving tougher than I thought they would be. The hide clings to the meat, completely frozen in their traps before I pulled them down. Cursing, I throw the second carcass at the foot of a birch tree and scoop snow over it. It will keep until tomorrow. One half mangled rabbit is better than none.

My heart drops when I turn. There is no longer only darkness filtering through the dying trees. Scarlet light, like something out of a nightmare, glares over the cliff above. The snow at my feet is red.

The snow is blood fucking red.

I look up and see the hated moon, just the sliver of a crescent piercing the sky with knife sharp points. At the same moment, a horn brays, then another, calling to each other

across the bowl of our valley from the guard towers atop Toeska's gates.

The Blood Hours have begun.

I spin without thinking, muscles tensed to sprint to Ena, to make sure she's okay. No one could possibly find us here, only seconds after the horns have sounded.

But what I see in the mouth of our cave stops me, my heart sputtering so wildly in my chest, I stumble over my own feet. A black figure, shadowed by the moon's red light spilling down the cliff, lifts the hide I'd spent days painting to look exactly like the stone wall. The tip of a white braid, dyed scarlet, shines like a beacon in the dark night. The human form slips inside, and I can't stop the roar that shreds my throat on its way out.

No.

No no no no.

By the time Ena's scream splits the answering silence, I am already running.

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CHAPTER SIX

Another melancholy wail of the horn rattles through the trees, loud enough to burrow into my skull, loud enough to nearly drown out my sister's voice.

“Sayer!”

The end of my name trills off into a second ear-shattering scream. I don't yell back or hesitate. My boots scatter snow as they pound into the heavy layer covering the worn earth, their muffled thuds sounding slow against the skittering staccato backdrop of my thrumming blood.

Somehow, everything has gone wrong.

The sight inside the cave as I skid through the entrance forces the breath from my lungs, almost throwing me on my knees in horror. I stop cold, staring at the floor, the walls. All spattered with gore ripped straight from my nightmares.

Whoever has done this is already gone. They must know the back entrance out of our cave too, the reason I picked this place especially for us. Our way to escape. I can't comprehend what I'm looking at, what it means. Not when our quiet cave is empty of sound except for Ena's dying breaths.

“Ena!” I stagger forward to her, nearly losing my balance when my gaze locks onto her.

She's pale underneath the smears of blood on her cheeks, her eyes two round pools of fear, the red that should have been coloring her face leaking from the slash across her throat. Her lips open to speak, but more blood wells across the chapped

surface, and the only sound is a guttural gurgle. Just like my victims. Just like the way I murder my own people.

I don't know where to put my hands, so I settle for gently placing them on either side of her head. I move one to cover the gory wound, but her cry of obvious pain pushes it away. There's another slice in her side, and I nearly vomit when I find a dagger protruding from her stomach, left there by Isla. She is the only one who would have done this without killing me too.

The dagger is a twin to Isaac's own—the one he insisted I kill him with. That dagger hangs at my side, ornate and silver and pristine compared to the gore which coats his sister's weapon lodged deep in Ena's stomach.

Hollow and aching, I push away everything. The past, what I've done, why this is happening. The blood is pulsing in shallow waves as Ena's heart does its best to kill her, washing red across her shoulders, where it seeps in her curly locks.

“No,” I croak, voice raw. The only word I can find among the jumble in my skull.

Even ebbing won't help this, won't heal this. Or maybe it can, and I don't know enough to do it. If the pull is too strong, I might lose it completely. Kill her faster. There is only one word to focus on, the only word for this moment.

“No, no, no, no.” I press my forehead to Ena's, her skin already growing cold. I don't remember when I got on my knees. Blood stains her clothes, the gore black on the green fabric.

My sister gasps for a final breath, then dies with my hands cradling her face.

The weight of what this means settles on me in bits and pieces, the spinning room focused on the gash across Ena's throat. There's no one left for me to protect. No reason not to ebb the black energy in the room, the thick cloak of murderous anger and wickedness layering itself around my shoulders. No reason not to leave the shell of my last family member and finally seek revenge for their deaths. For the path this vile city,

and these vile people, forced me down. Against the bloodhounds. Against the king himself. Against the priestess fleeing through the night away from my sister's cooling body.

I do not weep. I lay Ena gently down on the floor, then trail my thumbs over her eyes, closing them. I tuck the worst of the blood-soaked hair behind her ears, then cover her with our mother's blanket, the one she slept with every night. The one I smuggled out into the wilderness to bring her comfort while we tried to survive.

Standing to my full height over my sister's body, I breathe deeply. I stretch my fingers, flexing them once, twice. There is no fear now. No fear of what might happen. I know what will happen—and this time, I look forward to spiraling out of control. I want to let my magic kill tonight.

Using the tips of my fingers, I pull with conviction, letting the darkness swirl into my veins like poison. With terror no longer restraining my magic and nothing left to lose, I let the black pulse up my arms, down my torso, up my throat. Pressure throbs against my skull, filling my head, leaking into the whites of my eyes until the ebony fog clouds my brain. Black; empty, murderous black is all that remains.

I take a step forward, my boot sloshing in my sister's blood. In my ebb-fogged haze, I barely notice.

I will show them they are right to be afraid of what my power can do.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

The first thing I'm aware of is blood.

It covers me—my hands, my arms, my chest. Plastered in my hair, making a pattern across my jaw. Tacky and metallic, I even taste it in my mouth. It trails me as I stalk through the snow, leaving darkened footprints in my wake.

The forest is dim around me, lit only by scarlet moonlight and clouded by the black smoke swirling across my vision.

Something moves on my right, and I whirl. The dark magic still courses through my veins and pounds through my aching heart. It feels like it might burst as I shoot energy from my hands, the malevolent magic taking over my muscles, my mind. The menacing energy turns into dozens of razor-sharp daggers which slice through the man with ease. They flay his bow, dropping the arrow meant for my heart to the ground.

Another death to feed the blackness of my soul.

I came seeking bloodhounds, but the malicious energy sloshing against my skull has no care for whose blood I spill. Spinning, I search for a new target, pulling in more power to replace what I've spent. More, more, more, the energy chants in my head—or maybe that's me. More death, more violence. *More.*

I'm teetering on the edge of another blackout, the pull of the magic strong and tangible and sucking me down into its darkness again, when my eyes register a different movement in the bloody moonlight. A small figure darts across the edge of

my vision, curls bouncing behind her—red like my sister’s hair.

Ena. The word snaps the energy back from my mind. The darkness retreats, and I can see clearly for the first time in moments or maybe hours, I can’t be sure.

“Ena,” I say out loud, shocked at how raspy and low my voice sounds. Metal and salt coat my throat. Raising a hand to my neck, I cough the gore into the snow.

The sharp intake of a gasp makes me look up. This time, the figure is in front of me, eyes wide with terror. A girl—older than Ena by a few years but still small. Her hair cascades from beneath a dark blue cloak in a mess of blonde ringlets. The pale hair and the snowflake embroidery around the hood’s edge are dyed red under the dim moon. Beyond her stands a woman, another ebber, hands raised with a river of dark energy snaking up her arms.

Not Ena, my mind reminds me, and the agony is as fresh as it was when I held my sister in my arms and watched her bleed out onto the cave floor. Ena is dead.

The sentence repeats again and again in my head as the little girl scrambles away from me, disappearing into the snow. With each repetition, the darkness rises once again. I welcome it, ebbing the death around me, letting it drown out the anguish and the rage.

Only this time, the ebbing is different. It’s not just the black energy in my blood—there is a twist of yellow, bright as gold amongst the onyx. It’s tenuous and twisting, and it snakes up the smaller veins in my arm. There is anger in it, and fear, but also a sense of peace I haven’t felt since this morning on the mountain. When Ena was still alive and there was a chance we could survive. When there was hope.

Glittering energy streaks past me, followed by the resounding crack of a pine tree’s branches exploding. I whip towards the source, finding the woman has moved. She approaches me head on, hands held up in front of her in an ‘I come in peace’ gesture. Her hair falls in a long, straight sheet

over one shoulder, knotted and littered with leaves and pinesap.

“Who are you?” I ask, reality surging around me, the blackness receding in an ever-ebbing tide.

“Let me help,” she says, reaching for me. I jerk back, but she is quick—her hands close over my fists, and my head snaps up to find an amber gaze. Her fingers are curled around mine, my muscles hard and taut under her gentle touch. The blackness is a living thing inside me, pulsing with power.

“Easy,” she says, and her voice is like the melody to a song I have heard but can’t quite remember. Her features linger on the edge of familiarity, and through the fog, it takes a few seconds to recognize her. The brown leather clothing, the smooth silky hair—she is the woman who attacked Isla at the gate. That must be where I know her from.

Just then, the darkness roars, floods my veins, and my vision blurs again as the magic swells. I strike out at the girl involuntarily, the magic taking control of my limbs. The only thing keeping me from going under completely is the thread of gold energy, solitary in the blackness.

She jumps back as I wrench my hand out of hers, and the swing I aim at her face misses by inches. Her lips pull back in a snarl, amber hair falling into her eyes.

“Fine, idiot. We’ll do it the hard way,” she snaps, rolling to the side.

With the gloom shrouding my eyes, I’m unable to track her but the magic has no problem. It sends black energy from my fingers, the five streams of darkness joining into one long, sharp tipped spear.

By the time I register the thunk of the black weapon in the snow, she is behind me, pressed against my spine. Her soft chest is against my back, the hard points of her wide hips pushing against my thighs. Her arms snake around my waist, almost like a lover. But all sense of intimacy is shattered when she grabs my hands, pulling them violently behind my back and twisting my shoulder until it pops. I scream, the darkness

roiling behind my eyes. My knees buckle as she kicks them, my dislocated arm sending waves of agony through my torso. A tortured moan escapes my lips like a wounded animal.

“You chose this,” she reminds me, and I buck. Being held down makes panic skitter across my skin.

Her lips find my ear, her whisper hard and furious. “You’ll bring the Wolves down on us with all that noise. Shut your mouth, or I’ll kill you and not bother trying to save your life.”

“Men,” she grumbles under her breath as she moves away, forcing me down until I’m lying in the snow.

Through the jumble of pain and panic rattling around my skull, I make sense of her words—the Wolves. Save your life. She’s right—if I don’t stop screaming, they will find us soon. Maybe they are already on their way. Reason chases away the last of the magic’s influence clawing my mind, halts all drive for revenge, leaving only my instinct to survive. I have what might be the only sane thought I’ve had since I ebbed and lie still. The girl pressing her knee into my back sighs in relief.

“Thank you,” she says, and I grunt in return. She opens my palms and unclenches my fists until my fingers lie flat.

“Hold still,” she reminds me. “This is going to feel... odd.”

The tiniest nod escapes the control of the dark energy, which is pressing like an angry storm in my veins. Chaos and violence and destruction are all it desires. The gold in my body twists, sending another wave of peace through my mind to push back the darkness.

The forest is silent save for the shuttered breath of the girl above me until I break the quiet with a wild gasp. Something tugs at my blood, in my heart, and then the darkness flows out through my fingertips. A sharp curse echoes in my ear as she gasps too, the sound matching mine in the night. Once the flow is reversed from my body, it pours like a tidal wave, tingling with needle sharp pain in my fingers. All at once, her weight is gone from my back, just as the magic is nearly gone from my veins.

I flip over, biting down another scream as my shoulder throbs. She is a few feet away from me, shaking her own hands. Flicks of energy leave them in clouds, flowing out into the bloody night.

She ebbd the energy out of me. All my limbs have loosened and dropped. Suddenly very dizzy and utterly exhausted, I let myself fall forward until I am curled in a cocoon of snowflakes, and though my body registers the cold, I'm warm inside. My agony is soothed, my despair a shallow pool rather than a raging ocean. My forearms glow faintly gold from the small twisting energy still inside me—the same energy coming off her, I realize.

She stands above me, shaking the last black magic from her skin. Faint ripples of yellow dust off her and into the energy flow, already stained with smoky black and the crisp, violent red of death. Her gold mixes in and is lost amongst the shifting colors.

I glance down at my own hand to see faint orange streaks coming off it. I would jump, if I had any energy left. This is the first time I've seen my own aura join with the flow of energy around me. Instead, I watch it in a daze, my head swimming, dazzled and exhausted.

Of their own volition, my eyelids slump, and I can't keep my mind above the waterline of consciousness any longer. Letting myself float on a peaceful wave, I sink into a different kind of darkness. The last thing I see is the girl standing over me, silhouetted by the scarlet moon.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Wisps of soft gray clouds scrape away the blue sky, pine needles combing through them as they move slowly east. Or what might be east anyway; the world is spinning just slightly, the whole universe tilting on its axis when I try to ground myself amongst the trees.

I attempt to open my eyes a little wider, squinting into the diffuse light. Somehow, it's still too bright to open them fully. I take stock of my body, finding myself lying flat on my back, staring straight up. There are bruises on my knees, my face aches, and a dull pain throbs in my right shoulder.

What in Nidaos's name happened to me?

It's not until a sheaf of raven hair leans into my vision, a head hanging over me from above, that everything from last night comes crashing back. In shock, I curl into a ball as the horror punches me straight in the gut. Ena is dead.

Why am I not dead? I remember now what I did, though what happened after I ebbed is still fuzzy, and some parts of it are missing entirely. I know there was a lot of darkness, rage. A lot of blood. A young girl running into the night.

“Good morning,” a voice chirps just above me, and I look up to find the woman picking her way down the scraggly pine I lie at the base of. The snow is mostly cleared off my resting place, though there's a lump in my lower back where I must have slept on a chunk of ice. If you can call falling unconscious sleeping.

The girl jumps the last few feet down to the ground, landing sturdily on her feet. She's tightening a belt around her waist, hoisting a small backpack over one shoulder. I don't remember her having either of those things yesterday.

I stay quiet, out of shock or suspicion, I'm not sure. My head pounds, and it is difficult to wade through the murky, painful memories of last night. But I do know this is the girl who stopped me. Saved me from committing any more atrocities, and probably getting myself killed.

"You're supposed to say good morning back," she says, crossing her arms and eyeing me. Her warm skin looks almost too rich compared to the colors surrounding her, the bleakness of a cloud-filled sky and the somber green of the trees. "Especially to someone who saved you from a blind. That's just common courtesy."

"A blind?" I ask, trying to gather my whirling thoughts. She gives me an incredulous look.

"Yes, a blind. You know, what you did last night? Is your memory that bad?" The moment the words are out of her mouth, her lips snap shut.

I sit up slowly, and already the world tilts, wildly at odds with my head. I'm going to have to play nice—I can't fight, or even run, in a state like this.

"Who are you?"

A frown plays on her rosy lips as I reach out to catch the trunk of the tree for balance, though I'm barely sitting up straight.

"You should take it easy. You have energy sickness. It'll take a few more hours to wear off at least."

"Energy sickness?"

She grimaces, ignoring my question, and seems to decide answering an earlier one will make up for it.

"I'm Ever," she says, leaning back against the tree. The wind blows, tugging her deep brunette hair over her shoulder, bringing the scent of pinesap to my nose.

“Why were you in the tree?” She’ll have to answer one of my questions eventually. I’m already cataloging my weapons; my dagger is still in its sheath, but my holster and spears are lying at the foot of the tree. I reach out to pull them closer to me, and she watches with unreadable eyes. She didn’t take them. This calms me a bit. I don’t think I’ll need to use them on her—she seems friendly enough. Helpful even.

This question doesn’t bother her, it seems. “To hide.”

Her eyes are rolling skyward before the words are fully out of her mouth. A memory tugs at my mind, the image of Ahnica rolling her eyes the same way at whatever I’d said. The thought softens me for a moment, bringing a small spark of joy with it. It’s a fond memory, one not stained with sorrow.

I cock an eyebrow at the girl. “Why am I on the ground then?” I’m not sure where the playfulness in my tone comes from, and it surprises me as much as it does her. She grins back, eyes lighting up.

“You were too heavy to get up the tree unconscious. Plus, I figured if the Wolves came, it would be because of you. The least you could do is sacrifice yourself for me, your savior.”

“What an honor.” My head seems to have evened out a bit, so I let go of the tree and try to roll to my knees. At once, my vision swims, and I press my hand to my forehead to steady it. All my weight shifts to my other arm, my right, and I wince as my shoulder twinges painfully.

“Some savior. I’m pretty sure you dislocated my shoulder. Should I thank you for that too?” I grunt, throwing my other hand back to the ground to relieve the pain. She just shrugs.

“You chose the hard way.”

“What did you do to me, anyway?” I counter, looking up to catch her expression. For the first time since she came down from the tree, she’s not looking at me. The pine needles must be very interesting for her to watch them this intently.

“Do you want breakfast? I don’t have much, but I’ll share.” Her boot scuffs against the frost crusted forest floor, disturbing the pine needles with a soft crunch.

Another diverted question. But the mention of food has my body betraying me—my stomach grumbles, and the girl laughs. *What was her name again? Ever.* That was it.

“Guess so. I have some supplies too...” I trail off, not wanting to finish the thought.

I have supplies all right. Supplies spattered with my little sister’s blood, in the cave where she lies dead while I verbally spar with a stranger. Ever must notice the stormy change in my expression because her words are not as barbed when she speaks. They are almost teasing.

“Are *you* willing to share?” she asks, eyes twinkling with mischief.

Where a moment before I felt buoyed by the lightness of my memories, now they drag me down, and I struggle to stay afloat in the grief washing over me.

When I’ve wrangled the agony back into the gaping hole it’s made in my chest, I nod. Not the teasing, lighthearted response she probably hoped for, but it is the best I am able to manage. I have other caves, other snares. For now, until I figure out what I’m going to do, food seems like a solid plan. And as much as I hate to admit it, I owe this stranger. She saved my life, though I’m not sure that’s what I wanted.

“Thank you for helping me. I’ve got a safe place we can go, and food,” I say. A flash of the young girl from last night comes to mind, and I try another query. “What happened to that girl?”

“The one you almost killed? She ran off while I was disarming you of power. I tried to find her after, but the priests came, and I had your sorry ass to drag out of there.”

Another question burns on my tongue, the need to understand why she chose to help me after what I’d done rather than go after the girl. Why she thought I was worth saving. “Why are you helping me? Last night, and now?”

The rhythmic creak of the trees and the soft rustle of the pines is the only sound as she considers. As if weighing how

much to tell me. In the end, she settles for a simple answer I am not expecting.

“We’re both ebbers. If we don’t look out for each other, who will?” A pang of shame blooms in my chest, like a droplet of blood spreading through water. I have not been there for my fellow ebbers. I murdered them in the street for a chance to save my sister. And none of it mattered anyway.

“I’ll get you the herbs my mother used to give us when we got energy sick,” Ever says, turning away. “You’ll be back on your feet within the hour with those.”

“Ever?” The word is delayed, unsure, but she pauses at the sound of my voice. A glance over her shoulder reveals her face to me again, but her expression is unreadable.

“I’m Sayer,” I mutter, feeling foolish. She didn’t ask my name. But she gave me hers, and for some reason, I want her to know mine.

“Sayer,” she repeats, and a thrill runs through me at the sound of my name from her lips, clipped slightly and shaped in a way I’ve never heard before. I shiver involuntarily. A quick dip of her head acknowledges what I’ve given her. “I can’t say it’s nice to meet you, at least not after last night. Let’s see how the morning goes.” A flash of teeth and then she’s gone, disappearing into the thick forest.

I shake my head at the strangeness, the agony and sorrow that have been the last twelve hours of my life.

The pine needles prick through my shirt as I lie back, throw my uninjured arm over my eyes, and try my best to stop my world from spiraling further out of control.

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CHAPTER NINE

My head jerks back at the bitter taste when I hesitantly take a bite of the herbs Ever offers me. They are sharp and cloying, clinging to the ridges in my throat when I try to swallow. I make every effort not to vomit the mixture right back up, especially since when it hits my tongue, the dizziness immediately dissipates.

I chew as much as I can handle, pushing the rest away when she insists I eat more. Making a disapproving sound in the back of her throat, Ever shoves the rest into the pack.

A small fire blazes before us, smoky and wet, with only the tiniest bit of warmth rolling off the tentative flames. There's no need to worry about the bloodhounds seeing the smoke right now, and we will both be gone by the time the sun makes its daily descent. Ever informed me how my rampage attracted hounds from all around Toeska—I'm lucky someone didn't find me at the base of that tree last night and slit my throat.

“Okay, time for the fun part,” she says, standing and dusting off her hands.

Confused, I glance up, watching warily as she cracks her knuckles. “Time for the what part?”

“The fun part,” she repeats, gesturing to my arm. “We have to pop your shoulder back in.”

“And that will be fun, *how?*” I ask, biting back the words I want to follow with. *If it weren't for you, it wouldn't be*

dislocated in the first place.

Apparently, my expression gives me away because she scowls. “If you hadn’t fought me, I wouldn’t have resorted to such extremes.”

“Yes, because I was definitely myself during that,” I say, carefully monitoring her face for a flicker of any emotion, any indication to the questions she’s avoided. But she just rolls her eyes.

“Are you going to let me do it or not? Daylight is wasting, and I don’t think you’ll make it far with your arm out of sorts.”

One long breath from my nose later, almost a scoff, I nod. “Just get it over with.”

“Just get it over with, *please*,” she amends but doesn’t wait for my response. “Lie down and put your arm up.”

Though my tongue aches to snipe back at her, I do as I’m told, knowing the pain in my joint will be alleviated sooner if I stop arguing. Snowmelt trickles into my collar when I lie back, the clouds dizzying above me once again, my shoulder a mess of throbbing and heat.

Ever steps up beside me, her hands wrapping around my wrist. My core jumps when she makes eye contact, irises shadowed against the gray sky, hair falling around her like a spill of shifting ink. Her touch is softer than last night, gentle even, as she begins to move. In ever widening circles, she rotates my arm until it lies even with the joint. I’m so distracted by tracing the curve of her legs from this angle, the way her chest moves and the concentration on her face, I almost don’t notice when she heaves against it with a sharp pop. Stars flash across my vision, but a second later, she lets go and I sit up, already aware of the pain receding.

“Can you stand?” she asks a few minutes later, watching me from where she’s leaning back against the pine tree. She pulls the dark green scarf she has wrapped around her face down to blow warm air on her hands.

“I think so,” I answer, pulling myself onto my knees. When the world doesn’t start spinning once again, I place one foot tentatively on the ground. The toe of my boot is still covered in crusted blood. “Looks like it.”

“About time,” Ever says, kicking snow into the fire and shouldering her supplies. The rest of the dried fish she’d shared with me for a meager breakfast is stowed safely away, along with the mint leaves and small tin she used to make tea for us.

“Where are we going, exactly?” I ask, struggling to rise. I’m still weak—another side effect of energy sickness, apparently. Ever still hasn’t explained what in Nidaos’s name energy sickness actually is or why I have it, but I sense it has to do with the ebbing I did last night. She knows more about it than she’s letting on, but there will be time for questions later, when we are somewhere safe. Not out in the open like this.

Ever reaches out a hand. I regard it with uncertainty before ultimately accepting. She pulls me to my feet with surprising strength.

“Are you sure you’re okay to travel?” Her glance up at the sun overhead doesn’t go unnoticed. We’ve wasted nearly half the day sitting in this wooded glade, eating and letting me recover.

“I’m sure,” I say. “Did we decide where we’re going?”

“You said you had a cave.”

I hesitate, then nod, swallowing the bile in my throat. I mentioned my nearest back-up cave this morning, tucked into another mountainside a few miles south of here. I’ve spent hundreds of hours preparing multiple caves for Ena and me, places ready to run to if things went wrong with the first hiding spot. They are not as well provisioned, being back-up plans and all, but they will have to do. All the priests in the Blood Hours could not make me return to the first cave. Not today.

I will have to go back eventually, I realize with a sudden lurch of my stomach. Ena needs to be burned, deserves that at

least. Isla didn't take her immediately as the Blood Hours rituals demand. Normally, the Wolves collect the bodies and remove the clothing to be returned to their loved ones. My sister's body won't be burned with the rest, won't be allowed to move on to the welcoming embrace of the Dark Goddess with the rest of our family, in the aurora or otherwise. I've watched the flames of the mass funeral pyre rise at the end of each Hours, the glow so high, it could be seen from nearly any rooftop in the city. Excluding Ena from this is Isla's final way to spite me.

I don't know if the Dark Goddess truly cares about us, the ebbers she supposedly created. Sometimes I don't even know if the gods are real. But if they are, Ena needs to be given final rites—just in case what the priests say is true.

“Hello? Sayer?” Ever is waving a hand in front of my face. The sound of my name pulls me back, and it takes a few blinks before I focus on what she's saying.

“Feeling better my ass,” she grumbles. “As much as I'd love to watch you brood, and Goddess, do you make brooding look good, we're running out of sunlight.”

I choke on the breath I'd been taking, turning away to cough into the snow where she won't see the red creeping up my neck and face. She snorts behind me, and I try to clear my thoughts. “Uh. Yes. I have somewhere we can go.”

“Will we get there before nightfall? Will we be safe there? I'm strong, but if you collapse, I don't think I'll be able to carry you far,” Ever says. Her eyebrows arch, and her tone is flippant, but beneath, she has a softness to her mouth, the corners of her eyes. She noticed my distance. No doubt there's pity behind her sarcasm.

She feels bad for me. Honestly, I feel a little bad for myself right now.

“Yes, it's a few hours hike away. And it's as safe as we'll get out here,” I answer after a moment, working the questions through my head. Last night was evidence that even the best laid plans shouldn't be trusted, but we don't have much else to go on. “I doubt anyone knows about the other caves. I visited

them less often. And at least one of them is reachable in a few hours.” There are five scattered all around the lands surrounding Toeska. I wanted to make sure we had options.

“Alright, then. But seriously, I’m not carrying you.” She doesn’t comment on my phrasing. I haven’t told her about the original cave, or Ena.

“I’m not asking you to,” I remind her, taking a tentative step forward. My balance holds, and I don’t immediately faceplant in the snow, so I call it a win. “See? No carrying necessary.”

“Hmm. We’ll see about that.” The way her eyes roam me, checking me over, feels like a different sort of consideration. She gestures ahead, not taking her gaze off me. “Lead on, then.”

I don’t question bringing her with me to the new cave. I don’t question her sharing her food with me or helping me gain back my strength. I’m tired of questioning, wondering what I should do. This feels right somehow, and I don’t overthink it.

And when the darkness comes, I might need her more than I’d care to admit.



My muscles sing as we trek through the foothills of the mountain range, a long rolling expanse of rises lapping right up to the city’s edge. A blanket of trees shroud the expanse, a light snow giving way to patches of blue sky and the weak heat of the winter sun.

It feels good to move. Though the land is fairly easy to traverse, the snow hides branches and dips in the earth which force us to pick our way carefully over the terrain. The snow folds and compacts under my boots, and I hate that we are leaving footprints behind. It will be easy for the bloodhounds to track us—but we don’t have much choice, considering the

sun has almost reached the crest of the mountains. Darkness will fall soon, and if we spend another night under the open sky, it may very well be our last.

About halfway through our hike, Ever comes up with an idea. She scales a tree with ease, and I am in awe of how she makes climbing the forty-foot monster of a pine look simple. When she drops back to the forest floor, she carries two thin but long branches, both splayed wide and dripping with needles.

“Drag this behind you. It’ll cover the tracks.”

We test the theory, and though there is still an easily seen disturbance in the snow, it’ll be harder to make out than footprints, especially at night.

My mouth splits into a grin when I turn and examine the covered tracks. When my gaze falls on Ever, my smile widens further. “This is brilliant! I can’t believe I’ve never thought of this. You’re a genius.”

Either she is blushing or her skin is reacting to the chill because splotches of red brush her cheeks. Before I can see anything further, she tugs her scarf back up over her nose and mouth. Maybe the color was from the chill of the wind, which whips up miniature storms of white across our path.

“We’d better go,” is her only response, gloved hands gesturing to the sun. It’s being eaten by the mountains again, swallowed by stone and snow. I shudder at the reminder of yesterday—another time, another place, another rush to beat the night.

“Yes, we’d better,” I agree, and we move off a bit quicker this time, dragging our branches behind us.

We reach the cave just as twilight descends, the hooting of an owl the only sound in the frozen, darkening wood. The cave entrance is small and round, hidden by a mound of boulders I’ve worked hard to make appear natural. Ducking inside, I sigh in contentment at the relief from the bitter wind, moving ahead in the small entrance to make room for Ever. I pick up a small lamp left by the entrance and use a match to light it.

The cave mouth opens into a decent sized cavern—not as large as the first cave I chose—with a low ceiling. I have to bend slightly to fit, but Ever has no issue once she ducks out of the round hall. She’s about half a head shorter than my six foot height. Her eyes adjust to the flickering light coming from the lamp, allowing her to take in the stocked cave. Her mouth falls into a small O.

Boxes are stacked against the walls, holding numerous food items I knew would last. There are dried beans in a few, next to other crates holding glass jars of fruit and vegetables. I’ve got a few containers of crackers stacked on top, and above them hang bags filled with jerky. In the other corner are two bed rolls and two fur blankets, accompanied by small pillows, and three large glass jars for storing water. There’s also a metal pot for melting snow and making stews, and a large wooden spit to cook meat. In the center of it all, with a log bench on one side, is a fire area separated with large stones.

“Where did all this come from?” Ever says in wonder, her eyebrows rising. She glances at me when I don’t answer, and I shrug. The ambient yellow light tinges her hair with highlights of brown. It swings in a silken curtain as she tilts her head back to fully take in the space.

“I brought it.” Some of it is stolen, some bought with stolen money, some bought with Lennon’s money, some of it made. It took years for me to find enough supplies to stock these caves. That was partially the reason I took up hunting as my calling when I turned fifteen; to have access to the woods all around the city. I was determined to give all my family members somewhere to go during the Hours.

Ever’s face is disbelieving. “You prepared all this?” Her gaze roams the room for a third time. “How did you afford it?”

“I have my ways.” *Damn it, why did I say that?* It’s the kind of vague answer that begs for follow up questions. I avert my gaze and pick my way deeper into the space, heading to the logs I’ve piled against the wall to get the fire going. There’s a small crack above the fire pit to allow the smoke out, but it’s thin enough it shouldn’t cause us to be noticed. That’s part of the reason I chose this cave, even with the low ceiling.

“What does that mean?” Our lack of eye contact and my movement does nothing to stop the question.

“The people whose money bought these things didn’t need it anymore,” I say, still not looking at her.

“Oh. They were dead.” I nod, grabbing two of the larger logs and a handful of kindling to get the fire going. I don’t mention I’m the one who killed them.

Ever’s bag thumps against the ground, followed by her sigh of relief as she plops down onto the log. If my stealing from the deceased bothered her, it doesn’t for long, and soon, she’s chatting away at me again.

I set about getting the fire going while Ever removes her boots, rubbing her sore feet. Her shoes must not be warm enough—her feet are a bright, painful red when she peels off her too thin socks.

Without thinking, I stand and cross the wide cave to another pile of boxes set against the wall. There are many other supplies over here which aren’t foodstuffs—bandages, clothes. I pull out a pair of warm wool socks. Before I really consider what I’m doing, I’m already standing in front of Ever holding out the socks, offering them to her. The logical part of my mind tries to calm me as my heart begins to race, the tatters around the hole in my chest fluttering. Ena doesn’t need these anymore, and I have no use for them.

Amber eyes study the sturdy blue socks, knitted and lined with brown-gray fur. As her gaze slides up to me, there’s calculation in her eyes. Trying to figure out why I, an over six-foot man with fairly large feet, have a pair of women’s socks in this cave.

“Here,” I say, shaking the socks a little. My embarrassment is rising in my throat, and I feel more and more stupid as I stand in front of this stranger offering her my dead sister’s clothing. “These will help keep you warmer. If we’d been out there any longer, you’d have frostbite.” Heat creeps up the back of my neck, and I wish she’d just accept the stupid gift and let me out from under her scrutinizing gaze.

After another too long moment, she reaches up and takes the socks. The brush of her hand against mine is cool, cold even, and I remind myself to look for a pair of gloves for her later. I ignore the flip my heart makes at the contact and turn quickly, going back to tending the fire and avoiding those haunting honey eyes.

It takes me a while to realize the cave is quiet. There is no chatter echoing off the walls as there was before. No probing questions I don't want to answer. From where I kneel on a blanket next to the now crackling fire, I glance up to find her watching me, the dancing flames and the sluggish motion of the answering light bringing her face into stark relief. Her straight nose and round chin are easy to see, the way her lips are more full on the bottom and dip into a perfect bow at the top. It strikes me again at that moment how pretty she is. Beautiful even, with her large eyes topped with tapering brows.

I would look away, but she's staring right at me, and something in her expression catches me and holds me there. Still holding the socks, her thumb tracing the edge of the stitching absentmindedly. Her eyes flick away after we peer at each other a second too long, but soon, she looks back up, gaze coming to rest on the two bed rolls in the corner before she meets my eyes again.

"Who else is supposed to be here with you?" she asks. My own gaze slides back into the fire, finding comfort in the licking orange and leaping yellow flames. Her gaze burns my back, waiting, but I don't answer right away. I struggle to swallow the mass in my throat, to keep the tears gathering in my eyes from spilling down my cheeks. The hole in my chest gives a pitiful flutter, but even my anguish is too tired to antagonize me more today.

"My sister," I say, though it comes out so thick and quiet, I doubt she hears me. I try again, finding it a little easier to say now that it's already been put into the world once.

"My sister." This time it's a little louder, easier to understand. "This was our back-up cave if the first didn't work

out...” I trail off, not knowing what else to say. Not knowing how to say it.

I’m saved from my inaction by Ever’s question. “She was with you in the Hours?” I nod, knowing this says everything I need it to. If Ena was with me, and now she’s not, there’s only one thing that could have happened.

It surprises me when I hear the pat of her feet, when her weight settles down beside me on the blanket. There is silence, but for the first time, it’s not uncomfortable. Her presence soothes me, brings me back from the edge of my despair, and I roll back until I’m sitting next to her.

Our knees touch. I don’t move away. It’s been a long time since I touched another human who wasn’t Ena—one who wasn’t dying under my blade, anyway. The last two years I’ve been so focused on getting us through the Hours, I found I didn’t have time for other people unless I was killing them.

Time stretches, the fire grows then begins to die, and we don’t move. It’s not until my stomach complains audibly that I realize we’ve been here a while. Ever laughs a little as she rises, giving me a shove to my good shoulder when I go to stand too.

“Don’t be silly. I’ll cook. You’ve done enough today.”

She raids the stores I have, dumping water from a glass container into the pot and digging out a jar of vegetables from another crate. A little dried meat goes into the stew, and she lets the whole concoction boil as she watches from the log bench. Though shadowed thoughts of everything I’ve lost stalk the edges of my mind, I somehow find myself talking again. Lighter topics this time to distract me from brooding in the pain, like what we will need to gather tomorrow in the sun’s safety. I tell her about the snares I’ve set and how we could hunt. She mentions she used to fish, and I brighten at the idea of something other than game. Rabbit just doesn’t have the same appeal to me now.

Once the stew has cooked enough, we both slurp down our bowls, barely letting the liquid cool past scalding. It burns going down, but the warmth spreading through my body is

worth it. Ever's seasoned it with some of the herbs I collected, most predominantly mint and wild onion. Though the dried meat is tough and chewy, the stew tastes like the most delicious meal I've had in weeks.

It's not until the night grows late that I truly begin to relax. If the bloodhounds haven't found us by now, the marks in the snow have probably been erased by the wind. We are most likely safe for tonight—though nothing is guaranteed. Still, I am exhausted, and the best thing to do now would be to sleep.

I eye the two bedrolls, then sigh. Picking one up, I bring it to Ever, who's watching me with a carefully blank expression. When I press the bundle into her arms, she blinks a few times.

“Are you sure?” she asks.

“Yes, I'm sure. I'll take the first watch.”

Ena doesn't need it anymore, I tell myself again. This girl does. She would want Ever to have it. My sister was always a better person than me.

Ever doesn't argue, but her face becomes solemn, serious. Standing, she places a hand on my shoulder deliberately, and waits until I look into her face before giving it a squeeze.

“Thank you,” she says, and the sincerity embedded deep into her words is not lost on me. She's not just thanking me for the shelter and the supplies—she's thanking me for letting her into a spot meant for someone else. Her smile is sad and knowing as she stares into my eyes for a few seconds. I'm not sure what she finds there, but she nods, almost to herself. “She was lucky to have you with her. That's all a sibling can ask for.”

The words drop like stones through my body, thudding into my chest. Before I gather my thoughts or control the agony I know paints my expression, she is gone, letting go of my shoulder and moving further into the cave. I stay frozen there, staring ahead, listening to her roll out the pallet and lie down. The blanket rustles as she pulls it up.

By the time I unlock my muscles and tamp down the black sorrow leaking from my heart, her breathing has evened out

into the rhythm of sleep. I unsheathe Isaac's dagger and settle down by the entrance, my back against the stone and the blade across my knee. Then I watch the bundle of fur covering Ever rise and fall, timing my breath to hers to calm myself. I will the waves of agony swelling in my chest to calm, but it's like trying to keep a rolling tide at bay.

After a while, I give up and let the tears come.

It's the first time I've cried since Ena died. I know Ever awakens when her breathing hitches, but I'm beyond caring. I'm sobbing almost silently, face in one hand and knife in the other, doing the worst job of guarding the door anyone probably ever has in the history of the Blood Hours. My hand is streaked with bloody tears when I pull it away—I forgot to wash my face of the gore from my rampage. The thought pulls me back to the dark memory from my childhood, the one I normally keep locked up tight in the cobwebbed recesses of my mind. This brings on another round of agony, sobs escaping from the blood and bone cage of my chest.

Ena wasn't lucky to have me. I let her die. And it's my fault *she* is dead—the one I don't think about. The one I try to forget. But in that moment, I can't get the faces of either of the women who I should have protected out of my head. My hands are red with their blood.

In that moment, I wish for nothing more than for the bloodhounds to find me and put a spear through my shriveled black heart. I deserve nothing less.

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CHAPTER TEN

A gentle wind rustles the branches of the trees as it passes by the cave mouth, causing them to whisper and murmur in the pink-gold sunlight.

It's a surprise to have such a mild-mannered morning in the dead of winter. But what's even more surprising than the weather is the fact we are both still alive.

No bloodhounds discovered us, though I didn't stop crying for what felt like a long time. When I was spent, I picked up my head and met Ever's gaze from her bedroll. She stopped pretending to be asleep a while ago. I shook my head and turned my back on her, focusing on the red-black night outside and trying not to dwell on my shame. Nothing I did would bring either of them back. The only thing to do was to figure out what came next.

What does come next? I wonder, glancing at the girl beside me. We've been out in the gilded light for nearly an hour, blue shadows cast by the rising sun spilling down into the creases and crevices of the valley's snow. Ever hadn't brought up fishing again, but I did—I want seared fish for dinner. Even the thought of rabbit meat turns my stomach right now.

Sneaking a glance from the corner of my eye, I catch Ever stumbling again as she struggles through the heavy drifts. Despite the warm morning, it snowed at least another six inches in the night, and her shorter legs tire quickly slogging through it. I don't blame her—my own feet complain as I push through the powder. Her boots are too short, allowing snow to

fall into the gap at the top when she bends her knees. Maybe I could tear some leather from a pair of Ena's spare boots to make them taller.

I shove the thought from my mind, disturbing myself. I'm making arrangements like this girl is going to be around for a while—already planning on how to distribute my sister's belongings before she's even a few days dead. But really, what else am I going to do? Leave Ever? I've already considered the idea, pondered it all morning as I watched her layer on her clothing to protect against the cold, though she's already removed most of them in the unseasonably warm day. I could leave—probably should leave. Having another person with me is much more likely to get me killed. Now that Ena is gone, I honestly stand a better chance alone. I know how to hunt, to survive.

But do I want to survive? The suicidal agony and rage which plagued me as my sister died in my arms is gone now, softened by distance and weakened by natural instincts. I've been keeping myself alive for years and planning on how to escape the Hours for a long time. The habit of living is a hard one to break.

Ahead of me, Ever gathers her long hair into one hand, using the other to tie a small leather thong around the middle. I watch in fascination—I've never seen any woman wear her hair in the high, swinging style. Filtered sunlight strikes the bundle, coaxing soft copper and brass strands from the dusky depths. Ena's hair was lighter, bright auburn to Ever's dark brown-black, but the movement of her head still brings with it a deluge of memories.

Snow in Ena's springy curls as she squealed, one of Avaria's snowballs catching her in the back and coming apart to spatter her with white. My fingers running through her hair, a comb in the other hand, attempting to smooth her wild curls. I'd often braided the hair back from her face or clipped it at the base of her skull. I'd had to learn after the twins died—there was no one else to take care of it.

As if she felt me staring, Ever glances over her shoulder.

“What?” she says, an edge to her voice.

“Nothing,” I say, carefully stepping over a dip in the snow and coming up beside her. My long stride brings me equal with her easily. “I’ve just never seen someone do that to their hair.”

“A ponytail?” she asks quizzically, cocking her head. The supposed ponytail swings to the side, accenting the movement. I can’t help but grin—it’s almost comical with the thing swinging around her like an actual animal’s tail.

“Is that what you call it?” I stifle a laugh at her expression, the storm cloud descending into her brows.

“What do you know about hair anyway? Do all men here keep theirs short on the sides like you?” A snide tone sharpens her words, but my attention is not on her first question. It’s on the second.

“What do you mean ‘here’?” I emphasize the last word, puzzled. For an ebber, there’s only the city, ringed by the mountains and the invisible magical boundary.

She opens her mouth to speak, her cheeks flushing red, but a movement behind her catches my gaze. My hand finds Ever’s arm, stopping her with me as I try to track a glimpse of fabric through the thick trees.

“What—” she attempts to say, but I press my finger to her lips. They are soft, distracting, but my hunting instincts have me shoving the thoughts aside.

“Someone else is here.” I push her behind me despite a squeak of protest, closing my eyes to listen to the creaks and intermittent silence as the trees sway in a harsh breeze.

There. I snap my head to the side, opening my eyes to find a woman watching us through the boughs. Her sepia skin is flushed, dark eyes shadowed under heavy lashes. Clothes not unlike my own shroud her body, thick layers shifting to reveal fur lining beneath her brown cloak. No armor or wolf crest adorns her body. *Not a bloodhound. Just another ebber.*

Panic drains from me, though I keep the tension in my shoulders, my hand on my dagger. She does the same, poised

to take flight like a startled songbird.

Though I will not harm her, she doesn't know that. I've heard the stories of those ebbers in the Hours who would help murder their own kind, who believe Nidaos is right to call for our deaths. They become so indoctrinated, they want to help the Wolves take us down. Though my reasons for killing are different, my palms tingle as if warm ebber blood flows over them again.

In the Blood Hours, anyone unknown is an enemy. Which is why it was such a foolish thing to do when I trusted Ever—some would say ebbing was not the only suicidal decision I made that day.

Of course, it doesn't surprise me when Ever steps from my shadow with a smile on her face.

"Hello!" she calls, and though her tone is friendly, the woman bolts. Ever moves to follow, but I grab her arm again, letting the woman go. When she turns to me, Ever's brows are pulled together.

"I was going to offer for her to fish with us," she says.

"She wouldn't want to."

"Why not? We have more than enough supplies in the cave too. Why wouldn't she want to share a safe place?" Her bewilderment is puzzling to me. Any ebber in Toeska knows the stories, the whispers of the dangers of trusting anyone in the Blood Hours.

"That's not how this works," I say, trying to be gentle, but it comes out sharper than I intended.

Everything about her face hardens, and she pulls her arm from my grip with a hiss. "Are you so selfish you won't share your precious stores?"

Incredulity colors my words, tipped with sarcasm. "I shared with you, didn't I?"

"I'm not sure I know why you did that either," she says, eyes narrowing. With a sharp jab, she points the direction the

woman disappeared. “If that was your sister, wouldn’t you want someone to help her?”

An image pops unbidden into my mind—Avaria and Ahnica in the forest, eyes wide with fear, hungry and afraid. Alone. They had the caves, but no one was there to protect them from everything lurking outside those stone walls.

Storm clouds color my voice, anger flashing like lightning under my skin. “You know nothing about my family. My sisters knew better than to trust strangers—an instinct I apparently lack.” The words grind like stones from between my teeth, slicked with sarcasm. I spin and push through the forest, not caring if she follows. In fact, hoping she doesn’t, so I will no longer have to deal with this naive girl who thinks the Blood Hours is a picnic to be shared with every ebber we meet.

Still, even as I curl my fingers into fists and press the anger out into my knuckles, the answer to Ever’s question balloons to a painful pressure inside my chest.

I wish someone had helped my sisters when I could not. And instead of helping other ebbers, I’ve been murdering them.

I only know Ever follows from the rasp of her breath as I set a brisk pace. We still need food. A task is a welcome distraction from the dark path my thoughts have turned to.

The silence doesn’t last, and when I finally slow, Ever pulls alongside me.

“I’m sorry,” she says, and I grunt an acknowledgement. I don’t have the strength to stay mad and try to stay alive at the same time.

“You had more than one sister?”

“Three,” I say, my voice answering her softness.

My admission creates a pause for a handful of minutes. This time her voice is dropped, so low it almost gets lost in the heavy drifts. “Are all your siblings... gone?”

I swallow, focusing on the trees around me, the pine needles coming into stark relief against the blazing blue sky and dazzling white landscape. Without looking, I answer her.

“Yes.”

“Because of the Blood Hours?”

I nod, the top layer of snow crackling as I break through with my boot. She continues, curiosity getting the better of her.

“You don’t have anyone, then? Not even your parents?” She sounds horrified, and this does draw my attention back to her. I’m surprised by her shock, her brown eyes wide and face loose with incredulity. Everyone in Toeska knows loss, has seen families decimated, has had their own family torn asunder. My losses have come at a young age, but eventually, there is always one family member left after everyone else has gone to the Hours. She should know death like an old friend.

There is so much she doesn’t seem to understand.

“They died a long time ago.” I don’t elaborate, hoping she won’t ask how they died too. I don’t like lying, and I don’t want to explain my parent’s deaths.

“Come on. We’re wasting daylight,” I say and press forward, leaving her to trudge through the thick snow behind me.

Even with my ire at her harsh words still faintly beating with my heart, a thought clicks as I step ahead. I move right in front of her, breaking the snow in her path with my larger and sturdier boots. I hear her sigh with relief as she takes the first step into my footprint, the trek already easier.

The stream comes into view about a mile later, babbling as it tumbles over ice and stone. It’s a thin ripple of silver in the sunlight, small enough to step over in places, though it gushes over minuscule waterfalls in others. It’s still deep even at the narrow points, and within I spy the brown-gold flash of trout fighting the current.

When Ever finally reaches my side, having fallen farther behind during the last few minutes of the hike, her breath

billows out in clouds through the scarf over her face. Her fingers hook into the fabric and pull it down, exposing her mouth—her lips are nearly blue, the color looking strange against her warm undertone.

“You okay?” I ask, and though my initial query refers to the bloodless shade of her lips, it extends as I get a good look into her eyes. They are round, her brows pulled together in the middle, and she stares at the stream like she’s never seen such a thing before.

“Sure,” she answers. Even with one word, her teeth chatter. I’m definitely going to need to find more of Ena’s clothes for her.

Why am I planning like she’s going to be around?

Amber eyes slide down the path the brook cuts through the white wood, her expression growing more apprehensive as she takes everything in.

“This just isn’t... how I normally fish.”

I take a second look at the stream, wondering if I missed something—but no, it’s a fairly average body of water for this area. Sure, some of the mountain creeks in the higher elevations have larger waterfalls, and the water is sometimes full of minerals and has a blue tinge to it—but still, this is a standard stream, the water burbling and clear. I raise my eyebrows when she doesn’t answer, searching her face until her eyes flash to mine, then back to the stream again. It isn’t until the red creeps up her cheeks that I realize she’s embarrassed.

“How do you mean?”

Her boot kicks at the snow, but finally, she answers me. “I’ve never fished in a stream before. I fish on a boat, not from the shore.”

Has she only been to the other side of Toeska? There is a larger and slower river there, the preamble to the one running through the city, though at this time of year, it’s been frozen through and isn’t useful for much more than ice skating. The fish retreat to the still, smaller streams which feed it.

Though something rings false in her answer, I decide not to push. Daylight is wasting, and we need to stock up on fresh meat for at least a day or two.

“Okay. I’ll show you then,” I say, pulling the spears out of their holster and over my head. I hand her one and give her an encouraging smile, waiting until she meets my eyes and nods.

“Okay,” she echoes, though she looks unsure. It’s less awkward with the weapon in her hand—it seems to be familiar to her, and she holds it with more confidence than I find in her expression.

A few hours later, we have a healthy string of fish, along with a few squirrels I brought down while Ever practiced. She picked up the skill quickly, though it took a while for her aim to hit the mark. The fish are fast, especially when they ride the current downstream to avoid us.

I watch the strange girl as she expertly attaches the last fish to the others, as if she’s done it a thousand times. Why is she this good at so many aspects of fishing, but the stream stopped her in her tracks? I don’t understand her, and I don’t trust her. Not that she wouldn’t help me—she stopped my rampage in the forest after all—but those actions alone are a red flag. Any Toeskan ebber would not have done what she has.

Her accent is different than any I’ve heard, though this doesn’t truly hold any meaning—there are many people from many different places living in Toeska. Still, my instincts tell me there are secrets lurking, things she isn’t telling me.

She glances up at me for a second before going back to the fish in her hand. I’m unnerved at the guarded look in her eyes—there is a wall there, a strangeness I don’t know how I missed before.

Shouldering the catch, she meets my gaze again. I realize with a jolt I’ve been staring, and she has noticed.

“Are you ready to head back?” she asks.

I glance at the sun and nod, noting we should have plenty of time to get to the cave.

“Let’s go,” I mutter, rising and leading the way back through the trees. As she struggles to keep up, I wonder, not for the first time, why someone from Toeska can’t fish in a stream—and why they would come ill prepared for weather they should know very, very well.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Flickering, faltering light dances along the walls, flooding the gaps in the cave dark with orange and gold. The sight accompanies the scent of roasting meat, the flames coaxing savory smells from the trout we caught earlier.

Ever's face is hidden by her hair, the sable locks spilling like a cascade between us. I sneak glances at her all night, my eyes unable to keep from flickering over periodically. But she doesn't say anything and won't meet my gaze.

I guess it's for the better anyway—I've decided I can't stay. Without her, I stand a better chance of survival, and I know how to pay her back for her help. If I give her this cave, she'll be safe, and I will move on to another. There are enough supplies here to last her for the rest of Sangua's cycle. She's smart—if she hunts a little and stays hidden, she will survive the Hours.

I have other things I need to attend to; my last sibling's burning ceremony chief among them. Isla left her behind, so I'll light the pyre myself and pray for a goddess I'm not sure I believe in to watch over my sister as she makes her final journey from this cruel world.

I can only hope the next world is better than this one.

The hunger that had been clawing at my stomach moments ago turns to bile and storm as fear roils through me. I don't know how I will face our cave, the blood, the body. Somewhere along the way, I've accepted Ena is gone—but considering the fact from afar is very, very different from

confronting the violence and gore again. For the first time since I calculated when the Hours would fall, I am glad these ones are happening during the winter months, and glad the King has hunters drive predators from the woods before the Hours begin. There is some magic involved to keep them at bay, but it's necessary—death by animal does not count as a sacrifice to the gods. Dark Goddess forbid we don't die the way the holy ones believe we should.

Distracted, I don't register the contact my elbow makes with my cup of tea until it hits the ground. The wood clicks loudly against the stone floor and rolls away into a darker corner of the cavern. I don't move to pick it up, the weight of reality suddenly heavy on my shoulders.

We both glance up at the same time, the guarded expression still on Ever's face, though curiosity is trying its best to peer through. I look away, the secrets there strengthening my decision. I should leave here in the morning; I've helped this stranger enough.

"What are you thinking?" she asks, and I jump in surprise. She's not looking at me—her eyes are fixed on the fire, watching the flames twist and turn and fight against the cold.

"Why?" I counter. The low light makes it hard to read how her expression changes, but I catch the tilt of her eyebrows pulling together.

"Because I'm curious," she says, her voice deceptively light. Her hands work at a piece of wood she must have pulled off the log, worrying and twisting it through her fingers.

"I'm leaving in the morning," I say, knowing putting off the inevitable won't help. She'll find out soon enough anyway.

"What? Why?" Her body is fully turned toward me now, her voice higher than before. I appraise her, taking in the wrinkles between her brows. Her amber eyes give away nothing, though her body language leans closer to me.

"I have some things I need to take care of." It's not the whole story, but it is the easiest to explain.

“I could come with you,” she answers, and now it’s my turn to wrinkle my brow.

“Why would you do that?”

She shrugs, but the curtain of hair falls between us again as she untucks it from her ear. “We’re not dead yet. We must make a fairly good team.”

“I didn’t come out here to find a team.” I can’t keep the anger out of my voice. I came out here to protect Ena, and I couldn’t even do that. The responsibility for her life is too much for me to bear. If Ever dies too, then I’ll just have failed again.

