

A dark, atmospheric still life composition. At the top, a dried, golden-brown rose sits on a thin, golden stem. Below it, a spiderweb is visible, with a small spider perched on it. In the lower left, a moth with orange and black wings is shown in flight. A dagger with a black handle and a silver blade is positioned vertically on the left side. The title 'BEND HER' is written in large, gold, serif capital letters across the center. The background is a deep, dark color, possibly black or dark blue, with some faint, dark shapes that suggest a forest or a garden at night.

BEND
HER

CASSIE ALEXANDER

BEND HER

A DARK BEAUTY AND THE BEAST FANTASY
ROMANCE

THE TRANSFORMATION TRILOGY

BOOK ONE

CASSIE ALEXANDER



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With sincere apologies to Alfred Bester.

“Make it a savage war between us. Don’t win me ... destroy me!”

—Olivia Presteign

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INTRODUCTION

She was my death made flesh, and she was beautiful. My beast was transfixed, and I wrestled to control it again, trying to rein the things that were monstrous in me back, as I lumbered forward to breathe her in deep.

In sleep she was perfect.

Soft.

Quiet.

Helpless.

And my beast had a feeling she would taste good,
no matter where he licked her.



LISANE

I woke up to utter darkness.

That wasn't so unusual—the women's chambers of the palace were underground, to protect our quarters from the eyes of enemy mages—so my whole life, I had been a creature used to candlelight.

But I wasn't accustomed to my own breath hot against my face, or the rough feeling of fabric against my cheek—or knowing that my wrists were tied behind my back, painfully tight.

I blinked furiously, trying to wake up and remember what had happened to me, and why I was trapped like this.

The last thing I could recall was being in a carriage, with Castillion the Spiked sitting across from me. We'd been running away from the Deathless . . .

And now I was *here*.

Wherever *here* was.

Tied up, in the dark, on the ground, with a bag over my head.

The very thing my father had been afraid of for me for my whole life—and the reason I lived in a gilded cage, only getting to leave the palace when I had throne-sworn mages by my side—had apparently happened.

I had been kidnapped.

My panic became a living thing inside me, scurrying like a mouse from my brain through my throat to my heart and back, making it hard to think and breathe in turns. My hands

throbbed as all the blood my heart was pounding fought to get beneath the ropes that bound my wrists.

But I made sure to let nothing show, as I fought against every instinct I had to sit up and run.

I didn't thrash, nor did I scream for aid.

I was a princess.

I would give no one the satisfaction of seeing me frightened.

No matter how dangerous I knew lying on the ground could be.

And so I lay still for hours.

Waiting.

For Deathless to crack open the earth and pour through.

And when that didn't happen, I waited for someone to come and check on me. To name their price. To touch me in ways they shouldn't.

Only no one ever did.

I slowly moved to kneel on the cold stone floor.

My entire life I'd been told that I was precious. Too precious to see the sun unguarded, too precious to see the stars at night. It was what my father told me, and my brother, and the mages that guarded our doors, and my mother too, up until the Deathless killed her.

I'd wanted to believe them with all my heart, but the ties that bound me—and my captor's ongoing neglect—felt far more earnest and resonated with what I'd always feared to be true: that once precious things were put away, they were easily forgotten.

And if they're forgotten long enough, nobody notices when they break.



Three days passed . . . I think.

I managed to wriggle the bag over my head off, but the knots around my wrists never slackened, not even after me twisting enough to make my skin burn beneath them.

There'd been a bucket of water down here with me, and I'd drank from it awkwardly, with my hands tied as they were. It only occurred to me that I might be better off drowning myself in it after there wasn't enough water left in it for me to do so.

I even dared to use the one spell I knew, creating a small pool of light in my hand, hoping that it would attract someone's attention—women weren't allowed to learn much magic, lest it turn us barren or set us aflame—but no one came to chastise me.

In fact, no one had come to check on me all that time. My own waste was on my skirts; I was starving, weak, and whatever ill thoughts I had had about living windowless beneath the palace, well, now I knew how wrong I was. At least the palace had life and color and candlelight.

Water.

Food.

Whereas here . . . I was in a room made of stone just like my father's throne room. Only instead of a room where half the space was taken up by a statue of a woman's face crying an emerald tear overlooking his massive, ominous carved throne, this room was small and ill-lit by just a weak gray light, which showed dull gray stones, a low uncomfortable wooden chair, the bucket of water I'd finished—*yesterday?*—and three stairs up to a door that never opened.

Until now. The door creaked open and I jerked up.

“Hello?” I asked quickly, then was instantly ashamed. *Hello* was what you called to someone you were friendly with, not a jailer. It was a peasant's greeting from someone who was unsure of their place, not the greeting of a princess under dire circumstances.

I rocked to sitting, from where I'd been attempting to sleep on the floor. The space behind the open door was dark; the gray

light didn't reach that far, but I knew someone was there.

There had to be.

All of this was happening for a reason, wasn't it?

I struggled to stand, balancing on stiff legs, dizzy and weak from hunger and dehydration, and I didn't know what to do next, honestly. I had been traveling incognito, so there was a chance whoever had killed my mage and guards then captured me didn't know my rank.

Was it better to announce who I was and claim my lineage, or lie and seem incapable of producing ransom if they knew no better?

Which approach was more likely to get me out of here alive?

I decided neither, more immediate needs were first. "I'm thirsty, I'm hungry, and I need to bathe." I swallowed, staring into the darkness, willing something there to *answer* me.

"Do you think you deserve any of those things, Princess of Tears?" asked a low and menacing voice.

They knew—no, *he* knew—who I was. Drelleth, my homeland, was shaped like a teardrop, my dead mother was known as the Queen of Tears, and my captor was now mocking me.

I swallowed dry, my throat parched, as I grit my teeth. "I would like to think that any human does."

He made a thoughtful sound. "And what of your father, sending soldiers to fight the Deathless? Or his many wars before that? What of them? Or are his men, his *humans*," he said, mocking me again, "only fit to die?"

I took a deep and steadying breath. "My father does what he thinks is best, at all times. And I assure you that he cares for his soldiers, perhaps as deeply as he cares for me. As for the war itself . . . he has the best men and mages working on it." If he knew who I was, he knew how my mother died, and why my father fought so hard.

The disembodied voice watching me snorted, and I feared I was losing his attention. If he closed the door again and left

me here, I didn't know what would become of me. I couldn't stand being trapped in these walls another moment, the pain of the sores opening beneath the rope around my wrists, or the stench of my own befoulment.

As scared as I was for whatever lay beyond it, if I stayed here . . .

“If you know me, you know my father and brother will pay good money for my safe return.” I tried my best to sound proud when I said it, but I wasn't. I wanted to be stronger, and I was certain that three days prior I had been, that I would've spit at a captor's eye. But now, my entire world seemed to be collapsing into the darkness outside the door, like a tunnel I needed to crawl through to find light. And when there was no response, when the thought of my station or my money wasn't enough to guarantee my release, a part of me broke. “Please,” I asked my captor, not even sure what I was asking for anymore. I licked my lips with a sandpaper tongue. “Just . . . please.”

The moment between us stretched out uncomfortably long. *If he closed the door again, I would die; I was sure of it.* Then I heard him release a sigh. “Yes. You will have to please me. To survive.”

I felt his presence depart, but the door remained open, and I stumbled toward it.



The stone stairs leading up from my dungeon were sharp, something I found out when the rope binding my wrists suddenly released. I fell forward, out of balance, my shoulders in agony, and cut my palm deeply on the edge of a stone step.

I stopped myself before I cried out, though my eyes watered, and my palm sang in pain as thick blood poured down. I didn't want him to know I'd been hurt. I already felt over-exposed to him—whoever *he* was—and I was quite literally feeble.

But half a flight up from where I'd cut myself, I found another open door, and inside of this one was a bathroom, easily comparable in luxury to any in the palace. It had a wide copper tub full of steaming water with soap at the edge, and there was a carafe that had cool clean water to drink on a wooden stool beside it. I wedged the door closed with the toe of one shoe then took off all the rest of my clothes, guzzled water, and slipped into the tub's embrace.

I was in it until my toes wrinkled, recovering, feeling the warm water erase the knots of my days on the stone-floor. And then I scrubbed myself as I may never have before. My life prior to this place had been lived relatively cleanly, except for the times my brother and I roughoused as children, throwing horse apples at one another in disgusting sport, under a mage's protective eye. Now—I watched the water around me go from clear, to dingy, then back again to see-through.

Magic.

Someone here knew magic.

Of course they did.

I'd been kidnapped, after all.

I spent as long in the tub as I thought I could afford, knowing all the while that I couldn't hide forever.

And then I got dressed, in the exceedingly simple gray dress that'd been left out for me, not much more than a knee-length cotton sack with a thin sash for a belt. I quickly braided my long wet hair, without a tie to trap the end, and I couldn't bear to put my old shoes back on and so I didn't.

My wrists ached, and my hand throbbed, but if my captor wanted me to drink, and wanted me clean, then surely I would get to eat—and the second I was out in the stairwell again, I smelled what I hoped was dinner.

I walked up at least two flights of stairs, tracing fingertips along the cool stone of one wall—*how high was this place anyways? Surely higher than the palace!*—and by the time I reached the final door, I was so hungry I wanted to run through it.

Then I saw the long and narrow room beyond and stopped. It was clearly a dining hall—a long, dark wooden table marked it as such—but there were only two chairs, one at each end. The one closer to me was placed behind an empty silver plate, whereas I presumed my captor sat behind the other, and his plate was full.

He was bigger than all but a few of my father's guards, and looked sterner than most of them, with sharp cheekbones and a square chin. He had black hair to his shoulders, dark eyes, pale skin, and lips that seemed used to frowning, just like he was now. He was dressed in some sort of black leather shirt, I could tell by the way that it was draped on him, although the cuffs of it were folded back in a workman-like fashion, revealing a dusting of black hair and the stripes of several different scars on both his muscular forearms.

His eyes squinted and his nostrils flared at seeing me. I looked at his full plate—I didn't think he'd taken a single bite.

Either he was exceedingly polite, or he'd arranged this display to continue my torture.

"May I sit down?" I asked, attempting courtesy, hoping it would be returned in kind.

"You may," he said, gesturing to the table's far side. I sat down in the only other chair and saw my wan reflection on the dull silver plate in front of me.

The second I sat, he started eating, and even though I wasn't thirsty anymore my mouth watered. Perhaps there was a slim chance he'd forgotten that captives also needed food.

"May I eat?" I interrupted him when he showed no signs of slowing.

He ignored me, taking a deep drink of whatever was in his goblet, and then surveyed me with disdain as he set it down. "I haven't decided yet."

"What kind of answer is that?" I snapped before I remembered the importance of manners when placating strange men. My jaw clenched and my teeth ground, as he made a show of

licking gravy off a knife in front of me, the corners of his lips just barely lifting up.

“The kind of answer you’re going to get, my drab little moth, until I decide.”

I watched him take several more bites, listening to my stomach rumble all the while. “I’m Princess Lisane.” I had a name, and I would rather he used it.

“Oh, yes, I know,” he said, rubbing a piece of meat around his plate with a fork, before putting it in his mouth and biting it free. “Your friends mentioned that when they dropped you off.”

I frowned, then I realized I probably shouldn’t show him any disappointment. “Those weren’t my friends,” I stated, pretending to be bold.

One of his eyebrows arched coolly. He was almost done with his plate now, but surely there was more food where it had come from. “What is the last thing that you recall?”

I’d spent half my time in his dungeon trying to remember, when I wasn’t focused on being hungry, or wondering how strong the stones on the floor were. I’d been in the carriage, and we were thundering for the border, away from the Deathless, and then . . . “We were traveling.” Was Castillion dead? He’d been one of my guards since I was a child. He would’ve never let anything happen to me. “Who brought me here? And who are you? Does my father know I’m here? Have you asked for ransom yet?”

He brushed away my questions with a hand as he pushed his plate away from him, then gave me a piercing stare. “Tell me, little moth, what is your pride worth to you?”

I blinked, distracted at once. “Excuse me?”

“Your pride. Do you hold it in high value?” He settled his silverware away. “I find myself suddenly curious.”

“I—” I began, trying to figure out his game, but also feeling angry. “I am a woman of high rank. And while I have no idea who you are, or why I’m here—I know that I’m well-loved. My father, my brother, and Ker Vethys, my betrothed and a

Prince of the Seven, will be looking for me. So while you may have me at a disadvantage now, sir, trust that it is momentary, and you should do nothing untoward.”

His eyes lit up in clear amusement. “I would never, little moth. And you may trust that for as long as you’re trapped in here with me, I’ll never make you do anything that you don’t want to.”

“Good,” I breathed, relaxing slightly.

He watched me, and he laughed, shaking his head subtly. “Not really. Because I will make you want to do untoward things for me, moth. Eventually.” I swallowed and I frowned as he went on, “So let’s begin.” He circled the plate in front of him with a finger in the air. There were still several bites of meat on it, and vegetables, and his goblet must have been half-full. “Crawl over here atop the table, and eat this like a cat in front of me.”

I looked between him and his half-eaten food. “I would never,” I gasped, pushing my chair back, while he weighed me with his eyes.

“Is that so?” he asked. Mocking me seemed to be his favorite sport. “Because I believe you will, moth. Given time. Only the next plate, instead of treating you like a favored cat, I will treat you like a favored dog, and it will be on the ground.” He snapped his fingers and pointed toward his feet. “And the plate after that will be back in your dungeon, and then who only knows when the door will next open up.”

At the thought of being trapped back in that—*that*—place —“You wouldn’t,” I tried, searching for a way to reason with him.

“Do you know me?” he asked, sounding curious and leaning forward, but when no recognition fluttered in my eyes he sank back again. “Then perhaps you should assume I would.”

My heartbeat rushed, I could hear it pounding in my ears. “Is this a prank? To humble me?”

“Does it feel like a prank to you?” he asked, with a shrug, then grinned wickedly. “No? I’ll give you a few more moments to

decide.”

I sat in the chair, aching, my stomach practically folding in on itself from lack of food.

What would my family think if they knew?

Would Vethys still want my hand if he knew I had crawled for another?

But . . . how would any of them ever find out, if I didn't tell them?

Because surely, when they paid my ransom, I would make them kill this man.

I envisioned the moment my guards would cut off his hands and feet and feed him his tongue and he—whoever *he* was—would regret the moment he'd ever seen me and come up with this plan. He would be rendered helpless before choking on his own blood.

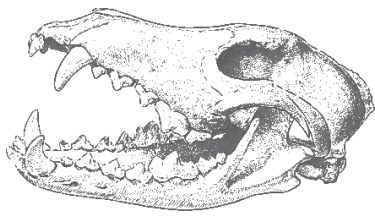
And in the end it was thoughts of violence and retribution that got me up onto his dining room table. Hands and knees. The hard wood of the table hurt to crawl on, and my poor cut hand was still throbbing; but none of that mattered anymore, because I needed to survive long enough for revenge. I hitched up the edge of the ugly dress I wore, so as not to crawl atop it, and I made my way down to his side of the table with vengeance in my soul.

A slow, cruel smile spread across his face as I neared, and when I reached his plate I pulled it toward myself. I started eating what he'd left on it with my hands. From up close I could see that he had also had several faint scars on his face, and he watched me with glittering eyes.

“Eat slowly, moth. You don't want to get sick,” he warned.

I waited until I was three bites in and licking drippings off my fingers to eye him with venom. “I will kill you, in time,” I swore.

He nodded in solemn agreement. “Of that, I have no doubt.”



RHAIM

Every mage gets one clear vision on the eve of their Ascension into their full powers, right before they get the brand of their mage-mark: you see the thing that will cause your absolute demise.

You will have other chances in your life to experience death along the way—while using magic extends your life, mages are not immune to dying from idiocy. But even the most careful mage knows he eventually will have one true death, whether he likes it or not, no matter how hard he tries to postpone it.

Some men see snowy peaks or waterfalls, others bucking horses, and some lucky few see themselves with old and wrinkled hands, passing peacefully in their sleep.

In all instances, we're told, the reasoning behind the visions is the same: if you're strong enough to be trusted with powers, then you must learn to accept the hand of fate, as surely as you'd earned it as your mage-mark.

You need to know, deep in your bones and now scarred on your skin, that while there are things in the world you can change with your powers, death comes for us all.

There is no amount of magic that can escape it.

And so, when a group of soldiers brought a bound and drugged woman to my doorstep, and pulled the bag off of her head and I saw *her* there—the woman from the vision at *my* Ascension, and who has haunted *my* dreams ever since—I knew it was the beginning of my end.



I'd toyed with the idea of killing her for days, knowing that no matter how I tried, it would inevitably blow back on me.

She was going to be the architect of my demise. To try and stop it by murdering her . . . as thrilling as the thought was, was unacceptable. Mages had both mythology and legend, and there were enough warnings scattered throughout each of them that I knew it wouldn't work.

Her father was King Jaegar of Drelleth, a country that had been of no consequence, protected more by its geographical position than its military might, tucked away between two mountain ranges and abutted by a rough sea. That hadn't stopped him from making war on his neighbors for years though. Betrothing his daughter to one of the Seven had made him no less fractious.

But it wasn't until the Deathless had killed his own Queen that he'd begun begging me to join in his battles.

My castle moved frequently, so the fact that he kept finding me said something about the power of the mages on his side—many of whom I did know, in passing—and his unwavering belief that my magical addition to his cause would help.

I'd blown him off, ignoring his pleas and offers of gold, and often simply moved my castle rather than respond—then he'd finally irritated me one last time. I'd put pen to paper, telling him to leave me alone or I would fight for the Deathless against him—which we both knew a lie, seeing as no living man would join their filthy ranks—before finishing that he had no amount of treasure that could change my mind, he should stop harassing me at once.

And that was when she'd arrived.

The next time my castle landed—a portal opened nearby and a carriage emerged, its horses white-eyed in fear at having been

driven through the portal's cold-darkness. After the driver got hold of the creatures again, it pulled up short outside my door.

I was so angry that the urge to give into my bestial nature was too great to resist. Whoever was interrupting my studies—I wanted them to fear me, to go back with stories about the Creature Who Shall Not Be Named. I wanted to appear in their nightmares at night—no, *more*—to frighten them enough that they remembered me by daylight.

I dropped my impeccable control and let *him* free.

I raced down the stairs of my castle, my form changing as I gave in to the monster my magic made of me: a massive beast covered in short, dark fur, roped with muscle, fingers tipped with claws, and my mouth transformed into a snarling muzzle filled with teeth and cruelly curved fangs. I let my anger pour through me and my humanity burn away, keeping only the most tenuous grasp on myself as I burst outside my castle, ready to pull apart whomever it was and spell the horses to carry their limbless corpse back from whence they came.

But there was already a mage I recognized standing outside the carriage in a sleeveless vest. Castillion the Spiked, one of Jaegar's throne-sworn—and he wasn't holding bags of gold or gems, but a woman, wrapped in draping gray, her cape and skirt drifting down from his arms like the wings of a moth—and that was the only thing that saved him.

My beast paused, panting, as a slight breeze blew her scent toward his finer nose—she smelled like almonds and honey—and my beast knew who it would be before I did.

“King Jaegar sends you his most valuable possession, All-Beast,” Castillion growled, standing firm in the face of my monstrosity. “Princess Lisane.” He ripped the bag off of her head, showed her to me, and she looked exactly how I remembered she would from my Ascension, hundreds of years prior.

Her sleeping face was delicately boned, a perfect oval, with a little strength to the line of her nose, and the pull of her narrow chin. Her lips were full but pale, likely from the drugs they'd given her, and her long auburn brown hair was coming loose

from its braids, fly swept from having chafed inside the bag they'd put over her for transport.

Had anything in my life ever been more apt than having the Princess of Tears delivered to my door?

I didn't think so.

For she was my death made flesh, and she was beautiful.

My beast was transfixed as I wrestled to control *him* again, trying to rein in the things that were monstrous in me back, as I lumbered forward to breathe her in deep.

In sleep, she was perfect.

Soft.

Quiet.

Helpless.

And my beast had a feeling she would taste good, no matter where he licked her.

I pushed his rough thoughts back—while knowing that they didn't belong to someone else entirely, it was just me giving into my deepest desires and darkest energies—until I could regain control of myself, even in this form.

“Do you accept?” Castillion pressed as his compatriot atop the carriage tried to keep the horses from dancing—just because I could spell beasts, didn't mean that all of them were comfortable with me, not when I held the form of a predator.

I took a heavy breath.

I had no choice.

She was the one thing I couldn't avoid.

My time had come.

“Yes,” I told him gruffly, with a throat unused to making human sounds, and moved to take her from him, my claws scudding across the fleece of her cape beneath her as he deposited her into my arms. She didn't stir. She was completely limp against me.

At my mercy, in a way, even as I was destined to be at hers.

Castillion eyed me and nodded. “And when can we expect you?”

I stared down at her helpless form, and metered out the rest of my life against her slight weight. “Three hours on the field of battle a day, every day, starting tomorrow.”

“I’ll tell my king.” The firm line of Castillion’s jaw said he didn’t agree with Jaegar’s trade, as did the tips of his spikes poking out from beneath the skin of his arms, like dragon-scale, in a wave, a blunted promise of potential violence as he spoke. “All-Beast—do not hurt her.”

It felt absurd for him to warn me from hurting the woman who was my downfall—much less under these conditions. I gnashed my teeth lightly at him, returning his subtle threat, and said, “I vow nothing.”



I’d been strong enough to leave her in the dungeon for almost a week, trying to convince myself that I was wrong, that it wasn’t her—but any time I’d deluded myself into near-belief, all I had to do was wander down and stand outside her door.

Sometimes she’d be softly talking to herself, other times quietly weeping—but I always felt a charge.

It was hard to tell what it was. Was it like listening to the sound of a snake’s rattle, warning you not to come any closer or it would bite? Or was it like the calm after a storm, when everything was quiet and the world held its breath?

Or was it like when I was about to draw upon my powers to *change* things, despite the fact that she, to me, was immutable?

I didn’t know.

All I was sure of was that there was a current of power flowing between us, like a tide surging back and forth. I wondered that

she did not feel it too, and I waited as long as I felt I could before admitting defeat and opening up her door.

I let her bathe because I wasn't entirely a monster—and why should I let her punish me with her stink? I also knew I would have to burn her clothing later; I didn't want anything here to tie her to her former life.

But when I looked for recognition in her eyes across the table I found none. She had no idea who I was, or what we were to each other. She knew nothing about my fate or future with her, or how she was destined to kill me.

Which meant in the present . . . she was mine, to do with as I pleased.

And I wanted to see her crawling.

There'd been a moment when I was pressing her, when I thought she was made of weaker stuff, and would fold for lack of imagination.

But then she mounted the table for me and made her way down it, the edges of her skirt hitched up so that I could see the red marks the wood was leaving on her kneecaps, her anger radiating off of her in waves.

How many men get to watch their death crawling toward them, in utter obedience, with spite in her eyes?

Not many, I would wager.

As I watched her eat with her fingers and threaten my life, it was possible I'd never been so hard, my heavy cock pressing against my leather's laces beneath the table. It was all I could do not to smirk at her.

Yes, I would die, and *yes*, she would kill me, but until then, I was going to earn out every moment of my glorious death from her, for as long as fate allowed it.

I pushed my goblet in her direction, and watched her drink from it. "Not too much of that, either."

She drank fiercely because I had told her not to, and set it down empty, wiping a red trail from the corner of her lips with

the back of one hand. I could tell from the way she held the goblet she was thinking about throwing it at me.

“Why am I here?” she demanded. The proud way she sat made her small breasts rise high, but I concentrated on the pout of her full lower lip instead when I answered.

“Because it pleases me.”

“And my ransom?”

“No one has offered one.”

I watched her do calculations behind dark-lashed eyes. Now that she was awake and I could see them for myself, I noticed her own eye color was an appealing bright amber, as it'd been in my vision—just like the copper eyes on the wings of certain moths. I'd spent centuries looking into women's faces, searching for those eyes, before I'd divorced myself from humanity almost entirely.

“Then perhaps you should let someone know you have me.” She did her best to sound strident, like she was in charge, for all that she was kneeling on my table.

“And why would I do that?” I asked, bemused.

“If you know who I am, you know my family has money, and power,” she sputtered. “And I am promised to Ker Vethys.”

“I want for nothing—and I haven't met him,” I told her, which was the truth, so far.

She took a deep inhale, before looking wildly around. “And . . . *you* . . .”

“I?” I prompted her, waiting.

“You're just here!”

Having gotten control of my baser instincts, I stood and took my plate from her, combining it with the silverware I'd kept out of her way, lest she be tempted to stab me. “You don't even know where *here* is.”

“I know I don't want to be here,” she snapped.

I held my hand out for my goblet as I laughed. “Moth, I don’t actually want you here either—and yet it is too late for both of us.”

She frowned, passed my goblet over, and I caught sight of the inside of her palm.

“What did you do?” I asked her.

“It’s not like you care,” she said, hiding her hands behind herself, then quickly writhing off the table to stand in front of me. She was much shorter than I was, and a weight I could easily pick up, though that wasn’t saying much, my magic made me preternaturally strong. She had curves, though, even beneath the cheap shift I’d given her to wear, and when I next looked up at her eyes, she was blushing furiously. “Go away.”

“You think you can shoo me off? In my own castle? How quaint.” I turned on my heel and walked for the door she hadn’t come in by. “Stay here,” I commanded, locking it behind me, then went through to my kitchen to scrape off the plate and scrub the pots. When I was done, I went to search for some simple salve I’d made for cuts.

The knowledge that I could be saving her from an infection darkly amused me. But then again, perhaps keeping her alive longer was the same as extending my own life?

I didn’t know.

Visions didn’t work like that.

I returned to find her sitting in her chair again, staring resolutely forward. Upon seeing me, she perked up, barely.

Scared of being alone with me—but also scared of being alone without me.

Poor little moth. Wait until I show you something to truly be scared of.

I set the jar down on the table and sent it skidding in her direction. “Use this on your hand and wrists. They’ll heal in time.”

She took it, frowning, and hid it beneath the table in her lap. “What now?” she asked, clearly thinking the worst of me.

I had given her no reason not to—and I was thinking it myself.

But I had already pushed fate far enough tonight. I jerked my chin at the staircase she'd entered by. "Go back down. A door will be open that wasn't before. You may sleep there rather than the dungeon for as long as you please me."

Her eyes looked everywhere but mine, scanning the room endlessly for exits. "Please you how?" she finally asked softly, staring at her reflection on my table.

"You'll know when you get there," I told her, departing.



LISANE

I waited until I was sure he was gone, and went back down the stairs with the jar in my good hand. I was still angry and scared and I couldn't believe what I'd been forced to do.

Me!

A princess!

Crawling!

No matter that I was going to watch my guards kill him, it was still repugnant to a part of me to have been brought so low by him, a nobody . . . *who lived in a castle and apparently had endless access to magic.*

I kept going down the stairs until I reached a door that I was sure hadn't been there earlier. It opened into a small cheerful room, lit by magic and decorated in light yellows, like the sun I'd mostly been denied. It had a nearly empty vanity, with a candle on it and its striker in a drawer, and an empty wardrobe.

The bed rivaled any in the palace, and on top of it was a duvet intricately embroidered with gold. I knew how many hours of work the embroidery represented, and I gave a small gasp as I reached for it, having never seen anything so fine.

And as I ran my hand across it in awe, I found something the embroidery's complicated pattern had hidden—a thin loop of gold, beautifully made. I held it up and worked its subtle clasp, found its hinge, and that was what gave it away.

It wasn't meant to be a circlet fit for a princess—it was a collar.

Like one might give a dog.

I held it in my hands, making it vibrate with my anger.

It didn't matter how pretty it was when that was *what* it was.

I twisted it, hard. It deformed readily, the gold almost pure, and I threw it across the room before sinking into the bed and crying.



I woke in the dungeon, with the jar of salve beside me. On the ground—or *in* the ground—again. *In danger*. My wrists were untied, but the door was closed—I flew up the stairs to beat on it with my good hand. “How dare you!” I howled. “Let me out!”

I kept it up until my throat was sore, then I heard movement on the door's other side and it swept open. The stranger stood inside the doorway, blocking it entirely. “Are you finished yet?” he asked, solicitously. “And might you like to go to the bathroom?”

“Fuck you,” I snarled at him—words I had never used before. I knew what they meant, but if my father had ever heard me being so uncouth, he would've personally washed my mouth out with soap.

“Really?” he taunted. “Beware of what you offer, moth.” I took a wary step back, but then he stepped aside.

I rushed past him and up the stairs for the bathroom and relieved myself, then made my way further upstairs as fast as possible, to put as much distance between me and the gray-lit dungeon as I could.

This time the stairs released me into a much larger room with a very high ceiling. It held several desks with papers strewn across them, and the walls were paneled with mahogany bookcases, full to the brim with books, broken up by

occasional little displays of . . . *bones?* . . . except for one wall that was all—

I gasped.

Windows.

They weren't floor to ceiling—they were half the height of the room—and only accessible by a few stairs up to a viewing deck, which my captor stood on, looking out. Their draw was so powerful I almost forgot my fear of him and nearly ran up to his side.

How long had it been since I'd seen the sun? Even before I'd been kidnapped . . . weeks?

A month?

I remembered the last ceremony my father had brought me out for, to stand on a stage and wave at our people, with a phalanx of mages protecting the both of us. Things had been bad enough when he'd just been afraid of enemy mages, but after the Deathless had begun to emerge, it seemed like no place was safe enough for me to see the sky.

And now . . . so much blue. So close. So pure.

It didn't matter how accurate the paintings of the outside world were on the walls of the women's chambers, when you were only viewing them with candlelight.

Were we really so high up that no one could see in? And was it truly safe for this stranger to have windows open to his lair?

All I had to do was mount the stairs to find out.

Three steps up—and three steps closer to him.

I lifted my foot, and he said, "I believe you forgot something," without turning around.

I stopped, setting my foot back down. "To crawl?" I asked with spite.

He didn't respond right away, and suddenly what was worse than being in a lightless dungeon—or the chambers I'd wasted all my youth in—was seeing sunlight without being able to

bask in it. To feel its warmth trace against your skin like a caress. To know the freedom that it promised.

Even before my mother's death I'd hated being trapped in my chambers. I could remember trying to talk my twin brother Helkin into taking me outside with him when we were little, and when he wasn't allowed, whispering through the door to our chambers at poor Castillion who was guarding us—back when I was young enough to think that all I had to do was make someone understand, and then I would surely be let out. I would pester anyone who was available, anyone who would listen, until my mother would pull me away, threatening to lock me up even further, in my room.

It didn't matter though—no matter what I said—it never worked.

Mages—*men*—would never understand.

“No, little moth,” he said, his voice quiet. “That only girls with collars on get to look out of windows.”

I looked between the back of his head and the window's bright light. My arm and hips ached from lying against the dungeon's stone floor and my wrists were still raw—he had hurt me, repeatedly, and now he wanted me to pretend to be a pet, for access to daylight?

I lunged for a piece of paper full of handwritten notes on top of the nearest table, and held it out in front of me, gritting my teeth.

He looked back instantly as I began to tear it, and one of his dark eyebrows cocked up. With the light from the window streaming in behind him, it cast all of his darkness into deeper shadows. “And are sure you would rather be punished again than merely wear a collar?” he asked in quiet warning.

The paper I held trembled slightly in my hands. “It is no mere thing. Not for me. I am a princess. I do not belong to you.”

“Clearly,” he said in a mocking tone. “No, you belong to your father. Or, failing that, his son—or whomever it is that they've promised you to. What was his name again?”

“Ker Vethys,” I said quietly, blood rushing in my ears.

“Ahh,” he scoffed. “And just what does it feel like to be a gentled mare, passed along from hand to hand? Instead of a collar, would you prefer a bit and reins?”

The night before I was treated like a cat, threatened to become a dog, and now I was a horse? “Stop comparing me to animals!”

“Then stop acting like one,” he said simply. “How long would you like to be without a view, little moth? When was the last time you saw the sun, or moon?”

I gritted my teeth. I didn’t want to answer him, but he continued.

“You were drugged for longer than you know. Your captors were quite clumsy.”

“Did . . . you tell them to capture me?” Had he had his eyes set on me this whole time? Some magical suitor that I never knew I had? Is that why he hadn’t asked for ransom yet?

He seemed momentarily taken aback. “No. I truly wish you had never crossed my door.” He took me in and heaved a sigh, making his way down the steps toward me like a dark cloud, and I fought not to run away. “Go get your collar,” he said, in a tone that broached no disagreement.



I left the magical library behind, and the stairs took me to the bedroom that I hadn’t spent very long in. The collar was still wadded up in a corner of the room. I picked it up, wondering if I would get punished for its current condition, and carried it back up the stairs, cupped between my palms like an injured bird.

“Here,” I said, offering it out to him, from as far away as possible. He moved closer and plucked it up without touching me, looking at it with distaste.

“I would encourage you to think again before taking my gifts for granted, little moth,” he warned, while working at the metal with his hands. His nails were short, and his palms lightly lined with calluses. “While thus far I find your attempts at defiance amusing, I am not usually a patient man.”

“Then what kind of man are you?” I asked, at the same time he finished what he was doing to show me.

The collar wasn’t a collar anymore. It was a thin golden chain—he had transmuted it right in front of me. My jaw dropped.

I’d known mages all my life—in fact, my entire life had been surrounded by magic, or shaped by the fear of it. I had seen my father’s guards in action before, and my brother had told me of the greater magics being done on the Deathless war’s front lines.

But I had never heard of something like what this mage had done, so up close, and so quickly I hadn’t even realized it was happening.

He held the necklace between us and it swung with his gesture. “Would you rather wear it this way?”

“Magic?” I asked him, because I needed to hear him say it.

He made an irritated sound, and pulled his leather shirt open to show me the mage-mark on his muscular chest, where it looked like he’d been branded with a hand. “Yes. Put it on—now—and you may never take it off.” He made a come-hither motion, and the gold chain twirled against his fingers.

I still didn’t want to wear it . . . but it didn’t seem wise to make a mage mad either. I caught the chain in my hand and tugged it free from him as he released it. I undid the clasp, refastened it behind my neck, and then ran for the window without asking.

We were higher up than I had ever been, in the middle of a mountain range. Worn-down mountains looked like waves as far as I could see. No wonder he felt safe enough for windows here—we were higher than the birds. I couldn’t imagine any Deathless crawling up from the mountaintop to attack us either, even if his castle was somehow on solid ground. “Where is this?” I asked myself. After climbing so many stairs

I thought I might be able to see my home in the distance, I hadn't expected not to recognize anything.

He came up to stand beside me, close, but without touching. "This is where I want to be right now, little moth."

I swallowed. "Clearly you are very powerful. Perhaps . . . you could help my father? You do know of the war, yes?"

I looked up at him and saw the muscles of his jaw clench before he answered me. "I do."

"So . . . maybe you and he could come to some arrangement. Surely there's something you want, something he can give you, to make helping him worth your while. Return me, gift him your services, and he would make you wealthy beyond compare."

He turned to look down, glowered at me, and shutters on all of the windows sprang shut. I yelped and jumped back at the sound. "I need to go," he announced, and then strode down the stairs. "Now that you're briefly behaving yourself, you'll need something to pass the time. I can't entertain you all day, nor would you enjoy it if I did. So stay here—can you read?"

"Y—yes," I stammered, chasing after him. "Can't you leave the windows open?"

"No."

I stopped and gawked. *We were in the middle of a mountain range! Who could possibly see us?* "Where are you going?"

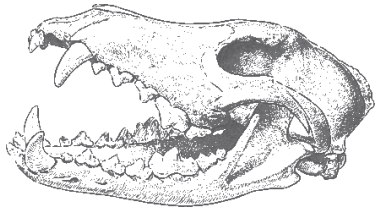
"You don't want to know." He gave me a me a pitying look. "I'll be back tonight. One of the doors will lead to the kitchen. Feed yourself, but don't drink any of the wine."

"But—" I started, still chasing after him, and he whirled on me, eyes dark and presence ominous.

"Do you really want me to stay?" he asked, in all seriousness.

I opened my mouth but no words came out.

"That's what I thought," he growled. "I'll be back," he said, then created a door in front of him out of nothingness—he opened it, and he was gone.



RHAIM

I ignored the feeling of her eyes on my back until the door I'd created was closed behind me, then I opened stairs up to the level of my castle that doubled as my laboratory, where all of my magical studies occurred.

There were just as many desks and papers here as the room in which I'd left her, only with different paperweights holding them down: experiments in progress, workings of anatomy that interested me, and murky jars of acid.

