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BRIDES OF THE HYLORR

DESIRE

IN HIS

BLOOD

ZOEY DRAVEN

DESIRE IN HIS BLOOD

BRIDES OF THE KYLORR BOOK 1

ZOEY DRAVEN

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DESIRE IN HIS BLOOD

A monster wants her as his bride...and he will stop at nothing to claim her.

Gemma Hara is drowning under the weight of her father's debts. Working herself to the bone, she knows that if she doesn't pay them off in time, the sadistic creditors will take everything: their home, their respected name, and, worst of all, her two beautiful sisters.

To save her family, Gemma agrees to do something reckless: marry a wealthy and mysterious stranger, who offers her a wicked bargain she can't afford to refuse.

However, his bargain comes with one terrifying catch. Because her husband-to-be is a *Kylorr*.

One of the most fearsome alien races in the Four Quadrants, the *Kylorr* are beastly monsters, all muscle and menace, with powerful wings, depraved cravings, and berserker-like rages. The worst part?

They survive on blood.

Cold and cruel, Azur of House Kaalium, the High Lord of Laras, demands Gemma as his blood bride. To feed from her. To use her body in whatever way he wishes. For paying off her family's debts, he expects her complete submission.

What neither of them predicts is how his bite doesn't bring pain—it fills Gemma with more exquisite pleasure than she's ever known. And as she finds her footing on a strange new planet, the one thing Gemma thought she'd never surrender might be at risk after all.

Her heart.

Too bad her new husband can't seem to decide if he wants to break it...or keep it forever.

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CHAPTER 1

Blue salt twinkled in the light of the floating, golden, glowing orbs. The salt clusters cast kaleidoscope-like refractions against the cave walls, and I stared, thinking it looked like a rippling sea. Beautiful and endless.

Mr. Cross didn't see the way my fingers pinched at the thick material of my pants. He didn't hear my palpable swallow over his clipped voice, a voice that made my stomach knot with sickening nerves. He couldn't sense the drip of sweat that rolled down my spine, sliding into the little divot at the base.

"Mr. Cross," I said, swiftly taking advantage of the brief lapse of silence over the Halo Com. "Would you like to see what I'm looking at right now?"

His thunderous glare pinned me in place, but my voice came out unwavering.

My superpower, I thought. Inside, I was shriveling up, crumbling in on myself like balled-up parchment.

Yet he didn't need to know that. I'd known men like him all my life, men that frequented my father's office, a revolving door of demons more unforgiving than the last. They preyed on weakness, reveled in desperation, and rejoiced in despair.

His impatience traveled through the Halo orb, the miniature image of him flickering briefly when I reached out to spin the small, hovering metal ball.

"The miners found it this morning," I informed him. And since he couldn't see me, I let my shoulders sag for a brief

moment. It felt like a steel band was tightening and tightening around my forehead, but I breathed through the pain. “A whole cavern of blue salt.”

My relief and excitement over the morning’s discovery had been short-lived. I’d calculated out the yield within an hour and the amount we could export could cover one of Father’s debts in full or a very small portion of all of them. That didn’t take into consideration the wages for the miners or Fran’s wages.

Or the bill that had just been delivered from an off-world seamstress for Mira’s newest dress. Or the ridiculously expensive plate set from a Dumerian potter that Piper had insisted she *needed* because Lord and Lady Rossi were visiting soon. A purchase—I’d later found out—Father had encouraged.

That tight band around my forehead spread. I narrowly suppressed my hiss as my temples began to throb.

Breathe, I reminded myself. *One thing at a time. One step forward.*

Then came the bitter thought, *One step forward, only to take so many backward.*

Mr. Cross was shrewd and his eyes were keen. “It is not enough.”

The nausea was rising in my throat. I spun the Halo orb back around so I could meet those dark eyes.

“It’s not *enough*,” came that familiar clipped voice. He jabbed a tiny finger at me, his image flickering with the sudden movement. “Do you take me for a fool? You think I don’t know about the other lenders? The 200,000 credits your father owes to them? The 45,861 credits he owes to *me*?”

His graying mustache was quaking with his fury, and even over the Halo orb, as outdated as it was, I could see his cheeks getting redder and redder.

“You need *twenty* caverns full of blue salt to pay back your family’s debts. But you already know that, don’t you?”

I just need more time, came the quiet thought. But I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of hearing those soft, cliché, pleading words. Not from me.

"There are endless mountains in the Collis," I told him instead, keeping my voice firm. My spine straightened. "There *will* be twenty caverns full. And more. Much more."

"If your miners don't pack up and leave once they realize the great House Hara has no credits to pay them with."

My family's name was a taunting twist on his lips. A quick, pleased grin followed when he caught my flinch.

A burst of frustration and pride made me snap, "Then I'll mine them myself! But you will have your credits by the end of the year. As agreed."

"And the interest," he added.

By then the interest would be as much as the original loan. And Mr. Cross knew it.

"And your interest," I said back, my careful mask falling back into place after my brief outburst. "Of course. How could I forget?"

"I have something else to discuss with you," he cut in before I ended the connection, his voice momentarily and uncharacteristically hurried.

There was a long, pointed pause through the Halo. Though I couldn't see it, I saw Mr. Cross shuffle something across his office desk. The sound of metal tinkered through the connection. My stomach soured further because I knew what was coming next.

"Remember what we spoke about last time. Have you reconsidered?"

A jagged edge of my nail caught on the worn material of my pants, fraying the threads.

"Despite what you think, Mr. Cross, my sisters are not *for sale*," I told him, my tone curt. I had the strongest urge to claw at his miniature, holographic image, if only to make those ugly words and the slimy *knowing* in his eyes go away.

“And what about *you*, Gemma?”

Stunned, I could only whisper, “*What?*”

Mr. Cross leaned back in his chair. In addition to loaning credits to people he clearly shouldn't loan money to, the human businessman was known for something else entirely throughout the Quadrants, something I thought far more dangerous.

He called it a *matchmaking* service. But underneath its “Lonely Beings Looking for Love” marketing bullshit, I knew what it really was.

It was human males looking for exotic alien mistresses who could do things their human wives couldn't. It was brutish, cold, lizard-faced Jetutians wanting a female that they could use whenever they wanted. It was wealthy Gwytri heirs that needed to marry to access their inheritance—and once they did, they shipped their new wives off to the nearest colony without a second thought.

Hell, I'd even heard that Mr. Cross coordinated monthly orgy parties with females from his little black book. Desperate females who needed credits fast.

Desperate just like me.

“How much is your pride worth, I wonder?” he asked, picking at the ends of his thick gray mustache. “How far would you go to save your home? Your family's good name?”

“If my father knew that you were speaking to me like this, he'd have your head,” I said, my tone cold.

A bark of laughter rose from Mr. Cross. “Come now, Gemma. You're past your prime. It is preserving your sisters' virtues that your father is more concerned with now.”

The truth of his words stung. They stung more deeply than I thought they should.

Past my prime?

I was thirty.

Yet...most human women were married by twenty-five—especially those that lived under the Earth Council’s rule. On the planet of New Everton, in the Collis, I was considered *withered*. Like rotting fruit on a vine.

“Good thing for you that I have an interested suitor,” Mr. Cross continued. “One that was *very* interested in the renowned beauty of the Hara daughters.”

His mockery was plain to hear. Everyone knew that my sisters were the beauties of the family. They were spitting images of Mother—though Piper had taken father’s dark hair, like me—whereas I had only taken small pieces of her. And they were both of marrying age with Mira being twenty-three and Piper twenty.

“What suitor?” I asked before I could stop myself, keeping very still.

Mr. Cross’s eyes narrowed on me. His expression was watchful. Alert.

The back of my neck prickled.

“A Kylorr.”

The blood drained from my face. Sucking in a quick breath, I stumbled back, as if I could escape the impact of *that* admission, even though it had come from a tiny floating Halo orb.

“I didn’t meet the suitor in person,” Mr. Cross went on to explain, his tone nonchalant. “I met his ambassador. He gave me the impression that no price would deter his lord from making the match. The Kylorr in question is apparently very wealthy. One of the heirs to the Kaalium.”

I barely heard his words over the rushing in my ears.

“The m-match,” I repeated dumbly, my superpower momentarily leaving me when my voice came out strangled and weak. “You cannot possibly mean—”

“Marriage. I mean *marriage*, Gemma,” Mr. Cross said slowly, that grin crawling over his features. “I’m *helping* you, can’t you see that? I can make all your problems go away in

the blink of an eye. All your debts”—he snapped his fingers, the sharp sound jarring—“*gone.*”

I shivered, the cavern walls beginning to sway.

“The Kylorr will pay whatever you like. But he is determined to marry a daughter of House Hara. Oh, and Gemma?”

“What?” I whispered.

Mr. Cross grinned.

“The Kylorr specified his preference is the eldest daughter. He wants *you.*”

CHAPTER 2

Our estate in the Collis was picturesque, a perfectly grand home surrounded by sprawling, groomed gardens, set against the backdrop of regal blue-tipped mountains.

Or, at least, that was how I'd seen it before: perfect and immaculate.

A cobbled path led up to the house from the main road, passing between extravagant golden gates, running alongside the vibrant green grass of the front gardens, and curling into a circular driveway. There was a fountain just before the sweeping staircase up to the guest entrance, but the fountain had long stopped working and we didn't have the money to repair the cracks in the stone from disuse.

After Father had returned from the war—a *hero*, decorated in glittering medals and fat shimmering jewels—once we'd packed up our meager belongings from our previous dwelling on New Inverness, the Earth Council had sent us here. I still remembered the first time I'd seen it. I'd been thirteen at the time. Experiencing the estate, in all of its perfect glory, I'd thought everything would be *fine*. I'd thought our lives would change forever. That we would be happy. That Mother wouldn't be sad anymore.