“*We* came out here to survive,” she starts, but I interrupt.

“Wrong again. I came out here to protect someone. They’re gone now, and I need to finish taking care of them before I’m done.”

The anger in her voice matches my own. “Done?”

Silence is my only answer as I fume at my stupidity. I say too much with this woman around.

“Is that what you were trying to do the night I found you? Off yourself because your sister died?” she asks after I am silent for too long.

I flinch, my whole body tensing. My eyes are locked on the floor, but her stare bores under my skin, laying my horrors open to the cool night.

“So what if I was?” I say gruffly. Why not admit it? Maybe murder and rage were my initial reasons for ebbing that night, but suicide was not far behind. Why wouldn’t I want to die when everything I’d ever worked for, slaved for, killed for, was gone?

“There are enough people in these woods trying to steal our lives,” Ever says, and I feel her stand, move closer. “You don’t need to help them, give them what they want. That’s how they win! They take our loved ones, and we just let it happen!” Her footfalls come fast and hard, clapping against the stone below her boots as she paces. “We can use our

powers to do many things—wonderful things—and the people in this place just find ways to make ebbers afraid of themselves. And when we are finally pushed to use it, all ebbers are able to do is rampage and destroy, blind themselves with hatred.”

She stalks back and forth now, the fire spilling light into her hair and against the side of her face, her anger deepened by the shadows cast across her features.

“You don’t even have an inkling of what you can do. Everyone here is so blind, disabled by hatred and prejudice.” Her rage burns hot.

“Are you going to explain any of what you just said?” I ask, my voice quiet under her ranting. I would worry about her voice carrying to the bloodhounds stalking the woods, but I’m too caught up trying to tease meaning from the complexities of her words.

She freezes, glancing at me then back at the fire again. Her hand comes to the bridge of her nose, and she sighs deeply. “No.”

“What are you doing?” I finally give voice to my concerns, wishing I could unravel the secrets in her eyes. “You say ‘here’ like this isn’t your home, your people. You say you can fish but lock up at the sight of a stream. You come out for the gods-damned Blood Hours wearing boots and clothes that won’t even keep you warm in the middle of winter!” I’m standing too now, shouting, confused about my own intentions, about why I care so much.

“Now you’re ranting about my actions, the ways of this city, as if you yourself aren’t a part of it. Who are you, where in eight hells are you from, and why are you here?”

Ever doesn’t hold my gaze. She collapses on the log again, throwing her hands over her face and releasing another sigh. I sit too, the anger draining from my limbs as quickly as it came.

Silence stretches long and lean across the fire, and I am only pulled from the reverie when the smell of burnt flesh

strikes at my senses. One of the trout is already starting to blacken, the other not far behind. I pull them from the spit over the flames, mouthing a string of curses. The blistered fish drops to the ground, and I cradle my hand, the skin crimson and hot where the burns run deep.

“Gods dammit!” I mumble, bringing the raw flesh to my mouth. It does little to help, more instinctual than anything else.

Before I turn around, Ever has dashed to the entrance of the cave. I start to protest, but she doesn’t leave—only leans out into the bloody night to gather an armful of snow. She’s back in a flash, pulling my hand away from my lips and pressing the snow to my burn. The cold siphons away the blistering heat.

“Let me see,” she says, all traces of her antagonized tone gone. With a gentleness I don’t deserve, she lifts the snow away and flips my arm to look at the seared skin.

A protest springs to my tongue as she touches the wound, and I snatch my hand away. She eyes me until I return the offending limb, scrutinizing it with a practiced eye.

“I’ll tell you what I meant earlier,” she says, and my gaze flickers to her face. It’s cast in shadow, the fire behind her, a hint of a smile on her lips. “When I mentioned our powers.”

“Yes?” The question is just a brush of air on my lips, but her smile grows infinitesimally.

“I said the people here make us hate our powers. Hate ourselves. And when we use them, we only know how to destroy,” she starts, her fingers hovering just over my burn. When the lines of blue snake up her fingers, across the veins in the back of her hands like lightning splitting the sky, I still don’t understand what she’s doing.

“But there is another side to ebbing, when it’s not surrounded by violence, by hate and fear. When driven by compassion, kindness, love...” Ever’s hand, full to the wrists with soft blue light, touches mine. A jolt goes through me, a rush of tension and heat and scorching energy racing down my

spine and pooling in my core. And it has nothing to do with ebbing.

Her caress finds my wound, and I watch in wonder as the ebbed energy leaves her hand. A sigh slips out involuntarily, the cessation of pain relaxing every tense muscle in my body.

Cool pleasure runs over my palm as Ever's magic slides across my hand. I gain control of myself again in time to glance down at the last of the blue sloughing away, leaving my skin smooth and almost glowing ivory bright in the shadows left behind. Completely healed.

"What..." I trail off, turning my hand over and holding it out of her shadow, into the firelight. I examine my fingers where the burn had just pulsed, red and hot. Ever lets go. There is no scar, not even a blemish. No wound to be found at all.

"How?" I find her face, my eyes wide with wonder.

The small smile on her face is illuminated by the last of the energy between us, the light dimming as it fades back into the flow. Before it escapes, I reach my healed hand out to it, ebbing a bit into my fingertips. The sensation of brisk liquid races through my veins, and I marvel at the energy painting the air when I release it.

As soon as the magic enters my bloodstream, I see the flow swirling around us, the constant river of energy spilling through the world. Ever's fingers, her hair, give off a dusting of gold that eddies away from her and joins the colors disappearing through the cave wall. The sight fades as I let it go.

"Not all ebbing is evil, like they teach in Toeska. It is not a curse Helena gave us. It is a gift." I find her watching me when I look back, eyes full of light, and I flush in embarrassment.

"I'm not from here," she continues, and my pulse races, fighting the calming effects of the ebbing. I knew something was wrong with her actions today.

“But where—” She holds up a hand to stop me, and I pause.

“I’m not here to die in these Blood Hours. I’m here to find my sister.” She reaches out to clasp my fingers in hers. “I’m sorry about your sister, about your family. I don’t know what it’s like to have a loved one die. But my sister was stolen from us long ago, and I want to find her. To bring her home. And the only way I can do that is by winning and asking for her return.”

“You’re... that’s going to be your boon?” When the Light God Nidaos punished the Dark Goddess for creating ebbers, he decreed he would watch over the Hours, to see if any of us are worthy of being saved. The prize is a boon, any one thing they can ask of the Blood King. But winning the Blood Hours is akin to being chosen by the Light God himself—a chance to have the ebber curse removed from our veins.

“You can ask for anything, right?” Her smile falters, and I quickly speak to reassure her.

“I suppose. I’ve never really thought about it. No one has ever asked for anything other than to remove our cursed magic.”

“Well, I’m going to ask for what I want.” She steps closer, and my heart beats wild against the confines of my chest. “What will you ask for? When you win?”

What could I ask for? Everything I’d done had been to save Ena. I hadn’t thought beyond our survival, beyond the boons asked before me. I’d never dreamed of anything more.

“I don’t know,” I say. But already a dangerous, foolish idea is forming in my head. If Ena was healed of her wounds, could I ask the King to bring her back?

Though I try to quell it, hope blooms across my stomach. I know I shouldn’t give this thought room to grow; I don’t know if I’ll have the strength to survive the agony of its failure.

Her eyes drop to our entwined hands, and I find I don’t want to let go yet.

“Would you teach me?” The words are out before I have time to question them.

Her brows rise as her gaze does, the freckles framing her eyes and speckling her nose more noticeable up close. “To heal?”

“All of it. How to ebb and not lose control. I’ve done a little, taken energy in, but I never dared to try more.”

Ever tilts her head forward, breaking away from my stare.

“Okay,” she says, and I hear the smile on her lips. “Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow,” I agree. She steps away from me, and I let my hand fall from hers, the chill night air already curling around the heat she left on my skin.

There’s no way this will work. Stop kidding yourself. I look with a pang at the cave entrance, as if I might be able to see through the stone and forest and snow to where Ena lays, still waiting for me to save her.

Hunching my shoulders, I bury the tiny spark in my chest, doing my best to smother it before hope can trick me down the path to failure once again.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

“**Y**ou already know the basics of ebbing, right?”

Ever’s voice is clear, crisp in the bright morning only made brighter by the fresh snow blanketing the clearing. I nod, sitting up straighter on the rock I’ve chosen for myself, a few feet away from Ever’s own perch. We’ve cleared them of snow and ice, but the chilled stone saps the heat from my legs.

“I know how to ebb. You saw me the first night,” I remind her, though I shudder to remember the blackness that stained my mind.

“My question wasn’t if you knew how to ebb,” she corrects, sighing. “Do you know the basics?”

“Oh. Well, I guess... not, then.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised. It’s not like anyone here would have taught you,” she snorts. Picking up a long stick she’s leaned against the rock beside her, she reaches down to the ground and draws a wavy line in the snow. “I’ll start easy. This line represents the flow. You’ve seen it before, right?”

“Yes.” This time, I’m confident. “Every time I ebb, I see it.”

“Exactly. This is called your Sight. You only have Sight when you have energy ebbed.” She draws an arrow going the opposite way from the flow. “Whenever you ebb, you are drawing energy into your body. It travels in your veins, your blood. The power of your ebbing comes from the tension of pulling the energy against the way it naturally wants to go.”

No one ever taught me the word for it—talking about our magic is forbidden in the city—but even without a guide, I’ve always described the motion of ebbing like pulling in my head.

“Like drawing a bow,” I supply, and she smiles. My heart gives the funny twinge I’m starting to recognize, and I look away. I’ve already noticed how the snow shine picks up highlights of mahogany in her dark hair, lit from above by the sun and from below by the dazzle of ice crystals. Her body, folded into a seated position, is all curves and hips and thighs perched on the boulder across from me. I’m glad I have the excuse of the cold air on my face to account for the redness flooding my neck and cheeks.

“Yes, much like that,” she continues. “When we take energy in, it has a mild effect on our mood. Calm, rage, sorrow, happiness—ebbed energy heightens these emotions. When we release the energy, we can shape it and guide its path as it leaves. If we want it to be stronger when we let it go, we pull it deeper. The further into your body you ebb, the more power you have when you release it.”

Much of what she says is familiar, but I’ve never had words to describe it. Her stick continues to draw in the snow, a picture forming under her careful strokes. It’s the crude outline of a person, with arrows indicating energy entering through the fingers. “However, if we draw the energy too far in...” She accompanies this with a lengthening of the arrow, up the arm and into the body. From there she draws many arrows going in many directions.

“It will have an influence on our actions, a strong pull on our emotions. You must remember this is a divine gift, once used by the gods to create the world. It was not made for mortals. When Helena gave it to us, there were dangers even she could not have foretold. If you pull it all the way in, as you did on the first night of the Hours, it reaches the delicate veins in our brain. There, it can take control of our thoughts as well. It even changes the whites of our eyes.” Her line finally stopped, ending where the man’s skull would be.

“Is that what causes the fog?” I ask. Grappling with the anguish tearing through me, I stare at the drawing, remembering. Twice, I’ve pulled the energy in too far—and twice, I’ve killed in an ebber’s rampage, with a black cloud muddling my thoughts.

“Yes,” she says, caution in her voice. “But it’s not always bad.”

My head snaps up then, my thoughts wild with the horrors I’ve inflicted in such a state. Her eyes are soft when they meet mine, the amber in them liquid and warm in a way that makes my stomach drop. *Gods dammit.* Rather than voice the dark memories her words muster, I simply nod, and she goes on.

“How ebbing affects us depends on the energy we take in. Not all of the flow is tinged with violence and malice. For example, if one of us were to blind ourselves here, with the tranquility of the forest and the cold winter surrounding us, the magic would direct us differently from how it guided you that night.” She gestures vaguely toward Toeska, which lies west of the clearing we’ve chosen.

“Why is the flow different here?” I ask, though I’ve seen the proof of the statement for myself. Haven’t I been ebbing in the mountains for years, letting the energy soothe my emotions in these calm woods?

“Every living being, and even some who are not alive, *per se*, adds their energy to the flow all the time. People, animals, trees—even the mountains themselves. My people have legends of a time when mountains and oceans were as alive as you or I, when they breathed life into the world after Nidaos and Helena created them.” Her voice has taken on a dreamy quality, and when I peer at her, she’s gazing east across the mountain range as if she can see whatever lies beyond.

“What is a blind? You’ve used that word twice now and never explained,” I say, my curiosity getting the better of me.

“Oh! I’m sorry. All this is as familiar to me as breathing—we are taught very young at home.”

“They teach you?” I try to imagine a life where my magic isn’t hated, spat on, thought of as evil—and I can’t, not really.

“All ebbers learn from a young age how to control and use their powers. It’s considered an honor in my culture to be born with the gift. Families blessed with it are often sought out for betrothals and matches because everyone wants the power in their line, even though it’s not always passed that way. We worship the goddess Helena and her gift to us, the gift of ebbing. It’s also taught for safety—as you know, our magic is dangerous, in the right circumstance.” She leans forward, resting her elbows on her knees. The movement drops the neckline of her shirt lower, and I have to remember to keep my eyes from straying to the faint line of her collarbone framing the base of her throat, the burnished skin there as freckled as her face.

“A blind, or blinding yourself, is when you pull the energy too deep and it enters your sclerae. The eyes come after the brain, and they are a visual sign the energy has completely embedded into the mind. You’re not truly blind—but since you are blind to your actions, your thoughts, and many people describe not being able to see through the fog of the energy, the name sticks.”

“Have you ever been blinded?” I ask, wanting her answer to be yes, wanting to not be the only one to have ebbed too deeply.

“We all must blind ourselves before we pass our final test and become adults. So we know what it feels like. But I have only been blinded by positive energy—the swell of the ocean, the sighing of the trees. The flow where I live rarely becomes dark and corrupted like it does here.”

The darkness I’d ebbed had been from the cave. From the death and deceit and agony swirling through the cavern as my sister left this world, her passing brutal and violent. I’d let it into my body, my blood, my mind, let the darkness swallow my anguish and release it on who knows how many souls.

Had I killed bloodhounds? Or only other ebbers who were unfortunate enough to get in my way? Maybe I’d given them a

quicker death than the hounds would have, but the thought does little to comfort me—even if they were slated to die, I'd been the one to end their lives. All I know is many fell to my power that night.

And the other time I'd blinded myself with wrath and rage, with the blackness swirling along the city streets, a child so hurt and scared that I'd latched onto the energy around me and willed it into my veins...

I shy away, scattering the ghosts of my memories like a flock of starlings. I'm on my feet before I even register the action.

“Do you have somewhere more important to be?” Ever's voice breaks through the dark clouds in my mind. When my surroundings come back into focus, she is staring at me, head cocked quizzically, eyebrow raised in taunt. “I don't have to teach you healing if you're no longer interested.”

“I am interested,” I say without thinking through the double meaning. Ever laughs, the snow eating up the sound greedily before it bounces through the trees. Shaking her head as I flush again, she pats the empty stretch of rock beside her.

“Excellent. I hope you brought a knife.”

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

With each slice the knife makes into my forearm, I study Ever's magic closing the gash. The first few times, I watch her demonstrate on herself, ebbing in a touch of the white-gray energy around us and layering it as a trailing gel over her cut. Then I insist she try on me, hoping the feeling of the energy healing my arm might help me understand.

Once I begin trying, with Ever by my side to close up the wounds, it takes me a while to pick up on how to shape the energy. Ebbing can be a chore; sometimes it is hard to pull in enough energy to work with, and shaping takes concentration and practice. I've only ever released the magic from my fingers, not consciously willed it into anything of use.

When I've gotten the consistency mostly right, Ever explains how to push the energy into the wound. Then comes the actual hardest part—forming the magic into tiny hooks, knitting the skin back together as the power slides away.

She shows me once again on her arm, the clean edges pulling neatly back together. Even the split freckles become cohesive. "It takes skill to leave no marks, but the magic wants to heal, to help. You can also work with neutral or even negative energy, but it will be harder to manage and control."

"Like the energy has a mind of its own," I note, eyeing my arm apprehensively. She nods encouragingly, taking stock of my nerves.

"You don't have to try today."

“No. I’m ready,” I say. I make a shallow slice on my outer forearm where the blood vessels are few, barely noticing the pain. My attempt at healing is clumsy, but after a few fumbling moments, I close the wound. I have just enough energy pulled in to succeed, sweat breaking out on my brow from the effort. There is a small pink line of scar tissue left behind, eerily reminiscent of my tally marks, but I’m still pleased with myself.

“You catch on fast,” she says, nodding in approval. Without warning, she leans forward and takes my arm, examining the line of rose-tinged scar against my chalky skin. Wherever her fingers touch me, heat erupts, and all at once, I’m overwhelmed by the smell of her hair, floral in an unfamiliar way I’d never noticed before, overlaid with pine sap.

The freckles on her forehead draw my eyes to her face, tracing the abstract lines and shapes they form as they spray across her cheeks, down the bridge of her nose. She leans back without noticing my inspection, dropping my arm and letting out a puff of air along with her laugh. “As much as I hate to boost your ego, it looks pretty good for your first time.”

“Can I try again?” I ask, finding myself looking forward to her inspection of my work. She laughs, leaning back further until her arms are behind her and the weight of her torso is balanced on them, narrow shoulders and heavy chest open to the sun.

“Sure. Slice yourself up all day if you want, as long as I get to watch.” Her smirk is sly and teasing, and I grin back, picking up her mood. She’s recovered some of her former sarcasm after admitting her secret to me last night, as if a weight is lifted from her shoulders.

“Anything for your entertainment,” I say, my voice dropping a shade. When her gaze darkens and flicks down—to my arm, or to my chest?—I know she’s caught my double meaning.

Her lips twist wryly, and her answer is exactly what I anticipated.

“Anything?”

We continue the flirting and taunting for a few more hours, although there are breaks in the teasing when I make progress with healing. It’s grueling and slow, not as easy as I’d hoped. By the end, I am growing frustrated with myself.

“Don’t beat yourself up,” she says when the sun begins its descent, unfolding her legs and sliding from the rock. “You’re playing catch up. Most ebbers have been doing what you’re learning now since they were children.”

“What’s the next step?” I ask, joining her in the snow. I stretch my arms above my head and roll to my toes, shaking the stiffness of sitting on cold stone from my muscles. A sigh passes from my lips as I come back down, and I catch her staring at my elongated body. She glares at me, turning and following our own footsteps back through the trees.

“Show off,” she mutters to herself. I jog to catch up, matching her shorter steps as we trudge back toward the cave. When we reach where we left the tree branches, she lets me walk ahead, unsure of where to go without our footprints for a guide.

I’ve just turned back to ask her a question when she stops dead in her tracks, head jolting up like a startled deer. I freeze, having heard the snap of a branch as well. Standing tall, I survey the surrounding forest, looking down the slope we’ve been traversing to where I thought the noise came from.

“Sayer,” Ever breathes, and I swivel to her. She’s gazing off to our left, eyes narrowed, trying to make something out through the trees. “Is that a person?”

I squint against the sun too, trying to discern a human shape amongst the tall, straight-limbed trees. Maybe the ebber woman has returned? But when I scan the climbable branches, I see nothing but the dip of snow-capped needles and shifting clouds beyond. I widen my search, roaming my gaze down the trunks. Pale skin, almost white enough to match the snow, catches my attention near the bottom, and I sweep across the low-lying brambles and leaf-bare bushes barely sticking out of the drifts.

Two slashes of cerulean eyes meet mine.

The ebber's eyes were not blue.

“Run,” I say as the figure rises, but it comes out a whisper. The sun catches on a pin at her breast, a wolf head wreathed in gold. I recover in time to turn and find Ever's wide eyes staring back at me, full of terror.

“Run!” I'm shouting now, pushing Ever back up the hill and away from the hunter crouched low behind the shelf of snow.

A bloodhound has found us.

Adrenaline, barbed and metallic in my veins, pumps through my legs as I sprint after her. The hunter knows her trap is sprung—she slogs behind us, slowed by the cloying powder.

Ever struggles uphill, snow thick around her knees. I catch up easily, grabbing her hand and pulling her with me. It's hard for her to keep up on her shorter legs—after a moment, I reach back and scoop her up, slinging her over my shoulder. Her protest is short lived as we careen through the forest. She's heavy, her thick thighs bouncing against my chest, but I am broad and strong enough to carry full grown bucks back from a hunt. Her weight is not a hindrance, especially with the threat of death looming at our backs.

I spare a glance back when I change direction, no longer keeping on a path. The woman chasing us is short, white-blond hair swinging wildly in a few braids down her back, a bruise purpling the corner of her mouth. Ice chip eyes bore into my soul.

My feet stumble, and I try to right myself but drop Ever in the snow. I launch toward her and pick her up again, the shock of the woman's identity rippling through my body, though I don't know why I'm surprised.

I should have known Isla would find me. Would take her chance to kill me after all this time.

But during the day? Doesn't Isla value her life too much for that? I swing around again, though I keep my balance this

time, knowing what to expect. Isla has fallen behind, her short legs unable to keep up in the drifts. Surging ahead, my legs pump in time with my heavy breath.

Where to go? Not the cave—no, wherever we go now could be easily tracked. The air is like glass in my lungs, my muscles screaming for me to stop. Only when I reach a wider gap in the trees where the snow has been shortened by the howling wind do I stumble to a halt, setting Ever down on her feet. She looks like she has a few words to say, but we aren't safe yet.

“Can't go back to the cave,” I pant, putting my hands on my knees and hanging my head between them. Isla crashes through the pines, but the sound is far enough away for the moment.

My eyes roam wildly, searching for somewhere to hide, a way out. Maybe Isla does hate me enough to kill me in the daylight, even if it means her death as well. “Wherever we go, she'll follow.” I gesture to the footprints leading directly to me, and Ever doesn't need to nod for me to know she understands. We dropped the branches when we ran. There is terror in her eyes, but also calm. Calculation.

“The stream!” Ever exclaims, and I straighten enough to catch sight of the silver ribbon lacing through the trees. “Come on!” She grabs my hand and pulls hard enough that I'm tripping over my own feet to follow her.

Comprehension only hits when Ever is halfway through pulling off her socks, her boots already on the ground by the rushing water. “What the hell?” I say, grabbing her arm. She shakes me off and finishes pulling the sock from her foot, glaring.

“It's the only way she can't track us,” she says, gathering her shoes. “Come on, get your shoes off. We need to go now, before she catches up.”

“She's going to know we went into the water,” I say, but I'm already pulling my own boots off. The snow burns like fire when I set my bare foot down, and I hiss at the bite of cold

as I shift my weight to my other leg. “If we even survive getting wet in temperatures like this.”

“She won’t know which way we go. And if we don’t, she’ll just track us until dark and kill us anyway.”

“If I get hypothermia, I blame you.” She’s already wading into the water, and the snapping of branches warns me that Isla draws closer. I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and plunge in after her.

For the first awful seconds, I am paralyzed. The glacial water slices down to my very bones, infusing my body with searing cold. I yelp in surprise and pain, then grit my teeth and force my feet to take me further into the stream. My body fights me as I strain against every instinct telling me to pull my limbs from the frozen water. I’m already numb by the time I trudge out to where Ever stands waist deep in the stream, her whole body quaking with cold.

We move as quickly as possible, fighting the current of the stream. Luckily, it mostly meanders, not offering much resistance. Downstream would take us too close to our cave. Rocks are slick underfoot, and at some sections, the stream is so still we have to shatter the thin layer of ice coating the surface before we can walk through. Such a thing would give us away if Isla came looking, but we haven’t heard her in a while—she must have turned the other way. Thank the fucking Dark Goddess for that.

“We’ve gotta get out,” I mumble to Ever, the chattering of my teeth clumping the words into strained syllables. “We’ll both die if we stay in here much longer.”

All she does is nod, her lips tinged blue and all color drained from her face. Her coppery complexion is sallow with shock when I help her out, her skin icy to the touch. I’m sure I don’t look much better, pallor stealing what little color there was.

At least our socks and shoes are dry. I’d thought she was crazy when she first took them off, but the warmth is delicious as I slide the dry socks over my feet. I stomp them, trying to

bring life back into swollen red toes. I'm terrified of frostbite taking them, but there's not much to be done for now.

The wet clothes are the worst problem—the sun is already dipping behind the mountains, and a northern wind has settled into the crevices of the range. I shiver harder than before, the soaked leather of my pants freezing to my skin. Ever's wet to the waist, half of her shirt clinging to her stomach and hips along with her leggings.

“We have to get away from the stream,” I say. Ever nods weakly. We trudge through the wood as the light drains from the valley, the pale snow ready to be painted in gory light.

“Where are we going?” Ever asks, catching my arm to steady herself. I shake my head—I don't know, and I don't know how to tell her.

“What about there?” she asks, pointing upwards. There is a gully ahead, born of some forgotten creek bed, and above it, a stone wall creates an alcove in the mountainside. It's no cave, but the shelf is clear of ice and protected from the wind by a rocky overhang.

“Good enough,” I mutter, too tired and cold to be bothered with opening my lips all the way. With her hand in mine—*when did I take it?*—I shuffle to the bottom of the wall. I boost her onto the ledge, then pull myself up, using the last of my strength to haul my body over and onto the shelf.

I lie with my eyes closed, on my back, catching my breath for a moment. Or at least I think it's only a moment, but soon, Ever is leaning over me and hissing. “Sayer! You have to stay awake!”

“Hmm?” I blink my eyes open, focusing on the red face above me. Red hair, red skin—red? I sit up abruptly, nearly smashing my head into hers. I stare up in horror at the scarlet scythe in the sky, the waxing blood moon hooded by smoky clouds as she rises into the night.

“Blood and stars.” I scramble back with the curse on my lips into the minor safety of the overhang, pulling her with me.

She's shivering, and when her gaze meets mine, I know she's as tired as I am.

"We need to get warm." I'm back in survival mode, the haze gone from my mind. Seeing Sangua bright and stark above us gives me all the clarity I need to assess our situation.

In our current condition, we won't last long. Remembering my pack, I sling it from my shoulders and rummage through the compartments until I find what I'm looking for.

"Oh, thank the stars," I say, unfolding the completely dry fur lined sleeping bag. I almost didn't bring the thing this morning—after all, we were only going for some training and would be back before nightfall. "For once, my paranoia actually paid off."

Ever says nothing as I pull some dried meat and nuts from the bag, a frozen waterskin, and some extra socks. I hand her one of the pairs, knowing any additional layers will help, though it isn't much.

"Should we build a fire?" Ever asks, but there isn't any hope in her voice. She already knows my answer before I say it.

"No, the hounds might see it," I answer. She nods, then eyes our meager supplies and looks back to me.

"What can we do then?"

I roll out the sleeping bag, pushing it to the farthest corner of the alcove where the shelf overlaps the most. I frown, glancing from the bag to her, then sigh.

"I'm sorry," I say, reaching for the laces of my pants. "We're going to have to get a little close."

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I can't bring myself to remove my briefs even though they are soaking wet. Ever has already tucked herself into the sleeping bag, still shivering. Our clothes are laid out where the sun will see them first thing in the morning—with any luck, they will be somewhat dry when we wake.

I kneel next to the bag, then slide my legs in behind Ever's. Luckily, this sleeping bag was made with two people in mind—I brought it in case something like this ever happened to Ena and me. It's a tight fit with two adults, but we manage, my body curling close to hers as I reach behind me and pull the leather cord to tighten the laces shut.

At first, all either of us concentrates on is the shudders racking our bodies, which subside as the fur absorbs our heat and traps it around us. My lower half thaws, first my toes, then my feet. Delicious heat licks up my limbs and I groan, half in pain and half in pleasure of regaining feeling in forgotten muscles.

Ever's body settles too, the shivers coming less and less until they stop all together. Her feet tangle with mine, and I yelp when her still cold toes seek the warmth of my calves, then find their way into the joint of my knee.

“Hey!”

At my protest, she presses her toes in deeper with a conniving giggle. Her feet suck the newly gained warmth from my legs, but I find I don't mind as much as I should—the movement brings her body closer to mine from top to bottom,

her back pushing into my chest and her hips curling against my form.

“Sorry, but I can’t help it,” she says, laughing. “How are you already so warm?”

“I’m naturally hot,” I say, aware the joke is lame. To my relief, she laughs and sinks back into me, resting her head against my chest.

“Apparently so,” she replies, pressing against a new spot on my leg for emphasis. We’re both quiet, and I close my eyes, relief from the night chill flooding my body. I’ve pulled the hood of the bag over our heads as much as possible, but our faces are still exposed. Luckily, the overhang blocks the wind, and it’s tolerable to have some access to the night air.

However, being nearly out in the open offers no escape from the moon’s awful light. I open my eyes again, and another stab of horror punches my gut. Closer than the other moon, Sangua floods everything around us in gore, and the shiver running down my spine at the sight of the bloody snowscape has nothing to do with the cold.

Of course, Ever notices the tension in my body and surprises me by finding my hand with hers. She pulls it over herself until I’ve wrapped my arm around her sturdy waist, as if I’m nothing more than a blanket. “Let’s repurpose those naturally hot hands for something useful then.”

Electricity zings through my core, and all at once, I am aware of everywhere our skin touches. Her body is more than warm against mine—she is on fire, or I am on fire, at every place our bodies meet. A new kind of tension builds as I become incredibly aware of her curves; her hips almost forcibly ground into mine in the close quarters, the softness of her stomach where my hand rests just over her navel. I spread my fingers slowly, experimentally pressing into the flesh that rounds to a small bulge under my hand. I’ve never been with a woman so full and soft before. My hand moves lower and comes to rest on the rise below her navel.

Ever releases an unsteady breath, arching into my touch, a new huskiness to her voice when she speaks. “Not the kind of

useful I meant, but I like your interpretation better.”

The trace of my fingers stutters, freezing on their path. What in the Dark Goddess’s name am I doing? I must be delirious. Maybe hypothermia has driven me insane.

“I’m sorry,” I stammer, snatching my hand away. I’m glad she’s facing away from me—with how hot my cheeks are, I could probably go for another swim and still not be cold. I find myself wishing for icy water again a moment later when Ever pushes into me as she reaches for my hand, settling it back over herself with a sound low in her throat.

“Why’d you stop?” she asks, dropping her shoulder to look back at me. Her eyes are molten gold, turned bronze in the red moonlight filtering through the creaking tree branches overhead.

I swear to Nidaos she knows what she’s doing when she arches just a little more, and my hips answer hers of their own accord. Our thighs are skin to skin, only a few fabric layers between us up the length of her back.

Hesitantly, I pull my hand away from her again. Her eyes flash, but before she can protest, I reach a finger tentatively toward her shoulder. She breathes faster as I trace the outline of her body with one fingertip—the roundness of her shoulder, the joint at her armpit, the edge of her breast hidden beneath her undershirt. I follow the hills of her soft stomach, a dip in the middle where her curves meet, then trace up the mountain of her hip. The slope of her thigh is as far as I can reach—she’s closed her eyes and is leaning into my touch. *What are we doing?*

The thought of hypothermic madness flits through my mind again, but I know I am *very* present in the moment. I barely know her, but in my mind, I see her again in the clearing, teaching me to heal. The freckles on her cheeks crinkling when she smiled, her carved collarbone peeking from beneath her shirt. Adrenaline surges through me, the breathless insanity of everything from the last hours and the closeness of Ever’s body an intoxicating, dizzying distraction.

Her lips part just a bit, and she smirks, arching into me again. There's nothing left on my mind but her, and her skin, so much skin burning against me. Oh gods, I can't stop the heat racing and rising between—

The snap of a branch. A heart wrenching rush of panic. Everything about the moment goes cold with instinctual fear.

Ever whips her head towards the trees, hard enough it looks like her neck might break. Without a thought for what I'm doing, one arm wraps around her waist to pull her into my chest. I lean over her, creating a shield with my body while the other hand scrabbles for the dagger lying just outside the sleeping bag. The searing icy steel on my palm is a comforting kind of pain. For too many held breaths, I don't move, prepared to fight whatever might skulk from the trees.

After a few of the tensest, heart pounding moments of my life, nothing appears from the bloody night. Returning the knife to its place by my head, I settle back into the warm furs, and Ever breathes again. She looks back over her shoulder, but the amber is not liquid with heat anymore. It's frozen solid in unfiltered terror.

“Maybe it was just an animal?” she asks, but I can tell she doesn't believe it. I nod anyway.

“Maybe.”

She turns her face away from me, curling into herself and crossing her arms over her chest. Her shoulders seem to fold in, making her smaller.

This time when I put my arm over her and pull her close, it's not for warmth or lust. It's the simple gesture of one human comforting another.

We stay like this for a while. I stare up at the moon again. After many, many carefully controlled breaths, Ever relaxes, and she unfurls her shoulders just a little to settle back against me. It's not like before, but I didn't expect it to be. The moment for that kind of closeness has passed.

“Does the moon scare you?” she asks. Her breath clouds in red puffs, looking too much like aerosolized blood.

“I’m just not used to being out in it,” I reply, suppressing a shudder. “Even at home, we stay inside during the blood moon. The priests call it Helena’s Eye, the only time the Dark Goddess can look down upon us. The legends say it’s bad luck to be touched by its light.”

“At home, we celebrate it,” Ever says with longing. I hold still to hide my shock—they celebrate an event as awful and terrifying as Sangua’s rising and the Dark Goddess herself? But I don’t want her to stop talking, so I keep myself quiet.

“She is our patron goddess. There’s a feast on the first night of the moon’s cycle—and one on the last. We all stay up until she rises. It’s considered a lucky night. Sangua’s arrival means more frequent, higher tides—and with those tides comes more fish. That’s our main source of food and commerce. It’s a time of abundance and plenty for the whole twenty-eight days.” Her voice trails off, and it’s almost as if I can feel the pang of homesickness wracking her body.

“It sounds a lot better than how we celebrate the moon’s rising,” I say, trying to keep my voice light. She snorts, and I smile at my success.

“We ebb too, all of us who can. Together, we pull in the brilliance of Sangua’s energy, her light. We show the Dark Goddess our appreciation for her gift. There’s a new celebration each night of her cycle—like building with ebb energy, creating sculptures of a sort.”

“You can do that?” The image of doing something frivolous with ebbing—something that creates rather than destroys—makes my heart yearn in a way I can’t quite place. “It sounds beautiful.”

“It is.” I feel her smile pressing into my arm as she turns her head a little. “I never win, but I like to look. My mother always said I have more talent in healing magic than anything else.”

“From what I’ve seen, I’d have to agree,” I say. Speaking of life away from this place, where a red moon does not bring death, eases the tension in my chest. “I’ve always been told the

coasts are nearly uninhabitable because of the tides. Is that not true?”

Ever shrugs against me. “Yes and no. When Sangua is not in the sky, pulling at some other area of the world, the tides can become rough. But my people live on high cliffs, not on the beach itself. It isn’t really a problem, and the ocean isn’t always like that. I’ve sailed in perfect waters hundreds of times.”

I’m quiet for a moment. “I wonder what else they’ve lied to us about.”

When Ever doesn’t answer, the silence presses in. It feels as though there are ghosts of words in the air, things she could say, or might say, but she seems to have no answer for me.

After a while, the strain dissipates, and we are both somewhere else in our thoughts. Conversational distractions at an end, mine keep returning to the gory moon above us, and how exposed and anxious I feel under her gaze. And to the minutes before the crack of a branch stopped something—what? The adrenaline of the day and the closeness of Ever’s body are clouding my mind.

“Who was the woman who chased us?” Ever asks into the quiet, and it seems too loud. She notices too and drops her voice to a whisper. “She looked familiar for some reason.”

My chuckle is unexpected as it rasps nearly silently out of my mouth. Ever shivers as my gauzy laugh caresses her ear, and I lean away from her. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” she replies, but her voice catches. She tucks her legs away from mine, untangling them, and the sudden void left behind allows cold in to lick the places she touched me.

“But who was she? You call them bloodhounds?” Ever continues, seeming to regain some normalcy to her voice. She turns until she is almost on her back, giving me a querying look. I struggle to reel myself back to our conversation, missing her warmth.

“How did you even see her clearly?” I ask, thinking of our mad dash through the forest.

Her body tenses. “Oh, I wonder. Maybe it was when you threw me over your shoulder like a sack of grain?” The sarcasm is heavy, and it brings another chuckle rumbling in my throat, dispelling the awkward weight of the air between us. She doesn’t like me laughing at her and reaches to lightly smack my arm. “I am perfectly capable of running. You didn’t need to treat me like an inanimate object.”

“Oh, sorry. I’ll remember that next time I’m trying to save your life and the snow is too high for you to run properly,” I say, flicking her nose with my thumb. She ducks away, but I catch the corner of her mouth lifting, and I feel like I was probably forgiven a while ago.

“As for who the hunter was, you should know. You punched her outside the gate,” I say.

“Oh!” Ever twists to face me fully, her nose so close to mine, I almost have to cross my eyes to focus on her. When I do, hers are wide and filled with shame, burning amber.

“Sayer, it’s my fault she was hunting us, isn’t it? They aren’t supposed to during the day, but she was tracking us anyway because of what I did.” She turns back over, twisting her hands together. “If I could just keep my goddess-damned temper. If these people weren’t savages, weren’t sacrificing people just to appease some *god*...” she trails off, stewing in her rage. I hear the guilt in her words too. She believes she’s brought Isla down on us. How wrong she is.

I shake my head. “Ever.” When she doesn’t respond, her body still taut, I tug at her shoulder. “Hey. Look at me.”

She rolls onto her back as much as she can in the tight sleeping bag, her wide hips stretching and pushing against me when she twists. “What?” she snaps.

“That woman isn’t after you,” I say, though I roll my eyes at her. “Not to say what you did wasn’t incredibly stupid.”

“She grabbed me!”

“Yes, and hours after that, she was sent into the forest to hunt you. It’s not a great idea to poke the wolf before it’s about to decide which prey to eat. But anyway, she wasn’t tracking

you.” I pause, but the debate of whether to tell her doesn’t last long in my head. “She was here for me.”

The way her mouth falls open makes the flesh around her chin gather a bit, the freckles dipping and moving in new ways. It makes me want to reach out and trace them, let them guide me to her bottom lip which is pouty and full with the display of shock and confusion.

“Why would she be here for you?” she asks, brow creasing, features moving in a dance with each expression.

It takes a second before her words register. A storm of regret rolls across my chest, and a familiar tide of anger rises in my gut. *Stupid Isaac and his stupid, stupid last request.* I never could refuse him, in life or in death. I curse myself again—my lips are too loose around this woman.

“She and I have... history.” I leave it at that, unsure how much to explain. I don’t want to tell her this—I’ve never told anyone about this. The memory still has claws.

Ever’s eyes narrow, and I swear there is more steel in her tone when she speaks. “What kind of history? An ex-lover? I suppose someone might think you’re good looking, Sayer, but not enough to hunt you down during the Blood Hours.” The last part tries to be teasing, but there is too much tension and heat in her face. It’s not hard to tell why, and I won’t let her get away with it too easily.

“What makes you jump to such a conclusion?” I ask, lifting a brow.

She rolls her eyes in response. “What else could you have possibly done to make her murderous?”

Just kill her brother. The mirth slides from my face. “No, it’s not like that.”

“Then what is it like?” she presses. She’s unconsciously rolled more toward me, her upper body parallel with mine, her waist still even with the ground.

I shudder and look away from Ever’s searching gaze for the first time. The wretched moon draws me into her again,

and it's as if I can feel her watching, the weight of her light a judgment.

I'm quiet a long time until Ever shifts, and I know she's going to ask again. She doesn't seem to take no, or nothing, for an answer.

"How much do you know of the Hours?" I ask. I don't take my eyes off the moon, staring back at her in defiance.

"Not as much as I should, probably," Ever replies, and it's the uncertainty in her voice that pulls me from Sangua. She's leaned away from me, or as far as she can in the tiny sleeping bag anyway, sensing I need space.

"Do you know how we are marked?" When she shakes her head, I continue, the words sounding dead and wooden in my throat. This has been recited to me many, many times. A piss-poor explanation of our death sentence.

"When a child is born in Toeska, it is brought to a testing center on its twenty-eighth day of life. Up until that point, the child is not allowed to be named. All children go through this, magical and non-magical alike."

Ever is rapt, hanging onto my words. I can't tell what emotions flicker across her face for once, so I go on.

"In the testing center, they take the child away from their family to back rooms. No one is ever allowed to see this ritual—it's supposed to be sacred. When they bring the baby back, the parent tells them the child's name—then it is revealed if the child is a normal citizen or an ebber. A promise of years is given to them; the number they will be allowed to live before their Blood Hours. They're also marked with the E tattoo they use to identify us." I untuck my hand from the sleeping bag and spread my fingers in front of her face, revealing the small E stamped in black ink.

"Oh," she says, the sound escaping from her mouth in a small cloud of breath. As I tuck my hand away, her fingers search out mine. She traces the webbing between my thumb and index finger before taking my hand in hers fully. "What happens after that?"

I clear my throat, trying to push down the disgust and bile. “If the child is an ebber, the promised years are tattooed on our arm—but the ink is imbued with the Blood King’s magic. For every passing year, one tally mark disappears. When you have none left, you go to the Hours.”

It’s easy to decipher the look on Ever’s face now—absolute, sheer horror. She didn’t know this. I wonder what else she does not know of the beautiful, gilded, rotten city.

“I remember the day of Ena’s test. She’d been a bright baby—quiet, but happy. My mother was so excited when she brought her in. She hoped she might be non-magical. She hadn’t shown a single sign, like the rest of us did. If she was normal, she’d get to live a full, rich life.” My throat swells with the memory.

“When they brought her back out, Ena was crying. It was the very first time I’d heard her scream like that—she would whimper and whine, as babies do, but she was wailing. It scared me. I rushed forward to see her as they placed her in my mother’s arms, worried. That was the first time I saw her tally.” Reflexively, I rub my arm, almost able to feel the dark scars on my skin. The old anger stirs, the all-consuming rage I felt ten years ago, the first time my young body felt such hatred in all my life.

“How... how many did she have?” Ever’s voice is small, a mouse to my lion. Her question grounds me, pulls me back from the edge of the chasm of swarming emotions threatening to sweep me over.

“Ten.”

Her gasp sucks the last bit of control from me. Now she knows what they did to my sister. The short life the Blood King cursed her with. A tear slips out and runs down my temple into my hair.

“That’s... that’s...” Ever struggles for words, grasping for a way to express her horror and surprise. I pull my fingers from hers and catch her face in my hand. It stops her reeling, her focus coming completely back to my eyes.

“Yes,” I say, knowing the feeling of falling in place, of trying to comprehend a death sentence being handed down to an infant. “Yes.”

“How can they do that?” Now the disgust has reared, the anger.

Yes, I think again. Yes. Now you understand. Though she doesn’t, not fully. But it’s easy to see her mind working, to see where this leads.

“How old were you?” she asks next, calculations buzzing behind her gaze.

“I was eleven when Ena was born,” I say, offering nothing more. *Please don’t ask about my years.*

Of course, I’m not lucky enough for that. “How many did they give you?” The abhorrence for the people who condemn us is nothing compared to what she will think if I tell her the truth. If I tell her how I really ended up in the same year of the Blood Hours as my ten-year-old sister.

“I’m twenty-one.” *Will it be enough?* One look at Ever’s curious face tells me it’s not. I don’t blame her for wanting to know—but I cannot, will not, do this right now. I know where these questions will eventually lead.

I close my eyes. Too much—this night has been too much, a series of cliffs and hills, making me dizzy. I want to be done thinking, done feeling, on this terrible night. And most of all, I don’t want to answer Ever’s questions anymore.

“I... I don’t want to talk about this,” I breathe. I turn over as best I can, away from Ever’s prying questions and curious, entrancing eyes. “We’ll go to one of my other safe places in the morning. It’ll be a long trek. We should sleep.”

“But Say-” Ever begins, but I cut her off more sharply than I mean to.

“I said I don’t want to talk about it,” I growl.

There will be no more words between us tonight.

I barely sleep, seeing only a baby’s arm marred with ten black slashes behind my eyelids, and feeling the pressure of

Ever's gaze on my back, following me into my dreams.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A finger of cold, like the caress of ice-crusted nails, drifts down my spine. I shudder, flipping over to give my right hip a break from the barely padded ground, and reach for the warm body I've grown used to.

My hand gropes, finding only chilled, forlorn fur beneath my fingertips.

Panic darts through my veins as I snatch the knife from where it lies by my head. My gaze sweeps the small lip of the cliff frantically, then the forest beyond, eyes wild. Ever is gone. How did I not notice her leaving?

"Finally," someone mutters behind me, and my heart forgets how to work for a beat as it sputters, then restarts. I grab at my chest and cover my mouth with my other hand, muffling the yelp which escapes anyway.

"Nidaos's eye, Ever!" I half yell when I spin to find her standing at the edge of the rock, hands on her hips. She's recovered her clothes, though they cling to her in a way that suggests they may not be fully dry. "You scared me half to death."

"You look half dead," she whispers under her breath, crossing the space and dropping a pile of wood and pine needles in the cleared space beside the sleeping bag.

"What are you doing?" I ask, though it's obvious. I'm still trying to figure out how to get my body to work right as I climb out of the sleeping bag, shivering, to stand beside her.

With a word, she hands me my clothes, and I pull them on, grateful they are nearly dry.

“Making a fire. We need warmth and to dry these clothes a little more before we leave. It’s warmer today, but the wind is bad. Cuts right through the damp parts.”

I nod, though the thought of a fire sets me on edge. But really, what else can we do? If we stay in wet clothes too long, we will get sick, and that’s a sure way to end up dead. Besides, the bloodhounds should be long gone by now—logically, we would have left the area. With any luck, Isla will have left to search for us, too.

Ever starts the fire with some flint she pulls from her pack, the sharp, acrid scent of burning pine assaulting my nose. Trying to ignore the smoke, I lean against the rock wall that protected us last night and sort through what we have left. It isn’t much—some dried deer and rabbit meat, a bar of packed oats and granola wrapped in paper, two waterskins. Water won’t be a problem with all the snow and the stream, but there isn’t enough food here for another night in the open unless we hunt. Our best option is to find one of my storage caves. Not to mention we need dry clothing, or it won’t matter whether the bloodhounds find us or not.

Ever side-eyes me as she tends the fire. I know she wants more answers, more of an explanation for last night. But my secrets run deep and dark, so I pull my hood up and let the leather and fur shield me from her penetrating gaze.

“Come on,” she says as the flames roar a little, finally robust and hot. Stretching out my legs, I sigh in pleasure when the warmth laps at the still damp spots on my clothing.

“Well, where are we going?” Her voice tries for casual, light, but comes out forced. The sentiment is matched by the set of her jaw and her tilted brow.

“There’s another cave to the southwest,” I say, pulling two strips of deer meat from my pack. When I hand one to her, she bites into it, making a face as she chews. I can’t help but laugh at her expression.

“What? You don’t like it?” When she scowls, the chuckle bubbles up my throat again, expands until it’s a full belly laugh.

“We don’t eat much red meat at home,” she says, trying to be angry at my laughter, but she can’t keep the smile off her face either. It’s ridiculous, ostentatious even, to laugh in the middle of a forest where people are hunting us, but somehow, it also feels right. It always does when I laugh with Ever.

“Do you really only eat fish?” I ask as my mirth subsides, taking a bite of my own meat. Salty rubber—that’s what it tastes like, if I’m being honest. I see why she doesn’t like it.

Ever shakes her head. “No, not just fish. Shellfish too, like oysters, mussels, and clams. And crabs, lobster, shrimp. Seaweed. The ocean provides a bounty of foods to choose from, though the temperate forest is not to be outdone. We have fruit trees like oranges and peaches, and avocados grow well in our climate. They can be bitter, but prepared right are delicious. We trade with some of the people to the south to get more exotic fruits like mangoes. But still, nothing beats a just picked orange, or fresh squeezed orange juice.”

My mouth is watering at the thought of fresh fruits, though almost everything she has mentioned is unfamiliar to me. It brings back memories of the sweet pears growing in our garden every summer, and the bitter apples my mother cut up and baked with sugar and cinnamon into the best pies. I close my eyes, trying to block out her face. Smiling, scooping a slice of pie onto my place—screaming, her hands coming up to block—

“Hello?” Ever snaps her fingers in front of my nose, and my eyes fly open. She sits back down by the fire, shaking her head. “Where do you go when you do that? It’s like there’s a whole other world in your head.”

“Nowhere,” I say, not wanting to admit where my thoughts take me. It’s not another world—it’s the hellscape of my memories.

“Yeah right.” She rolls her eyes and takes another bite, grimacing at the meat. “One day, I’m going to get those

answers from you, like it or not. My curiosity shouldn't be tangoed with. Or that's what my mom says."

"Your mother is alive?" I ask, surprised. I'm not sure why I'm surprised—maybe I wanted her to be like me, in a way. To have lost everything, to be alone. But that's a selfish thought, and my cheeks flush with shame.

"Yes. She's at home." Ever is quieter now, and I can tell she is in her own other world.

"But you're here for your sister?" I remember her mentioning her sister, but up until now, I'd been too concerned with keeping us alive to give it much thought.

"Yes. She was... taken from us, a long time ago. I'm here to get her back."

"And you're going to do this by winning the Blood Hours?" I raise my eyebrows, and she scowls.

"What, you don't think I can?" Her voice jumps higher, sharper, and I shake my head before she can explode on me.

"I'm not enough of an idiot to bet against you," I answer. "But no one has won in over a hundred years. I've only heard stories. What makes you think you'll win if all those people have failed?"

"They didn't want it as badly as I do," Ever says, confident. "They wanted the King to strip them of their powers. I have a much more important boon to ask."

I look down, turning the meat in my hands to give myself something to do. "That's all I ever wanted. To keep Ena alive, most of all, but beyond that, selfishly? I wanted my dangerous powers to be stripped." A dark, roaring memory of the things I've done with my magic rises, threatening to swallow me whole. I fight it, wanting to stay in this moment. To stay with Ever.

"They can be dangerous," Ever remarks. "But there is much more to it than that. They can be beautiful, and helpful."

"And destructive. And deadly," I say, monotone and flat.

“Sayer,” Ever says, and the sound of my name spoken so gently makes me lift my head. Pity clouds her eyes, but something else unidentifiable lies within them too. “What happened to you?”

I stand, shoving the meat into my pocket. My pants aren’t quite dry yet, but I can’t stay still with this girl with her probing questions for another second.

“Let’s pack up and get moving. The other cave is a good hike away, and we have to get there before nightfall,” I say. Ignoring her will only make her ache for answers, but I am not willing to say anything else.

I don’t wait to see if she acquiesces—I march to the sleeping bag and start rolling it, throwing things back into my pack. It’s only when I hear the scrape of her boots and the hiss of the fire going out that I know she’s readying to leave too.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Afternoon sunlight falls just so through the aspen trees, bringing the remnants of stubbornly clinging golden leaves back to life. The wiry, white branches whisper to one another when the wind moves through them, rattling like bleached bones.

“This place is creepy,” Ever murmurs. The aspen grove curls in on itself as we walk through the tunnel made by the trees. I have to agree when I look up, the skeletal fingers of each limb twisting together to make prison bars which clash with the rich blue sky.

“It’s beautiful in the fall,” I say, remembering the lunch breaks I’d sometimes take in the shade here. This grove grows south of the city and is protected from wind and snow by sheer gullies and the Aultos Canyon carved through the foothills. We’ve left behind most of the pines in this lower elevation. “All the leaves change from green to golden yellow.”

“Without their leaves they just look like skeletons.” The wind whistles again, and though it’s a soft wind, it still jostles the empty branches into one another with an eerie rustle. As we move deeper into the copse, a spot of red against the otherwise pristine white forest floor stops me. A trail of footprints leads south, decorated along the edges with darkened blood.

“These are old. It hasn’t snowed here in a few days,” I say, cocking my head and kneeling to examine the pattern of the shoe. Being a cobbler’s son, and working in Lennon’s shop

when I was young, I know the make of a boot. These prints are rough around the edges, with no protective tread like the shoes the priests and priestesses wear. “And it’s not a bloodhound.”

Ever comes up alongside me, peering over my shoulder at the tracks. “An ebber? They look like they were hurt.”

“Probably dead by now,” I say with no emotion, but my heart still twists against my sternum.

When Ever doesn’t reply, I glance back. She’s staring down the trail the prints make into the forest, as if she looks hard enough, she might find the poor ebber. Before she can make a protest to follow the tracks and offer aid, I stand and turn back to our path. The one that will keep us as safe as it gets out here.

“Well, we’re almost to the cave,” I say, running one hand through my hair to push the longer pieces in front out of my face as the wind plays with them. “This one is a lot more hidden than the last one, and it has a second entrance for escaping if someone finds us.”

“If this one is so great, why weren’t you here in the first place?” Turning from the bloody footprints with a careful blankness in her eyes and a forced lightness to her voice, Ever swats aside a branch clinging to her clothing like it’s trying to hold her in the grove. She shudders and breaks the offending limb with an angry snap. The sound echoes through the winter-dead trees.

“I’m glad we started with a different one. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have found you.” I don’t say what’s really on my mind, trying to keep my voice light. For once, she doesn’t push.