Three of the surrounding walls were covered in books, journals of mages long gone, along with relics from their lives and my own. After some eight hundred years of living, everything in this room had a story, most of them ones that only I remembered.

Me . . . and perhaps Finx, who startled out of his large silken nest in the corner in a blur of black fur and too many legs, to shout my name. "Rhaim!" All eight of his yellow, cat-like eyes blinked.

I put a hand out to stop him from speaking. "Yes, I am going. And no, you must leave her alone."

He bounced up to an empty desk and his furry body bobbed in despair. "I don't like it when you leave."

"But mostly when I don't let you touch things."

"That too," he complained.

I petted the spot behind his largest set of eyes, between his tufted ears, and he thrummed a purr. "I'll be back shortly. Keep an eye on her if you must, but don't let her see you."

“I won’t.” He waved four of his legs in a complicated promise.

The final wall of my laboratory held a magic-locked door with my portal-frame behind it.

I’d been a mage long enough that I could portal without one, but given a choice and when going outside, I preferred the room’s safety—it didn’t allow other mages to look through their frames to see into my castle beyond.

I’d created my portal’s frame out of bones and tusks, the remnants of my studies, and I’d made it massive enough to easily accommodate my beast’s form just in case. After locking the door back to my laboratory behind me, I stood in front of it, drawing up my power and focusing my intent, until the frame filled with an image of King Jaegar’s dimly lit war tent on the far side, and I stepped through.

Jaegar’s closest advisor, his son Helkin, the exact same age as Lisane, looked over at me with a scowl. “You’re late. We’re not paying for lateness.” He was dressed in casually ornate armor, more for show than for dealing with threats.

I eyed him dourly. “That’s funny, I don’t recall earning my payment out of your hide.” His hand reached for the elegantly hilted sword at his waist, but he was stopped by either common sense or a burning desire to survive the day. I glanced over at his father, whose only armor appeared to be a heavy layer of exhaustion over several furs, the only color on him a teardrop shaped green gemstone that symbolized his country, hung from a heavy chain. He looked at a table full of plans with rheumy eyes. “And how can I help you today, your Highness?” I asked of Jaegar, and only Jaegar.

Jaegar opened his mouth to speak, but then Sibyi the Cloudmaker entered. I had been close friends with his master once upon a time, so he seemed to think fondly of me. He was a tall, thin man, all angles and quite bald, and he always had several water bladders slung across his shoulders on leather belts over his deep red robes, in addition to a staff to lean on. “A breakthrough is brewing on the plains of Safia,” he informed the king, and Jaegar sighed and nodded, tapping a new spot on his map.

“Head there, then. See if you can cut it off before it gets worse.”

I put a polite hand to my chest, and gave a curt bow. “Consider it done. You’ll retain my services for three hours, per our agreement.” I gestured at the frame I’d entered through behind me, and an image of the lowlands of Safia appeared in it. Sibyi stepped through, trusting utterly in my magic, and I was preparing to follow, just as I heard Jaegar clear his throat.

“All-Beast, wait,” he said, and I paused. “How fairs Lisane?”

I turned toward him again. It was the first time he’d asked of her—and perhaps the first time he’d looked directly in my eyes since gaining my employment. Now that Lisane was awake and in the light of my castle, not the dark of my dungeon, it was easy to see the resemblance between her and the rest of her family. She and her brother shared their father’s brow and nose, only hers were more delicate and feminine, and Helkin’s brown eyes were a darker echo of her amber ones. I saw Jaegar’s tense swallow, and read the anger in Helkin’s jawline.

“I am not yet weary of her,” I told him, in a precise tone that could mean all things and no things at once, but mostly that he should feel very damned for having given me his daughter.



“How much time do you think we have?” Sibyi asked me, taking a long swig of the water that he’d brought with him.

He was another mage such as myself, the kind that made their own way in the world, and were not beholden to any throne—which meant he was choosing to serve Jaegar out of some strange curiosity or honor, of his own accord, a thing that seemed ridiculous to me.

I surveyed the empty grassland in front of us, full of trails cutting through well-cropped grasses. Most animals had felt

the breakthrough coming and wisely dispersed, but that didn't mean that I was powerless. I knelt down and picked up a handful of soil from a trail—it was loose; that made it easier—and meant I possibly had more friends.

“Give me a moment,” I told him, putting my hand to the earth, seeking. He nodded and waited as I closed my eyes.

Insects were the first beasts I had made a study of when I'd come into my abilities. They were readily available, easily controlled, and quite ominous in large quantity. The plains here were infested with them, just beneath the grasses. Ants, beetles, locusts, scorpions, I could feel their little lives and energies pulsing through the ground in waves. None of them knew why things were about to be *wrong* here, but all of them in their own small ways could feel it coming—the pressure of Deathless about to erupt from beneath them. I had visions of ants handing along their tiny white half-formed children, one to another, abandoning nests that it'd taken them several of their lifetimes to build.

I stood. “If even the insects fear it, it's close.”

Sibyi wiped an arm across his mouth. He'd polished off another water bladder, and I would've sworn I could see his belly protruding against his robes. He needed moisture to access his cloud magic, I assumed—all magic came with a price, usually related to however it worked. Perhaps for Sibyi, this meant staying hydrated. “I can slow them with a storm, then use lightning.”

“Good,” I said, as I dusted my hand off on my thigh. “I can do everything else.”

He grunted, slicked a hand across his bald head to wipe up the sweat there, then flung his hand upward to the sky. His face glazed with concentration and his body tensed, just as locusts started to ping my legs, the dull creatures finally sensing danger and trying to escape.

I followed Sibyi's gaze up and watched a cloud that hadn't been there before accumulating, just the slimmest mist of fog beginning to give us shade. Next, I heard the ground a hundred feet ahead of us start to sift, and felt a tremor beneath my feet.

The Deathless were about to open up the ground like a mouth, pushing their way through from their hellish world to ours.

Sibyi planted his staff strongly enough into the ground to keep it upright, and then clapped his hands over his head. The clouds over us darkened, and it started to rain.

The downpour picked up strength as he willed it, and I could see the concentration written on his face as he turned it torrential, pelting us with rain as hard as stones. The sun disappeared behind his curtain of clouds and it was like night had fallen. A bright snap of lightning sizzled, illuminating a pustule-like growth in the field ahead of us, and I could see that the first Deathless would start pulling themselves out of it any moment now. They were messily made creatures, with no genitals, ears, or eyes, just mouths full of sharp teeth and limbs that ended in claws, and full of a foul, dark ichor that appeared to power them.

“Rhaim,” Sibyi grunted, his eyes on the clouds above, relying on me to protect him.

“I know,” I told him, looking down at the mud around my feet, concentrating both my will and my anger.

I could hear the ants drowning. Feel each and every one of their small last moments of terror. It was no consolation that they likely would’ve died roughly anyways, or that their lives were so terrifically brief—we were destroying entire worlds worth of creatures—and for what, to save mere humans?

Humans and one particularly worrisome girl?

“Rhaim!” Sibyi shouted, and I looked up. The Deathless had slouched out of the ground, spotted us—however their eyeless faces found their prey—and were now coming our direction.

“Bah!” I shouted back at him, slamming my hand to the ground, with a crisp vision in my mind of what I wanted to happen next.

When I was done studying insects, I’d moved on to reptiles.

They were so completely foreign to me that it’d taken me a century to finish, but when I was done, I had spent long enough inside the minds of wild ones that I knew how they

lived, the way they moved, and how they felt. I had taken them apart and put them back together and I poured that knowledge, combined with my magical intent, into the ground around me.

Sibyi's magic-made mud cracked open at my feet, revealing scaled patterns below, and the alligators and crocodiles I had created with my mind started scrabbling themselves free, like the ground was blooming with violence. They hauled themselves out of the muck on stout legs and strong claws, swimming in the mud with their flat bodies and shovel-like noses. I willed them out into the flash flood Sibyi had created, told them they were hungry, then set them free.

It was my turn to stare and concentrate, ignoring the way the rain felt, how it slicked my hair to my neck, then rolled beneath my leather shirt. I only had eyes for the beasts I had given life, my thoughts were consumed by them, giving them form, keeping them intact. I knew precisely how sharp their teeth were, even as each of their individual teeth were different from all the others in their mouths. I knew the clouded hatred filling their limited minds, only possessing a few thoughts apiece, most of them angry.

I felt the way they felt when they finally reached the Deathless and started fighting them. How they snapped puffy, sodden limbs, heard Deathless howl in irritation and felt the sweep of their ineffectual hands as they tried to pry relentless jaws apart, losing fingers in the process. I tasted the ichor that kept the Deathless alive, bitter on forty different tongues, as the creatures that were a part of me, and also *not*, thrashed, swinging muscular necks back and forth, biting, crushing, and pulling wave after wave of emerging Deathless apart.

And the entire time, I felt the things in me that were beastly pulling at me, wanting to join them.

I felt my fingertips ache to birth claws, my jaw crowd with teeth, and fresh black wiry hair fight against the confines of the wet leather I now wore. It was why I could only promise Jaegar a few hours a day—if I used my powers any longer than that, I wouldn't be human for a time.

The cost of spending *my* magic, of taming *my* beasts—both real ones and ones I'd created—was turning into one.

And once I'd changed into my beast, I was endlessly tempted to become one, in all senses of the word.

Sibyi stood beside me, directing lightning bolts at the Deathless that my creatures missed, both of us slicked with water and mud from head to toe, and then it was over. The sense of presence the Deathless had created was through and the ground that they'd clambered out of fell even with the plain again, closing the door to whatever foul place housed them.

Feeling the pressure release—and the sudden absence of enemies—the small army I'd created turned, eighty feral eyes glittering as another lightning bolt struck nearby.

I clasped my hand in the air and willed my creatures back into the mud, severing my connection to them. I took a moment to watch them disintegrate, then I glanced over to Sibyi, who seemed tremulous, clinging to his staff. Whatever belly he'd had earlier was gone now and, if possible, he looked even thinner than when we'd started.

“Steady,” I told him, grabbing his shoulder to hold him up. I unfastened one of his water bladders and handed it to him. He took it with a shaking hand, and seemed to recover once half of it was past his lips—then he noticed me watching him, and offered it over.

“No, but thanks,” I said, reaching into my sodden leather shirt for a flask.

He laughed and reached his bladder out to thump against my flask's more solid metal, like we were old friends meeting after quite some time, as the sun started to peek through the clouds above.



LISANE

I —I didn't even know his name, and he'd just left me behind.

Here.

I looked around the massive room. The ceiling was so high, and the walls held more books than I'd ever seen before—than I'd even comprehended could exist. I would worry about the strange little displays of skeletons alongside them on the shelves later—there must've been one of every book in here, and I wanted to read all of them first.

But before starting that, I ran to the windows and tried to see out the glass. The shutters outside were tight. There wasn't even a gap at the hinges.

Would he be back before daylight faded?

Would I get another peek?

Was he tormenting me on purpose, or out of some unknown practicality?

Where had he gone?

And . . . why was I here?

If my captor was strong enough to make a door out of nothingness, he was strong enough to portal without a frame, which meant that he could go almost anywhere.

He was the embodiment of the reason I'd been locked away for most of my life—to keep enemy mages from stealing me for blackmail, or ransom, or worse . . .

For all the good that had done me.

Here I was, stolen.

Was I afraid of him? *Yes*. He seemed cruel and uncaring. I knew from my time in his dungeon that he was unkind.

But he hadn't touched me yet . . . and he truly knew magic.

Magic stronger than I had ever seen.

I took the necklace he'd given me off quickly and held it in my hands. Magical objects were not uncommon—Castillion always said more magic had been lost in the world than would ever be found.

Had the strange mage gone and given a magical object to me?

I ran the fine chain through my fingers.

I didn't think so.

I just . . . hoped.

Because I wanted magic of my *own*, more than *anything* else.

I'd been around mages all my life, always watching them, begging them to teach me more than the tiny spells I was confined to in my chambers. I couldn't count how many times I'd been told that having children someday would be "magic enough" for me.

But I didn't just want sharper eyesight for more needlepoint, or small magics to make my cheeks glow and my hair shine.

I wanted this.

Enough power to walk outside freely without a mage at my side. A life in which I determined my own fate.

And I wasn't afraid of burning to get it.

But no one wanted to give it to me.

I was in awe, and afraid . . . and hungry.

Like I had been the prior night, only worse, because it wasn't just my stomach, but my mind.

It was one thing to hear of the mages fighting the Deathless, and another to be confronted with their skills up close.

I was born long after the “good” days, when magic was used to bless crops, or summon rain. When mages often made colored explosions in the sky for celebrations and went around fighting monsters and becoming legends.

No, by the time I was born—and my mother, and my mother’s mother before her, for as long as anyone could remember—certain mages had sold their powers off to the highest bidders for fighting and espionage, which was why we high-born women had to be hidden in windowless chambers, so no mage could see us and portal in to steal us away.

Once I’d realized that the mages who guarded us were also the reason we were trapped there, it was hard not to hate all of them equally, up until the Deathless’ attacks had begun.

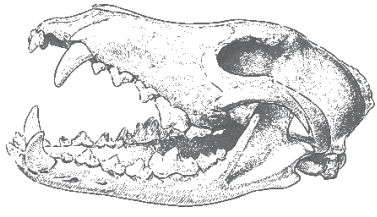
But after Deathless had crawled out of the ground of our chambers to kill my mother on Darkest Day, I finally agreed with their utility. And now my father was on a mortal mission to make every country on the continent agree to put their wars aside and take up shared arms and magics against this new and impossibly dangerous threat.

Which meant that mages were heroes again . . . some of them.

Not ones that stole princesses away for unknown reasons.

But if there were a way that I could help my father here, even while trapped, and also help myself . . . I turned toward the first of the broad bookcases lining the nearest wall. I was well educated, for all that I’d been sheltered, and I knew the fastest way to learn was to begin at the beginning.

I pulled over a table and put a chair on top of it, so that I could reach the upmost corner of the highest shelf, took its book down, and began to read.



When I portaled back, Finx was waiting. “I was good!” he announced the second the door began to open into my lab.

“I don’t believe it,” I teased him, locking the door behind me tight.

He made a scoffing sound, and then all eight of his yellow eyes focused on me, as his ears twitched. “Where were you? Are you well?” He leapt to the ground at my feet and batted at me with his forepaws. “Why are you wet? Why are you muddy?”

“I’ll explain later. In the meantime though, can you clean the trail I leave?” I asked him, trusting that he would, as I stomped through my study, dripping with water and mud, heading for the stairs.

My castle’s crenulated roof was only accessible by one door if I didn’t portal, and it currently opened up to a gorgeous view of the sun about to drop between two craggy mountains.

I’d created a small pavilion on my castle’s stone roof to enjoy such views from my bath, which was an inset marble tub much like a milky gem. I’d surrounded it with a few low walls to block the wind, and baskets full of massive towels. It was bitterly cold out, but my magic always kept the water warm. My soaked leather shirt hit the ground with a squelch, and the sudden chill hitting my body was invigorating—as was sinking into the tub’s gentle heat afterward, once I’d gotten my boots and breeches off.

The cloudy waters were laced with herbs and powders, magically preserved milks and honeys. It was a healing bath, and while I only needed it for its heat today, it was one of the many reminders I had in my castle of why I should stay human—because if I truly let my beast overwhelm me, I would never get to move in the realm of men again.

While I hated most men individually, I did like the things that men created. I valued fine pipe tobacco, the rough page edges of a new hand-bound journal, and large, beautiful crystals cut with faceted sides. I liked to eat meat like a person, lightly seared instead of raw. I wanted to be feared for my mind rather than dreaded for my appearance. And on the occasions when I did fuck, the size of my own cock and the fact that I'd pierced it was problematic enough, before the inclusion of a sheath and a knot.

Last but not least, would my beast fit into my soaking tub?

No, I thought, with a snort. But then again, if I ever gave into my beast fully, I wouldn't even remember my castle existed.

I let the tub's heat chase away the cold of the rain and wash off the mud, firmly restoring my humanity to me, and then I felt it—my moth had taken off her necklace.

It was no longer touching her skin.

That was the real reason I'd collared her: so I'd always have a vague knowledge of where she was, and if she was whole.

I made a thoughtful sound and sank deeper into the hot water, my mind bifurcating again, except this time instead of being pulled between beast and human, I was torn between disappointment and delight.

I would rather have her not disobey me . . . she didn't know my castle well enough, it honestly wasn't safe for her.

But the thoughts of how I would punish her for disobeying . . . well, tempting was not a strong enough word to describe them.

I stood up, shaking myself dry, and tossing open a nearby basket for a towel to loop around my waist, before going back inside.



Dried and dressed again in black leathers, I found her in my library, in a triangular fort she'd created by dragging around desks. The contents of one of my bookshelves were surrounding her on two sides, and she was making notes upon a third. Her head was bowed in concentration, and her feet were tucked beneath her chair.

Her necklace was off, but she hadn't broken it or thrown it across the room, she'd merely laced it through a book to keep a page.

"What are you doing?" I asked her, and she jumped. Little did she know her continued presence here was almost as surprising to me as mine was to her.

She flushed, startled at being caught—and I realized maybe she'd fenced herself in with the desks subconsciously.

"Where have you been?" she demanded.

I eyed her entire situation. She seemed to have had no problem keeping herself busy. "Why? Did you miss me?" I asked her, my tone snide.

"No," she said, frowning.

"In that case, I asked you first." I gestured at all her chaos and destruction. "What is the reason for all this mess?"

She stood and centered herself between all three desks. I watched her straighten her shoulders and clasp her hands in front of herself so tightly her knuckles went white. "You are a very grand magician," she began. I felt one of my eyebrows crawling up my forehead as she found the strength inside herself to continue. "And I would like to learn from you."

I stared her down and laughed, I couldn't help myself. But as I did it, she looked so suddenly bereft, I wished that I could take it back.

Her eyes went dark, and suddenly she became the same angry woman who'd so recently crawled across my dining table. "I'm not scared of burning."

"Ahh," I said, as calmly as possible. "And what if I am?"

It was almost the truth. She would be the death of me—someway, somehow. But she assumed I was just mocking her, again.

"I—I think those stories are made up," she said, mirroring her own brother's tightness of jaw.

"They may very well be," I agreed. "But why on earth should I teach you?"

She inhaled deeply and looked around the room, as though things were self-explanatory. "We have to do something to pass the time. You said it yourself, earlier."

I waited far longer than was necessary to respond, watching her fear and anger flush her in turns. "Or," I said, "I could spend all my time up here, putting books away, after I tie you up again below."

Her hands slid up to take hold of their opposite, still-healing wrists, gently wringing them. "You won't do that. Not as long as I behave." There was a question in her tone, wanting a reassurance I could not grant her.

I closed my eyes and shook my head, haunted by the color of her eyes regardless. "Do not think good things where I'm concerned, little moth."

"Please," she said, likely because it'd worked on me yesterday. "I truly want to learn."

"And that may be. But you are too old for it."

"I'm only eighteen," she pleaded.

"My master broke me in when I was twelve," I explained, attempting patience. "Magic requires a certain malleability of spirit, and a willingness to relinquish all control. I would not think a princess could be possessed of either."

“Just how many princesses have you met?” she asked me, her tone veering haughty before she capped it, remembering where she was. “You could try, mage. At the least.”

And now, an attempt at an order. *Poor little moth, to be forced to flail against the window so.* “Did these lines of rhetoric work better for you inside your palace?” I asked her before turning around. “I’ll go make us dinner. Put everything back as you found it, and meet me in the dining room.” I was halfway out the door when she shouted for me.

“Mage! Look! I already know some!”

She’d crawled out from underneath a desk and stood in front of it, stretching out one cupped hand. There was a shining light in the divot of her palm. It illuminated her more brightly than the ambient magic I had lighting the room, casting a warm glow across her skin, gilding her expression with golden hope.

I inhaled deeply. It would be far easier to fear for my life around her if she were less lovely.

“See? And I’m not on fire yet, mage,” she went on, trying to prove herself to me.

But it was still safer for me to shut her down. “And was that a useful skill, in the caves they kept you in?”

Her nostrils flared and her chest heaved before she spat out words. “How dare you mock me, for the world your kind created for me.”

“For what it is worth,” I said, with a grunt for emphasis, “over the course of my long eight hundred years, you are my first kidnapping.”

I watched her high emotions ride her. “Did you kill Castillion?” I didn’t deny it fast enough, and she looked to the light in her hand. “I wish that I could throw this at you!” she said, and made to do so.

I caught her wrist quickly but lightly, well aware of the raw gouges my ties had left on her skin. “Casting light is easy,” I said, picking the flame up from her hand, to put it out. Better for my moth to think that Castillion was dead by my hand,

rather than that he'd betrayed her—along with everyone else she'd ever known.

I didn't let go of her wrist; I used it to keep her close, wondering what would've happened had I let her throw her simple spell at me. *Would I have somehow died?* She didn't fight me, though she looked at me with disgust, her elegant lip curled. "Why do you want to learn?" I asked.

Her delicate expression shifted to haunted and when she answered, her voice was soft. "If you know who my father is—you know who my mother was, too."

I slowly nodded. Lisane's mother was the Queen of Tears. Everyone on the Continent knew who she was by now, and with the addition of Drelleth, the original Seven countries might as well have become an Eight. Jaegar had gone around to all the major courts, beating his breast against the terrors that'd sprung up from beneath his castle, killing his own Queen. He'd used the story of his tragedy to implore them to grant him money and mages to fight back, and surprisingly, many of them had.

I narrowed my eyes at her, wondering if the stories I'd heard were true; if she'd listened to her mother's demise hidden behind a thin wooden door. "You seek to defeat the Deathless to save yourself from her same fate?"

She shook her head quickly then. "No. Not just myself. *Everyone*. Like—my father—"

I knew instantly what she meant—at the front lines, where I'd just been. I let go of her wrist and stepped back. "Do not mention your father to me again," I told her, my voice low and threatening. "You are trapped here."

"Forever?" she asked, raising her chin. "Will you truly never ask for ransom?"

"Never," I growled.

Her lips pinched, trapped between a frown and a pout, and a certain horror settled on her shoulders, hearing the truth in my words.

What was left for her here if I didn't teach her?

Would that my ascending vision had been a little clearer when it happened, and that I could've seen anything in it beyond her face. Clues as to where she would kill me, how, or when. For all I knew it was just as likely that she would end me by tripping me down the stairs as it was while learning lightning bolts. Both highly unlikely, but even accidental deaths were final.

In actuality though, I'd probably been screwed ever since I'd brought her up from the dungeon, making a decision to play with her.

To push my luck.

And now here she was, pushing back.

I dragged my eyes up and down her as though she were beneath me. "Women can't become mages," I said, telling her what my master had taught me, and what his had taught him, a millennia ago. But I wouldn't have said anything, if I hadn't been considering it, and I knew she knew that as I watched hope flare in her amber eyes.

"So they say," she began slowly. "But how do you know? Have you ever tried to teach one?" Her gaze tracked mine, trying to read it.

"No," I answered truthfully. And I could've left it at that and walked away, only something inside me forbade me to. It was like instead of the mage-mark branded on my chest, the hand of fate was now behind me, pushing me forward, with a heady rush of challenge, pride, and inevitability.

The prohibitions against teaching women strong magic came from the olden days, far before even my childhood. And while I had read a thousand mages' journals, and all of them spoke of women burning if they learned too much as though it were a fact, no one trustworthy had ever written a firsthand account of it happening.

Like as not, the urge came from not wanting to waste a woman's time with what very much might be a folly. For every mage with true power, such as myself, there were hundreds with minor ones . . . mages who had wasted their

lives and risked the perils of Ascension only to discover the peak of their skill would be turning apples blue or growing feathers, but being incapable of flight.

So I didn't disagree with that, nor with the fact that the rules likely also kept young girls out of older mage's hands.

But my hands had *not* grabbed her.

She had been dropped into them.

And . . . what did it matter if I taught her? Who would enforce anything against me? Few mages were my equal. Who would even dare?

I narrowed my eyes. "If you contain magic, and that is a grand 'if,' you should know mages are unable to have children." That was the only part of the warning I was certain of, and it was the only thing I could think of that might deter her.

"So?" she challenged me. She was staring at me like she was seeking to control my mind with her desires. *I would be in trouble, if it turned out that was what her power was.*

I took a deep inhale, settling my conscience. If training was what she wanted, training she would get. "If I were to teach you, little moth, you would have to do everything I say. Even things you do not want to very much."

She licked her lips. "I will."

"You don't even know what you're promising."

"It doesn't matter. I want this." She straightened her shoulders and looked at me with unrestrained pride.

Pride didn't create mages, though. I shook my head curtly. "You only think you do."

Her lips pulled into a thin line, and it was like something combustible lit inside her. "Stop pretending that you know me!" Her anger made the loose auburn strands from her braid seem wilder, and it was like she briefly took up more space, made more brave by her exasperation. "You don't!"

I waited until she was done, until the silence between us stretched for far too long, and she'd retreated, folding in on

herself again, back to being a flower bud, rather than a flame. “You are right, moth,” I told her. “I don’t. But if I am to teach you, I must learn.” I looked behind her at the travesty she’d made of my bookshelf. “For my first lesson, I want you to put all of those books away, in order.”

She looked to the pile behind her, and then back at me, unsure if I was teasing.

“And I want you to do it while naked, wearing nothing but my chain.”

I heard her sharp intake of breath, as her eyes twisted back to me. Her lips opened, mouth full of protest—but then she remembered what I had warned, and I could almost read her thoughts.

She knew if she backed down now, I would never allow her to broach the subject of her magical education again.

That instead of ever having the unlikely chance to be my equal, she would be a mere adornment in my castle, for the rest of my hopefully long life.

I watched her swallow then place her hands upon her belt, while looking at the floor. “I have never shown myself to a man before.” It wasn’t the same as a denial, just her asking me for a kindness I did not possess.

“And you won’t have now, either,” I told her. “I am no mere man. I am the All-Beast.”

After a moment’s more hesitation, she started undoing the knot of her belt.



LISANE

“Continue,” he demanded, and then walked away, heading toward a wall that I was very much sure had not had a door on it before.

I watched the space he had left, seething with poorly wrought emotions. Pride warred inside my heart with anger and against shame.

I only had my belt off . . . and he was gone?

Was it enough to have started? Had I earned any trust? I made a slow show of folding the belt and setting it down before . . .

What?

Me doing like I was told?

Like I had promised him I would?

What had I been thinking, giving myself over to his whim?

I had been operating in my before-world, where inside the palace at least, men and women tried to act with honor.

But there was no precedent for that in his castle here, just him and the rules he made.

I was scared to think of him coming back and finding me naked. I didn't want him eyeing me, knowing me, *like that*.

But I was also scared of him returning and finding me clothed, because what then? If I backed down, even once . . . what was left for me here?

If I learned magic—if this was not some sort of cruel joke, which it very likely was—then I would be able to fight not

only the Deathless by my father's side, but fight *him*.

I reached for the end of my shift and yanked it up quickly, before I could lose my nerve, and folded it beside my belt. I tugged his necklace out of the book where I'd placed it, lassoing it back around my neck, laying its cool chain against my breasts. I heard him return as I grabbed a book and made my way up to the chair I'd put atop the desk.

I resolutely finished what I was doing, my back to him, putting the book back where I knew it'd come from. Then I stepped back down from the chair, onto the table, and turned around, arms wrapped around my chest to hide a portion of myself.

He had brought up a chair of his own, and he wasn't even watching me. He was filling a pipe—then he caught me looking. His eyes stayed steady with mine, and he gestured with the pipe's bowl. "Seeing as you're not going to enjoy yourself, I wanted to make sure I was doubly happy."

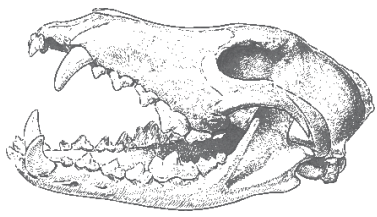
My jaw clenched and my teeth ground. "So this is just a joke, then, isn't it?"

He snapped his fingers, lighting whatever he'd filled his pipe with, and sweet smoke rose into the air. "Not in the least, little moth. To teach you magic is to trust you with my life. And where there is absolute trust, there can be no shame." He took a long drag of air in, turning his pipe's contents into embers, and then exhaled smoke that looked like a miniature running herd of deer, which thundered in my direction. "I am taking this seriously," he said, tilting his head at me. "Are you?"

Either he was mocking me, or he wasn't; I wasn't in control of that. All I could manage were my feelings in the moment—and if he wanted to take advantage of a poor kidnapped girl, then that was on his conscience, not mine.

Assuming he still had one.

"I am," I announced, and bent over, picking up the next tome.



RHAIM

She didn't look at me again as she worked, which gave me the freedom to look at her.

I'd known that she'd be beautiful, but how lovely it was to see all of her in action. The tense line of her calves as she strained up, reaching, the slight roll of her stomach as she bent over to pick up the next book. Her breasts, perfect and pert, and the way their weight swayed, depending on how she twisted, my chain dancing across them. Her ribs' pinch down to her delicate waist, and then the deliciously rude way her hips flared out again, showcasing the pleasing heft of her ass.

And all of her skin glowed, in shifting shades of pink. Her skin was pale all over; not a piece of her was used to sun, from the white curve of her shoulder, down to her slender-fingered hands. Her only color was the light flush of her cheeks at being known to me, the ruddy twin coins of her nipples, and then the rosy, soft, ruched edges of her lips I caught glimpses of between her legs as she bent over or stepped up, no matter how hard she tried to hide them from me. For having such long hair, she was mostly hairless elsewhere, which made the more animalistic parts of me sad.

I smoked my pipe and learned all of her, every curve, every crook, every cranny, and by the time she was finished, there was no part of her that was unknown to my eyes.

She crouched down, so that I could only see her by her profile, and she reached for her shift. I clucked my tongue to stop her. "Ask."

“Why?” She looked over at me then. She hadn’t caught my gaze again since I’d first lit my pipe, as if she could retain her modesty, by only averting *her* eyes. She was leaning forward enough that my necklace looped away from her skin.

“As I told you, moth, to train you, I also have to trust you. That you won’t make decisions for yourself without me. You and I both know your clothing is safe, but I have things you do not want to touch in other rooms here.”

She nodded subtly, making her hair’s braid roll. “May I put my clothing back on now . . . what am I supposed to call you?” she complained.

“The All-Beast, if you like. Or failing that, you may use sir.” I jerked my chin at her waiting dress. “So try again.”

“May I put my clothing back on now, sir?” she asked, in a spiteful tone. Every word was a disappointment to her, I could tell. Confined to women’s chambers in her father’s palace, no one had ever tamed her in her life.

It made all the thoughts of what I could do to her—what I *would* do to her, given time enough before dying—run riot in my mind.

“You may,” I granted.

She hopped off the desk and turned her back to me, sliding into the shift and tying its waist, before looking back. I knew she didn’t feel any safer with it on, after how much I’d already seen.

“Sit on the desk, little moth,” I said, getting up to draw my own chair closer. She did as she was told, but watched me warily, her knees clenched disappointingly tight. *Little did she know how I could smell her.*

I sat back, took my pipe by its bowl, and offered it to her, stem out.

“Smoking is foul,” she said, frowning at me without taking it. She had exhausted some well of bravery in herself, and was now almost shrinking before my eyes.

“Definitely,” I agreed. “But,” I went on, and exhaled deeply, concentrating on a fancy of my whim, and the remaining smoke inside me flew out and up, shaped like a small gray dragon, circling her head until it disappeared.

“Mere tricks,” she complained, swatting the end of the smoke aside.

“For now, yes. But what is the difference between twisting smoke here and summoning a storm?”

“Rain?” she guessed quickly with a frown. She was either still flustered from having shown herself to me, or she did not think me a man of my word.

“No, moth,” I said simply, willing her to calm. “Power.”

Her amber eyes searched mine, worried I was joking—which meant I got to see her expression when she realized I was not. She softly gasped, her pink lips parted, and her pulse jumped at her throat. Then she readily reached for the pipe and I released it to her. She held it in front of me, looking between it and me quickly. “Tell me how,” she demanded.

I tilted my head and gave her a look.

“Tell me how, sir, please,” she amended, adding doe-eyes to boot, thinking she might hold some power over me. And perhaps she did—because I liked hearing those words from her, in that precise order. I bit my lips so as not to smile.

“Inhale, first. Not too much.”

She didn’t listen. She wrapped her lips around the pipe’s stem where mine had just been, like a traded kiss. Then she drew in deeply, making the embers of the bowl flush molten red, before cough-cough-coughing out. I waited as she found her breath.

“Again,” I prompted, and this time she inhaled a more reasonable amount, looking to me for instruction, her breath held, her eyes watering, trying to be good.

My blood sank inside my body, hotter than the embers, as I wondered what it would be like to put my lips to hers and breathe her smoke in.

“Exhale,” I told her, fighting those darker thoughts for control.
“Slowly.”

She did as she was told, and the smoke drifted up as she released it. I reached for it with magical intent, gathering it, to bring it back, as she put the pipe down at her side.

“What now?” she asked, watching my hands closely.

“Now, it is yours. What would you like to turn it into?” Her eyes flashed, and I guessed. “A key to get out of here? A noose around my neck?”

“Maybe,” she admitted. “But not until I know things.”

“Ah yes. Perhaps you will let me live, as long as I still have some utility. I’ll have to remember that,” I said drolly, then offered the cloud of smoke to her, stretched between my hands. “Take it from me.”

She reached her hands out like we were children trading a game of string, sliding her hands to be just inside of mine, careful not to touch. And then she slowly pulled them back.

The smoke began to escape her grasp at once. “What—how?” she asked me in dismay, raking her fingers through it.

“Time and practice and focusing. You have to know what you want from it before it will listen. Power doesn’t wait for you to make up your mind. It is the embodiment of subtle choices you make and force into being. There is no rest for it, or you, along the way.” I picked up the pipe that she’d set down. “What did you want of your smoke, little moth?”

I wrapped my lips around the stem where hers had just been, her kiss traded back to me, and inhaled while watching her, waiting.



LISANE

What I wanted most was freedom. Not just from here, but something on a grander scale, so much bigger than I was used to that it scared me to admit it. In his dungeon, I would've been happy to go back to what I was.

But now?

“Make me an arrow, please, sir. And a bow.”

He smiled a dark smile and then exhaled, releasing smoke into the air between us, and it formed up just as it'd been told. I reached for it, and found it a disturbing combination of nothingness and solidity, like I was putting my hand into a barrel with tightly packed live fish, all flickering scales, trying to escape my attention.

I nocked the arrow and pulled the bow's string, just like the archers who were painted on the chamber walls, bringing it back and aiming it right at him. I released it, and the arrow flew the short distance into his chest, where it dissipated instantly.

“Did you really think I would let you wound me?” he asked, looking at the spot on his leather shirt where I'd just shot him.

“Not really,” I confessed. “But I also wasn't fully sure. Sir,” I added, hastily, and then inhaled.

“What?” he asked.

“I just . . . wanted to see if I could.” Not even hurt him precisely, although after him requiring my nudity, that

would've been a delight.

But just knowing that I could have an effect on the world. That I wasn't as clawless as fate had made me feel or seem.

He nodded solemnly. "Take the pipe. Inhale. Try again, now that you know what you want from it, and we'll see."



Hours passed. My entire mouth tasted of ashes, and my lungs felt like they'd been in a bonfire. While my concentration was flagging—but not his patience, which was a credit to him, despite his clear amusement at my failures, which I felt unkind—I thought I almost knew what I was supposed to do.

It was so close inside my mind.

I could feel it there. Tickling me.

Then he took the pipe away from me with finality. "Enough for today."

My shoulders sank. "But, I'm—"

"Not really very good at this," he said, cutting me off. I exhaled roughly, rather than say aloud what I was feeling, and he laughed. "See, if you could only channel that, when you were trying. You think too much and miss your moment."

I frowned. "Will I get good?"

He sighed and shook his head at me. "Sir. 'Will I get good, sir,'" he corrected me. "And no, if you cannot reliably remember to do the one thing I ask you, then no, I very much doubt you will."

Calling him sir was more bitter than the taste already in my mouth. I was a princess, only to be humbled by my brother and king, not a mere mage, no matter how powerful.

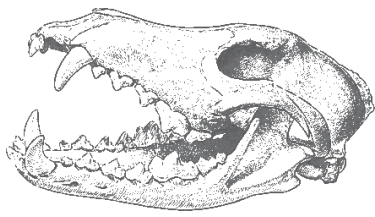
But he did have a point.

We had come to an arrangement, of a sort. And despite the greedy way he'd looked me over earlier, while naked, once he was teaching me, he'd only looked me in the eyes.