Because how could she be sad in such a magical, lovely place like this?

There was a miner lingering near the gates as I approached. It had been a long walk back to the estate from

the mine shaft transport but, truthfully, I didn't remember much after Mr. Cross had ended our Halo call. It took me by surprise to find myself at the swirling steel gates. Once they'd been painted a gleaming gold. Now the grime and rust made them appear a muddy bronze.

"Miss Hara," the Killup miner started, his hands twisting together when he spotted me.

"Mira is in with her tutor this hour, Sorj," I informed him, continuing down the pathway between the gates. Father hated that Mira often looked for Sorj through the window at dusk.

"Miss Hara," Sorj said again. Even though my thoughts were still pinned on *Kylorr* and the possibility that all of our debts could be *gone*, just as Mr. Cross had claimed, something in Sorj's tone made me pause.

"What is it?" I asked, frowning, stopping on the road. My head was still throbbing. All I wanted was to go upstairs and sink into a hot bath. But I knew there was more work to be done. I had the ledgers to balance. Workers to organize to begin clearing out the new cavern of blue salt. And I needed to contact that potter on Dumeru to see if the plates Piper had purchased could be returned.

Sorj shrunk back a little. His gray skin was darker in the evening light. The Killup male had always seemed wary of me. Piper said it was because of my face. She said I always looked displeased, that I had the expression of a pinched, stern, cranky tutor. Like Ms. Jada, our governess when we'd been young.

I made the effort to soften my frown as Sorj began, "I tried to speak to Lord Hara earlier, but he turned me away."

Exhaling a sharp breath, I looked over my shoulder to regard the house in the distance. Rectangular in shape, the house had been constructed from white blocks of stone, though they had grayed with time. Columns flanked the grand entrance. Tall, floor-to-ceiling windows allowed light to flood into the sectioned off rooms. I could see a light on in the upper floor. Mira and Piper, no doubt, with their tutor. A tutor Father

had insisted on keeping, though we could barely afford her wages.

Weariness was evident in my voice when I began, “If this is about Mira, you know that—”

“It’s not about Mira,” Sorj said, his tone sharpening. I looked at him in surprise. He blinked, as if shocked by his quick, defensive words. His lids closed vertically, unlike humans. “It’s about our wages.”

I couldn’t hide my frown when I said, “Do you need an advance? Because I’m afraid that’s not possible. Not right now.”

“An advance?” Sorj questioned. “We still have not been paid for the last cavern.”

My belly dropped.

“My father paid you for the last cavern,” I insisted. My fingers picked at the loose thread of my pants near my outer thigh. “I helped him divide up the credits myself.”

“He never paid us,” Sorj said, confusion and bewilderment passing over his expression. I’d learned to read Killup expressions quite well. They made up the majority of the miners we employed. “I can show you the credit records if you don’t believe me. But none of us have received our wages. Not since two months ago.”

Shit.

Shit, shit, shit!

“Miss Hara?” Sorj asked, his tone suddenly alarmed. “Are you all right?”

“I need to sit down,” I gasped out, pinching at the sharp jolt that suddenly spread between my brow bones as a wave of dizziness spiraled through me.

A moment later, I felt cool, strong, calloused hands guide me off the paved path. My feet met the pillowy softness of the grass. Engineered grass. It always stayed green. And, thankfully, it never needed to be cut. The cost for landscaping alone would have ruined us.

“Here,” Sorj ordered me. “Sit.”

I plopped down onto my backside, focusing on drawing in deep breaths. The air was crisp and sharp. It felt good against my suddenly blazing cheeks and stinging eyes.

Tilting my head back up to the sky, I saw that the sunset was gorgeous. Sunsets on New Everton, especially in the Collis region, were some of the best in the universe. Or so the Earth Council claimed.

And I believed it.

Streaks of lush purples, vibrant pinks, and bright ceruleans stretched across the sky and mingled like a braid. The strands disappeared behind the highest mountain of the Collis, the one that was named after my father. Mount Hara.

A brown bar of food was thrust toward me. Sorj knelt beside me, looking worried. In another life, I thought he and Mira would be good for one another. He would keep her grounded. She would make him smile.

“You should eat,” Sorj told me quietly. “You look faint.”

I couldn’t remember when I’d last eaten. No, wait, it had been at breakfast. Piper had looked on in pointed disapproval at the amount of cheese I’d eaten. Then she’d snipped snidely, “And you wonder why your dresses barely fit anymore.”

She was still mad from when I’d told her we wouldn’t be keeping the Dumerian plates.

I took the brown bar from Sorj’s grip. Miner’s protein. Nearly tasteless and very chalky but high in calories and nutrients.

I scarfed it down.

Then I sat there, my gaze alternating from the green grass underneath me to the sky overhead. Colors. So many colors.

“I’ll get your wages,” I told Sorj. “And all the other miner’s wages too.”

I didn’t know how. I didn’t know where the money would come from. But I would get the damn credits somehow.

“I’m sorry,” I added, my cheeks heating in shame. “I don’t know what happened.”

But that was a lie. I could tell from the shifting, careful expression on Sorj’s face that he knew it was a lie as well.

“I shouldn’t have said anything,” Sorj said quietly. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“If you’d never said anything, you never would have gotten paid,” I informed him, my voice hardening. “Don’t apologize for that. *Ever.*”

I knew he had family—his mother and sisters—that he regularly sent credits to. They relied on his work just as much as *we* did.

And Father likely gambled their wages away on another “investment,” I thought bitterly. What a slap in the face.

“Miss Hara...” He trailed off, his tone uncertain.

“What is it?” I asked, sighing, feeling my heartbeat begin to settle after its brief, dizzying spike.

“I know it’s not my place to say but...have you ever considered getting *help?*”

My spine stiffened.

“I’ve managed it for nearly five years on my own just fine.”

His pointed look made my ears burn. There I was... hunched over in the grass. Exhausted. Stressed out. There was likely a crumble of miner’s protein dotting my lip, and I ran the back of my hand across my mouth just to be certain.

“It’s just a rough patch right now,” I added. “With the stolen shipment and the equipment breaking during the last excavation, it’s been...”

I trailed off. I didn’t have the energy to make up bullshit lies, mere bandages to wrap around a bleeding wound that just wouldn’t *stop*.

Eyeing Sorj, I wondered what it would be like to tear off that bandage, if only for a brief moment. To spill my guts to

someone. To spill all the ugly truths I had been bottling away for the last five years.

The honest truth was that we were *broke*.

Flat broke.

With a Mount Hara-sized pile of debt on the verge of crashing all around us, owed to some of the most dangerous beings in the universe. Our home and everything we had would be stripped away. My father would likely drink himself to death, but he would be grinning as he did it. And my sisters...they would likely be sold off to the highest bidders to pay the debts, with no concern for their safety or happiness.

And me? I had no idea what would happen to me.

But would it even matter at that point?

“What...” I licked my dry lips. Lowering my voice, as if the house would be able to hear me from such a great distance, I asked Sorj, “What do you know about the Kylorr?”

His eyelids flared back briefly. Killup had gills on the sides of their necks. It was rumored that when they flared, they could emit toxins into the air, poisoning whoever breathed it in.

Maybe that was why I shrunk back a little when his gills rippled.

“The Kylorr?” he asked quietly, his gaze suddenly pinned on me, unblinking.

“Yes,” I said. “Krynn is not very far from your own home planet, right?”

“Why do you want to know about the Kylorr?” Sorj asked slowly. But I sensed the unease in his voice, the way his gills flared when he said the name of one of the most feared species in the Four Quadrants.

“Please, Sorj,” I said quietly. “Anything that you know would be helpful.”

Sorj swallowed. He cast a glance at the house, a thoughtful expression on his features, before his black eyes returned to

mine.

“The Kylorr are descended from...*rab’erise*,” Sorj told me, his mother tongue flowing effortlessly from him. “*Berserkers* would be the closest translation.”

So like many warrior species—like the Dakkari and the Luxirians—their ancestors had been no strangers to violence.

To...bloodshed, I added silently, with a tendril of hesitation.

“Their rages are said to be unparalleled,” Sorj told me. “You never want to anger one. It’s a sure way to be torn limb from limb. My own ancestors would know that. We fought against them in an ancient war. Long ago. Even before your own home planet was discovered.”

“And how did your Killup fair?”

A sharp, warbling sound rose from his throat. “The old records suggest we sent an army of fifty thousand soldiers. None of them *returned* from Krynn. I’d say we didn’t fair very well.”

That had been the past, however. I was more concerned with the Kylorr *now*. Every species in the universe had a dark past. Mine included.

“Do you know about the Kaalium?”

“Yes,” Sorj said immediately. “It’s a region. A territory on Krynn.”

“Do you know what it’s like there? Is it...”

I wanted to say *safe*, but I couldn’t make myself form the word. Whenever I pictured it in my head, all I could imagine was *red*. Rivers of blood. A dark sky. Hulking berserkers with fangs and wings and talons and horns.

And one wants me in his bed, I thought, shuddering.

Sorj shook his head. “No. Not many are granted access onto Krynn, much less into the Kaalium.”

“Why? Why is it so hard to get there?”

“Because it’s one of the wealthiest territories in our entire *universe*,” he said, his hairless brow furrowed, as if that were obvious. “Don’t you know that, Miss Hara? That’s where *lore* comes from.”

A jolt went through my body. “*Lore?*” I whispered, my thoughts racing. So maybe what Mr. Cross had said was actually *true*. That the Kylorr suitor *was* very wealthy indeed. Maybe he could pay whatever I wanted in order to save my family. Maybe the price I asked would be mere pennies to him.

I took a took breath.

“And is *it* true?” I asked him, my voice unwavering.