“Fair enough. You’ve been useful, for the most part, except when I had to save your ass on our first night.” Her voice is falling back into our natural banter, and her smile does something funny to my breathing. I brush it off, assigning the blame to our quick change in altitude.

We leave the aspen grove behind to both of our reliefs, making our way into what looks like a blind section of the

canyon. Bushes and large, deciduous trees dot the valley between the walls, the gray bowl of stone catching the mid-afternoon sunlight dripping over the mountains. The phenomenon is exactly why this region is called the Golden Valley.

I grow concerned when I approach the right wall of the canyon, searching for a familiar landmark. The crack in the wall, which normally indicates the entrance to the cave, is missing. Pacing back and forth in front of the stretch where the mark should be, I notice a boulder I don't recognize off to my left. I stalk towards it, eyeing the marks on the wall, evidence of a rockslide here not long ago. There is no snow on the boulder or rocks—this may have happened even as recently as last night.

My muscles complain, still sore from our long hike, as I scramble over the boulder. With relief, I finally see the entrance to our safe haven.

“Over here,” I call to Ever, grateful the rocks have not completely covered the entrance. She swings easily up and over the boulder, landing with grace next to me. We move a few stones to make the opening big enough to squeeze through, but I'm halfway down the tunnel before I realize Ever isn't behind me.

“Ever?” I call, turning back. I have to turn my body sideways to fit through the crack, but the rock only holds me a moment before releasing me back into the winter air.

“Are you sure this is safe?” Ever asks, eyeing the scars gouged into the cliff face by the falling rocks. Her brows knit together in concern, but I put an arm around her in comfort. “Not only does this seem unstable, but if that other ebber came through here, the bloodhounds might know about this place.”

“Don't worry. There was only one set of tracks. If anything, this rock slide is a blessing. The entrance is all but invisible now. Plus if another happens, which is unlikely in the same exact place, there is a second way out of this cave, remember? We'll be perfectly fine—hell, probably even safer than before.”

She still seems unsure, but one glance at the sun tells her the only thing I haven't. We don't have time to find another place—this one will have to do, safe or not. But I am confident this cave is going to be perfect to lie low in for a while. Isla won't be able to track us here, thanks to the sun melting the top layer of snow today and this entrance being nearly invisible.

“Alright,” Ever says, squaring her shoulders. She marches out from under my arm and squeezes through the opening, disappearing into the darkness of the cavern as I follow.



Ever builds another fire, and I dig through the crates along one wall. The supplies are very similar to the last place but even more plentiful. This cave is larger too, with a high, slanted ceiling that peaks in the center and echoes our words back to us when we speak. It's more a crack in the canyon than a proper cavern, but it serves the purpose we need it for—its long, narrow shape tapers off in the back, leading to another entrance hidden by a copse of dense trees and brush. The other opening is around a bend in the crack's length, keeping the wind from whistling in, and before long, we are both warm and content in dry clothes, sitting on opposite sides of the fire.

“I guess it's vegetarian tonight,” Ever remarks, pawing through the boxes of potatoes and sacks of grain.

“There's dried meat in the third from the left,” I say, nodding to the box. She crinkles her nose and decidedly skips over the indicated crate in her search.

“No thanks. These should make a good stew,” she says, coming up with some carrots from another box in the corner and adding them to the pile of potatoes. “I also found some herbs to season it.”

“Fine by me,” I say, thinking of the dried rabbit we ate on the way here and my stomach flipping a little. Since we'd

already finished the deer this morning, I'd swallowed the stuff down because I needed strength. Still, it stuck in my throat. *Am I ever going to be able to enjoy rabbit again?*

"We'll hunt tomorrow. A flock of turkeys winters here, and there are always lots of squirrels in the area."

"You sure know a lot about these woods," Ever says, looking up to see my reaction, but I don't tense at these words. This line of questioning is safe, comfortable.

"I'm a hunter. That's what I chose as my calling," I say.

She looks surprised, sitting back from a pot now bubbling with boiling water over the fire. "Why?"

"Why is that surprising?" I shoot back.

"I just thought with you living in a city and all, you wouldn't need to hunt. Or want to." She glances back at the pot, adding in potatoes as she skins and chops them absentmindedly.

"The forest is the only place I can relax," I answer honestly. "I don't have to worry about regular citizens staring or whispering. Or seeing other ebbers starving, begging for food. It's peaceful here. The... energy is better."

She nods. "I've never actually been inside the city, but even getting close, it's easy to tell the difference in the flow. The... malice. The hatred in those walls is strong. I'm not surprised you feel lighter away from it," she says.

"It's the only place I allow myself to ebb," I confess. She stirs the stew, and delicious smells tease my nose, my palate picking up hints of sage and thyme and spice. "It's the only safe place to do it."

"That makes sense too. You are untrained." Removing the wooden spoon from the pot, she blows on the liquid, then takes a small sip. "Do you want to try some?" she asks, holding the spoon over to me.

I reach across the fire, fingers brushing hers as I take the handle from her. I pull back, nearly dropping the spoon in the fire, and she laughs at my clumsiness. I laugh too, dipping the

spoon in and taking a taste. I'm not sure if it's the cold or just that the food is that good, because I'm taking another full scoop and nearly scalding my tongue on it right away. The warm liquid curls in my stomach, radiating heat into my chest, and I sigh at the flavors settling onto my tongue.

"This is good," I compliment her, going for another spoonful. She smacks my hand and pulls the utensil away.

"It's not done!" She hisses playfully, adding the carrots to the mixture. "You need to wait."

I grumble good-naturedly and settle back into the furs I placed to sit on, watching her cook. The snap of the fire sends sparks towards the ceiling, the smoke leaving through a crack that if I angle myself just right, allows a glimpse of the stars on their black velvet canvas. Still, it's hazy, and the smoke around Ever's head glows like a gauzy halo.

"So, I'm untrained?" I query, pulling at a thread of conversation we'd gotten away from but was still nagging me. Ever glances up.

"Well, yes. You barely can control your magic. What you did in the forest—at home, that is what toddlers do. They let the energy in, let it control them."

My ears burn, embarrassment turning the stew in my stomach sour. I sit up, leaning on my knees, not sure whether to feel stupid or angry.

"And you picked up the basics of healing quickly but didn't progress much beyond that, though it's to be expected," she continues, and a stab of relief cuts the tension in my stomach. "I think your potential is there, you just need to unlock your power. There's a hitch in the way you ebb, like you're holding back or something—once we get past that, the rest will come more easily. Any trained ebber could teach you the basics though, even with your constraints."

I know exactly what's holding me back from my power—but I don't say so. Can't let myself look too closely at why I've buried the use of my magic as much as possible. Enough people have been hurt by it already.

So instead of letting on that anything is wrong, I let a smile quirk the corner of my mouth when she glances at me. “And that trained ebber would be you, I presume?”

“No, I think you should let one of the bloodhounds train you,” she says sarcastically. I pick up some snow she brought in to melt for water and chuck it half-heartedly across the fire at her.

“Hey!” she squeals, knocking it out of the air with the spoon. It lands in the fire and makes a soft hiss as it melts away. “You’re going to get dirty snow in the soup.”

“I would like you to keep training me,” I say, still smiling. The one she returns is genuine.

“Then I will. And not just healing—how to control your power, how to shape it. How to resist the tempting pull of strong energies.”

“You really think I’ll be able to learn all that?” I ask eagerly. For the first time in my life, hopefulness about my power flows through me. For the first time, I am not utterly terrified of ebbing. Maybe I can let go and not hurt anyone.

“True control comes with time, but I can teach you to resist the worst,” she says, taking another taste of the stew. Her face lights up as she holds the spoon out to me again. “Dinner’s ready.”

Later, when way too much delicious vegetable stew sloshes in my stomach, I lie on my back staring at the cavern ceiling. The stars wink and dip between the rising snake of smoke curling through the small crack. An icy carapace crusts the edges along the opening, turned black and sooty where the smoke touches.

There is something wriggling in the back of my mind—a hope that I haven’t dared to say out loud.

“Ever?” I say, her name a question, and she rolls over to look at me. She’s been sharpening a dagger, humming softly to herself across the fire.

“Hmm?”

“Do you think...?” I trail off, then shake my head at my own stupidity. *Of course it won't work. Why would it work?*

“Never mind,” I say, rolling onto my back again.

“No, come on. What did you want to ask me?” The heat of her attention, her coaxing, draws me back onto one elbow, facing her.

“Do you think the Blood King has the power to... bring someone back?” I rush to clarify, knowing I already sound like an idiot. “Not like someone who died a long time ago, of course. But if their body was still here, still whole, had been healed maybe... I mean, the scripture says the Blood King has ties to all the gods, even Helena. She still rules the eight hells and the spirit world, after Nidaos cast her out for giving the ebbers their powers. The Blood King grants one boon to the winner of the Blood Hours, using all the gods' powers along with his own. Surely it's possible for Helena to bring someone back...”

I'm rambling, I realize too late, and shut my jaw with a click. I'm an idiot. Even if this were possible—and I'm sure it's not, sure it's just my wishful thinking—how would Ever know what the King can and cannot do?

But after a pause, Ever's hand comes to her chin, as if she's considering. Her eyes are unreadable but stirring with emotions, amber and orange in the light of the dying fire.

“I don't know, Sayer. If he commands the power of all the gods, I don't see why not. Helena is very strong.” She pauses, and I find myself hanging onto every word, as if she is the one who will grant me this boon.

“Could an ebber heal a body?” I ask, persistent now that I sense some minuscule amount of hope. Of possibility. “If there were a body, someone like us could heal the wounds with our magic?”

“I've never seen it done, but I believe so,” Ever says, though a frown still forms between her brows. “But Sayer... I'm not sure how much the gods are willing to give even if you win the Hours.”

“It can’t hurt to try.” There is a new intensity behind my eyes, desperation. “If I win, and ask this of him, and it doesn’t work...” I finish the sentence in my head. *There won’t be anything left for me with Ena truly gone.*

“If you win, and he says no, there are millions of other things to ask for. Money. Safety. Power. Freedom,” she says. I nod at her, though I’m not really listening. I’m trying to quell the hope blossoming in my chest—the hope that maybe Ena’s fate is not sealed after all.

“Thank you for offering to train me,” I say. I lie back down, and the stars seem a little closer, as if they know I feel lighter than air. “Thank you for this... chance.”

“Ask for what you want,” Lennon told me before we left.

Maybe I will.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The next few days turn into a week, then into nearly two. The blood moon has been in the sky for seventeen days, and Ever has been training me for twelve. We see no more traces of other ebbers and settle into a rhythm which feels almost normal.

At first, the training is tedious. She wants me to sit in a meadow, in the snow, and feel the flow around me. Just ebb in a little, then watch the energy swirl. I pick out the organisms still living below the permafrost layer, the way the trees give off green dusts of energy. Though I quickly grow bored, Ever reminds me I need to understand how the energy works before I can use it.

Thankfully, she deems me in tune enough with my surroundings to move on to the next step soon after. I ebb into my hands, and she guides them, showing me how my movements and the tensing of my muscles with the intention of my mind shapes the energy when it leaves me. I'm able to pour liquid from my fingers or shape my power into smoky darts which fly across the practice field to embed in a wooden target. Arrows, daggers, healing gel, spears, bowls—the ebbed energy can transform into a thousand different things. I still can't access the magic as easily and swiftly as Ever does, but even with my lower amounts of power, I make progress and learn to work around it.

At first, I am most interested in the weapons I can make, but the soft, positive and neutral energy are hard to hold in those shapes. It would much rather be used for healing or

another positive avenue, which is still proving difficult. I master the simple mending of wounds Ever teaches me—by the end of the ten days, my abilities have improved enough to stitch each shallow cut I make with my knife, but anything deeper or more complex is beyond me.

When I get frustrated, Ever reassures me of my progress, albeit a bit impatiently.

“Sayer, people take *years* to perfect this, both the healing and the shaping. Children are taught before they walk. The fact that you’ve picked up this much is a real accomplishment, especially with your lower energy levels. Maybe ebbers here just aren’t as strong as those at home in Bismaesa. Now stop bitching and keep practicing. It’s the only way you’ll get better.”

Her jabs, both placating and playful, do little to soothe my worries. I still can’t use my powers to protect us, nor to do the healing my spark of hope aches for.

My breaking point comes one day when we are sitting in the aspen grove. Ever’s holding the body of the wild turkey we hunted earlier in the day—presenting the fatal wound she’d made in its neck with an energy spear, which I am getting slightly better at holding together. Mine don’t last long enough to take down any prey, so one from Ever’s more steady, graceful hand had finished this bird off.

“You can heal this,” Ever says, guiding my hands over the hole in the turkey’s throat. I barely jump at her touch anymore—it has become familiar, though it still laces my blood with heat. But I am too tired, too frustrated today, for her skin against mine to have the usual effect. We are running out of time—there is less than two weeks until the Blood Hours end. And winning means nothing if I cannot do this.

I concentrate, calling the energy into my fingertips, into my blood and up my arms. It strains when I pull it in, wanting to snap free, but I quell the tension how Ever taught me to, ignoring the desires of the energy itself. Death, especially when violent like this bird’s, always sparks harder to control energy than normal. Ever said joyful, happy energy could be

hard to control as well, but it also makes you want to do things like dance and sing. It doesn't make you want to kill.

Taking a deep, deep breath, I push the energy out in a thick gel, gray tinged with red and black. Ever wants me to practice healing violent wounds, inflicted with negative intent—though this isn't as bad, since we killed the animal for food and not just for the sheer joy of it, like the bloodhounds. Still, the magic rails against my direction; even this slight negative charge is too much for me. I let it dissolve away rather than give in, as Ever has also taught me to do.

My frustration escapes in a huff, and I stalk away. My hands shake, and to my embarrassment, tears spring to my eyes.

“Hey, come back! Let's try again,” Ever says, springing up to trail behind me. Despite her harsh teasing and sarcasm, she is gentle with me, always weaving praise into the jabs. But today is too much—I am not learning fast enough. I need to get around my own trepidation and access my full power. If not, I won't be able to help Ena.

The anger at myself, at this place, at everything that's happened boils over. Accessing the flow no longer takes conscious thought, and a well of energy springs to life in my arms. I spin to face Ever, who's still holding the gods-damned turkey as she slips to a halt a few paces away.

Watching me with caution in her eyes, she sets the bird on the ground at my feet. More energy gathers in my veins, too much. When I release it, it slams into the animal with an explosion of color, so far from my intention to heal that I drop my hands in disgust.

“It's no use. I'm not any good at healing! This is pointless.” I turn to go but Ever skids around me, putting a hand on my chest to stop me.

“Sayer,” she says. Out of habit, I do stop, and she breathes deeply before pushing out her words. “You have been training for less than two weeks. Stop acting like an idiot. Did you learn to hunt in a day? Learn to shoot a bow and arrow in hours? Perfect setting a snare in minutes? This is no different.”

I'm already abashed before she's done speaking, but the desperation still gnaws at my insides. There is more at stake here than my success or failure.

"I know that," I say, looking down. When I raise my eyes to hers again, I reach out and touch her face, my fingers sliding across her soft skin until I am cupping her cheek, moving closer to her. A flash of something melts the amber in her eyes again, and gods dammit, I can't help the answering lick of heat. I stare into her eyes and step even closer, putting us face to face, bodies almost touching. Infinitesimally, she leans into my palm. "I know you've probably already guessed why I asked you about the Blood King's powers before. You probably already know what I'm planning. As stupid as it is, I want—" I choke, fighting against the painful lump rising in my throat. "I want to save her. My sister's body is still there. I want to heal her. And I can't do that."

Ever's hand comes up to my face, finds a tear I hadn't known was sliding down my cheek. She catches it on her finger, leaving a cool, damp streak in its wake. "I guessed."

"Of course, you did. You're not stupid." My smile is small, half of one really, and I know it doesn't reach my eyes. "That's why I wanted to learn. I had the idea before I even really let myself actualize it. But now that it's there... I have to try. And I'm not learning fast enough. I'm not good enough to help her." Another tear joins the first, and she wipes this one away, too.

"No, you're not," she says, and I think my body might collapse from desolation before she finishes the thought. "But I am."

Stunned, I pull away from her and step back in shock. "You—" I try, but my throat is too thick. I clear it and attempt the words again. "You would heal her?"

"I'll try," Ever says, taking my hand across the space I've put between us. She looks down at the blood there, the turkey's blood, spattered across my knuckles. "I don't know if it will work, but I'll try."

Before I know what I'm doing, before I let myself consider the consequences, my body is pressed against hers. I tilt her head up. My mouth finds hers, desperate and thankful and overcome with joy. With hope.

I crush myself to her, my lips tangling with hers, and she responds in kind. Her hands find my shoulders, my neck, one reaching up and tangling in my thick hair. My fingers find the curve of her waist, fasten around the small of her back, and the other cups the base of her skull in my palm. I'm rougher than I mean to be, but she is rough right back, pulling my head down to hers and standing on her tiptoes to reach me.

I back her against the stone cliff behind us, my hands running over her perfect ass before finding holds on her thick thighs. With ease, I lift her, breaking us apart and startling a gasp from her chest. My mouth hungers for another kiss, pressing her against the rock and grinding into the warmth of her legs around my waist. She tugs my head back by my hair, a sharp pull, and I allow the kiss to break. The sensation of her exploring my neck builds a low sound in the back of my throat. Her hands find my jaw, cradling it between them when she pulls away.

"Sayer," she says softly, gently. Her thumbs swipe at my cheeks, and I realize they are wet, the tears are still flowing and spilling down my throat. She must have tasted the salt. "You're crying."

"I'm—I'm sorry," I say, mortified. What am I doing? I pull away, setting her gently on the ground and backing up a few steps.

"I'm sorry. I was just so happy, I..." I trail off, trying to read her expression.

Sadness, worry, and something else cloud her eyes, something she is trying to hide behind the liquid desire still raging. My knees wobble at the thought of her mouth, her body on mine, and I very nearly press her back into the wall. But I'm still crying, the tears are still coming, and I don't know what she wants me to do. I don't know what I want to do.

“Thank you,” I say, and though the gratitude is for offering to heal Ena, I’m not sure if that’s all it means.

“Wait,” she starts, but I shake my head.

“I need to think. I need to... if we are going, I need to plan... I just need to think,” I stammer, backing away. Though she looks like she wants to say more, she only nods, and I turn and nearly sprint back to the cave, terrified of what this might mean for Ever’s safety.

People I care about don’t usually make it very long.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“**A**lright, let’s go.”

I look up, surprised, as Ever enters from the crack in the cave wall. I’ve started a fire in her absence. She didn’t immediately follow me into the cave when I ran from her. Part of me was glad she didn’t come after me—another part wished she had.

“What are you talking about?” I ask, cocking my head. She drops the remainder of our catch into a black pot and grabs her pack. While stuffing seemingly random items into it, she says over her shoulder. “To the next part of your training.”

“My training?” I ask, rolling my eyes. My foot scuffs the ground as I stretch it out in front of me, leaning forward with one knee still bent. “What’s the point, Ever? I’m not going to get good enough in the next two weeks for it to matter. By the time I’m proficient at controlling my ebbing, if we even survive, the Blood Hours will be a thing of the past. And you’ll be...” I trail off as I make this connection. Silence sits heavy in my throat, and I try to swallow past it. If we survive, in two weeks, Ever will have asked the Blood King for her sister. She’s not a citizen of Toeska; she’ll be gone.

“Tonight will help,” Ever says, ignoring my hesitation and my protests. She’s loading food into her bag; along with the sleeping bag and some of Ena’s clothes we’ve torn apart and patched back together to fit her. The food confuses me.

“We shouldn’t leave now. It’s nearly evening. In a few hours, Sangua will be back, and the Hours will start again.”

The firelight flickers as she whirls to look at me, eyes narrowed. “Do you want to learn or not?”

“Well yes, I—”

“Did you want me to train you or not?”

“Yes, I mean—”

“Then listen to me. If you want to get good enough to make a difference, good enough to have a chance of protecting Ena if the Blood King grants you your request, we have to do something drastic. Risky. You probably won’t be able to master healing fast enough for that, but you are a natural with weapons, even with the hindrances to your power. You ebb more than well enough to fight with the magic weapons I’ve trained you in, if you had a better reason to hold the weapons together than just hunting. And there’s another thing you’re used to that will help you learn quicker.” She swings her pack onto her shoulder, looking me up and down. My cheeks flush, and I curl my leg back into my body.

“But why the food, the sleeping bag? We’re not—” but she cuts me off again.

“No, I don’t plan to, but just in case. If you hadn’t had supplies the last time, we would have been dead from the cold. Better to be prepared for the worst, right?” Her foot nudges my bag towards me. “So, get packing, and let’s go. We’re wasting daylight.”

I look up into her face, search her features from the wrinkle in her brow to the freckles tight around her mouth. Her amber eyes, defiant, burning.

“Are you going to tell me what this risky plan is, at least?” I ask, getting to my feet. “I’d rather know what to prepare for.”

“No,” she says, leaning down to grab my pack. I take it from her but catch her wrist between my fingers, keeping her from pulling away.

“Why?” I ask, arching a brow. She shakes off my hand, but not before I sense her pulse quicken beneath my touch.

“Because if I tell you, you might not let me go through with it,” she answers, her grin wicked. I sigh, shaking my head, but shove the nearest supplies into my pack, hiding the return smile on my own face.



By the time we are nearing what I think is our destination, I am no longer smiling. Through the dusky pines, heavy with early evening twilight, I see a slip of silver here and a glimmer of gold there as we get far too close to the city beyond.

“Ever,” I hiss, not daring to raise my voice above a whisper. Though it is barely audible, even the snow crunching beneath my feet seems too loud. Unseen eyes peer from the shadows of the forest, and the sighing of the wind in the trees makes my heart skip a beat.

Ever ignores me, though she must sense the charged atmosphere too. Hair on the back of my neck stands on end, and foreboding weighs down my shoulders like iron chains.

“This is madness,” I say, taking a few crouching steps forward and putting my hand on her waist, the closest thing in her hunched position. She swats me off, not looking back, and I growl under my breath, but follow along anyway.

“Ever—” I start again, but she cuts me off, her voice agonizingly loud in the muffled wood.

“Shut it. We’re almost there,” she says, waving her hand at me. I grit my teeth, ready to pick her up and throw her over my shoulder despite her protests, when a gap in the trees opens, and I see the buildings.

It’s a small compound—only a handful of rough-hewn houses, stacked logs with clumsy stone chimneys. Smoke curls from the two on the left, and with a surge of frantic energy, I notice four people chatting outside the unpainted door of the closest.

My fight or flight instinct kicks in, and before Ever makes a sound, I've got her around the waist and pulled tight to my chest, my arms hiding her from view. She starts to say something, and I cover her mouth, lifting and carrying her away from the buildings. A spear of dilute light from the other moon refracts off the now silver city wall beyond, passing over her face and showing me the whites of her eyes, rounded in indignation.

I'm nearly far enough to be comfortable setting her down when her teeth scrape against the meat of my palm, her attempt to bite the hand covering her mouth managing to catch a painful pinch of skin.

"Did you just bite me?" I set her down, and she spins to face me. Her jaw is set, and she glares daggers at me through the gloom.

"Did you just pick me up against my will *again*?" she says, crossing her arms. "You deserve a lot more than a bite if you ask me."

"Both times were an attempt to save your life," I growl, stalking forward until we are nearly nose-to-nose. "What the hell kind of plan is this?"

"You need to practice on real people, when there are real stakes," she says, obstinacy in her tone. "This is the perfect way. I found this place when I was scouting before the Hours started. It doesn't have many bloodhounds, only the four you saw. No one would want to be stationed on this side of the city—the tundra up here is too open for most people to hide. You can handle four people, Sayer, especially with me here. We'll take care of it together."

I am beyond speech. I don't know what my face must hold, but something sets Ever on the defensive again. "Look, it even helps us. Less bloodhounds hunting us for the next two weeks."

"You don't..." I'm gripping her shoulders, too hard perhaps, but I take a second to glance toward the fading sky then back into her eyes. "You don't understand what you've done. We are miles from the cave—we're not going to make it

back. And you've brought us right into a den of gods-damned bloodhounds! What in the Nidaos's name is wrong with you?"

"It's a good idea!" she protests in a furious whisper, still fiercely stubborn.

"This is the worst idea anyone has ever had. We would be exposing ourselves to our enemies! We were safe in the cave —"

"Safe until that priestess finds us again," she mutters, glaring at me. She shakes off my hold, but I grab her again before she goes far. "Let go of me! I'm not going to hide in a cave and wait for someone to find us again, to hide like prey. I'm going to take some revenge for our brothers and sisters they have killed and better my odds at the same time. I thought fighting a real enemy and being around the city's familiar energy would help, but..." she trails off, looks me up and down. I flinch from the disgust in her gaze when her eyes find mine again.

"I didn't take you for a coward," she spits. "I'm going to do this with or without you."

"I'm not a coward, I'm just not an idiot! Why here? Why couldn't I just practice on some animals in the forest?" I say, taking a step toward her. Though no matter her answers, I know one thing for certain—I'm not letting her go in there alone.

"Because this is closer to the city. Closer to the negative energy of the hounds, their hatred, the bloodshed they wear like a second skin. If you ever want to overcome your limitations, truly control your power, you need to be able to do it anywhere. If you ever want to have a chance of accessing your full potential, you have to be able to ebb here and not give in. Not every fight will be in the peaceful essence of the aspen grove."

I swallow, choking down the arguments I'd been about to offer. She's right. I have to do this—I have to be able to ebb close to the city, around these people. What if we bring Ena back and I can't even protect her? I don't want to live in fear anymore. I don't want to be afraid of my power, or myself.

“Fine.” The word is edged, sharp, but I suffer it from my mouth.

Ever’s grin is a ghost of teeth against the fading darkness. “Good.”

“You didn’t say you had a death wish,” I mumble, but she’s turning away, crouching low again. I follow, apprehension wrenching my gut, every instinct screaming for me to grab her and run far away as fast as I can. But I won’t. I take a deep breath, brace my jaw, and creep up behind her.

The older, large sister moon Elue has now peaked above the trees, a thick, scooped crescent gliding into the sky. Despite her waning size, her glow is still bright, bathing everything beyond the pines in ethereal, pearly light. One man, sitting on a log along the edge of the nearest house, is sharpening an axe. He looks up at the sky, squinting to the left of the moon, then calls to his companion in the house. The other two people, a man and a woman, are stepping through the door of the building across the street, though they look back and nod before disappearing inside.

“They’re getting ready to go hunting,” Ever whispers. “We need to make our move now.”

“Let’s sneak around. Better chance of surprising them,” I say, gesturing to the left where the darkened back of the house looms. Ever jumps as if she didn’t know I was so close, letting out a small cry. Her hand flies to her mouth, eyes round, and we freeze in place as we wait for someone to point to our hiding spot.

But the man doesn’t move. *Of course, he won’t*, I chide myself silently. The bloodhounds are the hunters, not the hunted. For the first time since I saw the ramshackle buildings and the wall a few miles beyond, something other than terror enters my veins: anticipation. The excitement of knowing I will be the hunter now.

Let them be the ones cowering in fear this time.

Once a moment has passed, Ever’s shoulders relax, and she nods in the direction I indicated. We circle the house

slowly, keeping the man in sight while trying to stop the snow from crunching under our boots.

As we approach the cabin, using the well-stocked wood pile for coverage, a square of warmth glows from the back wall of the house. I nod to it, and through the glass, someone moves, throwing shadows from the room beyond.

Ever creeps forward again, deeming the house unimportant. It's easy to see her target is the man, his back to us, now humming as sparks fly from the axe blade in his hands.

But a flash of color catches my eye through the window.

“Ever,” I hiss almost silently, but she doesn't hear me, still intent on the man. Her hands begin to glow as she ebbs in the energy around us, a deep scarlet lanced through with gray and indigo spidering up her veins. I am stunned for a moment, the sight of her poised to strike, raw in her magic. The sound of voices pulls me away from her form in the near dark, back to the warmth of the cabin window and the crates stacked below.

There is something achingly familiar about the crates—not rough wooden ones used to store supplies in, or the metal ones hauled from ship to ship along the docks. At least twenty are stacked in neat columns to the side of the window and a few beneath. Painted a deep red, they have a gold latch, the boards sanded and painted with symbols turned to unintelligible smudges by the shade of the roof. The ground in front of them is trampled, grass poking through slush smeared with mixing hues of brown and rust.

Another night races to mind: opening a door. Falling to my knees. Kneeling over two wooden crates too similar to these, my hands on biting cold metal latches. Knowing what they contain would never be enough to justify the price my sisters paid.

A sack loose with copper coins. The clothes of a girl hunted down in the forest in the divine King's name. Avaria's entire sweater was soaked in blood; a scrap of dirty white cloth was all that remained of Ahnica's scarf.

All at once, I know what these crates are. What they hold. The pain they will cause to families still waiting with bated, hopeful breath.

I am nearly brought to my knees again by the realization, but when a voice sounds loudly from the window above, my head snaps up, stomach going cold. I creep closer, trying to deny it, trying to forget the boxes below filled with what remains of the ebbers already dead. But as I stand and peer through the window, I already know what I will see. I don't even have to glimpse her face fully, no more than a brief view of a straight nose and blonde hair, and I am sprinting towards Ever just as she conjures a dagger from the sparkling energy in her hands. Crates forgotten, everything forgotten except for the pounding of the panic in my throat.

The glittering, smoking weapon is inches from the man's throat when my own spear of dark black and ruby dread flies past Ever and sinks into the man's spine. He falls off the log flat onto his face, dead.

Ever spins to face me as I draw close, shock wide in her eyes. In the draining silver of the moonlight, she looks like a ghost already.

"Run," I breathe, grabbing her hand and pulling her with me. I already hear movement from the house, and I am pulling her behind me, bewildered and stumbling. She picks up her stride and comes up beside me, and though I know she is looking sideways at me, we don't stop.

There were two voices in the house.

One of them was Isla.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

“We should have stayed and fought!” Ever says, heated and huffing. There’s no sound of pursuit behind us, but I have no doubt they will be on our trail soon. I ignore her for the moment, spinning and scanning the woods, trying to decide what to do.

“Sayer, look at me.” Against my better judgment I do, knowing I must look wild, a trapped animal fleeing for its life. “What did you see?” she asks, taking a step forward.

When I say nothing, she takes my hand, giving it a squeeze, and my chest releases enough for me to speak. I don’t take the time to tell her of the boxes of the dead. If we do not get away from this place, we are going to die; we will become just another set of clothes in those crates. Two more sacrifices for the Dark Goddess’s punishment.

“It was her,” I pant, my breaths coming too fast, burning my throat. I pull my hand from hers to put it on my chest, trying to still my heart. “Isla, the woman who hunted us before. She was there with them. She must have tracked us to the south side of the city somehow...” I trail off. It wouldn’t have been impossible for her to pick up our trail in the snow, to follow us. “Which means the cave is no longer safe.”

“You have others, right?”

Barely listening, I nod, my mind far from this snowy glen. It’s sorting through the other caves I have prepared—there are only two unused ones left, and both are far, far from where we

are now. There is one closer—and I shut that thought down before I complete it.

“If it’s our hunter, we should set a trap.” She sounds more eager than scared. I give her a critical, disbelieving look.

“There isn’t enough time to—”

A branch snaps in the distance, and we both freeze. The urge to fight sluices through my veins, hot and bright. With this many bloodhounds, the smarter move would be to run—but my hatred for the priests storms across my reasoning, clouding my judgment.

“They’re coming,” I say, taking a wide stance in the snow, preparing for the onslaught. Ever has a better idea, pulling me toward one of the tall, sturdy pine trunks nearby.

“Climb!” She whispers, shoving me towards the tree. I turn to her in confusion, but she’s already rushing to her own tree. “If we can’t trap them, let’s at least ambush them!”

I glance back towards the direction of the noise, footfalls and hushed voices growing closer. The remaining three and Isla must be hunting us. The blood moon isn’t in the sky yet, but we have only moments before she joins her sister. My heart pounding against the inside of my chest, I start climbing.

Ever perches in a V high in the tree’s limbs, just protruding from the trunk. Her hair blends the black-green of pine needles, her skin cool and shadowed, shielded from the moon by the forest dark. My own complexion glows with dangerous brightness, but when words float to me on the wind and I look down, I realize it wouldn’t matter if it were shining like a beacon. The hounds are not looking up.

Isla is the first to enter the clearing, her head down studying the footprints we have left behind. The snow is churned from my pacing, Ever’s beseeching, and Isla walks in a circle around the edge of the mess, studying. I hold my breath as she passes beneath Ever’s pine, but she makes no move to look up.

“Where do they lead?” another voice asks, its owner joining Isla in the clearing a second later. The woman is short

and stocky, her black hair dotted with snow, face many shades darker than even Ever's warm complexion. Beyond the thicket of shadows surrounding the clearing, movements of two men rustle among the pines. Their breath clouds in front of their face while they let the two priestesses take the lead.

This is my first chance since the morning the Blood Hours began to study our holy warriors, the Wolves of Nidaos. Their armor is ornate, metal and expensive, touched with detailed filigree at the joints and padded with fur and leather beneath. The unfamiliar woman wears a chest plate formed perfectly to her body, along with a worked leather pair of pants from which a plethora of throwing knives clink and shuffle as she moves. One of the men steps from the shadows, sporting olive skin and dark hair streaked with gray. He wears a similarly decorated breastplate, made of gold metal. Isla, in comparison, is dressed so plainly, you might think she was one of us—a common leather tunic with padding over the visceral areas, a pair of fur lined black pants, and a charcoal-colored cloak.

She's dressed to blend in with the forest, our surroundings. Dressed for hunting.

Dread and bile mingle in my stomach as I watch, waiting for the opportunity to strike. We need to act fast—we are sitting ducks here, and soon enough, Isla will realize there are no footprints leaving this glen. I glance to Ever only to find she is already looking at me.

"They couldn't have gotten too far ahead," the man in the clearing says, shifting his weight. "I saw them go this way. We were only moments behind."

"And you're sure you saw two? What did the man look like?" Isla fixes her gaze on him, which I know is piercing, angry, and the same startling azure as her brother's.

Ever waves in my direction, and I focus on her again. She holds up a hand, four gloved fingers raised. One goes down. It doesn't take me long to catch her meaning.

I mentally count down with her as she lowers another finger. *Three*. The voices below have been raised, the hunters arguing among themselves.

“What do you mean you’re not sure?” Isla is barking.

Two. I ready myself, ebbing in black spider webs of energy, fighting to quell the dark malice roiling through me. I suck the magic back to my elbows, then to my shoulders with painful slowness compared to Ever’s quick zaps of power.

“I don’t know. His hair was dark. I saw two ebbers running away with magic still on the girl’s hands. Isn’t that enough?”

One. I’ve calmed the energy, harnessed it. I am in control. I am ready.

“No! I need to know exactly. He’s the one who killed so many of us on the first night.” Isla’s voice is harsh, but I don’t look away from Ever’s hand.

Zero.

In one leap, we are both on the ground, shattering the night. Ever already has two weapons in hand, both daggers of black and gold, flaming with malice. My hand hovers on my dagger’s hilt, metal cold from the night’s touch. In the other hand, I create a wavering, obsidian spear I’m not sure will hold together when I throw it. Tendrils of energy flicker and spark into the sky as I raise it, each trail rippling with edges of copper and crimson.

Before the man arguing with Isla has time to scream, Ever’s obsidian blade is deep in his throat. She threw it, conjuring another for her left hand before turning to meet the steel of the female Wolf’s sword, catching the blade between her crossed weapons and spinning away.

Tearing my eyes away, I focus on my own target. Ethereal spears fly from my hands, one after the other at the man in the shadows, but he ducks away, hiding in the brush. Though I want to pursue, there is a presence at my back, and some instinct tells me to duck and roll away. An arrow pierces the air where my head was moments ago.

I come up facing my opponent, who has dropped the bow and is unsheathing her sword. The metal is black, void of light, as if it is absorbing the night around us. With great effort, I

look up into the eyes of my greatest enemy. The one person who has every right to hate me.

And from the look in her bright sky eyes, she does. I killed her brother. I deserve every ounce of heat there.

“Isla,” I say, my voice breaking a little at the end. This woman was once like a sister to me, might have been a sister-in-law some day. If I hadn’t taken that away from both of us.

No, I only took it sooner. The bloodhounds would have hunted Isaac down only a few short days after I killed him. Truthfully, there was never a future for us.

She doesn’t deign to answer. With a scream, she charges me.

My hand curls automatically, and I ebb in the energy around me. The flow appears in the edges of my vision, but all I focus on is the power crackling like lightning up my veins. Maybe not as fast as Ever, but fast enough. It is dark, and black, and malignant—a thing alive with hatred and blood, death and decay.

I grit my teeth, forcing through the roiling emotions to focus. I raise my hand as Isla nears, and on a wave of instinct and concentration, I push energy out of my fingertips. A spear of the deepest, blackest spills forth in a torrent, throttling towards Isla’s chest.

She narrowly avoids the splinter of darkness, throwing herself aside at the last second. When she rolls to her feet, her eyes are wide, hatred dancing there. The phantom of a bruise still mars her mouth, sickly and yellowing, stretching as she spits at me.

“I always told Isaac you were just like every other filthy ebber.”

I take a step back in surprise, but she’s on her feet and charging again, snow flying from beneath her boots.

Smaller darts of energy fly from my hands as I duck under her blade, the sword aimed at my head. To my left, Ever is locked in battle with the other woman, her once short daggers

now transformed into a long, wickedly curved sword she wields with skill.

“Sayer Terrin!” Isla screams, and I whip around to barely avoid a blow to the neck. The edge of her sword catches my arm on the downswing and burns with the sting of hot blood meeting frigid air. I stagger back, trying to put some distance between us, but she is relentless.

I don’t bother speaking, trying to defend myself with words. There really is nothing to defend. I killed Isaac—Isla has every right to try to kill me.

Doesn’t mean I have to make it easy for her. *I want to live*, I realize—and I need to protect Ever.

Thinking of the knives on the other priestess’s belt, I ebb into my palms. When I release it, the energy forms into thin slivers of night, the magical throwing knives quicker than an arrow. They slice the moonlight, leaving trails of magic behind them. All miss but one, which lands deep in Isla’s right thigh.

“Damn you!” she screams, going to pull the blade out. I dissolve the weapon, letting go of the energy holding it. When it evaporates to join the whispers of flow around us, Isla yelps in horror.

“Demon spawn! Filthy unholy scum!” she shrieks at me, voice reaching an octave I didn’t know existed. Her wound gushes blood and she stumbles, the muscle cut deeply, maybe to the bone.

I conjure another spear, cocking it over my shoulder in a ready throwing stance. I should kill her, I know—and what is one more life among the many I’ve taken? But when Isla looks up, her sapphire eyes full of hatred and spite, all I see are Isaac’s eyes as he looked at me for the last time, as I slid the dagger beneath his ribs.

“Sayer, duck!” Ever’s shout pulls me from my trance, and I don’t even hesitate before I hit the snow. An axe sails over my head, arcing across the clearing and impaling a tree with a dull thud.

That could have been my gods-damned head.

My body instinctively rolls when footsteps echo on my right, the shadows folding around me as I find brush and pine needles for cover. The man who'd blended back into the forest sprints to where I just was, searching for his axe. There is another in his right hand, and he has a wicked looking mace strapped to his back. His coloring is much the same as the first man: olive toned skin and dark hair.

“High Priestess?” He rushes to Isla’s side and helps her to stand. She’s woozy, the lost blood affecting her already, and clutches his shoulder for support.

Did he say High Priestess?

“I’m fine,” she gasps out, though she looks anything but. “Find the man. He is top priority.”

Across the clearing, the other man is dead in a sea of snow, an open wound suggesting an energy weapon once resided in his neck.

“What about the girl?” another voice asks, and my head whips around, stomach hollowing out in panic.

Ever is struggling against the priestess’s hold, a heavy knife at her throat.

I don’t think. I just move.

I leave my cover behind, flying across the clearing towards the Wolf. My arms are raised high, the black filling them near to the elbows with malicious ebony energy. I am roaring with the magic, the corruption and vicious intent singing through my blood. I fight a fog clouding my eyes.

No. No! I will not blind myself again.

I shove the energy back down, forcing it to recede down my neck.

In control now, I arc one arm out in front of me. Ever’s eyes meet mine—trusting, knowing, encouraging. Believing I can do this.

The spear leaves my fingertips and rips right through the woman’s forehead.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

The blood moon appears over the horizon just as a garnet mist erupts from the Wolf's skull.

Ever has already ducked away. I lunge for her, pull her behind me, but she cries out in pain. I take stock of her, grasp her waist, and only when her eyes roll back do I notice the blood seeping from her side. Within seconds, I scoop her into my arms and run, leaving Isla and the man arguing with her behind.

Isla's curses fade as I barrel through the trees, too intent on our escape to pay attention to where I'm going. Low branches of silvered birches and stray aspens whip my face.

Soon, I notice the body in my arms, Ever's weight supported only by my shoulders and biceps. I slow, trying to readjust her, but she's unconscious and hard to maneuver. Jolts of panic skitter through my chest when I catch sight of my tunic where her wounded side has been pressed into me. There is an unholy amount of blood, soaking me from chest to navel.

"No," I moan, cradling her closer to me. She can't be losing this much blood. I can't lose her too.

I kneel, knowing Isla and her friend could be behind us right now, but hoping her wound will be enough to slow them down. My arms tingle as I place Ever on the snow, careful to support her lolling head, and peel up her shredded shirt to expose the wound to the night air.

It's so, so much worse than I thought.

Clean and deep, the slice begins just under her breasts and arcs down to her hipbone, leaving a gaping wound in her side. It gets shallower as it reaches the end of its curve, but towards the top, bright, white bone glints amongst a mess of muscle and red tissue. I fall to my other knee, the snow already invading the fabric of my pants, and press my head to Ever's chest. Her heartbeat is slow, as is her breathing, the rise and fall of her abdomen rickety and halting. She's lost too much blood already. I have to close this right now.

I pull my head up and frown, fluttering my hands across the wound. At least it's clean—the priestess's sword cut straight through the flesh, leaving smooth edges and no jagged muscles to try and connect. It shouldn't be much harder than closing skin—*right*? I grit my teeth, focusing. No matter if it isn't. I have to try.

When I ebb, I'm nearly knocked back by the intensity of the energy I've taken in. The air around me shimmers with tendrils of darkness, the flow eddying through the trees like a river of starless sky. The energy climbing my arms claws at my veins, malignant and demanding. We must be even closer to the city now. I fight hard to control myself and cut off the flow into my body, aware of every artery the black energy presses into. It yearns to stretch, to break beyond my control and fill my body, use it. To rage and destroy.

How will I heal with this? I ignore the thought, barely able to give it much hold through the energy storm ravaging my veins. My skin crackles with power, the blackness seeping out of my knuckles as I fight to keep it in place. With all the control I can muster, I slowly push the onyx light from my body, layering it in a gel across Ever's leaking wound.

Her body convulses once when the magic touches her, and I pull my hands back in fear. Have I hurt her more? But no, the wound looks the same. I lose hold of the energy on her skin, and it dissipates. Gritting my teeth, I try again. Relief floods me as the malice drains from my veins, my fingertips working to layer the gel over her side.

The magic fights me at every turn. Like a living thing, it mingles with my heartbeat, pushing against the limits of my power to hold its shape outside my body. I grit my teeth, sweat pouring into my eyes. The gel writhes like a swarm of locusts, attempting to rend Ever's smooth skin. I hold it off, a low moan echoing against the strain, putting all my will and force into pulling the severed edges of Ever's side back together.

My face is flushed, and my body aches when I finally give in. The magic roils from my hands as I let go, the wash of relief through my blood almost enough to elicit a joyful sob. I slump forward, crumpling with exhaustion over Ever's body. Long minutes pass before I catch my breath enough to lean back and assess what I've done.

The gash is closed, at least—an angry red line, scabbed in some places, replacing the gaping chasm of blood and bone. I have no idea if I managed to stitch back any of the muscle beneath, but at the very least, her side is no longer split, and the bleeding has stopped.

I mop my head with my shirt's hem, the chill prickling my damp neck. A tangle of sable strands sticks to Ever's forehead, and I reach up to tuck them behind her ears. Her skin is too cold, too bloodless, and though her breathing has evened out some, it is still shallow.

We need warmth and shelter from the night—both from the elements and from the reinforcements I'm sure Isla will send after us.

Gathering Ever into my arms again, her wounded side away from me this time, I take in my surroundings. I ran a fair distance after our escape—adrenaline is a hell of a drug. Unfortunately, it's in the opposite direction either of the two unused caves are located—and I know Ever will not make it that far.

Camping in the open is out of the question—the blood moon has already risen, though at some point, the clouds have rolled in to choke the sky. After our antics, this part of the forest will be crawling with more bloodhounds than ever before. We need a safe haven, a place to hide and recover.

I catch sight of the city walls, towering in the too near distance. Spirals of bronze hued towers flank the golden arches, a path of light spilling from the gilded bars and out into the stone road leading to the gate. The Blood Road, they call it—always glittering and clean. Always promptly clear of snow by some magical means. We've made it further than I initially thought, almost a full half circle around the city walls. The distance is much shorter since we are close.

I stare at the road, mind whirring. If I use it, I won't leave footprints for the bloodhounds to track, at least not until I have to leave it and venture back into the snow. But where to go? In the back of my mind, the idea is already brewing, but I waste a few precious seconds desperately searching, hoping there is another option.

When the answer hits, it's like a stab to the heart. I am slow to acknowledge it, wishing there were some other way. I let the waves of pain lap at me, the tide threatening to overwhelm me growing smaller and smaller with each swell.

Finally, as the reality of what I must do overrides my fear and heartache, I look down into the face of the girl who has come to mean so much to me in such a short amount of time. Her silken hair cascades over my arm, her freckles spattered like stars across her nose and cheeks, completely different in unconsciousness. She is still beautiful—but the spark, the fire and anger and laughter which make her burn so brightly, is dim. Almost gone.

"You have to wake up." My voice is a raspy phantom, almost lost to the shifting wind. "I deserve quite the scolding for picking you up again."

But no familiar retort comes. In that moment, I'd give anything to see those freckles bunch around her mouth when she frowns at me, or her amber eyes alight with indignation. I want to see her scowl and the flush in her cheeks, and hear her gasp when I pull her tight to my body.

I won't lose her too.

With a heavy, aching heart and heavy, aching feet, I stumble out onto the stones. People might assume it's a

dangerous thing to walk out in the middle of the road during the Blood Hours, but all the bloodhounds will be amassing in the forest behind me. They live out here during the Hours as well—no one will enter or leave the city gates while the blood moon reigns.

As if my thoughts beckon to her, red creeps across the road beneath my boots. I look up at the blood moon, into Helena's Eye, as the clouds clear, her nebulous cloak lifting to reveal a pocked, scarlet face just beginning to wane. Her full bloody glory falls across my cheeks.

I make her a promise—or maybe it's more of a vow.

“Helena. Do you hear me, Dark Goddess? I swear by all that is holy, the stars in the night sky, your power in my veins: The Light God nor the Blood King will have this one.”

My steps are quick and quiet, Ever's body swaying gently in my arms. When I reach the familiar tree marking my path, I step off the cobbled road and let my feet carry me through the silent, garnet hued forest to Ena and I's cave.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Turns out, I *am* a coward.

Before I reach the cave entrance, the one carefully hidden by the painted flap and copse of trees, I turn my feet in a new direction. The route is longer, slower going, littered with boulders and small bluffs, forcing me to skirt and scale one handed. Though it is harder and more dangerous, I clutch Ever to my chest and push on, only stopping when I've dropped into a small clearing tucked up against the mountainside.

The hole in the rocks barely constitutes a door, which is why it would have been the perfect escape route for Ena and me. No one would ever guess there was a mile of tunnel behind this small opening, hardly noticeable. I hope that means the bloodhounds won't notice it either.

I lower Ever to the ground carefully, pointing her head towards the opening and arranging her limbs, her arms crossed over her chest, legs straight and together. I back myself into the hole and lean out on my stomach, catching her under the shoulders and pulling her to me. It's a painfully slow process to shimmy her and myself into the hole, hooking my feet around rocks and cracks in the tunnel wall to pull us backward. My elbows are scraped to bleeding, my stomach has small micro cuts where my shirt rides up allowing gravel to abrade my skin, and my shoulder muscles are screaming.

When fresh air wafts over the back of my neck, I let go of Ever and pull myself into a standing position. Dizziness

overrides my balance, and I lean against the wall to steady myself. Drawing in deep breaths, I let the blood work its way back into my extremities. Though I know my minor cuts need healing, I'm too tired to care.

Once I'm sure I won't pass out, I reach back down and pull Ever the rest of the way into the cavern. It's really just a widening of the tunnel, with barely enough room for me to stand and just enough floor space for a fire and our sleeping rolls. Grateful for Ever's forethought even with such a harebrained plan, I dig the furs from my bag and shake them out onto the floor.

Ever isn't easy to move, but I manage to lace her into the bag and tuck the hood around her head. She sleeps fitfully now, her breathing deeper, but her eyes move back and forth as if a nightmare brews beneath her lids. When I sit next to her, she calms a bit. I allow myself a moment of rest, leaning back against the cave wall with her head in my lap, tracing her cheek and her jaw with the back of my hand.

In sleep she looks different—peaceful. Younger. It hits me that I don't know how old she really is. Maybe twenty? My age? Before I think too much about what I'm doing, I find my finger gliding down the bridge of her nose, then the tip, then to her lips beneath. My callouses catch on her bottom lip, so soft and full. I let myself lean forward until our lips are a whisper apart, and her shaky breath on mine.

"I want to kiss you," I say, the words a ghostly outline of a breath, as if I can bring her back to me with murmured desires.

My finger strokes her lip again, imagining it moving beneath mine. "I'd like to kiss you again like I did in the aspen grove. You don't know how much I crave the heat of you against me. I want to trace every freckle, to learn their pattern across every curve of your body. But most of all, I want to see your self-satisfied smirk again. I want you to berate me for my lousy healing skills, and I want to catch the way you look at me when you think I'm not watching..."

By the end, the words have trailed off, and I am searching for a hint of life, a hint that she heard any of the things I

couldn't say before—if she woke as I poured out my heart and left everything bare. But she doesn't stir.

Instead of her mouth, I gently press my lips to her forehead. “You *will* wake up, Ever. I promise.”

Easing her head out of my lap, I prop it on my pack. I run my hands over my arms, a shiver coursing under my skin. Somewhere along the way, Ever dropped her pack—meaning we only have the food and sleeping roll I brought, a few hunting knives, and a piece of flint. With sudden trepidation, I check my belt, but Isaac's dagger is still tucked into place on my hip. Luckily, I have some firewood stashed nearby, and a few snares in the area I can check in the daylight.

Of course, there's plenty of food, furs, and clothes at the other end of the tunnel. But my mind shies away from that reality, and I wrap another scarf around my face before standing and heading outside.

“Be right back,” I assure Ever's sleeping form, now twitching restlessly. “I promise.”

Then I squeeze out into the ruddy night.



The rabbit taunts me for far, far too long.

My instincts insist I should be moving, hurrying back with the firewood and pine needles tucked under my arm. Ever needs warmth, probably needs me to look at her wound again—but I can't take my eyes off the stupid white animal hanging by its back leg in one of my snares.

It's a good sign, really—it means the bloodhounds haven't been to this area. They won't know about the other entrance then, except Isla. That's how she escaped me the first time, after she...

I sever the thought before it can unfurl, not allowing myself to think of another bloody night in these woods. Isla

has no reason to suspect I'd ever return to this place now. She'd also traveled through the tunnel and out this way—there's no guarantee she could even find this side again. It's not as obvious as the other entrance.

I am torn about what to do with the rabbit. I don't want to take it—hell, I don't even want to touch it. Just the sight brings me back to another night not too far from here, a half frozen white rabbit in my hands with the pelt only partially skinned. When another girl waited in a cave for me to rescue her.

But Ena was not injured at the time—she was whole and healthy, until the dark figure slipped in to slit her throat. I flinch at the direction my obstinate thoughts have taken and sigh, dropping the firewood at my feet. Stepping up to the rope and unsheathing my knife, I cut the damn animal down and attach it to my belt before heaving the wood back under my arms. Meat is meat, and any sustenance will help Ever heal faster.

When I squeeze back through the entrance to the cave, pushing the supplies before me, I find amber eyes watching me blearily from the sleeping roll. I rush to Ever's side, see her trembling, but when I set my hands on her face, she closes her eyes and stills. For a moment, I'm terrified something is wrong, but Ever leans her cheek into my hand and smiles slightly. The shivers stop at once.

“Say...” she mumbles the first syllable of my name before her face goes slack, and I realize she's asleep again.

“I'm here,” I reassure her, letting her head relax back onto the pack. I set myself the task of building a fire, then skinning the rabbit. My hands shake as I strip the white fur away from the meat, but eventually, my muscle memory takes over, and I just try my best to focus on not slicing my own skin.

Forming one of the smaller branches I collected into a rickety spit, I fix the rabbit over the growing fire and let the smell of the burning wood curl into my mouth. Campfires always have a certain scent, one that reminds me of the forest, of freedom.