And I had promised him I'd do what I was told.

"I'm sorry, sir," I said, swallowing. "I'll do better tomorrow."

He tamped the contents of his pipe's bowl out into his palm, then disappeared them, before eyeing me. "One hopes."



RHAIM

I left her in my library while I went and made dinner for us both. I could see what she'd taken from my pantry to eat earlier for herself, small slivers of cheese, and a portion of meat. She hadn't eaten much, but she'd be hungrier tomorrow. Working magic used energy, and she had managed some.

Just not well, not yet.

I found her current lack of skill strangely disappointing. Perhaps this was why women weren't taught magic—maybe they couldn't learn.

But what did I actually hope for her? That the first student I had taken on in centuries might be decent?

Decent enough to kill me later.

I snorted and stoked the fire.

"Is it dinner time?" Finx scurried in, jumping up to sit on his haunches on one of my counters, all eight of his legs somehow tucked under himself. "And can I see the girl yet?"

I swept a hand out at him and made him jump away, then I cleaned the spot where he'd been sitting, so that I could use it to chop vegetables. "No."

The monstrosity of a cat, now sitting on the floor, rolled all eight of his golden eyes at me at once. "Why not?" he mewled.

I sighed and set my knife down. "Because you'll scare her." Finx's entire bearing slumped, like I had plucked out half his bones, which probably wouldn't hurt him as he had so many. "Stop that. You can meet her in good time."

“But I want to meet her now.”

“Not tonight,” I said, finishing a carrot. “But soon. I swear.”

Finx perked up at that, then leapt up onto the wall, and crawled out the door.



LISANE

We ate in silence, but this time I had my own plate. I hadn't gotten a choice in what I was eating, but all of it was very good.

After he'd left the library, I'd tried to read a book from a lower shelf, and found it indecipherable—and the book next to it, and the book next to that one, too. It hadn't been that way earlier, I was sure of it, and I wondered what had changed.

“Do you not want me to read, sir?” I asked after I'd already eaten enough so that if I angered him I wouldn't starve.

He looked up from his own plate, having eaten twice as much as me already. “Not until you've earned it.”

“How, sir?” I asked.

“By proving yourself worth my time. Today—” he began, sounding disappointed.

“Was my first day!” I protested, quickly adding, “Sir.” I'd only just eaten enough to not taste smoke anymore, and yet I would smoke enough to burn my tongue off if it meant gaining a fraction of his talent. Somewhere outside the confines of this castle, my father and brother were fighting against the Deathless, and someone as powerful as he was, was just sitting here, doing nothing.

Worse yet, *so was I*.

“How long will it take me to learn, sir?”

He took another measured bite before answering. “I do not know, moth.”

“How long did it take you?”

He set his silverware down and seemed to consider this. “I am still learning. I make time for my studies, every day. So, eight hundred years, give or take.”

I frowned. That wasn't the kind of answer I'd been expecting. “How long did it take you to get good?”

He groaned. “At which part? You're getting ahead of yourself, moth; save these questions until we find out if there's anything in you.”

What I wanted to ask next was, *and what if there's not?* But I didn't want to admit any fears in front of him, especially when his opinion of me already seemed so low. I did mutter, “Hope by the time I'm done the Deathless haven't overrun the continent,” though, quietly. “My father—” I began, but when I did I saw him look up.

“Do you think your father wants you learning magic, moth?” he said curtly.

I pursed my lips. The truth was, I was sure that he did not.

“Your father was happy enough to make war on other countries before the Deathless,” he went on. “And I suspect when they're defeated he will find fresh reasons to do so. You think mages trapped you in your chambers, girl? Or was it your father's—and, like his, other men's—absolutely unfettered ambitions?”

I stared down the table at him. “My father,” I began more loudly, to defend the man, and I watched him sweep his napkin up from his lap beneath the table.

“Dare to lift your hands and you will wish that you had not,” he warned, as he threw the fabric at me. It became like a bird in flight, creasing itself to flap in my direction, traveling the table's length toward me.

I remembered his warning in time to not react, and instead clenched my hands into fists against the table, as the thing came for my face. I screamed, I couldn't help myself, and it used that opportunity to wrap itself around me, its coarse

fabric shoving into my mouth, the rest of it looping around my head, gagging me just like a horse's bit.

I stared down the table at him, my jaw forced wide, the knot the napkin made tightening behind my braid. "When I want your opinion, little moth, from here on out I will ask you for it. And you will never mention your father, or brother, or whomever else you care about outside of here to me again. Am I understood?" he asked.

I wanted to refuse him. I wanted to take the knife that was by my left hand, cut his rag off my face, and then stab it through his heart.

But I was still at his mercy—and if I killed him, no one else would even try to teach me.

I felt my face grow red with shame and rage. I hated the power of knowledge he held over me, and I hated that I'd had to practically beg him for a drop, but I nodded, just the once.

"Good. Then you may use your hands now to untie that, and we may finish eating in companionable silence."

I made sure to eat everything on my plate quickly, in case I angered him again.

He left without announcing his departure, I only knew because he took his plate, and he didn't return from the kitchen after an appropriate amount of time. I took my plate and goblet into the kitchen, and he wasn't there.

I had been dismissed.

I set the things down and tried to go back to the library, but the door wasn't there—in fact the only doors left open to me, once I left the kitchen, were the two downstairs—one to my bathroom, the other to my bedroom.

At least I might get to sleep upon it tonight. I sat down and felt the stuffed mattress give beneath my weight.

Last night, I'd cried myself to sleep. But tonight that girl felt distant.

I missed my home and my family, and I did want to know that they were all right.

But today I'd been given the smallest taste of power, and it had changed me. I knew I would do whatever I needed to, whatever it took, to get more.

There was a small rough mirror over my vanity, set so that I could see a blurry image of myself. I got up and walked toward it, and it felt fitting. I wasn't who I had been anymore, but maybe I was becoming who I was meant to be.

As I stepped nearer to my reflection, the door to the wardrobe opened like it sensed my presence. Inside it was a dress—no, a slip. Of a more sheer and delicate fabric than I had ever seen. Gossamer, like rarest silk, with costly lacing at the edges. It was worth more than most of my garments back home had been, just here, apparently waiting for me.

It was too thin to wear for clothing, and any man looking at me in it might have well as seen my naked body, but for sleeping in at night . . . I quickly took off my ill-fitting dress and pulled it on instead. It was cool and slippery, and I knew already that I didn't want to take it off, ever, as I crawled beneath my sheets.



My next few days passed with some level of sameness. I would wake and eat alone, and then a door would open for me, taking me back into the library. Sometimes he was there already, sometimes he was not.

But the windows would always be open for a time.

I would run to stand in front of them, one hand upon the chain around my neck, my proof that I had earned the right to see, and looking out never ceased to amaze me.

Just seeing other mountaintops would have been good enough—but the All-Beast's castle moved.

It must have, somehow, unless everything outside the window's glass was some strange vision. One morning, the windows displayed a wide plain that seemed to roll in all

directions. I could see horses grazing on it, though none came near.

The next, we were in an ocean, which made no sense. But there were waves right outside; I could see their splash, and watching the horizon made me queasy.

The third, and we were in some kind of bog or moor, a terrain I had only read about in stories. The foliage outside was close enough to feel claustrophobic, and there were dark creatures swimming in the surrounding murky water.

I would have my moments alone with whatever view the castle gave me, and then, somehow, as my mind was full and I was ready to step away, he would appear, him and his damnable pipe. And every day he would close the shutters as he handed his pipe over to me, saying, “No distractions.”

His moods were lighter in the mornings, before he went off and did whatever it was that he did, for hours at a time. Perhaps that was when he went and did his own studies; I didn’t know, and I knew he wouldn’t tell me, only that there was always a gap in the day where he left me to my own devices. Sometimes with a book I could actually read—nothing magical, just histories, dry and dull—and sometimes not. And then he would come back again. Some evenings he would bring the pipe; some he wouldn’t. He would merely read in the same room as I did, but he would never open the shutters twice.

My skills increased . . . but only incrementally. And I could tell that he was just as frustrated with that as I was. I did manage to hold the smoke, but only barely. Whatever leap I needed to make to gain in power, I couldn’t, no matter how hard I tried.

We were together again one evening, and I watched him rake his hand through his hair at the end of our session, while contemplating me. One of the rare moments he seemed human, and I . . . I did not hate him less. There would be a part of me that always would. I knew it in my soul; I kept it burnished like a jewel.

But I did find myself wanting to make him happy, too.

If only because it would mean I was not such a failure.

He hadn't made me strip or crawl, not since those first few days. And as demeaning as those moments had been at the time, somehow failing him—failing us *both*—time and time again, as we shared the pipe, was worse.

He stood suddenly, crossing the short distance to the desk where I sat to look down at me. I wasn't afraid to look up at him anymore, so I stared openly.

His eyes took my face in as though he were drinking it, and then he released a held breath with a thoughtful sound. "If you were younger, we could go this slowly, but we can't."

Was he giving up on me?

On this?

I searched for some scrap of smoke left in my lungs to exhale for him, to show him that I was worth trying for. When I couldn't, I asked him, "Why, sir?" already afraid of his answer.

His eyes met mine. "Because I might die, little moth. Any day now."

That was not the answer I was expecting. I looked around in bafflement. "What could possibly hurt you here?"

"You have no idea."

"But—I—I—" I began, stuttering as panic swelled my heart. "I don't understand. Sir."

"I know," he said. "Which is part of the problem." He studied me again, close enough now that I could count a few bright flecks of emerald in his eyes. "Tell me the worst things that have ever happened to you, Lisane."

It was the first time he'd ever used my name, and hearing him say it made me gasp. "My ... mother dying," I answered slowly. "And then, being here. This." I looked around the room quickly, trying to understand.

"Prepare to add a third," he said. He produced a knife from somewhere on his person and reached for the hem of my skirt. I shrieked and flinched, but it was too late. He cut a broad line

down the cheap fabric's side near my thigh. "You will appreciate this more in a moment," he said, then looked at me and grunted, "Run."

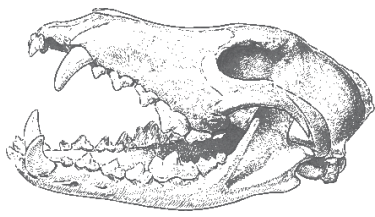
Three doors appeared, set into the bookcases of the wall behind him. Each of them flew open one after another with a frightening bang—all of them showing darkness beyond. I stared at them, afraid of the dungeon's return.

"What, sir? Why?" I asked, scooting back on the desk instinctively. Then I gave him my attention and found him changing.

Things rippled beneath his skin as I watched in helpless horror. Bones shifted, his cheekbones lifting up, his teeth jutting out in a short muzzle as dark hair covered his skin, and I realized he was transforming himself with magic, not just playing with smoke or views. The clothes that he wore were gone now, his whole body straining at its seams until it was half-again as large as he had been, shoulders, chest, arms broader and all wider, and he leaned forward as though standing was awkward on his new-boned feet.

His eyes went from wise to wild as I screamed.

He bellowed back at me, the sound of an animal, and I leapt off of the desk, racing past him.



RHAIM

I slowly followed after my little moth, holding back my speed and strength—I knew all the doors lead to the same final location.

I'd been patient with her for almost a week, measuring all the ways she could ever be a true danger to me, only to finally decide that she wasn't.

That despite her ambition—which I knew she had; I could fairly feel it rolling off of her, every time she tried her magic—she was the opposite of me.

Pretty, but ungifted.

Magically plain.

And that it was my fate to die at the hands of a nobody, which at first I found ironic, but then quickly became intolerable.

Whoever took down Rhaim the All-Beast needed to at least be legendary. Otherwise, my life would just be a footnote in someone else's journal, the same as so many of the ones I kept in my lab. A paragraph to sum me up, no more.

Whereas if I managed to train her up somehow in glory . . . well . . . I needed to know if such things were even possible, first.

And it felt like they might not be, day after day in my library.

So here we were. Me, padding down the stone hall after her, my fingers and toes tipped with claws, my teeth fit to gnash and possessed of a terrible desire.

I hadn't humiliated her again, past those first two times, because I didn't think that she'd learn any magic while frightened, but she hadn't become less attractive to me, in her attempts to blossom beneath my care.

In fact, watching her try so hard . . . while I knew she was learning for her own more wholesome reasons, it was hard not to imagine her struggling in other ways to please me solely. Swallowing down the gasp she would give at seeing my cock's pierced head. The lips that wrapped around my pipe stem also wrapped around my shaft. The hand that held my pipe's bowl, stroking at my sack. The amber eyes that the smoke watered tearing up, as I pleased myself with her mouth. At the thought of my knot flaring in my fist as I poured my seed down her throat, I full-body shuddered, wracked by temptation.

And so, I had only barely shifted into my beast. Just enough to frighten her—but not enough to frighten me.

Most men were monsters, but they got to live in denial of this fact.

I did not.

I knew exactly what lurked inside my depths, how it was unholy and impure. I knew what it was like to feel my humanity wane and let my baser instincts take over, and each time I did it, I felt it call to me.

There was something in it that was freeing—to cast off all the problems a man had, to only listen to your beastly side—it felt clean.

It was awful—but it was honest.

And as my beast, it was easy to scent her terror in the air, beneath her almond and honey, and the light floral notes of the soap that I'd given her to wash with. All of *his* senses were finer—and his needs were greater, in cruel counterpoint.

He hungered, and it was a full-body thing: his claws wanted to tear, his teeth wanted to sink into flesh, and he felt lust such as I had never known. Whatever we knew of her and had seen before had only whet his appetite—*my* appetite, as there was

no denying we were one and the same. To fully blame *him* for his wants and needs to absolve myself of them was delusional. And while I felt the temptation to give into them, to relinquish control entirely . . . I knew if I did so, I wouldn't be coming back. It would be like turning my soul inside out, disappearing my humanity, until only my monster remained.

So I kept a tight rein on the thing my magic made of me. I only needed the girl terrified; she had to believe in the danger. I stomped after her, breathing loudly, scratching the stone walls with my claws.

"I am coming for you, Lisane," I warned her, knowing my words would echo down the hallway.



LISANE

This couldn't be happening.

I stumbled down the stone hall, taking turn after turn, fast as I could, knowing I was getting nowhere. I passed doors at irregular intervals, and if I were in a town, I would have slowed to beat on them, to beg someone to open and take me in, but here—it was just me and him.

And he . . . *he was a beast.*

He'd as much as told me, more than once, but all men thought themselves rough, did they not?

But now, I was here, and what was worse than being trapped in the dungeon alone was being trapped literally everywhere else with him.

I'd been a fool to imagine any part of myself free, as long as I was inside his castle.

And now I heard him behind me, slavering, making the sounds a wild creature makes when it is shamelessly chasing prey. It felt like I could feel his warm breath coming nearer, and then I heard him call my name.

“Lisssssane.”

It was rough on his tongue, through his many teeth, and I knew I did not want to see him say it, the way his lips would snarl and his fangs would clash.

“Go away!” I shouted, without slowing down or turning—and then I found myself trapped.

I turned, and there was only a wall, with not even a door to helplessly strike on.

“Lisane,” he growled, from somewhere behind me, and I threw myself against the stone, beating my fists upon it, begging a door to open where there was none, feeling the sides of my hands bruise. “Poor, helpless Lisane,” he said cruelly, panting hard I thought—then I realized he was laughing. *At my terror.* “No friends. No family. No ransom. No magic.” I heard the clack of his claws as he stepped closer in time with his phrases. His breath was almost on me now; I could feel the heat of it licking up the back of my neck, as I buried my face in my arms to hide, crying hot, shameful, angry tears. “Trapped here, with me,” he whispered, the words malformed by the shape of his jaw. “And soon forced to do as I please.”

I felt his presence align behind me, even as I tried to disappear. I couldn’t breathe, my stomach hurt, and my body was tense, waiting for some violence to be thrust upon it—and the tears streaking down my cheeks changed, from lost to bitter.

I’d a chance at greatness, but I hadn’t managed it, and there was nothing left for me now.

I heard the animal sounds he made, sniffing loudly behind my neck. And a paw—that’s what it seemed like, his strong fingers now cruelly angular and covered with dark fur, each fingertip ending in a claw—took hold of my wrist and roughly pulled it above me. I squeezed my eyes shut again, and twisted my face away from him.

My heart was beating so fast I was sure he could hear it. And then his jaws opened with a wet smack and I knew that that was it for me. Just like I had been sure of in the dungeon.

And just like I’d been sure of in chambers, listening to my mother’s cries.

I was going to die an ignominious death here.

I was forgotten, abandoned, and alone.

Again.

And the knowledge of that was more awful than anything he could do to me. Him forcing himself on me would’ve been bad

enough, but to know that my life was unchanged and I was going to die an utter fucking disappointment to myself was somehow more breaking—

“NO!” I shouted, whirling, raggedly ripping my wrist free of his claws. I was trapped in the cage of his arms, his horrible face nearby, his massive body pressing in, his mage-mark burned onto the fur on his chest looking like the palm-print of his last victim. “YOU WILL NOT!”

I didn’t know if I was shouting at him or me—but *something* crackled in my mind. I felt a blinding moment of pain, but then it was like there was a weapon in my hand. I imagined it like the butt end of a whip, and all I had to do was *use* it—and so I did, I lashed out.

And a single scratch scored his short-furred skin, from the corner of his left eye down to his jaw. I watched his flesh rip open, clean as if I had cut it with a knife. He leaned back, a readable expression of surprise upon his monstrous face as his nostrils widened, and then he laughed. He laughed, and laughed, barking at first, until he became a man and I recognized him again. His clothing returned, though I was sure he hadn’t had any on in his beastly form—I’d been able to see all of him, even things I did not want to—but he still bore the cut I’d given him. He stared at me, bleeding freely, and as I gawked at him in horror, he slowly licked away a drop of red near his lips.

“Marvelous,” he told me, and I felt like he meant it.

Like he was glad I’d hurt him—but I didn’t get a chance to ask.

He left after that, without saying a word, and in front of me now there was a slightly ajar door.

I finished opening it and found myself back in my bedroom.



he next morning, I didn’t know what I was going to walk into.

T I'd tossed and turned all night.
Surely he'd be mad, and I feared his retribution.

But if he was . . . why hadn't he killed me?

And . . . how had I hurt him?

I might have understood me being able to hurt him when he was a man, maybe, possibly . . . but when he was his beast?

How?

I'd spent the next few hours in my bedroom trying to summon the power, remembering the moment perfectly, both the terror and then the feeling of the weapon, and what being so open to magic felt like, but I hadn't managed it again.

And then I'd spent the rest of my time in bed wondering what tomorrow would bring, until it was too late. The lights in my room grew brighter, and I knew that he was waiting.



I washed and dressed, putting on the same dress that he'd cut, the only dress I had, except for the strangely fine ones meant for me at night, and made my way slowly up the stairs. He wasn't in the dining room, and I forced myself to eat something in his kitchen, choking down a wedge of cheese and making myself gulp a glass of water.

And then I went back to the final door, the one that I knew would lead to his library and him.

He was standing on the risers in front of the windows, looking out, his hands clasped behind his back. There was nowhere to hide, so I went to join him, standing out of arm's reach to his right.

"The view today is lovely, is it not?" he asked without turning, knowing I was there.

I somehow looked away from him and saw a glorious dawn encroaching. The sky was painted with clouds that were all

shades of pink and orange, and below us ... sometime in the night, we'd flown over my home. Even though I'd never been above it—not like soldiers and traders who piloted magical airships like Rhaim did his castle—I knew it was *my* soil beneath me. I'd seen Drelleth before on maps, cradled as it was between these mountain ranges, with its tip in the ocean. Its shape was echoed, too, by the statue in my father's throne-room, crying Love's Lost Tear, which he'd pried off of the wall after my mother's death, to wear in her honor.

Below us, we passed over fields transected by hedges, some of them full of wheat, others lush and green, and still more dotted with fleecy sheep. I knew if we kept going for long enough, my father's castle would appear before we saw the Sorrowful Sea.

I stepped forward, my fear of him momentarily forgotten as I was wracked by homesickness, my heart aching with familiarity.

“Yes,” he said. “Your father's lands.”

I pressed my hands upon the glass, and then leaned fully in. We were still above it all somehow, and I knew there were no mountains or hills for his castle to be supported on—were we flying?

Could I somehow make it down?

I looked back at him to ask. Was this his new way to torture me?

And then I saw the thin cut I'd given him on his left cheek, a stark line of unexpected red atop his otherwise implacable expression.

“Why are we here, sir?” I whispered.

“Because I need to know where you stand, Lisane.” He looked out the windows, his dark eyes tracing the horizon. “I could give you back to him. I could set you free.”

I swallowed, parts of me thrilling, thinking of being far away from here already. Tearing off his chain and leaving it behind, never breathing in foul smoke again.

“Or,” he went on, twisting his attention back to me, “you could choose to stay and let me teach you.” The corner of his lips on the side with the cut lifted into a knowing smirk.

My cut might scar him. He had others; I had seen them—even beneath his fur when he had been his creature.

He was not invulnerable.

“Is this a test, sir?” I asked him carefully.

“No,” he said and shook his head. “But it is your only chance to choose your course.”

I looked out the windows, imagining the towns and cities my father ruled . . . and that I would never, not even if my father died. My hand had already been given to Ker Vethys, a man who I didn’t even know, to secure his father’s aid, practically the moment I’d been born. And even if that was not the case, even if we lived in peace, I would just be given to a gifted warrior or a trusted aide, and the children *I* bore would always be slightly less important than my brother’s.

And I would almost always be trapped in women’s chambers, inside rooms without windows. Too valuable to be free, but not valuable enough to have earned freedom.

Whereas if I stayed here . . .

“Make your choice, little moth,” he said.

I looked back and found him studying me. “What is your true name, sir?”

He tilted his head and then answered. “Rhaim.” And as he spoke, the cut I’d given him moved slightly.

I had done that to him. *Me*. Against a grand magician.

I had power in me.

I had found it once, and I would find it again.

“I’m staying.”

He—*Rhaim*—gave a pleased chuckle, from deep inside his chest. “I will go get the pipe.”

We worked all morning, and despite whatever ability I'd shown the night prior, and how well I could remember the crackling moment of the weapon in my hand, taming the smoke eluded me. At least Rhaim continued to seem patient, although the fraying tear up the side of my dress reminded me he could be otherwise.

Before he left, to do whatever it was that he did without me, he pulled a book from the shelf to hand over. "Start reading here."

I took it from him to open up. It was a journal, written in a flourished script.

"Ayazim was a well-respected mage in his time. I don't think you'll find answers in there, necessarily, because no two paths are alike, but it might help you to relax."

I frowned. "How can I concentrate and relax at the same time, sir?"

"We'll figure it out. You cannot chase your power down. It's not a rabbit, and you're not a wolf," he said, emptying his pipe to pocket it. "You need to access it, and channel it, and there is concentration in the channeling when you do . . . but to find it in the first place is not sheer willpower; otherwise every town's local despot would throw lightning."

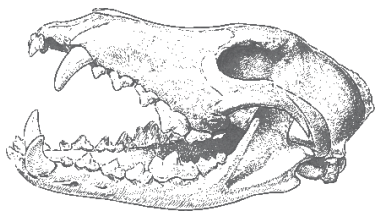
I licked my lips, listening. He'd referred to us as "we."

Like *we* might someday be the same.

"Thank you, sir," I said, bobbing the book up and down like a curtsy.

He nodded. "You're welcome. I will return," he said, and left.

But he didn't. Not that day, not the next, nor the morning after.



RHAIM

“Jaegar only sent the two of you?”

The man who passed for the mayor of the port town we were standing outside of had come out of his home to eye Sibyi and me warily.

“Two mages are all you need,” Sibyi said, giving the man a winning smile.

I didn’t bother. “Did you want to fight the Deathless on your own?”

The man frowned at me. He appeared sickly and had a nervous energy that made him seem guilty of something. “We have a thriving community here. We pay our taxes. Jaegar takes our sons, and for what?”

“Take it up with Jaegar,” I said, ignoring him. Some of Jaegar’s mages who were sensitive to magic were tracing down the Deathless, same as they once had me. We’d been told an eruption of Deathless was about to burst beneath the Impressive Bay, and we needed to get there quickly. We should’ve just portaled to the shore, but Jaegar’s policy was to use the portals that he’d erected around the continent for his mages if at all possible, so that the “people” would know we were there on his behalf.

Which meant we were fifty feet outside the port’s closed gates, and now having to deal with local government, a task for which my centuries of magical studies had not prepared my temperament.

I spun my hand behind myself—I'd lived long enough to travel to most places, and my memory was spectacular; it had to be, to use my magic as I did. I'd spent a pleasant day here years ago, shoreside—it would be nothing to portal into town, rather than deal with fools.

“No!” the mayor shouted, running up on us with his guards to stop us. They were a mealy lot, and a growl caught in my throat. I assessed the situation in an instant.

“The only reason you're in *charge* here,” I said, piercing him with my eyes, “is because Jaegar's been stealing sons away to war.” I took a moment to look disdainfully at all of them. “Either you all hid from the draft, or you were deemed incompetent in some fashion—I'm betting on the latter.”

The men behind the mayor crossed their weapons, long pikes with cruel hooks at the end, used to haul massive fish up from the depths.

Sibyi appeared confused. “Did . . . you not want us to do our job?” he asked the men, reminding me that he was young enough to be surprised by incompetence.

“I guess we share that in common,” I muttered.

“But we're supposed to—” Sibyi went on, as though he could explain his way inside.

“No,” the mayor said. “We don't need your kind. Go back to Jaegar and tell him we know he lies. We're done with him, and we're done with the Seven, and if he wants to march back here himself, I'll tell it to his face.” He held up a reedy finger and gestured between us. “And if we see either of you inside the gates, putting on a little show, we'll kill you.”

I gave him a wolfish smile, showing all of my currently very-human teeth, before looking for a clean piece of roadway to sit down on. “My death has been foreseen, and it is not by your hands,” I told him. It was not something I could be utterly sure of, but I had strong feelings. *Otherwise, why would fate have given me Lisane?* “So if you do see me inside your gates, likely saving your wretched stinking life,” I said, making myself comfortable on the ground, “you'd better have two

pouches of whatever passes for your finest tobacco to pay me with when I am finished, or I will come for you.”

The mayor spit in my direction, but it landed short. He made a sour face, either at me or his poor aim, and the guards rattled their weapons before all of them retreated quickly.

Sibyi looked between me and the departing men. “I don’t understand.”

“Give me a moment.” I unfocused my eyes and let myself feel my surroundings. The town ahead of us was swirling with life, and with life came animals, from the rats that ate scraps, to the fleas that rode on them, up through the chickens, dogs, goats, and horses—but I wanted something more.

Something stronger, and more dangerous.

Something from the open seas beyond.

I reached for my pipe, then felt a tickle in my mind, and set it aside. I didn’t think I’d have long enough to smoke it.

“Rhaim,” Sibyi clucked, clearly getting anxious.

I sucked in air through my teeth, compelled to explain myself to the other mage who was much, much younger than I was. “No matter where you go in your life, Sibyi, and no matter how well you perform your magery, there will always be a contingent of people ready to disbelieve you. The magic they’ve seen hasn’t been that impressive, or worse yet, somebody used it to trick them.”

I could feel the fish in the bay start to panic—but unlike creatures from the plains, they were relatively trapped. At least the sky above was dark—that would work in Sibyi’s favor—if he was even needed.

“It is almost the same with Jaegar, which is why they hate him,” I told Sibyi. *Same as I did, although for different reasons.* “He’s doomed on two fronts. Either he takes their men and supplies and grinds them up to win wars against monsters that they never see, and they think themselves fools for letting him—or he lets the Deathless attack their simple shores, forcing them to believe while risking killing the boys

who might one day replenish his ranks, and losing access to the dried fish that they'd bring with them."

Sibyi came over to stare down at me. "And what precisely are we doing out here?"

"Waiting," I told him. Just as the people who worked the ports beyond fished with nets, I was fishing with my mind, luring in exactly what was needed. "Just a little longer. You'll know when it's time."

Sibyi inhaled deeply. "Rhaim," he said, making my name an imprecation. I'd noticed on our many trips out now that Sibyi was rather duty-bound. A shame, seeing as his master, Zabel the Deathbringer, had been as irreverent as they'd come. Then again, it was easy to have a sense of humor when you could drop a man with magic at a hundred paces.

I ignored him, briefly closing my eyes. The waters of the bay were thrumming with activity. The Deathless must have breached below the waves—I sensed every single mobile living thing inside it now headed to the open ocean at its far side—all except for one I urged to meet them.

"Soon, now," I told Sibyi—as we both heard distant shouts of surprise.

In a little while, they'd shift to screams of horror.

"Is that because . . . ?" Sibyi asked, his eyes widening at the game I played.

"Most likely," I said, sitting up, then standing. I casually walked for the closed gate, and knocked on its doors. "Were you still intent on killing us?" I called up for sport.

Before anyone could answer me the gates opened, and people started madly rushing out.

"Fuck—Rhaim!" Sibyi snapped.

This time, he had a point. I couldn't open up a portal with this many people surrounding us; someone unprepared might run through and get cut in half. I looked over at him, casting up an arm to buffer us from the chaos.

“Get behind me,” I told him, and started pushing my broader form upstream.

It was one thing to not believe in the Deathless when you’d never seen one.

It was apparently another thing entirely to see one dragging its bizarre naked and forlorn body out of the waters you’d fished from, swam in, and shat in your whole life.

The terror of the port’s citizens echoed out of their throats and off the walls as they raced away from the creatures hauling themselves out of the water on their shores.

I’d never managed to make a study of a Deathless—they didn’t “live” long enough for that—and they didn’t answer any of my magic’s calls, nor could I ever sense their minds.

And after they were dead—*again*—they seemed to dissipate quickly, falling apart into their component bits of flesh and the fluid that animated them when they were alive.

But they did possess some strange kind of life, facilitated by residual willpower or fantastical hate. I knew it because sometimes when you were fighting them it almost seemed like they wanted to talk to you though they could never manage words, just a persistent, aching moan.

No one knew where they came from, or if they had a greater purpose—all that was known was if you didn’t kill them all, or somehow close the eruption they were emerging from, they’d just keep coming up from the ground, endlessly, and then they’d start killing things around them, before traveling across the countryside.

They went for the living creatures first, but if an eruption had naturally cornered them they’d start shredding plants with their sharp teeth—Sibyi and I had seen as much a week ago, sent to handle an infestation in a ravine. And the land where an eruption had taken place became inhospitable to life thereafter, a scarred spot where nothing else would grow.

I wasn't entirely sure what was going to happen out in the ocean after this, honestly. Would there be a dead spot in the sea? Would the water be poisoned? But studying that would be up to Jaegar's scholars later—for now we needed to act.

The density of terrified people lessened the closer we got to the water's edge, and miraculously no guards arrived to fight us—but there were a few brave citizens at the shorefront, holding out staves and blades.

The Deathless were slow, sludging forward—their strength was in their numbers, and their sheer relentlessness. These were dripping wet, intent on crawling up the shoreline, and making their way into the nearest hovels, twenty of them in sight, and surely another fifty or so still creeping up the ocean floor.

“Plan?” Sibyi asked, sure that I had one.

I cast my mind out. The creature I'd summoned was still speeding in. *Good*. “Just a few more minutes,” I told him, and then whistled loudly to get the attention of the nearest shambolic dead, continuing to walk for the ocean, my boots sinking into silty sand.

“Oh, this doesn't feel like a plan to me,” Sibyi muttered, not precisely clinging to my side, but quite nearby.

“I just need time, is all. Also I'll need you to protect me.” I wasn't fully myself anymore. It was like I was only half here, and half inside an entire other body, one that was gloriously huge and streaked with muscles.

Sibyi raised a hand up, then let out a hiss of air as he pulled it back down. “I can't use lightning if they're this close, Rhaim.”

Come faster, I whispered with my mind, willing my new pet to race. *Come and I will give you so many things to kill*, I promised it, then swallowed, realizing it was far, far larger than I had bargained for.

“Hold these for me,” I said, divesting myself of my flask and pipe, handing them to Sibyi, who took them but still gawked as the Deathless turned toward us.

“Why don’t you do some magic? Use clams in the sand to nibble on their toes?” Sibyi’s voice rose in panic as he tucked my belongings into his robe. As the dead came closer, I felt his fear and his power create a pressure change around us as he readied to somehow use his magic regardless of our safety.

Then there was a splash disturbing the surface of the water, fifty feet away. My vision shattered into two, the view of the kraken below the waves, watching Deathless clamber out of an eruption just offshore as the kraken used my eyes to look out at the dead already milling around us.

Yes.

These things.

Kill them all.

A tentacle the size of a man’s thigh lunged out of the ocean, grabbed the nearest Deathless in front of Sibyi, and slammed it to the ground. I watched it fall into pieces, and felt the creature’s pleasure at seeing it through my eyes, as Sibyi shouted in alarm. “What the—!”

“Protect my back,” I repeated to him, ran my hands through my hair, and gave myself fully over to the beast below.

If I were controlling a beast on land, it and I would be as equals, seeing the same things, feeling the same ground beneath our feet.

But controlling a beast from the sea required more of me—its eyes were not as mine, so it needed mine to see. And a creature this large . . . I needed all of my concentration, both to control it and to stop it from pouring through all my power.

My mind started to bend as the kraken used me—*same as I was using it*—to look around, seeing a world it never had before, with both a crisp and frightening curiosity, and something like delight, while I tried to corral its interest into killing.

That, I thought, focusing us on the dead walking our way on shore, the ocean lapping at our feet. *It would harm us.*

Kill it for me.

And any you see below the water, too.

Tentacles flailed up and splashed down, slamming on top of Deathless, breaking them apart, winding around their middles and squeezing, grabbing their ankles and pulling them down. All of the Deathless were drawn to our commotion.

The dead possessed no common sense. Deathless still poured out of the eruption, and I could feel their teeth biting ineffectually against the kraken's rubbery skin, their claw-like fingernails scraping against its hide as the creature twirled itself in loops beneath the waves, dashing them against the ground, grinding them against the shore with glee, the water clouding with both ichor and grit.

"Insanity," Sibyi whispered, watching.

Controlling the kraken was burning through my magic like a lit fuse, and I felt my beast surging under my skin, trying to answer the kraken's strength with his own. Arm after arm lunged out, massive loops of muscle, beating the ground around Sibyi and I with wet smacks that shattered the dead, spattering Sibyi and me with their tepid guts. Sibyi gasped, again and again, as we slowly turned, him guarding my back while I tried to handle my overstuffed mind.

"Rhaim?" Sibyi asked, sounding concerned.

I couldn't answer him.

The kraken was strong and old; it wanted more of me. Here I'd been thinking that it would be my pet—little did I know how curious it was of man, and how much it wanted knowledge of "*the dry*." I scanned the ocean, sheltered and unused parts of my brain lighting up with the strange senses it possessed, looking for the last few dead stragglers, sending the kraken after them, trying to finish things off.

And then the sensation of magical pressure released, both above and below—I felt the ground shake with my own two feet, at the same time as the kraken registered sifting sand. The creature looked around, disappointed that there was nothing left to destroy, and then focused all of its attention on me, like

it was trying to crawl into my mind, as if my skull were a shell it could fit into.

I shouted, dropping to my knees, and Sibyi followed me. I could feel the kraken watching him with unabashed interest.

We are finished! I told the creature.

*But are we **closed-beak** through?* it asked back, images taking the place of words as thoughts.

I knelt in the sand, fighting it, knowing its intrusion wasn't cruel—it had no concept of surface life, nor did it fully know what it was doing to me—just that it wanted to see.

To touch.

To *breathe*.

“Rhaim?” Sibyi asked, with his hands upon my shoulders. “Are you all right?”

The kraken was euphoric at feeling the touch of his *sad-short-tentacles* on me—and a loop of sheer muscle stretched out, winding around Sibyi's waist, and hauling him up to taste-feel with a suckered arm, pulling him out into the water for a closer look. I felt Sibyi gather his own power instantly, ready to protect himself.

“No!” I said and it turned into a howl as I lost the fight against my beastly form, racing into the water as I changed, trying to protect each of them from the other. “Don't fight!” I told Sibyi through my own crowding jaw. “Only—curious—wants to—know,” I panted, as inside my mind I implored the kraken to put Sibyi back down.

The kraken felt the difference in me—it didn't understand what had happened, and in its surprise, it was easier to tug it free from my thoughts as it dropped Sibyi. The other mage coughed against the water where he'd landed and gave me a completely panicked look.