Sorj’s gills fluttered again, hearing that which had gone unspoken between us. Until now.

“Is it true that they feed on blood?”

I’d heard horrific tales of the Kylorr, mostly from the maids and housekeepers before we’d let them all go. The other tales I’d sought out myself in my morbid disbelief, thumbing through old, dusty tomes in the library or searching through universal databases on the Nu device.

In these tales—if they were to be believed—the Kylorr would pin down their victims, enclose them in their wings like a cocoon, and *feed* on them, sinking their fangs deep. It was said the Kylorr could taste fear. That they deliberately hurt their victims because they liked the way it *tasted*, that pain lingering on their tongues like a fine wine.

Sorj’s silence was answer enough.

I closed my eyes, drawing in a deep, steadying breath. The miner’s protein had turned to stone in my belly.

“Don’t,” came his voice.

When I turned to regard the solemn-faced Sorj, he said, “Whatever it is that has you asking me these things, Miss Hara... *don’t* get involved with the Kylorr.”

Just then, I heard my father’s voice boom out over the grounds.

“*Gemma, get in here!*”

When I focused on the front door of the house, I saw his imposing figure, lit by a golden, hovering orb that had stopped at his side. Something else glinted gold, but it was the crystal glass of whiskey in his hand.

And it wasn't irritation in his voice at finding me with Sorj this late in the evening. I heard *delight*.

Standing, I looked back to Sorj, who was still kneeling in the grass. His gills had flared out at the sound of my father's voice.

I gave him a small smile I didn't feel.

I shouldn't get involved with the Kylorr?

I might not have a choice, I thought.

“I'll get you your credits, if you can give me a couple days. Don't worry. I'll handle it.”

CHAPTER 3

When I stepped into my father's office, I saw that my sisters were already there. Father sat at his desk. One of Hydroni-make that he'd had imported, all gleaming red wood inlaid with swirling metal strips. The thick, sturdy legs showcased intricate carvings depicting the last battle of the Pe'ji War.

The battle that had changed everything for us. The battle that had given us this house, this land, this territory.

"Gemma, there you are," my father burst out when he saw me enter the office, a wide grin on his handsome features. Behind him, I saw the backside of our property through the tall windows. Once there had been a shimmering blue lake—Mother's favorite place.

Though darkness was falling, I could still make out the muddy brown color of its murky water and smell the putrid film that had developed over the top of it. I swallowed, my gut twisting. I *still* couldn't stomach the sight of it. Even after five years.

Resolutely, I took my eyes away.

"You heard about the blue salt cavern?" I guessed, eyeing the glass of whiskey on his desk. Another expensive import. Judging by the pinkness of his cheeks on his tanned complexion, I guessed he was on his third or fourth glass of the night.

"You found more blue salt?" Piper asked, whirling on me with large, watchful eyes. "That's great news! Just in time for

Lord and Lady Rossi's visit. We can keep the plates after all!"

"No, we cannot keep the plates," I said, a sharp edge lining my tone. "I'm sending them back tomorrow."

"Father!" Piper barked, whirling on him. "I would just *die* of mortification if Lord and Lady Rossi ate off our chipped set! Fran broke another cup just yesterday. And there's a big crack in nearly *all* of the salad plates. You cannot expect them to—"

"Piper, enough," I exclaimed, feeling that stabbing headache return. My throat felt like it was tightening again, constricting.

Piper continued, "Lady Rossi's cousin is a wealthy merchant. The *handsome* cousin. We need to make a good impression on them so she introduces us. And if she takes one look at our existing plates, she'll turn her nose up at us. I wouldn't be able to bear it!"

She was talking about plates and handsome cousins, and I was on the verge of a mental breakdown over the possibility that I would have to sell myself to a Kylorr, that my father had lied about paying our workers, that every day the interest on our debts grew to more insurmountable heights, and that plates wouldn't matter when there would be *nothing* left.

I snapped.

"I don't want to hear about the *fucking* plates anymore, Piper! We can't afford them! And everyone knows Lady Rossi's cousin is already engaged to an heiress on New Inverness. So, what chance do you really have? Why would he choose *you* over her?"

I hardly ever cursed and I hardly ever *yelled*. Like, actually *yelled*. And so the stunned silence that resulted in my small outburst was warranted.

"Gemma," Mira admonished softly, stepping toward Piper, who crossed her arms and looked away from me. I heard her swallow thickly...followed by a small snuffle.

I blew out a short, sharp breath. Guilt started to settle, heavy in my mind as regret swarmed in my veins. I hadn't

meant to make it sound like Piper was *lacking*. Just that...well, reality was harsh. Lady Rossi's cousin was a wealthy man. Who would marry into an equally wealthy family. Not one like ours, riddled with debt, with enough baggage to fill the emptying halls of our run down estate.

"I'm sorry," I said, clearing my throat in discomfort. "Piper, I didn't mean that you—"

"Yeah, well, he wouldn't want you either!" Piper hissed, her green eyes flashing. She was crying now, but I knew that my sister could be cruel when she was hurt. I braced myself for what I knew was coming. "You're a cold bitch with a stick up your ass. You're just jealous that I might have a chance with him. Because he would never choose a frigid hag like you."

All the blood drained from my face. My heart twisted into a sea of knots. Piper and I had never gotten along well, but this was a new low. Even for her.

"Piper!" came my father's sharp bark. "Get out. Now."

"But—"

"Out!" Father roared.

I blinked back the tears, breathing through my stinging nose. I felt Mira's hand on my arm as Piper skulked from the office, slamming the door behind her, rattling a vase on the bookshelf.

"Are you okay?" Mira asked. When I met her eyes, I saw she was biting her lip. "She didn't mean it, Gem. You know that. She'll feel terrible once she realizes what she's said. But you know how she gets."

No, she meant it. She meant every word, I thought. But I touched Mira's hand, blinking back the tears that threatened to fall, and said, "I know."

Relief swam through her gaze. She didn't like it when we fought. It always put her in a tough position, being between us all the time.

“Gemma,” my father said, the clink of ice filling the quiet office when he lifted his glass. There was an apology in his eyes, but I still spied something else. Something...hopeful. “I’ll tell her she can’t keep the plates, all right?”

But it wasn’t even about those damn plates anymore, was it?

“What did you need to see me for?” I asked him, impatient to return to my room. I didn’t think I could do any work tonight after all. I was drained. All I wanted was to sleep, to put this horrendous day behind me.

Father swirled the whiskey in his glass and then drained it down. “Mr. Cross called me.”

I stiffened.

“He said he made you a match,” he said, beaming. His dark, straight brows rose over his warm brown eyes. “A *wealthy* match. And that you told him you would think about it.”

“What?” Mira breathed, and I sensed her turning to me with wide eyes. “Why didn’t you say anything, Gem?”

So...this was the source of his excitement.

“Did he say anything else to you?” I prompted, a little confused by my father’s measured exuberance. The Kylorr had been allies of the Pe’jians during the war. The Pe’jians that my father had fought *against* for the United Alliance.

“Something about a matchmaking fee when the marriage happens, but he assured me the suitor would pay it,” Father said, shrugging. He stood, walking over to the bar cart, lifting a crystal decanter from it. “He assured me the suitor would pay for *everything*.”

The words had been loaded with something unspoken. I shot a look at Mira, but she didn’t appear to notice.

“I haven’t accepted yet,” I reminded him, licking my dry lips. “I know very little about him, and I’d like to have some assurances before I—”

He whirled, a small portion of whiskey sloshing from the decanter, splattering onto the wood floor. Father didn't appear to notice.

"You *will* marry him, Gemma. It—it would solve *everything*. And once your sisters marry into wealthy families, the estate will be secure! Hell, they don't even have to be wealthy families, if this man is as rich as Mr. Cross says. They could marry whomever they choose. Love matches—isn't that what you want for them? But you will *all* be secure. Just as your mother wanted."

My spine shot straighter. "And what about the caverns? The workers?"

Father waved his hand like my words were nothing but a small nuisance. Like I hadn't given *everything* to the business for the last five years, all to keep our heads above water.

"I'll manage it just fine."

A tiny bloom of fury lit up in my chest. "You don't know how to run the business. Not anymore. You didn't even pay the workers last month when I entrusted you to do it."

Father scowled. "Was it that damn Killup that said that?" he asked. "Look, I told them that I would invest their wages and get them double back in three months. None of them protested."

"*My gods*, there are laws in place for a reason. You can't do that. Our workers depend on their pay. They have families to care for, and they don't need to be roped into your 'investments.'"

"Oh, Father, tell me you didn't," Mira said, biting her lip. She was likely thinking of Sorj.

Father's temper was rising. I could feel it. He didn't like to be cornered. And, much like Piper, he lashed out when he felt threatened.

He poured a hefty glass of whiskey, and the decanter landed on the bar cart with a sharp clatter. His cheeks were reddening quickly, but I knew it was more from his anger than the liquor.

“If I didn’t have you girls to care for, I could run the caverns easily,” he said, completely ignoring the situation at hand. “And I will. It will give me something to do when I know that all of you are settled and married.”

I bit my tongue so hard that I tasted blood. The metallic taste only made me think of other, more horrible things. Nausea pooled in my belly.

“You will marry this man, Gemma,” my father said, walking back to his desk, his words a sharp bark. “Tell Mr. Cross that you will accept the match. You might not see the blessing in it now, but you will thank me later.”

How had he turned this around? How had he turned *my* decision around so that I would need to thank *him*? Especially considering we were in this mess *because* of him. A mess that my sisters didn’t even know about because he’d begged me, with tears in his eyes, not to tell them.

“The ‘man’ is a Kylorr.”

My father froze, the ice clinking with the sudden stop. Mira’s breath whistled in. The hand she had on my arm squeezed, her fingernails pressing deep.