Once the rabbit is cooked through, I bank the fire, worried about it getting too smoky while we sleep. The embers still glow, orange and red through blackened wood, and it easily heats the small space.

Ever has rolled to her good side now, towards the fire. She murmurs in her sleep, brows knitting together at some dream insult or confusion. I want to laugh as the familiar annoyed look passes through her features, the one I've seen directed at me many times before.

Maybe she's dreaming about me teasing her, I think, then try to quell the thrill running through me. I shake my head at myself, watching the sleeping girl dream about things which probably have nothing to do with me.

I don't dare squeeze into the bag with her tonight—afraid to jostle her injury, I tell myself, and it's as good a reason as any. Pulling an extra cloak from my pack, I drape it over the both of us then settle down beside her. We share the bag as a pillow, her hair tickling my nose when I snuggle in close to her body. I don't want to hurt her by laying my arm over her side, so instead, I tuck one forearm under her neck and the other finds a hold on the fullness of her thigh through the sleeping bag.

Between the fire and her body heat, I am drowsy and warm. I keep thoughts from lingering on where I am, what I am too close to—the only thing I let myself dwell on is the smell of her skin and the steady press of her body against mine.

I'm almost asleep, ready to leave this hellish day behind when she begins to murmur again. At first, I think she's woken because her words are clearer, but when I lean over her to look at her face, her eyes are still shut tight.

"Sayer," she mutters, her fingers curling and uncurling by her neck. I adjust until my hand beneath her finds her grasp and squeezes, her fingers lacing with mine as she sighs.

"Sayer," she repeats, this time with more conviction, like it's an answer to a question I didn't know she'd asked. Then she sinks back into a deeper sleep, leaning into the cavity of

my chest. I loose my own sigh and place my head on the pack, breathing in her hair's floral and pine scent, using the tip of my nose to trace the soft spot along her neck.

Maybe she is dreaming of me after all.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I don't dream of Ever.

My unconscious hours are filled with blood—rivulets, pools, spatters of garnet and black. I watch while Isaac gasps his final breath, forehead pressed to mine and my arms coated with sticky red as the dagger digs in deep. I sob over my sister's broken body, her life spilling into her wild hair, cradled in my lap. Grimace at the pop of muscle giving way under my knife when I hold a stranger against my chest, aware of every jerk as he dies.

Every single kill—every person I've murdered—flits through my dreams. Slowly, painfully, I then live out my family's deaths; first as a child clutching my father's hand while my mother sobs over her brother's body, then as a teen holding Ena on my hip. Avaria and Ahnica are last, the red boxes from today blurring in my dreams as I open them again and again, clutching Ahnica's scarf to my chest.

And no matter how hard I fight, the dream I've forbidden myself to conjure, the one that leaves me paralyzed and screaming in the recesses of my mind, comes anyway.

I am twelve. I know this because my birthday just passed a few weeks before the Hours. I am old enough to understand now—I have to be.

The black tally marks on my arms stare back at me, and I shove my sleeve down to hide them, a habit I can't break. I hate seeing them, hate knowing I have more than anyone else. My mother says it is a good thing, but I don't see how—all I

know is it makes me different, makes my schoolmates and even my siblings look at me out of the corners of their eyes.

It's hard to blink my tears away while we wait, but I have to stay strong. My mother clutches Ena to her chest next to me on the couch, rocking and soothing her as best she can.

My father should have returned from Lennon's hours ago. He works in the man's shoe repair shop, cobbling leather and sewing fine stitches on shoes that people flock from all over Toeska to buy. Normally, he would have been back by dusk, the dying sunlight coloring the dull carpet with flecks of orange and red when he opened the door and limped through.

We've heard the rumors of what happened in the square. But my mother doesn't want to leave us alone to find out if they are true.

On my mother's other side, Ahnica holds her hand, murmuring reassurances. "It's alright, Ma. He'll be home soon." Though my sister is only fifteen, three years my elder, she has become a third parent in her own right. "Here, let me take Ena. I'll put her to bed."

My mother glances down at my sister, barely more than a babe. Her moon face is calm, serene, eyes half lidded with sleep and the kind of naked trust only children have.

"Alright," she sighs, releasing Ena into Ahnica's arms. She stands, cradling our sister gently, and rocks her as she disappears down the hallway.

"It's just you and me, little man," my mother says, wrapping her still warm arms around my shoulders and giving me a squeeze. I nod and lean my head into her shoulder, savoring the closeness. For reasons I don't quite understand, a dread I cannot quite place, tears pepper the backs of my eyes.

Two short, sharp raps on the door make us both jump. Her fingers dig into my flesh as she shudders.

Without a word, Mother rises and seems to float to the doorway, as if she were already a ghost, already gone from this world. As if she knows what waits behind that door. But I

don't, so I scamper behind her, peeking around her when she swings it open.

There is a man on our front step. He is not a priest—he does not wear their long black robes or their gray cloak. It is Lennon, dark and small in the night—and heaved like a sack of flour in his arms, is my father. My very, very dead father.

The last thing I truly remember is my mother's scream, everything else a blur spiked with horrific clarity. There is energy in my veins, ebbed into my fingers and stealing up my arms like smoky ink. Another image, this time Lennon's face, younger than the man I know now, his mouth moving but nothing coming out. My father's body in the snow where Lennon dropped him to try and pull my mother out of the way. And finally, my mother's delicate hands coming up in front of her terrified eyes as she begs me. "Sayer, honey. It's me. Please, calm down, ple—"

The final word is choked off in a scream as the black energy controlling my body fills my mother's with onyx darts.

A searing burn slices through my forearm before I fade into unconsciousness.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Raw and familiar, my throat pulses with pain as I cut off my own scream. My eyes fly open, hands reaching for the knife I usually keep under my pillow at home, but the only thing I find is a set of amber eyes staring at me from inches away.

“Sayer,” Ever murmurs, propped up on one elbow. She catches my flailing hand and holds it to her chest, where the steady thump of her heart gives me something to focus on.

“It was just a dream,” she says. It takes me a few wild seconds to find my head. I try to match the rise and fall of my chest to her heartbeat until I can breathe again, the expansion of my lungs accompanied by an ache deep within.

“I know,” I croak, coughing. I pull my hand away from hers and cover my mouth, fighting my voice’s cracked edges. “It’s not the first time I’ve woken up screaming.”

“Lucky for me it’s the first time since I’ve known you, or I might have died of a heart attack before now,” Ever says, giving a little laugh. It quickly turns into a grimace, and suddenly, last night’s events all come crashing back into my head.

“Take it easy,” I say, steadying her, snatching back the hand I’ve unconsciously moved from her chest to her hip. “You shouldn’t be up at all. You probably need more rest.”

“I was working on that before you decided to try and bring down the mountain,” she says, lifting the hem of her shirt.

Where there was an angry red line last night, her torso is now smooth and whole.

My eyes bulge to match my gaping mouth. “How did you do that?”

Ever rolls her eyes at me, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “Well, you see, there’s this thing called ebbing.” I’m just beginning to shake my head at her when her face becomes more serious. She looks down at her side again, then back to me. “Though I guess you were the one doing the healing last night.”

“I barely did any good. Just got the blood to stop,” I scoff, pushing to my knees. I avert my eyes from the pristine skin along her side, so different from the spangle of freckles along her face and arms, only one cluster of small dots disappearing below the waistline of her pants. How far do those go, exactly? The urge to find out makes me stand, knowing I should put some distance between her brassy, warm skin and my hands. I must have been blind with terror to not notice last night.

“Maybe so,” she says, sitting up and tracking my movements as I grab a stick from the pile and poke at the still smoldering embers. “But stopping the bleeding saved my life. I was in no shape to heal myself last night. You getting me here and patching up the surface kept me from bleeding out.”

“I wish I could have done more,” I half-mutter, almost under my breath.

“More? How could you do more than save my life, *again?*” she says. I add a few pieces of wood to the disturbed fire pit and watch them catch, pulling my cloak around me for the time being. Ever is still wrapped in the other, the brindled fur lining tucked up to her chin.

“How bad was my healing, after all?” I ask, genuinely curious. She shrugs as she joins me by the growing flames, leaving the half unlaced sleeping bag behind. Her movements are smooth enough, but she keeps a hand pressed to her side and lowers herself carefully, wincing through the pain.

“Not the best, but enough to keep the blood in my body. You fixed the first layer of muscle and managed to close the skin.” She gestures vaguely to her stomach. “In my few moments of consciousness last night, I roughly healed the major parts. I’ll be able to move and walk, though my internal injuries will take a few days to fully recover. The systems of the body become more intricate the deeper you go. Rather than piecing skin back together, I’m braiding muscles and tendons and veins. But those instincts still work wonders even when you can’t consciously direct them.”

“You healed yourself when you weren’t controlling it?” I ask, stunned. This is advanced far beyond my skill level, but fascinating.

Ever shrugs. “Of a sort. My internal healing is like breathing—I do it without having to think. It’s a part of me.”

“Not all ebbers are like that, right?” I ask.

“No, most have an affinity for one kind of shaping, though usually anyone can get the basics of any kind.”

“What’s my affinity?” I ask.

“Weapons, definitely,” she answers immediately, and I turn to her in surprise.

“Weapons? You saw me back in the grove. I’m barely able to conjure a spear for more than a few seconds!”

“That’s not what happened last night,” Ever reminds me. “It was like you’d been shaping weapons all your life. You didn’t even have to try. It came naturally once you were in the moment, and with the right energy. I knew all you needed were some real life scenarios.”

She sounds proud of herself, and I struggle to keep my face from darkening too much. “How about next time, we don’t use a ‘real life scenario’ that almost gets us killed?” I’m still angry with her about the idiotic plan which nearly ended her life, but it’s hard to hold onto when her shoulders slump forward.

“You’re right,” she says, and though it is what I wanted her to say, I can’t help the grin spreading across my face.

“Come again?” I ask innocently, and her head snaps up, her eyes already rolling.

“Really, Sayer? I’m trying to be serious here,” she chides, but it seems my teasing is infectious. Her smile lights her face, and I try to keep a lump from rising in my throat. Just last night, I was willing to give up anything to see that smile again.

“No, but really, I’m sorry. Even though I know you’ll never let me live this down, I have to say it—you *were* right. It was a stupid, dangerous plan. Thank you for getting us out of it in one piece.”

I shake my head, waving off her apology. “It’s alright. You would have done the same for me. And you held your own against those hunters. Besides, without your help, I could never have controlled my ebbing enough to do the things I did. If you really think about it, the whole night was a triumph because of you.”

Her eyes light mischievously, and she leans back, gaze bottomless and heavy lidded. “Well in that case, shouldn’t you be groveling at my feet right about now?”

“There will be time for groveling later,” I say, my core already molten as I take in her arrogant, curvy form, her cocked eyebrow all teasing and demand. I would do so much more than grovel on my knees for her. “How about for now, breakfast?”

When I pull the wrapped rabbit meat out of my pack, the groan she releases has me leaning back too, barking laughter. She joins me, and reluctantly, we both tuck into the rabbit meat, our appetites returned after our harrowing night.

I have no idea what time it is—I could have been trapped in those nightmares for minutes, or maybe days. Ever assures me the moons are gone and the sun is up. She crawled through the tunnel and checked an hour before I woke, though she hadn’t been able to make out its location through the thick canopy.

“You shouldn’t have gone out with your injuries,” I scold, but she ignores me, as is to be expected.

“Where are we, anyway? I don’t remember this cave,” she says, glancing around. She makes a face at the cramped quarters and scowls at the tunnel. “It’s not nearly the luxury I’m used to with your hideouts.”

I struggle to swallow the last bite of rabbit meat I just took, trying not to choke.

“It’s uh, not one you’ve seen before,” I say lamely. I set the rabbit down, my appetite vanishing. I try not to let the pull of nerves and anxiety lead bile up my throat. “This is the back entrance to... to the cave where...”

I can’t finish my sentence, but I don’t have to. Ever slides over to my side, her arms coming around me. When the sob breaks out of me, I let it—I don’t have the strength to hold back anymore.

“Oh Sayer, I... I’m so sorry,” Ever says, cradling my head into her chest. The front of her thighs press into my arm and I lean to loop it around her waist, avoiding her injury. She holds me, stroking my hair softly, and when I finally pull away, there are tear tracks down her own face.

“Sorry,” I sniffle, wiping my nose on my sleeve. I grimace at the thought of how revolting I must be, but Ever soothes my worries.

“Why should you be sorry for crying about your sister?” she asks, eyes wide, as if I’m insane for even thinking it. “Do you know how many times I’ve cried about mine?”

I wipe my eyes with the other sleeve, and she reaches out to take my hand.

“What happened to your sister, exactly?” My voice is still heavy with tears. She doesn’t hesitate with this question—we may be beyond keeping things from one another. *Well, some things, anyway*, I think with a sharp twinge in my stomach.

“It was a long time ago,” she admits, head down. I tilt her chin up, meeting her gaze.

“My mother and father and other sisters died a long time ago too. Doesn’t make it hurt any less.”

She nods but bites her lower lip. I long to lean forward and kiss that hurt, to comfort her and myself in the tangle of our bodies.

“I was young—maybe five, six? We are twins, my sister and me. Not identical, but my mom said we had that special twin bond. You never found one of us without finding the other.” Her small smile is effaced with memory, transporting her somewhere in the past. “We would do everything together. Until one day, we were playing on the beach. We’d gone farther than we were supposed to—around the bend of a cliff, too far for anyone from the village to see us. I can’t say what drew us there—following a crab, or something shiny maybe? But there were men waiting.”

I squeeze her hand, and she looks into the fire before returning the pressure. “They grabbed Echo before she even had time to scream. I think they were supposed to grab me too, but I was further from the forest, closer to the water. I dove in. Turns out, men from this place don’t know how to swim.” She glances at me with an eyebrow cocked. “Can you swim?”

“I’ve never tried,” I answer honestly. Who has time to swim when there is work to be done, food to put on the table?

“I figured. Anyway, I swam around the curve and back in sight of the village. It took me a while—half an hour, maybe, or an hour? It seemed like forever. I was exhausted when the waves deposited me back on shore. By the time the village roused me, I told my story, and people searched for them, my father’s men were gone.”

“Your father took her?” I ask, surprised. I’d assumed her father lived there, with her and her mother.

“His men did. Same thing really. He would never stoop to doing the dirty work himself,” Ever’s face darkened, and her feelings towards her father were plain enough.

“Why did he take her?” I should give her a break, should stop, but my curiosity burns strong. Not only do I want to know because I’m interested—I realize I want to know everything about her. And I want a distraction from where we are right now.

But when she shrugs, her face closes down, and I know I've asked too much. "I don't know. But I'll force him to give her back to us."

I rub her shoulder, then squeeze her hand again. "We'll win. We'll survive. And the Blood King will make him return your sister."

Ever's eyes dart to me, then away, back to the fire. "I hope so."

With quiet sitting heavy over us, Ever's words fading into pops of the settling fire, the remnants of my nightmare once again creep inside my skull. Flames make stains across my retinas as I stare into licks of orange and red, trying to think about anything that isn't my mother's last words, or the way she screamed.

"Was that what your dream was about? When your sister...?" Ever trails off at the end, but her voice breaks through my memories like wind through smoke.

A sigh rises from somewhere deep in my chest, angling out in a heaving breath. "No. It was about someone else I failed to protect."

"You can tell me, you know," she says, and when I twist away from the fire, her gaze is still soft, her hand finding a comforting place on my arm. "If you need someone to talk about it with. You're not as alone as you think."

My body hums, answering the small, imperceptible shifts in hers, and not for the first time, I wonder what it would be like to confide in this woman. Whether this first glimpse of darkness will scare her away, or if maybe it would be easier to bear with the two of us holding it together.

But below the golden glow of my small hope, my stomach churns, bubbling along with the nagging doubt in my mind.

"Ever?" I venture, and I know she's listening when her eyes dart up to meet mine.

"I was dreaming about my mother."

“She’s gone too, right?” When I nod, her fingers tighten on my arm. “Did you dream about what happened to her?”

Another nod. Mustering up my courage, I swallow down my doubts and tell her the secret almost no one knows.

“When I was a boy... well, I was twelve. My father didn’t come home from work when he normally did. We stayed up late to wait for him—it was a time of unrest in the city, and we’d heard rumors of a massacre in the square that day. Some ebbers formed a small rebel group and were trying to fight against the Blood Hours, against the barrier keeping them in Toeska. But my father was smarter than that—he knew rebelling would never work. Not when the city’s magic could strike you dead where you stood for breaking the law. We were waiting for him when someone knocked. Lennon, my father’s boss, was at the door. A riot had started in front of the cobbler’s shop—there were sun guards everywhere. People were screaming, and my dad saw a little girl in the crowd, crying, lost. He ran out to get her, to help... and at that moment, the city’s magic took hold. And dropped every ebb on the entire street dead.”

There are silent tears on both of our faces again, leaking from the corners of my eyes. Her other hand comes to her mouth. “Oh, Sayer.”

Unfortunately, this is not the end of the story.

“Lennon brought him to us. My mother was screaming. And I... well, I think it was the first time I ebbed since I was a young child, the first time after I’d been taught it was forbidden. And the energy roiling in the city was the blackest, most sorrow and hate filled kind you could imagine. I didn’t know how to control it—hell, I barely knew what I was doing at all. It overtook me in seconds. Everything happened fast, and I don’t remember much... but when I came out of the blind, my mother was dead, and one of my tallies was burning... then gone.”

“Goddess...” Ever’s mouth is gaping. “Dark Goddess, Sayer. No wonder you were afraid to ebb. No wonder you keep your power constrained. I am so, so sorry.”

A crease forms between my brows. “Sorry? What could you possibly be sorry for?”

“For... well, for everything on our first night. Of course you didn’t know how to control your power. I thought you were so stupid to blind yourself, and all this time... I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to be sorry for that. It *was* stupid of me to ebb that night. Desperation drove me and Ena was dead... I wanted to kill. I wanted to inflict pain. I wanted to die.”

Ever flinches, and she reaches up to curl her fingers in my hair, pulling me forward until my forehead rests against hers. I close my eyes, savoring her touch, the smell of her skin and the caress of her breath against my face. “You don’t want to anymore, right? To die?”

I pause. “Sometimes I think I do. But right now... no. Never when I’m with you.”

“I don’t want to lose you,” she says, her voice barely a whisper of heat.

I pull back just enough to look into her eyes. “You don’t think I’m a monster?”

“No,” she replies in earnest, the freckles around her mouth turning down in a frown. “You were just a child saddled with dangerous powers no one taught you to control.”

“And that lack of control meant I couldn’t heal Ena when she lay in my arms dying,” I reply bitterly, glancing towards the tunnel, the empty yawning mouth where my greatest failure lies, still waiting for me to save her.

Abruptly, she turns to me, eyes troubled. “Your sister is here? In this cave?”

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath to both fill my body and leave my mind empty. I’ve shared one of my darkest moments—and Ever is still here, still sitting beside me with wide eyes, willing to help.

My sleeve is rough against my raw cheek when I wipe away the tears. I can’t speak, my tongue glued to the roof of

my mouth as if not saying the words will stop time. Instead, I nod.

“Can you go in there? Or should I go alone?”

“You’re injured. We don’t have to do this now,” I say, my grip on her hand tightening. “You should focus on healing yourself. It’s not as if... as if she’s going anywhere.”

The shake of her head is small, subtle, the firelight pooling shadows around one side of her face. “Don’t worry about me. There’s no reason to wait, and it will make you feel better to have this done. To know it works.”

I swallow my doubts, fear lancing the edges of my throat and sticking on the way down. Waiting will only put off the inevitable; either this will work, or every horrible thing I’ve done has been for naught. Again.

“Okay,” I say, and even though my voice breaks, I struggle to my feet. Ever lets go of my hand to allow me up, then slowly rises alongside me. I steady her, tilting my head in concern, but before I get the chance to ask if she’s sure she’s strong enough for this, she reaches up to cup my face.

“It’ll be alright,” she whispers. Her thumb runs along my cheekbone, and her touch leaves a wake of warmth and trust. “I’ll be with you. We will heal her, together. We will survive together. And the Blood King will give you what you want too.”

And though hope stirs in my chest, though my heart swells and I want to trust this woman down to the very marrow of my bones, I’m not sure I believe her.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The air in the cave lays thick with silence, weighted by the echo of Ena's final scream. It presses against my eardrums until the world narrows to the throbbing of my heart, my breath coming in heavy gasps tasting of salt and rust.

I am surprisingly numb as I step further into the space, leaving the tunnel behind. Ever follows at my heels, her cloudy exhalation rising to mix with mine. There's a sharp intake of breath that might be pain or horror as she scans the room. She takes my hand. I realize I'm trembling when my knuckles knock against hers.

Leading her forward is an effort, but I focus on the ground, taking care to not step on our possessions strewn around the floor. There is a wooden cup I took out of the cupboard above the sink at the last moment, since it would be less likely to break while traveling. Here is a tiny chess piece I carved for Ena for her birthday last year, travel sized—and yes, here are the rest, the box ripped on one side and spilling minuscule pawns and kings out onto the stone. There is a boot print in blood on the wooden lid—I must have broken it when I'd blinded myself with ebbing, and not even noticed.

It's only when my eyes catch a familiar fabric pattern on the ground that I stop short, toes inches away from my mother's quilt.

"Is this...?" Ever asks, gripping my arm.

I nod.

“Isla killed her?” I don’t know where she gleaned this from, a guess perhaps, but I nod again, a bit numb. “Do you want to... you don’t have to stay.”

I shake my head. I need to be here. I won’t leave my sister alone.

Ever tries to catch my eye, but there is nothing to grasp. My eyes are empty, my face bloodless and gray, like I am the corpse wrapped in cloth and lying on the unyielding floor.

I make myself watch. Ever steps forward, then goes to one knee before the bundle. Slowly, she peels the blanket away from Ena’s face.

The scene is not as terrible, not as violent as the one I remember in my head. The wound still gapes, the edges ragged and stained with black blood, but above the gore, Ena is serene. Her skin has paled to a lifeless cast, her hair a tangle of curls framing her head. With her eyes closed, and if I ignore the ugly rend in her throat, she could almost be asleep.

But she is not asleep, I remind myself. She is dead.

It’s odd—I have cried so much in the past few weeks since she died, but here, next to her body, none come. Only the small spark of hope burning in my chest keeps me from walking out into the snow, away from the numbness and guilt and sick shame. If I can save her, if Ever heals her and the King grants my request, I might be able to forgive myself for losing her in the first place.

Ever’s hands charge with energy, blue-gray in the darkened space. The torch I carry in one hand barely sheds a circle of light large enough to envelope us. I could have grabbed a larger one, or even one of the firelights stocked in here, but I specifically chose this torch to avoid the full effect of the blood-stained ceiling and long dried spatters on the walls.

Lightning cracks of energy race along Ever’s fingers, which hover hesitantly over my sister’s throat. “Is this the only wound?”

Since she isn’t looking at me, I find my voice somewhere in the jumble of my throat. “No. One on her side too.”

Nodding, Ever tucks a lock behind her ear in concentration. Shifting until she kneels, her hands flutter, assessing the gash.

Light pours from her, shifting until it covers Ena's throat. Though I must have seen Ever heal a hundred times by now, I can't help but be awed as the magic starts to move. It hooks onto the jagged edges of the wound with tiny fingers, coaxing and fusing the flesh back together. In mere moments, the energy dissipates, and left in its trail is smooth, perfect skin. Her neck is whole, lovely and pale from collarbone to chin.

For a mad second, all I want is to gather her in my arms. When I go to my knees, it's as though I'm sitting next to her bed at night, after she's fallen asleep listening to me read or tell her one of our father's stories.

Reality haunts the edges of my mind, for there is no rise and fall of her chest. There is no fluttering of her lashes. There is still her own blood matting her curled hair.

It takes a few moments to truly come to terms with it. She is not there. She is not in this body, this husk. There's no shine to her eyes or toothy grin pulling at her lips—no wrinkle of her nose or reaching of her small fingers for mine.

But Ever survived—her smile has come back to me. Through the swelling pain, as my pitiful imagining goes down the drain, I hold on to the small hope thrumming in my chest. Ena's smile will return too. I will make sure of it.

The dazzling, glowing energy still stains the insides of my eyelids when I blink, plastering blue and green remnants across my vision. Ever takes the torch from me without speaking, and I smooth Ena's throat with trembling fingers.

"It worked," I say. It might be wonder or hope or sorrow in my voice, but Ever's answer would be the same regardless.

"Yes," she says. She waits, giving me the space to trace along Ena's jaw, to tuck a piece of hair behind her ear.

Time stretches, an instant turning into a minute, a minute into something infinite, a bubble of hope in a broken, bloody world. Ena's body lies in front of me, cold and empty but

whole; something which was impossible only days ago. Who knows what other impossibilities lie on the other side of a moonset and a handful of sunrises.

The edges of the bubble blur as Ever shifts, and I lean back, letting the connection between my hope and this moment break. I open my mouth, wanting to thank her but unable to find a way to put this and so much more into words, when a scream rocks through the thick cave walls, straight into my skull.

Another scream. Another ebber probably already dead in the snow.

I'm on my feet just a hair slower than Ever, who's sprinting for the exit, face screwed up against the pain in her side. She moves with a hitch in her step, but still too fast for me to catch her before she slips into the night. Cursing, I follow, head clouded with memories of the bloodhounds holding a knife to her throat not so very long ago.

Moonlight pours over the trees, the scarlet turning the forest into a bloody tableau. Laughter and piercing wails twine through shadowed branches, a dirge of ebber dread clashing with the elation of bloodhounds enjoying the hunt. The kill.

I am going to kill Ever myself when I catch up with her.

Long legs pumping, I push harder, easily overtaking her limping form. She's holding her side with one hand as she half runs, half shuffles—the other is raised, pulsing with onyx, spidering veins.

Ahead, almost too far to make out, two bloodhounds stalk through the trees. Trails of darkness blossom behind them, spreading through the snow; blood leaking from the two bodies they drag.

The man's jaw is slack, a spear still protruding from his belly. Beside him, the woman's expression is frozen in a look of horror, cuts covering her face and neck, finished with a gaping throat.

"Ever," I say, grabbing her wrist. The energy sizzles against my skin, angry and buzzing. She tries to pull away, but

I tug her to a stop, turning her towards me.

Amber burns in her gaze, molten and glowing hotter than forged steel. “We have to help them.”

“We can’t help them,” I say, pushing her hand back to her side. It still spiders with energy, crackling and spilling tension into the air between us. “They’re already dead.”

“So is your sister,” she spits, stepping closer, rage morphing her features into something unrecognizable. “Why is she worth saving, but they’re not?”

My whole body flinches, and I drop her hand, stepping away. “Everyone is worth saving. But not everyone can be saved.” It comes out a whisper, my guilt for my own terrible deeds lapping at the shame coursing through me. Still, I hold her gaze. My hand stabs through the garnet dark, back towards the cave.

“I have made a lot of choices in my life. I regret many, but protecting that little girl with every dark part of my soul is not one of them. I had to chose; them or her. If I have to choose tonight, them or us, it will be us. It will be you every time, Ever. Not because you or I deserve it more, but because no one else ever will. Toeskan ebbers do not get easy choices. Only hard choices and harder ones.”

The flames in Ever’s eyes bank, the amber softening to cooling embers. Her hand flexes once, twice, then releases the sparkling malice of black energy back into the night.

“I’m sorry,” I say, though I don’t know if it’s to fill the silence or to apologize for this or to atone for the dark things I’ve done. “This is how it has to be. We can either survive to save our loved ones, or we can die trying to fight for strangers. And as much as I ache for those ebbers, as much as I hate the bloodhounds holding them, I’ve already lost Ena. I almost lost you.” My throat retaliates, tightening, and won’t allow the last of the thought to slip out. *I don’t want to lose you again.*

We stay there for a beat, the tension dissipating with the mist of our mingled breath rising into the night. After a pause, Ever steps forward to counter my retreat, taking my hand.

“You’re right. There wasn’t anything we could do.” *This time*. I hear the unspoken words and know this won’t be our last conversation on the subject. But I’m unwilling to further bare my heart to her, unwilling to yet reveal the secrets that would make her truly understand but make her hate me as much as the bloodhounds.

“Wow, twice in one night? Are you going to make a habit of telling me I’m right?” I say, willing a light note into my voice. As if we didn’t just see two dead bodies scouring a trail of blood through the snow. As if we didn’t just let two murderers go unpunished.

Ever smacks my arm as we move through the forest, away from the blood and back to the warmth of the cave, the promise of safety.

For now.



I t’s like we have been gone for days when we return to the smaller cavern at the other end of the tunnel. The last few hours seem unreal to me, more dream than reality. Where all the time went, I could not say.

When we settle down to sleep, I toss and turn, restless. I can’t get comfortable, aware of every bump and rock under my makeshift bed more than before. But beyond that, an unfamiliar ache settles in my chest, a coldness gnawing at me—I miss Ever’s warm body curled around mine. We collected a spare sleeping roll from the main cave, and now she lays across from me, the dying embers between us.

I should tell her. I should tell her all of it. She deserves to know what kind of man she is getting involved with, the things I have done to bring me here. That I am no better than those hounds dragging ebbers off to their death; my cause may have been nobler, but the outcome was the same. Dead bodies in the snow, blood pooling in the night.

Maybe she would understand. She is doing an insane, impossible thing for her sister—would she sympathize with what I have done for mine? If I tell her, explain how every ebber in Toeska is haunted by the knowledge they will die in the Blood Hours, could she swallow the way I clawed for every little scrap of hope possible? Every chance to save Ena at the expense of people who would die anyway?

I'm about to break the silence weighing on me, to climb to my knees and lay all my secrets beside the flames, but before I push off the furs, Ever is already getting up. She scoops up her bag and makeshift pillow, dragging them behind her when she marches around the fire pit. I roll to my back and watch as she spreads the roll beside mine, squeezing between the wall and me to lie down without meeting my gaze.

Despite the war raging in my mind, I can't hide my smirk as she tucks herself close to my body. One thigh wraps around my hip in a way that makes my heart go wild, and a now familiar heat races up my core. Guilt and desire gnaw at me in equal measure as I slip an arm around her and stare down at the silken spill of her rich, black-brown hair snuggling into the crook of my shoulder.

She mumbles, the musical tones of her voice rumbling through my chest. "Get that big dumb smile off your face and go to sleep."

It's at that moment I know I'm lost. Because before I let her snuggle into my arms and hold her close, I should tell her everything.

But I do not know if I can handle Ever hating me.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

There are nine days left until the Blood Hours end. And we have a plan.

“How do we know she will follow me?” Ever asks, glancing down with apprehension at the marks I’ve sketched on the paper. They create a rough outline of the city and the surrounding land, mapped in slashes of gray charcoal. After seeing the bloodhounds so close to our cave the other night, and knowing Isla is still scouring the woods for us, I no longer want to hide. We may not be able to save everyone, but we can at least save ourselves.

With Isla gone, we may just make it out of the Hours alive.

“She’s seen you with me twice. With any luck, she will assume wherever you are, I won’t be far behind.” A blush no doubt accompanies the heat creeping into my cheeks, and Ever’s smug smile only confirms my fear. She reaches out to touch my face, and I snap my teeth at her playfully.

“Weirdo. You’re cute when you get embarrassed,” she says, shaking her head and pulling her hand away. She turns back to the map, growing more serious as she looks over it again. All traces of pain are gone from her face; we’ve rested a few days, and the magic working beneath her skin gives her a new, healthy glow. “But really, what if she doesn’t? The whole plan will fail.”

“It’s not going to fail,” I say, pointing to the star I’ve drawn on the map to indicate where I’ll be waiting. “She’s going to follow you, but not too closely because she won’t

want you to realize she's there. Lead her to the river but hide before she reaches you. Once she notices me, I doubt she will be able to resist the opportunity, especially with so few days of the Hours left. The river isn't sturdy anyway, but with your ebbing, the ice will crack under her feet. And as you conveniently reminded me, people from Toeska can't swim."

The plan is simple and involves little risk on our part. Even if Isla makes it across the ice somehow, I'll be armed and ready. If there are other bloodhounds with her, I doubt they will dare to cross. Isla is just mad enough to do it anyway if it means getting to kill me.

"What about Ena?"

I shake my head. I've thought a lot about this, as much as it pains me to leave her behind. "I don't want to risk anything further happening to her. She's been safe here so far."

Ever agrees, thoughts already skipping ahead to the next problem. "I've never heated something from that far away." She frowns, her fingers tracing the distance.

"It won't take much to break the ice up—it's not very thick. The river runs too fast for it to get a good freeze. If you aim just enough energy into it, she will be swept under and with any luck, we won't have to worry about her anymore."

"I'll have to climb a tall tree," she says, cocking her head as if imagining the river and the surrounding forest in her mind. "We should scout this. Then I can get a better idea if it's possible."

"We have some time. But we can't wait too long- we don't want Isla to find us again. Next time we meet her, it has to be on our terms," I say, nodding to myself.

So far, Isla is the only real threat we've had, and I believe we are strong enough to outsmart the other bloodhounds who follow the rules. But Isla is playing by the rules of a different game—revenge.

The places we can hide are running out. There are only two caves left, one of them close to the river. It's what gave me the idea for this plan in the first place.

“I want to practice before we move,” Ever says. “The stream near here will work well enough. I’ve tossed energy into water to make it boil before, but never more than a foot or so.”

“You’ll be able to do it. You can do anything,” I say, and she swats at me. The last few nights, we’ve fallen asleep together, the heat coursing through me slowly morphing from shame into desire. I’ve buried my guilt along with my secrets, covering them with the layers of Ever’s laughter and shrouds of late night conversations. Secrets are for lighter times, and with possible death stalking the forest and lurking across a frozen river, I don’t give the guilt room to grow. There will be a chance for truth later, if we both survive.

That is what I keep telling myself, anyway, when my conscience eats away at the lining of my chest, and my throat closes to keep the words from spilling into Ever’s ears.

“Stop buttering me up like it’s going to get you somewhere,” she scoffs. I try to grab at her, but she squeals and ducks away. Light and weightless, leaving dark thoughts crushed down deep, I spring after her, catching her after a few evasions and wrapping her in a hug. Her ample waist presses softly into my arm as I squeeze her tightly, the other winding around her broad shoulders. She squirms before giving up and settles into my embrace, back against my chest, sighing in defeat.

“Is it going somewhere now?” I ask into the shell of her ear, letting my voice rumble with the warmth snaking through me as she presses close. The shiver running down her spine is not from the cold.

“Yes, keeping a woman against her will is a great way to get somewhere with her,” Ever says sarcastically, but the breathlessness to her voice gives her away. Still, I release her and step away, smiling brightly.

I shake my head. “I don’t think anyone could force you to do something you didn’t want to.”

“Want to give it a try?” She arches an eyebrow at me, the playfulness heating to molten amber under the surface of her

gaze.

“Oh, Ever,” I say, stepping closer. I don’t press my body to hers again, but instead reach out and place one finger under her chin. I raise it until her huge, liquid amber eyes are looking right into mine, and tremors of desire race through my blood until everything is on fire. “When I give *that* a try, there is nothing you won’t be *begging* me to do.”

I almost hear her knees knocking together; imagine the muscles of her core tightening. Our eyes are locked, frozen in this almost moment, and not for the first time in a few days, I wonder if this is it. Will this be when we finish that first kiss, when we finally give in to the tension that’s been building while we lie curled together at night? Though this is not the first time I’ve hoped she would grasp my hair and push me against the cave wall, then kiss me until I forget my own name, it hasn’t happened.

Yet.

My self-control is wavering—I can’t take much more of this, this racing blood and aching skin, yearning for the brush of her against me. To forget what I am hiding—to forget the darkness always a thought away. I am about to lean in when she pulls her chin down, putting a hand on my chest.

“Maybe I’ll be the one making you beg,” she says with a wicked wink, turning away. I try to find my lungs, my mouth, and by the time I’ve remembered how to breathe again, she stoops by her pack, tying the top closed.

“What are you doing?” I ask, embarrassed to find my voice still rough with desire.

She slings the pack over her shoulder. “I said I wanted to practice. Isla isn’t going to sink herself.” Her eyes trace up my body, reigniting the flames I’ve been trying to quell. “If I fail, she will reach you across the ice. She might hurt you. I need to make sure this is possible, or we need a new plan.”

“Nothing is going to happen to me. This is the best plan we could have thought of—a way to attack her without getting close enough to get hurt,” I say. I am truly confident this will

work. Ever is the only ebber for a hundred miles who can use her powers this way—the priestess will never see it coming.

Ever shrugs. “Even still, it would make me feel better.”

“Alright,” I agree somewhat reluctantly, striding over to my own bag. After packing a few emergency supplies, Ever crouches down and squeezes into the tunnel, leaving me to follow behind into the cold afternoon sun.

The walk is peaceful, almost familiar, our conversation settling into Ever’s ideas for the plan, then into a comfortable banter. The hum of our voices and the dampened sounds of the melting forest around us lull me into contentment.

For a moment, I relax into myself; into a place I haven’t been able to find in days, months, maybe even years.

For a moment, I imagine I have no secrets.

For a moment, I almost forget the storm brewing on the horizon.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“Why’d you pick this one if it makes you jumpy?” Ever asks, coming up behind me on the ledge. There is a wide shelf here, jutting out to give an astounding view of the sleepy trees and distant mountain crests, dyed in shades of rose and lavender and azure by the setting sun. We spent a day perfecting our plan, and most of today traversing the Winterspoke forest, arriving just before dusk.

“You can see for miles,” I answer, gesturing to the landscape, a sea of opal and emerald, and the glitter of the city to the southeast. “It will be easy to spot anyone coming. Also, there aren’t as many options on this side of the river, or in the Winterspoke forest. I wanted one cave in each corner of the map so to speak; then no matter where Ena and I went, there was somewhere to run. This one might not be the most hidden, but it was the best I could find considering the others in this area were barely depressions in the rock.”

“Why not sleep in trees? There are other ways to hide,” Ever says, slouching against the cave mouth.

“Not all of us are squirrels,” I answer. “I’m surprised you never rolled out of one.”

“I was climbing trees before you were born,” Ever scoffs. “And even the smallest child knows to belt yourself in if you’re going to nap in one.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Before I was born? How old are you?”

A tan finger waggles in my face in response. “Now that’s just rude. You should never ask a lady her age.”

“You’re a lady?” I earn a glare for that one and laugh at her scowl. “Come on, I’m just kidding. But seriously, how old are you? I told you my age.”

Ever’s annoyance melts away like ice in the sun, a grin surfacing beneath. “Guess.”

This is a trap if I ever saw one. She knows it too as I hesitate, and the grin widens. *Fine, but if she gets insulted, she asked for it.*

“Nineteen?” I ask, guessing low. From the roll of her eyes, she knows what I’m doing.

“Come on. Really guess. I said I was alive before you were born, so I have to be older.”

“Twenty-two?” Another shake of her head. “Twenty-three?”

“Now you’re just counting up from your age.”

I frown. “You can’t be that much older than me. You honestly look twenty, except for...” My eyes drift down to her hips, the curve of her thighs, and I make the very, very smart decision to swallow the rest of my words. “Twenty-four?”

“Ding-ding, we have a winner,” she says, shaking her head. “And I know I don’t look so young, but thank you for trying.”

“You’re absolutely beautiful,” I say, an impulsive thought. There was self-degradation in her last remark, and I can’t abide it.

Ever stares at me, then bursts out laughing. “Thank you. I think so too.” She pauses, then rests a hand on my shoulder. “You’re not bad yourself.”

I can’t keep the flushed, satisfied expression off my face. “Thanks.” I look out across the darkening sky, twilight chasing the last of the sunset’s jewel hues over the horizon. “Are you ready for tomorrow?”

Ever slides into my side, her arm snaking around my waist. We stand curled together, watching navy fade to gray and shadows sweep the valley below. The wide, mighty river is a sable ribbon cutting through the trees, only the occasional star reflected between strips of fast moving clouds. Elue set a few nights ago, leaving the blood moon alone to rule the sky. I squint, imagining I see the cave where Ena's body still lies from here.

“Ready as I can be, I guess. I wish I could get some more practice in, but what you said earlier is right. We can't wait much longer or she is going to find us again. When we came across those tracks on the way here yesterday, I thought for sure she was going to be waiting for us in the trees,” Ever says, shuddering.

My arm tightens around her, and she leans her head into my chest. The moment is so natural, so normal, as if we'd done this a thousand times and will do it a million more. “It's going to work. You've nearly perfected the heat technique, and we found a great spot. All that's left is to find Isla and lead her there. And in a week, all of this will be over. I'll have Ena back, and you'll find your sister.”

I expect Ever to say something, and when she doesn't, I peer down at her. The top of her head rests against my chin, her gaze turned toward the city's high walls.

“What happens after that?” she asks. I am still looking at her, and for a moment, I imagine the glimmering stars silvering the strands of her hair like old age. But then her question seeps into my bones, turning them brittle, and the vision of what might be shatters. Following her gaze towards the city, I suppress a shudder, a well of fear churning inside me for the first time in days.

“Let's get there before we worry about after,” I say. Will she leave with her sister when she wins her back? I could never ask her to stay here—what kind of life would we have? Ebbing is all but forbidden in the city. She would never give that up. Ever without her magic would be like the sky without a sun.

I don't want to let myself consider a future which might not even be possible. If she'll even have me after everything I've done, and everything I've kept from her.

Her nod bumps against my shoulder, and I relish the warmth of her body tucked against mine for a second longer. After another breath, she extricates herself from my hold. Footsteps echo as she retreats into the cave, leaving me standing on the ledge, the cold wind forcing itself down my throat to chill my heart.

I am not ready to lose her.

There have been other men and women before, even a very few after Isaac, but not this. This warmth, this comfort, this companionship... no, nothing like her.

I should march into the cave and tell her right now. Tell her all those I've killed and why. Tell her I want her to understand, need her to understand, because I can't imagine walking through those city gates without her beside me.

I've never told everyone everything. Not Ahnica, who was my best friend. Not Ena, who at one point was my entire world. Not even Isaac, who I dreamed of building a life with.

Now they are all dead; and when the wind blows again, licking at the deepest of my fears, I shudder with the thought that I might be the one who gets Ever killed too.

That reality digs its claws in deeper as my attention wanders to the frosted glass river below, the blackened velvet of its surface concealing the promise of an icy death. There are so many ways this plan could go wrong. I could die tomorrow. Ever might too.

This inky midnight hovering on the horizon may be our last.

Blowing out a long, shuddering breath into the chill night, I turn on heel and stride back into the cave.

But not to tell Ever the truth.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The warmth of the cave wraps me in an embrace as I duck inside, frosted air trailing fingers along the back of my neck as if reluctant to let me go. Shivering, I circle the fire to where Ever's already nested herself into the furs. She glances up at me from under lashes the color of night, her bronze gaze blurring into amber desire.

"Done brooding on the balcony?" she teases, lifting the blanket and sliding back to make room for me. The movement reveals wide swaths of her torso barely covered by her underclothes. Her collarbones are dotted with those damned freckles, scattered like tantalizing constellations calling me to explore. They grow more sparse as they extend over the tops of her breasts, bleeding into the unmarred skin beneath where the sun cannot reach.

I raise a brow at her almost naked body, something like adrenaline but sweeter buzzing around my head, through my blood. "Quite the pajamas."

She rolls her eyes, fanning herself dramatically. "If you haven't noticed, it's a bit warm in here. Who built the fire so big?"

"You."

The corners of my mouth pull up as she scowls, but I catch the assessing look in her gaze when she glances up and away too quickly, when she pulls the blanket down just a bit more.

I'm not the only one who's been thinking about how to spend what might be our last night together.

"I'll bank the fire and come to bed," I say. "But no promises I'll cool you down."

Embers smolder as I tame the flames, the burn of Ever's hungry gaze fixed on my spine. When I turn and cross the small stretch from the fire to her, she peels back the blankets, inviting me in again.

I settle beside her, one arm beneath her, the other draping across her waist, the same as usual. But tonight is different—tonight, her skin burns against mine, a silky fire that consumes every thought. Tonight, she faces me instead of turning and allowing me to curl around her, tangling her legs between mine and reaching her arms around my shoulders. The shift brings us closer, lips a breath away, my heart drumming out the rhythm of my racing thoughts.

Death waits with icy claws outside, shrouded behind a still to rise dawn, but here, the sun and the moon and the new day cannot reach us. Not yet.

Tonight, the only dawn is the feel of Ever's lips as she kisses me.

There's nothing to say out loud that our bodies cannot—the fervor of knowing we may die tomorrow, that this may be the last chance to explore the heat blossoming between us. The passion which may be destined to burn before it blooms, before we become ashes on our funeral pyres and remnants of blood on snow. She and I crash together, my guilt buried beneath a storm of desire. Together, we ignore the haze of uncertainty looming above, turning our backs on the night, sheltering in each other's bodies where the blood moon can no longer see us.

A trail of freckles leads my lips down her neck, the patterns offering tantalizing paths for my tongue to follow, eliciting a gasp from Ever's swollen mouth. Those gasps turn deeper, then become moans, her hands going from pushing me away to gripping my shoulders like they are the only things holding her in this world.

“Sayer,” she groans, and my name is a plea, a question. The breathless edge of it has me slowing down, ghosting my lips across the pillar of her neck, the hollow of her throat, the dips in her collarbone. Breath rasps from her as her chest rises and falls with battered breath, her back arching into my touch when she tips her head back to expose her neck.

Given the access I have craved for days, weeks even, I hungrily explore the golden fire-glow skin there, tracing the lines of her throat until she’s writhing in my arms. One hand comes up and tangles with my hair, the other guiding down, pushing my face towards her chest.

I obey.

I flip us in one move, my fear gone with the racing of my heart, leaving her breathless as I lie her gently down beneath me on the furs along the fire and settle over her. Thrusting the blanket away, the fabric’s pull reveals the long length of her torso, her rich skin gleaming in the firelight. I resume my kisses at her collarbone, anticipation and heat roiling in my blood, my lips straying closer to the arched curve of her breasts. The band around them laces in the front, and I reach up to untie it just as my mouth finds the top of the swell. I shift back to watch the band fall away, the perfect weight of her chest pulling her breasts towards the sides of her body.

Her nipples are already tight with desire, her breasts as full and luscious and enticing as I’d imagined them to be. My groin throbs when I cup one in my hand, Ever’s gasp as I thumb her nipple sending my heart into dizzying spirals of pleasure. With a dip of my head, my tongue flicks out to circle her areola. Ever’s head lulls back, and my mouth wanders to the center. She arches into me with a near scream of pleasure. A thrill runs through me at the new knowledge of her body. *Gods, I love hearing her moan.*

Though it’s torture, the need for her skin against mine a hunger that must be sated, I pull myself away. Ever whines when my body leaves hers, eyes popping open and narrowing. But when I lift my shirt over my head and lean back over her, a satisfied cat smile pulls her lips up.

“What?” I ask as I loom over her, planting my hands on either side of her face. I press my chest down into hers, every place burning where we touch, the wet spot I’d left on her breast pushing against my ribs.

“Get back down here,” she says, catching my face. At the same time, she leans upward to kiss me, one of her hands snakes between my legs and squeezes. I buck, groaning into her open mouth, but her other hand has the back of my head and holds me firmly in place. I’m wild with waves of desire as she presses her fingers along the length of my shaft over my pants. My knees settle between her legs, and I nudge them open further.

She bites my lower lip, a nip which sends me deeper into the kiss, a frenzy of desire and pulsing need burrowing into my core. When I catch a glimpse of her face, the teasing smirk is what nearly undoes me. But two can play at that game.

“You really shouldn’t have done that,” I say, letting a wicked grin widen my lips. Then I kiss her again, hard. Ever’s mouth meets mine with hunger, her fingers tangling in my hair.

I lean back until I’m kneeling between her legs, giving her no choice but to break the kiss or be pulled up with me. She chooses the latter, wrapping her legs around my waist and grinding into my lap as she strokes me up and down again through the fabric.

Gathering her hair in my fist, I pull gently at first to gauge her response. She knows what I want, nodding while she grinds harder, her hand leaving my shaft so the full weight of her core rolls against me. My groan fills her mouth, and then I break the kiss by pulling her head back with a tug on her hair. Her soft sounds guide me as I cover her neck in kisses again, this time following with more down her shoulders and arms. I brace my hand across her shoulder blades and dip her, exposing her breasts to my wandering tongue.

The rolling of her hips into me gains momentum while I lick and suck and tease, taking my fill of her body and letting

my other hand get lost in exploring her tantalizingly fleshy stomach and the thick thighs beneath.

Letting her lean all the way back until her shoulders are on the floor once again, I spread my hands over her thighs, digging my thumb into the bones of her hips. I carefully lift her until her ass rests against my cock, making no secret of how it pulses beneath her. She whimpers in pleasure, looking down her exposed body as I run my fingers under her waistband, finding the string. I undo the tie and pull them down, then carefully off each leg, until she is bare before me, her hips in my lap and her legs splayed apart.

Backing up, I set her fully onto the ground before bending to kiss each of her thighs. They lead me to the apex of her center, to a patch of dark hair. When I lick from the bottom of her fold to the top, Ever's moans are barely audible from between her legs. She convulses as I find her clit, sucking and flicking until her thighs squeeze my head. I come up for air, making eye contact with her and wiping the taste of her from the sides of my mouth.

"I'm sorry if I nearly suffocated you," she says, breathless, but she doesn't look sorry. She looks like she wants to do it again.

I turn my head and kiss one thigh, then the other, burying my face in her core again. After another round of gasps, I look up at her as I lick her, and she tilts her head back and moans again. My cock jumps at the sound, and it's all I can do to keep from taking her then.

"I'd beg you to suffocate me if it meant I got to die with the taste of you on my tongue," I rumble, teasing her with the vibration of my breath on her legs. She shivers, and I lick again and again, the heady scent of her arousal and the taste of her pleasure making me burn. When the fire inside of me threatens to burst, I pull myself up, pressing my body to hers, and kiss her again.

Her hands find the laces to my own trousers. When she finishes, I roll, taking her with me so she winds up on top. My nails run down her back, caressing and tracing as I taste her

breasts again, and she throws her head back. Her long hair tickles my fingers, and I gather it again, holding it and tugging gently to keep her there, where I fill my mouth with the taste of her skin.

“Sayer,” she groans, and from the moisture pooling beneath her on my lower stomach, I know what she wants. I lean back and settle my hands on her hips.

“Yes?” I say, smiling, and she bends to kiss me. In this moment, things slow, our bodies meld. Her mouth opens to me and I find that my lips, my tongue fit just right into hers. The silky softness of her hair creates a curtain around our heads, blocking out the rest of the world and casting her face in stripes of firelight.

Her chuckle, low and dangerous, sends heat licking through me. I break our kiss to find her smiling, warm and soft and wicked. “Should I make you beg, Sayer?”

I can’t look away as she takes both my hands in hers, tangling our fingers. Pressing closer, she pulls my arms above my head, leaving me laid out beneath her, my heart thrumming and blood singing. I go to move one, and she slaps my hand lightly, moving it back.

“You stay right there,” she whispers into the shell of my ear, voice all demand. I moan, low and deep, and my cock hardens even more. “Mm, yes,” she murmurs, and I may combust from the heat her words send coursing through me.

Her hands glow, and I can’t make sense of why. But when her fingers arch over both my wrists, something pins me to the ground. I pull against the bond, solid but flexible, and I look up to see a set of energy ropes holding my wrists to the floor of the cave. Ever has pinned me down with her magic, and I tilt my head back and close my eyes as another wave of pleasure courses through me.

She leans back and surveys me with a lazy look, taking her time. I don’t move a muscle, as I’ve been told, only following her with my eyes. Her thighs tighten around my waist, and when she sits back, the wetness between them rubs against my

hard length. I groan again, unable to resist the urge to push against her.

“How badly do you want me?” Ever asks, rolling her hips to emphasize her point. My shaft, trapped between my body and her slit, throbs in time with the moan escaping me.

“So badly,” I gasp, straining against the bonds as I arch into her.

She stills, and I open my eyes to find her eyebrow cocked. Watching. Waiting for something.

“Please,” I beg, pushing my hips against her, aching to be inside her. “Please, Ever, oh gods please.”

“Good boy,” she murmurs, smirking, and grants my request.

In seconds, her warmth and moisture are gone, and my cock can finally stand upright. Then she is there, all around me, and I arch and tense as she buries me deep inside her.

Every rock of her hips and squeeze of her thighs sends stars across my vision dizzying and brilliant. After a few moments, I find her head tilted back, riding me, the bonds gone from my wrists. I wrap my hands around her waist and guide her rhythm, thrusting from below and urging her on.

“Yes, oh gods, yes,” I cry, bucking. “Ever, Ever, Ever, Ever.” Her name is on my tongue, the taste of her skin in my throat, her own end building. She tightens around me, and just as she throws her head back in the thrall of her peak, I find the crest of my pleasure and plunge over the edge.

We collapse together, all tangled limbs and lost breath. When we finally find the separations between us, when our skin peels apart and becomes two people once again, I gaze at her sex ruffled hair and shining amber eyes.