I snatched him up beneath his arms with hands now tipped with claws and hauled him back to shore.

Go home! I told the kraken, feeling its intense sensation fade, closing myself off from it, bit by bit. *Back to the deep with*

you!

But I would wrap-taste-learn, it said in its complicated way, and I felt it ache for knowledge—the same as I so often had over the course of my life. I put a clawed and furred hand to my head.

Yes. I promise. If our paths meet again. I meant it—I truly did—but I also couldn't lie to the kraken if I'd wanted to, not when we were still magically intertwined.

And because it believed me, I felt it slither out and leave us. I collapsed beside Sibyi, feeling damp sand grind into my short fur. He looked over at me, still horror-struck by what had almost happened.

I guessed his final death, watching him. “You drown, don't you?”

He blinked at me, slowly focusing. “Yes. But not like this.” He stared up at the sky, and then started laughing, somewhat maniacally, before looking back at me. “Nice coat,” he said, his lips lifting into a grin.

“Fuck you,” I growled at him, and gave a barking laugh.



Sibyi took his time standing and dusting himself free of sand, while I merely stood and shook myself, well aware of how much I hulked over him in my beastly form.

It was one thing for me to decide to change, and another thing entirely for me to burn through my magic and have no choice. I knew I'd be trapped like this now for days as I wrestled my beast inside myself, pushing my humanity back out to the surface like I was swimming through tar.

He relished in his control over me, feeling the wind blow through the fine hair on his back, and the shaggier hair around his neck. *He* could scent the fish guts that'd been spilled on the docks nearby, and the aroma made him drool. The commotion

of the people who'd just watched us fight pleased him, even as he found it irritating, because it proved they were scared, and he liked *when people were frightened of him*.

And possibly I did, too.

We padded up the shore, my pawprints beside Sibyi's boot prints on the beach until we met the mayor and his guards where the sand packed into the stones of the streets, and the crowds behind him hushed.

To his credit, the mayor had two pouches of tobacco in hand, which he gave to a guard, to give to me—I directed him in Sibyi's direction, who gave me a look, but then took it regardless.

I gathered enough control of myself to speak. "Next time you insult a mage—consider how close that creature is to the water's edge," I growled with my rough voice, before walking forward. The people in front of us parted to make space in a wave.

"And keep paying your taxes, eh?" Sibyi added, joining me. I snorted at him.

I could feel the eyes of the crowd on me and hear their quiet conversations. Some of them had seen what'd happened, and were retelling the story to others—some of them seemed fearful, and others of them seemed angry. I knew oftentimes scared men needed to yell at someone to hide their fears.

"Bribes?" Sibyi whispered as we walked, patting the pocket of his robe where he'd stashed my tobacco. My leathers were spelled to survive my transitions—but the rest of the objects I carried weren't, so it was better he held them for now.

"I've taken worse from lesser people," I said, lifting my lips in a snarl. My beast was scanning the crowd, contemptuous of them. *He* wanted to be the thing they expected, to move on all fours, slaving, gnashing *his* teeth. *He* wanted to *scare* and then *chase* them as they ran away, preferring to hear shrieks of sheer terror to shouts of manly bravado, and his instincts pulled at me every bit as hard as the kraken had earlier. It had been a long time since *he'd* had this much power over me.

I put a paw up over my mage-mark to remind me it was there—it was the only thing in this form that proved me once human, and not some monster that should be killed on sight.

And then we were outside, in front of Jaegar’s portal. I fully expected the townspeople to disassemble it once we were gone, and perhaps burn the pieces.

“Who do you think they’ll tell stories of, later?” Sibyi asked as he waved his hand to open the portal to Jaegar’s tent. “The Deathless? The kraken? Or you?”

“I don’t care to know,” I told him, as we stepped through it.



We found ourselves in a convocation of war-mages when we returned, most of whom I knew on sight: Pellian the Stoneflyer, Megial the Candle, Wyrval the Green, and several others, then lastly Castillion the Spiked, Jaegar’s throne-sworn. His gaze travelled over me, and his upper lip curled in condemnation.

He alone knew what Jaegar had spent to get me here. My beast surged forward, stealing back whatever progress I had made, and a low growl rose in my throat, unbidden, at the thought that he had *ever touched my property*.

“Rhaim!” Wyrval said, coming up obliviously to clap my furred back, and I had to stop myself from lunging to snap his arm off. He was the same size as me when I was human, but with much darker skin, and his short beard and hair were tinged by moss. He could work magic with plants the same as I could with animals—in fact, he was probably the next most dangerous person in the room, and we would be evenly matched if we fought, depending on the terrain. “I’d heard you’d come around! I can’t wait to work with you!”

Unlike the townspeople we’d just left behind, my fellow mages looked at my new form with the same hunger for knowledge I usually felt.

My beast found their interest in me disconcerting—he wanted to get home to *beautiful Lisane*.

No, I told him, with no small amount of horror. I knew the things he felt for her, because they were merely amplifications of my own urges, without decorum or boundaries.

Yes, my beast refuted me. *She belongs to me*, he continued, curling his claw-tipped fingers into grasping fists. *And someday, I will mark her and knot her and make her mine*.

And what was worse than being trapped inside my beast, was that I couldn't deny that I wanted those things, nor the illicit thrill I felt at *his* confession of them.

Which was why I could never let *him* out like this, around her.

The rest of the men in the room finally registered how dangerous I was in my current condition, as I inhaled with a snarl and a drop of spittle fell from my muzzle to land on the carpeted floor.

“Excuse me,” I gritted out through too many teeth, my shoulders rising and falling with my breath. I needed to get away from here, to cool down and cool off, and gain control again. “It will have to wait several days. Tell Jaegar.”

Only I couldn't go home like this—I would go elsewhere, to wait my magic out, for Lisane's sake.

Sibyi pressed a hand to his side and groaned. “I think either that thing cracked a rib—or you did,” he said, giving me a mock glare, as he tried to dissipate the tension. “He summoned a fucking kraken,” he complained, loudly, to everyone present. “Without telling me.”

“It seemed the most expedient choice,” I made myself say, feeling like I was pretending to be human even as I took a step back because the need to escape was overwhelming. All the other mages were too close here. I could scent their sweat, some colognes, what they'd last eaten—I needed to get free.

“And what if you hadn't found one offshore?” Sibyi asked.

“Then I would've let you zap all of them with lightning bolts,” I told him brusquely. “I have to go now, though.” I moved to

swing a paw behind me. Portaling in a room this crowded was usually considered rude, but I had to escape. “Tell the king.”

“Tell the king what?” a loud voice asked as the tent flap flew open, and Helkin entered with several of his guards and a man who must’ve been close to his own rank, because his armor was equally ornate, with a purple cross beaten into the breastplate. Helkin spotted me, head and shoulders over everyone else present in the room, and his eyes went wide, as his men’s hands reached for weapons.

None of Jaegar’s court had ever seen me as a beast before—only a few of the mages present here had. It didn’t bother any of them, they were used to the vagaries of magic . . . but they also hadn’t made a deal with me.

“That he *summoned* a kraken,” Sibyi said, shaking his head. “That then tried to eat me!” He laughed, and congenially punched my arm.

I didn’t feel the blow, even though I knew Sibyi was strong. I was too busy following Helkin’s thoughts as they flashed across his face as he took me in, piece by piece. My sheer size, the fact that I was banded with muscle, and then all the individual parts past that comprised me: the ears, the muzzle, the fangs, the way my neck sloped out to my shoulders, and the numerous scars from prior fights that cut up my short black fur. I saw him take in my sheath, folded up against my stomach, the awkward way I had to hold myself to stand as men did, my wicked whip of a tail, and all twenty of my claws.

I looked like something out of a nightmare you told to small children who didn’t behave, and I didn’t know whether it was better to see me in the half-dark, as Lisane had, to possibly be able to convince yourself I didn’t exist, or I wasn’t as bad as you feared, then to see me in the full day like now, where there was no denying that I was.

Yes, princeling, I thought but didn’t say aloud, as I took a step toward him. *I am the beast that you have sold your sister to.*

*She wants to be with me now—and I will **never** give her back.*

I dared him to read the truth of it in my eyes, before repeating myself. “Do not plan on utilizing me for three or four days.” I moved around Sibyi and headed for the door.

Helkin blocked it with his body, his jaw clenched and breathing hard. “That wasn’t our arrangement, All-Beast.”

I looked down my muzzle at him, visualizing myself picking him up and hurling him across the room. I leaned down and growled, “I changed the rules. What of it?”

He stood his ground, as his guards neared. “My father and I—we took you at your word.”

I blinked and laughed, sounding like a hoarse bellow. “Oh? I’m glad to know it was a *family* decision then,” I said, feeling a whit of my humanity return with my mockery of him. I pushed him aside and left the tent—if I couldn’t portal away, I needed more air to breathe.

I heard swords pulled out of scabbards and I turned on the dirt path outside, finding Helkin’s contingent of guards prepared to fight. Castillion wisely put himself protectively in front of Helkin, although I could’ve killed the boy ten times over before the Spiked One managed to stop me.

The other mages had also come out, and were counseling peace. “Didn’t you hear me? *A kraken*,” Sibyi repeated to someone with emphasis, hoping it would change their course.

I caught and held Helkin’s gaze, ignoring Castillion purposefully. “If I were entirely without honor, *boy-thing*, I would’ve never fought for you at all. So you will have to trust that I am both honorable and that I know what is best for me and *my* family.” I watched his eyes narrow and his nostrils flare, thinking about just what I’d implied. “Four days, on the outside,” I told the assembled mages and stalked away.

I wasn’t going to portal now.

Let them all see me and quake.

I listened for the sounds of being followed as I headed for the outskirts of camp, which was loosely guarded by a ring of less powerful mages, whose only job was to use their abilities to

keep the Deathless out. I didn't hear anyone for a long while—and then I heard someone running up behind me.

“Rhaim!” Sibyi called after me, jogging up, holding one hand to his side. “Now that I think about it, this is probably what broke my rib,” he complained, pulling out my flask, quickly followed by my pipe and my two pouches of bribed tobacco.

I was tempted to tell him to just keep them all—the second I was out of sight, I intended on dropping to all fours and running as far and as fast as I could, to keep my beast busy and wear his strength down, making it easier for me to control him. I had no interest in carrying anything for several days with my claw-tipped fingers, or in my maw—then I thought about the last time I'd seen the pipe: cupped in Lisane's hands, in her lap, her full lips frowning, her eyes pressed closed, as she searched inside herself for magic.

Would that I could give her some of mine.

Would that I could give her any part of me.

I shuddered, wracked with want and need. I'd been a fool to deny myself the pleasures of humanity for so long, always thinking that I would have another day, and maybe that was what made me so susceptible to her.

But of course my death was going to be special to me. Lisane and I were trapped in a dance now. We didn't know the steps, but we were bound to one another whether we liked it or not. We were both doomed to finish the song, together, and somehow my acknowledging that made my beast relinquish the slightest hold of my body, and I didn't feel like I had to fight so fiercely inside.

I took the pipe and one pouch from Sibyi, deciding to stay upright for the time being. “Keep the liquor—I'm sure it tastes better than the water in your bags.”

He laughed, then looked at me strangely. “Why aren't you portaling home?”

There was an inquisitive group of soldiers paying attention to us now—not any of Helkin's personal guards, but I hadn't reached the edge of camp yet. Jaegar's men were

understandably nosy, and some of them had come out of their tents to listen in—and to see me. Word had gotten out, and they were the same as the crowds at the port: curious, angry, scared. I could scent the sweat of their labor, the sweet tang of their fear, and a whiff of the foul ichor that kept the Deathless living, from when they'd gotten splashed while fighting them.

Had any of them come from the Impressive Bay as children? How many Deathless had they seen? Had they been forced to fight by the draft, or had they always been hoping for the chance, foolishly brave like my Lisane?

I reached up to draw my thumb down the mark she had given me on my cheek.

“Because I don't want to scare anyone,” I said, I told Sibyi, loudly enough to carry.

I filled the pipe in full view of the soldiers, lit it, then wedged it in between my teeth.

Let them tell stories of this beast instead, the one who walks, and talks, and smokes thoughtfully. I gave Sibyi a nod, then turned around.

I would pretend to be a man again until I was one.



The shutters stayed open at least, and the view stayed the same, except for the traveling sun and the sheep drifting as they grazed. I spent half my time reading the book Rhaim had left for me, and the other half daydreaming about the life I'd left behind, so close below but still so far.

Had something happened to him?

I would feel better about his absence if he'd left me more clear instructions. I had a small run of his castle, of all the doors that would open for me: bedroom, bathroom, library, kitchen, but I felt trapped and lonely. I was irritated that he'd made me promises then left, then irritated at myself for hoping for his return, up until the morning I'd found him sitting on the same chair I had drawn up to look out the windows, his boots on the sill, and his pipe in his mouth.

I almost ran up to him. "You're back!" I exclaimed, putting my hand to my chest. "Sir," I hurried to add.

He glanced over—the book he'd given me to read was in his lap. He'd picked it up from the chair where I'd left it. "Indeed," he said, with light sarcasm.

"Where did you go?"

"It doesn't matter," he said and shrugged.

"But the castle didn't move!" I gestured wildly out the glass.

"And you didn't like the view?" His tone changed to amused.

"No, not that," I sighed, going from surprised to frustrated. I swore as a princess I had had greater control of my emotions,

but anytime I was around him they flickered like a candle flame. “I thought you might have died.”

“Ah, from one cut to my imminent demise.” He tsked. The mark I’d made on his cheek was almost healed—and it was going to scar him, I thought, with a certain amount of pride. He drew himself up more solemnly, pulling his feet down. “I am sorry if my absence scared you, little moth.”

I frowned at him. “Scared is possibly not the right word,” I said crisply. “Sir.”

Rhaim laughed at that. “Regardless,” he said, standing up. “How much of this have you read?” he said, tipping the book in my direction.

“Just over half. I don’t understand everything in it, though. And there are times when some of the words in it hurt my brain.”

“Certain chapters are spelled. Keep trying; eventually, they’ll make sense. Have you managed any new magic since I saw you last?”

To be honest, I’d been so scared of failure I hadn’t tried. I shook my head, and he lightly sighed, before handing the heavy book to me. “Then your training continues. Take this over there, to that table.”

I took the book from him and went to do as I was told. He’d rearranged some of the furniture since I had left the room last night, and one of the tables was against a wall of books and empty. I swallowed. I trusted he did nothing without purpose.

So what was coming next?

I made my way over, wondering if I should prepare to run again, or strip, or crawl, feeling a strange combination of frightened and alive as I cautiously looked back at him. “Here, sir?” I asked, my voice small.

“Yes,” he said. “Bend over it, Lisane, and touch the books beyond.”

I stood at the side of the table, waiting for his request to make sense. Its top was a thick slab of wood, and I wasn’t sure how

—
“Did I ask quietly?” he wondered aloud.

I set the book aside, and did as I was told. The table caught me at the top of my thighs just before they hinged. I lowered myself down over the wood, onto hands, then elbows, then my chest, and I reached out, as far as I could, my fingertips only barely gracing the book spines on the far side.

I heard him come up beside me. “Keeping your body there, now lift your skirt,” he commanded.

I knew I’d heard that order right as well. I felt myself flush and my stomach go low. Here I thought we were going to be equals—what kind of fool was I? My heart thudded in my chest as my breath steamed out on the table’s shiny top in hot little bursts.

Then he briefly pressed one of his hands on the small of my back. The sensation made me jump and then still. “Never mind, Lisane,” he said.

His hand lifted and by the time I twisted to look his direction, he’d picked up the book and was walking off.

I rocked up onto my forearms, watching him go, willing him to look back.

Had I disappointed him? Was I not ready? Why couldn’t he speak more plainly?

“I want to learn, sir,” I called out after him.

He stopped and tilted his head, without looking around. “I want that for you too, moth. But you have to trust in my instruction, first.”

I rose up on my toes and bit my lips, trapped between humiliation and despair.

I wanted to believe in him.

No, I realized, it was even worse than that—I planted my head into my hands, breathing hard—I wanted him to believe in *me*.

“Just,” I begged him, then I pressed my cheek against the table’s surface and raced my hands down to hitch up my skirt

before I could think about it again. I had no undergarments on, I hadn't had any since I'd first been given this dress, so I was completely exposed, far more than I had been when I'd been shelving. There was no hiding now, and I couldn't pretend that he couldn't see me. "Sir," I said softly, and then closed my eyes tightly.

Either he would come back, or he wouldn't.

And if he wouldn't—I would wait till he returned and found me.

There was a long pause, one in which I was sure I had lost my chance, that I was showing his library my ass for nothing, then I heard him exhale roughly. "Are you ready to train now, Lisane?"

"Yes," I told him, though my eyes were still closed.

I heard him approach and felt him set the book back on the table. "And may I touch you?"

He was asking. He hadn't asked when he'd been his monster.

This was safer, yes?

I nodded against the table rather than answer him with words, and then I made sure when I was finished my face was turned away from him, where he couldn't see it. My blood was ringing in my ears, and I knew my cheeks were red.

"Good, moth. Here I go," he warned, and I slowly felt the heat of his fingertips and then of his palm, as he settled his hand on me. I clenched, fearing some invasion, but all he did once he was there was stroke me, from the top of my ass, down its curve, to the highest point of my thigh, before lifting his hand and doing it again, touching places no one but my mother, my maids, and I had seen. By the time he did it the third time, I was less frightened of him—by the tenth, I'd managed to catch my breath.

By the fifteenth . . . I didn't know what to think anymore, so it was just easier if I didn't.

As if sensing that, Rhaim started to speak again, his tone as gentle as his hand. "I can't train you, Lisane, if you don't

believe in my training. But I also cannot explain everything that I'm going to do to you, because if I do, it won't work." His hand paused. "Little moth, look at me."

I risked turning toward him and finally opening up my eyes, finding his gaze intent on mine.

"If I had told you I was going to become my beast the other day, would you have been so frightened or tried so hard to escape me?" he asked.

I thought back to my sheer terror that evening—and how it'd allowed me to access enough magic to hurt him. If I hadn't truly believed in his violence, would that have been possible? "No, sir," I confessed.

"That's right," he agreed, rubbing just his thumb across the highest point of my ass. "So knowing that, little moth, do you want me to continue?"

Whatever fears his careful petting had pushed away came rushing back. "Are you going to hurt me?" I mouthed the words rather than whisper them, and was horrified to watch him nod.

"If you allow it." His gaze scanned down my body, to where he'd left his hand. "I had you lift up your skirt so I would be able to see my marks."

It felt like my soul left my body. Whatever I had thought *this was*—I couldn't breathe, I couldn't think. *He was going to hurt me—and he was asking me to let him.* My mind swirled and the room went dark, until he lifted his hand from my ass, put it on my cheek, and tapped it. "Come back, little moth."

I gasped in surprise at the unexpected touch. Was that a hit? No, it was just him reminding me he was there—maybe the rest of it would be like that, too? "How bad?" I asked, my voice soft and high.

The look he gave me then was solemn. "No more than you can take."

"How will you know?"

He shook his head slightly. “I won’t; not until we find out together.”

“And will I be able to do magic then?”

His lips pressed into a thin line before he answered. “Honestly, moth, I cannot say.”

I swallowed, my mouth completely dry. If he’d made me any promises . . . I would’ve wanted to believe him, but I would’ve also known I shouldn’t.

Which meant he was telling me the truth. “Shall we continue?” he asked.

Rather than respond, I closed my eyes and curved into the table’s wood, tensing—and he placed a hand on the small of my back again, pressing me down. “Relax, Lisane. Breathe.”

When I felt his hand lift up I trembled—and then yelped in surprise as he smacked me with the book.

The sensation was unexpected. I leapt forward, catching my legs against the desk’s edge, my body thinking itself smarter than my mind. Then he touched me again with his hand, soothing the spot that he’d just hit, as I twitched and bit my lips.

“Steady,” he counseled. And then I felt his hand lift, and I knew it was coming again.

Another solid thwack.

Why was he like this?

And why was I letting this happen to me?

He drew the edge of the book up one of the spots where he’d spanked me, and I hissed.

“Red is a beautiful color on you,” he said, and then he struck again, this time swinging up, catching the curve of my cheek and making me jiggle, my breasts rolling his necklace against the table’s dark wood.

“Why, sir?” I whispered, wondering if he would really answer me.

He paused. “Control. Trust. Letting go.” He changed the side of me that he was on, and stroked my hair back from my face. I fluttered my eyes open to see him, expecting to find him cold and impassive, but instead, he seemed concerned. “And while what we do may make you cry, you are not just the Princess of Tears, Lisane. There is so much more to you. I know it.”

He stroked his hand kindly across my welting ass as he spoke, and I didn’t know if I should flinch or lean back into him like a cat.

And then he struck me again, this time with his hand, making a slapping sound and sending me jiggling anew. A flush rose up over my entire body, I could feel my blood soaring, embarrassed to be exposed and treated so.

He went back to stroking my raw welts gently, as he leaned down on the table beside me.

“Do you know what I thought of every night that I wasn’t here, little moth?” he asked, and I quickly shook my head. It was so strange to be having a conversation with him while he acted like this was normal—*any part of it*—and it made my mind spin even harder.

“I didn’t care what you were thinking, or if you were scared or angry with me,” he said, while stroking his palm against my hot skin. “All I wondered was, ‘what will my little moth become?’” He brought his face to mine, so that I was forced to look deep in his eyes, and the closer he got, the easier it was to see the flecks of green inside them. “Don’t you want to know that too?”

I swallowed and nodded. “Yes,” I breathed, sagging down, giving over, so that my hips were the highest point of me.

He took another moment to measure my intentions, then gave a satisfied exhale. “Good, Lisane,” he said, and smacked me. His face was still mere inches from mine, his torso turned to face me. His eyes stayed on mine, searching for the magic we both hoped was there, no doubt. I closed my eyes so I wouldn’t see myself disappoint him; it was too much on top of everything else. “Beautiful, Lisane,” he said, and smacked again, the other cheek. I whimpered, but I didn’t move.

“Strong, Lisane,” he crooned, encouragingly, and hit me again. I twisted and whined, as he went back to soothing. “Brave, Lisane,” he said, finally, finishing me off with one last stroke. There were tears in my eyes but I was holding them back.

I lay there, dizzy, breathing hard, and feeling things I’d never felt before. Shame, so much shame, that I was here, being ill-used by him, like this, and the knowledge that the countryside of my home was just below us made me want to run away and hide.

But.

Did he believe the things he’d said about me?

More importantly . . . did I?

I had suffered through them, hadn’t I? I had just proved myself strong, and brave . . . even if not pretty while doing it. I sniffed with the tears I hadn’t cried.

I opened up my eyes and found him still watching me closely. “How much more can you take?” he asked me, utterly calm.

I searched inside myself for the answer, and found it. “Whatever magic requires.” His pupils widened at that and he let out a ragged breath, licking the line of his top teeth. All human now, not a single fang among them, but I remembered what he was, and how scared of him I’d been. My legs were shaking, my bottom hurt, and my pride was non-existent. “I want to learn, sir. Help me.”

One of his dark eyebrows rose up and the look he gave me then . . . it wasn’t affectionate. I did not think there was any such feeling in him. But it was intrigued, and I had his full attention, which was somehow almost as bad as suffering his hand.

“Bold, Lisane,” he told me, sitting up, smacking my ass again with an open palm, moving to stand behind me.

This time he didn’t stop and he didn’t tell me anything; I was alone on the wood with my thoughts. I hid my face in my folded arms, giving up on touching the books, just withstanding his onslaught, like I had dove into a stuttering river of sensations. The strikes against my ass, with their fresh

and sudden pain, and the way each new stroke made my old pains worse. The way he drove me forward on my toes, so that I could barely kick to touch the ground and felt unstable, and the way my body and breasts rocked back and forth, forward and up, then falling back, only to be hit again. It hurt, and I bit my lips and my nails cut my palms, and I was angry, and all I wanted was to be *free*.

From here.

From him.

From everything.

The desk cracked beneath me, as the same sensation happened in my mind. A sharp release of power, snapping like dry kindling. I screamed as I fell forward, catching myself in the sudden valley made of wood before I hit the ground, and then I twisted, looking up. My ass hurt where the welts he'd left touched the broken desktop, and he was looming over me in triumph.

“Was that you, or me?” he asked, though his laugh and grin said he knew the truth.

He offered me a hand. I didn't take it. I would've crawled away from him if I'd had anywhere else to go. I needed to breathe, I needed space—he was everything I hated and he made me hurt—but somehow he also made me magical, and I didn't understand.

Rhaim sat on his heels in front of me, making us even in an instant. “When I was fourteen,” he said, “my master held me underwater. My choices were to learn to breathe like a fish, somehow part the waves, or drown.”

I blinked, wiping away unshed tears with the back of one hand. My bottom was on fire now, everything that touched it made it burn. “Which one did you manage?” I somehow asked without sobbing.

“To breathe like a fish. Which is more complicated than you might think.” He stood back up and offered me his hand again. “You may very well hate me later—but wait until you have learned more, first.”

I stared at his hand. *At least there were no lies between us.* I took it, letting him pull me upright. The second I had done so though, I let go, to quickly shimmy down the skirt of my dress. His gaze flowed over me, then to the table, and back again—and he put his hand beneath my chin and pulled my face up so that I was forced to focus on him.

I was a flustered, sweaty mess. I hurt, I was angry, I was sad, I was so ashamed I could throw up. It felt like I didn't know anything anymore—maybe not even *who I was.*

And all my uncertainty made it easier to concentrate on him.

I still hated him—but it was good to feel sure about something.

“Repeat after me, Lisane,” he said slowly. “As I train you, I will never hurt you more than you can handle.”

When I hesitated, he shook my head gently. I swallowed, feeling my throat move against his knuckles. “You will never hurt me more than I can handle,” I repeated.

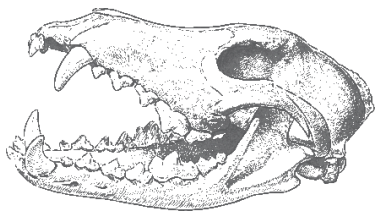
His eyes searched mine. “Do you truly believe that, little moth?” he asked me. His entire voice and bearing was sincere.

“No, sir,” I told him, and watched his brow furrow and his lips pull into a frown, before I whispered the truth of my heart. “But I want to.”

His jaw clenched, but he released my chin and nodded. “Please trust me, then. You are so much stronger than you know.”

I looked back at the table behind me. “I don't feel strong right now. Just sore.”

“Give it time,” he promised. “You will.”



RHAIM

I'd felt the greatness in her coming, of course. Each time I hit her, like the thunderclap of a nearing storm. I'd leaned forward on the table with her at first, to judge just what she could take of me, but then when I'd stood and seen the twin ovals of her ass, slowly turning vibrant red, carrying the welts from *my* hands like so many mage-marks—if I were not so used to controlling myself, things could've gone poorly.

Because from standing behind her I could see the soft pink edges of her seam, just barely hiding between her legs and much tighter hole between her ass cheeks. I'd been strongly tempted to fall forward on my knees, spread her wide, and taste her.

But she was untouched, and if she found this frightening, then that would scare her so much more.

And . . . she was trusting me.

She had done what I had told her—mostly without question—even though she didn't fully understand.

Even though I had been hurting her.

She hadn't squealed and squirmed her dress down, or started any piteous cries—instead she'd tried to be brave. I could read the lines of her body as she tried to ride through the pain, to find places inside herself to put it, until she couldn't take it and she overflowed—

And that was when the desk cracked.

Like her magic had snapped its fingers, helping her escape.

I suppose I should've been glad it didn't decide to hurt me instead—but if my final death was beating a beautiful woman's ass red, I was prepared to go. It would've been an ignoble death, for a noble cause.

I watched her gather herself up, and I knew she was hurting. “I have medicines that will help the inflammation, and the pain.”

“I'm all right,” she said quickly, staring down. “Sir.”

“That's not actually true. And I wasn't merely making a suggestion.” I toed her handiwork with my boot. “That wood is from a kaorak tree. At least a thousand years old, and three inches thick, and you broke it like it was nothing. So even if you are not lying to me about your ass, which we both know you are, you'll probably pass out soon.”

She was still trying to catch her breath, and to hold the skirt of her dress away behind her, so it wouldn't touch her skin. “Why?”

“You're not used to being a conduit yet. For all that it's finally happened, there's still parts of you that want to fight it. And fighting on the inside is just as exhausting as fighting on the out.” I willed her to listen to me. “It's okay to be tired, and it's okay to be weak. We are not at odds here, little moth, though your welts may disagree.”

“I think that . . .” she began, and I prepared to hear a blissful “you are right,” but then her eyes rolled back and I had to catch her before she fell.



I hefted her up in my arms and summoned the door to her room. Her face was as slack as the day she'd arrived, when I'd put her in my dungeon, and this time I was carrying her again, but only to her bed. I settled her there, then watched her flinch uncomfortably, hurting even in her sleep.

“Shhh,” I soothed her, and turned her to her side, to find Finx there. “Shoo,” I told him.

“I know the rules—but she’s asleep!” he protested, looking at her with all eight of his eyes. He touched the rough fabric of her dress with his four forepaws. “You could put her in something nicer, you know.”

“This is nice enough.”

My pet made a disdainful snort. “Not as nice as mine,” he said, and scabbled into her wardrobe before returning with what looked like a sheet of silk. I took it from him, and found a dress—a variation on the many others I could see hanging up inside.

“This is what you’ve been doing with your time?”

“Yes,” he said, bobbing. “And they’re nicer than the things you’ve been giving her to wear. Except, oh, wait, you haven’t.”

It would be kinder on her skin, at least. I untied Lisane’s belt and tugged her old dress off of her, bending her like a doll to free her, until she was naked on her bed before me, lying quietly on her side.

I’d been hard the whole time I’d been spanking her, of course—*how could I not be?*—and I ached still.

But now was not the time, nor place.

I wrestled her into the new dress, and I had to admit that it better complemented her soft skin. Finx chittered in his triumph. “Can I meet her?” he asked, expectantly.

If she was to truly be a mage, then I needed to let her witness my mistakes.

And perhaps one of them was keeping her. I rose from her bedside, and told Finx, “You may.”



LISANE

When I woke it was light in my room, mimicking daylight, and I was wearing one of the silk dresses from my wardrobe. I had no memory of putting it on.

I moved, and I was sore, which meant . . . *that had really happened.*

I'd practically let Rhaim beat me.

But then . . . I'd cracked his desk. His desk that had been made of thousand-year-old wood.

With my mind. With my *powers*.

I bit my lips to stop from squealing, which was good, because a second later I focused on a pool of blackness near my pillow's side.

What . . . was that?

One set of golden eyes opened, pupils slit like a cat's, then another, and another, wrapping around its head.

By then, I was screaming, sitting up, then hissing from the pain.

"Hello, princess!" the creature announced, waving my panic down with two limber legs.

I picked up my pillow and swatted at it—it scurried off impossibly quickly.

"Princess," I heard it say disappointedly, and whirled. It was sitting atop my wardrobe where I could see that it was not right.

I was closer to the door than it was—I bolted and ran headlong up the stairs.



I reached the dining room first, like I always did, and Rhaim was there on his side of the table, reading a book while eating. He glanced up when he saw me, then his eyes raked across my form, and I remembered how sheer this dress was.

“There’s a—a—thing!” I said pointing behind me, the way I had come.

“His name is Finx. He made you that,” he said, pointing a fork in my direction, before waving it up and down.

I stood there, trembling. “What is he?”

“A cross between a spider and a cat. And I gave him the voice of a ten-year-old boy,” Rhaim said, then grunted at my horror. “He’s an aberration. A thing I made that I ought’ve not.”

I looked back behind myself, and saw the creature there, waiting in the darkness of the hall, all eight of its shining eyes blinking. “Don’t tell her that,” the creature whispered.

“Why not? It’s the truth.”

The spider-cat crawled out into the light. His legs were not so loathsome when I could see the way they were attached, especially when he lifted a third leg on one side to scratch his ear.

“But he’s also loyal, and dependable, and I’d trust him with my life,” Rhaim continued.

Finx made a strange chittering noise, like a cat when it’s spotted prey mixed with another, far more alien sound. “And he really did make you that dress. And all the others in your wardrobe. Unbeknownst to me,” Rhaim said, with a slight glare at the creature. “I told him to leave you alone until this morning.”

He picked up a piece of what looked like bacon from his plate, and tossed it across the room. Finx chased it, skittering with all eight legs, batting it even further out, then pounced, crunching on it loudly.

“Why now? What changed?” I asked him.

“We both know you have powers,” he said, picking up another piece to tear and chew. “Up until now, I thought you had, and you hoped you had, but now we are both sure.” He followed Finx with his gaze. “He is the first thing I made when I tried alone—no, I take that back—he was the first thing I made that lived. So do not practice your powers without me from here on out, you may not be so lucky as to make yourself a reasonably charming spider-cat.”

“With . . . the voice of a boy,” I added.

“The boy was dying. I couldn’t fix him. I merely stole it.” Rhaim shrugged and gestured that I should sit and eat.

I didn’t know how to make any of that make sense, so I gave up on trying. I went over to my seat, and found a cushion waiting on my chair. I sat down delicately on it. “And it is morning?” I guessed, looking at my plate. Had I truly slept an entire day?

“It is, moth. How do you feel? Tell me,” he commanded.

I looked down the long dining room table at him. “Sore,” I confessed.

He nodded curtly. “I need you to eat everything I give you today. And to drink everything in the cup by your right hand.” I peered inside it. Its contents were brown and they smelled bad. “It will help with the pain and healing,” he encouraged.

“No, thank you, sir,” I said, pushing it back.

He gave me a bemused look and chuckled. “I wasn’t asking. And if you don’t drink it, your lessons will only take longer. I will not hurt you again, until you are healed.”

I stared hard at my plate and was quiet for a time, and I knew that he was waiting for a response. “Is this the only way to learn, sir?”

And then it was my turn to wait. He said nothing until I looked at him again. “It is what I have available. No rivers to drown you in here, alas.”

“Just books and torture then, sir?” I breathed.

His head tilted and his full lips pursed. “Was it really? Think back.”

I took a shuddering inhale. “Torture . . . for which I volunteered.”

“Repeatedly,” he said, one eyebrow rising. “So does that make it worse, or better?” When I didn’t respond, he rose and walked toward me, pausing to lean against the table halfway down. “Do not break on me now, little moth, when we are both so close to discovering your depths.”

And suddenly I was ambushed with realizations about my current situation. I was in a strange castle, with a strange man, wearing a strange dress, and sitting on a cushion because he’d spanked me like a child. “Why do you care? Why do you want to teach me? Am I just some foolish entertainment?” I looked around for the spider-cat and couldn’t find it. “Do you secretly wish I’d grow more legs?”

Rhaim closed his eyes and his brow furrowed. “You matter to me more than you know, Lisane.”

My name on his lips again—when he wanted things to be personal. “Did you mean the things you told me, yesterday, *Rhaim*?” I said, with as much spite as I could muster.

He made a growling sound and squinted, shoulders tensed, signs of warning that I was walking up to a dangerous line, but then I watched him make himself relax again. “I did when I said them. But strength, bravery, and boldness exist on a continuum. Your beauty is a constant, yes, but the others change from day to day.” He pushed himself off of the table and walked back to his plate. “Only you can decide if you will be brave again. I will never force you. Except, perhaps, where drinking your medicine is concerned.” He sat down again and gave me a sly smile. “Although I think you are probably brave enough for that.”

I grabbed the cup with a reluctant hand. “Why aren’t you mad at me now?” I’d been angry enough, and forgotten half my *sirs*.

“First times are always emotional. It is not entirely your fault; you’re still human, and I am not always as cruel as you think I am. So eat. And drink,” he said, then added an ominous, “or else,” but I knew that he was joking.



I finished my breakfast on my own as he left, and then he returned before I could follow him into the library, carrying in a stack of books. “These are for you to read, in your room. I don’t think you’ll want to sit much for the next few days.”

I was glad of the books, but . . . “The windows?” I asked.

“Will still be there when you feel better.” He gestured me toward the stairs to my bedroom. “Which I expect will be momentarily.”

I took the books and sighed. I was in no position to fight him, and if I did, he’d probably just make me talk him into hurting me again.

“Don’t sulk, moth, or I shall take back my comment about your beauty,” he said, giving me a smirk. I rolled my eyes at him on purpose, and trotted down the stairs.

My bedroom’s door was open, and it was suffused with morning light. His magic, probably, so I couldn’t doze, I would be forced to stay up reading, even though I was still tired. I walked into my room with a frown, and then I gasped.

One whole wall of my bedroom now had windows.