“But I’m guessing Mr. Cross didn’t tell you that,” I finished. Another possibility nearly stole my breath. “Or maybe you didn’t care to ask.”

His hand shook, but I spied the shame mingled with his disbelief.

“So, what do you think of it now, Father? Would you still have me marry him, knowing what my future would hold?”

Would you have me marry him to settle all your debts? To save this house, where Mother died? To purchase more whiskey so you can drink yourself to an early grave? To feather this coffin of a place with more golden, glittering things that you don’t need?

I couldn’t help the terrible thoughts.

Truthfully, I had already made up my mind on the matter. There was no choice. That had long been taken from me.

But I wanted to hear him say it.

I *needed* to hear him say it.

“Father, you cannot allow this,” Mira exclaimed quietly, as the silence continued to stretch. “Absolutely not!”

Father’s brown eyes never left mine, however. He and my mother were night and day in appearance. He was a large, barrel-chested man, with thick salt-and-pepper hair, almond-shaped eyes, and round, ruddy cheeks.

My mother had been willowy and slender, with fine blond hair as smooth as silk, wide green eyes, and a honeyed complexion from her afternoon swims. A great beauty from a wealthy family, who had fallen in love with a grinning, confident, brash soldier from the outskirts of New Inverness.

Rye Hara and Sophie Crest. Lord and Lady Hara of the Collis, they had become.

Lord Rye Hara of the Collis looked me straight in the eyes, and he said, “You will marry the Kylorr, Gemma.”

Mira’s hand spasmed on my arm. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her gaping at Father.

“And you will save us all,” he grated softly.

He tilted his whiskey up to his lips and drained it in one gulp. The empty glass clattered onto the surface of his desk when he was finished. Then he turned his back to me, looking out the window toward the lake. I wondered if he still imagined Mother there, when it was sunny and warm. I wondered how he could stand the sight of it, even though she was buried there.

I barely heard Mira’s sharp protests. I barely heard what Father said to her in turn.

I was the eldest daughter. Before today, I had been of no *real* value to him. I was past marrying age, after all, and everyone knew it was marriages that exchanged wealth between families. Until today, he had planned to rely on Mira’s and Piper’s beauty to save us.

I knew Father loved me. But if he had a choice between settling his debts or marrying me off—the daughter who had no prospects—well...it was always going to be an easy choice.

“I’ll marry him,” I said, my voice finding strength, when I met my Father’s gaze in the reflection of the window.

“Gemma, just...*no*,” Mira started, and I heard the wavering in her voice, the helplessness in the way she looked back and forth between us. “We can sort this out!”

“But I have some conditions,” I said, ignoring her.

Father turned, his expression grim. He waved a hand in the air to let me know he was listening.

“I will hire on a manager for the caverns. You will not go near them. You will not deal with any of the workers, nor will you touch their wages again. The manager will oversee everything and they will deposit your share of the profits into the main account at the end of every month.”

Father put his hands into the pockets of his trousers, but his expression didn’t change.

“You will let Mira and Piper choose their matches when the time comes,” I continued. “And you will not interfere.”

“Go on,” he said, his tone rough and guttural. “I’m sure you have more.”

“Just one more, though I would not consider it a condition,” I said, my throat tightening. “Once I leave the Collis, I’ll be *done* with the loans, Father.”

His expression darkened. His gaze flitted to Mira quickly, who asked, frowning, “Loans? What loans?”

“And everything having to do with them,” I added.

Which translated into *keeping the collectors at bay*. The pleading for extensions; the endless Halo calls; fielding the threats of terrible violence against me, my father, my sisters. Everything I’d shielded my father and my sisters from.

“This will be a clean slate for you. Don’t do anything to ruin that,” I said, my voice breaking at the last words. “Do you

accept?”

It took long moments but finally my father inclined his head.

“I accept.”

MR. CROSS'S KNOWING FACE LIT UP THE HALO ORB. IT looked like he was shirtless, likely getting ready for bed. I'd been pacing my room for the last twenty minutes, storing up my courage to make this call.

“I knew I'd be hearing from you soon, Miss Hara.”

“How much is he paying you to make the match?” I asked. It was something I'd wondered since our call earlier.

Mr. Cross's grin could only be described as *hungry*.

“The Kylorr? One hundred fifty *vron*,” he said.

One hundred fifty thousand credits.

That was the price of my father's original loan, the interest if we'd taken until the end of the year, and *more*. Much more.

“*And he will pay off your father's loan to me.*”

Why? I wanted to shout in disbelief.

Why was marrying the eldest daughter of House Hara so *vital* to this Kylorr? To spend that obscene amount of credits when we'd never even *met*?

I suppose I'm about to find out, I thought.

“Do you have something to say to me, Miss Hara?” Mr. Cross asked, his tone taking on a gleeful tinge. “A thank-you perhaps?”

Swallowing, I dug my fingernails hard into my palms.

Then, with the strongest voice I could muster, I said, “Tell the Kylorr I'll marry him if he pays off all my father's debts and secures our estate.”

“Do you have a price in mind that I should relay to him?”

A price.

Like I was something to be sold. Cattle in a field. Blue salt in a cavern. Plates from a potter on Dumera.

You're a cold bitch with a stick up your ass, Piper had said to me.

The debts would only require 200,000 to pay off. If he wanted to make this a transaction, then I would too.

Steeling my spine, I said, “Four hundred *vron*. Two hundred to pay off the debts up front. But I will require another two hundred to be placed into a secure account under my name—and my name alone.”

Maybe a selfish, scared part of me thought my price would send this Kylorr running.

Mr. Cross laughed. But his grin was wide when he said, “I admire your sense of self-worth, Miss Hara. But his ambassador did assure me that he would pay whatever price you asked. I'll relay your message and get the contracts drawn up.”

When the Halo call was over, I stood in the middle of my room, a fire roaring in the hearth, frozen in disbelief and grief and anger and shame and terror.

That was when the impact of what I'd just done hit me *hard*.

I just sold myself to a Kylorr.

CHAPTER 4

“Gemma?” came Fran’s soft voice. “They’re ready.”

Turning from the window, I met Fran’s hazel eyes. Her black curls had been wrangled into a tight braid that fell over her shoulder. She was dressed in a deep emerald-green dress that looked beautiful against her warm brown skin.

My friend gave me a wobbly smile as she took in my white dress and my long, straight hair that I’d left unbound. She said, “You look beautiful, Gem.”

I ignored her words. “Has Father met with the Kylorr yet?”

Meaning my soon-to-be husband and his witness, all the way from Krynn itself.

“No, he’s...he’s waiting for you. You’ll go in together, and I’ll be right behind you.”

I nodded and strode forward, the slippers on my feet slapping against the stone. “Let’s get it over with, then.”

Before I lose my nerve, I added silently. Or my breakfast.

Everything had happened so fast. Only three days ago, I had called Mr. Cross with my answer. The very next morning, I’d had an answer from the Kylorr and a contract to sign.

Now I was standing in the atrium of a Nulaxy courthouse. A neutral governing colony, given my father’s ties to the United Alliance and the Kylorrs’ own loyalties to the Uranian Federation.

Only two days ago, I had packed up my entire life into three trunks. Only two days ago, I'd said goodbye to my home, to my planet, to the Collis. Only two days ago, I'd said goodbye to my mother at her grave by the lake.

Only two days ago, I'd said goodbye to my sisters.

We thought it best if they didn't attend the wedding and instead stayed behind in the Collis. We thought it *safer*. It was possible the Kylorr could change his mind. That upon seeing my sisters, he could change his preference to one of them. I didn't want to give him the opportunity.

When we'd said goodbye, Piper had barely looked at me, which had left a tight knot in my throat. Mira's tears had soaked my shoulder, and I'd had dug half crescents into my palms to keep myself from soaking hers. We'd never been apart since either of them had been born. Not once. Not ever. Not even for a day. Now I didn't know when—or *if*—I'd ever see them again.

Fran, the last remaining housekeeper of House Hara and my dearest friend, had come as a witness to Nulaxy in their stead.

"Gemma," she said, stepping in front of me, blocking my path when I made a beeline for the door that would lead to another door that would lead to *him*.

Fran's gentle, warm touch made me freeze. I hadn't cried. Not once. But I didn't need to be strong for Fran. She wouldn't think any less of me, and so when the tears suddenly blurred my vision, I let them.

"Oh, Gem," Fran murmured, biting her lip. She reached out and pulled me into a hug. "It's going to be okay."

More bandages. Temporary ones. I wanted to believe her.

"I-I made arrangements for the new manager to be at the house starting next week. Father will meet with him, but I would appreciate if you could show him the caverns, introduce him to the workers," I said.

"Gemma," Fran said, sighing, pulling back. Her hazel eyes darted between my own. She was only a year younger than

me, but sometimes she felt more like a mothering figure.

“Promise me,” I pleaded softly.

She nodded hesitantly. “I will. But *stop*. I know they’re your family and you can’t help worrying. But you’ve done everything you possibly can for them. You’ve given so much. *Too much*. Let them stand on their own. You need to start looking out for *yourself*, okay?”

Hadn’t Sorj said something eerily similar?

I swallowed and wiped at my glassy cheeks.

“Don’t pass judgment so quickly either,” Fran said quietly. I flinched. “You don’t know him. Or what he’s like.”

“He used Mr. Cross to broker this marriage,” I pointed out. “And you’ve heard the stories, Fran.”

“That’s all they are. *Stories*,” she said, taking my upper arms and squeezing.

Blowing out a sharp breath, I gave her my hesitant nod. “You’re right.”

“Of course I am,” she huffed, cracking a small smile. Then her smile faded. “I’ll miss you, Gem. If I could go with you, I would. You know that.”