For a moment, the only sound is the crackling of the low fire. Then we both burst into laughter.

It’s a dangerous thing, this happiness, this light. But as guffaws bubble up in my chest, as I hold her to me and listen

to the bright bell of her mirth, I know there is no place in the world that wouldn't feel like home with her beside me.

"That took us long enough," she says when the laughter subsides, rolling onto her back and wiping her head.

"It really should have happened days ago," I agree, propping myself up on an elbow.

Ever shoots me a look, one eyebrow raised. "Days? I've wanted you beneath me for weeks, you idiot." But her smile is all teasing, and the uptilt of her mouth softens her lips, just begging to be kissed. I lean down, fully ready to make good on the invitation, but she pulls away before I can cover them with mine.

"Hold on there. I need a moment to clean myself up," she says, the underlying heat in her voice letting me know she won't be gone for long.

"Of course." I lie back, content to watch as she wraps one of the blankets around her shoulders and pulls some contraceptive herbs from her pack. To give her privacy, I turn away when she uses some of the water to wash, boiling still more for tea. She settles back into my side moments later, snuggling against me with a cup of steaming liquid and a warm, lazy smile on her face.

"How much do you need to drink for the effects to work?" I ask, nodding to the cup.

"Just a sip."

Carefully, I reach over and take the cup from her hands, stretching to set it well away from the furs. "Then maybe we can reheat this in a bit."

Her face flushes, and she is on me again, hungry and demanding and burning. I press her back down, trying to stay in the warmth of her light, lose myself in the taste of her skin and the sound of her cries.

The ghost of my secret haunts the edges of my joy, but I push it away.

There will be time for regrets if we are still breathing by moonrise.



Hours later, in the raven black before dawn, I am back outside. Restlessness and shame press against my sternum, anxiety swelling like a storm about to break.

I tried to sleep when Ever collapsed into the furs a final time, but my blood grew jittery and hot in my veins. The image of her slipping through the forest, ink-spill hair glinting with ruby highlights in Sangua's light, kept popping unprompted into my mind. Everything rides on tomorrow—the survival we have clung to for weeks is almost within reach.

If we kill Isla, we will be safe. No other bloodhounds will bother to hunt us—they are used to prey who are easy to kill. Within the first few days of the Hours, most of the participants were already dead. The ones we saw a few nights ago were most likely the last.

Normally, there is a festival in the city square on the day when the last ebber dies, which lasts from noon through the night. Most years, it doesn't take more than a week, maybe two, for the festival to begin. The people in the city must be wondering who is outsmarting the bloodhounds—and hopefully, the hounds themselves already believe we are chosen by the gods to survive. It'd almost be sacrilege to kill us now, when we are clearly favored by Nidaos.

That won't stop Isla.

My feet tread lightly across the ledge, taking me once again right up to the edge. It's almost as if the red light from the blood moon overhead stings where it touches me, but I clench my teeth and force myself to pause anyway.

The sky is not clear—great storm clouds roll over the horizon, cloaking the waning moon in gauzy layers of gray and black. Even still, the whole bowl of the valley looks as

though it's been filled with old blood. The sight reminds me of the blood which stains my soul, the things I have yet to tell Ever.

In the cave, awash in the glory of her heat, the demons fled my mind. I lost myself in skin and sweet musk and amber; but here in the dark, they once again feed on the bitter taste of my guilt.

The trees are swaths of void between lucent garnet snow, the river now a road paved in ruby ice. The diluted light hovers in patches where the moon is obscured, and the beams that pierce the overcast night flit between them.

A small, sharp clink sounds next to my foot, and I look down to search for the source. Just as I spot the tiny ice ball, another much larger one hits the back of my neck, like someone punched me in the spine. I curse and reach back, pulling the coin sized piece of hail from my hood. There's no time to examine it though—it's followed by a flurry of others as the sky opens, and ice rains down from above.

I stumble back, about to make a run for the safety of the cave, when I spot movement on the river's far shore. I pull up the collar of my shirt over my head like a tent, allowing the worst of the hail to bounce harmlessly off the taut fabric. The projectiles hit my arms, leaving behind a sharp sting even through my sleeves.

There's no need to hide myself—the forest around me obscures well enough, especially in the hail. But I can still see quite far even in the storm, and when a figure darts from the river's edge and sprints for the protection of the tree canopy, I have no doubts about who it might be.

At least we won't have to go far to find Isla in the morning.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

We wake a bit after dawn and dress for the coldest weather of the Hours so far. The air nips and bites, teeth of frost and claws of ice dragging over our exposed skin. By the time we reach the river, Ever's teeth are chattering so hard, I dig out another scarf from my pack to wrap around her face.

"Maybe Isla got hit in the head by a hail chunk," Ever grumbles through her shivering.

"Our luck isn't that good," I snort, taking stock of our surroundings when we clear the trees.

The river rises up as we get closer, a small drop from its bank spilling us onto the frosted ice. Ever reaches for my hand, and we cling tightly to each other while we make our way over the treacherous terrain.

We slide and slosh our way across, Ever wobbling behind me. I am glad we nixed the idea of running across the ice to lead Isla out here—we'd have been flat on our faces in seconds. Better for me to wait across the river and for Isla to be the one slipping right into our trap.

Once on the other bank, we turn northwest, the weak sun on our backs doing little to warm us. An hour later, Nidaos's eye has climbed higher, and we have reached the huge, gnarled oak which marks the location we've chosen.

I pace anxiously as Ever climbs into the tree, shimmying up the trunk with practiced ease. There is a wide platform in

the center created by the splitting of the massive trunk into a highway of branches. With another heave, she pulls herself into a higher but still sturdy V and tucks her pack away behind the leafless limbs, only keeping the small bow and quiver of arrows we picked from the stores in our last cave. She needed a weapon to get Isla's attention without getting too close.

"There," she says, dusting off her pants. With a few graceful slides and one leap, she is back on the ground in front of me, grinning. My hands reach out and take her waist to steady her, even though she doesn't need it. I am the one who's being steadied as the familiarity of her body under my touch helps soothe the panic building in my throat.

"You're going to be too exposed," I say, looking up at the tree again. Yesterday, it seemed like the branches provided much more cover—but now, the skeletal fingers offer little shelter against the sky's brightness. "What if she sees you?"

"She won't. She'll only have eyes for you," Ever teases, tilting her head and batting her eyelashes. Her tone is all tease and flirt, but the undercurrent is unsure. She's scared too.

"We could do something else," I say. Something where I'm the one in danger, not Ever. It's my fault Isla is still hunting us, after all.

"This plan is good. We worked through a hundred others and always came back to this one. I'll be fine." She steps closer and wraps both arms around my shoulders. I embrace her in return, one hand on her neck and the other at the small of her back.

"You'd better," I say gruffly, pulling back to grab her jaw through the fabric wrapped up to her nose. "I want this back."

"What, this old thing?" she says, pulling the scarf I gave her earlier away from her face. The woolen knit tickles my nose as she shakes it at me, and I snort.

"No," I say, knocking her hand aside. Her face is left open, exposed to the chill. "This." And I kiss her.

It's different, here under the open sky. This kiss is not shrouded in the warmth of our own world, tasting of fervor

and salt and the pressure of a fatal morning's blade at our throats. Not a desperate plea to forget what we face. This tastes like a thousand words unspoken, a future I still harbor possibility for, a girl I have no right to. She tastes like honey and hope.

When we break apart, I lean forward and kiss each of her closed lids. "And these," I say, then move to the tip of her nose. "And this." Ever smiles and opens her eyes, all amber and embers.

"If we wait for you to kiss every part of my body you want me to bring back, I'm going to miss my date," she says, and the implication of all the things I'd like to touch with my lips once more ignites me. I cover her mouth with mine again, the fire spreading, scorching where our bodies come together with a different kind of passion. Her tongue clashes against mine, our kiss a newly forged mess of heat and teeth and desperation. There is an edge of goodbye in this kiss—like last night, our bodies know what our minds don't want to admit.

We break apart when Ever pulls back, breathing hard. She pushes away from my hold and stares. My mind is barely coherent, thrown off by the sudden lack of her in my arms. I take a step back too, hand going to my chest.

"I have to go," Ever says, finally averting her gaze to glance at the sun. "I need time to find Isla and bring her here. Go wait where we agreed. I'll be back."

"Okay." Every combination of words running through my mind is simultaneously too much and not enough. This is the first time in twenty-four days we will be separated. And a sense deep in my gut tells me nothing good will come of it.

"I'll see you soon," she says, a painfully fake smile plastered on her face. Snow crunches as she takes a few steps towards the thicker trees.

"Hey," I call. She turns to face me, her expression carefully blank. A thrum of dread beats in my pulse, a wretched, prophetic intuition to ask her to stay and abandon the plan after all. "I mean it. Come back."

Her face changes—her eyebrows relax; the tension in her cheeks slackens. The freckles around her mouth soften as she looks at me, like she is trying to tell me something I'm too stupid to articulate.

“I'll always come back to you, Sayer.”

Will you? I want to ask, the words grating against my throat, boiling in my stomach. *What if the bloodhounds are not the only monsters out here?*

She shakes her head a little, half her mouth lifting at the corner. “Go get ready.” Lifting the scarf back over her face, she turns on heel and disappears into the snowy maze of pines.

If we survive this, I promise to tell her. A promise to myself, one that quakes terror through my bones.

I watch her retreating back for as long as possible, craning my neck to catch a distant patch of green scarf or a glimpse of brunette hair. I watch long after she is gone from my sight, long enough that my legs start to fall asleep, and my nose goes numb. I watch, knowing she had to go but some part of me hoping to see her returning through the trees, telling me what an idiot I am for agreeing to this dangerous plan.

But she doesn't, so after what may have been hours or minutes or days, I turn and slip onto the ice, making my way to the predetermined spot where I will wait.

Wait for Ever to return.

Wait for my former lover's sister to come so I can kill her.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

What would Isaac think?

The question plagues me as I wait—or rather, it's the question I allow myself to focus on. It's a rough day when the best queries running through my head are whether or not my dead lover would approve of me killing his sister.

His face comes unbidden into my mind; young like he was the day he died. Only nineteen, his blue eyes two crystals of brightness above his frown.

I curse those sapphire eyes in my head, two calm points in the storm of my anger, my desperation. He'd been right in the end—it was the only way. He set me down this path, and I owe it to him to finish it.

I shake my head, dispelling Isaac's lingering frown. It's all too fucked up—the Hours, Ena, Isla, the whole thing. Killing Isla is only going to continue the cycle of blood which brought us to this point. But it will also ensure Ever and I survive, that Ena might come back. And I've done worse things to protect someone I love.

After dismissing Isaac, my mind is left to think about the one thing I've been avoiding—Ever. Where in eight hells is she? Did Isla catch her before she could lead her here? There are so many things which could go wrong.

There are so many things I have to tell her.

I'm pacing, finding too much energy in my muscles to ignore. My eyes unfocus, and I barely notice the rustle of the

trees or the graying of the sky going overcast. There is nothing but the crunch of my boots across the melting hailstones.

A scream, one that chills my blood, breaks from the trees. Even though I know it is simply a signal, icy energy races up my hands, and my head snaps up to locate her. There—running through the trees, spraying snow behind her as she goes, jet hair bouncing like a banner from the crown of her head.

“Ever!” I respond, and just as my words carry across the frozen water, Isla comes into view, limping slightly but still moving fast. Ever skids sideways as she happens over the bank, toppling a drift along the river’s edge. She nearly slips, dropping the bow she holds in her hand before righting herself and taking off again. Hail and ice and the wooden bow skitter across the river’s still crust, rattling loud enough for me to hear on the other side.

Relief sighs through me when Isla stops cold. Her eyes fix on me, lighting up, sweeping up my frame until her blue meets my gray. I flinch—they are Isaac’s eyes staring back at me, but they are not full of the love and gratitude and fear as they were the final time I looked into them. All that lies in Isla’s eyes is hatred and malice. Judgment and revenge.

Like we’d hoped, she starts towards me, marching to the icy edge. Her feet hesitate at the bank, looking with uncertainty at the river’s frosted surface. A stream of sunlight escapes the cloud’s grasp, turning opaque ice into glittering glass crystal. Isla shields her eyes, glaring at me once more, before reaching down and testing the ice with her foot.

“Come on, come on,” I chant to myself, and it’s almost as if Isla hears me. She pulls her foot back and narrows her eyes, backs away a few steps. Everything in me tenses, my chest tight and breathless. She knows something is going on.

I do the only thing I can come up with without ruining our entire plan—entice her. A sword solidifies in my hand, the energy springing from my fingers to form the long, single edged blade similar to the one I used to spar with Isaac years ago. It was his signature—Isla will recognize it.

“Isla!” I call, and her head snaps away from the river and up to me. Her face hardens when she sees a mockery of Isaac’s sword in my hand, made of ebber magic.

For a heartbeat, I hesitate, the words thick on my tongue. There will be no going back from this moment; no hiding my past from Ever any longer. I know how to make Isla angry enough to cross the ice, and I know what it will cost me.

“I killed him, Isla! Stuck a dagger right between his ribs,” I shout, though each word is a sharp agony, a knife twisting inside. “I used him, used his death to make it into these Hours. Come take your revenge!”

A small snap sounds across the clearing, and Isla drops an object from her clenched fist. One of Ever’s arrows pierces the snow tip down, the fletched end falling beside it. Isla’s face begins to change, angry red working its way under her pale skin.

For a second, I believe it worked, that she will charge out onto the ice. But my biggest mistake comes when my eyes flick to Ever’s tree for just a fraction of a second.

It’s enough. More than enough. Isla follows my gaze and remembers what she’d chased to this river in the first place. I can’t see Ever from here—she has hidden herself amongst the scant branches, obscured from sight. But Isla must know she is there because she limps up to the trunk and cocks her head. I bite my tongue, hoping Isla won’t be able to see her and will lose interest. To my horror, she drops her pack and unsheathes her onyx sword.

Then, despite the injury in her leg from our last battle, she begins to climb.



The next few minutes pass more like a memory or a dream than reality.

My feet slam into the ice when I leap forward, sprinting across the frozen river. I slip and fall on my face, leaving smears of blood on the glassy surface. There's no time to stem it as I scramble to my feet again, pushing up in one great heave and taking off again.

Two falls later, I am at the bank, barely even registering the bruises already blooming under my clothes, on my knees. Isla has reached the platform-like intersection in the middle of the tree and is about to mount the split leading to Ever's pack. Ever's bow still lies on the shining ice, and the branches between them block her aim at the huntress. She clutches an energy dagger, eyes wide and watchful, hands buzzing with ebb magic, waiting for an opportunity to strike at Isla when she nears.

"Isla!" I scream through the blood pouring into my mouth, the word muffled and distorted by my very broken nose. Isla turns, smile sharp and glittering, a mountain panther about to pounce. An energy spear forms in my hand without conscious thought, and I hurl it at her. She ducks, the weapon embedding in the wood behind her head. After a moment of wavering, it disappears, breaking apart in a mist of blue dust.

"Finally come to face your crimes, Sayer?" Isla says, grabbing onto the skeleton of a branch above her head. She kicks out and lets go directly on top of me, sword aimed for my skull, pursuit of Ever forgotten.

I roll, and then she is on me, swinging. I ebb in more power, shaping it into a weapon for each hand; a dagger and a sword trailing gossamer shadows, energy sharper and stronger than steel. Holding tightly to my ebbed weapons as the magic weaves inky tendrils around my hands, I return her attack.

She parries my first blow, dodging sideways to duck under my guard. Her hilt connects with my side, the wind going out of me. As I gasp, she slashes at my calf, spinning away before my dagger can come up to meet her throat.

"You deserve a more violent death than I can give you," Isla spits at me, raising her arms in a well-practiced stance. She jerks her head toward Ever in the tree, raising her voice.

“Were you going to kill her too? Slaughter her like you slaughtered my brother?”

If Ever speaks above us, the sound is drowned out by the roaring of blood in my ears.

“You’re the one out here in the Blood Hours,” I say, trying to look for a break in her guard. “You’re one who has become a bloodhound, the very people who would have hunted Isaac. At least with me, he chose his death, and it mattered. He loved me enough to give me that.” My voice breaks on the last few words, and this enrages Isla further. She strikes, and I barely have time to move before her sword slices through the air where my arm just was.

She’s gotten better. They train all the priests and priestesses in many forms of combat—hand to hand, swords, staffs, the works. Her skill makes my sparing look like backyard child’s play, my hunting skills a fox compared to a lion. She is better than me even with the way she favors her injured leg. She will win.

Unless.

I do the thing she would never expect me to do, the thing Isaac always encouraged in training—I charge. Her strike finishes, leaving her twirling towards me in the snow, but she does not expect me to be on top of her so quickly. I bowl into her, not pulling back my weight at all, and we both go tumbling to the ground. My weapons evaporate as I lose my hold on the magic, blacking out for half a second when Isla’s elbow hits my nose.

By some luck of the gods, I land on top. Isla’s sword flew from her hand when we fell, but she is not unarmed. She punches me in the nose, sending me reeling back onto my knees. With a great lunge, she reaches for her weapon a few arm lengths away, but I’m already on my feet. I grab her ankles and pull her backwards, nearly falling as I find the empty air under my steps. We both tumble onto the ice, and I use the momentum to sling her by her legs further out onto the river. Her limbs splay wildly as she spins, her arms coming up,

attempting to protect her face before she skids to a stop a quarter of the way out.

“Ever!” I scream, gaining my feet again. The world tilts when I stand—I’ve lost a lot of blood. Not only is my nose bleeding, but my calf wound drips down my pant leg and splashes across the top layer of ice.

A groan behind me alerts me Isla is recovering from my attack. I whip my head over, finding her struggling to her feet. A bright red scrape mars one cheek where it dragged over the ice, the skin there half gone. Though her body is battered, Isla’s eyes are still the same sharp blue as she braces a hand on her knee and stands to her full height.

“Don’t defend him! If he has told you he loves you, it is a lie. He killed the last person he said that to,” Isla calls to Ever.

My eyes catch on her when I risk a quick glance back—a flare of dark brown amongst the dense gray of dead branches and crystalline icicles. Her face is drained of blood, amber eyes unsure as they meet mine. If she doesn’t heat the ice soon, doesn’t trust me enough to give me a chance to explain, everything will be lost. I can’t last much longer.

“What...” Ever’s words float from the tree, seeking answers I don’t know how to give. “What is she talking about?”

I should have told her. I should have fucking told her.

But would this moment be any different if I had?

Isla smiles, blood dripping from her face, leaking into her mouth and staining the edges of her teeth with dull pink. “You didn’t tell her? I can’t say I’m surprised. Monsters don’t care who they hurt to get what they want.”

“You don’t know—” I growl, but she cuts me off with another yell to Ever.

“I’m talking about the things he’s done to get here,” Isla says, driving her will into the wedge of opportunity she hears in Ever’s voice. “He has killed ebbers to secure his spot in these Hours. One of them was my brother, the man he claimed to love.” She spits blood onto the ice, sparing another glare for

me. “If you let me kill him, I’ll let you go free. I’ll make sure no one looks for you. You’ll win.”

I watch my enemy, not daring to look back again. My heart pounds, stomach burning, knowing my secrets have finally caught up with me. With Ever behind me, I can’t see if she hesitates—if her eyes spark with horror and doubt. Would I blame her if she let me die to ensure she wins? Pushing down the bile building in my throat, I hold on to the memory of her curled into my body as we sleep, of the way she kissed me just minutes ago on the edge of a frozen river, a lightness like hope in every breath.

“Do it!” I bellow over my shoulder, praying everything we built over these last weeks is worth enough. That it will outweigh the darkness drowning my hope.

Before the word is fully out of my mouth something hits the ground at Isla’s feet.

I have barely a second to register the small, charcoal color orb before everything goes white, like the sun has shattered in front of my eyes. I try to stumble back but suddenly, the ice beneath me disappears.

A loud crack resounds through my eardrums a second later, just as my head falls below the cold blackness of the river below.

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CHAPTER THIRTY

I have never been so cold in my life.

Every part of my body screams as the river takes me in her frigid talons. Chill seeps into my skin, through blood and bone and marrow until everything narrows to the searing cold. My limbs don't respond to me when I frantically try to move them, jerking in a way which seems to make me sink faster. I'm afraid to open my lids, feeling as though when I do, my eyes will freeze in their sockets.

Even if I could get my arms to move, my legs to kick, I would be dead anyway. I don't know how to swim.

Worse, I don't know if Ever meant to hit me or not.

Hours seem to pass before I open my eyes. The edges of my vision are fuzzy, the lack of oxygen nearly blinding. Blood muddies the water, curling from my wounds. The instinct to breathe is an agony in my chest, but I know an inhale of water would be my last. I fight the current, kicking and rolling, trying to find the surface through the gloom, trying to ignore my throbbing, broken nose and open wounds.

A streak of white in my peripheral catches my limited attention, and a second later, I barely make out Isla's bright blue eyes. They are open, staring straight ahead, her short blond hair floating in a spiky halo around her face. She does not struggle or gasp. Dead.

The only reason I'm not yet is because I managed a huge lungful of air before I went under. Isla's body grounds me, and

I flip onto my back to find a white ceiling of ice above.

Fuck.

The current tugs on my clothes, my hair, pulling me further down river. Isla bobs along beside me, her limp body bumping against jutting rocks as we sink further into the riverbed. We've left behind the openings Ever blasted into the ice—there is nowhere to go even if I could swim up. There is no escape.

I know with heavy certainty I am going to die.

Ever isn't coming to save me.

I close my eyes again, not wanting to see the death sentence hanging over my head. "*I'm sorry for not saving you, Ena,*" I think to myself. "*I'm sorry for not telling you the truth, Ever.*"

Despite knowing my doom, I still fight. My limbs twitch, but the commands I send them go unheard. Muscles lock up, already freezing in the icy grip of the water. Finally, though I twist and shudder with effort, my lungs can't hold out any longer. Breath escapes my mouth with a whoosh of bubbles, and the frigid water sears as it pours down my windpipe to replace it.

By this point, my mind is drifting like my body, not really there. I am somewhere in my memories, flitting through highlights. Solstice with my family sometime before Ena was born, my mother smiling as she hands me a present wrapped in red paper. Learning to shoot arrows with Uncle Cam in the woods, his hands fitting deftly over mine as he taught me to aim. Sitting at my father's feet in Lennon's workshop, playing with bits of scrap shoe leather while he hummed under his breath. Kissing the top of Ena's head as she wrapped her arms around my waist and squeezed.

I pass out with the image of Ena's curly red hair tickling my chin.



“**B**reathe, Goddess damn you!”

I am still cold, but not as cold. It’s a relative thing, temperature. Objectively, anyone would say this is frigid, but to me, the blast of cutting, icy air is a warm balm.

Something is happening to my body—I’m coughing. Water rushes up my throat and over my lips, but I am too numb to do anything about it. All I know is there are hot hands on my chest, pushing and pumping. Another heave of water leaves my body, and this time, my throat stings, raw with coarse silt and the salty tang of blood.

Gel, soothing and warm, coats my skin. A wet pop from my nose proceeds the gush of pain, and then everything is numb again.

Sensation returns slowly, as if I am waking up from a deep sleep. First, my chest constricts, this time bringing with it cool, fresh air. My body tenses of its own accord, my muscles lifting towards the oxygen they crave. I convulse, lungs rasping as they demand more, more, more.

Gasping, I finally find my eyes. They fly open, and for a moment, I don’t believe what I’m seeing.

“Ever?” I ask through the air my body still yearns for, rushing in as if trying to make up for those cold, brutal minutes without. Shudders wrack me, the water on my skin drawing the winter air toward me, already beginning to freeze along my arms and neck.

Ever is soaking wet too. Her hair is plastered to her skull, covered in a thin sheet of ice. She’s shivering, but I’m not sure if it’s from the cold or from the sobs bubbling out of her throat. Or from the raging storm in her eyes. Tears, warm and flowing, cut twin rivers down her face.

“You goddess-damned idiot,” she swears at me, collapsing onto my chest. It’s only when her skin, hot and flushed,

presses against mine that I realize my shirt is open. I push up with the little strength I have and try to pull her closer, needing both her warmth and comfort. To my surprise, she jerks back.

“I know, I know,” I say, even though I have no fucking idea. My head is still spinning, trying to make sense of how I’m alive. “Did you heal me? Did you dive in after me?”

She pushes away from me roughly, a slice of cold sliding into the space left behind. There’s no deciphering the flash of emotions tumbling across her face, but I pick up on the anger when she says, “I couldn’t let you die.”

“Why?” Maybe I’m an idiot for questioning, but I don’t care. “Why not let me die? You could have taken her deal. You’d win all the same.”

“I’d never make a deal with a bloodhound,” she hisses, all her hatred and anger concentrated there. “But I couldn’t let you die because I deserve an explanation. And if anyone gets to kill you, it’s me, not some stupid river.”

Our stares clash, muscles tense on both sides. My tongue is a dead fish in my mouth as I grope for a retort, a way to wriggle away from the truths now exposed and waiting. Several silent moments pass, as if the entire forest has paused its rhythm to listen. To judge my deeds.

At last I lean back and close my eyes against everything I know must come next.

“Was she telling the truth?”

“Does it matter?” I ask. I may have almost drowned minutes ago, but somehow, this feels closer to dying.

“It does to me.”

My teeth sink into my bottom lip, finding purchase for the painful words I say next.

“Then, yes.”

“You killed her brother?”

“Yes.”

“You killed other ebbers?”

A pause. A twinge in my heart. “Yes.”

Nothing moves for so long, I wonder if she’s gone. But no, she is still there when I open my eyes, paused like a statue except for the ragged breaths coming in noiseless heaves. I glance to the sky, waiting for something—waiting for the touch of her knife at my throat. Waiting for her to leave. Waiting for everything I hoped for to fall apart.

Instead, her hair swings into my vision, blocking my view of the gray sky. “Get up,” she says roughly.

“Why?” Maybe she’s changed her mind about pulling me out of the fatal water after all and is going to push me back in to let the river finish what it started.

“I didn’t get soaking wet in the middle of winter so you could die anyway,” she snaps, hauling me to my feet. She’s healed most of my major wounds, but nothing can give the strength back to my limbs, which shake like a newborn colt’s.

“Let’s move. I’m freezing,” she says, marching away, not bothering to see if I follow. I limp after her, my head spinning, knowing a reckoning is coming but too weak and heartsick to do anything about it.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The cave is not the same one we left this morning.

Physically, it sits in the same place, has the same features: the high ledge, the low ceiling, the raw circle of stones stained with soot. But inside is no longer filled with the cozy warmth from our bodies and the softness of Ever's laugh. Instead, the air is stagnant with permeating rage, the cold tension of lies kept and broken, unspoken promises.

I've wrapped the blanket from our bedroll around my shoulders, trying to ignore the way it still smells of Ever's hair, trying to staunch the flow of despair from my bleeding heart. Ever moves in stiff jerks, pots clanging and embers hissing as she coaxes the fire to life. Snow sizzles as it melts, boiling the herbs she throws in with a roiling which mimics the shifting amber of Ever's eyes. They skitter over me, refusing to land for more than a moment, unable to be caught by my gaze.

A cup skids across the stone, tossed from an angry hand. She won't even get close to me. I slump deeper into my desolation, only bringing myself to pick it up and dip it into the liquid when the frost settling into my bones prickles against the very marrow.

The tea is warm on my tongue, but it tastes like regret.

Ever settles across the fire from me and finally meets my gaze. Everything narrows to the circle of her face, to the set of her mouth against the too calm way she says the words.

"Tell me. All of it."

I let my eyes wander over her face one last time, soak in the scowl and the slope of her jaw and the crinkle between her eyes. Try to fix this moment in my mind; the last moment before Ever will truly hate me.

“I...” I start, but how do you begin to tell someone you are a monster?

I wish Ever would reach out to me as she has in the past, would squeeze my hand or rub a soothing thumb over my skin. But her arms are crossed; shoulders tight, and I don’t think I’m going to get away with evading questions any longer.

“I loved someone once,” I begin. “We were friends, then lovers, and eventually much more. In a different place and maybe a different lifetime, he would have been the closest thing I could fathom to a soul mate.”

Ever watches me, but I can’t read her expression, the glinting in her eyes. I push on, finding it easier to talk now that I’ve begun. The beginning is always the easy part anyway. My love for him was never the dark part of this story.

“His name was Isaac. We met through random chance—he started working in the shop of a family friend. I’d lost both my father and my mother by then, and my Uncle Cam to the Hours years before. His father had just died from pneumonia, so we found a lot of solace in each other. But we both knew in the end, it would never work. I had seventy-two years to live. He only had nineteen.”

I’m not sure if Ever’s mouth gapes because of Isaac’s tally or mine. The horror in her eyes is now unmistakable, but it does little to temper the fire there. A click marks her jaw snapping shut.

“On the night of Isaac’s nineteenth birthday, he asked me to do something for him. By that time, all my family was gone except for Ena—the twins, Ahnica and Avaria, had died six months before. Ahnica was my best friend besides Isaac, the closest of my siblings. She told me to look out for Ena, to protect her, but I didn’t know how.”

The edge of my nail is smooth as I trace it over the skin where my tallies used to be. “I’d had an idea for months—well years, really, ever since I killed my mother. Her death and my punishment for it showed me a way to get into the same Blood Hours as Ena. It was the only way I could protect her, by physically being there to shield her and make sure we both made it out alive. But to get my tally reduced... Well, there’s only one crime where the sentence is a reduction in the number of years you get to live.”

My knees creak when I lean forward, the burden of what I’m going to tell her weighing me down like the promise of fifty-one years alone once did. That same solitary future appears more and more likely with each passing minute. When I don’t go on, her voice reaches out quietly into the space between us.

“What gets your tally reduced?”

You can do this, I tell myself. You owe her this much at least.

“I don’t know how much you know about Toeska,” I start. “But the city has magic in its very foundations, and that magic knows about all crimes committed within the walls. Some crimes cause the city to alert the guards. Other crimes are so bad, the city exacts its toll right then and there. Removing a tally mark from your arm is one of those tolls. And the only crime deserving of such a penalty is murder.”

A loaded pause presses down around us, filled only by my roaring pulse.

“And it *has* to be the murder of ebbers,” she says, low. It is not a question.

I don’t flinch at the coldness in her words. Numbness seeps over me, my voice leaden, my mind trying to escape the raging inferno of my shame.

“Yes. It’s only certain kinds of murder, certain people. If an ebber were to kill a non-magical citizen, the sentence is instant death. But they don’t really see ebbers as people. We are cursed. As long as there are enough of us each year to

appease Nidaos and fulfill the human sacrifice, no one minds crimes amongst ourselves. The only way I could reduce my tally without dying was to kill other ebbers.”

Ever’s face is shadowed by the flickering fire, and I have no idea what she’s thinking. “I see. But what does this have to do with your... person?”

I swallow the pain in my throat; the air around me scratches on the way down, suddenly too dry. “Isaac asked to be my first victim. For me to kill him, before the Blood Hours did.”

We are silent for a few achingly long moments. I look down into my lap, not wanting to meet her gaze, knowing what I will find there. Disgust. Hatred. All deserved.

I don’t want to see if she understands the depths of my wickedness yet. That to get here, I have murdered fifty-one people. Instead, I lean my head into my hands, feet anchoring me to the ground, and let the words continue in a torrent.

“I dream about his death all the time. The knife, the blood, his moans of pain as I killed him. But if I hadn’t done it, he said he would do it himself. His death would be wasted when I could gain from it. It was his final request. To this day, I still don’t know if I regret it.”

My voice cracks and breaks so many times, I don’t know if she even understood me. Now that the flood gates to the darkest corners of my memories, to my blackest and most haunting secrets have been opened, I can’t stop talking. It’s almost a relief to finally tell someone. To no longer hide.

“He was only the beginning. I had forty-nine victims after him. I tried to learn to make it as pain free as possible, but there is always terror and agony in any kind of violent death. I only chose people close to going into the Hours, those who had months or weeks or only a year to live. I wanted to give them an easier death than the bloodhounds would—or that’s what I told myself, anyway. All along, I knew I was a monster.”

The words finally gutter out, leaving only the cracking of crimson flames.

“Isaac was Isla’s brother?” Ever asks, scattering my thoughts, the ringing in my skull.

“Yes,” I say into my hands. “The rest of his family were regular citizens. It’s a rare thing for an ebber to be born into a normal family, but not unheard of. They loved him with the blindness family does but hated all other ebbers. Thought they were dangerous, especially me. But when Isla came to me, wondering what had happened to him... I couldn’t lie to her. And since according to the city I’d already been punished for his murder, they couldn’t do anything. That’s why Isla became a priestess. I didn’t realize she only joined for the chance to murder me in the Hours.”

Quiet settles on us again, the only sound the wind singing to the trees outside. Ever hasn’t moved, has scarcely breathed. What is she thinking? Is she processing what I’ve told her? Is she planning her escape from me, the ebber murderer?

I may not have been able to admit it before, but this—losing her—is more painful than anything I can imagine. I chance everything, my small spark of hope, the tatters of my heart, on a single glance up.

She is not looking at me.

“So, you’re telling me,” she starts, and the way her words come out, flat and cold, douses the spangle of hope I’d let smolder in my chest. “That for the last three weeks, we’ve been chased down by a bloodhound who had every right to want you dead?”

“I didn’t have a choice,” I say, but my desperation can’t hide the note of falseness.

She speaks my remaining thoughts out loud, low and dangerous, all oil waiting for an open flame. “There is always a choice. You chose to kill our people. You chose to take away their chance at surviving the Hours.”

“No one survives the Hours—”

“We are right now!” she explodes, launching to her feet, and I lean back as she whips herself around the fire. There is the rage I’ve seen rumbling beneath her skin—there is the girl I’ve fallen for, shining bright enough to burn me down to the ashes I’ve sowed. “You and I may win this thing. A few days from now, we will march into the city and ask for your sister’s life back. Why do you get to do that, Sayer? Why do you deserve that privilege, that chance, more than all those people who died with your blade in their gut? What makes your life, your sister’s life, more important than anyone else’s?”

“That’s what you’re angry about? Not me keeping this from you?” I ask.

“I don’t give a damn about you not telling me. Everyone has their secrets.” Energy crawls up her arms, smoke coiled in her veins and flames in her eyes. “The more important thing is, you stuck a knife into what, fifty other ebbers’ hopes and dreams? You’ve stolen their chance so you could have your own.”

My voice is quiet when I answer, my own anger clogging my throat with rough words, so only a few escape. “I told you before. Ebbers here don’t get easy choices, and I will choose my loved ones every time. It feels like you will never understand.”

“I won’t understand? No, I don’t know that I will. I don’t think I could ever understand *murder*. You’re just as bad as the bloodhounds, cutting the throats of ebbers in the night. You wouldn’t even help all those people we passed—”

“You don’t understand!” I burst out, cutting her off, rising to my feet. My vision is filled with red clots, shimmering adrenaline rushing through my veins like slicks of dark energy. “You are not Toeskan. You don’t know a fucking thing about living in that city.” My finger juts out into the bright sunlight tilting at an early afternoon slant into the cave, towards the glint of silver which gives away the metallic walls in the far distance.

“In that city, we fight for our lives. We fight to exist—we fall to our knees before a king who sends us to slaughter in

hopes our children won't be struck down in the street. And the one thing all ebbers in Toeska know is that no one—*no one*—comes out of the Blood Hours alive.” My breath shutters, air heavy in my lungs, truths pouring from my mouth I never intended to say. “I never expected to survive the Hours. I never truly believed any of this would work. But I had to try. Because if I didn't, I'd watch my sister walk through those gates and never return. The best I could hope for was her bloody clothes and a handful of coins while I sat waiting in a kitchen with a single chair at a table built for seven.”

Stepping closer, I glare into her gaze, daring her to say another word. “Tell me you would let your sister go. Tell me you could stand to watch the tallies on her arm fading each year, witness the tears slide down her face as another one burned away. Tell me you could look into the faces of the dead walking, look at their bare arms, and not start seeing each one as a chance. A chance for mercy from the bloodhounds. A chance to keep your sister alive, no matter how small it might be. A chance for even one ebber death to matter. Go live a day, a week, in my city, and tell me you wouldn't have done the same.”

Ever steps forward, and though her face has drained of color, she tilts her head back at me and gets right into mine. “If we survived, those people could have too. It isn't right.”

“None of this is right,” I hiss, lips inches from hers, and I don't know if I want to kiss her or walk away. “There is no right when the Blood Hours begin.”

“How could you do it?” Her voice wavers, throwing snow onto some of the anger coiled in me. Amber eyes search mine, as if trying to tease answers from the storm cloud gray. “How could you cut their throats and not think of their own hope to win?”

Swallowing back bile, I force the words out. “I didn't want to. I hated every minute of it. Sometimes I retched myself sick; sometimes I nearly passed out from the froth of warm blood on my hands. But every night when I returned home and saw Ena's shining face peering around her door, I knew I would go out and do it again.”

Ever's expression darkens, and I can't read what goes on there. But her lips stay closed.

She still doesn't understand. She never will. To her, saving her sister is as easy as gambling in her own life beneath a blood moon she thinks is beautiful. Whereas I have blackened my soul with the deaths of so many, and it still isn't enough. A few dead ebbers dragged into the night and the broken body of a little girl weigh light against the things I've witnessed, and only touch at the reality of what the Blood Hours hold.

She needs to see the worst for herself.

The thought bursts to life in my mind, everything sliding into focus so fast, it makes my head spin. I step back, counting the passing days until they settle onto an idea, reigniting my hope. The moon is waning, and with each fading slice of night, the bloodhounds will be preparing for the Hour's end. If I can show her—if I can prove how impossible it should have been for us to be standing here right now—maybe she will see.

Maybe she will stay.

Maybe I'll prove I'm not what she thinks. A monster, definitely, but one who has his reasons.

"I need to show you something," I say, gesturing to the open gray sky. Afternoon is beginning to fade to dusk, but there is something I must lead her to before Sangua rises. Something that may convince her I'm telling the truth when I say no one is meant to survive this.

Her expression tightens, lids narrowing to slits, mouth drawn into a line. My heart aches at the wariness, the suspicion, but I hold out my hand like I have to her so many times.

"Please, Ever. I know I haven't earned it, but trust me one more time."

A second passes like a minute. A bird calls from the spray of branches outside.

Of course, she ignores my hand. Instead, she stalks out ahead of me, eyes bright with too many things. And I follow

her, ready to show her the gruesome ends my people meet here in Toeska.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Sooty twilight settles around us as we approach the edge of the Blood Road.

Trees twine with the beginning of night to obscure the cobbles and their contents, hiding Ever and me from the few bloodhounds still milling about. They should be looking for us, should be preparing their hunt, but instead, their heads bob between pine needle branches, clustering in small groups now that their gruesome day's work is done.

Motioning Ever forward, I trace a path parallel to the road, closer to the city gates. The acrid stench of burning stuffs itself up my nose, dribbling smoky fingers down my throat until it stings. I don't know when they set the pyre for the last of the ebber bodies, but the choking wood and flesh smell still lingers.

Every Toeskan ebber knows their end will be fire and a small crate of clothing and meager coins sent home, if they have any family left at all. Otherwise, the clothes burn with us. The city has no need to offer anything to families made phantoms already.

My heart beats too fast and too loud, but the bloodhounds amble away, still talking and laughing, their armor nowhere in sight. Fear loosens its hold; seeing my suspicions proven right soothes my nerves. There will be no more hunt for us. We have as good as won. Though I won't let myself believe it until the final sunrise washes the sky of Sangua's blood. Still, as if I needed more proof, I spy the crates.

Every year, they can be seen from the rises in the city, from taller roof tops stretching above the wall—organized columns of red crates. The number changes every year, but if I counted them, I could always tell how many people would fall to their knees that night, their last hope dashed by a knock on the door and a priest with a few meaningless words.

They say, “*We honor their sacrifice to Nidaos.*”

They mean, “*We bring you the remains of the loved one we slaughtered.*”

It hits me again, how Isla was never going to do this for Ena, this final rite. There would have been no one to bring a crate home to, but she still should have burned on a pyre with blessings to Nidaos, her body collected the night she’d fallen. Should have been given a chance to find the fabled afterlife in the aurora. Gratitude and anger plunge into my stomach as one, and I wish not for the first time I’d forced Isla to a more violent end.

But Ena is not why I am here tonight.

I am here for myself, really. To try to prove all the blood on my hands had a purpose. That my desperate actions, while horrifying, did not steal the hope of life from others.

I couldn’t steal something they never had.

Ever deferred to me after stomping through the trees for a few miles, eventually falling behind and placing her feet into my tracks in the snow. The familiarity stung, but I pushed on, leading us to this moment crouching in the trees.

Sounds of laughter and chatter fade into the ever encroaching night. Many solid minutes pass before I rise, stepping onto the road.

The boxes sit where they always are. With only the barely there dusk light to illuminate them, they almost blend into the wall, almost could be mistaken for supplies or imports into the city. Almost.

Gold whorls paint their sides, names written in ink, picking up the bare bits of light and throwing them back in stark relief.

Air brushes my arm, disturbed as Ever steps up to my side. “What are they?”

A scene flashes across my vision; my mother on her knees before a crate such as this, her brother’s name in too pretty script across the side.

“This is, by all odds, where we should be right now.”

Ever doesn’t turn to me. Moving like a phantom, she glides closer, and I hover near her side while she runs her hands over the closest one. Its lid isn’t quite on right, throwing the whole column askew. A folded cloth is pinched in the ridges where it should sit. A tug loosens the fabric, the pile of crates on top settling into the same neat stack as their neighbors. The garment’s whole hood is exposed now, white thread picking a snowflake pattern along the dark blue edge.

When Ever brushes her fingers over it and looks up at me, sorrow and a new kind of pain glaze her features.

“This belonged to that little girl. From the first night.” The words are slick with sickness.

“I think so,” I say, swallowing my horror back. I brush my hand over the rough edge of the crate, the golden pale words there spelling out a name. *Kara*.

As Ever’s eyes roam the towers of the dead ebbers, her mouth moves in a silent rhythm. At first, I think she is praying, but when her lips start to repeat their shapes, I realize even the Dark Goddess could do nothing here. She is not praying. She is counting.

I don’t know how high she gets before she stops.

The forest has been swallowed by true night, the boxes nothing more than a hulking shadow against the backdrop of the city walls and the misted night sky before Ever steps back. Darkness softens the contours of her features until she might be a blank face, might be any of the people whose remains still stain the air with ash.

“My name should be up there,” I tell her. “Ena’s too. The city promises us a certain number of years, and we pay it back

with our blood. It's been so long since the stories say someone won the Hours, I think they might be just that. Stories.”

“There are so many,” she whispers, the consonants and vowels breaking along the lumps in her throat.

“And as many families who will soon receive a piece of clothing instead of a daughter or brother or wife or son.” I glance up, trying to make out any names in the now almost complete darkness before Sangua's rising, knowing somewhere among them are the names of those who I didn't let Ever help. “I couldn't save them all. So I tried to save the only one I thought I could. And even then, somewhere deep down in my very bones, I've always known my end waited in the embers of a pyre and the bottom of a box.”

Ever shifts closer, and I drag my gaze away from the future I've somehow managed to skirt. Back to her face, which even in the dark is full of something I don't let myself hope is understanding.

“When you killed them,” she asks, voice strong but barely loud enough to rise against the wind whispering through the pines, “did they think it was better than this? Did they think it was mercy?”

“I don't know,” I answer truthfully, the only thing I have left to give. “But Isaac wanted his death to matter. And so would I. If someone had cut my throat to save me from this, to maybe save someone at all, I would have fought through the blood and pain to say thank you.”

The night is quiet—we are quiet. Everything stills to the pounding of my heart against the throes of my fear.

I can't muscle my way out of this. I can't fight it or kill it or sacrifice for it. All I can do is wait and hope this girl I've fallen for will forgive the things I've done and deem me worthy of absolution.

Everything might be a dream when she steps closer, putting her hand on my arm, the tempest of her pulse beating from her wrist into my sleeve. It doesn't seem like she wants to leave. If I didn't know better, I'd imagine she was pressing

closer, pulling me tighter to her side. Settling in like she wants to stay.

Oh, gods, how I want her to stay.

When she leans her head into my chest and nods, just once, I tilt my head to the dark sky and release the breath on which I'd held every fear and doubt. Someone has looked at me, taken stock of my deeds and my reasons and nodded that I am not a monster—decided I'm worthy of trust, redemption.

She finally sees me, daggers, darkness, and all. And she is going to stay.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

There were more conversations to be had once we reached the cave, of course—apologies and explanations, a hundred sharp truths and difficult questions to be discussed. Histories shared and tears shed, forgiveness found. But since seeing the realities of the Hours, the names scrawled across all those crates, Ever understands why I did everything I could to get Ena and me out of an impossible situation.

Acceptance feels like peace. With my darkness illuminated, the weight of my traumas buoyed by two souls, the next days are the happiest I think I've ever had in my life.

And while I still fear I'm going to catch a hint of disgust when Ever looks at me, I am trying to remember she saw everything, saw my most gruesome depths, and did not leave.

After a few days of sleeping in, Ever seems determined to get up this morning, but I have other plans. She tries to fold back the covers, but I snake a hand around her waist, pulling her back against me. She shakes her head but doesn't argue, settling into my embrace with a huff that tries for annoyance and only manages amused.

"Today is the last day of the Hours. We should prepare for tomorrow morning," she insists.

I sigh, rolling away from her onto my back. I know she's right, but I don't want this to end. Leaving this cave means going back to the real world—back to the body of my dead sister, and the city, and all my hopes and fears for the future.

Out there, I don't know if the Blood King can bring Ena back, or if Ever and I will find a way to stay together after all of this ends. Out there, I don't know anything. Here, I have the warmth of Ever's body and the contentment I've felt in the last few days. Someone who understands and accepts all of me for the first time in my life. I'm afraid to leave it behind for the uncertainty awaiting us beyond the city gates.

"You're right," I say, pushing up onto my elbows. I grab my trousers from next to the furs and slip them on, then reluctantly search for my shirt.

"I should write that down," she mumbles to herself as she dresses on the other side of the bed roll. "Never going to get you to admit it again."

"I can hear you," I say, swatting at her with the shirt I've finally located. She ducks away from me and sticks out her tongue, lacing the band around her breasts again.

"I know." She pauses, her eyebrows knitting together. "It's just..." she trails off but doesn't need to say any more. I understand exactly what she means.

"It's almost over," I say, gathering up various items strewn across the floor.

I pick up a pair of balled up socks that have rolled away from the rest of our clothes. As I pluck them from the floor, I recognize whom they belong to. Ever has been carrying them with her for weeks now—but once, they belonged to Ena. They are the very pair I gave away the first night.

I could have Ena back by tomorrow. I know I should be elated—should be racing back to our cave to collect her, camping in front of the gates to get her to the King as soon as possible.

Instead, a hollow, aching fear permeates my mind. What if everything I've done—befriending Ever, learning to control my magic, surviving, killing Isla—was all in vain? If the King can't bring Ena back to me, none of this mattered.

The socks crumple in my fist, my whole body tensing, trying to push down the thought. Ena doesn't need me at the

moment, not until tomorrow morning, but I've been selfish the last few days, trying to hold on to this little bubble of happiness.

Ever's small hand finds the knot between my shoulder blades and rubs, pushing in a deep, circular motion. The world narrows to the rough calluses on her fingers as she slips the hand under my shirt, kneading and massaging while she traces up my spine. I tilt my head back and close my eyes, allowing myself to give in to the peace of this moment.

"I'll get to meet Ena soon," Ever says as she stands on tiptoe and kisses just behind my ear. She repeats the motion on the other side, her lips leaving a ring of warmth in their wake.

"I hope so," I murmur, stretching my neck. I reach above my head and tense all my muscles in one long, lean stretch, then turn to face Ever.

"We should leave soon. It will take us most of the day to get there."

Ever nods. We will return to Ena's cave and stay there tonight. In the morning, we'll take Ena's body to the gate, where the crowds will cheer and celebrate us all the way up to the Blood Palace. Right to the steps where the Blood King will bless us and grant our boons. Where, by Nidaos's grace, I may get my sister back.

The fear I've been suppressing for days must show on my face because Ever steps into my arms and holds me tight. The dread in my stomach is somehow worse than when I thought I'd drive away Ever with my secrets. Fear coats my ribs, heavy with the possibilities of what I might lose. And the unknown of what will happen after. I tuck her under my chin and squeeze back, ironically unsure if I am ready for The Blood Hours to end.

Another full day's journey has us reaching the first cave under steady blue twilight. Not long after we arrive, Ever ducks down the tunnel to the smaller side of the cavern we stayed in before, making some excuse about checking to make sure we left nothing behind. Recognizing the private moment she is giving me, I cross the cave and kneel next to my sister.

She's still wrapped in the quilt, though her face is uncovered, eyes closed and muscles relaxed. How many times have I sat next to her, tucked her in to sleep just like this? With Ever's healing, the only evidence of the violence which ended her life is a fading line of dried blood dripping down her neck.

I reach for the waterskin at my hip and pour some into my hand. The next few minutes I spend washing all traces of death from her face, her throat, pulling back the blanket to tend to her side. It is quiet, busy work, and when the silence presses too heavily, I talk.

"You always hated baths," I tell her conversationally, wiping some crusted blood from around her ears. "Even when you were little. Remember when Ahnica gave up and let you go without for a week? You were practically begging for one by the end."

An obvious idea comes to me, and I hurry over to our supplies, digging through a few crates until I find a clean shirt and pants. I dress Ena in them, a morbid echo of our usual bedtime routine, but find comfort in the movements anyway. Soon, I will be tucking her into bed again. Soon, we will be a family again.

Anxiety dances along the edge of my chest, but I push it back, extinguish it. There is the chance the King won't bring her back—but until the proof of that dark possibility is in front of me, I choose to believe. I choose hope.

"Okay, love, all cleaned up. Wouldn't want you to come back and think I didn't take care of you," I say as I cover her with the quilt once again. Sinking down by her side, I brush her hair away from her face.

"I'll always try to protect you, Ena. I'm sorry I couldn't the first time, but I am doing everything in my power now. I learned how to ebb, and I have a friend who told me all about this city right beside the ocean. Wouldn't it be so fun to see the ocean? If you can find your way back to me tomorrow, we could go there. Another adventure, like in your books." I'm rambling, but the pain in my chest is a good one, full of the kind of burning and light I imagine stars must be made of.

Ena's hand is easy to find through the thin blanket, and I squeeze it once before letting out a sigh, a tiny smile sneaking onto my face as hope bubbles it to the surface.

"I can't wait to see you tomorrow."



Though it's strange to be out in the dilute red light, I am not afraid.

Hesitantly, Ever steps out behind me and takes my hand. I lead her to the cliff face alongside the cave, the one I hunted along on the very first day of the Blood Hours.

Though she still seems uncertain about being out in the blood moon's twilight, Ever grins. "Will you at least tell me where we're going?"

We arrived back at the cave hours ago, but neither of us tried to sleep. I spent some time sitting beside Ena, imagining her coming back to me tomorrow, while Ever stared into the fire, her expression unreadable. Dreaming about her sister, I'd guess.

"Up there," I answer, matching her smile, and gesture at the barren rock towering over us. She tilts her head back to look up, then without hesitation launches herself at the cliff. "Last one to the top makes breakfast!" she calls back, delighted with her head start.

I should have known better. Shaking my head, I jump up behind her, finding the hand and footholds from memory. Soon, I'm flying past her, racing to the top and heaving myself over the edge. When she reaches it, not far behind, I offer her a hand and help her up.

"Guess you're making breakfast," I tease, pulling her close.

She smiles and shakes her head. "Probably for the best. I'm the better cook anyway."

“I can’t argue with that,” I say, leaning in to kiss her. The last few days have softened the shards of hurt between us, with words to soothe the wounds left behind by lies and suspicions. The reality of what we have done—the impossible—animates the air between us with anticipation. Of what kind of happiness we might find in one another, after this.

She pushes me away but stays in my arms, glancing out across the landscape, which stretches for miles.

“So, what did we come up here during the blood moon for?” Ever asks.

“For that,” I say. I point to the spray of rocky crags to the east, where red is giving way to pink and gold and lilac in the sky.

We are silent, the air buzzing with expectation as the moon gives up more and more sky. Barely more than an angry crescent scratch, Sangua shrouds herself in the coming sun’s colors, lavender and magenta and brilliant orange overtaking the fiery red. She is almost pretty as she sinks below the final line of horizon, her ruby glare leaving a red scar across my vision before, with one final wink, she is gone.

Tomorrow will bring with it the darkness of a new moon, until the next Blood Hours begin.

“Sayer.” Ever grabs my chin, swivels my face to hers. Her smile is shining, incredible, almost as bright as the dawn eating up the last of the night. “It’s over. It’s over!”

She lets out a whoop, jumping up and down in my embrace. Laughter tumbles up my throat, spills from my lips as the hope in my chest burns. When she stumbles to a halt, I take her head in my hands and kiss her, light of the morning suffusing us with its truth—The Blood Hours are over.

We have survived.

We have won.