From floor to ceiling.

And we were in the sky.

I was trapped between delight at so much daylight and horror at the possibility of us falling.

I set the books down on my bed and crept toward them, going to my knees at the end to creep up and peer over.

“So high!” said the spider-creature, suddenly appearing beside me, with his face plastered to the glass, twice as brave as I was.

“Quite,” I said.

He looked over, all of his eyes blinking at me sequentially. “Do you mind if I look, too?” he asked, and I could see his small, cat-like mouth moving humanly as he spoke, beneath his petite triangular nose, and behind two jutting fangs.

I wanted to tell him *yes*, but I made myself say, “No,” and pointed. “Just look from over there.”

“Certainly,” Finx agreed.



I lay on my stomach reading for two days, coming up to eat my meals alone, always with a cup of medicine, and I began to not mind the creature anymore. He wasn't much of a conversationalist, but it was nice not to be alone.

And on the third day, Rhaim came to check on me.

“How do you feel?” he asked, from just outside my door. “Finx says you're getting better, but I thought I ought to check myself.”

I brought myself from the ground to kneeling quickly. “I have questions, sir,” I told him, rocking myself up to stand.

“Yes?” he inquired.

I straightened my shoulders, realizing what I might be asking for. “Could I ask them in the library?”

He considered me for a moment. “If you think you're feeling up to it.” He turned, and walked away.

The books he'd left me with were an assortment of mages' journals, each telling their stories in their own words. Every

one had true powers, above and beyond the simple magic many people could do, but all of them seemed ridiculous. One was the journal of a mage who could make anyone fall asleep for fifteen minutes at a time—but then he, himself, would also need to sleep, so even though he attempted to use his powers for a life of crime, he always got caught. And another mage whose powers seemed miraculous, in that he could do any magery he could think of, but just the one time—so he never did anything, just in case he might need it later. And the third built sandcastles on the shore every day—truly, I did not know what Rhaim wanted me to get from reading them.

So I asked, “Why did you pick these books?” when I got to the library, holding them out. I’d put on three of Finx’s soft, sheer dresses to hide my curves, and I could feel the fabric slipping against itself and me as I walked up to the risers, where he sat at the top. The windows beyond held no more pull for me, now that I had my own.

“What do you notice about them?” he asked.

“They’re all . . . odd.” It was the kindest thing I could say.

“Indeed,” he agreed. “Not all mages are equally talented or useful, and even the ones that have true power often can be limited by a lack of imagination.”

I exhaled readily. “Yes! Why did Faladin keep rebuilding his home on the same beach where it washed out every day? When he could’ve just built a home on the edge of a desert?”

Rhaim laughed. “I think in addition to his powers, he also suffered from a poet’s soul. Plus, I suspect he was frightened to go to a place he hadn’t been.”

“Why?”

“He might have had to cross a forest to get to a desert. And if something had attacked him, what then?”

I blinked. “Surely there’s sand in the forest, somewhere, in the ground?”

Rhaim held his hands up. “Faladin was never brave enough to check, and so I guess we’ll never know.”

I considered this. “Was that you wanted me to glean from reading, sir?”

“For now,” he said, and nodded subtly. “And to get accustomed to the idea of writing truthfully, no matter how strange or embarrassing your story winds up being.”

“But why, sir?”

“Because you’ll need to start your own journal shortly. You are to be a mage now, are you not?” He stared down the elegant length of his nose at me, and I felt my heart flutter with pride.

“I am,” I stated strongly.

“Good,” he said, smiling with indulgence. “Then the first use of your talents today will be to help me fix my table.”



We walked over together to the table I’d broken, and I saw he’d balanced it from beneath with larger books, and lined the jagged back seam up.

He hadn’t been lying. The wood was thick.

I had done that.

“And the entire time you healed, you didn’t attempt to use your powers, as I asked?” he queried me.

I nodded quickly. I’d been tempted—but my glorious windows kept showing sky, and if I’d broken one of them, as I had broken this . . .

“Good,” he said, with a knowing snort, like he could read my mind—and I knew he knew. It was why he’d granted me the windows. They weren’t truly a gift—just a nicer cage.

“Now,” he said, continuing, running a hand along the splintered seam’s rough edges. “How do you think we should fix this? Using my powers as the All-Beast, not yours, seeing as we’re not entirely sure what you can do yet?”

I looked from the wood to him. “What does being the All-Beast mean, sir?” He hadn’t given me *his* book to read, after all.

“That any beast I have studied sufficiently, I gain the ability to create, control, and occasionally its skill.” He jerked his chin toward the sky outside. “I understand flight, thus, my castle flies.” As he said the words he also studied me—and I wondered if I was just another beast, to him.

“Does that include humans, too?”

“Good question, little moth. And no. Though I have tried, in the past, many times. Finx is the most I ever managed, when I was still learning my skills, and testing their boundaries.”

“And just how does your version of studying work?” Each of the mages in the books I’d read had had their own weird paths to power.

“Observation. Dissection. Experimentation. Practice.”

I blinked. “I would think it would take a very long time to gain even one animal’s worth of skills—how many do you know?”

“Another good question. Several hundred. But I have also been alive for much longer than you think.” He reached over and tapped the table’s surface. “So. Give me your guesses.”

I stared at the wood and bit my lips. I didn’t think I knew of several hundred animals, but I’d eaten honeycomb before. “Could you fix it like a bee?”

His eyebrows rose in surprise. “With wax? Probably not strong enough, but please, go on.”

“Spider-silk?” I guessed. “Or . . . whatever it is that lizards have on their feet when they run up walls. Is that glue?”

He chuckled. “No. But again, smart choices.”

“The substance sparrows make their nests with?” I knew they lined my father’s castle’s eaves.

“Mud,” he said, with a slight head shake.

“The thing that lets a clam hinge tightly?” I clapped my hands together in example.

“Muscles and tendons. But Finx aside, things I make of flesh do not survive, so I don’t waste time trying anymore. I usually use whatever materials are available to me.”

I wracked my brain, thinking hard, then sighed and looked up at him. He seemed endlessly amused. “If I give up, will you just tell me?”

“This time, yes,” he said. “Because it is a trick question.” I frowned, as he went on. “Sometimes your power breaks a thing, but just because you broke it does not mean you can mend it up again.”

I blinked, then pursed my lips. “And what if my power were secretly carpentry?”

He outright laughed at that. “True powers are rarely so straightforward—not to mention useful.”

I inspected the table again. “So your point is, I should be careful what I break?”

Rhaim nodded deeply, willing me to understand something I couldn’t with his eyes. “Always, Lisane,” he said slowly.

I stood there thinking. “So if my powers have managed to cut you, once, and to break this . . . is my true power one of violence?” I pointed at my own chest, turning toward him.

“You’ll have to tell me, once you find it.”

I took a deep inhale, trying to find it inside myself, with him waiting. And when I exhaled, giving up, he eyed me kindly. “I will go get the pipe.”



I spent my time alone in the library pacing. What did my moments have in common? My anger, my fear, and a healthy dose of shame. I hadn’t figured anything out by the time he returned, with the pipe already lit.

Rhaim puffed out smoke, caught it, and handed it over to me. I could catch it now, at least, but that was no longer impressive,

comparatively. Who was I to mock Faladin, when I couldn't even form smoke?

"Try slicing it," he suggested, stepping away.

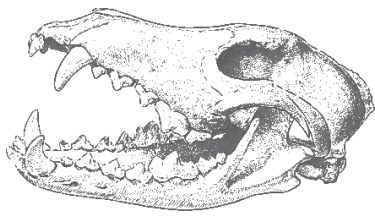
I concentrated my will on the smoke I held, and felt a tiny *zap*—like the beginnings of a headache in my mind—and it divided into halves.

I tried again, felt another *snap*, only this time through my arm like someone had pinched me—but I divided it into fourths. I gawked through the smoke in front of me at him. "I am a person who cuts things? I am a tearer?"

"A *terror*, perhaps," he said, exchanging emphasis on the word. He came to stand by my side, considering the smoke with me.

"Some kind of butcher, or a seamstress?"

"Eh," he grunted. "Stop looking for answers in things you know, and give in to what you don't."



RHAIM

I sucked on the pipe while she played with her smoke, trying endless variations of the same subtle thing, gathering it up only to portion it back out again.

“A baker,” she said, showing me a handful of smoke sliced like a pie. I snorted, and then her eyes widened. “Sir,” she added, her full lips pursing into a tiny frown. “I’ve been forgetting them,” she said and winced.

“I had noticed. But don’t worry, I’ve been counting.” I managed to say it with a straight face, which made her give me a worried look until I laughed. I wasn’t going to be a stickler for formality while she was so enthusiastic. I would wait until she hit a wall—and then I would be there, again, to force her over it. She snorted and rolled her eyes at me, then went back to practicing, reforming the smoke into a small cloud, before concentrating on something, very, very hard.

I enjoyed watching her think, her bright eyes lightly flashing, the way she’d rock her lower lip in between her teeth and then slowly, thoughtfully, pull it back out. Her little sharp intakes of breaths, all her huffs and sweetest sighs. Tiny parts of the smoke she held drifted away as though she was a whittling sculptor.

I had used the past few quiet days to come to grips with the knowledge of my death at her hands. I thought I’d fight it harder, or be more disappointed that my time was near, but when I searched inside myself for anger, I couldn’t find it, and this was why: she was trying.

She reminded me of myself when I was younger, oh so long ago. Back when I, too, had longed for mastery of just one-small-elusive *anything*. When I hadn't known the boundaries of my magic, or who I would become. She'd begun with even less hope than I had, and I was pushing her far faster than my master had pushed me.

She was like the smoke twisting up from my pipe. Formless, but full of potential.

And when she twisted her open hands towards me, having finished what she was doing, a word hovered between us: *Sir*.

“Well done, little moth,” I said, truly charmed, and the way she looked at me then, all full of joy and excitement, earned out a portion of any future damage she would deal me. “Keep going,” I urged her, and then left the room.



I opened a door to my laboratory, just beyond her line of sight, and Finx met me there, bobbing excitedly. “She has talent!”

“She does. So far it’s small, and it needs tending, but it’s there.” I headed for the books along one shelf, pulling them out and flipping through them one by one. Surely I had one here that was empty—yes.

A beautiful, thick journal, with a dark green leather binding, and flat emeralds embedded across the front of it, nested against each other like a sheaf of wheat. I had bought it for myself years ago, when I thought my story would be longer, but now, hefting it in my hand, it seemed only right to make it hers. Her life could fill its pages.

After deciding that, I hurriedly cleaned up my smallest desk, rearranging my own experiments in progress elsewhere.

When I returned, almost all the smoke was gone, and she was looking tired. Her shoulders were slumped and she'd taken a seat, but was also leaning forward, her hands on her knees.

“Moth?” I asked, walking up.

She raised her head at hearing me. “Sir,” she said, giving me a tight apologetic smile as I frowned at her condition.

“Do not push yourself so hard. You cannot learn while tired.”

Her expression clouded for a moment, thinking of her future. “But the Deathless—”

“Are Deathless, by their nature,” I cut her off. “The front lines can wait for you. And I would be very sad if I came back to you and found you burning.”

She made a sound between a snicker and a snort, covering her mouth with the back of her hand. “That must be a lie.”

“My sorrow, or that women’s magic turns to fire?” I asked, with a snort of my own. Lisane shook her head to dissemble rather than answer me, and there were dark circles beneath her eyes. “You have done well today, and your exhaustion is only normal, moth.”

“It is?” she asked, in something akin to disappointment.

“Yes. And it will lessen in time. As you grow more used to things. Come,” I said, waving her up. “I have something I want to show you.” I waited as she stood, wondering if I would need to catch her again. She’d layered two or three of Finx’s silken dresses on for some reason, and their colors working in opposition made her look iridescent, like a butterfly or hummingbird’s wing. Her amber eyes still reminded me of the night-moths though. “This way,” I told her, leading her.

I created a door to my laboratory and held it open as she walked through.

Her jaw dropped a little, perhaps sensing the more intimate nature of this room as opposed to my massive library. “Where are we?”

“My laboratory. Where I do all of my studies and thinking.”

I watched her walk to one wall, and start tracing her fingers along book spines, then moving to touch the objects I had displayed in front of them, crystals and claws, assorted

trophies from my last eight hundred years of life. Her hand hesitated, and she looked to me. “None of them are spelled,” I told her, and she nodded thoughtfully.

“Is this where you go when you leave me?” she asked.

“Not always. But this is a new place where you can come to. I’ve attached it to the main stairwell, and I will never close the door.” I walked over to the desk I’d cleared for her. “This is yours, so don’t break it,” I teased.

She flushed and gave me a small smile, walking up to the table and touching the book I’d left on it for her.

“And that will be your journal,” I went on. “From here on out, you have to write in it, every day. I’ll bring you anything you feel your experiments require, until you determine how your powers work.” She exhaled through pursed lips, already concentrating. “It will take time though, little moth,” I warned. “I think you’ve done enough for today.”

“Then what else will I do?”

“Rest, I hope. Read. Look out the windows. Sometimes dreaming helps—or you may start your journal. Anything on the shelves here you may touch—but nothing on the desks. I have many half-formed ideas in progress and I don’t want your magic—whatever it may be—affecting them.”

“Understood,” she said, nodding and swallowing quickly.

“Also,” I said, turning to my room’s final wall, with the door to my portal chamber. “You may never, ever, go through this door. I will know instantly if you do.”

She gave me a look like I was being silly. “I’m sure you’ve locked it, sir.”

“I have. But I’m also sure you broke a kaorak wood table, so do not speak to me of locks.” She straightened, realizing what that truly meant, as I gestured around. “I am trusting you now, little moth—as you have so far trusted my instruction. Do not betray me.”

“I won’t, sir.”

“Good. Because up until now, even though you may feel as though you have made me act upon you out of anger,” I began, surveying her, thinking of everything I’d put her through so far, “that has never been the case. In fact,” I felt compelled to add, “were I *truly* angry with you, one of us might not survive.”

Her brow knit in confusion and her eyes were wide—because she assumed it would be me killing her, of course.

She had no idea how irresponsible her innocence had made me—but I knew because I was leaving her alone here.

“I need to go,” I went on, “but you may stay if you like.” I walked for the door I’d told her not to open, knowing full well her father and her brother were expecting me.

“Is one of these books yours, sir?” she called after me, so I looked back.

“No. Living mage’s journals are private. Mine is hidden from you, and yours should be hidden from me. I will return.”

I opened the door so it faced her, and she could not see into the room beyond, and went inside.



LISANE

I sat down at the desk Rhaim had given me with a sense of mystified pride.

I'd kept working with the smoke after he'd left, with diminishing returns. I'd kept doing the exact same thing I'd done—*that'd worked prior!*—but then it stopped, and I'd gotten scared I was doing it wrong.

But coming here renewed me.

Rhaim believed in me—*or I wouldn't be here!*—and gave me a journal of my own to write in. I looked at the journal's glorious cover, dark green leather with an intricate pattern of faceted emerald slivers embedded in it, then opened it with excitement, feeling the slight roughness of the paper beneath the pads of my fingers, ready to hold ink. I breathed in its bookish scent.

All my life reading books and now I was finally going to get to write one? About myself, no less? My silly heart swelled with pride.

And then on top of that . . . I looked all around the strange room he'd left me in.

Rhaim really did trust me.

In all the stories I'd ever heard about girls getting kidnapped, no one had ever mentioned this part, where they were given rooms of books to read and windows with fresh views to look out of every morning.

In fact—I thought that might be the first sentence of my new journal. I laughed to myself, and Finx bounced up on the table.

“What’s funny?” he asked me, blinking all of his eyes.

“Nothing—just—all of this,” I said, completely unable to express how I felt to him.

I felt more free at this very moment than I might have ever before in my life.

Finx twisted his little head this way and that. “Can I laugh too?”

My eyebrows rose. “If you want, why not?”

He wriggled his body from side to side, making a strange noise that almost sounded like me. It would’ve been creepy if, at the end, he hadn’t said cheerfully, “I did it!”

“Yes, yes, you did,” I agreed, grinning at him, reaching out to pat his head like I’d seen Rhaim do.

The creature went back to his usual far more comforting purring, as I stood to take stock of the room.

Three of the walls were lined with leather bound books of varying sizes and colors, from darkest black to blues as bright as the sky, oranges like hot flames, and purples like the sunsets that were painted on the walls of the rooms where I grew up.

I pulled out book after book and opened up pages, to see scrawled writing, some cleanly done, some nigh illegible, in all sorts of different hands. Some of the men jumped into their stories, whereas others took their time—every book in this room represented a man who’d been given magical power for life.

And as I’d already seen from my current studies . . . powers often wasted.

One mage’s life story encompassed an entire shelf, whereas one of the books only had two pages filled in. Had the mage died immediately thereafter, or merely forgotten his book in an inn? I snorted.

Why did all of them get power and not me? They weren’t any better than I was. Some of them didn’t even seem half as willful.

What separated us?

Why did they think that women couldn't learn magic?

And why was Rhaim different?

Or, perhaps the better question—why was I different, to him?

Somehow I had the feeling the answer wasn't in a book.

In front of all of them were more of the strange objects that Rhaim collected and displayed—only here they were placed more casually, and were perhaps more personal. Fragments of bleached bone, cruelly curved claws that took up my entire palm, and teeth in alarming size and number.

There was a dagger in a tasseled sheath, additional pipes like the one we'd smoked—which made me smile—and an assortment of whips and other weapons which I did not understand. I lifted one up, trying to figure out its purpose.

“Rhaim doesn't like it when people hurt beasts,” Finx said, from nearby. He'd been following along behind me, batting objects off of the shelves before lassoing them in midair with the strange silk he extruded, then hauling them up with his hind paws, to begin the sequence again.

“And is this place yours?” I asked, reaching a corner that was full of the silken stuff he created, tacked down to the shelving on both sides, and obscuring the bindings of nearby books. I reached out and touched it, and found it as soft as the dress that I wore.

“It is!” He ran up beside me, popped open an edge I hadn't realized was there, and dove in. I saw the silken sheath move a little as he got comfortable inside.

“Can I see in?” I asked, and in answer the edge opened again, pushed by one little paw.

“This is where I sleep,” he said, as I leaned over to peer down inside, finding him nestled in the bottom of the silken sack he'd sewn for himself. “And also where I wait.”

“For what?” I asked him.

“For Rhaim to return.”

I turned around and realized we were almost directly across from the door that Rhaim had said I shouldn't touch. "Where does he go?" I asked the creature.

"I don't know," Finx complained. "He never takes me."

I knew his portal chamber had to be behind the door—and if I ever became a good enough mage, I could use it myself. "Maybe someday we will both leave."

Finx crawled back up inside the sack to look out with all eight of his eyes. "Really?" he asked me.

"Really," I promised.

"I would like that!" he exclaimed, before sobering a little. "But only if we get to come back."

That . . . was something I didn't think I could promise yet. If I got that strong, why would I return here? But I reached into his nest to pat his strange bristly fur again nonetheless. "We'll see."



Rhaim hadn't returned by the time I decided to go to my bedroom and take a nap—he wasn't lying about using magic; it exhausted me.

It also hurt.

Not a lot, and the pain was temporary, lasting only as long as the magic did, really, but I found it odd.

I knew everyone's magic had a price from the journals he'd let me read, and I didn't know what mine was yet. I didn't even know if I was doing enough magic to pay a price.

I'd brought an armful of different journals down to my bedroom, so that I could figure out other mages', in case it helped.

I just didn't want to ask Rhaim.

Because what if that was the reason no one taught women magic? As respected as I felt by him—*occasionally*—I knew I was just as much an aberration as Finx was.

So there was no point in telling him anything, unless it either hurt more, or I got very, very good at magic first.



Finx came down to get me for dinner, waking me up—and when I reached the dining room, book in hand, I found Rhaim already sitting at the table, holding a book of his own. His dark eyes flashed at me, saw what I was holding, and then the corners of his lips quirked up. He said nothing though, choosing instead to turn his eyes back upon his page and eat.

What was the price of his magic?

That he must be eternally reading?

“Are you always studying, sir?” I asked him, setting my book down. Was that how I needed to be, holding a book morning, noon, and night?

I would if I had to—I’d do anything required, if I just knew what would work.

Rhaim tilted his head. “Not tonight,” he said, and I frowned at him, wishing I could shake him until all his secrets fell out. “Can’t a man just read for pleasure?” he asked.

“You are no man, though, but the All-Beast,” I told him, just as he’d once told me.

He chuckled darkly, recognizing my clawless swat for what it was. “It is a history, moth, if you must know. From one of the kingdoms that existed several centuries ago, but are gone now.”

“Khersa, Gellen, or Xophor?” They were countries that had been wiped out of existence, and were no longer on any map. Up until the Deathless had arisen, that had been my father’s greatest fear for us.

“You know of them?” Rhaim asked in some surprise.

“I couldn’t sing and I couldn’t dance, so I got to learn to read instead.” The palace had books, and I was well-taught. “I went to classes with my brother, for as long as he was in chambers, like me.” I kept staring down the table at Rhaim though, thinking. “But why would you care about histories, if your castle hardly touches land?”

“I am still curious about the world, even as I float above it.” He closed his book and set it down. “What else did you learn before me?”

“Needlepoint,” I said, looking at my fingertips, remembering the pricks. My mother had made sure I had some skill to show to Vethys and the women I would share chambers with at his family’s castle, his mother and his sisters. And as much as I loved and missed my mother ... “I hated it,” I confessed.

He looked amused. “Then I won’t ask you to relearn.”

“I think Finx would be disappointed if I did.”

He gave me a casual smile, before pressing, “What else?”

“The way I should be.”

“And how was that?”

“Gracious and kind.” *Like my mother had been.* “Don’t talk too loud. Don’t want too much,” I said, repeating the lessons she’d taught me. *Remember, Lisane, you will not only be a Queen for a man, but for a country.* I sighed before continuing. “Make space for others, always. Wait quietly. Be patient.”

Rhaim had the decency to look appalled on my behalf. “That sounds awful.”

I inhaled and held my breath before answering truthfully. “It was.”

He nodded. “No wonder you take well to magery. What else?”

I twisted my lips to one side, thinking. “To know how to manage maidservants.”

“Ah,” he said, with a soft laugh. “Well, you may manage Finx, but not me.” He tipped his knife in my direction. “And you,

too, are a reader. What were your favorite books?”

My favorite ones were the ones I was not allowed to read. I had found a trove once, in our library, books hidden behind other books, that some prior occupant or maid had snuck in. Stories that were not just histories of war, but of love as well, and parts of them were bawdy. I’d read things inside them I hadn’t learned of yet . . . and given the direction my life was taking me, I maybe never would.

And yet . . . I was okay with that.

Because here I was, making a new kind of story—the kind I’d start writing down tonight before I went to bed.

I had read enough journals now; I felt like I knew where to begin.

Rhaim scratched his chin while waiting patiently for my answer, and I didn’t want to tell him.

“The one that I read earliest, and most often as a child, was *The Tale of Sweet Lirane*,” I demurred. “I think my mother named me after her, hoping I’d gain her attributes.”

Lirane never got into trouble. Lirane was always gentle and sweet. She had difficulties of only the most minor sort, and they were always easily overcome.

“Did it work?” Rhaim asked.

“You’ve seen me naked. You tell me.”

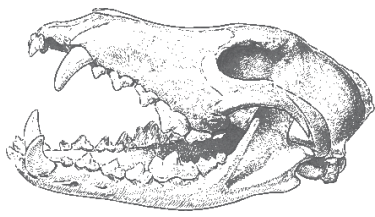
Rhaim guffawed at that, then blocked his mouth with his hand as if embarrassed by it. “I take it Sweet Lirane would not approve of your studies here?”

“*Lirane* would’ve fainted at the thought of showing a man—or beast—her honor.” It was true. Lirane was always fainting. Her life was quite impractical.

“And what would Not-So-Sweet *Lisane* rather do?”

I considered this for a moment. “Become powerful,” I said simply. “Sir,” I added, then returned my eyes to the page, so that I might make it happen sooner.

I felt his measured attention on me a moment more, then he rejoined his book as well.



RHAIM

I cleared the table for us both when she was finished, seeing as I wasn't entirely above "maid" work, and my little moth was yawning. I took our plates into the kitchen and cleaned up everything from dinner, wondering if that was why no one trained women to magic. Perhaps they weren't physically up to the task?

But then Lisane came into the room with me, holding a journal open while frowning. "Rhaim, this one's spelled too."

I dried my hands off and I took it from her, tsking. "You'll be able to read it in time."

"But why not now?"

I shrugged as though I did not know. "Perhaps you are not ready."

But the truth was, I'd hidden any mention of a mage's Ascension from her, in all of the books in my library. Only other mages truly knew what happened at our ceremonies and what they meant to us. I didn't want her asking questions about mine, as I wasn't sure I'd be able to convincingly lie to her if she started.

She held the book open and squinted at it, and from this distance, I could feel her own magic fluttering against my much stronger powers, like a butterfly's fragile wing tickling stone. I felt a swell of pride—and then realized maybe that was why she was often tired.

Because she was so damnably stubborn.

Lisane softly moaned, and closed the book, putting a hand to her head.

“Are you well?” I asked her, and it was my turn to frown.

“I’ve got a headache.”

“Would you like some tea?”

She shook her head, then winced. “No.” I watched her make up her mind, her emotions painted across her face. “What was it like when you learned, sir?”

“Long and arduous,” I told her, honestly. It was hard enough not to be a beast now, but when I was a teenager, all rage and hormones and desires—it was a miracle my master didn’t take me into the woods, turn me to ice, and then shatter me to pieces. “Go rest, little moth,” I said, taking the book from her hands. “No more reading, not tonight.”

“But—” she weakly protested.

“Do as I ask. For the novelty of it, if nothing else,” I said, pretending to be stern.

Her expression softened and she almost smiled. “Yes,” she said. “Sir,” she added, belatedly.

“Bah. I’ve lost track of all the *sirs* you owe me.”

She put her hand to her mouth to titter. “I’m sorry, sir.”

“Not as sorry as you will be if you don’t go to bed right now, moth.” I held the book up and ran a dramatic thumb across its pages, remembering the last time I’d stolen a book from her. Her eyes widened and I wanted to read so much more than fear into that look.

“Yes, sir,” she breathed, eyes suddenly bright.

I offered the journal back to her. She gingerly took it, and then ran off, hopefully to do as she was told.



LISANE

I lay in bed that night, thinking, my mind finally clear.

I knew enough about how different mages from other times worked, the prices they paid for their magic, and their paths—all that was left now was to discover my own.

And I was afraid I had.

I'd thought each of the times I'd used powers I didn't understand had a commonality to them. I'd thought maybe it was shame—me being afraid of being useless, in the tunnels where Rhaim's beast had confronted me, and me being spanked against Rhaim's table, unable to hide myself from him.

But when he handed me Elzorbia the Bright's journal tonight in his kitchen—teasingly threatening to spank me again, with the journal of a mage whose only power was controlling rainbows—I realized those moments I'd shared with Rhaim had had another commonality.

Pain.

When I'd been in the tunnels, Rhaim's claws had raggedly scraped my wrist as I'd tried to get away from him—and I'd been able to cut him from cheek to jaw.

And when he'd spanked me—I'd been able to break his heavy wood table.

It was like I had managed transmutation myself—except instead of taking gold from a collar to a chain, I'd taken agony and made it manifest.

If I was right, I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

Nor did I understand how I'd managed to shape the smoke today—had I been able to hold some of the magic inside me for later, compressed like a spring? And then been able to let it leach out, like water under pressure, until it wasn't anymore?

Was that the best metaphor for it? Where his beating me had somehow filled me up with magic—*even as it hurt me!*—and given me power to later use, which I had until there was nothing left to pour?

I didn't want that to be true.

I didn't want to have to rely on someone else to make me magical—in fact, that seemed even worse, possibly, then having no magic at all.

The entire point of me becoming a mage was to free me—not to tie me to one's side.

So if it was true, I would never tell him.

But I didn't know anything yet, not for certain.

Tomorrow, though . . . I'd have to begin my experiments.



When I reached the laboratory the next morning—skipping by the windows entirely, now that I was on a mission—there was a tray of clay atop my desk.

Rhaim was sitting with his back to me, considering an eye on a metal tray upon one of his desks. The thing was almost as big as my head.

“What is that from?” I breathed, having no idea.

The pupil of the eye narrowed, focusing on me.

“Do your own magic,” Rhaim said, without even turning around. “Try to change the clay I gave you next—it will be harder than the smoke.”

I swallowed and nodded, taking the clay with my hands and building it into a rough image of my father's palace, then attempted to turn my magical attention on it, trying to cleave off imaginary bricks.

Nothing happened, for what felt like hours.

At least Rhaim had the kindness not to comment upon it—if he noticed. His full concentration was on the massive eye in front of him. Then I moved—and I saw the pupil follow the motion.

“Are you watching me through that?” I accused him.

“Trying to.”

“You can reanimate the dead?” I asked, my voice going high in amazement.

He turned around and shook his head. “No. Just using my powers.” He reached out and pressed the eye with one hand. It turned the color of earth, and he collapsed it—without his magic, it was the same as the clay that was in front of me. “I recently interacted with a kraken. I was considering how it might see underwater.”

“Oh,” I breathed. *As one does, surely.* I felt a wave of jealousy, that he knew exactly how his powers worked—then a wave of fear that perhaps I knew how mine worked, too.

He misinterpreted my expression and said, “Keep trying, little moth. Your day will come, I am sure of it,” before turning back around.

I spent a long while looking at the back of his body, now that he couldn't also watch me. He was sitting at an angle, letting me see the strong line of his nose and jaw. He was working the clay into a different shape now, some sort of tentacle, moving it thoughtfully with dexterous fingers.

Was I also like clay to him?

Was that why he wasn't afraid to mold me?

Would I ever be in a position where I could mold myself?

I frowned at the castle I'd created in front of me, willing it to disintegrate, or explode, or shatter, and when none of those things happened, I raked my fingers through its walls, razing it to the ground . . . and then gathered my emotions and built it back up again.



Not long after that he left me, without speaking, going into the locked room through the side door. I waited to make sure he was really gone, and then walked around the room's perimeter, picking up a claw, a fang, and one of the knives, before sitting back down in front of my clay.

If accessing my magic was just as simple as hurting myself—I would far rather be the person in charge, even if it scared me.

I pulled the knife from its sheath—its blade looked sharp, and its tip fiercely pointed. I pressed the tip to my finger, watched it dent my skin, and then tried to talk myself into pressing it just a little more. All the way. Enough to get a drop of blood.

And . . . I couldn't.

Was it because I was scared of hurting myself?

Or afraid of discovering yet another avenue of failure?

Then Finx emerged from beneath my desk in a sideways fashion that let me know he'd been clinging to its underside prior.

"Have you been under there this whole time?" I asked him, putting the knife down with a guilty clatter as he sidled toward me in his start-stop way.

"Yes," he said, pausing to rub at one ear with a hind paw. "There was a bug."

My eyes widened. "Did you get it?"

"No," he said, with frustration.

I scooted my chair away from the table quickly. “How big was it?”

He metered out a little bit of one paw with another, by way of illustrating. “Not that big!” he complained, clearly wishing it were bigger, although one entire tip of his paw was plenty big for me. “But it was very fast.”

That didn’t make it any better. “Ugh, no,” I said, standing up.

Then I realized what I was doing.

Running away from an insect.

Some mage I was.

I couldn’t prick myself—and I was scared of bugs.

“Go catch it, Finx?” I asked the beast.

He bobbed his entire body with a jolly, “Okay!” and then ducked back under the desk again, disappearing over its far side.

I swept the knife up. Rhaim could come back any moment—it was now or never.

I set the tip of the blade to my fingertip, closed my eyes, and jabbed it in, biting back a squeak.

When I opened them again, there was a tiny drop of blood. I milked my finger, making myself bleed.

It’d hurt . . . but had it hurt enough?

I concentrated on the clay, trying to give it the slightest dent or scrape with my mind—nothing.

I poked sequential fingers with the claw I’d grabbed, and the fang, in irritation, making them bleed as well, like I was doing an arcane needlepoint.

Was there some threshold I needed to reach first before I could make my powers felt?

I didn’t know.

I growled and slashed my bloody fingertips against the clay castle’s side, making it look like a monster had attacked my

toy fort, as I heard a crunching coming up from beneath the desk.

“I caught it!” Finx announced, from the vicinity of my knees.

I reached for the castle, and quickly rubbed away the bloody marks on its walls, muttering, “I’m glad one of us was successful.”



Three days passed the exact same way, and my failures felt like they were endless—in much the same way the Deathless truly were.

Rhaim continued to say nothing but quietly worked around me, leaving me alone, going into his portal chamber and re-emerging at odd times.

But on the fourth day, he sat down across from me and stole a portion of my clay.

I knew better than to ask what he was doing. I just watched—and all he did was make a tower, same as mine was, only nicer looking.

“You’re not funny,” I complained.

“I wasn’t trying to be,” he said, carefully constructing a wall, and scoring brick marks on it with a nail. “You keep thinking only of the end result, but never how you get there. The smoke was easier because it wasn’t solid, but I could think of at least ten magical ways that might work to cleave this up—maybe more.” He gave his tower a final pat. “Is my mind a knife, so I cut it like a blade? Do I separate it with a relentless wind? Do I see myself wearing it down, like a shell tossed by a tide? Do I pull its essence apart, on a level too small to be seen?”

I pushed back in frustration. “How would the All-Beast do it?” I asked him.

He plucked up another piece of clay, rolled it between his thumb and forefinger, then set it down. It cracked open and a

little beetle emerged, six-legged, with a shiny green back, and it started heading for his tower's base. It scraped at the clay with its jaws, slowly chewing its way inside.

I gasped, as he went on. "I would summon a hundred smaller beetles to do my work for me. Or perhaps one very large beetle, the size of a horse."

I watched the beetle work, then turned to find him watching me. "Are you joking?"

"About the horse-sized beetle? Yes," he said, breaking into a grin. "You can't change the size of things too much. They're only meant to be their proper size. But a hundred—or a thousand—beetles might be quite effective. Perhaps better than one elephant, or two."

And not for the first time I wished Rhaim owed my father fealty . . . but if he did, then he wouldn't be here, teaching me, would he?

The beetle worked and worked, and made a sizable dent, but then it seemed to die, turning back to clay. "What happened?"

He shrugged, picking the piece of clay back up to roll between his palms. "The price of my magic is giving things my life, in a manner of speaking. So it behooves me to be careful about it when I do."

I boggled at him. And here I thought it was bad enough, that I might be fueled by pain. "Your very life?" I asked him.

He tilted his head back and forth, clearly withholding. "In a manner of speaking," he repeated, looking everywhere in the room but at me. "Great magic has great costs, and I would rather not tell you more of mine. I don't want to scare you."

My jaw dropped a little. I'd spent his absences these past few days hurting myself in quiet, foolish ways, with slaps and pinches and pokes, scaring myself about what I might need to require of him.

But who better to ask to hurt you than someone whose own magic metered his own life out?

“If your magic requires an element of your life, Rhaim, then aren’t you afraid of dying?”

He gave me such a strange look then, somehow sad and kind and mystified, then shrugged. “Yes,” he said simply, with a sigh. “But I have been waiting a long time now, and it hasn’t happened yet.” He rocked back in his chair and contemplated me. “So tell me, little moth, my cutter of beasts, my breaker of tables, and slicer of smoke—how is it that you think you work? And is there anything I can do to help you?”

I looked between the tower and my clay-stained hands.

I’d written down the “experiments” I’d been doing in my journal every night, knowing that they paled in comparison not only to the ones he did, but also against every other mage I’d ever read about so far.

The price of Elzorbia’s rainbows was that they made him blind for a time—but that never stopped him from creating one to share with any child he met along his path.

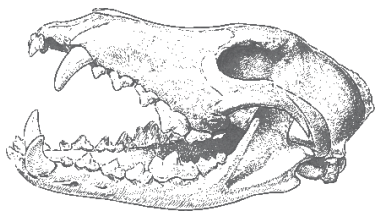
He merely sat down afterward to recuperate, waiting until he could see again before continuing.

I took a deep, deep breath, deciding.

“Lisane?” he wondered, waiting, but I stayed quiet. I stood up and I walked along the walls as I often had once he’d left, greeting the little pieces of bone and claws I’d used to poke and scratch myself with like we were old friends until I reached what I thought I needed.

I picked it up, and brought it back to hand it to him.

He looked between it and my eyes, trying to be sure of me first, then he took it and he stood.



RHAIM

Lisane had pulled out a heavy whip to give me. It had a weighted handle with a long, thin leather tether.