“I know.” But it had been in the contract. Only *I* was allowed to step foot on Krynn. No one else. Not my family. Not my oldest friend. I squeezed her hand. “I’ll—I’ll miss you too, Franny.”

I looked at her, steeling my spine. She gave me a clean cloth to wipe the tears off my cheeks. I took a deep breath, fastening my eyes on the door.

He was near. He was close.

“I’m ready.”

WHEN THE DOORS OPENED, I SAW WINGS. GREAT, TERRIFYING, black wings, folded and tucked against their owner's broad back, hiding their massive span. I couldn't see his face, but he filled the room like a violent and sudden storm, making panic rise in my throat.

Father's hand spasmed against my forearm. I stopped at the threshold of the small, darkened courtroom, my legs freezing beneath the skirts of my white dress. A human wedding tradition. I wished I would've worn black. *He* was dressed in black, after all.

This wasn't a celebration. This was a transaction.

That thought unlocked my legs, and I began to walk, dragging my father forward, whose grip had tightened considerably on my arm.

Is he having second thoughts? I wondered. Bitterly. Sadly. *It doesn't matter now. I am already sold.*

I was House Hara's sacrificial lamb. Offered up to my new husband, with my neck bared and presented, awaiting the slow death of his bite. I'd heard it was a terrible death...to be drained by a Kylorr.

At our approach, he turned.

Whatever remained of the air in my tight lungs whooshed out as our gazes connected.

Red.

He had red eyes. Since his skin was gray, those eyes resembled burning embers nestled among dark smoke. His pupils were vertical slits, flaring briefly as we regarded one another. Then, strangely, those pupils flitted and narrowed on my father.

His bones were sharp—his cheekbones, his nose, the hard square slash of his jawline. His face was grim and surprisingly regal. Haughty and arrogant even, given his pushed back, broad shoulders and the sudden flaring of his massive wings, the sound like a whisper in the silent room. Black horns jutted above his temples, with a ribbon of spikes spiraling tight around each of them.

Our differences—between a human and a Kylorr—were vast, though not as vast as I’d assumed. His face was long and angular, but he had two eyes, a nose, and a wide mouth with thin lips. His hair was black, like mine, shorn to his shoulders. His ears were pointed, the tips peeking through his hair.

Chills ran down my arms, however, when I spied his fangs. Two of them. Long and sharp, poking into his bottom lip, ivory against his dark gray lips. I imagined them slick with blood. I imagined the flash of them in darkness, accompanied by those terrible, terrible red eyes, and I froze all over again.

My father’s grip tightened on my arm.

“Gem,” he said softly. The hesitation clear in his voice. When I looked over at him, there was a bead of sweat dotting his forehead. Indecision played out over his face.

Whatever he was going to say, however, died in his throat and I heard his hard swallow. There was a flash in his eyes. *Guilt*. Sorrow. But determination as well, and it made my heart sink.

It was my father who pulled me forward this time to approach the three figures: my new husband, his witness whom I barely noticed, standing in a darkened corner, and the Nulaxian male who was overseeing the brief ceremony.

When I stepped up next to the Kylorr, it was jarring how *massive* he truly was. He towered over me. Though he didn’t carry the large, intimidating bulk of other alien species—like the Nulaxian male before us—he was finely sculpted like a marble statue, taut but lean enough to surprise me.

He’s a berserker, I reminded myself.

An alien-vampire berserker.

The Kylorr’s battle rages were infamous for a reason. Because their strength could be *triggered*.

By what? I couldn’t help but wonder. Would he *grow* in size?

As if I couldn’t help myself, I chanced a peek up at the Kylorr. An heir to the Kaalium. Whatever that meant. But it

was obvious he was wealthy. That he *came* from wealth, had been born into it.

His clothes were finely made—the stitching on the leather precise, not a thread out of place. It was a hardened black leather from the looks of it but appeared supple to the touch. There were tailored cutouts for his wings and large straps across his back which made an X shape, hammered steel shapes pressed into the straps, words—Kylorr words?—stamped into the metal. A dagger was at his hip. The handle looked well worn from use. His pants were made of the same material as his tunic, though there was flexible plating that protected the front of his thighs.

And on his hands...*gauntlets*. Gunmetal gauntlets that covered the tops of his hands, running up to the middle of his forearm. His knuckles made sharp metal points.

A armor, I thought, my mouth going dry.

He'd come to this wedding like he was preparing for battle.

The Nulaxian male made a warbling sound, like a clearing of his throat, as if he sensed the sudden tension in the courtroom, suffocating and heavy.

My father had stopped behind me with Fran. It was only the Kylorr and me standing before the Nulaxian male, facing him.

“Do you come to this joining of your own free will?” the Nulaxian male asked, peering at me with bright blue eyes.

Of course they would need to ask that. It was a common tradition these days with trafficking ports at every major colony.

I nearly laughed. Instead, my fists squeezed at my sides.

“Yes,” I said, the word sounding strong. Strong enough that I saw the Kylorr turn to peer down at me. Even I could see the frown on his face and the narrowing of his eyes. Did he *want* me to be frightened? Did he want me to turn on my heel and flee at the sight of him?

Perhaps he did. Perhaps he got off on fear and that was why I was here.

Perhaps he'd heard that human women were submissive. That they were malleable to their master's needs. Was that what this Kylorr wanted? Sex? A human woman chained to the foot of his bed, to frighten and fuck whenever he pleased? Was that what hundreds of thousands of *vron* were worth to him?

The Nulaxian male, I noticed, didn't ask my intended husband the same question.

"Then let us begin," the clerk said, tapping on his Halo tablet, projecting a contract into the air before us. Words in the universal language were enlarged, the paragraph scrolling slowly. "Do you agree to the terms of marriage laid out before you, Gemma of House Hara, daughter of the Collis?"

My heart was throbbing in my throat. The words were jumbled in my mind, though they were clearly projected before me in blue, non-flickering pixels.

Truly, it didn't matter. The *vron* to pay the debts were in holding as of this morning, according to Mr. Cross. They would be released to my father's debtors the moment the marriage contract was filed. My family could be free of them *tonight*.

That was enough to draw the word out from between my lips.

"Yes."

"Then you may sign."

I took the stylus from the Nulaxian male, silver in color and incredibly worn. I wondered how many females had signed similar contracts in this very courtroom. My signature was a messy scribble.

"Ah," the Nulaxian male said next, flitting a quick look to the silent male next to me. "One more. For the Kaalium's archives."

Much to my confusion, he procured a second contract from behind his podium, though this one was on thick linen parchment. Identical to the first from what I could see, written in the universal language.

Just as I perceived the Kylorr moving next to me, I heard a soft metallic hiss. The flash of the dagger that had been sheathed at his hip shone in the light as he handed it to me, those red eyes pinned on mine. His expression was a glare, and the cold gleam in his gaze was enough to make me wordlessly accept the dagger from him, as if he'd cast me a spell on me.

“Sign with your blood,” came the Nulaxian’s warbling voice.

My breath was sharp and I looked up at the Nulaxian. I was all too aware that the Kylorr’s wings flared again at my reaction. Even the smallest of movement from his wings made a tendril of hair blow across my cheek.

Show no fear, I reminded myself, looking down at the dagger. The blade was clean. Well cared for and wickedly sharp. I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of my fear.

I pressed the sharp edge into the pad of my thumb. A bead of red blood rose. Beside me, the Kylorr stiffened as if he could smell the metallic tang.

Hurriedly, I dipped the tip of the stylus into the small bead and used it to sign my name. The scrawl of it was even messier than the first, and I dropped the dagger onto the podium as if burned, the stylus too.

Then I pressed my thumb into my white dress hard, pinching the fabric between my fingers, hoping to stop the flow.

The Nulaxian male turned to my almost-husband, speaking to him directly for the first time since I entered the courtroom.

“And you? Do you agree to the terms of marriage laid out before you, Azur of House Kaalium, son of Thraan, and the High Lord of Laras?”

Azur.

Somehow knowing his name made this even more real than the stinging of my thumb.

Azur of House Kaalium. Son of Thraan. High Lord of Laras.

Who is he? I couldn't help but think. *Who am I marrying?*

Azur said nothing. His answer was the flourish of his signature on the floating contract. I watched the way his gauntlet flexed and moved like a second skin with the movement.

Then he snatched up his dagger.

He dragged the blade across the entirety of his gray palm, and I watched as black blood pooled into the lines of his flesh, like streams of ink.

His blood signature joined mine on the parchment. Black against my red. Only, he signed *over* mine, our signatures becoming a jumble of grotesque lines. As if he were staking his claim already, an allusion and insinuation of what was to come.

Azur straightened. He turned to aim that cool gaze at me, as if daring me to speak. When I said nothing, he turned his head over his shoulder. This time to look at my *father*.

With a quick swipe of his long fingers, the Nulaxian made the contract disappear from view. Filed in the universe's shared database.

It was done.

It had happened so quickly that it felt *wrong*.

In a mere matter of moments, I'd signed my life away, scribbled down onto a million floating pixels that resembled paper *and* with my blood. *A contract. A promise.*

For a marriage ceremony, it had felt cold and impersonal.

And yet...

This Kylorr was my husband now.

“No...” came my father’s voice, surprisingly brittle. For a moment, I thought he was protesting but then he continued with, “No harm will come to her. Do you understand, Kylorr?”

A slick whisper sounded in the room. When I looked down, I saw large *blades* had extended from the gauntlets, resembling long claws, the shimmering sharpness of them enough to make me pale and balk, stepping back into Fran.

My husband smiled. All his teeth were sharp, but his fangs glinted like his gauntlet’s blades.