Still, the swoop of joy and elation in my gut is tinged with the scuttling sickness of premonition. I’ve gotten everything I wanted; the partner I never knew I needed, the victory, the chance to see Ena’s smiling face again.

For what feels like the thousandth time, I have hope.

But this hope feels like losing a tally, like the stinging under my skin that for all my life has only warned of one thing: death is drawing closer, and sorrow has not finished with me yet.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Dawn the morning after the Blood Hours looks much like I imagined it.

I am walking up the cobbled road outside of Toeska. The sun rises behind me and to my right, casting a spray of mid-morning light onto the gates ahead. Their refraction off the golden filigree is so bright, I itch to shade my eyes, instead keeping them downturned. Daylight glosses the road with a gilded shine, a froth of shadows spilling over the smooth surface and into the ruts between stones.

By my side is a woman gripping tightly onto my arm. Her eyes are wide as she braves the sun's glare to take in the shining facade hiding the city's decay. The cheering crowd on the ramparts, in the street just past the metal doors, screams its adoration for our survival of the very slaughter they sanctioned.

There are subtle changes to the vision, the dream that has danced in my mind for years. The girl's hair is darker, molten umber instead of sunglow red, falling in a straight curtain rather than wild curls. She is taller, toned in tan and bronze, where the other would have been pale and small. The little girl who should have been walking in her place is a limp bundle in my arms, heavy and motionless as a sack of flour.

Instead of walking proudly into the city with Ena by my side, I carry her dead body in my arms and cling desperately to the hope that the King I've despised my entire life will grant

me the boon I seek. Not to rid myself of magic like I once prayed for—but to bring my sister back to me.

The shouts and whistles of the crowd grate on my nerves as the gate looms, cutting off the sky for a brief moment and sending shivers of trepidation down my spine. Ever is a leaf in the wind beside me, her fingers trembling on my arm, though you'd never know it by looking at her. Shoulders squared, chin up, she walks with an exuberance that would put the best actor to shame. When we step under the intimidating portcullis and enter the city proper, the screaming mob around us is nearly deafening, but she doesn't bat an eye. Rather she does, but it is in a wink to the nearby gawkers, followed by a few waves in their direction. Even if my hands weren't full of my sister's body, I couldn't put on the show she does.

Two sun guards materialize from the shadows on either side of the road, falling into step behind us. In the growing dawn, the suns ornamenting their uniforms shimmer like artificial imitations of the one now cresting the walls. In my lifetime, no one has ever won The Blood Hours, but I've been exalted with enough stories of victories by other ebbers long ago. Tradition mandates a march through the city while parades echo from the streets around us, where we can hear the citizens celebrate the deaths of our family and friends. Temples will throw open their doors and serve ruby colored wine in small ceramic cups—food will be given out to even the poorest in the city tonight.

All it cost was a few ebber lives. And I've paid in many people's blood for the chance to kneel before the King and ask for my sister's life.

An elbow in my ribs grabs my attention.

"Smile, or at least make your face less broody," Ever whispers through clenched, grinning teeth.

"Why should I bother?" I grumble back. Emotion clots thick in my throat when I take in the blur of faces surrounding us on all sides. They cheer for our victory—but they would have just as soon cheered for our death.

“Everyone will know something is up if you don’t act happy. We just won the Blood Hours.”

I’m silent for a beat, keeping my face tentatively neutral. Those who condemned me to death, who cheer me now for becoming the gods’ chosen, don’t deserve a smile—but there is a truth to Ever’s words I cannot shake. I try to remember our happiness on the cliff this morning, to let it brighten my face and mask my ominous glower, but it spills through me like a sieve.

“Do you think he will return your sister to you?” I ask her as we round a corner, the palace coming into view on the high hill it was built on. The question is an echo of my own thoughts—I was so sure before, when the heady elation of surviving the Hours heated my blood. So hopeful. But now, under the towering spires of the King’s seat, I wonder just what we are about to walk into. Dread pools against my thrumming heart, pressing down with the weight of a current before a storm—the deeper instinct that something is about to go very wrong.

Ever doesn’t look at me, only stares with intensity at the castle ahead, with its glittering silver metal work and the towering turrets roofed in cobalt. “He’d better.”



The steps to the palace have been festooned in the Light God’s colors, blue and gold, with topaz accents deepening the rich sapphires they surround. A cerulean carpet pools down the stairs, and the top-heavy banners snap in a bright breeze. Though the landing swims in an ocean of sky-colored fabric, the clouds beyond are ominous, gray and weighty with the promise of snow. They frame the massive statue of Nidaos crowning the palace doors, perched on the roof with his sun staff in one hand, a human heart in the other. One represents the might of his will—the other our sacrifice.

We reach the foot of the steps in the midst of raucous joy, carried there by the thunderous crowd as we'd passed each new turn. Already the festival revels beyond the route they parade us down, vendors hawking wares and children trailing brightly colored ribbons which catch underfoot. Citizens wave small blue flags emblazoned with the sun and crossed axes of the King's seal—though I doubt the man has ever held an axe in his life.

I halt at the bottom stair, pausing to look over at Ever. She stands on tiptoes, trying to peer over the edge of the landing, seeming as unsure as I am. Twisting around, I search for the sun guards or a priest or somebody to tell us where to go from here. I'd assume we should climb the stairs, but the great palace doors, carved of ivory, are still closed. And since no one in my lifetime has ever survived the Blood Hours, I have no reference. The stories never mentioned specifics.

As I comb the crowd, a glimpse of silver catches my eye. It's the movement of a cane, all gleaming wood and metal accents. I follow the glint until I find the face it belongs to, already knowing who it will be.

Lennon stares from behind his wire glasses, thick lenses distorting his eyes. Even so, I note the flicker as they dart to the bundle in my arms, then to my face. His smile, the brief glimpse of it I'd gotten, turns to sheer horror. Despair. And I relive my grief all over again as his face falls, tears lacquering his cheeks to a shine in the morning light.

I clutch Ena tighter, looking away from his sorrow and grief. I will not let this be her fate. He will see—I'm going to take his advice. I'm going to ask for what I want—her life back.

"Who is that?" Ever asks, glancing over her shoulder. I keep my eyes forward, not wanting to look at Lennon again. Knowing I may break down if I do, may run to him and let him wrap me in his arms like he did when I was a boy. Like he did the day my mother died.

"I'll introduce you later," I hedge.

“I think he wants an introduction now,” she says, and I give in and peek behind me. Lennon pushes through the crowd, using his cane to forge a path ahead.

I open my mouth to—what? Ask him what he’s doing? Tell him to stop? But it doesn’t matter. At that very moment, the horns add their mournful bray to the crowd’s chatter, and the world goes silent. As one, every person in the city turns towards the gilded palace and bows, like we have been taught since we were children. Even I bend my back as low as possible with Ena cradled in my arms, the muscles screaming with the strain of carrying her all this way. Ever, being the smart woman she is, does the same a heartbeat later.

It’s just in time; the castle doors swing open on wide, silent hinges. From the yawning mouth of the doorway emerges a grand entourage, sun guards decked out in splendid navy uniforms, their ceremonial golden axes and swords polished to a high shine. They march out in rhythmic order, two lines standing aside to reveal the nobility behind them.

The Blood King is dressed head to toe in red. It is a brutal ensemble, sharp steel accents and garnet silk wrapping around his frame. A step away from his usual blue, the royal color, the crimson cloth is supposed to honor the fallen sacrifices the Blood Hours have taken from us, those who the Light God, Nidaos, did not deem worthy. On this day, no one but he and his heir will be swathed in vermillion, his heir’s robes pinned with the sun crest marking her as the next divine ruler. I’ve seen her every year during the many ceremonies and festivities the Blood King and his daughter preside over after the Hours—she can’t be more than a few years older than I am.

The violent red suits our divine ruler, and it’s easy to see where he got his moniker of Blood King. The horns’ bellow ebbs away, and the crowd lifts their heads to their king, the knuckles of their right fists resting against their foreheads in the traditional gesture of holy acknowledgement.

With my hands full of Ena, I cannot salute him as scripture demands. I opt to lower my head respectfully until the gesture is finished, then stand to my full height while everyone else’s hand falls to their side. Ever hovers next to me, nervous

energy buzzing through her veins, her foot tapping on the ground. But she doesn't look at me—she has eyes only for the Blood King.

He steps forward, robes swishing from stone to rug as he steps onto the carpeted dais. “Come forward, Nidaos's chosen. I would see the ebbers who have been deemed worthy by my brother in his heavenly halls and honor you properly.”

It occurs to me what a sight we must make as we ascend the steps, dirty and unkempt. Both of us bathed in the days following Isla's death, but there was nothing to be done for the rips in our clothing. Ena is the only one cleaned and dressed in fresh clothes, but our mother's quilt still serves as a shroud for her body, browned in spots by dried blood.

The final few stairs seem to take days to climb, but all at once, we are standing on top of the world. Unable to support Ena's weight much longer, I set her gently down on the plush carpet. I glance to Ever, wanting to know what is running through her head, needing the comfort of her eyes, but she refuses to tear her gaze away even for a second. Her whole body has gone rigid, staring straight ahead like a prey animal caught in torchlight. I follow her gaze, assuming at first she is staring down the Blood King himself. But suddenly, the warmth of her hand leaves from my arm and she is running, flying across the landing until she hurtles into the arms of a figure standing a few feet beyond the King. Gasps rise from the crowd as she pulls back, smiling at the woman whose face is full first of surprise, then awe.

“Ever?” she asks hesitantly, gripping her arms. Her fingers are a familiar golden-brown, dusted with freckles, the shock of wild, warm black hair crowning her head, dark eyes wide.

Though their bodies are different, their coloring, the shape of their faces—they are too similar. This stranger on the dais is familiar to me in a way she should not be. I reel, the horror and realization dawning even before the name falls from her lips.

“Echo,” Ever says, tears thickening her voice. “Oh Echo, I never thought I'd find you. I—”

But I shut them out. The ghost of Ena's dead weight is heavy in the soreness of my arms as I stand, making my bones ache. The rumble of the crowd swells, shocked whispers hissing from shuddered mouths. The Blood King has wheeled around, and in my peripheral vision, I see his mouth moving, but I don't register the words. I'm staring, lost beyond Ever's shoulder, the hair spilling down her back, the red robes scraping the heels of the other woman's shining boots.

Echo is dressed head to toe in sheets of crimson silk, the Blood Heir's pin shining bright and metallic on her chest.

Bile, sharp and sick, pools in my throat, coats my tongue. I swallow it back, trying to hide my terrible awe as I watch Ever embrace the Heir to the Throne of Toeska.

She is the Blood Heir's sister.

She is the Blood Heir's *sister*.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

The bright, brilliant colors, the sapphire carpet and the glittering gold palace, are suddenly too much. I want to close my eyes, but I am frozen, locked into place by the adrenaline sluicing through my blood. The balloon of shock in my chest is swelling, making it hard to breathe. My body jolts forward, and I don't know whether it's to protect her or demand an answer. Only my unwillingness to leave Ena's body holds me back. I pull in the frigid air around me, trying to get a hold of myself.

The implications of this, though they'd already been circling my mind, finally go in for the kill. I'm reeling from the realization that I denied for the first few moments, the bile returning and threatening to make me vomit on the carpeted dais.

If Ever is the Blood Heir's sister, then her father...

I unlock my body, force my eyes away from the shining waterfall of Ever's hair, and turn to look at him—the King. I've seen him at different points all through my life, always in some grand spectacle, some elaborate celebration or ceremony, always from far away. Other than to stare him down with hatred and grief in my heart, I didn't give him much attention, too busy trying to keep my family alive. But now I look. Really look. And I see it.

It's subtler than with her sister, whose face could nearly be the mirror image of Ever's. On him, it's the shape of the cheekbones, the shell of the ear. The texture of his hair,

although a very different hue, spilling from the crown of his head in a short, straight sheet to brush his shoulders. The freckles dotting his pale, white complexion, so in contrast to his daughters but connected by those marks. In the wrinkle on his forehead as he frowns at her, still holding her sister tightly in her arms.

Ever looks a whole eight hells of a lot like her father.

There's a whole cascade of emotions, one after another, piling like green sickness in my gut. Panic, pain, anger, hurt— gods, it shouldn't hurt this much. But something inside me changed on that ice, in those caves, over these weeks of blood and survival, laughter and hope. When Ever leaned into me and nodded her acceptance of the shadowed parts of my soul. Somehow, it wasn't enough, and the man I've become is aching at the secrets still between us.

I showed her everything, and still she could not trust me with this truth.

When Ever looks back to me, the naked guilt on her face does not lessen the sharp knife wound to my gut. I wish she had told me. Given me the chance to accept her secret too. How much else was a lie?

My mouth opens, but I have no words for her. Nothing but the dull roar in my head that I long to scream across the stage. I don't know what to say to this woman who has saved my life over and over again, but who now stands at the side of my enemy. Moments ago, our enemy. So I mouth a simple question.

“Why?”

Our connection breaks for a splinter of a second as she looks to the woman beside her, then back again. Pleading with me. Begging me to understand.

And achingly, I do.

Because in the end, didn't Ever want the same as me? To get her family back, to hold on to the torn remains of it and try to piece it together? And glancing back to where she grips tightly to her sister's shoulders, tears spilling down her cheeks,

another feeling adds itself to the weight in my stomach—understanding. Ever would do anything, lie to anyone, to get her sister back.

And so would I.

She gave me the chance to save Ena—and even if this all turns out to be a lie, that bright spark of hope still lingers. Whatever happens next will reveal how deep Ever’s secrets run—then I will decide whether I can forgive her, as she did for me. Though the weight of the truth yokes my shoulders, I concede a slight nod.

The girl I am falling for is the daughter of the man who sends my people to slaughter every year, and she kept that fact a secret from me since the day we met. And even after I told her everything, laid myself bare, she did not do the same.

The King’s scowl, which was twisted up into his light brown mustache, loosens. His eyes go wide as Ever turns to face him. She simply stares at her father, eyes now dry above tear-stained cheeks. The anger, burning beyond her calm mask, smolders in the narrowing of her eyes.

“What is the meaning of this?” the King hisses, voice low enough that only those on the stairs might hear. The sun guards shift uneasily; as if they know they should have grabbed her before she reached the Blood Heir, but this turn of events has them questioning what they should do next. As if she senses their rising uncertainty, Echo snatches Ever’s hand in her own.

“Father,” she says, lowering her eyes respectfully. “This is my twin.”

Words have never burned me like this—the torture of hearing it confirmed.

The King looks almost as dumbfounded as I was moments ago, before hiding the emotion behind an arch of one well-manicured eyebrow. “Your sister?” His eyes, blue and bright, scan Ever from head to toe. “You claim to be the daughter of a god?”

Putting on a show for his people as always, since he must know who she is. Ever told me his men tried to kidnap both of them.

Though I am angry with her for lying, it pales in comparison to my deep hatred for the King. Isaac flashes into my mind, begging me to kill him to keep his sacrifice from this man, and I wish I could ebb without the guards striking me down. Send a spear of dark energy right through his matching heart.

But I must wait until I see if he holds Ena's salvation or not.

"I don't claim anything from you," Ever says, voice even. Echo shoots her a look, but Ever ignores it. "I only claim what is mine by the right of The Blood Hours, as a winner and chosen of your gods. I only claim the boon I have earned."

The King is calculating—it's easy to see from his tightening expression that he doesn't know exactly what to make of this, of her. I have to admit I'm surprised at his reaction; his measured response, careful calculation, isn't the righteous nature I expect from a god.

So far, only people on the dais have heard the exchange, but the crowd is beginning to murmur and shuffle behind me. Their whispered doubts and muttered uncertainty wend through the square, spreading word of the crazy girl who dares touch their gods onto the street beyond. And looking vulnerable, human even, the Blood King cannot abide.

With a whispered word from the King, the sun guards stand at attention once again, and he gestures Echo and Ever forward. The Blood Heir responds immediately, murmuring under her breath. Whatever she says does the trick because Ever strides up, standing straight and tall.

Once they are in position, standing to the King's right, he faces forward once again. I'm still in front of him, but a sun guard grabs my arm and jerks me out of the way. I nearly elbow him in the face as he pulls me back with a hard grip, but I grapple with my instinct and keep myself in check. I lunge for Ena and scoop her into my arms again, unwilling to leave

her behind. Thankfully, the guard lets me—with Ena in my arms, I'm in no position to fight. He deposits me a few steps away from the dais edge, far enough back so everyone in the square now has a full view of the Blood King. Terrified to set her down and be separated again, I bite my lip and fight through the agony of my tired muscles, holding Ena to my chest.

“My people,” the Blood King cries, his voice unnaturally amplified, ringing out over the courtyard. There is a wail of holy rapture from the crowd, their fervor for their divine ruler ricocheting off the ornate buildings surrounding us. There's no way the King's voice is that loud without magic—and just as I suspect its use, a blessed yellow light shines from his hands, throwing the square into sharp relief.

“My people,” the King repeats, the glow brightening even more until every etched wall and gilded brick shines with his holy light. “Today, we witness a miracle and accept the honor the gods and goddesses bestow upon us for the sacrifices we have made. We have given them thousands of souls in the Blood Hours these past hundred years, and not before my birth has the city seen a winner. To show their favor, they have not only chosen one among our most unworthy, but two!”

The roar of the crowd grows feverish, some people collapsing to their knees. I'm not sure if I keep the disgust off my face as I survey them, but no one is looking at me. All eyes are fixed on the King, bathed in light, the red of his clothes brilliant as fresh blood, standing with his arms open to the adoring people. Why don't they see the hypocrisy here? Why is one magic revered, the other a death sentence? None of it makes sense, but I bite my lip, hard. That magic may just be what brings Ena back, and I can't show disdain for it now.

When the crowd quiets, the King folds his arms, and the light dies. His feather brown hair still seems to hold some of the glow, dancing lightly on an unseen wind like a halo around his head.

“After Helena betrayed him by giving away the gods' power, the power to control the energies of the world, Nidaos declared he would look for those among her cursed worthy to

walk the path of light again. Though our mortal flesh makes such powers dangerous and rotten, these two have proven to the Light God himself that they are beyond the temptation of the darkness within them. Let us welcome the divine's chosen, embrace them with new eyes and open arms." The sun guard behind me shoves me forward, and I nearly topple over before I adjust to Ena's weight. Echo has given Ever a push, though not as harshly, and Ever looks back as the distance between them grows and their hands are forced apart. I avert my eyes from her as we move to stand side by side before the King. Now is not the time for a conversation.

"Chosen, speak your names. Who has my brother chosen to receive a boon of my power?" The King commands, his voice deeper than when he spoke to Ever before.

I step forward before Ever speaks. I do not want to hear her voice before I get this out. There will be no waver in mine.

"I am Sayer Terrin, your Radiance," I say, bowing my head. I have never seen someone address the Blood King directly, but the priestesses who preach in the street call him by this name. An attendant off to the side flips through a sheaf of papers, then nods at the King. It seems to satisfy, and he waves me back, blue steel eyes already moving to Ever.

"I am Ever Brasa," she says without moving, arms at her sides. Out of my periphery I see her hands twitch, and I imagine she is itching to cross her arms, to scowl that familiar, heart-wrenching scowl of hers. Beyond the King's shoulder, Echo gives the barest, smallest shake of her head. The attendant searches his papers a few times, becoming increasingly frantic, then with wide eyes opens his mouth. Before he speaks, the King shakes his head, turning back to his daughter with a sly, calculating slant to his features. My stomach churns as I look between him and Ever; her name is not on the list, and he knows it.

"You have been through much, Sayer Terrin and Ever Brasa," the King says, voice and face unchanged. But the glint in his eye, the bone-chilling glare he levels at her brings back my urge to protect Ever and stirs my hatred for him. "The Blood Hours is a trial only the most holy, the most worthy are

able to survive. But only the lowest among us are given such a test, and so there is one more proof you must give us of your worth.”

Though the mistrustful part of me screams not to, my head swivels to catch Ever’s eye at the same moment she looks up. We are inches apart, barely a whisper of space between us, and the fear and worry in her eyes immediately brings me back to the ledge, looking down on the frozen ribbon of river.

In that fraction of an instant, the crowd and King and palace vanish, and once again, it’s just the two of us. Standing not divided, but as a team against a world trying to rip us apart. As if there truly are no secrets between us, just the trust we’ve sheltered from the elements until it could burst into a wildfire scorching enough to burn this city to the ground. To survive anything.

“Luckily for you, it is a simple task. Just as Sangua rises for twenty-eight days of sacrifice, the children in the city are given twenty-eight days to survive, before they are named and tested. And so, I ask you to show the tattoo given to you to mark you as the ones the pantheon deemed fit for the trials and sacrifice your kind make. Show your ebber mark, and anything you ask of me, I shall grant.”

I haven’t looked away from Ever, and so I see the exact moment the realization hits both of us. A fettered breath escapes while the flames in her eyes gutter and die. Until now, we’ve made it through each thing that’s tried to kill us—but how do we survive this? Because I can concoct no trick or plan which will mark Ever’s skin with an E between the webbing of her fingers.

True panic forms between the creases of freckles on Ever’s face. She doesn’t have a way out either.

There may be more betrayals behind those amber eyes. There may be more lies covered by honeyed words that brought laughter to my lips as easily as they destroyed my trust. This girl has lied to me, may have used me—but I remember her shuddering breaths as she gazed upon crate after crate of the dead. I saw the way she looked at me in the

moments after I showed her, seeing not just the blood on my hands but the desperation to save the scraps of my family. I know the touch of her body against me in the night, burning with more than desire.

She gave me hope. A small spark flickers within me, a chance that Ever did not lie about everything. And if I want that chance, I need to protect her now.

I give her the only thing I can: a distraction, a few precious seconds to figure a way out.

Breaking our gaze and the communication passing between us in mere seconds, I look up at the King and step forward once again. Going to one knee, I gently set Ena on the ground and lower my head. I raise my right hand above my head, fingers splayed wide to expose the E inked in magical black on my skin. The mark that binds me to this city, keeps me from escaping, marks me as a sacrifice to the gods.

The Blood King nods at me, his face impassive, and I haul myself to my feet. But before I pick up Ena's body, the King speaks.

"Please return to your knees, Sayer Terrin," he says, and my blood gives a wild surge. Is he going to ask for my request now? Obediently I drop to my knees, bruising them even through the thick carpet.

"Speak and tell me the boon you would ask of me. Through my divine powers in our world, and through the strength of my brothers and sisters above, I will grant that which you seek." The King's declaration sends shock waves of elation and hope straight into my soul. Feeling suddenly reverent at the power crackling through his words, I speak.

"Your Radiance, I ask for something I have never heard asked for," I start. I lean forward and pull Ena's body closer to me, then gently unwrap the blankets tucked around her. Behind me, the crowd titters, and even the guards lean in closer to peer over me. The King silences them by spreading his arms, everything about him unreadable as he gestures for me to continue.

I am still unwrapping, untying the knots holding the shroud together. My fingers fumble with the final one, breath coming fast and hard, clouding around my face in time to the rhythm of my pounding heart. The moment is finally here.

“My King, I ask for this,” I say as the final strings come apart and the blanket falls open. Ena’s cold, pale face glistens in the King’s magical glow, frosted like new snow. “I ask for my sister to be returned to me.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

A series of hushed gasps ring across the dais, cries uttered in shock and quickly extinguished by hurried hands.

Even the guards flinch from their stoic attention to side eye the dead girl lying before me. As the news spreads from those people close enough to hear my request and into the back of the crowd, the muttering begins again. With eyes like thunderstorms, the King silences them with another bright flash of light.

He does not speak right away, and there are the creaks and moans of bones as everyone shifts uncomfortably. The sun guards have returned to stillness, though one has come up close behind me, standing only a few feet from my back.

From down his nose, the King stares at me. Most only see a divine solemnity in his face, but this close, there's so much more. Calculation creases the skin along his eyelids, and just the hint of anger tightens his upper lip.

“You have asked for something no one has before,” he says, addressing me but also the crowd. “The traditional request is to have your powers stripped from you, to become an honored citizen of Nidaos’s blessed kingdom and live out the remainder of your days free from the tribulations which plague your kind. To be free of Helena’s curse, the danger and madness ebb magic brings. Are you sure this is not the future you seek, young man?”

Cold, burning rage jumps to my lips, but I clamp them shut. I master my emotions and look into the gaze of one of

my so-called gods.

“I am sure, Your Radiance,” I say. I can offer no explanation without telling him everything—how his religion, his city, stole the life of a ten year old girl. How sick and twisted and fucked everything about this place is, gods and goddesses be damned.

The Blood King studies me; the vermillion of his robes somehow reflected in his irises, turning the blue to a deep shade of indigo. “This is a weighty request, one which goes beyond the cusp of just yourself. You are asking the divinities to return one of the lives claimed as sacrifice to them, after Nidaos chose you to live. Are you ungrateful for your life? Ungrateful that the Light God chose you as worthy? Perhaps he chose wrong.”

“Nidaos did choose wrong, Your Radiance,” I say. The whole world is quiet, like my ears are full of water, like I am back in the swollen silence of the river. But I push on, afraid he will not grant me this—if he says no, Ena will be lost to me forever. “My sister was a pure soul. She was taken from us too early, too violently. I am the one who has sinned—killed and maimed, brought more violence and blood into the world. She is the one who should have been chosen by the Light God for survival. I would trade places with her in a splinter of a heartbeat.”

Considering, the King looks me up and down, hands and heart open on my knees before him.

“You question the wisdom of the gods?” he asks, eyebrow lifting.

“No, Your Radiance. I only ask you and your siblings for mercy and understanding. You of all beings know how strong the bond between brother and sister might be. I love my sister—I want her back.”

He seems to deliberate, then closes his eyes and tilts back his head. A tremor wracks his body, and his hands glow purple, then blue, then green, then gold. With a sudden movement, he breaks from the trance, clapping his hands together enough to make me jump, the light fading.

“I have spoken with my siblings,” the King announces, looking out over his people. Whispers of reverence and prayer rise behind me, amplified a thousand fold by the stone around us. The King looks back to me, purpled eyes narrowed. “Nidaos has agreed, and the Dark Goddess will comply. They will return your sister to you, but not without compensation for Nidaos’s loss and Helena’s gain. If you ask this boon, they demand this in return—you must take your sister’s place. Her ebber mark will be removed, and she will become a full citizen, will live a long and happy life. In one year, you will return to the Blood Hours again and must withstand them a second time if you wish to join her in that future. Until you win, you will not be allowed to see her. This is the deal Nidaos and Helena will make.”

Ever’s sharp inhale is the only sound I hear. Another Blood Hours? And only one year, a year I must live without even seeing Ena, before I die? Because I know the gods, or the bloodhounds, will not let me succeed again. This man before me, who speaks in divine tones but holds a fire of anger in his gaze, will not let me survive. To earn Ena’s life back, I must condemn myself to death. All the futures I’d let myself imagine go up in smoke the minute the words leave his mouth.

I don’t pause to consider my answer.

“Yes,” I gasp, and I don’t let myself register Ever’s cry behind me. “I’ll do it.”

For a moment, I wonder if the King will refuse me anyway, and somewhere in my body, a piece of me is straining to look at Ever’s face. But I will do anything to allow my sister to live, to grow old and happy. Maybe Ever will take Ena with her when she goes.

“Alright, young man. If this is your wish, by the grace of my siblings and the benevolence of my powers, I will grant you this boon. Bring the girl here, and place her at my feet,” The King says, holding his arms out to the raucous cheering of the crowd.

Now—right now? He is going to do it right now? A surge of breath burns in my chest, elation and fear and a million

other emotions needling the flesh of my throat, my lungs. Adrenaline and sheer will find the strings to my limbs, sending me scrambling forward to scoop Ena's body in my arms, leaving the blanket behind. Her cold weight settles against me as I move, making short work of the distance, but I only have eyes for her face.

In moments, I will have her back. I will see her eyes open, her breath catch, her mouth form the shape of my name. I am too shocked, too scared, too everything to cry or laugh or cower—so I kneel before my King and let her rest gently on the ground. I bend until my chest touches my knees in reverence, afraid any wrong move, any offensive twitch, will cause him to revoke his decision. Before I rise, I lean over Ena and kiss her in the middle of her smooth, frosty brow.

“See you soon,” I murmur. The King mutters to the guard near him, and the man moves behind me, roughly gripping my shoulder and pulling me to my feet.

The swiftness of the act, the violence of the sharp tug on my body, changes the air around me, charges it with something fizzing and metallic. I try to shake the man off, but his grip only tightens, and the sudden urge to fight bubbles in my blood.

I glance back to where Ena lies open and exposed in front of the Blood King—the very man who sanctioned her death. All at once, I go cold, not able to shake the intuition that I should run back and take her as far away from this place as possible. But she is not here right now—she is in the spirit world, and this is the only chance to save her. Though it goes against every instinct I have, every muscle straining the opposite direction, I let the guard guide me back to my place beside Ever. He does not let go of my shoulder.

Ever's gaze bores into my side, but I'm unable to spare the glance. Not as the King steps up to my sister's corpse and begins to speak. Buzzing fills my ears, the echo of my skittering heartbeat, and the whole world is drowned out except for my sister's body. Which is ever, ever so slowly beginning to glow.

Breath escapes in shudders and small gasps, shaking in my chest. I am light-headed, dizzy. I try to gulp in more air, to breathe more deeply, but my lungs expel everything I fill them with. As Ena's glow engulfs her, the light seeping into her veins and creating spider-web patterns on her skin, I give up on oxygen entirely. Every part of me is still for one long, silent second, until the glow becomes too much and my eyes close of their own accord.

Apparently, the light is blinding everyone else too because I hear exclamations of pain and awe all around me. From behind my eyelids, the world looks white, too bright, like standing in a field of freshly fallen snow with the sun overhead. Rivulets of tears leak from the sides of my eyes as I tilt my head backward, and maybe I am praying or dying or simply begging any beings who might hear me to *please, please, please* return my sister to me.

I don't look when the light fades. I'm trembling again. Because if it didn't work, I don't want to see. It will break me for the final time.

"Sayer," my name is just a breath on the wind. The crush of disappointment is a hammer to my sternum, nearly knocking me off my feet. Because the voice isn't Ena's—it's Ever's. "Look."

With trepidation, I lower my head and open my eyes.

Ena is breathing.

It's just the tiniest rise and fall of her chest—the barest imprint of life. But as I watch in amazement, in wonder and awe and overwhelming joy, her hands begin to twitch.

Finally, her eyelashes flutter, and her eyes open. They stare straight up into the stormy sky, blinking a few times against the overcast light.

"Ena," I sob, and a million things break and heal and break again in my chest. I want to drop to my knees and pray my thanks to Helena and the other gods. But most of all, I want to hold my baby sister again. "Ena!"

She does not respond to her name. I start to move even as another sob crests my throat, but the hand on my shoulder tightens.

“No,” the sun guard says, catching me before I take off to Ena’s side. “The King has instructed you are not to touch her.”

I ignore him and push again, wanting this one moment before she is ripped away from me, before I will never see her again. But all at once, my arms are behind my back, and he is holding me, pinning me there.

“Get off me,” I growl, using all my strength to rip myself from his grasp. But three more guards have joined him, and now I am fighting like an animal, bucking and kicking. I throw my head back into the first guard’s face, stunning him enough to break away for one glorious second. The others catch me before I get more than half a step, screaming Ena’s name.

I am more beast than human now, screeching unintelligible curses and twisting, reaching for my sister. I let them hurt her once—I will not do so again. Ever’s voice is what pulls me out of the madness, the violence and pain. What keeps me from ebbing enough energy to blast them all across the square.

“It’s okay. She’s fine.” Her voice is a balm, a familiar peace and calm from the black storm building inside me. I slow, then stop fighting, breathing hard. The guards have not hurt me beyond defending themselves, though my shoulder is close to popping out again, the muscles screaming. I find Ever’s face and hold my eyes there, forgetting the sting of her betrayal. Letting the last of the madness drain out of me, as if releasing energy back into the flow.

“You knew the price for this boon,” someone else says, and my eyes break away to find the King’s. He is standing a few paces away from Ena now, gaze on me.

“Why is she not responding?” I spit at him, barely curbing the anger and fear mingled in my voice.

The King nods slowly. “She will be soon. When my sister Helena—the goddess of the spirits gone from this world—brought her back to me, she told me your sister will need time

to adjust. It is a shock to go from the beauty and evanescence of the spirit world back to the jarring reality of ours. She will need time to grow used to her body once again, especially after being away for so long.”

He looks down at her, his face carefully blank, and I wonder what thoughts are running behind those empty sky eyes. “You have preserved her well, but the world of mortals and gods is not the same. She may not remember you, or this place, right away. But Helena assured me that soon she will be as she was. Your sister will live a long and happy life, free of the ebbing magic which plagued her so. As agreed, you will carry the burden of her sacrifice on your shoulders and must earn the right to stand in her presence once again.” His hand flexes, eyes flicking to Ena. “And so the boon and bargain have been struck.”

I open my mouth to speak—however, just then, Ena sits up. The movement is odd, rigid and strange, but she is moving, pushing her wild curls out of her face.

“Ena,” I breathe. Slowly, in a daze, she turns her head and looks at me, gray eyes light and shining. And empty.

Her brow crinkles in confusion, and she stares at me, not blinking. I flinch deep in my heart at the lack of recognition there—she doesn’t know who I am.

But a small part of me is grateful. Maybe she doesn’t remember the trauma, the fear. Doesn’t remember how I failed her.

A sun guard approaches and extends a hand to my sister. Ena takes it, her small fingers not quite able to wrap around his. It’s as if her muscles aren’t responding normally. He hauls more than helps her to her feet, where she sways unsteadily, legs buckling.

Did something happen to her body? Did we miss a wound when we healed her? I want to look to Ever for confirmation, but I can’t bring myself to tear my eyes away from Ena while the guard helps her stumble across the dais. Someone brings a chair for her, and she sinks down onto it, movements still stiff.

“Ever Brasa,” the King states, looking away from me and from Ena. There is a slight sheen of sweat on his brow—bringing her back must have cost him in some way. Ever’s heat leaves my side, and I catch the sight of her in my peripheral vision as I return my gaze to Ena, watching for even a glimmer of my sister in her movements. She stares out across the square, looking distant and empty, no recognition or laughter or curiosity playing across her face. Nothing of my sister beneath her gray eyes.

“Please show your mark,” the King says, and I know this is the moment. The moment when Ever will either have some brilliant plan or will be shown a fraud. What will they do to her? Lock her away? Kill her? I am about to break my gaze from Ena, but I barely begin to turn when Ever’s answer rings across the dais.

“If you want proof I am an ebber, why don’t I just show you?”

Everything happens in slow motion then. I start to rip my eyes away, but with a sudden shift, Ena opens her mouth in a silent scream. Her eyes roll back and she thrashes, sliding out of the chair onto the ground. I answer with a shriek of her name, throwing myself against the guard’s hold. They are not expecting it, distracted by the spectacle in the center of dais. Then I am running, though I’m not fast enough.

To my left, I catch sight of Ever’s hands. They are held high above her head. And they are glowing with ebb magic.

The whole world implodes around me.



The chaos is bold and swift, choking me off from Ena’s slumped form. Blue uniforms form an impenetrable wall, hands grasping at my arms when the guards catch up.

“Ena!” I scream, and an elbow comes out of nowhere to clock me in the jaw. I stumble back, bouncing off bodies as something pushes us forward, towards the looming open doors to the castle.

“To the King! To the Heir!” a guard yells, and it gives me just enough distraction to rip away from the people pulling at me and lose them in the sea of blue fabric.

“Ebber filth!” someone shouts above the clamor, fading away as the roar grows.

What in eight hells is going on? I am shoved forward by the guards swarming their King and Heir, barely managing to stay upright in the stream of bodies.

Ena. Ever. I need to find them. The guards who’d been trying to take hold of me are gone, lost somewhere in the stampede. The riot’s tide has brought me under the overhang of the castle’s ornate stone awning, the doorway only steps away. I catch myself on a marble pillar lining the entrance and haul myself up onto its wide base, giving me a few extra feet above the crowd.

With horror, I realize the source of the panic, the rush of bodies. Citizens are roiling up the steps in a bubbling, angry mass, pushing and climbing one another. A few are armed, spears and daggers and hunting knives—some shriek, bare hands flying in outrage. Others flee down the alleyways along the square, spilling into the streets beyond and sending the festival careening to a halt as others run. But there are simply too many people in the square, too many different directions. Some try to run, some try to climb the steps to get to us, and hundreds of others are caught in between.

The people are rioting. Because they saw Ever ebb.

Their hatred for us runs that deep. I’ve heard of men and women getting beaten, torn apart in the streets just because someone thought they saw a shadow of color in their fingers. Ever actually fully ebbed in front of them—and mad with thousands of years of fear and hatred, the zealots are storming their own divine King’s palace.

A new fear spikes my heart—where in the Dark Goddess’s name is Lennon? He is too old to be in a riot. He’ll be knocked down, crushed. And if the city decides to deliver a blast to the square, to the citizens, like they once did to the rioting ebbers, my father...

I am panic stricken until I see the bright glint of his cane. It dances as he beats back a few rioters trying to clamber up beside him on his perch. He has climbed the steps to one of the surrounding buildings’ porches, somehow managing to pull himself atop a pillar similar to the one I’m standing on. He is holding his own, and the rioters are already losing interest in his vantage point, turning away to join the mass writhing up the castle steps.

He is safe. That’s the important thing, and now that I know it, I have no more time to waste. I scan the remaining chaos, searching every inch for a splash of silky black-brown, the bounce of an orange curl. And when I find them, they are close to each other.

A sun guard has Ena, her eyes staring and empty, slung over his shoulder like a doll. She seems to have stopped seizing, but why isn’t she walking on her own? Her name rises out of my throat, tearing my voice as it builds into a scream. Right beside her, Ever is hissing and fighting as the guards drag her, Echo huge eyed and stumbling by her side.

“Sayer!” Ever is screaming, eyes casting about wildly. “Sayer!”

“Ever!” I bellow in answer, and somehow through the clamor, she hears me. Our eyes meet, but she’s not the only one who has been alerted to my location. Two sun guards break off from the King’s protective circle and begin to fight their way to me, pushing and cutting down citizens as they start to mix into the guard’s ranks. I see one guard’s sword plunge deep into the belly of a shrieking woman. When he pulls it out, it is slick with ruby blood.

Swallowing, I jump down and rush towards them. They have both of the women I care about, and I’ll go wherever they are taking them. I duck and dodge through the crowd, nearly

taking an axe to the head. A large burly man wields it, but one of the guards knocks it out of the air with his blade and turns to bury the weapon in the man's chest. He stumbles back; the guards lock their hands on my wrists and drag me back towards the King.

I don't fight them, and soon, we are passing through the carved double doors and into the dim coolness of the palace walls. The King is gathering people around him, and the sun guard holding Ena puts her down where she stands quiet, completely calm. I want to run to her, but the guards still have my wrists. Then the King lifts his hand.

The doors slam shut with a resounding boom, a foreboding quivering of finality I feel in my bones. At least we are safe. Ever is here. Ena is alive.

With relief, I let the guards pull me back, away from the muffled din outside. Everything will be okay.

I turn away from the doors just in time to see Ena's eyes close and her tiny body collapse to the floor.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

“E NA!”

Once again, I fight, wrenching myself from the guards only to have them clamp down on my shoulders, around my neck. An arm presses into my windpipe, tight and strong, cutting off my bellowing.

Forced to the ground, my knees slam into the floor hard enough for my teeth to crack together with the impact. When the pressure releases from my throat, I cough and gasp. Immediately, I surge to move again, to shorten the distance between my sister and myself, but I jolt back at the cold metallic bite of a sword at my neck.

“Stop,” one of the guards huffs next to me, an unnecessary command. I’m already frozen, my mind flitting from one idea to the next as the hunter in me calculates my next move. If I move, this man will cut my throat, and I will be worse than useless to Ena then. Sweat brimming over my brow, I wait, wrestling with every instinct screaming to get to her. The blade is so sharp, it’s already sliced a thin line into my neck, and the slow trickle of warm blood seeps over my skin.

“What in all eight hells!” The King roars, swinging towards his men. The sun guards nearest him take a nervous step back, exchanging a glance.

“I want the surrounding area secured. Call the Wolves and all the sun guards stationed on the walls. This palace is to be cleared of people in no more than an hour. Understood?”

An older man steps forward, his beard and eyebrows graying, his head completely bald. A pin gilt with the royal crest is secured at his breast.

“Yes, Your Radiance. What about the square?” he asks.

The glint in the King’s eye when he waves off the captain’s concerns chills my blood. “I’ll take care of that soon.”

The captain nods. He gives a gesture to a handful of others around him, and they snap to attention. As one, they press their knuckles to their foreheads, then march out, forming two neat lines. Numerous guards remain behind, including the three holding me down and the two who have now thrown Ever to the floor a few feet away. Echo is nearly at her side but stops when the King’s voice rings out through the vaulted room.

“First, I need to deal with *you*,” he snarls, scarlet robes flashing as he whirls to glare at his daughter on the ground. It’s the first time I’ve even bothered to notice the room around us—vibrant tapestries hang from the wall behind him, sapphire and cerulean. There is a grand staircase along the back wall, all gleaming wood and wrought iron filigree finished with gold and ivory paint on the walls. It all complements the now bloody floor I kneel on.

The King’s eyes are iced fire, blue and smoldering with hatred, malice. I shiver, knowing exactly what I would find if I tasted the energy in this room. The ornate, luxurious walls of this palace, this city, all filled with corruption and rot.

Ever has pulled herself to her knees, though two guards still hold back her arms. There is a bruise forming on her right cheek, the one closest to me, already spreading up along the ridge of her eye. Blood and spit shine where a split mars her lower lip, the swelling rounding her words when she speaks.

“Me,” she snarls back, leaning forward, straining against the guards’ hold. “Your daughter, finally come home.”

“You are no daughter of mine,” the Blood King says, taking a step forward. I jolt towards her just before the slap connects with her bruised cheek, nearly knocking her to the

floor. My efforts are rewarded with another sluice of blood down my neck.

Held up only by the guard's grip, Ever sweeps the hair off her face with a flick of her head and looks up into her father's eyes.

"You caused a riot," The Blood King says, leaning down to be at eye level with his daughter. "Your reckless stupidity has the city in an uproar. How dare you blaspheme one of our most sacred rites with—"

Ever cuts him off with a wad of bloody saliva, spit right into his face. Despite my fear for her, a flash of pride and vindication wells in me as the King reels back, reaching to wipe the mess from his eyes.

"Stupid, filthy ebber!" he screams, winding his foot back. Despite her bravado, Ever cowers away from him, turning her face away in preparation for the blow. But before he executes the kick, his back swinging boot slams into Ena, sending her body sprawling. She rolls, landing with her limbs splayed and her head tilted at an unnatural angle.

My scream echoes around the chambers, the painted walls and glistening floor sounding it back. "No!"

Everyone freezes, turning to me. I hadn't noticed before—Ena is not breathing. She is perfectly still.

She is dead.

"No, no, no!" I bellow, starting to buck again, not caring if the sword finally cuts all the way through my throat. I hear a rough word, a command in the King's voice, and suddenly, the cold metal lifts from me, the hands retreat. I am free. Scrambling to my feet, I stumble like a drunk as blood flows generously from my neck and soaks into my shirt, the hair on my chest. I trip and go down on the floor, too dizzy to make myself stand again. Blood loss and the thousand rushes of adrenaline today have made me weak. So, I crawl to my sister's body, pulling myself the last few feet, my body leaving a slick trail of garnet on the polished floor.

“Ena,” I weep, touching her face, her hands. They are still ice cold. Not warm as if she breathed only seconds before.

I don’t understand. I pull Ena into my lap and sit up, finding the strength somewhere in the deepest pit of my soul to look up into the Blood King’s hard face.

“What...?” I trail off. I don’t know how to ask this, what to even ask. But he knows which answer I seek.

The King sneers, moving closer to me. Behind him, I catch the barest glimpse of Ever slumping in relief. “You think I can bring people back from the dead? You are almost as bad as the zealots out there.” His finger points with emphasis to the double doors, to the dull roar still pounding against them.

“But...” I stammer, trying to clamp onto this thought, this idea, and hold it through the screaming chaos in my skull. “But you’re a god. A divinity in mortal flesh. Why... why couldn’t you bring her back? Why didn’t Helena let her come back? She was here.” My eyes wander to the tiny body cradled in my lap. Her eyes are no longer closed—they are wide, and gray, and utterly empty.

The King’s disdain is a stain across his features, twisted and ugly. “I am no god, you fool. Just a more powerful man than you will ever be, thanks to the ebbers slaughtered each blood moon. I suppose I should be thanking you for your sister’s life—my power will be able to continue running through the streets of Toeska, keeping it safe from ebber filth like you.”

“You...” Ever’s voice trails into a scoff, and when my eyes snap to her, she is straining against the men holding her. Leaning towards the king with a mix of shock and horror and murder in her eyes. “I knew your powers were similar to ours. Mother told me that much. But I thought there was some ritual—some divine power transfer would make us fit to rule. It’s the reason I decided to come after all these years to rescue Echo... how much time did she have left before you made her a goddess and I couldn’t reach her? But this...”

Her breath catches on a laugh, almost hysterical, and an amber gaze sweeps the King, reassessing. “A religion built on

lies, a throne balancing on the bones of other ebbers. Because that is what you are, right? An ebber who orders the death of others to glutton yourself on their power. Who tears families apart and slaughters *children*.”

All eyes in the room turn to me, or more accurately, to Ena’s body in my arms. All except the King and Ever, who are locked together in a battle of wills which goes far beyond this room.

“He’s—an ebber?” I ask, though no one seems to hear me. I am reeling, falling into a spiral, no longer sure what is up and what is down. Everything I have been raised to know and believe is being ripped away. I always doubted the existence of the gods, but now I am facing the truth in that doubt, and it feels like the entire world is crumbling around me. Ena is truly gone, as is every semblance of the life I thought I knew.

Now, all I have left is rage.

Sliding Ena’s body to the ground with gentle hands, I surprise the guards by surging to my feet. My lunge catches the nearest one off balance. At the same time, energy zips through my veins and back out, the dagger in my hands black and churning with malice as I rush the King.

With a simple flick of his hand, my dagger disintegrates. The plush carpet catches my stumble, all the energy sapped from me in an instant. Small auras of darkness spider up the veins in the King’s hand. In seconds, someone grabs my shoulder, and there is another sword poised at my throat.

“I am no mere ebber,” the King says, standing tall, glaring from me to his daughter. With his nod, the guard throws me to my knees besides Ena’s body once again.

“I’ll tell you what you are, *Father*,” Ever spits. The King’s focus goes back to her, my attempt nothing more than the buzzing of an annoying fly. And though my rage is burning, my body shaking, I know if the King can disarm our magic, this is not a fight I will win.

Ever’s body also quivers, my anger and hatred for this man reflected there. “You are a coward. You don’t even have the

honor to murder those people with your own hands, to be the one who looks into their faces and watches your greed steal their lives. At least then, I could give you an ounce of respect for embracing your ambition, your brutality. Instead, you hide in this palace behind your guards, wearing a shroud of divinity to disguise your cowardice. And I thought you were pathetic enough for partnering with a god as cruel as Nidaos.”

The room holds its breath, the sconces and stones and stairs leaning in. No one reacts. Then the King rushes at Ever, intending to beat her, or maybe kill her, I don't know. The only thing I do know is Echo dives between them, curling around her sister's body and taking the brunt of the kick the King throws their way directly in the spine.

Echo screams, a high, blood curdling thing, and the King pulls up in horror. Even the sun guards release Ever, and the twins tumble to the ground, a tangle of limbs and identical umber hair.

When Echo's convulsions come to a stop, Ever sits up, her sister in her arms much like Ena was in mine. But Echo is still breathing, eyes wide in shock and pain but able to right herself a moment later. Ever steadies her as they rise together, glaring at the King with absolute loathing.

“Echo, I...” the King starts but doesn't seem to know what to say.

“I'm sorry, Father,” Echo lowers her head, eyes on the ground.

“Don't apologize to him,” Ever growls, arm around her sister's shoulders. Tucking her close to her side, Ever leans over her protectively. “I'm not sorry. What I said is true. You are worse than worthless—you are pathetic. You are no more a god than I am a goddess.”

The King opens his mouth, but Ever cuts him off.

“Just because you have more power doesn't mean you aren't one of us,” she spits. When she turns to me, shaking against the bite of a sword next to Ena's body, her face softens.

No one moves as she rushes across the room and kneels at my side, reaching for my face above the blade's sharp edge.

But I turn away. She knew—through every shared night and comforting word and bared secret—she *knew* what he was. She looked me in the face every day for the last month and did not deem me worthy of a truth which changes everything. The King's power is the same one we are slaughtered for. The gods are not real. And in this moment, the woman who I thought might be my home has become no better than a stranger.

“I didn't know,” she breathes, and my chest tightens as another wave of pain crests. I don't know if she's lying, and I'm not sure it matters. “I've had suspicions, but I didn't know. I just thought he ebbed like our gods do—I didn't know he wasn't divine at all.”

“How?” I ask, my voice rough and broken and too quiet. I ignore Ever clinging to my arm and look up, directly at the man I have hated my entire life, who has made everything I've worked for into a lie. “How did you bring her back out there?”

One golden-brown eyebrow quirks up, and the King scoffs. “My power has little limitation. To reanimate a corpse by manipulating energy? Something I mastered long ago.”

“You sick bastard,” Ever says, standing. Numb with grief and the realization this room most likely holds our deaths, my eyes follow her as she stands and moves away. Conflicting emotions register across my mind, foreign things I am not sure belong to me. I want her back at my side to fight with her—I also want to burn down this palace with everything and everyone inside.

She turns to the guards. “He is a false king, a false god. And yet you still follow him?”

“Ever,” Echo says, apprehension in her voice. She glances at their father, and when I follow her gaze, my blood runs cold.

The King is smiling.

But Ever doesn't notice. "He has lied to you. He has deceived you. He does not deserve your loyalty or worship. He only deserves your disgust. Is that the man who is your King?"

Her voice fades. No one moves. The guards don't even blink. I see exactly when the realization sets in. When she turns back to the King, who is grinning now.

"Are you finished?" he asks, almost polite.

Ever gives a final glance around, and the anger and righteousness morphs into realization, then defeated horror. She closes her eyes.

"They already knew, even before you told us."

"Hmm, maybe you are smarter than I thought," The King says, motioning to the guards. Two step forward and seize Ever once again. Echo puts up a hand and opens her mouth like she might protest but is silenced by one lift of the King's finger. "Take her and the boy down to the cells. I'll figure out what to do with them once the city is back under control."

"Wait!" Ever says, straining against the guards' hold. To my surprise, the King gestures for them to halt.

"I still have my boon," Ever pants.

"If I am no god, as you claim me to be, I am under no obligation to grant you anything." The Blood King's smile is all teeth. "But ask if you wish."

I don't know if Ever really thinks this will work, or if it is a last desperate plea. I have been calculating, trying to see how we could get out of this. Trying to find a way to strike at the king again, even if it means my death. But I do not think such an option exists.

"Free her," Ever begs, a genuine pleading stealing into her voice. She glances at her sister, who has her hand over her mouth in horror. "Free my sister, and let us return home. This is the boon I ask."

How in all eight hells could the Blood King's smile grow wider? How could the hatred in my stomach possibly burn hotter?

“Echo,” he says, still looking at Ever. His brows are cocked, the entire divine mask gone from his features, malignant joy at her pain written into every line of his face. “Would you like to go with your sister and return to your traitor of a mother? The choice is yours.”

Every muscle in Echo’s face is tight, her lips strained over her teeth. She looks frantically from her sister to her father, locked in a battle of wills all their own. But when Ever breaks the King’s stare, her large eyes filled with pain and pleading, tears spill down Echo’s cheeks. And then she bows her head.

“No, Father. I wish to remain by your side, where I belong,” she says obediently, and though her tears drip onto the floor, mixing with the sweat and blood, she doesn’t look up when Ever whispers her name.

“I cannot force someone against their will. Your sister has chosen to remain here,” the King says, stepping close and bringing his face just inches from Ever’s. He moves between her and Echo, forcing her to meet his gaze.

“I am your daughter, your heir, too. Shouldn’t I have some power here?” Ever says. She is calm, quiet, her voice all ice.

“I already have an heir,” the King says. “I don’t need another.” Then he steps away, beckoning to his daughter. “Come, Echo. We have things to attend to.”

Echo’s sheet of inky hair flows down her back as she begins to follow her father up the stairs. She glances back halfway up, pausing with one hand on the railing in a tight knuckle grip, her face that of someone who didn’t know their heart could be torn in two.

I see something in Ever break as her sister’s brown eyes overflow with tears. She is still looking back, but her body is already turning to continue after their father up the sweeping staircase. Her decision made.

“Echo!” Ever screams, a shattering, trilling sound, reminding me of the way Ena called for me just before the blade bit into her throat. This is similar, though there are no daggers or moons or blood. Echo’s eyes hold Ever’s a moment

longer, hand trailing on the carved railing as she climbs, then she turns and disappears, hurrying to catch up with her father's long stride.

She doesn't look back.