I'd snatched it from a cruel man once, who'd been threatening a stallion. He'd asked me to make it stop bucking, and instead, I had it kick him in the chest, and together the horse and I found a new and kinder owner for him.

I'd taken the whip as a sort of trophy from the moment—and I thought I'd never have cause to use it again, much less on a beautiful woman.

A certain weight had settled around my little moth's shoulders though, and while I wanted to press her and ask her questions—*what she hoped to gain, why she'd chosen this for herself, and why now?*—I also knew I needed to respect her decision, and trust that it wasn't made lightly.

I took a moment to balance the whip in my hand, then said, "Follow me," and gestured her into the hall, to lead her up the stairs.

I couldn't whip her in her bedroom, the lab, or in the library. I didn't want to traumatize her—*more*—where she rested or where she worked, so I took her to the last place in my castle she was likely to ever be.

My bedroom.

It occupied the castle's entire uppermost floor, at the end of a short hallway off the stairs, but it was the most spare of all the rooms in the place, with just a fireplace with a chair in front of it on a rug. My bed was a massive and sturdy construct, made

to withstand my beast's greater size and weight, with a post the circumference of my bicep at each corner, and its head was to one wall.

"Stand over there," I told her, gesturing to the bottom of it, "and take off all your clothes."

She did as she was told in silence and I realized I had hardly heard her voice at all this week. I wished that I could hear it now, but I didn't want to break her concentration.

Not before I broke her—of whatever misconceptions she had about the nature of her power.

She needed my help to get away from all her conscious thoughts and pressures.

She needed to find the space in herself where she didn't struggle anymore.

Try anymore.

Be anymore.

The quiet part of her that existed separate from the rest, that both was and was not, that she needed to live, but didn't dare think about, like taking a breath.

She pulled off three of Finx's soft silk dresses, and I took up two of them, twisting them into ropes to string her up, from wrist to bed post. Then I nudged her feet wide, with the insteps of my boots.

"And you're certain, little moth?" I asked her.

She nodded, so I parted her hair over her shoulders, and down the front of her, so it wouldn't catch the whip's leather tip, and took a moment to settle myself in.



Stretched out as if on a spider's web, my little moth was a sight to see. Her curves were just as graceful as my memory recalled on lonesome nights, and she was but a

handsbreadth from my pillows. The temptation to cut her loose, shove her forward, and make her scream for different reasons wound inside me like a snake, and made the piercing at the head of my cock chafe against my pant-leather.

But we were here because she trusted me.

For what reasons, I did not know, because the thoughts I had around her, even when we were quiet in the same room together, should've been enough to catch my books on fire.

But I would endeavor to earn her trust.

Somehow.

Because stepping up I knew, if I could not only tame her—but *train* her—it would be the greatest accomplishment of my life. More than even the dragon I had managed to summon once.

How many men get to meet their own death—and then bend her to their will?

“It will be hard, but do not brace yourself, Lisane,” I told her, rocking the whip’s weight in my hand. “And breathe. Always breathe.”

I heard her swallow, and watched her nod as I drew my right hand back.



My first smack was across her ass, because I knew it was familiar to her, and she went up on her toes. She didn't cry out, choosing to twist her head and fight. I smacked her again, the other direction, and she only shuddered.

“You have nothing to prove,” I told her, laying a stripe across her shoulder, avoiding her soft waist with all her precious organs. “You're already here,” I said, leaving another mark. “That is enough for me,” I told her, with a third. “And it should be enough for you.”

I paused, walking forward to caress my handiwork, feeling her shiver like a twitching horse, then I waited for her to calm, stepping back again.

I worked her over, from top to bottom and bottom to top, alternating, but never letting her guess where I'd strike next, and she gave up on silence, crying out. She danced for me, beneath my onslaught, prancing like the proudest pony might, tossing her head as her ass swayed beautifully.

As the whip was crueler than my book and hand combined, I was careful not to let strokes overlap, always marking virgin skin . . . and then I realized that that was true, too, that she really was a virgin, and the things we had done together were debauched, compared to her prior palace life.

No matter what her brother thought, I would not take that from her . . . but I had other tools available to me.

I dropped the whip and came up behind her, pressing my chest against the hot skin of her back. She hissed and I felt her writhing, twisting both against the silks and me. "Who will have you now, Lisane, after all of this?" I whispered harshly in her ear, and she took a great intake of breath.

Words hurt worse than whips, sometimes.

"What normal man would stand you, now that you are marked?" I continued. She rocked onto her toes like I was burning her, and threw her head back against my shoulder. Her jaw was clenched tight, and fat tears fell from the corners of her eyes.

Had I pushed her too far, or just far enough?

I swept her to me with an arm around her, just beneath her breasts, and lifted, so that her toes were off the ground and her ear was level with my lips, wrenching a groan of agony from her as her raw back slid against my leathers. "Fuck normalcy, Lisane, and fuck your former life," I growled. "You were meant to be a mage."

She shuddered in my arms, making high sharp noises, and I caught her hair up in my free hand and twisted it, to get her attention. "Do not break my bed without me in it, woman.

Whatever it is that you think now, wherever it is that you are, bind it to you,” I told her, with a shake. “Hold it in and make it yours.”

Her breath was coming hot and fast, her nipples were hard, and her eyes were rolled back but what I could see of her pupils were wide—and then she utterly collapsed.



When I woke, I was still tied . . . and in a tub, in the dark, the only illumination a nearby candle.

I splashed awake, trying to make sense of where I was, wondering if what I risked had worked.

“There you are,” said a familiar voice as my eyes blinked open, seeing . . . *stars*.

An endless quantity of them flooded over the sky, with no beginning and no end, and for a second, floating in the tub, I felt like I was among their number.

I gave a soft gasp.

“How do you feel?” Rhaim asked, coming up to the side of the tub and kneeling down on one knee, with all the sky behind him.

I looked around at the tub I was in—it was level with the floor—but there was no ceiling above here, clearly. “Confused,” I told him.

“Confused, *sir*,” he said with a snort, and moved to sit cross-legged on the edge of the tub beside me.

There was a rope tied beneath my breasts, and beneath my arms, and then again to something behind my back. I sat up more to look around—then realized I was naked and dipped back down. I supposed I didn’t have much modesty left where Rhaim was concerned, but the night air was chilly, so it was easy to stay in the water’s soothing heat. “Where are we, *sir*?” I asked him.

“You have your bath downstairs—well, this is mine. We’re atop the castle, beneath the stars, and the water’s infused with magic, so it can heal you.”

Which explained why the water I was in was cloudy—though I could still see the candle’s rippled reflection in it. I did feel better than I had when he’d been whipping me—was that the tub’s magic, or my own? *I didn’t dare hope.* “How much does it heal? Does it give you back your life?”

He reached in to stir a hand beside me. “No. No one can do that for me. All mages’ days are numbered, no matter what we do.” He pulled his hand out, shook it, and then reached behind me. The rope about my chest released and one of Finx’s pretty dresses floated out over the water’s milky surface. “I was worried you might drown. How much do you remember?”

I sagged even deeper into the water, now that I was in control. “I remember you hitting me.” The harder I concentrated, the more crisp my memories became. The shame of disrobing around him—*again*—and of this time letting him tie me, like I was a beast.

And then . . . the whipping.

I remembered everything about it.

What it felt like when the first blow hit—there’d been no way to prepare myself for the sharp sting of pain; there was no analog for it in my previous life. It felt like I’d been slapped, then burned, and then I heard the leather whistle through the air and knew it was coming for me again, and somehow the anticipation of that was almost as bad as the pain when it landed.

I hadn’t even tried to be brave this time; there was no point. I had cried out, and I had wept, and I had fallen apart. I’d used up all my bravery when I’d offered myself over to him, ready to let him write on me with the whip like I wrote on a page, hoping that at the end all of this would be worth it.

And then he’d gathered me to himself and . . .

“You said things,” I whispered. I felt myself flush even hotter than the water, remembering.

“Ah,” Rhaim said, lying down on the ground and stretching out. He tucked one arm beneath his head, contemplating the stars, and I let myself float up, so we were in essence lying side by side, me in the water and him on his roof. “And what do you think about that?” he asked me.

“I think,” I began slowly, then paused. Even if this water healed my lashings . . . it wouldn’t touch the marks I held inside me.

It was one thing to run away from the life I had known.

It was another to know it would never take me back.

I sank down in the water, all the better to hide my tears.

“I think I don’t want to think yet, sir,” I confessed quietly.

He made a thoughtful noise and nodded. I could see the profile of his face by the candle’s light. The dark lashes of his eyes, the edge of stubble along his cheek and jaw. I was rarely so close to him without him looking at me, and something about the safety of this particular moment made it hard to look away.

“I meant everything I said, Lisane. I have never lied to you.”

I snorted, making little waves upon the water. “Only about horse-sized beetles.”

I saw the corner of his lips curve into a smile. “Briefly.”

Watching him, after what I had been through, I felt weak. I wished for some true kindness from him. Not just the flat of his hand, or the omnipresent knowledge that he was always willing to hurt me.

This . . . this water was kind, I supposed.

But it was not the same thing as safety, nor relaxing—for all that he frequently said I should. I had food, yes, and shelter, but I was missing something more.

Companionship.

The one thing he could never truly offer.

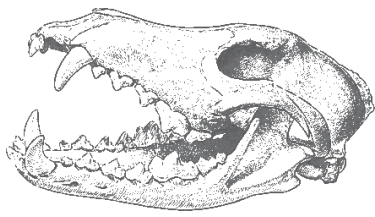
He was both my mentor and my jailor, which meant I was his student and his prisoner. While he might have some fondness

for me, it was only in relation to our roles, because I would never be his equal. And I did not think he would ever just want to hear about my day . . . unless for some reason he first asked.

Rhaim turned toward me then, catching me looking, but clearly couldn't read my thoughts. "Has anyone ever taught the stars to you?"

I shook my head, only my face above the water. "No, sir." I had hardly ever gotten to see them before, and never in such numbers.

"Would you like to learn them?" he asked. I nodded, and he returned his gaze back up. "Then let's."



RHAIM

I talked to her about the stars, telling her all the same stories my old master had told me, how Ollachi the Cruel chased Brayen the Flame across the sky in the winter for heat, but how they both hid from the sun in the summer, how there were times when it looked like the moon was being eaten but it wasn't, and how only those with the best eyesight could make out all the pearls embroidered on the Serpent's Purse.

She listened and tilted her head to follow my arm as I pointed, but soon I watched her rub her eyes. I stood and opened up a basket to draw out a towel to hand her, and caught her pouting.

"But I want to learn more," she protested.

"There will be more stars in your future, little moth, I promise," I said, looking away. I felt her take the towel from my hand and heard her step up from the water.

"You can turn around," she told me shortly, and when I did so she'd tucked the towel around herself. Her wet hair was clinging against her body, and she seemed so small and vulnerable in that moment it made me ache.

I picked up the candle I'd set out for us, and watched its flame glint off my chain around her neck. "I would see your back, moth."

She frowned and her head bowed. "I would rather you not, sir."

I knew I could order her to show me, and she would . . . but something in her now seemed fragile. "All right," I said, and

led the way to the physical door down into my castle, set into a parapet.

She paused and looked back once we'd reached it. "May I come back here, sir?"

"No." I hadn't considered that she might be more interested in using my tub than hers—but I should've guessed as much, seeing as she longed for the outdoors. But I needed free access to it at all times, in case I came home injured.

I watched her shiver in the dark. "Because you're worried other mages will steal me?"

"No. Because it is my tub—you have your own." I gestured again for her to use the door I had opened for her, but she didn't.

"Why didn't you bring me to heal here after you spanked me, sir?"

I made a low noise of irritation, wanting her to hurry up for her sake. "Because I didn't want you taking your injuries for granted, little moth. Nor did I want you to think that I did, either."

She gave me a wild look then, stricken, like somehow I had lost the last several weeks of progress with her, and she was trapped anew.

"Lisane—what is wrong?" I asked, crowding her inside, whether she liked it or not.

She danced away from me, running halfway down the stairs, before turning back, briefly panting. But she didn't say anything else—she just clutched her towel and then ran from me again.



I spent the rest of that night pacing by the fire in my bedroom. Had I hurt her? *Yes*. Had I been cruel? *Most*

certainly. The many stripes on her back had attested to that.

But this time the cruelty had been her idea, not mine, although I didn't fight against it. No, I had agreed to push her, because she needed to be pushed.

I'd felt the stirrings of magic in her again when I'd been whipping her, but then after she'd fainted, things had fallen silent, and when she'd woken we were back to what felt like the normal flow of fate between us: me wanting her, and her hating me to some degree.

I could teach her everything inside my castle's library and laboratory, give her access to almost everything inside my mind, but the only thing she had want of was the one thing I couldn't give her—her own magic.

I was starting to be worried about her for her sake.

I would be disappointed, of course, if I couldn't raise her up in power . . . but she would be the one to actually have to live that way.

With a drive such as hers . . . could she manage it?

Maybe this was why no one taught women magic—the discovery that they couldn't perform it was too disappointing for them to handle.

And when I did go to bed, I found one of Finx's dresses spooled upon it, from when I had cut her down. The iridescent fabric was in shreds now; there was no point in giving it back to her. I held it up, watching the embers of the firelight behind it, feeling its silk, as smooth as her skin.

I brought the fabric up to my face without thinking, breathing it in as an animal might, not just with my nose, but with my mouth slightly open, like I could not only inhale her but taste her too. My beast rushed to the surface, begging to come out, pricking me from the inside with *his* claws, urging up *his* teeth, as *he* tried to take over.

She was so close, just a few flights of stairs away, which I knew might as well have been a continent, but my beast was not convinced.

All *he* wanted was to take control of me . . . so that I would then not have any.

I twisted my head and forced my beast down, letting the sheer silk trace against the skin of my cheek, wishing that it were her hand instead.



D *id Rhaim know what he was doing to me?*

I hadn't even considered that he might, until he'd made his comment about me not taking my injuries for granted, and then the thought that he'd known that this was how it would work somehow—that I would only be as magical as whatever amount of pain he thoughtlessly doled out—left me reeling in horror.

But—I didn't even know if it *had* worked.

I was so tempted to detour on my way down to my bedroom, to burst into his laboratory and try to do *something* with the clay, but knew I shouldn't, not while he was near.

If I did indeed possess magic now, if somehow his violence had instilled it into me, I wanted space and time to experiment carefully . . . which meant waiting until he was gone next.

I dropped my towel to the floor, pulled on another one of Finx's beautiful dresses to sleep in—and when my back hit the mattress, I knew that all my wounds were healed.



The next day I met him in the laboratory, when I had had my fill of the windows—I'd been so spoiled it took more than mere sunlight to draw me to them anymore. But Rhaim's castle was in the middle of someplace where it

was snowing, there were mad flurries of the white stuff swirling around outside, and that had entranced me for a time.

He didn't turn as I entered, he merely said, "Moth," in acknowledgement. The clay castle was as I'd left it, misshapen and malformed. I sat down behind my desk, and hid my hands inside my lap, stewing in my anger.

An hour passed by. Rhaim continued to work on something I couldn't even see, it was hidden by his bulk, but he did eventually turn around.

"Are you well?" he asked, his brow furrowed with either concern or confusion.

I suspected the latter won out, and I bit my tongue not to yell the truth at him. "I am."

He tilted his head like he did not believe me. "After yesterday, Lisane—" he began.

"I am well, sir," I snapped abruptly, cutting him off.

His eyes narrowed and one of his eyebrows crept up. "Perhaps I should spank you for your tone, then."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" I asked him, daring him to deny it.

His expression turned implacable. "Only if you first begged me," he growled.

I ground my teeth and stood. And that was why he always made me ask first. So that I was always culpable in my own—*whatever this was.*

Torture disguised as training?

So that I would be bound to him.

"Here is your magic for you," I said, slamming my hands into the clay in front of me, sending chunks of it flying everywhere.

He stood to contemplate me, setting a small knife on his desk behind him, and wiping his hands off on a towel. As he turned I could see a fearsome piece of some creature on a metal tray

in front of him, a disembodied paw, with the skin pulled back, and claws pushed out.

I realized I had been foolish to think he might have seen me as clay that needed molding before. Now it was clear that I was closer to the flesh he experimented on as he tried to understand it.

Because he, too, had flayed me.

He sighed, with a frown and a headshake, looking at the spatters of clay I'd gotten all over my side of the lab, and I braced myself for a subsequent rush of his anger. "Little moth," he began, and I clenched my clay-painted hands into fists as he kept talking, ready to try and use whatever powers I had on him if he pressed me. "How many times have I told you you cannot try to force magic?"

I blinked, taking a step back as he continued.

"I know I have hurt you before, more than once," he confessed, looking me directly in the eyes. "But I wonder if your ambition doesn't hurt you worse." He touched his chest, in a grand gesture. "All I have ever been possessed of is a blazing curiosity. I learn for learning's sake, because I can, without a goal. But you, little moth . . ." he said, letting his voice drift. "Your ambition whips you harder than I ever could. It makes me worry for you. I can help you to heal your body—but only you can heal your mind." He crossed the room to stand in front of me and put his red-stained hands atop my shoulders. "Sometimes I wish I could take your whip away from you, for your sake."

I swallowed and closed my eyes, feeling a rush of shame at having doubted him—probably the first one I'd had inside his castle with appropriate clothing on. "It isn't wrong to want something with every fiber of your being," I told him.

The look he was giving me when I opened my eyes again was deep and sad. "No, no it is not, little moth. But I have lived long enough to know that often the world is unkind."

I gave a small cruel laugh. "I know that, too—even though my life has been a short one." Trapped in a windowless place,

banned from the sun, no one ever trying to teach me stars, a thing I was now sure every peasant girl knew before me.

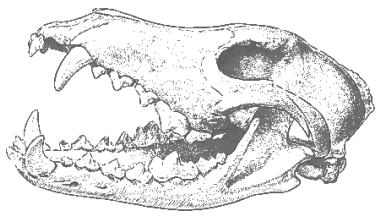
Forced to listen to my own mother die through a closed door, and always knowing that I could be next.

“I know,” he repeated to me, his tone grave. I felt his fingers tense against my skin, and then he released me gently. “I need to go now, little moth.” He glanced around the room. “Finx or I will clean this later. Go upstairs and look out the windows if you like; I will leave them open for you until I return.”

I bit my lips as he turned to go into the room where I knew his portal was. The paw he left behind on his desk was massive enough—how big was the creature it’d come from? Was that where he went when he left? Off to wrestle things wilder than me?

Now that I was slightly less angry, I was worried for him for the first time. “All-Beast,” I called after him and he paused. “Wherever it is that you go, will you be safe?”

He turned back to me briefly. “I am safer there than here,” he said. He didn’t sound like he was teasing, as he closed the door behind him.



RHAIM

When I portaled into Jaegar's war-tent, I found Helkin there alone. He curled a lip at the sight of me—especially my hands, which I hadn't washed, and I wondered if I'd left bloodstains on Lisane's dress when I'd touched her.

"All-Beast," Helkin said curtly.

"Where would you send me today?" I asked, my expression flat.

Helkin's eyes lit up and his nostrils flared. "You wouldn't like the honest answer to that, foul creature."

"Are the other mages foul? Or just the ones that touch your sister?" I didn't bother hiding my disdain for him.

"I had no part of that deal."

"Hmm. And yet somehow, it was made." I scratched my chin, pretending to ponder. "So perhaps you are not as important as you think you are."

I watched things in him begin to combust—he had the same temper as Lisane did. "I would kill you if I could," he promised.

"And I, you—if she did not think so highly of you, that is." He looked surprised at that. "Sometimes she talks to me," I went on, taking a stalking step toward him. "After she spreads her legs for me at night."

He growled incoherently then, a sound my beast longed to come out and answer, but I held back, only giving Helkin a

wicked grin. I didn't care if my lies pained him—he still would have sold Lisane, only to a different person, for a different price.

“You are not of my kind, magicless-boy,” I explained to him slowly, as though he were but a child, “and I am not your throne-sworn—but for your sister, I would not be here. So come to grips with your slippery conscience already, and tell me where to fight.”

Helkin leaned forward, and I wondered if he'd actually try to strike me, but then we were interrupted by his father—who ascertained what had been on the verge of happening with a look. “Stop torturing yet another of my progeny, and go to the caves beneath Singalor, All-Beast. Sibyi and Megial have already gone ahead.”

I sneered at Helkin. “As you wish, my king,” I told his father with vast sarcasm, and drew my magic about myself to portal.



LISANE

I waited, hugging myself, to make sure wherever it was Rhaim had gone to that he wasn't coming back.

But . . . I fairly prickled with energy.

A sort of frantic anticipation, a feeling like I was very, very full of . . . something I couldn't quite put my finger on.

Life seemed possibly too meaningful, and *power* seemed too strident, and wasn't even maybe what I wanted.

No, what I wanted was to matter.

To transform myself into whatever it took to occupy the space I held fully.

To turn myself from a moth into a dragon.

Although that would put me under Rhaim's domain once again, I thought with a snort.

"Oh, let me just—*please*," I whispered, facing the wads of clay that remained on my desk. "Do something," I whispered at it, throwing the force of my mind at the cage of my reality.

I held my breath, could've sworn I felt things shift inside me, like the first lick of flame catching on kindling . . . and then the fire went out, as whatever energies I thought I'd possessed faded.

I tried again, and again, and again, and then gave up, sagging back.

I had gotten beaten . . . and for what?

I would never become more than what I was.

Finx came into the room, climbing halfway up the wall and heading to his nest. He paused and bobbed to look around at the spattered clay. “What happened?” he asked.

What happened indeed.

“Nothing,” I told him truthfully, and stooped to begin cleaning.



When I was done, I washed my hands and got myself food from Rhaim’s small kitchen, where there was a box that always remained cold, and where he heated our meals with his own magical fire.

I couldn’t even cook food here.

What use was I?

I ate things without tasting them, went back to my room, and pulled my journal out.

I’d only hidden it beneath my pillows—I didn’t feel like there was anywhere in the castle I could truly hide anything from Rhaim, so I didn’t try hard.

I couldn’t even hide my body from him; what chance would I have to hide a book?

Although what did it matter, anyway? I would write in it again, tonight, telling it of my failure, like all the other failures I’d already written in its pages—and all of these were things he already knew.

My pity for myself now felt unfathomable.

I was used to a certain type of unfairness in life—which didn’t mean it didn’t chafe, but at least I was accustomed to it.

But now, I had dared to hope, to fully commit to a dream, only to find it not only yanked from my grasp but that it likely wasn’t even possible.

Maybe this was why no one taught women magic—because the thought of being forced to go back to a normal life after having had hope was too much for them to bear.

I lay in my bed, eyes closed, angry and exhausted in turns, slowly curling into a frustrated ball. What would happen when Rhaim realized I was useless? I knew he wouldn't ask for ransom . . . but that didn't mean he wouldn't just take me back home when he got tired of teaching me.

I couldn't imagine going back now, even though I tried.

The thought of living in a dark hole—no matter how elegantly appointed, and with many candles for light—made my heart clench, and my throat start to hurt at the thought of screaming.

When I was little, my father used to tell me stories about the outside world, to entertain me . . . but as I'd aged, when Helkin had gotten to go out and start living them, leaving me and my mother behind, that knowledge had become torturous, even before her death.

And afterward? After the ground had opened up and she'd screamed for a maid to get us help, and then thrown me into my room and locked the door behind me?

I knew my father hadn't meant either of us harm—he thought he'd been keeping us safe, all that time—but his actions had hurt me nonetheless.

Just as bad as anything that Rhaim had ever done to me.

No—*actually*—far, far worse.

Because for all his violence—Rhaim had sworn he'd never push me further than I could handle.

And all of his punishments had endings.

If I went back to my old life, that would be it for me.

There would be no return to this one.

I swept up my journal and sat at the small vanity that I'd been using as a desk, in front of the blurry mirror, which showed my sorrowful reflection. I opened it and searched inside myself for the right words to categorize this new version of my

failure, wishing instead that I could draw a map, a path to a magical new life, firmly escaping my old.

But I didn't know how.

Tears of frustration pooled in my eyes and I got mad at myself for crying.

I hated being called the Princess of Tears. I felt like it mocked me, and through me, mocked my mother.

But there was nothing else right now that I could do.

I put my pen down, ink forgotten and bleeding across a page, blindingly angry at my helplessness, to fold my head into my hands and cry. Tears hit the pool of ink my pen was disgoring, watered it down, and made it spill further and further out, as I cried hard enough to make my head hurt. It felt like someone was touching live coals to parts of my mind, and the pain from this only made me cry more—I was suffused with agony at my upcoming fate, my current misery, and by the feeling that I had been so close to freedom if I could've only grasped it.

Rhaim would be home soon.

I needed to get myself together—if he saw this broken version of me, he'd cut short whatever time I had left here.

I blinked, wiping my eyes as I pulled my head up—and the mirror in front of me didn't show my reflection anymore.

“Father?” The word escaped my lips before I could bite it back, which frightened me, because his image was so clear I felt like he could hear me. He was in a room somewhere, with dark heavy fabric for walls, and he was arguing—with Helkin! It felt like they were close enough to touch.

I leaned closer, even as a pain began inside my skull, like something was trying to hammer its way out.

What did I care though, when I had this?

I was seeing something that was real. I had no doubt. This was no mere figment from my mind. This was magic, and I was its source, and I didn't care if it burned me up entirely.

I read my name upon my brother's lips—they were definitely arguing—about me?

Why?

Were they scared for me?

How long had I been gone?

I hadn't even tried to count the days.

I gritted my teeth as the pain became excruciating—I ran my hands up into my hair and pulled it, trying to give myself some other sensation to focus on, but it didn't work—and then the image started to vibrate, losing coherency, until it dripped off of the mirror, just like the ink out of my pen, before disappearing entirely.

My headache went with it, leaving me swaying in front of the newly blurry glass—but—*I had done it.*

I didn't know how precisely . . . but I had.

"Finx!" I shouted, getting up to dance. "FINX!"

The spider-cat rushed in along the ceiling. "What's going on? Are you all right?" he chittered down at me, running in excited circles and looking everywhere.

"Is Rhaim back yet?" I asked him.

"No." He artfully flipped to fall and land right-side-up on my bed. "Why?"

"Because!" I shouted at him, laughing. I put my hands to my head again.

It worked!

I would have to figure everything out—and I'd have to tell Rhaim—and who knew what he'd think of me then, but I was sure it would be all right.

He wanted me to learn.

Unlike . . . literally everyone else that'd ever been in my life.

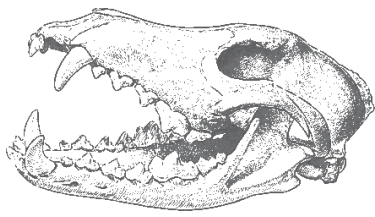
I fell into my bed beside Finx. I'd had tutors, of course, but they'd always been beholden to my father and the throne.

It felt like before Rhaim, no one else had ever cared.

Finx came over and drummed his little forepaws on my forehead, finding the same spot on me where I had begun to pet him in passing. “Is everything all right?”

“It is, Finx,” I said, twisting over to grin at him. From here I could see the grotesqueries of his fangs and mouth and how all of his many legs were attached. He was improbable, but I didn’t find him disgusting anymore.

He was magical, I was magical, and everything was going to be okay.



RHAIM

I promised my moth I'd be safe, and here I was walking into the dark.

I'd caught up with Sibyi and Megial standing outside of the wide entrance to one of Mount Singalor's many cave systems, debating on who should go in first.

Sibyi's magic was next to useless, seeing as we didn't want to get flooded, and Megial's powers of concentrated light would eventually cook us in the tunnels along with the Deathless, if he used them intensely—plus, he admitted reluctantly, for his powers to be at their fullest, he needed to be beneath the sun.

The rocky terrain inside the cave didn't provide me with enough loose material to transform into creatures, but I still summoned everything the cave had in it—bats, spiders, centipedes, bringing them out of the ground in a wave to help me and sending them deeper into the tunnels to report back.

Megial groaned. "I wish I hadn't seen that."

"You're the one illuminating them," Sibyi complained, his thin lips curled in disgust.

"Well, I don't want to be in the dark with them now!"

"Shh," I hushed both of them, listening, sorting out assorted responses. The bats were the most help; they flew around the Deathless easily, and if they were right . . . "There's at least a hundred," I said. "Maybe more."

Megial cursed beneath his breath, and Sibyi gave me a look, asking, "How many can you take?"

I closed my eyes and concentrated, getting a sense of the place from the bats as they flew. The cave system was narrow, which would prevent me from being surrounded, if I was careful . . . but once we engaged, there'd be no stopping them. There was no place to hide—or cut them off.

“I’m going for reinforcements,” Megial said, waving his hand beside himself.

“By the time they get here, there’ll just be more,” Sibyi told him.

“Then I’d better go quickly,” Megial said, and walked through his portal to escape.

Sibyi scoffed after Megial’s portal closed “Some help he is.”

“It’s better this way,” I said, using my own magic to light the walls now. “He seems easily panicked, and I don’t feel like dying by fire.”

“You die underground?” Sibyi asked. He’d been curious about my death ever since I’d guessed his.

I amused myself by looking around for Lisane’s copper eyes before responding to him. “Not today, I don’t,” I said, and handed him my flask and pipe.



I had personally killed the Deathless before, but never in such number. At first, I only changed enough to become beastly, so that I had speed and strength, fangs and claws, but as time wore on, and now that we were in combat, I had no choice but to let more and more of my humanity go to fight. There was no turning back, and they seemingly had no end.

With Sibyi behind me, occasionally leaning forward to stab his staff through a pillowy torso or help me shake off a tenacious arm, we slaughtered our way down and into the mountain, searching for the end of the Deathless and their magical source.

It wasn't hard work, but it was a grueling slog, becoming more disgusting by the moment. The vital fluid that the Deathless ran on splashed out once they were pierced, coating the both of us, and offending my beast's finer nose. It took time and effort to wrench them apart, yanking their limbs off like the legs of a crab, or popping their heads like fat ticks, feeling their teeth and bones scrape my palms.

And all the while, they kept coming. Reaching, grasping, trying to claw and gnaw back at us—my beast took to bellowing his discontent, as if roaring at them would make them reconsider, but it did not; they had no individual sense, and it was starting to feel like their numbers might be infinite—until we finally reached their end. Just before we could see into the eruption that had set them free, the entire mountain shook as the ground resettled, and with that came falling rocks.

My beast's arm and flank was torn open by a sharp stone but he managed to dodge getting crushed. Sibyi was not so lucky; he was pinned.

"My leg!" he shouted, staring at the boulder that'd crushed his shin in horror.

I clapped a furry hand over his mouth. "Don't set more rocks free," I growled.

I watched his eyes go wide, and then his senses came back and he nodded, wincing in pain. "Rhaim—I'm stuck. I can't—I can't portal—" he said, and he was right—one had to move through a portal to use it—plus we were far too deep inside the mountain's bowels to portal safely. Transporting oneself through air was one thing, through stone, entirely another.

"I'm not leaving you," I told him, hoping to calm him down. I squatted on my heels to inspect the boulder, cupping a light in my palm to see just where his leg had been damaged.

"Where's Megial?" he whispered, as the scent of his fresh blood cut through the smell of the Deathless' ichor.

"Waiting for us to be finished, no doubt." I reached for the edge of Sibyi's robe and ripped a strip off of it, threading it

beneath his knee and knotting it tightly. “This is going to hurt. Try not to scream,” I warned him, and then put my back against the boulder.

The boulder didn’t want to move, and I could hear Sibyi hiss from pain as the stone ground his bone against the cave’s slick stone floor. He made a high-pitched sound, just as the rock finally shifted, and then I heard a thud, as the stone rolled away—the other mage had passed out.

Just as well. It would be easier to carry him without the additional weight of his pride.



I chose to let the bats lead me out of the caverns, rather than waste magic on illumination, now that I was trying to hold my beast in—and because of that, and because I was walking as a beast did, quietly padding against rocks, rather than with the clunk of boots—I was able to hear an echoed conversation as I neared the exit, so I paused.

“I can’t do that—” I heard Megial protest.

“Can’t, or won’t?” A man fought him.

“They’re in there! They may yet come out!”

“Or we’re about to be overrun with Deathless—we can’t endanger the towns below. Cut the mountainside down, mage.”

“It’s—I—” I heard Megial begin to make excuses. I knew from the bats that it was dusk outside, and that Megial’s powers were fading.

I also knew, from being a mage, how loath we were to tell others what our skills cost us, lest that information be used against us later.

I kicked a rock so that it rolled loudly, and heard the jabber of surprised and fearful men at the sound, just as I emerged.

Megial's wry little face was flooded with relief. "See, Vethys! There they are!"

My ears perked at the name, and I took in the man Megial spoke to. He was the man I'd seen near Helkin before in ornate armor—and I knew I'd heard his name from Lisane's lips.

My beast began growling, and it echoed around us as though the entire cave was my throat.

"All-Beast," Megial said, running forward. "I went back—it took time to gather troops—there's so many infestations today—and—"

"Take him," I told him, cutting him off as I passed over Sibyi's broken form. "There's a knot below his knee to stop the bleeding. Someone needs to straighten his leg before it heals wrong." Then I looked over at the man who had dared to have a claim on what was mine. "This infestation is no longer your concern."

Megial disappeared into a portal behind the men, leaving me alone with Vethys, and twenty non-magical men with swords.

Vethys frowned, looking past me, like he did not believe. "They're all dead?" he asked.

I held up a hand and clenched it into a fist. "By my hands and claws. Every single one of them." I knew the soldiers could read the truth of things, in the broad gash on my arm, and the way that my fur was matted with ichor, rock dust, and bat shit. "Were you going to trap Sibyi and I in?"

"Megial said there were over a hundred Deathless. We thought you lost."

"We?" I shook my shaggy head with a growling scoff. "Megial would've never given up on a fellow mage. So who else did you confer with, man-thing, prior to your arrival?"

I watched his fingers tighten on the hilt of his sword. "I owe you no answers," he said, and my breast swelled with the urge to fight. I suspected Vethys and I were thinking the same thing: he, that if he killed me and swore his men to secrecy, no one would ever know, and me, the same, only I would merely have to kill all of them.

I chose to breathe loudly, watching the awe in his soldiers' eyes bend to fear, then circled a hand behind myself, ready to portal elsewhere so that I could once again cool down. "Tell Jaegar I will be away for some time."

His eyes narrowed on me. "Why do you get to leave, when none of the other mages do?"

I turned around to face him briefly and give him a snarl of a smile. "Because, little lordling, when I am like this, no one wants me near."



Rhaim didn't come home that night.

I ate dinner in the laboratory, which was now much cleaner than it had been, after I'd swept all my clay away, and watched the door, thinking about how using magic had felt, trying to dissect the moment as Rhaim had been dissecting the paw that was still sitting on his table.

I'd hurt, but . . . the image of seeing my father and brother fighting resonated with me.

I felt bad for them, of course, and no doubt they were worried about me—but their thoughts and feelings didn't matter.

My mind was made up, and so was my future.

And surely Rhaim could get a message to my father from me. Just one, once, to let him know that I was safe.

That maybe even . . . I was happy.

Which was a strange thing to think on, yes, but as long as I was going to continue my studies—I'd had more freedom in the past few weeks here with Rhaim than I'd had in my entire prior lifetime.

I would let him beat me morning, noon, and night, if I could get stronger and gain control.

I laughed at the thought of it, and then ran to my bedroom, bringing back pillows and a sheet, making a nest for myself not all that far from Finx's, so that when Rhaim came back, I would be the first thing he saw.



The door swept open the next morning, while I was still curled up on the ground, startling me awake.

Rhaim looked down at me and growled. “You are a moth, not a dog,” he said, before slamming the door closed behind him, and opening up a portal taking him somewhere . . . outside?

“Wait!” I shouted after him, as he stepped through the loop of his magic and disappeared.

I’d only gotten a flash of him, but he’d been covered in dirt and dust, and there’d been a ragged gash down his arm—his leather shirt had been cut open, revealing a deep red tear into the flesh beneath—and he’d smelled like death itself. I threw a hand over my nose and mouth to hide from the lingering stench, and then ran to Finx’s nest to shake its walls.

“Where did he go?”

The spider-cat scrambled out of the top of the nest and leapt down to the nearest desk. “Up to the roof, like always.”

“How do I get there?” I asked him. Finx bobbed, torn. “He was hurt, Finx. What if something’s wrong with him?”

Finx tried to brush off my concerns by waving two of his appendages. “He has been hurt before—”

He had? “When?”