I suppressed a shiver, despair and fear rising in my belly, making me want to vomit. So much for not showing him my fear. It shone on my face now like a beacon. And when those red eyes came to me, that smile only widened when he saw it.

“I will do whatever I please with my wife, Rye of House Hara, Lord of the Collis.”

His voice was like an endless fog. Deep and dark, wrapping me up and making me lose my way. *Lost*.

His wings flared behind him, an unbreachable wall, the dark span of them shocking. His hand clamped over my arm, tugging me toward him, away from Fran, away from my father. The hot smear of his blood was like a brand on my flesh, the strength of his grip evident.

“She is *mine* now.”

CHAPTER 5

“*I*t will be a three-day flight to Krynn,” Rivin grunted, releasing my arm abruptly enough to make me stumble into the quarters. It didn’t help that the trail of my wedding dress twisted around my legs. The Kylorr male frowned down at me. For a moment, he stepped toward me, as if to help, but then looked away. “How many meals do you take a day?”

Rivin was my new husband’s ambassador. Not the one who’d brokered this marriage with Mr. Cross, but he’d been the only one present as Azur’s witness. The one who’d stood quietly in the corner of the courtroom, his hand casually draped on the hilt of his sword, as I’d signed my name in blood. The one whose arms Azur of House Kaalium had shoved me into the moment we’d left.

My husband hadn’t even let me say goodbye to my father, to Fran, and that stabbing tendril of cruelty nearly made me cry.

But if he thought he could break me, he was wrong.

“Am I to be a prisoner on board?” I asked Rivin, straightening when I got my legs underneath me. He was dressed in the same fashion as Azur: armored. Though, unlike his lord, he wore a flexible plating down his chest and had circular, decorative rings cuffed to the bones of his wings. “Locked away in this room until we arrive to your home planet?”

Truthfully, it would be a relief. Perhaps my husband wouldn't seek me out on our wedding night. Perhaps he would just *leave me alone*. Which was the next best thing I could hope for, being the bride of a Kylorr.

Rivin had bright blue eyes, resembling the color of the Nulaxian male's. A deep scar ran down his left cheek, curving around his mouth like smile lines. Only this male was scowling something fierce.

Strangely enough, I didn't see fangs. Could...could the Kylorr retract them?

"How many meals do you take?" Rivin asked again.

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him, *None*.

But I would need my strength and a clear head once we arrived to Krynn.

"Three."

He turned.

"What about my belongings?" I asked hurriedly. My three trunks from home. My entire life packed into them. I needed to change out of this dress. I needed to burn it next.

"They will be given to you once they are searched," Rivin informed me, his heavy footsteps treading back up the short set of stairs. Those stairs led to a door I knew would be locked from the outside, which led out to the hallway of the Kylorr's ship.

I watched that door close behind him.

Then I was alone.

Dragging in a deep breath, I slumped down onto a chaise lounge, plush and draped in black velvet. The whole room was appointed with expensive furnishings—including the largest bed I'd ever seen on a space cruiser, a glistening bar cart of multicolored liquors in various crystal decanters, and a complete Halo system installed into one of the wall panels. There was a second door that I assumed led to the washroom. And behind the bar cart, there were floor-to-ceiling windows

that looked out into open space, dark and starry, where the ship was docked in a private bay.

Not even as soon as I got my bearings in the room, a gentle hum sounded and we pushed off from the docking port, the launch sequence seamless.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I clenched my fists in my dress, feeling my thumb throb. When I opened my eyes, I saw the dried stain of my blood, dark red against white cloth.

I thought of his voice, soft like smoke but as unyielding as stone. It was my fear that this was *his* room, his private quarters. When my gaze flitted to the bed, I stood and walked to the Halo panel. I tapped on the setting to darken the windows and to project the mountains of the Collis instead.

Home.

Not anymore.

I felt a breeze across my face as the Halo panel adjusted the temperature in the quarters to that of our province. I heard bird songs, bright and melodious. I smelled the pine trees after a rain. Instead of the darkness of space, I spied the peak of Mount Hara. I was transported home for a brief moment of time.

But instead of peace, all I felt was crippling worry. Worry that my father wouldn't keep his word. Worry for my sisters. Worry that I would never see them again. Or Fran.

Instead of the bed, I curled up on the chaise. Lying on my side, I felt velvet tickle my cheek and I thought of the red glare of my husband, thought of the sound of his wings and the whisper of the blade across his palm, the slice blooming black.

With Mount Hara in my sights, we set course for Krynn.

FOR THREE DAYS, I WAITED.

My trunks were returned to me on the night of the first day, and I could finally change out of my bloodied wedding dress. I

pressed my face into the textures of my clothes, breathing in the soap Fran used to wash our laundry and feeling my throat go tight with grief.

On the second day of our journey, I spent it mostly curled up on the chaise lounge. Rivin locked the door whenever he came to drop off my meals—three a day. All were travel rations, dried chunky bars of high-calorie meals. His lips seemed to press tighter and tighter with every single one he delivered to me, and I wondered about that.

The second night, I decided to help myself to the bar cart, wrinkling my nose at the whiskey and going instead for the blue liquor of Bavian *slew*. It reminded me of the blue salt caverns, and I downed the first glass like a shot, the taste pleasantly sweet but tart.

It didn't take much to get me drunk—I never drank, after all, leaving that particular habit to my father—weaving around my new prison, my head light, giggling like a loon.

The third day, I woke with a pounding headache and so incredibly nauseous that I slept as much as I could. The bed was still made. My meals were untouched. I never cried. Not a single tear, though inside, I felt shriveled and defeated.

When I woke next, I saw *him*.

With a gasp, I shot straight up from the chaise lounge, highly aware that my dress had bunched up during my fitful sleep and I had a sour taste of *slew* on my tongue.

Azur's red gaze dipped to my bared legs, and I hurriedly tugged the material down, rising on shaking knees to stand before him. He had his arms crossed over his chest, leaning against the wall next to where I'd been sleeping.

How long has he been watching me? I thought, panic rising in my throat.

He was wearing a deep green tunic—the color of our dark pine forests in the Collis—that molded to his chest, highlighting ridges and valleys of sculpted muscle. His pants were black, his dagger present at the belt on his waist. He wasn't wearing his gauntlets, revealing veined hands with

long, strong fingers and surprisingly neat and shorn black claws.

He was studying me quietly, those eyes narrowed on me, his chin tilted down. Like a predator with prey, that gaze tracked my every movement. My every breath. My every fidget. And so I forced myself to be still.

Azur flashed his fangs at me when I held my breath—thinking it likely he could hear my thunderous heart—and I couldn't contain my flinch.

“Gemma of House Hara,” he rumbled, the words drawn out. Mocking though soft. “Daughter of the Collis. I must admit, I expected more from such a noble house.”

I wasn't surprised at the level of indignation that rose in my breast, even as nausea roiled in my belly.

The sharp words left my lips. I even *smiled* at him as I noted, “Yet you paid for me. You paid whatever I asked. Whatever I wanted. You were desperate to have me.”

Those red eyes *burned*. His glare nearly withered me where I stood.

Perhaps my pride would be my undoing. Perhaps it would be a blessing. Perhaps that berserker beast in him *could* be triggered. Perhaps my death would be quick, a flash of a blade, instead of the slow drain from his feedings. Because thinking of him taking my blood, knowing it would *nourish* him, *strengthen* him...it was sickening.

Azur pushed off the wall quicker than I could blink. Then he was leisurely circling me, once, twice, three times, like a beast about to pounce but not before making its prey fearful.

Chills ran down my arms when he stopped at my back, goose bumps rippling across my flesh. My heart felt like it was in the pit of my stomach. His scent drifted to me, a clean, woody musk like the silverdrops that bloomed only under a full moon in the Collis or of damp soil after a heavy rain.

His touch came, cool and unavoidable, oddly gentle. He swept my black hair over my right shoulder, baring my neck, his dull claws scraping over the column of it like a warning.

Azur gathered my hair in his large fist...

Then a ragged cry tore from my throat when he jerked my head back by my hair. Not hard enough to *hurt* but hard enough to make me claw at his forearms in panic and alarm. He pulled far enough that my back was arched, my neck completely exposed, my head craned back so I was forced to meet his eyes above me. To look up at him. To submit.

A vulnerable, uncomfortable position. One meant to make a point...that he *owned* me. That he had the strength to make me do whatever *he* wanted.

I dug my nails into his forearm, but he didn't even flinch. I only dug harder, determined.

"Remember how you feel right now," Azur murmured, his eyes trailing down the front of my body, catching on my heaving chest. "Remember the way your blood is rushing. How you're desperate and squirming to get away from me. Remember this *ache*, little wife."

There was a sting over my scalp as his grip tightened. A whimper escaped me, and I did the only thing I could of. He wanted me to submit to him? Never. Instead, I pressed my nails as deep into his forearm as I could and I clawed *hard*.

A hiss escaped him. Anger flashed and he pulled me closer. He bent over me. Roughly in my ear, he growled, "Because this is how you will feel every day for the rest of your life, Gemma of House Hara. I give you my word as a son of the Kaalium."

His head lowered.

"*No*," came the ragged plea when I felt the sharp press of his fangs against my neck. But I was powerless to stop it. I was completely exposed to him, made vulnerable and unprotected by his sheer strength.

His fangs pricked at my skin. His hot exhale of air against my jugular made my scalp tingle. He bit—but not hard enough to break my skin. It was a *warning*. There was only a sharp pressure, and then...

Azur released me.

I gasped for breath as I fell to my knees on the floor, my hands flying up to the bite. The skin was smooth. He hadn't made me bleed. Not yet.

But I had made him bleed, I realized when he stepped in front of me. A small stream of black blood was running from my deep nail marks across his gray forearm. A part of me was horrified at what I'd done.

The other part, however...