Ever's anguish is a river, a lake, an ocean. She screams her sister's name again, fighting the guards, bucking and kicking and biting in her attempts at escape.

Some part of me doesn't want to go to her, is still betrayed by her, even though there was always a chance the King would not or could not give me what I asked for. But her secret was only a fraction of the truth—insignificant in comparison to the revelations laid out before me.

I would have tried, regardless of her suspicions, if she had revealed everything. Because the chance at saving Ena was always worth it, no matter the cost.

When my eyes lock onto Ena's body again, I realize how naive I have been. The sword comes away from my throat, and I take the chance to lean towards my sister. My lips barely find the familiar curve of her forehead before the guards haul me away.

How could I ever have believed in gods? No god would watch something so pure be taken so brutally from the world. No god would allow the Blood Hours to exist.

Ever screams for her sister, but I cannot do the same for mine. My sister is gone, dead, and this time, there is no hope of her coming back. I have failed to save her.

But there is still someone left to fight for.

One look—that is what I give myself as the guards begin to drag me away. Through the haze of blood loss, I stare, trying to memorize my sister's face for one final time. Trying to reach past her closed eyes, past the veil between worlds, and apologize for this. For everything.

Asking for her to understand why I am finally accepting her death—and her blessing to keep fighting for what I have left. Asking for her forgiveness, for Ever, and for myself.

Then, I lash out at the men holding me. They are thrown off, not expecting me to kick at their legs. One goes down before another of his friends bolts to join him. They are not able to subdue me until a third forces me down, and they tie my hands and feet to carry me despite the struggling.

The whole time, I scream Ever's name.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The dungeon of the Blood Palace has a thick, peculiar smell.

“Ever,” I say as I come up behind her, trying to breathe through the metallic, rusty tang coming off the iron bars around us. My hand finds the curve of her shoulder, firm but gentle, pulling her away from the lock she’s desperately ebbing energy into. “Let me try for a while.”

“No.” She shrugs her shoulders out of my grip, her voice clawing to stay on this side of tears. Whether they would be angry or sad, I don’t know. “I’ve almost got it.”

A sigh rattles out of me, chafing against the wound finally beginning to clot at my throat. I haven’t wanted to bother Ever to heal it, not when she’s been ferociously hammering at the lock to our cell. And when we have barely spoken since being thrown in here. Ignoring the pain of my injuries, the bruises and scrapes, I reach around and cup her hand in my palm, still glowing with lightning cracks of color.

“No, you don’t.” I wait, staying there, steady behind her, until her shoulders curl inward and the magic eases from her fingers. The lock glows red hot beneath her touch, but nothing she has tried has destroyed it yet.

“Come here,” I say, and she turns into me, weight rocking into my chest. My legs give a little, but I catch her with one hand, the other on the bars of our cell, holding myself up as I tuck my chin over her head. Despite everything, despite the

things I haven't quite forgiven her for and everything she accused me of, this is what I crave right now.

I hold tighter when the tears begin to come, my free hand stroking the frazzled strands of her hair and pressing her to me. Finding comfort for my grief in her touch, I try to accept the very thing I have been avoiding for weeks—that Ena is gone.

“I just thought...” I already know what she means. She expected to come here and find her sister a captive in need of rescuing. And though the girl I saw upstairs might need someone to save her, it doesn't seem like she knows it.

“We both did all we could,” I whisper, sending strands of Ever's hair moving on the ghost of my breath.

“I didn't do enough,” she answers, and though she has calmed a little when she pulls back, there is a new kind of despair haunting her eyes. When we were first thrown in this cell, she was all fire and anger, hissing and spitting and shooting energy into the lock, the bars themselves. This is a new face, one of anguish and agony. One I know very well. “I should have come sooner. I should have said more to her. I should-”

“Ever,” I cut her off, taking her chin between my fingers. “You did more than any sister should ever have to. You cannot change her mind for her or decide her fate. She has chosen a path, and now we have to choose ours.” I glance at the lock behind her. “Let me try for a while.”

Her amber eyes search my face, the streaks of salt already beginning to dry. They roam to my throat and then lock onto the still seeping gash there.

“Goddess, your neck!” she exclaims, reaching up and running her fingers over the wound. A cool sensation washes over me, and I sigh in relief as the skin knits back together. She frowns as she examines the other scrapes on my arms and chest, setting to work tracing them with healing energy. “You should have said something earlier.”

“You were more in the mood to destroy than heal,” I say, the phantom of a grin coming to my face, though it is weighed down with the heaviness of everything that happened today and doesn’t quite reach my lips. “Sit. You need to rest.”

The tip of her tongue is already moving to argue, but she closes her mouth and seems to think better of it.

It isn’t until I begin working at the lock, forming a pick out of the rotten energy around me, that I dare breach the thing we haven’t spoken about. The things she knew.

“Why didn’t you tell me you thought the King was an ebber?” Though I understand—Goddess, how could I kill so many people and not understand doing anything it takes to save a sister?—a line of fire traces up my throat, spilling anger into my mouth. “And why didn’t you tell me who you were? Especially after I told you everything?”

I don’t look at her—won’t look at her. Not yet. My heart wants her, maybe needs her, but I must hear this first.

“Would you have trusted the Blood King’s daughter?” she asks. The lock pick glows in my hand, gray and red and black swirling up its thin length.

“No,” I answer. “Probably not.”

“At first, it was just strategy. I saw your strength, and after you told me about your caves and supplies, I knew I stood a better chance of surviving to save Echo if I stuck with you.”

The cold metal numbs my hands as I keep working, the ancient corrosion on the door leaving flakes of blackened metal on my sleeves. There’s too much buzzing around my head, a hundred things I could say, but silence stays my tongue, bitter alongside the metallic taste of rust.

A scrape of cloth against stone and the fall of boots tell me she’s moving closer. In my peripheral, she squats down and leans against the bars, just out of reach.

“Then, I saw you. *You*, Sayer, not the dark deeds and bloody mask you wore like armor. The kindness overriding the guilt in your face when you handed me those socks. The haunted look in your eyes when you spoke about Ena. The

pain in your sobs when you broke down on our first night. Those were the glimpses which made me think beyond what you could do for me. I started contemplating what I could do for you. And when you kissed me in the aspen grove...”

My face turns to her then, and she moves closer, a hand tentatively reaching for me. I hold still, don't move away. She shifts onto her knees as her fingers find my cheeks, and for what feels like the millionth time, I am swimming in her honey eyes. They are a prism of brown, rich and earthy and so warm. And in them, I see everything I might have left to live for.

“That was when I knew I was really in trouble. Because I was not supposed to care for you. Our kiss... it set fire to every plan I had, burned them to ashes. The Blood Hours were no longer just about saving my sister. They were about saving yours—and you.”

Everything is a jumble in my head: anger and elation and the staccato, sharp beat of my blood. “You were angry with me for everything I'd done to try and save Ena. You called me a monster, as bad as the bloodhounds for taking away a chance people never truly had. But The Blood Hours still commence every year, and you didn't tell me every reason your family gives for our sacrifice is a lie.”

A muscle ticks in Ever's jaw, but after a beat, she nods. “It's like you told me, proved to me, out there on the Blood Road. Desperation is a powerful thing. I would have done anything to save Echo, just as you did for Ena. If I told you my secrets, I might not have survived to find her.”

“I know. I understand that. I just wish you'd told me. Didn't I deserve the truth too?”

Her mouth turns down, weighted at the corners. “Yes. I should have told you. And I'm sorry. But I truly believed there was a chance everything would work—a good chance, in fact. Even if he was an ebber like my mother suspected, he is still incredibly powerful. You've seen what our magic can do; heal and build in addition to breaking. With the added connection to the gods, why couldn't he bring someone back from the

dead? And I swear, on my sister's life, on my mother's home, I did not know he was not a god."

My gaze searches hers, and it is clear as the snow dazzle on a winter morning—she is telling me the truth.

I must decide if it is enough.

Breath shuttering, I reach for her. Cup her face into my hand and relish the warmth, the way her eyes close and her charcoal lashes flutter like butterfly wings against my skin. Remember the way she looked at me as I showed her my truth, my darkest of secrets, my monstrous betrayals to our people.

She forgave me.

"Okay," I say. "Okay." I lean my forehead into hers, the weight of secrets evaporating between us. We have both done terrible, horrific things to save the ones we love—we both accept each other's darkness.

The pall of mistrust and fear and betrayal is swept away as I lean back, meeting her eyes. My grief tugs on me, wanting to pull me down into a full spiral, but there are things to be done if we want to survive tonight.



Ever keeps me entertained while I work on the lock by telling stories. We've spoken of her mother a few times over the last weeks, but now I ask her to tell me again—the real stories this time.

"She ran away with us when she found out she was pregnant. Didn't want us to grow up in this city, under his rule. She left behind her whole life, the place she'd been born and the man she thought she loved."

"It's not hard to see why she stopped," I mutter under my breath, obviously not quiet enough because Ever snorts from beside me. She's been watching me try different picks, all of which always seem to dissolve when I think I'm close to

opening the Goddess damned door. I don't know what we will do when we get out of here, but escape is the first step.

“My mother doesn't have the best taste in men.”

“Well I'm glad you don't have the same problem,” I tease, and I almost hear her eyes rolling.

“How humble of you.” She snorts, shaking her head. “In her defense, she said he's gotten meaner with age, drunk on the power once his father stepped down and he took his place. As Blood Heir, he might have once loved my mother—as Blood King, there was no place for her at his side. She hoped to give us a better life, as all parents hope for their children. So, she ran, taking us with her.”

I nod, not wanting to interrupt again. Focusing on her stories and our banter is the only way I've been able to keep myself from thinking about—

My thoughts veer sharply away. There will be time later to properly mourn Ena's death, a time to look back on the last visage of her face and break down. Ever's voice is a melody guiding me away from my beckoning grief as she continues.

“I grew up on the beaches of Bismaesa, swimming in the dark tides, playing under the broad leaf trees in the summer and hunting the cold seas by boat in winter. I never knew my father, but my mother found a woman she loved and married her when I was very young. I had two loving, doting parents, and a sister who was my best friend in the whole world. There was nothing more I could have wished for.”

I know what comes next—her sister's kidnapping. But she skips this part; it is one of the things she did tell me truthfully.

“After Echo was stolen from us, my mother told me everything. About my father, about Toeska. And I knew I couldn't let Echo live in a place like that. But I was young, not strong enough. So I waited, trained and grew stronger in my ebbing. And when I was old enough, I came up with this plan. Enter the Blood Hours, win. Find her. Bring her home. I thought my father's own laws would trap him, force him to free her. I just never imagined she wouldn't want to be freed.”

I stop my machinations, glancing over my shoulder at her. She is staring straight ahead, but there are no tears. We've shed so many of those tonight, it would surprise me if there were any left.

"I never even thought of the possibility that my home was no longer hers. Does she love our father? Did she choose to stay because she wants to become Blood Queen after his passing?" She shakes her head, finally looking at me. "It just doesn't seem possible. That I came all this way, that he let her choose. And she chose him."

The thin rod of light in my fingers vanishes once again. Instead of ebbing another, I settle onto the hard floor with her. She scoots closer and leans her head on my shoulder as I lace my fingers through hers, squeezing.

There is nothing in the cell but the sound of our breaths and the shifting of our bones against the stone floor.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

We both start when the dungeon bursts with sound, the loud creak of hinges sending a finger of terror trailing down my spine.

The iron door at the far end opens just a slit, the person on the other side pausing while the scream of metal on metal rings through the room. I rush to the front of our cage, trying to make out the figure slipping in from the shadow of the hall beyond the doorway.

Firelight catches her hair as she turns to us, the orange and red hues highlighting copper strands against the warm black. Eyes bloodshot and hooded, face red and puffy from crying, Echo steps fully into the light with a grimace plastered on her face.

I glance to the door, then the roof, waiting for the pounding of the guards' boots. When I look at Ever, she is clinging to the bars beside me, staring at her sister in wonder.

"Echo?" she breathes, as if her sister might be an illusion, a hallucination that might dissipate into the silence.

"I'm here," her sister says, crossing the small space after a long heartbeat. Her hands wrap over her sister's on the bars. "I'm sorry for how I acted in the throne room. I'm sorry —"

"You came," Ever interrupts; the wave of her hope crests, and she reaches for her sister, grasps her shoulder through the cell. "I thought you'd chosen him."

A searing twinge of guilt passes over Echo's face—and Ever does not miss it. She pulls away, leaving Echo's hands alone on the cold bars.

“You are here to help us, right?” Ever says, the words pitching up. Her feet trip over each other a little as she stumbles back, and I reach out a hand to steady her. “So we can all go home?”

“This is my home,” Echo says, pleading. “It's not horrible like you might think. I have a good life, and I love our father.”

“Love him?!” Ever's voice rises half an octave, and half a decibel too. I glance at the ceiling again, afraid her exclamation will do the job the squealing door did not, but I know better than to intervene. As much as I want to throttle Echo, as angry and heartbroken as I am for her, this is Ever's battle. This is Ever's last chance to save her sister, or possibly accept it just can't be done. I've already had my turn.

“How could you possibly love that man? He *slaughters* people, Echo, people who otherwise would have a long, happy life,” she continues, glancing at me from the corner of her eye. “And forces others to do terrible things to survive.” A glow of warmth pricks at my chest, chasing off the last linger of doubt.

“He has never killed anyone,” Echo protests, but Ever waves it away.

“Maybe not directly, but the blood of thousands stains his hands.”

“Father didn't create the Blood Hours,” Echo defends. “He is simply doing what must be done to keep our city running. Our ancestors made the doctrine to protect Toeska and keep us strong.”

“He didn't stop the Blood Hours either.” Ever retorts. Scarlet paints her cheeks beneath rich fawn skin, anger flushing until the color nearly matches the murky red glass firelight swirling low in Echo's grasp. “Tell me how murdering people just because they use the same magic we do is right. Explain how in the Dark Goddess's name that protects Toeska.”

“He needs the magic!” Echo says hotly, and for the first time, I see her getting riled. “We need the magic. It is how we run the city, keep order, and provide for our people. The ebbers are sacrificing for the city’s survival! How else could a city-state exist without countryside to support it, far away and cut off from the rest of the world? Those who give their lives in the Blood Hours also gift their magic to the city, and Father accesses the power to take care of his people. He uses their magic for the greater good. Not to mention The Light God demands his sacrifices, and in return blesses this city with his favor.”

“So he just followed in the blood soaked footsteps of some ancient ebber? I’ve seen ebbing from the people who live here—they don’t have half the power I do, Echo. Did our ancestor make them lesser so they could never be defeated?” Ever hisses, shaking her head. She moves even further away, and I place a steadying hand on her back. Echo’s eyes flicker to me but land for barely a second before returning to her sister. “There are cities all over the world which run just fine without the murder of thousands. You’ve become just like him, fooled by him and the religion he plays at. He’s got you so blinded with devotion, you can’t even see through the falsehoods in front of your eyes.”

Echo lifts her chin. “You believe in the Dark Goddess, don’t you? Do not scorn my religion. I did not become like anything. I’ve always been this, been me. I just understand how the world works, and the sacrificial cost it takes to keep a city from utter ruin. What the gods demand of us.”

“Helena would never demand blood sacrifices,” Ever hisses. “He’s really tricked you into following him, believing he is carrying out the holy duty of the gods. Did you know before tonight that he is not a god? How do you still even believe in them, when he said himself they are false?” Ever says. “He’s manipulated you so much, you think the murder of hundreds, of children, is sane, that a god speaks to him and demands the deaths of your people. Even if Nidaos is real, he does not convene with that man. Listen to yourself. Have you gone completely insane?”

Before Echo fires something back, I interrupt. “Why are you here?”

Echo’s eyes whip to me.

“To free her,” she answers, looking at Ever. I didn’t think she could get any more shocked, but Ever’s eyes go wide.

“What?” she says, gasping.

“I came here to let you go,” she says, reaching into her pocket. A set of keys jangles in her hand, dark and heavy as they hang from her fingers.

Her face softens as she looks at Ever again, the tension draining from it. “Despite our differences, despite all you have said and done, you are still my sister. I will always love you, and I will always be grateful that you came here to try and save me. Though misguided, you would have died in the Blood Hours for the chance to rescue me. It means more to me than you’ll ever know. I owe you at least this. There is no need for you to die here just because you love me.”

With no more hesitation, she fits a key into the lock we’ve been working for hours to destroy, the door opening with a silent swing.

“Go. The guards will be gone for another five minutes—it was their shift change, and I blackmailed my maid into causing a diversion outside the barracks. The replacements will be busy for a few minutes, but they won’t stay long.”

Ever looks between the open door and her sister, eyes wide. “I don’t understand.”

“Go. Before they come back.” Echo’s stare is pleading. “You don’t love our father, and I barely remember our mother. My place is here. I believe in protecting Toeska. But you don’t belong here, and after everything you have done for me, I need to do this for you.”

“Echo...” Ever closes the distance between them in a few short strides. “Echo.”

Her sister’s deep eyes, so much darker than Ever’s, flick to the door. “You have to go now, or this will all be for nothing. I

cannot protect you if he finds us here.”

But Ever does not back down. She holds her sister’s shoulders, gripping tight.

“Echo, come with me.”

“No. I’m sorry, but no. I’m doing this because there is one thing Father is wrong about. There is no need to keep you here, and no need for you to die.” She pauses, as if debating her next words. “I won’t go with you, but I will set you free.”

“Where do we go once we get out of the palace?” Ever asks as I step up behind her.

A memory, hazy but nagging, pricks my mind. Something Lennon said before the Blood Hours, when he came to lecture Ena and me in the square.

But I am distracted as a sheet of panic drops over Echo’s face. “We? He can’t go. Father would murder me if I set both of you free. I could at least make some excuses for you—”

“What?” Ever’s voice jumps loudly again, and Echo takes a step back. “I won’t leave him. I won’t leave him! What is wrong with you?”

“It’s impossible,” Echo’s hands come up, eyes wide. “We will be found out, you’ll get captured...”

“I don’t care,” Ever says, and the last of the doubt lingering in my stomach uncoils. After everything, she won’t leave me behind; I was right to forgive her.

Echo’s face blanches. “Please. I am trying to help you. I love you.”

Ever nods, sorrow passing over her face. “I know, Echo. That might be the worst part.”

She glances back at me. Still speaking to her sister, she doesn’t look away. “Do it for the god your scripture claims to love. He is the true winner of The Blood Hours, the first chosen by Nidaos in decades. Free him as his boon, since your father could not grant him one.”

Echo's conviction wavers, eyes darting around the room. I long to push through her, itch to sprint from this place with Ever over my shoulder, but this is not my decision. I look to Ever, waiting. As the silence presses on the three of us, the sisters in an intangible moment, that damned memory itches at my mind again. Just as Echo's resolve finally breaks, and she steps out of my way and gestures to the door, the vestige of Lennon's voice on that fateful morning pierces through the haze.

"Sayer, after—there will be a ship—"

The words he said to me just before I left him. I remember him charging through the crowd to me this morning, batting people aside with his cane, the panic in his features.

"There will be a ship..."

Echo has barely moved her feet before I am bursting out, grabbing Ever's hand.

"I know where we have to go!" I cry, tugging her toward the door. "I know how we can get out of the city. Come on, before the guards come, we..." I trail off when there is resistance. I halt, already knowing the reason why.

Ever still clutches my hand, but she is turned away from me, staring at her sister. I wait, glancing between the two twins, whose eyes are locked on each other.

Ever and Echo stand there for a few too long seconds. Our time is running out. Only when footsteps sound somewhere far off above us do I tug Ever's hand again.

"We have to go," I whisper, glancing overhead. Ever nods, starts to turn—

"I love you," Echo says, and there are years of heartbreak and oceans of distance in those words.

"Goodbye," Ever answers. As we start to move, she looks back, memorizing her sister's face one last time. Then she turns away and leads me through the narrow opening of the dungeon's door.

Leaving her sister behind.

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CHAPTER FORTY

Soft clicks of boot heels on carpet follow Ever and me around the corner as we dash from the dungeon and sprint to the turn of the nearest hallway. I grab her arm and pull her back against the wall, holding my breath, waiting for the shout announcing we've been spotted. Only after a tense pause do I let my chest deflate, glancing at Ever's half lit face.

"Where should we go?" I ask, but she shakes her head.

"I have no idea. I've been in this palace as many times as you have. The main entrance is back that way, but I don't think the Blood King is stupid enough to leave it unguarded." She gestures back to where we came from.

"We definitely need to get away from this area. It won't be too long until they realize we're gone, even if Echo stays down there."

Ever's hand tightens on my arm, but it's the only reaction she has to her sister's name. "Let's go this direction and try to find a way out. There has to be another exit besides the main door."

I nod and pad down the hall, stealing to the other side to keep out of the clean white moonlight spilling through the windows and across the plush indigo carpet. The silvery light is startling—after a month of nights soaked in scarlet, the brightness of Elue at her full strength almost unnerves me.

We creep along, starting at every rustle of cloth or creak of the castle settling in.

After a number of turns, the gold framed paintings and marble tiled walls all begin to look the same. We climb two sets of spiral stairs, glancing nervously around the curved rail as we go. But no one jumps out at us—no guards' voices ring down from above or below.

Minutes are flashing by, and it is apparent we are hopelessly lost. There won't be much more time until someone notices we are missing or finds Echo in the dungeon alone. I have no idea if we are heading deeper into the castle or closer to escape.

A thought pricks the hairs on the back of my neck. I tap Ever's shoulder. "Why haven't we seen anyone? After the riot, you would think we would see sun guards and bloodhounds patrolling. At least a few."

She shakes her head, but when she looks at me, I can tell by the wild whites of her eyes that the thought unsettles her too. "I don't know. Everything feels so... empty."

"Come here," I say, stealing across the dark hallway until we reach the marble tile on the other side. No moonlight shines through these windows, but when I stand a little taller to peer out, I see a balcony off to our right made of the same white marble, overlooking a garden drenched in shadow.

"Let's try and get out there. Judging by the moon, this window faces south, towards the square. If we get onto that balcony, we should be able to see the doorway and maybe figure out which way to go."

A bob of her head marks her agreement, and on near silent hunter's feet, I steal down the remainder of the tiled edge of the hall. Ever's hand rests on my back as I stop at a door, one which hopefully leads to the room connected to the balcony.

Leaning down so my ear is flush with the crack, I press my face to the floor and listen. There is no sound from inside, no air brushing past to indicate movement.

I signal to Ever, then stand and place my hand on the handle. With the gentlest pressure I can muster, sweat beading in the grove between my shoulder blades at the thought of how exposed we are, I press the lever down.

Thankfully, these hinges have had much better care than the dungeon door—it swings open silently, the room a yawning mouth beyond.

I step inside, Ever following close and pulling the door shut behind us. The soft click resounds like a crack of thunder in the silent room, and we both freeze, waiting to see if someone will rise out of the shadows to catch us.

A few frozen breaths pass, but nothing stirs. My heart is just beginning to come down when Ever’s voice by my ear makes me leap a foot in the air.

“No one is here,” she says, then flinches back from my jump. I place my hand on my chest, trying to find my heartbeat, the side of my tongue aching where I bit it.

“Sorry,” I say, shaking my head. “I didn’t realize you were that close.”

Even in the near blackness, the whites of her eyes glow as she rolls them. “We should go to the balcony.”

A quick dash across the room brings us to the balcony door, which is thankfully unlocked, the bright glow of moonlight outlining its shape in the gloom. I push it open with my back pressed against one wall, Ever on the other side.

Beyond the door and balcony, a garden lurks below. In the shadows thrown by the castle’s bulk, I make out the tops of a few small trees and the vague outline of a winding stone path. Past the treetops the outer palace wall looms, and to the left, there is the edge of the ornate staircase we climbed only this morning. It seems as though days have passed—so much has changed, and yet I am barely a few hours older than the man who stood on those stairs and held hope a false god could bring Ena back.

A few steps bring us out on the stone balcony, blanketed by chill night air.

Our furs and coats are gone, stripped from us when we were thrown in the cells below. All I have on is a sleeveless tunic and breeches, the boots on my feet the only weather appropriate thing I'm wearing. Ever isn't much better off, and so we lean into each other for warmth as we rush to the railing.

Just as I expected, the garden is dark and empty, no patrols winding through the well-manicured flower beds or between neat lines of trees. Ice coats the branches reaching spindly arms to the star flecked sky, their fingers almost brushing the bottom of the second story balcony we stand on.

"There," I say, pointing to the edge of the staircase beyond the wall. "If we leave this room and go right, it looks like a few turns should take us to the front steps."

"There aren't any lights on the stairs, only down in the square," Ever says, narrowing her eyes. I follow them to make out the slow movement of torches far into the courtyard in front of the castle; far enough out we could probably sneak past with ease. "Why aren't there soldiers guarding the front door?"

"Maybe the King doesn't believe his citizens would ever harm him," I scoff, though again something eerie pricks at my mind. "But after the riot tonight..."

"Look," Ever says, stepping away from me and gesturing to the right. Over the wall, between the storied buildings and into the city beyond, a flickering glow casts the sky in orange and smoky gray.

"Fire," I breathe, flinching at the sight. "The rioters set the city on fire?"

"I guess that's where all the sun guards are," Ever says, shrugging. "More cover for us."

"As long as the south side isn't burning," I say, trying to shake off the cold needles of terror threading down my spine. "That's where we need to go."

"What's there?" she asks, but before I answer, a bell tolls from somewhere behind us. Another follows it, the wound on my tongue pulsing as fear spikes my blood. Voices are raised,

and the torches in the square begin to move back towards the castle at a run.

“The alarm,” I say, not bothering to lower my voice. It may take them a while to find us in this random room, but the hallways will be crawling with guards now, the front door swarmed. “What should we do?”

“There’s an escape right in front of us,” Ever says, peering over the balcony. She’s already clambering onto the carved marble railing and pulling energy into her fingers by the time I realize what she means.

My hand runs over the edge of the barrier, noting the sturdy top rail and the slats which let air curl through them.

Ever is already braiding a rope of energy, struggling against the dark currents of the city’s flow. Straining, I ebb to help and am nearly knocked off my feet with the sheer malignance, the dark and tortured energy swirling up veins and arteries. It is stronger than any energy I’ve ever felt. Grappling with the power takes a moment of gritting my teeth, holding tight to the memory of Ever in the forest, telling me how to control it.

With a moan bordering on pain, I stop its pursuit up my arm, leaving it to swirl in angry threads beneath my skin. Between Ever’s practiced hand and the sheer force of my will, we soon have a long vine of rope cast over the railing, knots every few feet along its wispy black length.

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CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Every ounce of control, every thread of my will, goes into holding the rope together.

The energy is a hissing, twisting thing, trying to coil out of my grasp. Though I don't let the traces I keep in my fingertips extend past my knucklebones, they writhe and hiss, trying to seduce me into letting them climb higher in my veins. The pull is strong and hypnotic, but I avoid their temptation by keeping my eyes rooted to the top of Ever's head, focusing on her climbing down below me.

With a small leap, she jumps to the ground, glancing back up to check my progress. I judge the distance, then sigh in relief, letting go of the hateful black energy, the rope dissipating into black mist. The last ten feet are a blur as I fall, rolling when I land and coming up on the balls of my feet.

Ever is already poised to move, waiting for me. I grab her hand and we run, ignoring the garden paths in favor of cutting a direct line through flower beds and manicured lawns to reach the wall.

"This should be easy enough," Ever says, nodding to the stone before us. It is rough hewn with easy footholds.

"It would be, except for that." I nod to the thin line of energy pulsing at the top.

"What is that?" Ever asks, squinting at the wavering line.

"Magical barrier. Kind of like what's surrounding the city lands, to keep ebbers from leaving Toeska," I answer, studying

it. “It usually only works one way, at least that’s what Lennon told me once. And I bet the King wasn’t imagining ebbers would be breaking out of his palace.”

“What if it isn’t?”

“Only one way to find out,” I say, putting one foot up on the wall, then reaching up to find a hand hold.

“Goddess,” Ever mutters beside me, but soon, she is right behind me, scaling the stones at a steady pace.

I reach the peak of the wall first, taking a deep breath as I stare at the barrier. It shimmers with light, much like the flow. Not for the first time since I found out the King’s secret, I wonder how he has the power to control something like this. How he makes magic that traps my kind, keeps them out of some places but keeps them in others, when his magic is the same as ours.

Shaking my head to clear it, I haul myself onto the top of the wall and punch through the barrier.

The magic flows like water over me, my arm pulsing with blue, green, purple light. The top of the wall is wide and flat, maybe five feet across, and the magic extends from the edge of my side about a foot out.

Once my skin touches the other side, there is a searing, stinging pain, not unlike the burn of losing one of my tallies.

“Blood and stars!” I yelp, half falling through the barrier and clutching my arm. In seconds, my whole body is on fire, and I writhe on the stone while Ever crests the top.

“Sayer!” she exclaims, pulling herself up and running right through. The magic seems to pass over her with no trouble, and in seconds, she is kneeling at my side as the burning recedes.

“I’m fine,” I groan, fisting my hand so hard, my fingernails dig into my palm. There are still stinging tingles running up and down my body, but they are less painful, and after a few deep breaths, they are gone almost entirely. I’ve felt the uncomfortable itch crawling beneath my skin whenever I got

close to the barrier surrounding the city in the forest, but I'd never touched the thing. Now I definitely never want to.

"You don't look fine," Ever says, reaching up to check my forehead, still beaded with sweat.

"The barrier hurts on this side," I say between pants as I regain my breath. I rise onto my elbows, and Ever stands and pulls me to my feet. "I doubt I'll be able to go back through that. Did it hurt you?"

"No. Looks like attending holidays with my father's side of the family is out," Ever says, and I give her an incredulous look from under my arm while I wipe my forehead. She just cocks an eyebrow and smiles.

"Let's check and see if your mother's side will host," I say, squinting out over the city proper, trying to decide the best route to find Lennon's house. "If we head further down the wall, we..."

I trail off, all thoughts derailed. The scene below us, in the wide open and near silent square, has me nearly falling forward off the wall.

The entire city courtyard leading up to the grand staircase is littered with bodies.

Blood chokes the street, coagulating in thick pools and viscous rivulets between cobblestones. As far as the eye can see, and even into the alleys beyond, there are corpses strewn here and there. Some have weapons protruding from their bodies—mostly arrows, a sword, an axe in one man's head close to the foot of the wall.

The true horror is the rest of the people—men, women, and children. Every single one with not a wound to be seen, not a fight mark or scratch on their skin. Many have fallen with their back to the palace—trying to run away from the riot, not toward it. And yet they too have dropped dead where they stood, their noses and mouths leaking blood.

Thousands and thousands of people stood in this square today, watching us accept our boons from the King. Citizens, ebbers, everything in between. Now the street is a gristly

mockery of the lively crowd, more than half those people painting the shadows with their blood.

“Goddess,” Ever breathes, reaching out to steady herself on my arm. “What happened?”

“The King took care of the riot,” I answer, a sick sense of *deja vu* coating my stomach. “Like he said he would. It’s not the first time he’s used the city’s magic to quell unrest.”

“The city did this?” Ever asks, horror in every word. I nod, gathering the lump in my throat and swallowing it.

“Yes. The same way it killed my father.”

The combination of pity, horror, and sorrow on her face makes my throat tighten. Luckily I don’t have to respond because she turns to the absolute massacre before her, eyes wide. “Is that what happened here? Because of the riot?”

“Probably,” I say, and suddenly, Ever sways on her feet. She nearly collapses, and I spring to steady her, to keep us both from toppling over the edge.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, bewildered.

“It was me,” she says, voice faint. “This is my fault. My ebbing. I ebbled in front of everyone, and that started the riot.”

“You didn’t have much choice.”

Ever starts to shake her head, but I cut her off, stepping closer, grabbing her chin. “We all have impossible choices to make, Ever. Some have consequences we could never have predicted. But we learn to live with the darkness and pain. Trust me—I know what it’s like. And despite how much you think you deserve the guilt, this is not your fault. This is the fault of the person who made a world in which we had to make that choice.”

Her smile is watery, wavering, but she forces down her guilt and pain. “Okay,” she whispers, and I move my fingers from her face to clasp her hand in mine.

Then we run.



Pockets of unrest still smolder as we sprint through the city, having scrambled across the castle wall and scaled down farther north, away from the stained square. Buildings burn, easily spotted by the smoke and the sounds of fighting. The Blood King must not want to kill all of his citizens tonight—who would be left for the Hours next time Sangua visits? Rather than using the city’s magic like he did in the square, he’s sent his bloodhounds hunting.

The detours we take to avoid the chaos are often long, causing us to go far out of our way and circle back, or climb buildings and jump from roof to roof. Though I’m sure the alert has been put out for our escape, there are not enough sun guards to send after us. At least I hope. It seems the entire holy army is busy trying to keep the city from burning itself to the ground.

Minutes stretch into hours as we slink through alleys and sprint across well-lit cross streets. By the time we reach a familiar road dimly illuminated with stringed firelights, my feet are dragging and my stomach is in knots.

Though I long to return to my house, my own home and precious remnants of my family just tens of feet away, I force myself to turn down a connecting street and flit across the main avenue, Ever on my heels. Grateful Lennon’s shop also opens onto an alley, I take Ever’s hand as we sidle up to the back door.

I knock once, then pause, knocking three more times in short raps. Only then does a horrible thought flicker through my mind—what if Lennon didn’t make it out of the square?

Relief floods through me when the door cracks to the length of the chain holding it closed, and a familiar black eye peers through, taking in Ever and me crouching amongst the garbage cans outside the door.

“Thank the skies,” Lennon murmurs, his voice half concern, half annoyance. “Took you long enough to get here.” His eyes cast around, sorrow piercing my gut when I realize who he’s looking for beside me. I am not the only one the Blood King fooled.

“She’s not here. I’ll explain later,” I whisper. Lennon nods and closes the door again. There is the muffled rattle of the chain sliding free, then he opens the door and rushes us in.

“Hurry,” he cautions as we slip inside. He looks one way down the street, then the other, and shuts the door with a thump.

“Where is she?” he demands, barely giving Ever and me the chance to straighten and shake off the nerves wound tight since leaving the palace wall.

I shake my head, swallow the lump in my throat. How to explain? I’m surprised when another voice speaks the words I cannot.

“She’s gone,” Ever says, looking the old man in the eye. I glance at her, wanting to protest, but she holds up a hand. I am the one who needs help now, and she is giving it to me. “My father lied. He could not bring her back, only reanimate her body long enough to fool everyone into thinking he could. He is no god, just an ebber like us.”

Lennon looks her over with shrewd eyes, studying her. For a heart stopping second, I think he may throw her onto the street. She did just tell him she was the Blood King’s daughter, after all.

But to my surprise, he turns to me, and for the first time in nearly ten years, he wraps me in a hug. The old man barely comes up to my sternum. I’m also surprised when I give in to his embrace, leaning against his shoulders and letting go of the tightness in my chest I didn’t know I’d been holding onto. Though Lennon may not be my father, he is the closest thing to family I have left. And like a child in their parent’s arms, I let go of my strength and my resilience.

“I’m sorry, my boy,” Lennon says as I slump into him, my frame too large for him to hold up fully. Still, the strength of his hands on my back is soothing, the comfort which only comes from complete trust.

“You tried so hard to protect her. You gave up so much. She was lucky to have a brother like you.” The words are a salve, a balm I’ve refused to believe from any other person’s mouth. Isaac, Ahnica, Ever. But this is Lennon, the man who held me after my mother’s death, who looked after us when we lost my dad, who came and took care of Ena when I couldn’t get out of bed for three days when the twins left for the Hours. From this man, I believe it when he says I did my best. That I was a good brother.

“I knew it was too good to be true. When I saw her get up, I knew, but I still wanted to hope. I thought he might still have powers we don’t understand. For the first time, I prayed our false king was not as false as we know him to be.”

I pull back finally, wiping my nose on my sleeve. I open my mouth, trying to process through the welling of grief and relief, but Ever beats me to it again.

“You know the king is not a god?” she asks, her voice husky but firm. Lennon nods.

“The resistance has known for years. Long before you were born, child, we knew the royal line had no bearing from the gods.”

“Then why haven’t you revealed him to everyone?” I ask this time, stunned. All along, Lennon has known this secret? And he is a part of the rebels?

“Because though he is not divine, he is powerful. We lost a great many men the last time we tried to speak up. That was when we lost your father, the day he tried to save a little girl from the street. And your uncle was in the resistance too, joined after your parents got married. He fought right up until his death to try to end the Blood Hours. He was always fighting for you.”

I reel, leaning against the wall of Lennon's entryway. Today, tonight—it's all been too much. I need to lie down, to sit and stare at a wall and picture nothing at all.

“Come, you are tired. There has been too much on this day, too many shocks and revelations.” Lennon gestures to the kitchen, which lies just beyond the small hallway we are crammed into.

“Lennon,” I say, pushing through my stupor. There is too much at stake here—if we are caught, Lennon could be executed. Or worse. We need to keep moving. “You said there would be a ship after. We need to leave. I don't want them to catch us here. They would hurt you.”

Lennon waves me off with a swing of his cane. “This is what the resistance does now—helps people escape. We may not be able to face the King directly, but we still try to help the ebbers of this city.”

My mouth falls open, and though I thought my emotions were spent, anger is hot and bubbling in my throat. “Then why did you not get us out before the Hours? Get Ena out?”

He is already shaking his head before my protest is finished. “There are thousands of ebbers in the city who want to escape. You think there are no other brothers like you, who want to protect their sisters? You think there are no mothers and fathers on their knees, begging for us to take their sons and daughters? I tried, but I am not a high-ranking member. I do not have many at my beck and call, especially as a citizen. I am a transport place only. But I managed to secure you and Ena passage on a ship leaving after the Hours. I don't know what is going to happen now, with the riots and all, but it should still be leaving soon. You and your... friend can be on it if you wish.”

I am still angry, but I am so, so tired. I don't have the strength for hate right now. I barely have anything left at all.

“We will go,” Ever answers for us, and the only sign of the gratitude I muster is to squeeze her hand. She hauls me off the wall, and Lennon beckons us to follow him into the kitchen.

“Eat. Sleep. Take what supplies and clothes you want. And when the sun rises tomorrow, we will take care of the final arrangements.” Lennon stops me before I fully enter the kitchen, catching my shoulder.

“I am so grateful you made it out, Sayer. I prayed to the stars every night asking for you to be safe. Don’t beat yourself up about Ena—even your survival is a miracle I barely dared hope for.”

There is nothing left of myself to give. Instead, I squeeze his shoulder back, beyond words. And I know he understands.

Hours later, full from what food I could force down and finally hydrated, Ever and I curl up to sleep. Our bodies tangle on the mattress Lennon has on the lower floor of his home, a guest room I’ve never been in before. It’s clean and warm, lit by a dim oil lamp in the corner, but I barely care about any of that. The only thing I care about is finally getting to fall asleep cradled somewhere safe, with Ever in my arms, the lies and secrets finally gone between us.

I am grateful to have even that.

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CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Everything around me is fog and warmth.

I burrow deeper into the blankets swaddling me, my limbs heavy and complaining as I roll onto my side. I'm not sure what woke me, but sleep is already beckoning me back to her comforting embrace. Out of habit more than conscious thought, I reach to sling my hand across Ever's waist where she usually curls into me, the curve of our bodies familiar and settling.

My fingers spider across empty sheets.

Immediately, I am fully alert, sitting up in terror. For a wild moment, I don't recognize where I am: the fabric of the sheets is brittle, and the lack of dexterity the mattress gives as I spring up sets my nerves on edge. Only a heartbeat passes while I take in the barren walls lit by a flickering candle beside the bed, the wood floor speckled with dust, the sturdy staircase built of yellowing timber.

Lennon's house. The riot. The escape.

Everything becomes razors and ice, the world snapping into focus. We escaped the palace; we're in Lennon's guest room. Lennon belongs to a rebel group of ebber sympathizers.

Am I sure I'm not still asleep?

But no, this is real. Everything is all too real. I sink back onto the mattress, the springs giving beneath my folded weight as I curl up my legs and press my forehead into my knees. Too much has happened, and a few hours of sleep have not made

them much better. At least I don't feel like I'm going to collapse anymore.

Soft murmuring, like muffled music, floats down from somewhere above me. My fear spikes, until I catch the lilt and fall of voices, the unfamiliar harmony of two familiar people. Lennon and Ever.

Their conversation leaks down the stairs, and before I consider what I am doing, the wooden steps are beneath my feet and I am settling myself onto the second stair from the top. Heat spills from beneath the door, and when I rest my head on the landing, I make out the flickering dance of flames in Lennon's kitchen hearth.

The lingering scent of chamomile and citrus sift across the floorboards, just enough to tell me they've been here a while. Some inner part of me relaxes on instinct; chamomile tea is Lennon's favorite.

A mumbled word tumbles through the crack, and when I turn my ear to listen, Ever's voice follows behind from the table tucked into the alcove by the window.

"Can I ask you something?" Ever says, her voice moving a few inches closer. Leaning over the table. Lennon must nod because she clears her throat before continuing.

"Why, after all these years, were you only able to get Sayer and Ena out now? What changed? A ship after the Hours would not have helped if they never came back. And Sayer has shown me the impossibility of winning."

Lennon sighs. "Unfortunately, it is not so simple. Their father's death in the riot changed everything—not just their family, but how the King's men saw them. The city may deal out its own punishments, but it is not sentient, not all knowing. It sees a crime committed, and the sun guards are alerted. Sometimes it acts on its own, if the command is straightforward. Take Sayer's method of reducing his years, for example. An ebber is killed—a tally is taken. Simple. But tracking someone, like trying to find you two tonight, is different. It senses the laws being broken, not individual people and places."

“So if I went around the corner and stole from a store, could it track me then?” Ever asks.

“Yes and no,” Lennon replies. “It could track that something was stolen, and that you were the one stealing it, but not who exactly you are.”

“But what does the city’s magic have to do with Sayer’s father?”

The soft whack of the cane makes me smile, as does Ever’s small gasp. He’s hit the side of my chair in the same way more times than I can count and made me jump. “Patience, girl. Youths these days, I swear to the skies.” After a pause he deems long enough to teach Ever her lesson, he continues.

“His father was found dead in a square full of openly resistant ebbers. Even though he wasn’t a part of the rebels, they cataloged him as one. Which means they have been watching all his children for years. And when Sayer... well, when his mother died, things got even worse.”

“He told me,” Ever says softly.

“Did he now?” Lennon’s voice is full of surprise. “He’s never told anyone that. Not a soul, unless he told Isaac.”

I cringe into the stairs, splinters scraping against my arms. Lennon is wrong; I did tell Isaac. He knew everything—and confiding in him led to his death at my hands. At least he did not live to see the monster I became.

But Ever has seen the monster; seen the darkness beneath my skin and the bloodstains on my soul. I’ve seen the broken parts of hers. And she has chosen me in spite of everything I am. Maybe because of everything I am.

They sit in silence for a moment. I press my cheek to the cool wood at the edge of the door and try to make them out, but the shadows are too thick beyond the light of the fire.

“Covering up his mother’s death was... hard. Impossible even. I pulled every string I knew with the rebels, but the city knew Sayer had killed her. That was the first tally he lost from killing.”

Black and slick, the dagger of guilt lurches in my stomach. I don't know if I'll ever fully forgive myself for what I did. And now it sounds as though it may be my own fault Lennon couldn't get us out.

"But after, on the same day his father died no less, the rebels wanted nothing to do with us. Their uncle was already gone, and no one would listen to me alone. Now it wasn't just the city watching us—it was the guards too. It was years before my contacts started allowing me to help hide runaways again. And you have to understand I am only a citizen. In the resistance, we are treated like the ebbers are in Toeska. Not to be trusted." Another creak as Lennon adjusts.

"Ahnica, Avaria, Ena, Sayer," he says, his voice softening as each of my siblings' names passes his lips. "They were my children. I would have done anything to keep them safe. I begged, pleaded on my old, decrepit knees for help. The resistance wouldn't do it. When we lost Ahnica and Avaria, I..." He trails off, and for the first time in my life, I hear his voice break.

"Sayer couldn't get out of bed for days. Ena was young—only seven. She didn't understand where they'd gone. When I looked into her eyes the morning they brought what was left of the twin's clothes to us... when I watched grief and guilt nearly eat Sayer alive... I vowed I wouldn't let it happen again. That I would save them. But he had his own plans and got himself into Ena's Hours. I understand better than anyone why he did it—she was a light, that little girl."

"But the resistance changed their minds?" Ever's words are gentle, and Lennon clears his throat.

"They decided to help when it was almost too late," he says, and my heart falls further into the sea of my guilt. I had no idea he'd tried this hard to save us.

"There was a boat. It was set to leave the night before the Hours. I gave the resistance money, took on the most dangerous jobs to earn their trust back. Desperate, I promised them anything they wanted, an open ended offer. Just when I thought all hope was lost, they came to me with the

information about the ship a week before the Hours. I was going to tell Sayer—I'd been afraid to tell him about the resistance until now. You've seen him, how he thinks. He would have joined immediately, and then he would never have gotten out of this city. He always wants to be the hero, to protect people. Someone had to protect him from himself."

"He does love to play the martyr," Ever mutters. Then quieter, "He deserves more than this place."

"He and Ena both did. Two beautiful souls born into a city of blood," Lennon agrees. "But something went wrong—the times changed, things got rearranged. The boat was rescheduled to leave the second night of the Blood Hours festival, whenever that would be. I told Sayer the morning of the Hours—well, I tried. He hadn't been speaking to me for a while at that point. I didn't approve of what he was doing, burning his years, even if it was for Ena. I didn't believe his plan would work—it would just lead to losing both of them. But after the escape plans changed, it was their only hope. To survive. To win."

The room is silent, but tucked into the stairs, my head spins, thoughts rambling and whispering in my skull. Right now, I hate Lennon so much I could scream—for the lies, for keeping me from the resistance my uncle and he were a part of, for not saving my sisters sooner. But in the same breath, the same thought, my love for the old man is threatening to burst my chest. He took care of us, tried to get us out, and loved us like we were his children.

"Is it still leaving tomorrow night, even after everything that happened today?" Ever asks. Always practical.

"I don't know. I'll need to venture out tomorrow, try to find out what I can. The whole city is in lock down right now, but I know who to ask. With any luck, you two will be on a ship tomorrow night."

"Will you tell him? All of this?" Ever asks, and I pause the torrent of thoughts in my head to see what he will say.

"There isn't time. Besides, he has enough heartache already," Lennon answers, and though it stings, I recognize it

for the mercy it is. “He’s been through enough. All I want for him now is to live—to find a life outside these walls, this city. For him to find a spark of happiness, as he and his family were for me.”

“I want that for him too,” Ever says, and all the tension in my body softens, melts into a deep pool of something I didn’t think I was ready to admit yet, even to myself.

“He loves you,” Lennon says simply, and I start. He laughs, probably at the expression on Ever’s face. My whole body tenses, waiting for her reaction. “Easy, child. Don’t be afraid of it. You love him too. Don’t take it for granted—finding love in this harsh world is a precious thing.”

“You love him, and yet you want him to leave,” Ever says, the accusation not doing enough to cover the embarrassment in her voice.

“I am an old man,” Lennon says. “Sayer is young. And as we said before, he deserves more than this place. Even if it hurts us, these are the things we do for the people we love. We let them go, or keep them close, or save them from themselves even at the cost of our own desires.”

Ever is quiet, the crackling of the embers the only sound. My heart flips between fear and hope, the pause of her silence as vast as the sky between stars.

The squeal of Lennon’s chair legs on the floor and the tap of his cane on the ground warn me my time for eavesdropping is up. I slip down the stairs and back into bed, diving under the covers and arranging my limbs across the pillows just as a waft of warm air comes through the opening door. A few footsteps and a moment later, Ever’s warm form molds to my back, pressing her voluptuous body against my spine. Her arm snakes over my waist and comes to rest on my chest, right over my heart. I try to calm it, to breathe deeply as if in sleep.

Kisses pepper the back of my neck, then drift to the exposed, shirtless skin between my shoulder blades as Ever settles against me. My racing heart must give me away because she asks into the quiet dark, “Sayer?”

“I’m awake,” I admit, flipping over so I face her. In the dim light, she is more shapes and heat than a true form, pressed against the length of me like she needs all her body to touch mine.

She doesn’t say anything, reaching up to trace my face; the curve of my forehead, the planes of my cheeks. Leaning into the trail of fire in the wake of her touch, I close my eyes, trying to steady my breathing.

When her hands slip down to my collarbone, below my shirt, traces whorls along my ribs and circles the bones of my hips, I might die under the heat of her touch. Unable to hold myself back for a moment longer, I capture her mouth with mine, putting every word I have and haven’t said in the last few hours into the seeking need of my lips and the scrape of my teeth on her tongue.

For a handful of breaths, nothing exists but the press of our bodies and the soft cries from her mouth. Muted candlelight casts shadows across half her face, one side dancing with light. We pause a moment, a whisper apart, searching each other’s eyes. Seeing each flaw and darkness and strength and hope—nothing hidden, nothing secret. Accepting each piece, and the pains and joys that come with them.

After, when we are tangled in each other, body and soul, and my mind has started to drift towards peaceful black, Ever’s mouth presses to the soft part of my throat again.

“I love you.” I sense the movements of her lips more than hear the words as she whispers them into my skin. “I love you, Sayer.”

Once a few long moments pass, her breathing deepens. As she sleeps curled around me, I let go of everything else in my head to try out a new phrase on my tongue.

“I love you too.”

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CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

“I don’t like it,” I say, the thud of my boots on wooden floors echoing around the basement chamber.

“I’m sure he’s fine,” Ever assures me, but one glance at her face tells me she is worried too.

“He’s been gone for too long.” *Thud. Thud.* I can’t stop pacing.

Lennon has been gone for hours—much, much longer than it should have taken to visit his contact. He said the man lived on the eastern side of the city, across the main avenue leading from the gates to the palace. Despite the chaos, it’s not a long walk. An hour at most, even for an old man. It’s now been four, and the sunlight which glowed under the door above us has been gone for at least two.

“Maybe the resistance had a lot to catch him up on. Or he is having trouble finding his contact. There are a million perfectly reasonable explanations for why he’s been gone this long.”

“And a million more that mean something is terribly wrong,” I mutter. As I pass her once again, Ever snags my arm and pulls me down onto the bed.

“Sit down. You’re driving me mad.”

Huffing, I flop down alongside her, then fall back onto the bed. Every muscle in my body is tense and strained.

“If he’s dead, I don’t know how we are going to get out of here,” I say.

“He’s *fine*,” Ever assures me. “And we will find a way out. All we have to do is go up the river. Swim maybe. That’s where the boundary is permeable.”

I shake my head, knowing the truth of it. I hold up my hand, splaying my fingers to show the tattoo branded on the webbing. “Not for me. This will stop me cold, probably set my hand on fire if the barrier on the palace wall was any indication. I won’t be able to cross unless this is nullified somehow. Lennon said his contact would know what to do. Without him...”

Ever lies back with me, her wild hair fanning around her like rays of liquid night. She turns her head, looks at me, then shakes it slightly. “Come on, Say. You survived the Blood Hours, for Goddess sake. We already did the hard part. A simple escape should be nothing to you.”

“I very much doubt that was the hard part.”

She swats at me, and despite myself, I smile when I catch her fingers between my hands. Her tongue pokes out as she wrestles her hand away from mine, laughing a little when I try to catch it again. “You really are the most pessimistic person I know.”

Somewhere overhead, the front door slams closed, and the sound of hurried, hobbling footsteps aided along by the cracking of a cane scurry across the floor.

“Lennon!” I shout, shooting out of bed. I take the stairs two at a time and fling the door open, the handle taking a chunk out of the wall behind it.

“Sayer,” Lennon gasps, stopping in the kitchen doorway to put his hands on his knees. He is spattered in blood.

“Are you hurt?” I ask, rushing to his side and nearly picking him up. I drag him across the floor, and Ever is there with a chair. I kneel before him after easing his body down, looking for the source of the blood, a wound or a cut.

“Not... my blood,” he gasps out, the words coming between shaky breaths. He coughs violently, the spasms wracking his body, and I grab the handkerchief out of his pocket and hold it to his mouth. His hand covers the back of mine, and when we both pull away, there is some of his blood staining the white silk.

“My god Lennon, you can’t be running like that. Your body can’t withstand it,” I snap, aghast at the red speckled cloth in my hand. “You’re going to make your lungs explode.”

“No time... for... that now,” Lennon says, another cough erupting from his chest. I hand him the handkerchief again, but he ignores it, reaching past my outstretched hand to grasp my chin between surprisingly strong fingers. “You must... go. They are...”

He trails into another coughing fit, covering his face with his elbow. I touch his arm, my other hand supporting his body. “Who? What happened?”

Lennon straightens, tries to push past the obvious pain. “My contact... I waited for them in the usual place. They never came. Went to their house... door was open. He was dead.” He pats his pocket with a trembling hand, comes out with a small package and a folded piece of paper. “Found this in a secret drawer.”

Ever’s expression hardens into the calculating look I know is her survival mode, gripping the table as she leans towards Lennon. “They were dead? Who killed them? The sun guards?”