“Last week. And a few days before that. And—”

I stared at the creature in ignorant horror, then cut him off. “But what if this time is different?” Because surely it was worse, I’d just seen it—

I watched Finx’s thoughts play across his furry body. “He will be mad.”

“Not if he’s hurt badly enough.” I crouched down to be on Finx’s level. “Please, Finx. Take me there?”

Finx nervously stroked himself with his hindmost set of legs, and then leapt to the ground. “Follow!” he commanded, and I did so.



Finx took me back to the main staircase that wound through Rhaim’s palace, and went higher than I’d ever been allowed to go before—of course the spider-cat was allowed free-range of the place. He actually lived here; he wasn’t trapped, like me.

We reached the final door, and he raced up a wall. “Don’t tell him I brought you here?”

“I’m sorry, Finx—I think he’ll know,” I said, reaching out to give the creature a comforting pat, then I put my hand on the door’s handle and quietly opened it.

Sunlight streamed in, golden and pure, and not filtered by a window. I paused there, on the threshold between light and darkness, fresh air on my face, feeling wind against my skin, entranced by the sensations—and then I threw my hand up to block the light so I could see.

Rhaim was there, in profile, stripping off his clothes. I saw the wound he had again, and gasped—then I saw the rest of him, and blushed furiously.

He slowly swiveled his head to look over at me. “Go away, moth.”

“What happened to you, Rhaim?” I asked him, taking a brave step out toward him. I endeavored to look him only in the eyes, same as he mostly did me, but it was difficult, especially when I caught a glint of metal. I hadn’t wanted to know what his leathers hid, but now that I did, would I be able to forget?

“A mountain tried to wrestle me. It lost.”

“Don’t mock me.”

He picked up a towel from one of the baskets and wrapped it around his waist before fully facing me. “I am allowed to have secrets from you, moth,” he said.

I could see the brand of his mage mark against his chest, like a hand, as well as each and every one of his muscles, like they were chiseled into him—but over them there were rough marks, red scratches, purpling bruises, and that horrific gash on his arm. Something had hurt him badly.

“Go back inside. It’s not safe for you here,” he growled.

“Not safe for me?” I protested, taking another step forward and gesturing wildly at his arm. “You were hurt! What—and how—”

“Do you think you’re the only one who can hurt me?” he asked, sounding snide.

I paused and swallowed. “No. But . . . I don’t want the castle to fall out of the sky.” I didn’t even know where we were now. It wasn’t snowing anymore . . . I took a wild look around, seeing only air and clouds, before looking back at him. “I live or die, as you do,” I said, quickly adding, “sir.”

Rhaim closed his eyes as if pained, and then his fist holding his towel closed clenched. His shoulders twitched, his chest shook, and then he was laughing, as though someone had told him the world’s best joke.

I felt his disdain for me cut through me like a knife.

Just a day ago I thought I might be happy here . . . and now?

I turned, not to go back inside, but just so he wouldn’t see how badly his cruelty hurt me, how quickly it made tears spring to my eyes. I would rather that he spank me again than mock my concern like this.

“I can sew,” I said quietly. Until I could control my magic, it was perhaps the only true skill I had to offer him, from all the needlepoint of my youth, and knowing that made the shame of his dismissal burn brighter.

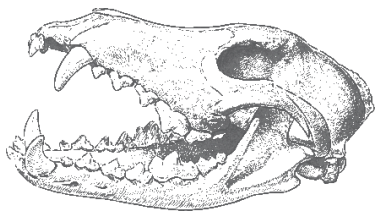
I made to run back into his castle, where I might be indoors again, but I would at least be away from him. As I first stepped

back into the shadows though he shouted, “Lisane!” sharply after me.

I paused, thinking he would tell me to shut the door, or make fun of me again, and winced to prepare for the blow.

But instead he said, “I apologize, moth. That was unkind. My wound does not have need of your sewing.”

I didn’t turn back, or acknowledge him in any fashion. I just kept heading forward—and when I was three stairs down, I looked back and the door was gone.



RHAIM

I watched the space where Lisane had been as I cast off my towel and sank into my tub, hissing as the water hit the wound upon my arm.

I had spent twelve hours walking across the continent, gathering my beast up and putting him away like a winter cloak, until it was safe for me to portal home, only to find Lisane sleeping on the floor of my laboratory.

I'd forgotten I'd given her access to the room, and even if I had remembered, it would've never occurred to me that she would apparently spend the night there, waiting for me—or manage to follow me outside, to the edge of my bath.

It'd been easy to read the horror on her face at seeing me naked. I had taken her terror personally at first, thinking perhaps that she found me and my many scars disgusting, but then I remembered that she knew nothing of men. Her eyes were as virgin as her body. It made me want to take her and teach her more than magic, but I knew that would be impossibly selfish and cruel. And while her brother assumed I was always my beast, that was not the case.

No, I knew that when she did kill me—either on purpose, or by accident—if she survived the incident herself, she would have to return to her world, and unless I had made her magnificent in the meantime, it would be the same as she had left it.

A world that was cold and cruel toward the so-called weaker sex—and if I ruined her before then I would be doing her a greater disservice than she knew. Like others of her rank, she

needed to somehow go under an arch made of unicorn horn and into a windowless bridal chamber, with a downcast gaze and her eyelashes fluttering on her bashful cheeks—which meant she had seen all of me that she was going to, for her own sake, despite my fervent desires on the matter.

Still though, who had that man-boy been, and how would he have treated her, if Jaegar had managed to pass her off to him? I sank deeper in the tub's waters, wondering, feeling more certain by the moment that I should've killed him on principle.

I'd teased her once before about living in a cave, but there were some families who truly did keep their women trapped in hillsides, not far off from the type of place I had just fought Deathless in. In certain countries, they viewed their upper-class women less as human and more as breeding stock. Just because Jaegar had momentarily united everyone to fight the Deathless war didn't mean he'd managed to change all their customs.

Did she . . . know that? Had anyone warned her?

And just how innocent was she?

I did not know what I longed for more—to discover that Lisane was more worldly than she seemed, and thus both miraculously interested in and able to accommodate my needs, versus the thought of stripping her naivety from her, petal by petal, until only the woman I made of her remained.

But none of that mattered, really, when there was always the chance that she might have to go back.

I didn't want her to. Neither as my human, nor as my beast—in fact, I felt sure that, if allowed, he would tear apart anyone who came for her. But the one mark on my body that the tub wouldn't heal away was the hand of fate, and whether I liked it or not, it was always pushing me.



hat night at dinner, her expression was severe, and she only had eyes for the table.

T “Are you not hungry, little moth?” I asked her, when she did not eat. By the time I’d gotten out of the tub, she’d swept her bedding out of my laboratory, and I’d avoided her by sleeping the rest of the afternoon.

She pulled her gaze up slowly. “I want to send a message to my father.”

A low growl started in my throat, unbidden—but she didn’t look angrily at me, nor with the fierceness I so often admired.

She seemed hurt.

Sorrowful.

My shoulders tensed—would that I had beat her senseless to see her so, rather than injured her with my carelessness. “Why? What would you tell him?”

“That I am alive,” she said, back to addressing the table and not me. “He would want to know.”

“And what good would that do him or you?”

“Surely he searches for me. And surely he is worried.”

The latter, yes. The former . . . he knows exactly where you are, and who you dine with.

“And do you think I would survive delivering such a note?” I asked, curious if she meant me harm.

Her eyes stayed on her hands. “You killed Castillion, so I think you might.”

I clenched my fists, rather than growl again, and she slowly rose from the table, having eaten nothing. “I find myself tired,” she said, flicking her wrist against her skirt. “Good night.”



or two days, my moth had the run of my castle, the kitchen, the laboratory, the library. She did not speak to me, and she ate nothing.

I know because I had Finx watching her, even when I was gone.

“She only drank a little water,” he reported, when I’d returned from another one of Jaegar’s assignments, while twisting his two front paws together in a gesture of concern.

She didn’t join me to smoke and learn, she didn’t attempt anything with the clay, she mostly stayed in her room, although she was always sure to show up at mealtimes and eat nothing while her plate was full, her eyes only on a book.

At first I thought I would be happy to coexist in silence, as I had before having her delivered to my doorstep, but the longer she ignored me, the more irate I became. And the fact that she still loved her fool of a father in spite of his cruelty towards her—and the fact that I could never tell her of it, lest it harm her more—made me positively venomous.

On the third day of her insolent silence, when she had again gone without food, I stormed down to her bedroom, slamming the door open on her. I found her in just one of Finx’s translucent shifts, lying on her bed reading, with an entire scholar’s mistress of books accumulated on her bed’s far side. I would’ve been proud of her, were I not so pissed off.

“What is it?” she asked me, her eyes looking sunken and her face sallow.

“You will eat,” I growled at her.

“Why?”

“Because I say so.”

She put the book she’d been reading down, and swung herself to sit up. “Why?” she pressed.

“I demand it, and that is enough.”

“Is it, though?” she asked as her eyebrows rose. “Or what, Rhaim, you’ll throw me into your dungeon again? And starve me anew?”

“Do not tempt me, little moth,” I growled at her.

“Why?” she asked again, her voice rising. She stood, and I imagined she was thinner than I had seen her before, which I didn’t like. “If you’d wanted me dead, Rhaim—you would’ve killed me. If you’d merely wanted to torture me—you could’ve already done that, too. And you swore you’d never ask for ransom.” She moved to stand in front of me, and her eyes held a fraction of their old flame. “You want something from me. What is it?”

I bristled. Her room smelled like her, of course, and her long hair was out of its familiar braid for some reason, so it swung in wild sweeps around her breasts, clinging to them in a path I wanted to follow with my tongue. And as her cheeks pinked in anger at me and her jaw hardened with her resolve to fight, I felt the beastly things in me long to respond.

What I want, little moth, is your everything.

“If you won’t answer me, then leave,” she told me, the line of her mouth quivering, taking my silence for more mockery.

I reached out and took hold of her throat, faster than she could’ve moved away. “I want your obedience. Or failing that, your courtesy.”

She didn’t fall back, not even when my claw tips emerged to indent her delicate pale skin, though she licked her lips before she spoke. “I will grant you neither, for the rest of my life, even if I am in chains.”

I kept her chin held high, so that she would not see the beast of me, the way her insolence made me hard and long to tame her. She didn’t twist or fight; she knew I had the better of her—but I didn’t think her scared.

No, my moth was angry. Because now I felt her tremble with it, and I knew that it was rage, not fear—even when a single solitary teardrop fell from the corner of her eye, to trace a wandering path down the soft skin of her cheek.

Princess of Tears indeed.

I caught it with the thumb of my free hand before it could fall and be wasted on the floor. “If I let you write to him, do you

swear you will behave?” I asked her with a snarl.

I felt her swallow beneath my palm. “Yes,” she whispered.

I released her, and she stepped back, gasping, her hands reaching for her throat, now dotted by five pricks of red. “Then write your letter, and seal it with wax.”

“And you promise it will get to him? Even if you have to deliver it with . . . a bird, or I don’t know, a hive of bees—”

“I have never lied to you, Lisane,” I growled. *Unlike many others.* “I expect to see you tomorrow, for meals and training. You may give me your letter then.”

She took a deep and settling inhale, her copper eyes wide, and I strode out of her room. I waited until I was alone in the hall to bring my thumb to my lips, licking away the whisper of salt her tear had left behind—and then the blood on all of my claw-tips on my other hand in quick succession.

I wanted to taste so much more of her it hurt me.



LISANE

I spent hours calling Rhaim's bluff, crafting a letter I knew that he would never send, retelling my captivity in almost every sordid detail. I kept his name out of it, and that I had managed any magic, but I hid nothing else.

Rhaim couldn't let my father know that he'd captured me—it would be tantamount to asking to be attacked. While the Deathless were a seemingly endless threat, I still felt sure my father could spare some mages for my rescue. At the same time I knew Rhaim's pride, which he possessed in irrational quantity, would never let him admit any fear.

So there was no point in lying in any portion of it, because surely Rhaim was going to destroy it the second he departed, portaling off to do whatever it was he did on his own each day. He wouldn't really deliver it for me—he couldn't take the risk I'd named him.

And for all his talk of never lying—he'd never once told me how I'd gotten here, or why he would never ask for ransom. And what kind of man—or *bestly mage!*—kidnaps a girl in the first place?

And worse yet, I realized, as I wrote things down, he'd made me complicit in my own captivity.

I wanted to believe he would've given me back when he'd offered to, once upon a time.

And I wanted to believe there was a time when I would have gladly gone back.

But . . . now?

Now I existed in some strange limbo. Independent beneath his roof, but still under his thumb. Unfit for one world, but not ready for the next.

All I had done here was find myself a bigger cage.

I folded the letter into thirds after blowing the ink dry and found an unused candle on my desk I could melt for a seal. I was about to search in my drawers for a striker, when I realized Rhaim had laid hands on me again. I put a hand to my throat, finding the spots where he had grabbed me.

Had it been enough?

I stared at the wick of the candle, concentrating my will, trying to twist the knowledge of creating mere light in my palm to be actual heat enough to light it. It felt like I was burning a tiny hole inside my mind, like someone was pressing a heated needle into my brain. I had a moment to wonder if this was it, the moment learning magic caught up with me, and I would burst into legendary flames—but then the candlewick took. Slowly at first, then all at once, becoming a dancing lick of fire.

I sat there as the pain my magic had caused me receded and I was left with rising awe. I stared at it until the wax cupped at the tip threatened to overflow, then I put it back into the candle holder hurriedly, and took up my pen again, unfolding the letter to add a few final lines.

Please do not come for me. I have no need of your assistance, I wrote and paused. I couldn't claim to be happy anymore, but as I watched the flame's reflection stutter in my mirror, I was sure of the truth as I wrote it down:

This is where I belong.



I joined Rhaim the next morning for breakfast, carrying my letter in one hand. He watched me walk across the room from the door and sit down, placing it upon the table. He

didn't so much as glance in its direction—his eyes were for me alone until I'd taken my first bite.

After that, he went back to reading.

I ate at a stately pace, despite the fact that I'd been starving, because I wanted to maintain some illusion of personal control, and when I was done I announced, "I brought my letter."

He held up one hand for silence, without looking up, and I wished that he'd done me more harm the prior day so that I now might light his hair on fire.

When he was ready, he snapped his book closed. "I wanted to finish my page. Apologies."

"We both know you don't know the meaning of the word," I said, then added, "sir," in a perfunctory fashion.

He gave me a smug, knowing look. "Hmm. Perhaps someday I'll learn, but after eight hundred years, you shouldn't hold out much hope." Then he stood and walked down the length of the table to me, one hand out for my letter. I offered it out to him, sure it would be destroyed momentarily.

"Aren't you worried what I've told him?" I asked him, trying to get him to confess.

"Have you asked for ransom?" he asked, and when I shook my head, he shrugged, settling the letter into his leather shirt. "Then no."

"Why not?" I pressed.

"You might have noticed we're rather unassailable," he said, twirling his hand around to indicate the castle that he lived in.

What would it be like to live his life? Above any concerns entirely? "Do you truly fear nothing, sir?" I asked him.

His usual stern expression softened, and he snorted softly. "Just one thing, and one thing only."

"What?" I asked because I had to.

"No, little moth. You do not get to know," he said, shaking his head. "I'll deliver it now, and be back for your studies this

evening.” He tapped the place over his breast where he’d hidden it, and began walking away so calmly that even I was forced to believe him.

“If you truly do see my father, tell him that I love him and I miss him,” I called after him.

He turned toward me, looking back. “Does your letter not say that?”

“It does.”

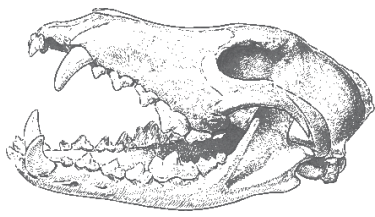
His eyebrows rose in bemusement. “Then do you wish for me—or the monkey that I send in to deliver it—to malingering and die?”

If he actually delivered my letter, and *if* he did die . . . my studies would be quite set back. “Not entirely, sir.”

Rhaim considered me then, like I was another one of his specimens, and wound up shaking his head. “I am never giving you back, Lisane. No matter what your letter says.”

“And I believe you are a man of your word. Which means you will deliver it, as you swore to.”

“I am, and I will,” he said, giving me a curt nod.



While I was indeed curious what Lisane had written to her father, I would have never broken her seal to investigate.

It didn't matter what she'd said about anything we'd done—Jaegar had known the risks he was taking in sending her to me. Considering the reputation I was gaining, he should be glad I was keeping her alive. I had gone from a mere handful of men having seen my beastly form in centuries to entire platoons of soldiers witnessing me. Over the past few weeks, the Deathless attacks had become so relentless that even mages were spread thin, and we were being sent out with human squadrons. Their jobs were to protect us while we worked our magics, and they did, having no choice—without a mage to help them return through a portal, they might have had to cross entire mountain ranges to come home, otherwise.

But it meant that many soldiers had now seen me raise up animal armies from the ground, summon useful creatures from the surrounding countryside, or fight in beast-form by their side. Many of them seemed to relish the opportunity to see strong magics done up-close, but there were always a few I felt the need to keep an eye on, even if the cheers when we were finished were universal.

I locked the door to my portal room behind myself and walked through my arch of bones and into Jaegar's war-tent. There were scattered humans and mages there, along with Helkin, at Jaegar's side.

"You're early," the boy said.

“Is that as much a crime as being late?” I asked him, before scanning their small number. “I would talk to Jaegar, alone.”

“You have no special rank here, All-Beast,” Castillion told me.

I stared him down coolly. “We both know that’s a lie.”

Jaegar made a dissatisfied sound, but then stood up from his makeshift throne. “I will listen to the mage in peace,” he said, waving the rest of the group away.

All of them followed his order, but Helkin stayed behind.

“Only your father,” I told him.

“Surely anything you want to say to him, you can say in front of me.”

“Surely anything I tell your father, he can tell you later, if he chooses to.”

“Enough,” Jaegar said loudly, giving Helkin a firm gesture. The boy snarled, but left, as Jaegar focused his attention on me, putting a contemplative hand on the green gem upon his chest. “What is worth you disrupting my day, All-Beast?”

His tone was even, but I could already see the scenarios running through his mind, and I wondered which he feared the most—that I had killed Lisane with my brutality, or that I had somehow made her belly round with child. Mages couldn’t have children, but I could imagine him fearing that outcome nonetheless.

“She asked that I deliver this to you.” I pulled out the letter and held it up. His eyes fell upon the seal, where Lisane had scratched an *L* into the wax. “But first, I need something of yours, to prove that I delivered it.”

Lisane would never believe that I had risked myself in coming here otherwise—and I could always claim whatever creature I’d sent in with the letter had stolen from the king on their way out.

“Does . . . she—” he slowly asked, loosening a wide gold ring bearing ornate script around his left ring finger.

“Know how she came to my castle? No.” I offered over the letter as he gave up the ring. “But my silence on that is for *her* sake, not yours.” I hid his ring inside a pocket, as he broke the letter’s seal.

I watched Jaegar’s face as he read the letter. The man had been a king for a long time, and he was not known for making rash decisions, which was a thing which I had wondered about more than once before.

How long had he had to sit and contemplate the worth of his daughter’s life before sending her to my castle? Had it been an easy decision to part with her? What level of magery earned virginal princesses as bribes? Had Wyrval the Green been a little less enthusiastic about tearing Deathless apart with roots and vines, would it be him here instead of me?

The only tell on Jaegar’s pale and haggard face was a slight widening of his nostrils. He refolded the letter, tucked it into his robe, much the same as I had prior, and said, “I see.”

When it became obvious he wouldn’t share the letter’s contents with me, I shrugged and made a show of clenching my fist, popping all of my knuckles in turn. “Since I am here already—where should I go to fight?”



LISANE

I spent quite a bit of time staring out of the windows that morning.

Rhaim hadn't closed the shutters when he'd left, because his castle was in the sky over the ocean. The sky was a brilliant shade of sapphire, and the water hundreds of feet below was a lovely aquamarine. I stood inside a sunbeam, finding myself transfixed.

It was fitting that I was here now—having sent Rhaim off with my letter, it felt like I had cast away my last tie to earth.

Even if he didn't deliver it—even if he read it—I knew I hadn't lied.

I did belong here.

I had spent so many nights and daydreams up until this point in my life just dreaming of escape. Cutting off my hair, getting free, and running wild in the woods. Feeling the grass beneath my feet and counting the stars at night. Wishing that I'd been born lower class, so no one would care who I was, or what I was worth to them.

But a girl who could create fire was halfway to freedom.

And freedom was worth the risk of being burned.

I gave my reflection a subtle smile, and then shrieked in surprise as something black and furry ran across the windowpane outside.

Finx, hearing me, scampered back up and waved. I put a hand to my chest and shouted his name, angry at myself for being

scared of him. “Finx!”

I couldn’t hear him, though I knew from the way he moved he was speaking to me, bobbing and swinging several arms, and then he ran away.

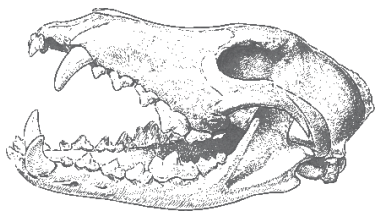
Why was he outside? And how did he get out?

I knew Finx had a larger run of the castle than I did—could I talk him into taking me up on the roof again? So that I could bathe myself in Rhaim’s tub, beneath the sun? I plastered myself to the window, hoping to get his attention—and then he raced back and I had it.

There was a little bird wrapped in silk between his forepaws, and he showed it to me through the glass in what appeared to be excitement. “Oh, no, no, no,” I said, turning around as he brought it to his face. I knew he had to eat somehow—and I ate meat too, and I knew it came from somewhere—but that didn’t mean I wanted to see his odd little fanged mouth in action. I put a hand to my own mouth in horror, and then laughed at the strangeness of my current life. Perhaps I should’ve included this moment in my letter? Or maybe I’d write about it tonight, in my journal. Other mages’ journals included moments just as random—and actually, now that I was exclusively reading the innermost thoughts of men, I was mostly underwhelmed, and generally glad I was not in their company. The risqué books I’d found hidden in my library had only barely scratched the surface of their wants and desires it seemed, and for every one of Rhaim’s counterparts who were as scholastically inclined as he was, there were two or three who, in addition to wasting their meager magical talents, wrote about women in grossly unflattering ways.

A shadow passed behind me, momentarily cutting off the light streaming into the library, and I wondered if it was Finx again, bringing another bird back to show me—then I realized the shadow was far too large for that, and there hadn’t been a single cloud in the sky.

But there *was* something blocking the light. I turned, squinted, and made out the outline of a ship like I had seen before in Drelleth’s harbor, flying straight for the castle’s side.



RHAIM

J aegar sent me out with five soldiers I didn't know. I didn't like trusting strangers, but it wasn't entirely unusual—and when the fighting was finished, I would get to go home to Lisane.

Hopefully my delivering her letter would settle her conscience, so that we could get back to our studies—and so that I might have more excuses to be around her, again.

Because as I spent last night pacing, wondering what my mother thought of me and everything I had subjected her to, and what of it she might deign to tell her father, I realized that what bothered me more than her starving herself to force my hand was how keenly I felt her absence when she'd withdrawn herself from my life.

I'd truly been mad at her—*and possibly still was*—but the knowledge that I had missed her was horrifying.

Me, the All-Beast, who spent most of his life wanting for nothing, had suddenly felt a hollow space at my core.

I'd become accustomed to her presence—even if she was frequently in the way. I missed her quick wit, her flashing temper, the small furrows that appeared between her eyebrows when she concentrated too hard. I had gotten used to having someone to talk to—even when I didn't want to, even when it was just her, talking at me—and I liked the feeling I had when I walked into a room finding her already there.

It felt like someone had left a gift for me.

And if I were in a room, when she entered it, all the better—because then I could pretend that she was coming to me.

To *my* side.

And not just because she was interested in a book I stood nearby.

“All-Beast,” one of the soldiers behind me said, giving me a worried look. We were near a cliff, with a view of all the jungles of Trevath beyond. Everything else with a lick of sense was racing past us, birds flying through the trees with worried calls, monkeys swinging from branch to branch with terrified hooting, even butterflies were flying determinedly upwind.

My sense of *something* about to happen when the Deathless were near mocked the same feeling of destiny I had around Lisane.

Perhaps the fact that she was doomed to kill me made my still-living days around her sweeter. For all that she would be my death—her recent argumentative and striving presence in my life had given living it a purpose.

And already the absence of her was far worse than whatever the emerging mindless monsters below were about to do.

The ground shifted beneath our feet, and one of the soldiers shouted in surprise.

“I feel it. I know,” I said, putting a human hand out to calm them—but it was my beast’s hand when I pulled it back.

It wasn’t worth hiding him when so many soldiers had seen him already, and when he could fight more devastatingly than I could. The trees just below us shuddered and his finer nose could already scent the Deathless’ funk.

All I had to do was end this quickly, then go home.



LISANE

I watched, horrified, as the airship on the horizon came closer, sailing across the sky as though it were the ocean.

“Finx!” I shouted. “FINX!”

But the creature couldn’t hear me, he was still outside—and what made me think he would have a way to contact Rhaim when I didn’t? I put my hands to the window glass, begging my magic to work, to make the shutters shut and protect me—because the moment a mage could see into Rhaim’s library, they could portal in. “FINX!” I howled.

I ran to sweep books and papers off of nearby tables, hauling them up the risers with a strength I didn’t know I possessed, shoving and scraping wood against wood, before flipping them over in my panic, trying to barricade myself inside as my mind raced.

It felt like I had just gotten here yesterday!

I had so much left to learn!

Had something happened to Rhaim?

It was this last thought that pinned me to the ground. How long ago had I sent him off with my letter? Had he been captured . . . or worse?

Because of me? My words, carelessly shared on paper? Damn his pride if he’d really delivered the thing—but then double damn mine, for sending it in the first place!

I levered the last table up the risers and flipped it, panting. The seams where the tables met the window edges weren’t perfect,

but the mages would have to get awfully close to see through. I stood in front of one of these skinny gaps now, looking out. The wind had changed, and now I could see the flag the ship flew.

It wasn't my father's flag—it was a purple cross, on a white field.

The flag of Vethys's country.

My stomach, already low, found new depths to slither into.

“No, no, *NO!*” I screamed—then I ran for the laboratory.

I picked up every weapon I could find, and even hauled one of Rhaim's strange jars of works in progress out. I would throw every book in the library at them, I would fight them with chair legs and bones—no matter what it took I was *not going back*.

I was making a second trip when I heard the sounds of an explosion, and Rhaim's castle rocked. I shrieked in terror and raced back to the library, finding shattered glass and splintered wood as an anchor, a massive thing of iron, clawed in all directions like a wicked chandelier, grabbed hold of the risers and a chain behind it went taut and pulled.

The aggressive action was followed by the sound of men cheering from the outside.

Men.

Men who would lie to me and trap me and hide me from the sun.

I pressed a hand to my stomach as my throat filled with bile.

I would throw myself from the window first. I would rather know what it felt like to fly, until I plunged into the waves, tasted the sea, and drowned, than be captured again by a mere man. I scrabbled through all that I'd brought, took up a dagger and threw the sheath aside. Rhaim's castle rocked again, as Vethys's ship hauled it near, casting the whole library in shadow.

“Do not be frightened!” called an unfamiliar voice.

I wasn't frightened of *him*—I was frightened of everything he stood for. “Fuck you!” I howled back, sobbing, absolutely terrified.

An oar stirred in, knocking glass out of the window and shoving a broken table back, then the window lined up with a door, and a wooden bridge extended. A man raced down it and into the library, announcing my name. “Princess Lisane!”

I had never seen him before. He was much bigger than me—I leapt at him, stabbing wildly.

“Princess Lisane!” he shouted again, dodging my blows. He was wearing armor and no one had ever taught me blades—I dented his chest piece with my ferocity, but the metal didn't break. He readily disarmed me, sending the dagger clattering down. “I am Vethys, your betrothed, here to save you!” he said, mystified at my reaction.

“Go away!” I shouted at him, but there was no magic in me right now. “I don't want to be saved!”

Vethys took a step back at my vehemence, but was otherwise undeterred, looking me up and down, and I could see him deeming me harmless. “You are as beautiful as others swore.”

And this was why I would throw myself into the sea. “They swore, did they?” I mocked, and then I bolted for the blue of sky and ocean between the structures.

He caught me, faster than I would've thought possible, and hoisted me back bodily with a shake. “What has he done to you?” he demanded, acting like I was broken.

Because to him, I was.

I wasn't what he wanted of me. Someone beautiful and complacent.

Someone I could never be again.

“He has done nothing!” I sobbed, and if I could go back and burn my letter with my fire I would. “I will never leave!” I snarled at him, as wild as an animal, even as I kept crying. “You can't make me! I won't go with you! I won't!”

“Princess,” he said sternly, baffled by my defiance. “You have no choice.” He was just my age—but he thought he was better than me, because the world had always told him that he was. “You will come with me.”

He advanced as I shrieked my defiance—but for all that I knew magic, I wasn’t good at any of it yet, and I’d lost all concentration in my terror. I backed up until I was cornered against a bookcase, trying to calm myself, to find the power I knew I had inside me, but it was hard, *because where was Rhaim?*

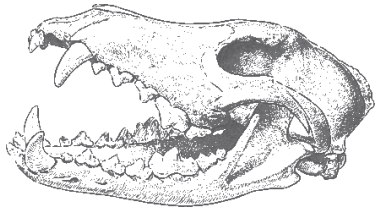
And if he wasn’t here—was he all right?

I sank in on myself, calling out for him, picking up the dagger again out of the splinters where I’d dropped it. “*Rhaim!*” I shrieked, my voice breaking.

Vethys gave me a disappointed grunt, then knelt down, swatting the dagger out of my hand. “If you won’t come like a woman, princess, I will take you like a child,” he said, picking me up. “My mages will fix you.” He swung me over his shoulder, and when I tried to kick him I only hurt my bare feet against the steel he wore.

I spat, thrashed, and clawed as he carried me to the window.

“*Rhaim!*”



“Were you conscripted yesterday?” I shouted through fangs at the useless soldiers who’d come with me. “Am I fighting them alone?”

I picked up a Deathless and flung it at one of them. He managed to dodge it, but all the rest of their fighting had thus far been perfunctory—like they’d read the idea of fighting in a book, but had never given it any practice.

The thick trees of the jungle were slowing the Deathless’ pace as much as they were ours, which gave me time to complain. “Did you want them to overtake this continent and then cross the seas to kiss your mother?” I growled. The next Deathless that lumbered forward I dismembered, ripping off its arm to shake at a soldier behind me. “I’m of a mind to shove this through your skull,” I said, even as the limb began to disintegrate in my paw.

The soldier had the wits to look frightened and not much else—but he did glance back to another soldier for strength. All of them were behind me. It was only natural I take point, seeing as I was stronger than any three of these men put together—perhaps of this lot, four or five—but they possessed none of the eagerness to fight that I’d seen in other soldiers I’d been assigned.

Nor any tactical skills, I thought, as I beheaded a Deathless I’d brought low. The least they could do would be to act as a clean-up crew, so I wasn’t having to finish all my own kills. It wasn’t like the Deathless fought with vigor—once they were down, even Lisane could’ve polished one off.

I poured out my current irritation with these men and my situation on the Deathless surrounding me, thinking of nothing but getting home, bathing, and then greeting her, and then I felt it.

The smallest movement of magic inside my mind.

Somewhere, thousands of miles away, and hundreds of feet in the air, my moth had taken off her necklace.

I stood straighter, ignoring the slowly advancing wall of Deathless coming through the trees.

It had been around her neck this entire time, ever since I'd made her show herself to me the night she'd shelved my books . . . and now it wasn't.

Even though she had no current reason to defy me.

The Deathless crowded in, but rather than protect me or themselves, the soldiers just stood there, waiting.

I grabbed hold of the nearest soldier's breastplate, turning him into a living shield, placing him between the Deathless and me. "Where do you come from?" I demanded, as the Deathless advanced on him.

"Sir!" he pleaded, twisting his neck to look behind himself in terror.

"Answer me, and I might kill you kindly, rather than holding you here for them to gnaw."

"Kellshane!"

The land of Lisane's betrothed. I glanced from side to side—I had a feeling all of them were from there.

And they had been sent here, to be inept with me, for a reason.

I threw the man up and forward, landing him behind the line of Deathless I'd been holding back. All of the nearest ones immediately turned toward him—the only reason he survived their attacks for long enough to scream was because he had his armor on.

I made eye contact with the rest of the men. "I could kill all of you and no one would know. But I think it far worse that I

leave you here, with them, creatures that don't sleep and always hunger." I swirled my arm beside me, creating a portal, and stepped through.



LISANE

I grabbed hold of the window frame as Vethys carried me through it, shards of glass cutting into my hands, causing me to bleed freely, and I didn't care. We were on a platform, a plank suspended between the two flying structures—it wasn't very wide, but it did have rope railings.

“You can't!” I howled at him, pulling myself back. For some reason, despite the advantage he had on me in skill, and size, in my terror we were almost equals in strength.

“I can and I will!” he shouted back, reaching behind himself to grab a fistful of my hair and haul me back by it, to break my grasp. His clawed fingers caught up Rhaim's necklace too, and it choked me for a moment before breaking and sliding off me, falling to the water below like a glinting strand of hair, another loss.

There were more men now, shouting behind me, with a fine view of my ass as Vethys hauled me along. They sounded as confused as he was—even more so when I threw myself to the side, crashing us against the ropes there.

“What is wrong with you?” he shouted. I didn't answer him, and he'd just about pried my fingers loose from the window, so I caught the ropes of the railing next as he dragged me forward.

And alongside us, the chain that bound Vethys's ship to Rhaim's castle began to dip. There was no way they could haul the anchor back out—but when they dropped the chain their ship would be free.

“No!” I shouted.

I'd only managed to purposefully use my power once—when I'd made the flame to seal the letter that'd doomed me. I tried to focus on burning the ropes that were now streaked with my blood—but I couldn't concentrate like I needed to. I still needed training—I still had to learn—and now I never would!

I felt hands grab my feet, men coming out to help Vethys hoist me in, and I kicked out, spinning one of them away as I made Vethys tilt.

And then I saw Finx on the gangway. All eight of his eyes took in what was happening and he made a chittering clamor. He leapt onto Vethys's armor, raced up it, then planted his fangs into Vethys's exposed neck beside my hip.

Vethys shouted and whirled, trying to swat him off. We swung to the side, all of his weight against the ropes now, the wooden board between the structures groaning, and always, always, the metallic sound of the ship's anchor chain slipping out.

I rolled off of Vethys's shoulder while he kept trying for Finx, falling onto my ass on the plank, and kicking out my feet. "Finx!" I shouted when I was free, and he leapt for me—only to be swatted in midair by Vethys. I watched the spider-cat tumble out over the water. "NO!" I cried out, running my hands up into my hair to tear it, my very heart breaking.

"You will come with me!" Vethys shouted, reaching for my arm to haul me up. He twisted it roughly, not caring if he bruised me—because what were bruises when you were going to steal someone's entire life?

And that was the focus that it took.

Realizing that if I did not do something now *this very minute* then the page of my life would be turned and I would never get to write my own story again.

"GO AWAY!" I shouted, at Vethys, at the ship behind him, and all the men aboard, with every fiber of my being—and it was like a wave full of power rushed out from my soul.

I felt it leaving me, like a punch in the stomach and a slam to my ribs, and I swore I felt them breaking—then I watched it land. It hit Vethys first, throwing him back almost off the

plank, up to the window of his own ship, and then the men who were standing behind him, who'd been kicked while trying to help, and then his ship itself rocked precipitously, like it was a toy floating in a tub and a child had slapped it.

It stunned them—and it was all the magic I had in me, I knew it. I felt hollow now; there wasn't anymore.

I didn't know if it was enough.

It had to be though. It had to be. Please.

And then I heard a bellowing behind me.

Whereas Finx's battle cry had sounded totally alien, because I'd never heard a spider-cat's before, I could guess whose I heard now—and when I saw the expression on Vethys's face, I knew I was right.

Rhaim's beast leapt out, landing on the gangway, almost breaking the wood. I had just a moment to see him in full light, covered in black fur and roped with muscle, his mage-mark the same as I remembered it from the night when he'd frightened me, and his tail that I didn't think I'd ever seen. He scooped me up with one paw and roughly threw me back into his castle, then he turned and roared. Vethys scrambled backwards onto his own ship, shouting, "Go! Go!" trying to get the flying structures to part—but Rhaim leapt into his ship, and I had a feeling it was too late for my former-betrothed.