I tilted my chin up as he scowled down at me. I glared right back, despite my heaving chest and my wounded pride.

"I will break you," he promised me softly, those eyes rapt on me. "It is only a matter of time."

The worst part was that I *believed* him.

This Kylorr *was* a sick monster. He'd bought me, he'd brokered this marriage, all because this was a game to him. He wanted to torment me. He wanted to make me fear him. He wanted me to submit. How many others had he done this to? How many other wives had he had?

A thought occurred to me. Were there *other* wives, even now? Did he go around collecting various females from different species, accumulating them with his wealth, all to bring back to Krynn and keep them locked away for his sick pleasure and amusement?

I believed he would break me eventually. I heard the truth of it in his voice.

However...

"Not before I draw more of *your* blood, *husband*," I promised him right back, meeting his eyes. My voice was unwavering. It was strong and certain.

Azur grinned. A wide smile that would otherwise have been considered darkly handsome, if not for the fact he was a twisted beast inside. Instead that grin filled me with dread and despair and loss and grief.

"I welcome you to try that again," he warned. "You won't like what I do in retaliation."

His black tongue flicked against one of his ivory fangs.

Then his eyes went to my night dress and my unbrushed hair, made even more unkempt by his handling.

Scowling, he said, “Wash yourself and dress. Make yourself presentable.”

“Why?” I gritted out.

“We’re descending to Krynn,” he told me, already turning his back, making his way to the door. His wings appeared even darker than they had in the courtroom, though this time I spied tiny veins, like a spider’s web, running through the thinner membranes. “I wouldn’t want my wife to embarrass me in my own keep.”

The derision and distaste in his own voice was baffling. Still on my knees, I scrambled up to stand, pushing back my hair. Despite the fact that I’d worked myself to the bone for the last five years, I was still a daughter of the Collis from a respectable house. Even though no one knew of our debts, of our shame, my father was still a great and honored war hero. New Earth citizens recognized him from all over the colonies.

“I am still a Lord’s daughter!” I hissed at his back. “You cannot treat me this way and expect no repercussions. As a citizen of New Earth, I am protected by the United Alliance.”

His laugh filled the room like a rumble of thunder. He didn’t even turn to face me. He gave me his flared wings, and behind them, I heard, “You gave up your citizenship when you signed your name in blood, *wife*. You belong to the Uranian Federation now. As such, you belong to Krynn. To *me*.”

His smirk was dark and mocking when he gazed at me over his shoulder. Acid burned the back of my throat.

“As for your father,” he spat, “he was only too happy to let you go.”

I reared back, the unexpected words hurting more than I’d ever thought they might. It wasn’t anything I didn’t know already. My father hadn’t fought to keep me. He had betrayed me long before this Kylorr had ever made his terrible offer to Mr. Cross.

“Clean yourself up,” he ordered me again. The voice of a High Lord. Cold and detached but forceful. He knew I would not refuse him. *Could not* refuse him. “We’ll land on Krynn within the hour.”

CHAPTER 6

*R*ivin was staring at me. Hard. I recognized the look. I saw it very rarely, but I knew what he was thinking.

He had his arms crossed over his chest, leaning against the ship's corridor. Putting more weight on his left wing instead of his right—an old injury from long ago. A bone that had never quite set right from when we'd been young.

“Do you have a grievance?” I challenged, never deviating from my path. I hadn't been away from Laras for long, but I never liked to journey off planet. Not with the Kaazor testing our borders again as of late. I needed to be home, back in my territory of the Kaalium.

Only, this journey was necessary, I thought, grinding my teeth together, feeling a prick on my bottom lip. When I pressed my fingers there, the roughened pads came away black with a small bead of my blood.

Forgetting I'd had them extended, I retracted my fangs so they wouldn't cut my lip, licking the blood away. For a brief moment, I thought of *her*. The fear she couldn't quite mask, though she'd valiantly tried. The pleading waver in her voice when she'd begged *no*. She feared my bite.

She should, I thought, steeling my spine, a shiver of satisfaction zipping through me.

“Are you sure this is wise?” Rivin asked. *Again*. “Kythel said—”

I growled, “This is my responsibility. Not Kythel's.”

“Azur,” Rivin said softly, pushing off the corridor right outside *her* room. *My* room on board *my* ship, truthfully. Considering I couldn’t stand the sight of my new bride, I’d bunked in the common quarters with the crew. “I—I haven’t seen you like this in a long time. I’m worried that—”

“What?” I asked, rounding on him, flaring my wings until he was forced to take a step back. Behind his shoulder, I saw the closed door of her room. I could still smell her in my nostrils, taste her on my tongue. She’d smelled *divine*. When I’d bitten her neck in warning, I’d almost been tempted to take my first feeding right then, my claws curling at the *want*. Her scent unsettled me. The ferocity with which hunger had gnawed at me was surprising, considering looking at her made me feel vaguely nauseous. “She is owed to me. She is owed to us all.”

“Then your brothers should have a say in this, don’t you think? And Kalia?” Rivin asked quietly, his blue eyes flickering between mine, his head narrowly bowed, a symbol of respect and deference. But my friend knew he could push boundaries with me, boundaries I wouldn’t let others ordinarily cross. There was safety nestled in the folds of our long friendship, despite the fact that I was the *Kyzaire* of Laras.

“It is my responsibility. For Aina,” I told him again. Quietly. Keeping his gaze. “We will not speak of this again, do you understand?”

Rivin’s lips pressed.

I was the eldest son of House Kaalium.

Rivin—an only child—couldn’t possibly understand the *weight*. The burden. But when I closed my eyes to sleep at night, all I could see was Aina. All I could hear were her wails. All I could think was that she was trapped in a dark, endless place, cursed to live out the remainder of her immortal life in Zyos.

I hadn’t slept properly in over a month, and the fatigue was beginning to pull at the edges of my mind. This was about

family. It was *always* about family. The heart of all Kylorr. The heart of all great Houses.

Turning from Rivin, I continued on my way to the helm. I itched to get off this ship. My wings hadn't stretched properly in nearly a week. I hadn't felt the icy wind in my face, the caress of it against my wings, hadn't touched the clouds of Laras, nor looked upon the Silver Sea in nearly a week.

It had been much too long, and I vowed that I wouldn't return to space unless my father requested my presence.

Thinking of my new bride, I clenched my fists at my sides, navigating through echoing hallways, Rivin trailing me.

She is owed to me, I told myself again. And I can do whatever I please with her.

I smiled.

Nyravila.

A Kylorr concept, a *right*. To wrong a member of our family was to wrong us all. And balance must be restored. For Aina's soul.

In my bride's human terms, it meant...

An eye for an eye.

Nyravila.

That beautiful word filled my soul, and I vowed to Aina that I would see her safe.

I was the eldest son of House Kaalium.

And there was vengeance running hot in my blood.

I'd saved House Hara only so I could watch it fall once more.

This time, it would be at *my* hands.

CHAPTER 7

I expected endless screams into a perpetual night. I expected a dark, shadowed keep with high walls and barbaric, bloodied, red-eyed soldiers standing at the ready, fangs glistening, marked chests bared.

I expected shackles and chains. I expected downcast gazes and sunken-in eyes. Hollow cheeks. Hunger and desperation.

Everything I'd ever heard about the Kylorr was that they were beastly, soulless, violent creatures who thrived on pain and torment.

Only...I'd never expected *this*.

"Come," Azur ordered me, narrowing his gaze on mine before walking forward into the ivory courtyard from the darkened transport tunnel.

Blinking into the bright sunlight, I followed, Rivin trailing behind me. We'd landed not even a half hour ago in a private docking bay and taken an underground transport here. Judging by the flutter in my belly, the transport line had been blazing fast, and we'd arrived at our destination in mere moments.

My eyes widened as I stepped forward.

The courtyard was *pristine*.

Beautiful.

Smooth cobblestones pressed into the soles of my slippers as I stepped out of the tunnel's door. Rivin closed them behind us, and I saw the heavy doors were inlaid with a metal that sparkled silver in the sun, making elaborate designs that

reminded me of the crawling ivy that used to grow on our estate's walls. Intricate metalwork that must've taken months to craft by a skilled hand.

The tunnel led out to a courtyard terrace. There was a curved stone staircase to our right, the steps smoothed from time. The staircase had beautiful carved banisters, black, spindly vines trailing up them, wrapping around the stone, blooming with vibrant indigo flowers. The whole courtyard was filled and spilling with lush plants, tumbling over weathered walls.

But my gaze was drawn back to the terrace and the magnificent view that it afforded beyond.

We were situated at the shores of a sea, judging by the salt in the air. The sunlight dappled over the calm waters, gleaming like a pile of jewels. The water stretched wide, as far as I could see. To the right, set deep into the land away from the cliffs, I spied tall mountains jutting into the clouds, taller than Mount Hara, even.

Without thinking, my feet guided me closer toward the edge of the courtyard so I could get a better look. I hadn't seen such a breathtaking sight. *Ever*. We had lakes in the Collis, but some were so small they could only be considered ponds. If this truly was a sea...it would be the first I'd ever seen.

A familiar hand wrapped around my forearm, making me gasp as it tightened. When I looked up, Azur was glaring at me. He tugged and I was forced to turn away from the view, catching sight of Rivin's speculative look.

My husband released me when we began to climb the stairs, turning his back on me. I watched him ascend, frozen at the base.

"This way to the keep, *Kylaira*," came Rivin's voice, gesturing up the staircase.

Azur stilled.

His hand clenched on the banister, crushing a withered vine from the crawling plant, and he threw an unreadable look over his shoulder at Rivin.

Then he continued on his way, his wings flaring wide as he ascended the curving staircase to an upper level of the terrace. He'd replaced his gauntlets, I noticed, and they glimmered in the sunlight almost as much as the sea. Made of the same metal that was hammered into the wooden door.