Lennon nods and thrusts the package into my hands. He drops my chin, using all his strength to curl my fingers around them. “Go. You must go now. They are... they are coming.”

“What?” I say, my mind not able to keep up, or maybe refusing to. “Lennon, we can’t go. The ship—”

“Leaves four hours before dawn,” Lennon finishes for me, cutting me off. “You must go. The sun guards... will be here soon.”

“I won’t leave you!” I cry, pushing off the ground.

“I will be... fine,” Lennon stares up at me beseechingly. “They are not looking for me and don’t know you’re here. I’m just an old man. I will change before they get here. But you need to go now, before they get any closer.” He’s regained some of his breath, his composure becoming more sure. “The note explains how to nullify your ebber mark. Go.”

Ever is around the chair in a heartbeat, catching my hand. “We have to—”

“No!” I roar, wheeling on her. She doesn’t shrink back, standing with hands on her hips.

“They are coming. We can’t take him.” She glances back at Lennon, and he nods, bracing himself on the table to stay upright. “Come with me, now. Please.” Her hand extends towards me, fingers open and encouraging, waiting for my own to find their place.

I stare at her hand, then beyond her to the man who has been like a father, a brother, a friend. The only family I have left. Though I didn’t think it was possible, what is left of my heart breaks again.

“Lennon,” I moan, my voice catching.

“It’s okay, my son,” Lennon says, locking eyes with me. “Go. Live and be happy. I can handle this. I will be fine, and someday, I will find you.”

We both know he is lying, but my tongue is too twisted up to say it.

A crashing knock booms from the front door, a stern voice issuing an incomprehensible command from the other side.

“The back door,” Lennon says, rising to his feet. He stumbles but catches himself on his cane, sparing a final glance at us. “Go now! I will distract them, keep them here as long as I can.” He throws a long house coat from a nearby chair over his sullied clothes, securing it tight around the middle to hide the blood.

“Come on,” Ever says, and steeling myself against the pain, I finally grab her hand. She pulls me along, and soon, we are flying through the door, into the black-slicked alley and

away from the last member of my family as he stands in the doorway of his kitchen, watching me leave for the final time.

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CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

My feet must have wings as we fly down the streets, dodging crushed vendor carts and chunks of stone broken off nearby buildings during the riots. The soles of my boots collect glass along the way, the shards creating grooves which unbalance me with each step.

“This way,” I say as we slide through an intersection of back alleys, only caring about putting distance between the sun guards and us. *And Lennon*, I think to myself. Though my heart squeezes, I force the thought down, push away the tears threatening the backs of my eyes. There was no time for a proper goodbye.

I recognize where we are now—this alley will take us northeast, closer to the docks and away from the city gate. Back towards the palace, too, but it can’t be helped if we are going to use the river to escape.

“We need to hide,” Ever says. “Read this note before we get too close to the palace. Take care of your mark before we hit the river.”

“Right,” I say, nodding.

Directly ahead, before the alley curves sharply west, a building sits half crumbling from where the mob or the sun guards ripped away the wooden supports under the second story overhang. Though it looks abandoned, we pause in the partially caved-in doorway to listen. When it’s apparent that whoever lived here is long gone, I slip inside and pull Ever with me.

We huddle behind a half wall of stone, the sky above visible through some holes in the ceiling going all the way to the second story. I shudder to think what kind of magic made those holes—did the ebbers try and fight back?

With the cloud shuttered moon and faint starlight spilling through the mangled roof to guide me, I unfold the note Lennon gave us. Ever reads over my shoulder, and I squint to make out the words inked on the paper in a scratchy, hurried hand.

L.

Fishes swim faster than we thought. One, two, three, four, all before dawn. The Light God punishes ebbet blasphemers. Burn them away. I fear I may meet Nidaos soon—
RUN

The last word is scrawled along the bottom, hurried, afraid. The top is obviously in code, and I am thankful Lennon had time to at least tell us that much.

“Four before dawn,” I say, glancing at the shards of sky visible through the stone. “Dawn is at 6 o’clock in the morning. The boat must leave at 2am.”

“What does the rest of it mean?” Ever asks, eyebrows crinkled.

“I don’t know.” I am as baffled as she is. And the only man who holds the answers to the question is far behind us.

“Maybe open the package,” Ever says. “We might understand more then.”

I nod, pocketing the note and plucking out the parcel. Plain looking brown paper covers the outside, but it is weighty in my hand, hinting at something substantial. The paper is sealed with raw, unstamped red wax, which reminds me sickeningly of coagulating blood.

“This better be worth everything Lennon went through to get it,” I growl as I shred the paper, breaking the seal. Beneath

the wrapping is a box of black velvet, small copper hinges holding it shut.

Inside, resting in an imprint of slippery cloth perfectly formed to its shape, is a metal rectangle. Silver etchings cover the outside, filigree and leaves reminiscent of the kind seen around the city gate, or on the palace railing, though there is not a speck of gold on this.

Ever's gasp startles me so badly, I nearly fumble the silver rectangle out of my hand.

"By the Dark Goddess!" I snap, grasping the package's content firmly between my fingers. "I almost dropped it!"

"Do you know what this is?" The awe in her voice immediately drains my anger away.

"Do you?" I ask, turning to her. I hold out the silver thing, and she appears almost reverent when she takes it.

"This is an ebbsink," she says, holding it delicately, like it might break apart in her grasp.

"An ebb-what?" I ask, cocking my head. The faint starlight refracts from the silvered surface, brightening the cast flowers and arched metal swirls.

"An ebbsink," Ever repeats, laying it flat on one palm. With the other hand, she pulls in a thin wisp of gray-red light, hissing as it spiders up her fingers.

"What are you doing?" I hiss, but she shakes her head at me.

"These hold energy," she explains, touching her finger to a small indentation I hadn't noticed before in the side of the rectangle. The spot is hidden amongst the whorls of leaves and metal work, but when Ever's finger makes contact, the color bursts from her and races along the arches and spirals, filling them with magical light. "Any ebber can place magic into this, then use it later. You can even put it in contact with an object, and it affects whatever it's touching without prompting."

I'm lost for words, watching while she pushes the last of the energy she ebbled into the ebbsink and turns it in her hand.

It pulses with a soft, gray light, the stabs of red racing along the flowers and whorls. “They are insanely rare. We have one in all of Bismaesa, and it is nowhere near as fancy as this one. It’s a great way to store heat. My people often use it to help those with hypothermia after a near drowning. You saw how unpredictable ebbed heat is. Using an ebbsink is much safer. It’s where I got the idea for the balls of heat I made in the forest, once you suggested it...”

Something in my mind clicks. I am no longer listening to Ever. I pull the paper back out of my pocket and stare at the words scrawled there in code by a desperate hand who knew he was about to die.

The Light God punishes ebber blasphemers. Burn them away.

Burn them away...

“Look!” Now it’s her turn to start as I shove the note at her. “Burn them away!”

“What?” she asks, looking from me to the note. I shove the paper at her until she takes it and then spread my hand open to expose the tattooed E to the pearly blue starlight.

“Burn the ebbers away. That’s what the code says,” I say, pointing to the words. “This E marks me as an ebber. If we burn it away, maybe the barrier won’t be able to tell I am an ebber any longer. And you just said that thing holds heat.”

Ever looks between me and the ebbsink, her mouth falling open. She winces, turning the metal rectangle over in her hands. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? Why are you sorry?” I say, my alarm rising. But she just shakes her head, burnished ebony hair reflecting a spangle of colors as the ebb magic eddies and spins through the metal in her hand.

“Because this is going to hurt. A *lot*.”



Back pressed to the wall, one hand braced on Ever's shoulder, I grit my teeth in preparation for the pain as she sets the ebbsink against the webbing between my fingers. It still pulses with gray and red and black in what would probably be considered a beautiful pattern if it weren't about to sear off my skin.

Ever is straddling my legs, a fact I'm focusing on to distract myself. But even with her body close and supple against me, I still dread the pain to come.

"Hold still," she mutters, snagging my wrist with the hand not holding the ebbsink. I glance at the thing dubiously, both grateful and wishing we hadn't found it after all.

"Will this work?" I ask her, and she scowls.

"How should I know? But it's the best chance we've got." She rolls her eyes to emphasize her irritation with me, adjusting her grip. "Are you ready?"

"No," I say through clenched teeth, closing my eyes. I try to focus on the sway of her hips as she balances over me, take in her floral scent as her hair blows in the night breeze. Try to focus on anything but the cold metal pressing into the delicate webbing of my right hand, my weapon hand, where the tattoo mars the pallid, rose-tinged skin. "But do it anyway."

Ever's breath hitches, a glow beyond my eyelids as she ebbs in the magic to push through the ebbsink, the heat. We thought it might be better if it was already in contact with my tattoo when it turned hot, less painful for me.

We were wrong.

The searing, rippling agony is like nothing I've ever felt before. Shards of heat tear through my skin, shredding my nerves and my muscles and my bones. Faintly, in some distant part of my mind, I recall the tally marks burned like this when they disappeared—but this is something different, something

so much more intense, the tally removal might have been a bee sting.

I can't help it—I scream. Ever clamps a hand down over my mouth, pinning me down with her strong legs and riding out the spasms as I writhe. There is more burning below it too—a searing sensation traveling across my hand, spidering up my veins. The smell is awful, burned flesh and charred meat and a tang I can't quite place that somehow reeks like magic.

After what feels like hours, the spasms slow, my muscles uncoil. The agony recedes, though not much—my hand still aches and throbs with pain.

“Done,” Ever says, pulling the wretched ebsink away from my fingers. Every inch of my hand where the metal touched is bright, flaming red, so deep, it's taken off every layer of skin and gone straight down to the muscle. I blanch, fighting off the urge to vomit, and look away before I lose control of my stomach.

“Think that did the trick?” I say, panting and trying to catch my breath. I am careful to only breathe through my mouth, to avoid the smell of my ruined hand assaulting my nose, but I gag again when I realize it lingers in the air. The taste of my own burning skin on my tongue.

“I sure hope so,” Ever says, climbing off me and using my good hand to pull me to my feet. As soon as I rise, the air is already clearer, a breeze carrying away more of the smell up here as it whistles through the holes in the ruined walls. Without the stench assaulting me, I take a chance to glance down.

“I'm never going to be able to wield a weapon in this hand,” I say in horror, staring at the burnt flesh.

“Now that the tattoo is gone, maybe I could heal you?” Ever asks.

“Goddess, please try,” I say, letting out a shaky breath as I hold my mauled hand out to her. “But if the damned mark comes back, you're going to have to tie me up to burn it again.”

“With pleasure,” Ever says with a wink, already gathering a pool of energy in her veins. The heat rushing to my cheeks is at odds with the coolness encircling my wound. I sigh in relief as the flesh knits back together, the touch of Ever’s magic heady and bright.

It isn’t until the energy begins to fade, until I look down, that my throat catches on the strangeness of the sight.

“My tattoo is gone,” I say. I turn my hand this way, then that, letting the starlight steal over it and double check there is no longer a black E somewhere in the newly healed skin. It is as if the mark was never there—as if I was not born in this horrible place, as if I’d never been branded by the corruption of this city at all. I glance to Ever. “I’ve always had it. As long as I can remember.”

“You’ll never have it again,” Ever says gently, and though my hand feels strange and foreign, I smile at her. Maybe I can actually leave my old life behind.

“Come on, it’s nearly midnight,” Ever says, reaching for me. Her thumb skims over the bare webbing between my fingers. “I like you like this. All prettied up. Maybe you should let me heal all your scars.”

“You like me better a little rough,” I say with a wink, and her answering smirk twists her lips in that way that makes my heart skip a beat, makes me forget the next impossible task we have before us.

“You know me too well, Sayer Terrin,” she says, eyes sparkling.

Something occurs to me then, and I glance back down at my hand. Taking a deep breath, I flex my fingers.

There is no pain—there is no pull.

There is nothing at all.

“Blood and stars,” I gasp, closing my hand. I try again with my other hand, tugging and pulling, but no energy spills into my fingers. I look up into her shocked brown eyes. “I can’t ebb.”

She swallows, letting out a long sigh. “Well shit.”

“Yeah, that about covers it,” I gasp, attempting to ebb again with my other hand. “Not even with my left.”

I strain my muscles, clenching my joints, trying to pull even an ounce of energy into my veins. Though nothing physically happens, there’s a stirring like something familiar—but in a heartbeat, it is gone, no more than a wishful resonance in my blood.

“I guess you’ll have to go back to good old metal weapons,” Ever says, but under her teasing, there is an edge. Inside, I am being jerked between shock and horror, elation and relief. Some part of me always wanted this—to get rid of the curse in my veins, to live a normal life. But that part of me died sometime in the last twenty-eight days, and now I ache for my connection to the flow, the ebbing magic which brought me and Ever together, the gift which has saved my life again and again.

Ever steadies me, searching my eyes. I don’t know if she sees the extent of my inner turmoil, but in response, she reaches below the waistband of the loose pants she chose from Lennon’s basement, fishes around by her thigh, and comes up with a sheathed dagger. “Take this.”

“How did you manage to hide that?” I ask, a grin sneaking onto my face in spite of everything. We haven’t had weapons since the guards searched us before throwing us in the Blood Palace dungeon. With another pang, I realize Isaac’s dagger is gone. But in light of all that has been lost, it seems insignificant.

“It pays to have thick thighs sometimes,” she says with a breezy wink.

I sigh, shaking my head to rid myself of the images the mention of her thighs calls to mind, to clear my head of my circling, biting thoughts. We can’t change what’s happened—and I’d rather lose my magic and escape than keep it and spend even one more night inside this wretched city. “If everything goes to plan, I won’t need to ebb tonight anyway.”

“But where should we go for now? It’s still too early for the boat,” Ever says.

I pull up a mental map of the city—where could we hide near the docks with easy access to the river? After surveying the familiar routes, I have an idea.

“Let’s go,” I say, and without hesitation, Ever follows me as we steal together out of the broken building and into the night.

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CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Here at the center of Toeska, the river is a lazy, swollen thing. Heated by the city's magic, the water teems with life—fish race by in short bursts of bubbles, and algae clings to the walls of the marina like a living curtain, pulled by the current. Boats are spaced evenly along the mooring pillars, bobbing to block out the starlight with their masts as they sway.

Inside the ramshackle half-open storage shed Ever and I are crouched in, the night air has no mercy. Unlike the water, there is no warmth here to keep the frost from our fingers or the ice from crusting the corners of our mouths.

“You’d think with a whole sacrifice worth of ebber’s magic to steal every year, the king could keep the buildings warm too,” Ever grumbles, shifting as her knees pop. I’m tempted to sit down, my own thighs screaming, but I want to be able to run at a moment’s notice.

“That would require him to actually care about us,” I say, trying to keep the trembling from the frigid night out of my voice. I hadn’t even been this cold in the Hours.

“I’ve got some ideas on how to warm up,” Ever says, and though there is a teasing to her words, it’s overridden by the look of misery on her face.

“I’m sure you do,” I counter, balancing myself on my toes as I sling my arm around her shoulders. “But now isn’t the time.”

“On the boat then?” She cocks her eyebrow, and I have to roll my eyes.

“Let’s try not to die first, and then we’ll see.”

The sky peers back at me as I glance beyond the roof, trying to determine exactly how far the moon has moved. Elue is beginning to set behind her veil of clouds, a rounded edge sometimes peering through the thin wisps as patterns of gray shift around her. Is it almost two yet? The trek across the city took nearly an hour, and the last few have been spent huddled in this shack, watching the marina.

“How are we going to know which boat?” Ever whispers.

“Probably whichever one is being crewed at two in the morning,” I quip, and she rolls her eyes at me.

Resounding and deep, the chime of a bell strikes close by. I lean around the boxes of fishing equipment to spy the clock tower lording over the marina. It’s a sturdy thing, all brick and arching metal work, rising out of the river’s center.

One bell tolls, then another. Silence settles over the water once again.

“Well, it’s two,” Ever says, inching up to peek around the crate with me. “Any signs of life out there?”

I am about to answer when a globe of golden light flashes into existence, chasing the shadows away from the worn dock. The illumination falls on a small boat, its prow shaped into a simple, sharp curve that casts a thin shadow onto the dark water below. The tall sides, probably hiding a deep seating area, are lacquered in orange and green, bright sun bursts painted in a repeating pattern on the sides. Straight through each side rest numerous oars, their tips hanging high out of the water while the boat tugs gently on the line mooring it close to the dock.

“That might be us,” I say, nodding my head towards the shining globe, what I recognize now as a lantern hanging behind the glass of the small cabin towards the back.

“It’s a Larene ship,” Ever whispers, tugging a stray fishing net out of her way to get a better look. “The nation next to

Bismaesa. We trade with them every summer. I've been to their capital city, Timaya, hundreds of times.”

“Good. You'll know how to get us home once we get out of here then,” I say.

A sly, teasing grin slides onto her face. “I'll finally teach you how to swim.”

“Haven't you dunked me into enough bodies of water?” I ask, trying to be serious, but a smile bubbles up anyway. In that instant, I see it again—our possible future. And we are just one boat ride away from obtaining it.

Ever's eyes dart from me, the white around the amber completely visible as they widen, settling over my shoulder. I wheel around before she says anything, then nearly tackle her into the deeper recesses of the shack when the first sun guard emerges from the gloom.

Their footsteps rattle the wooden walls of the shack, reverberating through my teeth. Ever pulls the fishing net over us, and even though there are holes in the textured knots, it gives us some measure of cover amongst the already concealing boxes and crates.

I don't dare turn my head. Ever doesn't dare to move us further. They are so close, I hear their breath, smell the pitch coming from their quivers. Pitch must mean—

I open my mouth, intending to breathe the words into Ever's ear, but she places a hand over my lips and shakes her head. Her eyes never leave the figures moving beyond the protection of our shed, their footsteps marching down the dock. They are too close to risk anything at all.

Screaming reverberates through my mind, all my hopes and dreams and our only escape plan going up in flames. I can nearly taste the panic in my mouth, a thick coating of ashes and blood.

We should warn the resistance members on the boat, the ones who were willing to risk everything to get us out of Toeska. We should have carried Lennon with us, tied him to my back if we had to. I should have never let Ena die.

Regret is a river capped in thick ice, keeping me trapped in the depths of despair. All we can do is wait as the sun guards stomp by, ready to burn our last hope to cinders and soot.

From far away, a voice rings out from one of the soldiers. “Search the ship!”

“Blood and gods-damned stars,” I swear under my breath.

“Here,” Ever hisses, scrambling back delicately so as not to upset any of the buoys or rolls of fishing line behind us. We move carefully out from under the net, not wanting to make any sound to attract attention, then duck around another crate. Grateful for the concealment, I turn and peer over the top of the box.

The soldiers are thorough, combing the ship completely.

Another voice floats downstream to us as a man approaches the one soldier who stayed ashore, probably a captain. “There’s nothing on this ship, sir.”

“Then how did the damn light come on?” he growls, shaking his head. “Alright men, gather back. We’ll keep searching the docks. You four that way, you four with me. If you find anyone, shoot to injure if you can, shoot to kill if not. The King prefers them alive.”

The guards split; half taking off upriver while the captain and his few men turn towards us. My eyes follow them, not breathing while they tromp past our hiding place and disappear as quickly and noisily as they came.

“Goddess,” Ever breathes, sinking back onto her heels and then sitting fully down onto the floor. “I thought they were going to burn the ship to the ground.”

“Do you really think no one is there?”

“Only one way to know. Let’s go.”

Slinking and sneaking, we steal towards the water’s edge and across the open space of the dock. I hate the exposure, my back the perfect target for arrows and axes, but no twang of bows or shouts break the silent night. The boat is trickier, requiring us to hold the rope steady for each other and cross

the ever-moving space between the wooden dock and the deck. The ship rocks and sways under our feet, already making me queasy. With a quick hop, we disappear from the top deck, jumping down into the hollowed out middle with another roll of the ship which sends my stomach heaving.

“I’ll be sick within the first few feet of our voyage at this rate,” I grumble, and Ever shushes me.

“What? The guards aren’t back yet,” I say, peeking over the top deck. The sides of the boat block the shore from view, but there is no thump of boots.

“Be quiet,” Ever hisses, pulling me down until we are even with the rows of benches set below the protruding oars. “Listen.”

It takes a few minutes, but after what seems like an eternity, there is a settling in the boat, a light creaking, and a phantom sound in the wind. I still, listening harder, straining to hear when it comes again—a soft, muffled movement this time, like cloth against wood.

“What—” I start, but the rasp of wood sliding against wood snaps my head around. From the far end of the boat, near the stern, a small section of the planks have moved aside. A shine flashes as the boat tugs at its mooring, pulling the prow up just enough so starlight and the glint of the globe from the cabin above refract on something in the hole’s depths.

There is a pair of eyes staring back at me.

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CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Already I am loosening Ever's dagger from my belt, the hilt cold against the new skin on my hand. I hiss at the eyes watching, trying not to let any trepidation waver my voice.

"Who's there?"

"What is your name?" It is not the voice I expect, but lighter, more full. Feminine and brisk.

"Sayer Terrin," I say, moving protectively in front of Ever. "And she isn't Ena Terrin, but that's who was supposed to be here."

Ever's gasp has me turning, already starting to pull her behind me from whatever new threat we are facing, but the voice barks out again, tone quiet. "Don't move."

"There is a blade against my back," Ever says, eyes catching mine from my frozen half turn.

My first instinct is to yank her away, but I don't know how fast the wielder will move. And if he's faster than I am, he'll slice into her spine.

"What the hell?" I whisper, not daring to move fully but shifting my gaze back to the watching eyes.

"Who sent you?" the voice asks.

"Lennon Ireston," I spit, angry and afraid and exhausted. "Is this the resistance boat that is supposed to take us out of here?"

“We were told the girl would be Ena Terrin,” the woman in the boat says. “Not whoever this is.”

“She’s with me, gods dammit,” I say. “We escaped from Lennon’s house just as the guards came down on him. His contact is probably already dead, leaving no way to alert the resistance that my sister died in the Hours.” I swallow, the lump in my throat rising, but now is not the time to let myself dwell on Ena.

The eyes glint, but ever so slowly, the board slides back further. From between the narrow gap, a woman climbs out, a small one at that, with bronze dusted skin and dark hair. This woman can’t be more than four foot eleven, but she stalks up, moving smoothly over the swaying deck. She is dressed in cotton and leather and simple brown fleece, the cloth hanging about her, leather matching the color of the orange cap she has tied around her skull to keep her hair out of her eyes.

Her inspection is thorough—she stares into my eyes, nodding to herself as if she recognizes their gray depths. She plucks my hand from my side and holds my fingers apart, staring at the webbing empty of a tattoo. It takes every bit of my control not to wrest it back from her. “You got rid of the tattoo. Good.”

“We still have the ebbsink,” Ever says, keeping very still.

“And the note,” I add. But the woman doesn’t ask for them.

“You’re you. I knew your uncle. A good man—you could nearly be his twin.” Before I have time to comment, or ask the million questions surfacing in my head, she drops my hand and spins around, then taps her heel twice against the nearest bench. “Alright you lazy dogs. Let’s go. Ship’s to sail in two minutes, no more no less.”

All at once, the walls open with raspy sighs, and crew members slide from narrow spaces inside the hull. A squeeze at my elbow tells me Ever has been freed from the threat of the dagger, and I pull her protectively into me; though she is already ebbing her own weapon and whirling towards her would have been assailant.

“Put your knives away,” barks the first woman, stepping between Ever and the burly crewman who climbs out of a slightly larger compartment in the ship. Unsure if the command is for him or Ever, I look between them, but he sheathes the blade immediately. Ever hand twitches like she might stab the man anyway, but the woman holds up a hand. “No one here is gonna hurt you, girl. Sorry for the threat, but this resistance is worth a whole lot more than your life. Had to make sure the two of you could be trusted.”

The woman motions towards the empty bench at the back as the men and women of the crew settle into position.

“Who exactly are you?” I ask. Ever pauses mid-step, her gaze swiveling from me to the woman as if she is fighting internally between telling me to shut up so we can get moving and her own curiosity.

“A friend, apparently,” the woman says. “Name’s Moira, though, if that’s what you’re askin’. Captain of the Marooner.”

“Just leave it and let’s get out of here,” Ever says to me, shaking her head.

“You should listen to her, boy. Smarter than you.” Moira cocks her head. “Not sure why you’re worth getting out over all the others in this place, but I guess the resistance owes you after everything Cam Vaughan, your uncle, did. And Mr. Ireton too. Good men,” she says. “You’re Cam’s sister’s son, rig—”

“Come sit with me,” Ever says, stepping forward to grab my hand and effectively cutting the captain off.

“Fine,” I grind out, trying to forget the words I knew Moira had been about to say. I turn and follow Ever down the boat’s aisle, the captain’s eyes on my back the whole time.

“You deserve to get out as much as anyone else,” Ever whispers to me as we sit on the too small bench near the front of the ship, half of my ass hanging off the edge.

“You and I both know that isn’t true,” I say back.

“Goddess, Sayer, will you quit with the self-deprecation? Next comment like that, I’m throwing you overboard. And I

will not pull you out of this river twice.”

I open my mouth to retort, but Moira’s light tenor rings out from the top deck, where she crouches low to the deck above us.

“Alright crew. We haul out all slow and gentle like.”

“Won’t the guards see us go by? A few of them went downriver,” Ever asks the captain, keeping her voice low.

“We’re scheduled to leave, have all the papers,” Moira says, reaching into her pocket.

“The soldiers were obviously looking for a ship leaving around this time. Are you sure those papers are still good?”

Moira gives Ever a scathing look. “Would you rather sit and wait for them to come back to check?”

With an exhale, Ever sits back against the wooden hull and crosses her arms.

“Now that we’re done being questioned by the Toeska dregs,” Moira stands a little higher, peering over the rail in the direction of the river’s current. She strides off, disappearing from view, and I crane my neck to see her. The golden light spilling over the edge of the upper deck is extinguished abruptly. She reappears a moment later, a frayed rope in her hands. “Take us out of here.”

As one, the crew begins to row. The ship glides smoothly away from the dock and cuts through the water with almost no sound.

The worst part is the ship’s movement—even though there is barely a ripple, each stroke of the oars pulls the boat forward with a lurching motion which sloshes my stomach with bile.

“Slow the rows,” Moira hisses, and as one, the crew retracts the wooden paddles from the water with almost a creepy synchronicity.

We are cruising, floating down the river freely, with no guidance at all. With the light snuffed, only the stars and cloaked moon provide a feeble, silvered illumination to our held breaths.

First, we hear the voices. It's easy to pull the guard leader's sharp bark out of the night air, snapping at his companions to keep searching.

Second, comes the shout. Despite pulling our oars, dousing the lights, being completely silent, we've been spotted.

Third, we hear the twang of a bow, smell the burning pitch, and everything is on fire.

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CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Well, not quite everything.

Most prominent of the things burning is Ever's hair. An arrow makes a perfect arc into the ship and lodges right into the wood above her head, the wispy tendrils sticking from her scalp catching fire immediately.

"Goddess damn it!" Ever shrieks, dropping to the floor between the benches and smothering small flames licking down her head. I drop too and gaze in horror as the ship's wall flares with fire.

"Ever!" I say, glad to see she's doused the sparks, though the air still smells like pitch and singed hair.

"Bail in!" Moira shouts from somewhere above, and a few crewmembers rush to the top deck, sprinting to catch the buckets the captain tosses from the side of the cabin. I stand and move towards the stairs at the back of the below deck, but Ever catches my hand and yanks me half off the steps.

"What—" I start, but the snap of a bowstring sounds from the shore. One of the men on the deck right above us gives a cry, then he and his still full bucket crash over the edge and nearly down on our heads. We both run, crouching to avoid the other arrows, but the volley goes wide and lands with a hiss of steam in the river.

When I glance back, it's obvious the man who fell is dead. His fellows don't spare a glance at their companion—gritting their teeth and avoiding looking at him, they stride to the edge,

toss their meager water buckets on the still growing flames, then go back to the side of the boat for more.

“We should help them,” I say, looking at the ladder again.

“Not possible,” Ever gasps out, pointing to the other side of the ship. Another arrow has landed, charring the wood. And spreading with surprising ferocity across the lacquered planks.

“The paint is aiding it,” she breathes, and from the moment I realize what she means, I know this ship is not going to make it out of the city in one piece. It is doomed to become scraps of charred wood floating in the current, and the occupants inside will either be captured or die.

“We have to go overboard,” I say. Ever stares at me incredulously.

“You don’t even know how to swim!”

“I’ll figure it out. Do you have a better idea?” I snap, casting around wildly for some other option and coming up with nothing.

I’m not sure whether Moira’s heard us over the shouting and the crackling of the paint as the flames hungrily pounce on the lacquer, or if she’s just come to the same realization I have.

“Abandon ship!” she screams, throwing down her bucket. “Get off and swim, you fools! Go!” She waves at the other crew members, and the few left below with us trying to smother the patches of fire with blankets and jackets rush up the ladder to join her on the high deck.

“Let’s go,” I say to Ever, but she shakes her head, pulling back on my grasp.

“No.”

When I turn back to argue, her hands are full of glowing black, red, and gray light. Already it snakes up her arms, her veins, pulsing wickedly beneath her skin.

“Ever?” I ask, growing uncertain when it does not stop at her elbows, the furthest I’ve ever seen her ebb. “What are you doing?”

“Saving you,” Ever pants with effort, arteries in her neck standing out as she strains. The magic is licking higher—it’s up to her shoulders, beginning to spider across her chest. The next word comes out through clenched teeth. “Again.”

The energy laps at her neck now, turning veins standing out blue-green under her dawn skin to a slosh of sharp red and void sucking black. Higher, higher it moves, caressing her jawline, cracking apart the features of her face as if chasms have opened across her brow.

“No!” I shout, grabbing at her hand, but the energy zaps at the contact. I jump back, then plunge forward again, horrified as the energy finds her temples. “Ever, stop!”

Ever tips her head back, hair rising to stand around her like a crown of obsidian. Her eyes close, her mouth opens, her arms rise—then she lets out a scream so eerie, it thunders through me as though it might shatter my skull.

The magic is tormenting her. Killing her. When she opens her eyes, the sclerae are not white—they are red and black and gray. She’s been blinded.

“No!” The word comes again as I jump forward. I will not lose her. I will *not* lose her.

Ignoring the sparks jolting at me, I grasp her fingers. “No, come back to me. Come back!” But she doesn’t hear me.

An idea, a vague memory flits across my mind. It is a foggy image; my face in the snow, Ever twisting my arm from my socket. Placing her palm on fingers. The strange, unnatural sensation of the energy leaving my body through my hands. The movement of Ever’s fingers as they shook the black energy from them.

Though I have no idea how she did it, I place my palm against her hand. “Please, Dark Goddess, let this work,” I whisper. Then with a desperate tug, I try to latch onto the energy thrumming in Ever’s veins. With everything left in me, I *pull*.

Absolutely nothing happens.

I try again. Nothing. No matter how I tug, no matter how I gasp and contort my hands, I cannot pull the magic from Ever's body. Those stirrings rise again, echoes of something familiar, but all at once, I am hit with the realization I'd forgotten in the chaos.

With the tattoo gone, ebbing is impossible. There's no way to pull the magic from Ever's body.

I can't save her.

I glance up in desperation, freezing at the look on Ever's face. It is no longer blank, or malignant, no longer thrown back in pain and torment from the malicious magic stealing through her. For a second, although her eyes still race and swirl with color, the amber centers lock onto me.

"Sayer," she gasps, whispers, spits. "Duck."

I hit the ground just as the magic explodes from her fingers and into the night.



A wave—a literal wave—of energy bursts from Ever's skin. Not just her hands—it flows from her arms, her torso, her legs, every inch of exposed flesh pouring energy into the ship's center. The liquid magic strikes the flaming wood like the ocean tsunamis I've only heard about in stories, curling and seeping into each crack. Ever raises her hands, seems to hold her breath as she holds the water shaped energy, forcing the magic to continuously flow up and then over the sides of the boat, spilling into the river beyond.

To my amazement, it diverts around me, forming two channels on either side until I am on a small island of wood in black and garnet sea. Gasps from all around the upper deck tell me the rest of the crew is experiencing the same thing.

I look up from the colors pooling at my feet, gawking while the spilling energy smothers the fires, washes away the pitch. The river of light is a torrent, a rapidly swirling gush,

bathing the very night itself in shifting light. Another swell sheds from Ever's body, churning and wild as it erupts straight up, then comes down all around the ship like a roof, a shield. Screams from the shore tell me the magic is not flowing around the soldiers there. When the sounds cut off, I have a feeling the ominous, magical water has found its way down their throats.

The sight of such destruction both awes and terrifies me, vague bitterness churning in my stomach. But when I look at Ever, I nearly vomit on the spot.

She is still standing a few feet away, seeming to tower above me from where I crouch on the ground. Her head is thrown back again, mouth open in a silent wail, arms raised and palms to the stars. And though magic bucks and spins around her, she is not empty, as she should be after such a display. Her skin still eddies and swirls, ebbs with energy in her veins.

Ever isn't ebbing at all.

She is channeling the energy, the magic merely using her as a vessel to flow through. She may have chosen its shape and form in a flash of control, of clarity, but there is no control in her now. The magic pours from her skin, pulses in her eyes.

The truth tears through me, dread as dark as the energy in this wretched place; it is not going to stop. It is going to flow and flow and flow. And when she is spent, unable to sustain it any more, the city's magic will kill her.

Because that has to be what this is—the very magic of Toeska, strengthened by years and years of ebber slaughter. Wielded by her family, by the blood flowing in her veins. But she doesn't know how to use it, or how to control it. Not like the Blood King or the Blood Heir. She is a girl of another place, another world, where violence does not reign and infants aren't branded with the number of years they will be allowed to live.

It seems the city does not care. But I do.

“Ever!” I scream, voice hoarse, barely a sting against the roaring, pounding power. The boat lurches forward, pushed by the energy as it explodes over the back of the ship, and if I were on my feet, I would have toppled to the ground.

I have to do something. Have to save her. She is doing her best to save us—and she is dying. *She can't die.*

If only I could ebb. If only...

My thoughts trail off, and then I scramble to my knees, breath coming hard and fast. I cradle my right hand, splaying my fingers, staring with intent at the blank canvas where the wicked E tattoo once scarred my skin.

“Ebb,” I whisper, staring at the thing. “Ebb, dammit! Ebb!” I tug and pull on the air around me, concentrating all my strength on that one spot, that one command. I try to ebb with all my strength. There is something blocking me, cutting off my contact to the flow.

I close my eyes. Feel my way through my veins, into my hand. It is almost as if my awareness has left my body—no, not my body, just my head. Inside, I find my power, the magic stirring in my veins down the arteries and muscles and capillaries. I want to weep when I register the strength there, the potential burning and buzzing in my skin, waiting for energy to flow in and fill me with swirling light. I have not lost my power at all—just my connection.

I search the web of my veins until I find the ruined pathway, the collapsed network in the newly healed flesh. It is as if a gateway has been barred, blocking the magic from my body. The channel that allowed it out into the world, the tattoo, is gone.

But Ever doesn't have a tattoo. She never has.

And all at once, it comes to me. The realization. The understanding. The reason the barrier won't be able to see me, to stop me, is because right now, I am not an ebber. I have no access to the flow at all; can perform no magic because the E is gone.

The terrible black mar, the tattoo I have barely thought of all my life, hidden away in the webbing of my hand, was not just a mark—it was a gateway.

My eyes fly open, and I stare at the too smooth skin. I don't know how I didn't see it, didn't sense it before. The tattoo is what allows me to ebb—what holds open the passage to my power—but no, that isn't quite right. I flex my hand, something confining and choking my magic itself.

With a sick kick to my gut, I feverishly try to ebb again. The collapsed gateway flickers and aches, somehow beyond my physical body. Somewhere deeper, in the inner part of who I am, what I am. Somewhere far into the chasm of my power.

As I paw and claw to access my magic, an echo of Ever's scorching words to her sister burns unbidden across my mind.

“Did our ancestors make them lesser so they could never be defeated?”

I stop cold, staring at my hand in horror as another realization hits me.

That is why the King brands us.

“Oh gods,” I whisper. The tattoo was not holding the connection open—only keeping it restricted, contained. Beneath that mark, something choked my magic. The E was holding it open just enough for me to ebb—for the other citizens of Toeska to have a reason to hate us, but not enough for the Blood King to ever worry about how strong we might become.

The hold on my ebbing is not a gateway—it is a collar.

I stumble back, my feet moving of their own accord, shock coursing through my blood to the thready pounding of my heart. This is why Ever has always been more powerful. She has no collar on her power, no gateway through which she must ebb, no lid to seal it shut when the mark is removed. This must be what the Blood King does to the winners—blocks their powers until they die, when he absorbs them too. It is why Ever can come and go in this city, because she is not

marked to be kept on a leash. It has nothing to do with the barrier seeing me as an ebber at all.

Right now, the collar is closed, squeezed shut, sealed with the removal of the tattoo. Like this, the barrier will not even recognize it is there. That is why I had to burn it before crossing.

But that decision, that action, has rendered me powerless. My head whips up as Ever screams again, this one cutting me, shattering me; so heartrending, I imagine it might obliterate the stars.

In the rattling pain of that sound, I hear Ena's scream when she died, and my own tortured sobs as I stood beside my mother's slaughtered body. I hear Avaria's trembling cries, and my father's laughter, and my uncle's soothing, and Ahnica's last words to me whispered in my ear just before she slipped through the city gates to her death. "*Save her.*"

This time, I will.

I throw myself back into ebbing with everything I have, every ounce of strength and resolve and power. I remember Ever's lessons, my own innate sense of belonging, the thrill of my magic. No ebber has ever wanted to ebb as much as I do right now.

Maybe that is what does it. Or maybe the ability to break through this seal was there all along.

Just when I am about to give up hope, I find a chink in the seal the ancient Blood rulers placed on my ancestors long ago, the one this King branded onto my skin with the promise of a name and years and death. It is something I cannot see, only feel. My head falls back, nose trickling with blood as I heave a last desperate pull through the small weakness separating me and salvation. A crack in my collar, one that the city's barrier would not have noticed without the mar of the tattoo. One that, on some instinct, I don't stop to try and understand but dive for with all my strength.

I don't exactly know why. I don't exactly know how. But through that small spot of an opening, my power squeezes in.

And shatters the shackle on my magic completely.

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CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Instantly, the pressure is gone.

My body crumples to the ground, throwing me onto my knees and scraping my skin on rough wood. With my head tilted down into my chest, blood drips hot and thick onto my shirt, my whole body aching. I open my eyes.

I am free. There is nothing chaining me here, to this life, to this city. The shackle put on my people generations and generations ago is gone.

My body is different, lighter somehow, and yet there is a coiling power in my veins like I've never felt before. This goes deeper, as if some floor to my magic has fallen away, and I stand on the edge of a great chasm of potential.

Testing, I pull a bit of the flow back into my fingers and cry out. It is so easy, the energy is nearly to my shoulders in a fraction of a second. I let go, the magic springing from my hands with new vigor, willing and able to obey my every command. The malignant energy still has an opinion on the matter of its form, a mind for what it should do, but it takes significantly less effort to silence it. This is stunning, incredible—ebbing is as natural as breathing now.

No wonder Ever thought I was a dolt, if this is how she experiences her power.

Ever! I snap my head up. She is still frozen in time, the energy flowing through her, though her skin is turning sickly yellow around the cracks of energy. *How much longer can she*

stay alive? My blood thrums, the limitless canyon of my power screaming to be filled.

To my surprise, the surge to my feet is hindered by the weight of my body. It's only once I try standing that I realize I am exhausted, all my strength spent. Breaking the seal on my magic took a deeper toll on me than I'd thought. On some instinct, I reach for the energy around me, knowing ebbing is the only way I will remain on my feet for more than a few steps.

As I open my hands to the energy swirling and bursting around me, I pause. Something is different—new and unknown. Before me, as the barest hint of gray-red light fills my fingers, I see a wider color spectrum than I ever have before.

The flow has been transformed—or maybe I have. There are hundreds, thousands of colors dipping and frothing and pouring through my fingers into the flow. Red and blacks and grays, like the energy I expected, but underneath and within them are strips of deep purples and soothing blues. Vibrant pinks and yellow tinged greens dart like fish in the river beneath my feet. Slivers of silver and patches of coppery gold glint like precious metals among the darker energies. Colors I don't have names for, that I have never met with my eyes, all glittering, twisting, and convalescing into a living ribbon of energy.

And beyond the colors, the light and beauty of their iridescent swirls are the emotions. I am flooded with memory scraps, thoughts and hopes and dreams and doubts and grief. Each tendril of light casts away the essence of the person who let it go.

It is as if time has frozen on the cold wind, though somewhere in the back of my mind, I know it is just Ever's tidal ebbing stopping everyone in their tracks. My own energy, seeping from my skin, has a red and copper tinge beneath the usual orange, and my newfound knowledge tells me it is passion, determination. I snap my eyes to Moira above me, who has her head tilted back in unhidden wonder at Ever's power. She is leaking red-hot anger and black dread, green

anguish and gray grief of her companion's death—and yet there is hope there, golden and glittering through the black and gray mist.

The man at my feet, though the last breath has long left his body, still gives off a hazy energy—even the arrow through his throat looses smoke into the wind, a shining gilt thread that carries its archer's hope to hit his target.

It takes all this, to see the good and the bad and the thousands of other colors looping and twirling around me, to find the answer I need.

This is the gift Ever spoke of when she told me Helena's curse was actually a blessing. This is a power worthy of gods.

Instead of reaching blindly, clumsily for the energy, I pick and choose. I pull at the delicate gold hope and the silver tendrils of joy. I tug on the reds and pinks of passion, the glowing yellow of love, the deep-sea blue of resoluteness and calm. I bring these energies together; fill myself with their strength and resolve. And then I turn towards the woman I love.

Only full to the arms with the bubbling swirl of emotions and intentions and light, I clutch them tightly to me. I must prepare for the onslaught ahead. Because the magic Ever has coursing through her body will not go gently.

I don't know what this malignant city's energy will do to me, one who is not of the King's blood, an ebber who has just discovered the limitless embrace of his powers. One who is willing, and always has been, to sacrifice himself for the people he loves.

I allow myself one last look at her face, allow my gray gaze to trace the freckles from the corner of her mouth to the edges of her night-sky hair. I memorize her eyes, the shape of her cheeks, the plump flesh of her bottom lip. Even though she is rigid and strained before me, that is not what I see when I look at her.

Memories cascade through me; her turning to me in an open snowy field, lit from behind by the glow of the dying

sun.

The image of the shining whites of her eyes as she rolls them, fighting the uptilt of her mouth, while we sit in the aspen grove in the noon light.

Her amber eyes boring into mine from above in a world all our own, the entire universe in the space of a breath between our naked bodies, her hair casting the diluted light around us in stripes of bronze.

With one last calming breath, I place my hands atop her upturned palms.

“I love you,” I whisper. And *pull*.

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CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Someone familiar is calling my name.

My mother? No, her voice is long gone from my mind.

Ena? *Not her either*, I think, as my name winds itself through my ears again.

Isaac? His tenor is deeper than this whisper, this gentle chiding tugging at me through the haze.

It is not Ahnica, Avaria, or Uncle Cam. It is none of the people I have lost. I try to grasp their names, their faces as they slip by, but nothing is solid. Everything is smoke and mist, the swirling of color and clips of old memories.

The voice is angry now, stronger. Through my taut, aching muscles, something jerks my chin down. I push a little harder, straining somehow further, the searing in my blood coming back to me in one harsh breath.

I am fighting, I remember suddenly—that is why my muscles are locked and screaming, my throat raw, my mouth filled with blood. The energy of Toeska itself is invading my veins, clawing at the edges of my mind. Churning, angry, with nowhere to go. With this returned awareness, I redouble my efforts, thrusting the darkness and malice back into my neck, my chest.

“I love you, Sayer,” the voice murmurs through the fog. “I love you, you idiot.”

Then her mouth is on mine, and the touch clears my head, brings me back to this moment. To my body, where my hands itch to wrap around her, my chest pressing against her soft, supple curves as if we have melded into one body, one heart. The ache starts in my sternum, spreading across my skin, flushing my cheeks with desire and need and a deep, desperate plea to never be parted from her again.

She is calling to me, her words and her kiss. And something in my soul answers.

Struggling to regain control of my limbs, I slam into the invading force with the bright colors in my head and chest I gathered before ebbing the city's power. Slowly, inch by grinding inch, the darkness recedes, chased and harried by the hope singing in my blood.

My palms come up behind Ever's body, away from her, and in a violent torrent, flush away the malicious energy. The sorrow and aching and the deaths of thousands of ebbers over hundreds of years pours from my hands. I kiss Ever more fiercely, wrap my body protectively around hers to shelter her even as tears pour down my cheeks. Every scream, every last flicker of pain, fear, and misery flood through me—I come to know hundreds of lives and thousands of souls, all ended and absorbed by the ancient energies in the bones of the city. Weeping for them, I grieve each one as their spark magic leaves my fingertips, but I do not stop. Because curled into my chest, still pressing her lips to mine, is the last person in the world I love.

And we are not going to die today.

There is crashing, breaking, splintering, and Ever and I are thrown forward so hard, I nearly crush her beneath me. I shove the last of the energy from my hands as we fall, then wrap them around her, pulling her back into the protective circle of my arms. When I lift my head, we are still sliding, careening wildly toward two holes blown wide open in the back of the ship. I snag a bench leg with the tip of one shoe, wrapping a calf around the wooden pillar, then a knee to hold us in place. Because the boat is still propelling forward faster than I ever thought possible.

In the far distance, where we floated seconds ago, are the dead bodies of soldiers in the water. Next to them, and already beginning to dissipate, lie two streaks of fading gray, red, and black energy, tipped in gold and white where I blasted the magic into the river. The mangled ship is being propelled by the back force of my ebbing, shooting us down the rest of the river's straight path like an arrow fired from a bow.

In seconds, we are through the gates they never bother to close, and then the barrier is looming like a giant pane of rippling, living glass. I curl into Ever, waiting for the pain to come as we pass through, waiting for it to sense me and stop me cold, splatter me on its surface—but it does not. Instead, it's like water over my skin, tickling and vaguely cool, and then it is gone. I hardly dare glance back at the towering barrier that has kept me prisoner for twenty-one years as we hurtle into the night.

The boat barely slows as we barrel along the straight section of river for what seems like miles, the gray-green blur of pines and moon-bright snow a smeared world of shapeless color.

The canyon above our heads is all grays and black, shattered bits of moonlight stealing into the top to spill down through slits in the walls. This low, on the river itself, it is dark, and the flecks of stars between wispy clouds overhead look a lifetime away. We are still going fast—much too fast. Worry gnaws at me—this river will not stay straight forever.

“Goddess,” Ever mouths, breathless, the speed ripping the word from her lips before it reaches my ears. But a wall of stone at least two hundred feet high is looming ahead, a curved cliff sheared from the mountain itself. And the dread and fear I've been building in my gut slices through me in a pang of horror.

The river is turning. The boat is moving too fast.

“Hold your breath,” I gasp into her ear, then suck as much air as I can into my lungs. I squeeze tight to Ever, my arms banded around her waist, legs curled to support her. She clings back just as fiercely, her own body locking around mine.

I let go of the bench, and we slide right through the gaping wounds in the ship's stern, into the freezing river beyond, seconds before it crashes into the cliff wall.



The river is colder than I remember.

Every muscle in my exhausted, aching body is shredded, the mercilessly cold river sinking its fangs deep. I stifle my gasp of shocked pain, keeping as much air in my lungs as possible. Because this time, I knew what was coming. This time, my savior is right beside me.

Whether on instinct or skill, Ever is already swimming, tugging me along behind. Her kicks are strong and nimble, her body all grace, propelling us like fish through the black water. Though there is cold radiating from my chest, through all my limbs, I follow her example and give a few kicks too, which push us along until we burst through the surface.

We are both gasping, hyperventilating as the winter air stabs needles of frost into our skin. Shaking and exhausted, Ever pulls us through the wide gap the boat's hull has made in the ice, and I hook one leg onto the thick sheet to haul us onto dry land.

Panting and trembling, we lie on our backs, gazing up at the thin ribbon of sky visible beyond the high canyon walls. The barest color—a drop of emerald, a dancing line of purple—begins to peek through the clouds above. The aurora watching over us. Maybe it's my family looking down on us as the legends say, waving with curtains of soft green.

I drop my head to the side, cheek flinching from the ice beneath me, to glance toward the city. Toeska shines like a gem in the night, but its gilded walls are far away, farther than I've ever seen them. We are beyond the curtain of shimmering magic which marks the city's land—miles and miles past it. So far past that if I hold up my thumb, the gilded cage I once called home disappears entirely.

“Hey.” I roll my neck the other way, dropping my hand, breath still coming fast and sharp. Ever’s smile warms the marrow of my bones, heats my blood, sends my heart racing. She is brilliant in her triumph, amber eyes shining with starlight, dappled face washed with the silvered moon glow and the first breaths of the aurora’s color as the clouds clear.

“We made it,” I answer, my words a living mist rising above our heads. It mingles with hers as she laughs, the night air stealing her breath and eddying it away into the sea of sky above.

“We did,” she agrees, her voice light with joy.

“I thought we agreed no more dunking me in the river,” I tease, finding the strength to do so in the lines of her face, the giddy triumph blossoming in my chest.

Her laughter bubbles up again, making the freckles around her eyes crinkle and the icicles on her lashes break away. Even drenched to the bone, hair wet and freezing to her skull, nose crinkled in a fit of giggles, she is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. I close my eyes, savoring the sound of her unbridled happiness. Of our freedom. Somewhere beyond us, the voices of the crew rise from the ship’s wreckage.

“Sayer,” she says, and gods, all I ever want to hear for the rest of my life is my name on her lips. I open my eyes, reach out my hand to her across the frosted ice.

For a heartbeat, when she laces her fingers with mine and meets my gaze with her burning amber eyes, I feel the hand of a little girl I once sought to protect. One with wild red hair, who I carried on my shoulders and would have sacrificed everything to save.

Then two identical twin hands, each precious to me in her own way, squeezing a gentle goodbye.

Finally, mother’s light touch, the rough leather of my father’s callouses, and the strong grip of my uncle’s palm.

It’s as if all my family is there in this moment, this breath; the end of one chapter and the beginning of another. We still have far to go, but they are all around me, connecting me to

something. A future stolen from them, but one I have the chance to live.

I will not let their sacrifices go to waste.

“Let’s go home,” I tell Ever.

Her answering smile makes me realize I might already be there.

If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a review on Amazon and [Goodreads](#).

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First I must thank my publisher and editors Brittany Weisrock and Bryan Weisrock, in addition to the whole Lake Country Press team. Not only did Brittany and Bryan give me a chance to put Sayer's story into the world, Brittany also cobbled together my manuscript into the brilliant creation it is today. Thanks for being the best book mom, Britt, and always fighting for me. I am lucky to have found a home with LCP for so many reasons. No one would be reading these words if it weren't for you, and I am forever grateful.

Huge thanks go to my LCP author siblings. It's not often you stumble upon people who feel like a family without even trying. Thank you for the zoom calls, the gifs, the million messages every morning, the laughter, and the support. There's no one I'd rather share the ups and downs of this journey with than all of you.

Shout out to my beta readers—you looked at this book when it was raw and full of typos and still found a way to love it (and caught my thousand it's that should have been its!). You all helped me fall in love with my own work, and I am so grateful I had such a big support system as I struggled with the doubts and rejections during my publishing journey. I also must thank my amazing ARC team and everyone else who helped make *The Blood Hours* a success.

It goes without saying that there are people in my personal life without whom this book would not exist.

Lisa, your unwavering support means more to me than you could ever know. Every day I appreciate our loving friendship and your excitement at every single one of my milestones. You are my oldest friend, over ten years strong now, and I have you to thank for the confidence/ support to pursue my dreams. Thank you for everything, including being the first person to read a scrap of my writing and not laughing at how bad it was.

Des, this novel would be an extra hundred pages if I tried to write out all the things about you I am thankful for. You know everything you've done for me—and that both this novel and I would not be here without you. Thank you for believing in me, and Sayer, despite our flaws (and especially for pointing out those pesky random swords where they should not be!). Every word I write is tangled up with yours, and I would not have it any other way.

Andrew, my love; you are my home, just as Ever is for Sayer. Thank you for the little things—putting in your headphones so I can write, bringing me a charger or a drink so I didn't have to stop when the words were flowing. Thank you for your support and your love, for being my partner in all things, and for reminding me every day that I am enough. Your belief in me and my dreams made all this possible.

And thank you reader, for giving me a chance to tell Sayer's story. I hope you loved it as much as I do.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

An east coast girl at heart, Ann ventured west a few years ago with her husband, settling at the foothills of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado. When not reading fantasy novels (especially those with dragons!), she spends her days discussing books with her best friend, playing video games with a cat curled in her lap, and arguing with fictional characters about what's happening in her latest work in progress. For her, the true magic of writing is crafting an entire world by putting words on a page. Her favorite stories are the brutal ones that make your heartache for the characters, which is reflected in her debut novel—*The Blood Hours*.



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