I stood in the empty window, bruised and bloody, my hands shredded, my heart broken, barely able to breathe because I hurt so badly.

I did this.

I'd gotten Finx killed, our castle attacked—there was only myself and my stubborn nature to blame.

I should've known my father would figure out where I was, and who I was with, and send men for me. Or I should've

feared that in delivering my letter, Rhaim would make a mistake.

Either way . . . all of this was my fault.

I had longed to change the world, and now I had.

I didn't know how long I stared out at Vethys's ship as it slowly sailed away, feeling dead inside, listening to men's screams as it flew higher, watching bodies drop from it to fall into the waters far below. A portion of its belly must have clipped us in passing, because the castle rocked again. I leaned out of the window, trying to see up, wind tearing against my face—and then I stared down, wondering if the water would still welcome me.

Then someone behind me grabbed the fabric of my dress and roughly hauled me away from the window's edge, whipping me toward the nearest intact wall where I caught myself on a table.

I cried out in surprise and turned and found Rhaim there.

Or his beast, rather.

The creature stood half a head higher than Rhaim did, bigger in all respects than the man himself, and he was no prettier by daylight than he had been in the darkness of his halls. Every piece of him looked deadly, from the mouth crowded with fangs as thick and long as my thumb, to his hands and feet that ended in so many sharp claws, and all of him in-between covered in short black fur, marred by scars and his mage-mark, and matted with blood.

His chest was heaving as his nostrils flared, and I got a powerful sense of *otherness* from him, that I hadn't felt the night that he'd chased me.

"Rhaim," I whispered, wishing I could summon him. If he'd been a man, I would've ran into his arms, so pleased that somehow both of us survived, and I would've let him hold me while I cried for Finx. As it was now, I wanted to throw myself at him, but when I tried to raise my fists above my head I couldn't, the movement made my cracked ribs grind. I tried to brace against the agony, hurting both inside and out. "Where

were you? Why did you let that happen?" I demanded of him. No matter that I had brought it on myself—I wanted it to be someone else's fault.

But I stopped before hitting him, because his eyes were unfamiliar.

We weren't allowed pets in our chambers so I had never interacted with animals much, but I knew he was one now, something wild and frightening. He took an ominous step forward to lean over me to breathe me in. He made a low, snarling sound as he did so, and I realized not all of the blood on him was from other people—I could see fresh wounds on him, slices and tears, gouges that were still weeping blood—and they were all my fault, too.

"They hurt you," I whispered. First Finx, now this—I sagged, wrapping one arm around my ribs to brace my creaking ribs, leaning on the table behind me, sinking my head.

What had I done?

I started crying freely, wracked with regret, consumed by despair. Sobbing made my ribs hurt more, and I could feel the edges of the bruises my own magic had given me begin to swell beneath my fingers.

Vethys was right.

I was broken.

And no amount of magic could possibly fix me.

I gave into my sorrow, making sad soft noises of grief, my heart as shattered as the window glass—and a hand full of claws reached for my chin. Furred fingers tucked beneath my jaw, forcing me to look up, Rhaim's beast wanting my attention.

I wished he were himself. I wanted to tell him everything.

"Come back, Rhaim," I told him, like he'd once told me, but my sense of otherness from him didn't change—instead it only amplified as he leaned in, opened up his frightening maw, and breathed hot air over me, right before swiping his tongue in a warm stripe across my cheek, licking away my tears. The

strange sensation made me shudder, but somehow I knew better than to fight him. I only sniffled, as he carefully cleaned my other cheek the same.

He was so close now, and so much bigger than I was, his head bent to mine. I was eye level with his mage-mark, and it mocked me. I would never have one. I would never control my powers.

I would never control my life.

I picked up one of my bloody hands and set it against his chest where the mark was, matching the brand there almost perfectly.

It was the closest I would ever get to having one myself.

The beast made an unsettled sound, still breathing hard. Then he grabbed hold of my wrist, his claws wrapping fully around it as he pulled my hand high and licked the blood from it. I watched him smack his lips, tasting me, and then as if deciding he wanted more he leaned in, and his other hand grabbed my thigh.

I squeaked and kicked back from him, ribs aching, my dress catching on the torn seam of the table because this was the one I had broken when I had still dared to hope.

I clutched my arms around myself, both to hold my ribs and protect myself from him. “Rhaim, you’re scaring me,” I whispered.

His ears perked forward, but all he did was growl, leaning over the table to plant a hand by my hip. But then his eyes met mine, staring into them solemnly, and he took a step back, and back again, before opening a portal behind him into blackness and disappearing through it.

I sagged down, collapsing to the table’s top slowly, curling up into a ball. I hurt and I hated myself, and I didn’t want to move—but I heard a strange rustling. I forced myself up on an arm, wondering if even more of Rhaim’s library was blowing out the hole in the wall, when I saw a little furry body zipping this way and that over what was left of a table and crushed books.

“Princess?” asked a familiar voice from some of the rubble.
“Are you well?”

“Finx!” I sat up instantly, gasped in pain, and flung my arms out for him regardless. “I saw him hit you!”

He jumped onto the table by my side. “Did you see me bite him first?”

“Yes—I did—it was glorious.” One of his hind legs was bent poorly, but I swept him up into a squirming hug. “How did you survive?”

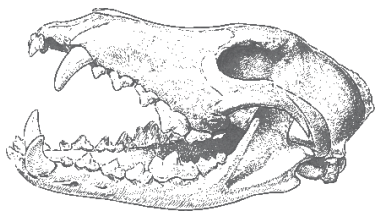
“Same way I always do!” he said, slipping free of me, springing off, to catch himself in a bob on the ground. Two of his legs on one side straightened the leg between them that was currently misbehaving—then he used his backmost legs to zing webbing out at a book behind me, hauling it down in illustration, showing me how he’d managed to get by.

He took a moment to survey the mess surrounding us. “Rhaim’s going to be really upset when he sees all this.”

“Yes,” I said with a snort, pressing one bloody hand to my chest, feeling the bones beneath my breast grind. “I suppose he is.” But I had no idea where Rhaim was right now, and I didn’t think I wanted to see him any time soon.

And as Finx and I were both injured, and I was fairly sure there’d be no one else coming to attack . . . “Will you take me upstairs now, Finx?” I asked, showing him my ragged palms.

Finx took a moment to consider them, then said, “Well, we probably can’t get into any more trouble today, can we?” and fearlessly led the way to the staircase.



RHAIM

Portaling into my library and seeing Vethys's hands upon Lisane, I suddenly understood why men of high breeding kept their women in windowless pits.

I had had a rein on my beast until just that moment, but at seeing that—no longer.

The man-thing was taking what was mine.

I gave a roar, and raced out to get her back.

Fighting the Deathless earlier had only whetted my appetite. Vethys's men fought back bravely, but in such close quarters, it didn't matter, especially when I knew that every one of them must die.

Anyone who'd seen into my library. Anyone who'd seen Lisane.

Anyone who'd thought that attacking the All-Beast wouldn't be followed by decadent retribution.

I didn't even fight *him* because our wants were one and the same—the utter destruction of anyone involved.

I clawed out men's guts, I flung men overboard. Spear tips pierced me, swords slashed, and I ignored them, howling out my vicious frothing hate as I swept through the decks of the ship, one by one. Between his finer nose and ears, none of the men could hide, and when I was finished, I resurfaced onto the deck of the boat and found Vethys where I'd left him, propped against the mast with two broken legs. He screamed as I advanced, and started trying to crawl away.

I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of his death.

I wanted him to suffer.

I detoured to the magical mechanism that kept the ship afloat, a cage full of hovering glass orbs, having found no other mages aboard. Jaegar might have betrayed me—and Lisane might have too, in her *letter*—but at least no other of my kind had.

I kicked the structure apart, shattering half the orbs inside of it and letting the rest of them fly off, and Vethys started screaming as the airship began to drop. I roared at him, enjoying one last moment of his terror, before portaling off.



My beast's first instinct was to go to where he'd last seen Lisane, and so he did, sending us into the library, where we found her leaning out the open window. He reached for her with a paw, dragging her back from its edge, and when she turned to see him, she was angry.

She smelled of almonds and honey and the iron tang of her blood. Like sweat, like fighting, like fear, and he *wanted* that from her.

And then she started sobbing, and that was *even better*.

His urges suffused our body, ripping away whatever tenuous control I'd managed through the carnage so far, shoving me back inside his mind, holding me hostage while he felt all of his desires. Tasting her tears and blood was not enough. *He* wanted to rip her skirt, spread her legs and enter her—*he* wanted to hear her cry out as he thrust, to feel the snug tightness of her cunt as *he* made her fit *him*—and *he* wanted to fuck her until *he* came and knotted her, then crouch down after his knot subsided, to lick his cum and her virgin blood away until she was ready for him again.

The only thing that stopped him were her eyes.

“Rhaim, you’re scaring me,” she said, and he didn’t care, because he wasn’t Rhaim anymore—but even the beast didn’t want to die. He remembered our Ascension, and the eyes of the woman who killed him, and right now, from this close and with her terrified, Lisane’s amber eyes looked just.

Like.

That.

The beast took a step back, and I tried to swim to the surface, pushing him down.

Give me control, you monster, I thought, fighting the embodiment of the worst urges in myself—and then at the thought of seeing Lisane’s eyes again, only staring at *me* instead of *him*—I waved an arm behind me and portaled into the darkness of my chamber.



After stepping through, I stood there for quite some time, feeling my beast dissipate, leaving only me behind.

The man who had just murdered so many men he’d lost count—although I would have done it all again, to save her.

Even if she did not want to be saved.

Her letter must have told her father everything. And I had been played for a fool, by her and by him, but most of all by myself, for thinking I was too important to be touched.

I waited for my temper to calm, but kept finding new embers to light it.

I wanted her more than I had ever wanted anything.

And at the thought of her having spurned me—perhaps this *was* what it felt like to die.

I was still in the dark, and the last thing I’d seen had been her eyes.

When I could stand myself and my situation no longer, I walked out into my laboratory and called for her.

She didn't answer.

I stormed down my stairs, flinging all the doors open along the way, even ones she couldn't access, just because I wanted to hear their crashes match my mood, until I stood outside her bedroom.

"Lisane," I growled, sounding beastly even to myself, through human lips. "Open the door." When she did not, I growled louder. "Lisane!" I said sharply—then kicked it open.

She wasn't in her bedroom, either. There was still a pile of books left alongside her pillows—and then barely tucked beneath her own, I saw a hint of emerald green.

I pulled it out. It was her journal.

I knew I shouldn't read it, but she was already going to kill me—I might as well give her one more reason to.

I thumbed it open, skimmed it quickly, finding the diary of a girl who—I took a deep inhale, suddenly wounded worse than anything the soldiers had just done.

She'd cataloged every time I'd hurt her . . . and the magic that that pain let her use, even as it hurt her too.

I whispered her name—and then I shouted it, needing to find her—racing back up the stairs to where I hoped she was.



Finx was guarding the topmost door that led out onto the roof—in fact, he'd spun a web across it, apparently to stop me.

"She said she didn't want to see you," he told me, like somehow everything that'd happened had been my fault, something I would've protested, but her journal was still in my hands, the blame inside it clear.

“Finx, let me through,” I said.

“No!” He sat in the middle of the web and chittered disagreeably. “Where were you? We were attacked! She almost died! They bent my leg!” I eyed him, as he waved one of his back legs around. The limb looked fine to me. “But she put me under the water, and it fixed it, and then told me she didn’t want to see you.”

“I need to talk to her, Finx. Please.”

Finx knew how rare that word was from my mouth. He made another sound of consternation. “Will you tell her I fought you?”

“Yes. Now move,” I commanded, and he leapt out of the way while I swept my hand through his mess, clearing the webs off of the door. I pressed it open and strode out into the sun.

Lisane was naked inside my milky bath—only the blood from somewhere on her person had turned it pink.

“Lisane,” I murmured, rushing forward.

She jumped back, hiding herself with her arms.

“I will not hurt you,” I told her—and then she had the temerity to laugh at me.



LISANE

R haim—now fully human, or as human as he got, although his leathers were filthy and his hair was wild—stood at the foot of his tub, and now he claimed to not want to hurt me?

After everything that'd just happened?

“Your beast—” I began to blame him, and then I noticed—he was holding *my journal*. “What are you doing with that?” I asked as I bucked forward in the water.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he demanded, shaking it at me.

“Tell you what—” I started, but the lie melted on my tongue. “Why didn’t *you* tell *me*?” I countered, just as angry.

“I had no idea your magic hurt you,” he growled, slamming the journal down to the stone roof of his castle.

I gave a haughty laugh. “Why would I think that you care?” I said with enough venom I watched him flinch, and then he snarled.

“I would’ve wanted to know!”

“Why?” I shouted, pounding a fist against the water, making it splash at his feet. “You hurt me too!”

All I’d done since I’d come out to bathe in the tub by the light of the setting sun, was think. Of all the things that had happened today. Of the idiot I’d been, how cruelly I’d been treated, and how now I had no hope.

I had powers, yes—but they required someone else to use them.

I would never be free, not like how *I* wanted.

I looked up at him, my eyes full of tears I couldn't hide. "Did you make me like this, Rhaim?"

His jaw dropped and he breathed roughly. "No, Lisane. I would have never."

I wanted to believe him but I found it hard. "But how do you know? Are you so sure?" I asked, and my voice broke.

Rhaim stood there, watching me, his eyes only for mine, his expression lost. "Because, Lisane," he began slowly. He took a step into the tub with me, boots and clothes and everything. I gasped and scooted back, rising out of the tub to sit on its edge, reaching for a towel to cover myself.

He kept coming in my direction, his hands out, and it was all too easy to imagine him making the same gesture to calm a wolf or horse. "Lisane," he said softly, closer yet. "I never would have taught you, if I had thought that might happen."

I was every bit as frightened of him now as I had been of him in beastly form. But I'd left my legs inside the tub, so perhaps his magic also worked on me—and when he reached them, he wrapped his arms behind my knees and bowed his head into my lap. He was breathing just as hard as when he had been his beast and I could feel his beard's scruff against my knees.

I didn't know what to make of this version of him.

Had I tamed him somehow?

Why was I scared to touch him, when he had so often touched me?

Then he slowly lifted his head up and he took a ragged inhale. "Little moth, I swear I would not always hurt you."

"What do you mean?" I whispered. I didn't understand.

His dark eyes focused on mine, willing me to trust him. "I would show you, if you let me."

I thought of every time he'd ever touched me, with his palm, his whip, his claws, his cruelty, but this offer was more frightening yet.

I knew what to do with sorrow—*I was the Princess of Tears!*—and he had taught me how to deal with pain.

But I was helpless in the face of kindness—especially from him.

Rhaim had soothed me in the past, yes, but this was far more terrifying, more even than his beast had been, because his eyes were human now. They were looking at me with a heat hotter than the tub's waters, and I felt things inside myself yearn to answer.

I licked my lips and nodded slowly. Then he pulled back, but not too far, unlacing his arms from behind my calves now, circling both my ankles with his hands, before carefully pulling them up, riding his fingers against my skin. His head was bowed in concentration as if he could see through the murky water to what he was doing, and my breath shuddered as they emerged from the waters still on me, his strong thumbs against the inside of my knees, beginning to gently pull them apart.

“Rhaim,” I whispered.

“My trespass will not change you,” he promised, before setting lips upon my inner thigh once he'd made himself space.

I wanted to protest because I knew that wasn't the truth. He'd been doing nothing *but* change me, ever since I'd gotten here—and he was a fool if he thought this moment was any different. But all I could do was watch him, spreading me wider as his mouth traced up and in, leaving a trail of kisses in his wake.

I had read of this, or things like this, happening in books. But nothing on the pages had prepared me for what it felt like now, this nervous energy building up inside me, the liquid hunger in my core.

Everything he did frightened me.

I never wanted him to stop.

He lifted his lips away from my skin and turned to face me so that I could feel his breath against my center. “I'm going to open you, little moth,” he warned me, a moment before he did

so with his hands, reaching in to press my thighs wide with his palms, exposing my innermost parts. “Little moth,” he whispered, going back and kissing higher on my leg, at my thigh’s widest, softest portion, and I knew where his lips would be next, there was no other place left for them to go. My heart was thudding in my chest, my nipples taut beneath the towel. I panted, watching him, as he glanced up.

“Please,” I asked. Just like that first night, when I’d begged release from his dungeon, that had set off each of my nights here since. “Please.”

“Yes,” he said, closing his eyes before kissing me at my seam.

I gasped then let out a long exhale, as his lips and tongue began to search me, touching unfamiliar places, in unfamiliar ways. He was every bit as deliberate now as he’d been earlier, tasting me, sucking me, exploring, and I made small noises of surprise with each new sensation.

And then I feared.

Was I just another experiment to him, something new to be pulled apart piece by piece while he studied it, and abandoned when he was through?

Then he made a noise against me, a sound of satisfaction like he found me delicious, and he pushed a hand up my belly to lift and tilt it back so that he might eat me more easily, and it washed that thought away.

I fell back to my elbows as he rose from the water between my legs to spread me wider, making another rough sound of pleasure against my core. My towel fell open and I didn’t care; the sun was gone, but the moon was here, and I wanted its light to touch me just as badly as . . .

I wanted him.

His lips sucked, his tongue pushed, his chin ground, and then he looked up, catching me watching.

“What?” I wondered, as he moved to stand between my thighs. Half his hair was damp, it lay against his neck in dark wet curls, and the tub’s healing water slicked off of the leather clothes he still wore.

“Shh,” he counseled, leaning over me, giving me an expectant thrill—but all he did was take another few towels from a nearby basket, to make me a pillow out of them. As he did so his hips brushed between my legs, and there was enough light left to see the firm outline of what I’d glimpsed when he’d been bathing and I longed to tell him to lie down.

“Cover me,” I whispered.

Rhaim rose up and paused, considering.

“I know you wanted to, earlier,” I told him. “It’s okay,” I promised.

I didn’t want to be fit for civilized society.

I didn’t want men like Vethys to think they could ever take me back.

“It’s okay, *sir*,” he teased, his lips curving up into a subtle smile. He rested a hand on my knee, and I prayed the other would reach for his leather’s knots. “But no, little moth, I will not be a beast with you again tonight.”

“But—” I protested, not understanding, as he sank back down into the waters.

He said, “I swore I wouldn’t hurt you—and I would taste you more,” and he did.



Rhaim took hold of my legs, put one over his shoulder, and his lips met my seam again. I made a whining sound without thinking, because there was a certain spot, that every time he touched it—my hips had a mind of their own, bucking up.

“Rhaim,” I said, and made his name a prayer.

“Let it build inside you,” he said, like he always did, like what he was doing now was magic too, only I could feel his lips touching me as he spoke and feel the press of his hot breath. I started to pant and my ass began to clench. I whispered his

name again, filled with strange sensations of near delight, while watching the stars above. The distance coming upon me now was the same as when he beat me, but from an entirely different cause.

“Rhaim—*sir*,” I breathed, as his lips sucked and his tongue rolled, and I couldn’t help myself—I ran my hand into his hair and held him there. “Sir,” I begged him, not even sure what I was asking for, only that I knew I needed.

He growled into me, as my hips rocked against his face. His eyes were closed as he worked upon me, but his arms were wrapped around my thighs now, tilting my hips up for his consumption. Then one of his hands stroked up and cupped a breast, running his thumb across its nipple. I trapped it there with my other hand, he did it again, and I moaned anew. It felt like there was a line of fire shooting between it and my hips, and while the waiting ache between my legs had not abated, it was being replaced by something new.

A growing heat.

A squeezing.

And my whole body followed, becoming tense.

What he was doing to me was a kind of magic I didn’t understand—but I wanted to.

Desperately.

And he also wanted that for me. I knew, because I looked down and saw him bowed over me, his mouth riding my hips as they moved in waves, his dark eyes finally full of readable emotion.

He—*wanted*—to give me—*this*.

All I had to do was—*take it*.

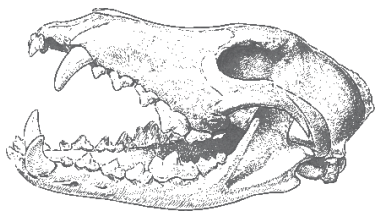
My hand fisted in his hair as I took deep breaths. “Sir! Sir—*sir*—*sir!*” Pleasures rolled through me as strong as the waves I kicked into the water, my whole body writhing, things tensing and releasing in me that had never moved before. “Sir!” I shouted, as another crashed through me, and he started making a low, guttural moan between my legs as his mouth followed

all my movements, his tongue relentless as it pressed me through. “Sir—sir—*oh*—sir,” I cried out with each shudder, as sensations dredged through me like the rake of uneven claws.

And then whatever magic had possessed me finished, flying away to join the stars above, leaving me and my weary body behind.

“Rhaim,” I said, making his name a sigh as I sagged down.

He took a few final laps at me as I released him, and he rocked back, but not too far.



RHAIM

All I wanted to do was show my moth she was safe, and drive her into pleasure's arms.

She'd tasted of the milk and honey of the bath, and then her own earthy flavor once I had licked her clean. My attentions had left her dripping like a fountain, and after the guilt I felt, I wanted to make her wet enough to wash my soul.

I'd been hard ever since she'd let me open her knees, when she'd had to know at least a portion of what was coming and she'd still given her trust to me. My cock had been straining against my breeches, so ready to slide in and take her, the way her body had wanted to be taken—so much so she even knew it when she'd said as much.

But I was sure she was a virgin, and I'd promised her no pain, so I had to keep her intact.

That had not stopped me from feasting on her. I had tasted all her folds and edges, licking along every portion of her crease, running my tongue inside her deepest furrow, feeling her willing muscles trying to squeeze me there—and then I'd replaced it with my chin and kissed up at the spot where all things met, just above, and heard her gasp and moan.

Each time she made a sound, each time she shuddered, each time she whispered my name like it was the only word she knew, my fat cock twitched like it wanted to escape and ravish her. Even my balls themselves felt beastly, heavy, filled with need and ache.

I was so swollen with desire for her, so straining, so eager, that it burned—I had lived almost a thousand years—and I would

have willingly died, just to get to shove myself inside her delicious cunt, only let me come just once—

Then her hand was in my hair, and all my attentions were on her.

I reached up and rubbed her breast, feeling its soft weight in my palm, the quick way her nipple pebbled, and how fast her hand caught mine to keep it close. I leaned in, and over, and made sounds equal to hers, throbbing with the same need as she did, as she rubbed her perfect, greedy pussy on my face.

Her breath caught and her hand tightened and her ass clenched and I desired this for her every bit as much as she did. She was so close, she had to know it, even if she didn't know toward what. I opened my eyes up to look at her and caught her staring down, her jaw dropped, her pupils wide, chest heaving.

Yes, I wished, vehemently. Stay like this forever, Lisane.

Just keep trusting me.

Please.

And then she named her orgasm mine. “Sir!” she shouted, throwing her head back while rolling her hips. “Sir—sir,” she sang, as even more sweet juices released and her thighs trembled against my jaw. I followed her, pressing her down, sucking, tasting madly, which brought my own hips against the tub's walled side, and it only took one touch, one inadvertent grind—I moaned low into her as my cock pulsed, spilling out my seed, grunting with each twitch. My own pleasures ran riot over me, lifting up both my balls and the hairs on the nape of my neck, as below the tub's edge, my jetting cum clouded the waters more.

She released my hair and my hand and fell back on the towels behind her with a conquered sigh. I rocked back, lightly pressed her knees closed, and exited the tub, to pick up both her and her journal. She closed her eyes, winding her arms around my neck as she nuzzled into me. Her softness made hard parts of me break, even as it made other parts twice as feral.

I took a winding path down to her bedroom, all the better to hold her close while I still could, then opened the door, carrying her in, kneeling to settle her upon her bed. She shifted and rolled appealingly, pulling her covers around herself, then looked to me, her eyes half-lidded with exhaustion and sex.

“Did you do magic, little moth?” I wondered.

“I did,” she said and sweetly smiled. “It was amazing.”

The thought of anyone hurting her enough to empower her almost made my beast rip out of me. But I managed to hide it as I held him back and brushed a lock of wet hair away from her eyes. “I have no doubt. You may tell me of it later. Rest for now.” I placed her journal beside her on her pillow and pressed a chaste kiss on her forehead. “I have business to attend to. I may be gone for several days.”

She tried to rouse herself at that. “Rhaim, no,” she said, pushing herself up. “Don’t kill him. Promise me.”

We both knew who she meant—her father, who must’ve told Vethys to come and take her.

And she was right—I could not allow for that to stand.

“It’s all my fault,” she went on, her expression changing to one of utter sorrow.

“Did you tell them to come for you?” I asked, without menace. I would forgive her anything right now.

“I didn’t.” She shook her head and winced. “I fear what I did was worse.”

I imagined a thousand betrayals, and none of them mattered, because she’d just been in my arms. “And what was that, little moth?”

“I told him I didn’t want to go back.” Her cheeks turned red and she looked down, softly adding, “Ever.”

I had lived through centuries of violence, and no other creature had come quite so close to stopping my heart.

And at the thought that they’d tried to take her away from me . . . I growled as I stood. “No man will ever touch you

again, Lisane. That’s the only promise I can give you.”

“So only beasts, then?” she asked, sitting fully up in bed, eyes flashing, and I wondered how badly Vethys had hurt her, if she had magic in her yet. “Am I to be your gentled mare?” she demanded.

I caught her chin in my hand. “Nothing about you is gentled,” I said, as she jerked away from my touch. “Which is why you knew you couldn’t go back. We will discuss this when I return.” I started walking for her door.

“Rhaim—” she called out after me, and I didn’t turn around. “Rhaim!” she shouted, and I ignored her, stepping into the hallway. I heard her begin to order me, “*Do not—*” as I created a portal to Jaegar’s camp and stepped through.



LISANE AND RHAIM’S STORY CONTINUES IN [BREAK HER](#),
COMING 5/15/23—KEEP READING FOR A SNEAK PEEK!



BREAK HER

TRANSFORMATION TRILOGY BOOK
TWO

LISANE

I ran to the hallway to stop him, but I was too late—Rhaim had portaled away, leaving me alone in his castle, while he went off to kill my father.

I turned to the wall and pounded a fist upon it, and then groaned. I was still sore from working magic earlier. I put a hand beneath my breast to where my ribs ached—the tub's waters hadn't healed me completely, but I was out of magic now.

And I was trapped, here, unable to stop his vengeance. I wasn't strong enough on my own, because my magic didn't work unless someone else had hurt me.

Rhaim's name for me was right—compared to him, I was a moth.

Something beautiful, but easily crushed.



RHAIM

I didn't portal directly to Jaegar's war-camp—instead I moved from place to place miles away in the surrounding countryside, in the dark, using my magic to pull the wolves that I knew were there closer to the outskirts of the camp and human firelight.

And when I was finished, I portaled myself to a spot in front of Jaegar's tent. His nightly guards saw me, but none of them appeared concerned—they knew who I was, and by now they were used to the odd comings and goings of other mages—and Jaegar likely hadn't told them they were going to war with one. I summoned one of the owls that nested nearby to eat the rodents that such a large encampment encouraged, and it came to me, still carrying the gold ring I'd bent around its foot the day before. I pried this object off of it and set it free, waiting patiently for my plan to come together, even as I seethed with the need to act.

Jaegar had thought he'd take Lisane away from me? After having given her to me in the first place?

And all because she had *chosen* my company over his?

I hadn't read the letter from her I'd delivered to him, thinking myself above it at the time, but now I wished I had—I would've read the sentence where she said she wasn't returning a thousand times.

As it was—I reached out with my mind, and heard several distant howls. My creatures were in their places.

“I call a convocation!” I shouted aloud.

Jaegar's guards, who'd begun to eye me with curiosity, startled. They had no idea what a convocation meant—but other mages would, and I knew Jaegar's throne-sworn slept nearby.

Castillion the Spiked came out of the next tent over, shirtless and half-awake. “A convocation? On what grounds?”

“Your king tried to steal from me.” I watched him with glittering eyes, waiting for him to try to deny it. The obvious question would’ve been to ask “Steal what?” but we both knew Castillion didn’t need to guess. He’d been the one to deliver a sleeping Lisane to me two months prior.

There were more howls now, as wolves spoke to other wolves, and I heard the clamor and surprise of men waking to the sound.

“All-Beast,” Castillion complained, after waving his hand toward Jaegar’s tent, sending one of Jaegar’s guards scurrying inside.

“Do you deny it?” I took a broad step forward. My beast hated him to an irrational degree, and I felt its pull inside me, asking to be set loose.

Castillion’s jaw ground, and I knew the man hated me back. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he spat.

My eyes narrowed. I knew Castillion was Jaegar’s closest mage—and it didn’t sound like he was lying. My rational, mannish part wanted to gather more information to understand, whereas my beast thought Castillion would quickly confess if he were made to see his own intestines.

Other mages gathered, whomever was at camp and not out on missions fighting the Deathless—the war against the monsters was a round-the-clock operation, seeing that as of yet no one could predict when they’d attack. I heard them murmuring concerns to one another, giving me width berth, and I saw Sibyi the Rainmaker join their ranks, leaning heavily on his staff, still healing after having recently broken his leg.

I waited until my wolves’ howls reached a crescendo, making it clear that the entire camp was surrounded by creatures loyal only to me, and then with a gesture from my hand, their howling stopped, leaving ominous silence behind.

“You all know I had no interest in the lives of men,” I said, addressing my fellow mages solely, though I knew soldiers beyond them would hear as well. If this camp had just been full of soldiers, I would have killed them all in thoughtless

retribution for trying to steal Lisane, but I knew I needed to prove my case to those who were of my kind. “And perhaps some of you know that for years, Jaegar tried to tempt me into his battles, offering what I suspect he offered most of you. Gold, power, opportunities for greatness—things I needed none of, or that I already possessed.”

I saw Castillion’s eyes widen as he realized what I would share next.

“A day before I joined your ranks, Jaegar made a bargain with me. He had Castillion deposit his daughter, Lisane, outside my castle, for me to do with as I please, and I have fought for him ever since.”

There were gasps at this. Castillion stepped forward, the spikes he was named for rippling across his naked chest, metal piercing through his skin, and my beast longed to answer his challenge. “Rhaim!” he shouted.

“I let her think you dead, rather than a disappointment!” I snarled, as the howls outside of camp started up again, louder, closer, as I summoned the wolves to me.

Castillion shot a spike out through one palm, where he could use it like a sword.

“Rhaim called convocation!” Sibyi shouted. “He’s not done talking!”

“Indeed,” I agreed. And if Castillion attacked me now, I would have the right to kill him—and in the unlikely event he survived the attack, other mages would shun him for the rest of his days. So I slowly turned and made sure my voice would carry. “I have been side by side with many of you. I have saved some of your lives, to be sure, and at least a thousand Deathless have been murdered by my hands,” I said, and raised an arm into the air, clawing my fingers into a fist.

“And yet,” I said, finishing my circuit, to face Jaegar who had finally emerged from his tent, “*And yet*—yesterday he betrayed me. Sent men to attack me at my castle. To try to take what is *mine* back.”

“I did no such thing,” Jaegar proclaimed.

I laughed harshly as the wolves I'd called in raced through camp, scaring the circle of lesser mages who kept the camp safe from the Deathless. I could see through the wolves eyes as the men they encountered jumped back in terror. "Have you no honor?" I asked Jaegar.

Helkin, Jaegar's son and Lisane's brother, ran up—and he had somehow known to put all of his armor on. "He has more honor than you do, monster!"

No. I wasn't monstrous, yet—but I soon would be. "You *gave* her to *me*," I growled, my deep voice going rough as I started to change, my bones bending and pushing out into my far more frightening form, half again as big as any human could be, covered in muscle and short dark fur. "She is *mine*." I laid claim to her, even as my mouth crowded with teeth. "And anyone who tries to take her from me *will be punished*."

I snaked my head around to include everyone else who was near. I wanted them all to know. Now that Lisane was within my castle, and within my grasp—

"I am never releasing her," I snarled, and then focused my attention back on Jaegar. "Ask him the truth of things. He knows she is happy."

Jaegar's spine was made of steel—and I knew he was where Lisane had gotten her stubbornness from. But I still had his ring inside my palm, as proof of having delivered Lisane's letter. All the men here would recognize the markings on it, even though it was bent, if he made me show it to them.

He stared me down. "Happy—no," he said, and then took a deep inhale. "But she does want to stay with you, All-Beast, for now."

And it was my turn to seem unbothered, even though I was. My beast didn't care if Lisane was happy, so long as she was *his*—but the man in me took the news of her unhappiness like a blow, even as I understood its cause.

I had hurt her.

Many times now, on purpose. That she was willing to *be* hurt didn't change that fact.

The first of my wolves reached the center of camp, leaping in to sit by my side, calmly panting with his tongue lolling out, as more wove through tents to join him. Nosy soldiers on the perimeter shouted and shirked back, while Jaegar and Helkin's guards crowded closer. I didn't want the wolves to get injured, so I hadn't told them that they should be angry—yet—as they circled me.

“Father, how can you say that?” Helkin gasped, whirling to look at the man.

“She wrote me a letter, that Rhaim was so kind as to deliver recently.”

Helkin appeared horrified by this, and I began to guess the truth of things. Lisane hadn't lied to me when she'd told me she'd wanted to stay . . . and Jaegar wasn't likely lying about his ignorance, now that he was confessing the letter's existence, and as much as admitting to our bargain, before the whole camp.

Which left Helkin and his friend Vethys, Lisane's former betrothed, whose corpse was now feeding fish in the Azurlean Sea. I took a step toward the boy, as the wolves nearest me took to snarling. Castillion leapt in front of him, his spike-sword out.

“Where is your friend?” I asked Helkin, jerking my jaw up. “The one your age, with the purple cross on his breast plate?”

“I don't know,” he lied—but I could scent his fear with my own nose and the noses of the surrounding wolves.

“Well, if you don't know, then I certainly don't know, either,” I said, and gave him a menacing smile. Let Vethys's people come to Jaegar and wonder what happened to their floating battleship and child. Let him explain to them that I killed every single man aboard, including their son—on his own son's say so. “But let me ask you this—do you truly want her back, or do you just not want me to have her?”

Helkin didn't answer.

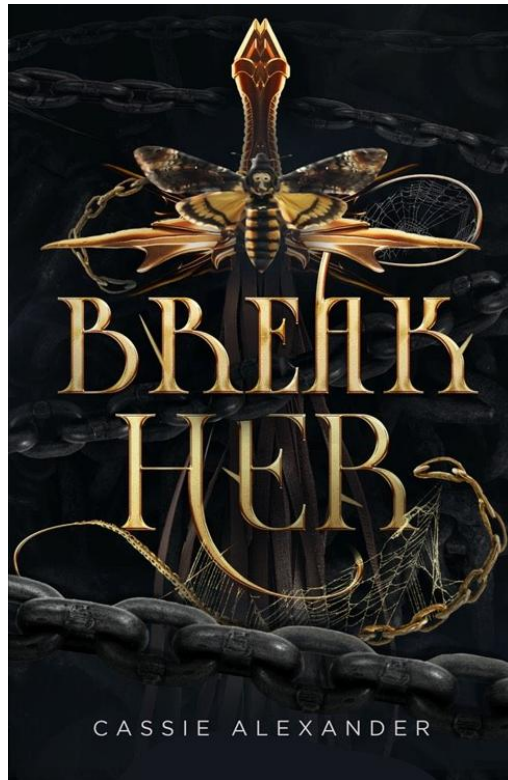
If my beast were left alone with him . . . the wolves nearest me began growling, matching *his* mood.

But I needed to become a man again eventually and face Lisane. If she were already unhappy now, discovering that I had killed members of her family would not endear me further, no matter how richly they deserved it.

I turned away from him and spoke to my fellow mages first. “Do not trust the soldiers or your king,” I said, before sneering up at Jaegar. “Our bargain is broken.” And then I addressed anyone who could hear me. “Anyone else who dares trespass against me, to try to take what is *mine*,” I said, snarling as the wolves did, “will never know peace again, not even as a corpse, because once you are dead I will have jackals shake your body apart and vultures strip your bones.”

The wolves began a raucous howling, punctuating my curse from both inside and outside of camp, and I joined them, my beast’s voice every bit as wild as theirs. I had thought I’d portal elsewhere after this, to bide my time until I was in full control of myself again, but decided against it. I didn’t want to leave the wolves in danger here among the soldiers—I put Jaegar’s ring in my mouth, and raced out of camp with them on all fours.

I wanted everyone present to see me for who I truly was—no man, but the All-Beast.



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I hope you like it.

And I hope you want more.

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