My knees were shaking as I followed, unsure of what I would find at the top. Unsure of what my life would look like after this moment.

Looking over my shoulder, I caught one last look at the sea and drew in a deep breath. The higher we climbed, the clearer the view became.

The stairs were short, but the air felt thinner on Krynn. By the time I reached the top, I was gasping, my lungs tight. Then my eyes swiveled to what Rivin had called *the keep*.

Now I understood what he'd meant.

A towering, beautiful, glittering fortress lay before me. A house—if it could be called that—that likely spanned the entirety of our estate in the Collis. The architecture itself was eye-catching, with strong, unforgiving beams of stone meeting graceful swooping arches of windows and sunrooms. There were two towers I could see from this angle—one at either end of the keep. Watch towers? I wondered.

I was too busy gaping up at the beauty of the house and its surroundings—bracketed by the majestic mountain range to the right and the shimmering sea at its back—that I failed to notice the line of Kylorr—close to twenty individuals—that were spilling from a massive set of doors.

Rivin nudged me forward. Azur had already reached the first of the Kylorr—an older male with a streak of white running through his auburn-colored hair—and ducked his head to speak with him.

Most of the Kylorr were males, I noticed. Out of the twenty of them, only three were females.

Keepers, I thought. *Keepers of the keep*. They were staff, judging from the similarity of their dress.

And they were all looking at me with undisguised interest and careful expressions.

“That is Zaale,” Rivin told me gruffly, gesturing toward the older male that Azur was speaking with in low tones. “He is the head keeper of this house. You will likely see him more than your own husband.”

I turned my head sharply to regard him. He pulled me to a stop, giving the keepers time to look at me, while Azur finished his conversation.

“Why are you doing this?” I couldn’t help but ask.

The scar that ran down his left cheek pulled when he frowned. “Doing what?”

“Helping me,” I said, my voice strong and unwavering, though inside I had never been more afraid, standing on the outskirts of this beautiful house.

“Is that what I’m doing?” Rivin asked, his voice surprisingly hard and dark. He narrowed his eyes on me, his blue gaze flashing with an unreadable expression. He chuffed out a harsh, short laugh. “I suppose I just know what it’s like.”

I didn’t understand what he’d meant by that, but before I could ask, Azur’s cold voice slid between us.

“Ludayn.”

“Yes, *Kyzaire?*” came one of the female keeper’s voices. An oddly small Kylorr stepped forward. Her wings were fluttering, and I couldn’t help but notice that one dragged on the ground as she walked.

The female had hair the color of the indigo blooms I’d seen below on the terrace. The color stood out against her gray skin, making the strands appear almost dirtied and dull. Her bright yellow eyes flitted with what I guessed was nerves as she waited for Azur to speak.

I’m not the only one he frightens, then, I couldn’t help but think.

“From this day forward, you will be the *Kylaira*’s keeper,” my new husband informed her coolly. I couldn’t help but

notice the looks of disbelief that were being tossed around by the males in line or the pressing of the remaining two females' lips. "Serve her well."

"Y-Yes, *Kyzaire*," Ludayn gasped out, her eyes going wide. "I will not fail you."

"Take her up to her rooms," Azur ordered.

This whole exchange happened without him turning to look at me once. And yet he captured my attention so thoroughly. I could still feel the scrape of his teeth against my throat. I shivered in dread.

Take me up my rooms, Ludayn, and keep me there, I couldn't help but plead with the small female in my mind. As my keeper, keep me away from him.

Ludayn's gaze strayed to me, and I felt Rivin nudge me again.

"Go," he murmured. "She will take care of you."

Behind him, I could still see the shining waters. The sun was already setting, and I hadn't realized it. Space was disorienting. All I knew was that I felt like I could sleep for days.

It felt like I was outside of my body as I moved forward. But Azur was already speaking with Zaale again. As I passed him, I heard, "I'm going to meet with the patrol on the northern borders. We will meet once I return tonight."

Northern borders?

"Yes, *Kyzaire*," Zaale said. "Will you need to feed once you return? I can schedule to have a giver come—"

"No," Azur cut in. I froze when those fiery red eyes turned to me, and he could barely conceal the cold malice in his voice. "I have a wife now, after all. It is her blood that will sate me. Rivin, let's go."

My throat tightened. I might've gasped in dismay, my heart giving a thunderous boom.

With one mighty gust, his wings unfurled and propelled him cleanly into the air, swirling dust and warm air all around me. Even though the dust stung my eyes, I couldn't help but watch, lips parted, craning my neck back, as he launched himself into the sky and then soared like a bird high above us, dipping and weaving. His speed was unfathomable, the span of his wings even more massive than I'd originally believed.

I was in a daze as I watched, unable to take my eyes off him. I'd never seen anyone fly before. Very few alien species that I knew of *could*.

Before I could blink, Rivin joined him, another burst of energy rippling across the ground, sending stray pebbles rolling.

"*Kylaira*," came a gentle voice. I felt a grip on my wrist, but it was soft and warm. "I will show you to your rooms."

I said nothing, allowing Ludayn to pull me forward. When we reached the set of doors into the keep, they were both just a speck in the distance, dark spots against the setting sun.

"Your rooms are on the upper floor," Ludayn informed me as we entered what I assumed was the private entrance of the keep.

Inside, I was met by soaring ceilings made of the same white stone as in the courtyard below and a grand, wide, curving staircase in front of me. The inside of the keep was hollowed out, though I could see the individual floors stacked neatly above, winding around in a circle before branching off into wide hallways, into rooms beyond. There were decorative and intricate stone railings protecting anyone from the falling down to where I stood.

Though on second thought, a Kylorr wouldn't fall. They would *fly*. Which was why I saw openings in the railings at various intervals.

"Ludayn, there you are! Is Azur back yet?" came another female's voice from three levels above, echoing in this atrium of a place. A core. The center. When I craned my neck back, I

saw another Kylorr was stepping up to one such opening... before she jumped. My heart was lodged in my throat. She was hurtling too fast to the ground. She was going to hit—

Her wings flared wide at the last possible moment, making her hover above the ground where we stood before she landed gently and neatly. The female was smiling at Ludayn as she tucked her wings back. She was beautiful, I couldn't help but notice. With gleaming black hair and bright red eyes.

When the female saw me, however, it was difficult to explain the expression that came over her features. She hadn't seen me, I realized. I'd been hidden behind Ludayn and the archway above me. But when this female locked eyes with me, something dark and cold shuttered her gentle smile.

"Oh," she said simply, looking down the stretch of me. A familiar look. One Piper had often given me when she hadn't liked a dress I had chosen that day. Then she ignored me completely, turning to regard Ludayn, her tone strange and tight as she asked, "Where's Azur?"

"He went to meet with the patrol at the northern borders," Ludayn said. She added, "With Rivin."

"Where are you taking her?" the female asked stiffly, discomfited, barely glancing at me again.

"I'm Gemma," I cut in before I could think better of it. But my hackles rose, and I didn't like to be spoken over as if I wasn't even there. If I allowed that, it would make me feel smaller than I already was. "Gemma Hara. Pleased to meet you."

The female stiffened. Oddly, when she looked at me, I saw her eyes fill with unexpected tears.

"Kalia," Ludayn gasped, reaching forward to take her arm, "are you all right? Do you need—"

"You belong to House Kaalium now," the female, Kalia, spit out. "Do not forget it, *Gemma Hara*."

I was too shocked to speak, watching a sudden tear trail over her cheek. It was silver. Her tears were silver, like mercury.

Kalia sniffed, wiping angrily at her cheeks, and then she pushed passed us.

“What in Raazos’s name is wrong?” came Zaale’s voice as Kalia nearly bowled him over in her attempt to get outside. “Kalia.”

Only, the female never said anything, and Zaale pinned me with a long, unreadable look. My tongue felt glued to the roof of my mouth.

Then a weathered huff burst from Zaale. “Take the *Kylaira* up to her rooms, Ludayn. Just as the *Kyzaire* asked of you. And keep her there until his return.”

“Yes, of course,” Ludayn murmured, limping forward, tugging me farther into the atrium and toward the wide staircase that rose high into the keep.

My new prison, I couldn’t help but think as we ascended.

Because for all its beauty...that was exactly what it was.

CHAPTER 8

The wind slid through my hair and traced its fingers over my cheek. Cold and refreshing, it filled my lungs, and I dipped my left wing to catch the edge of it, letting it propel me farther as the keep came into view.

Rivin had stayed behind at the northern border for the night. No sightings of the Kaazor since I'd left or of their *kyriv*, but the lack of *anything* put me on edge. When the Kaazor went dormant, they were preparing. For what? I didn't quite know. Laras had a strong army. With my brother's armies, most of which could be here within a day, I didn't fear that the Kaazor—and their leader, Zyre—could overrun Laras, the capital of the Kaalium. They had tried before after they'd broken the treaty and had failed miserably.

It was the *kyriv*, truthfully, that could do the most damage if one managed to reach Laras, or if they hit the city walls from the eastern pass. The *lore* harvest was approaching too. The fields were vulnerable.

My home glittered like a beacon as I circled around it. The sprawling villages of Laras stretched beyond it, spreading to the west, the east, and the south. The Silver Sea reflected Krynn's moon, which rose high in the northern sky.

For a moment, I savored it. Hovering in the sky, my wings working to keep me stationary as my gaze ate at the view. I took in the villages—the lights that flickered in individual homes, the long stretch of fields to the southeast, the thick,

lush forests just beyond. In the air, I breathed in the north winds that funneled down from the mountains.

I swiveled around to look at the keep. The home I'd grown up in. There was a part of me that envied my brothers. That they had spread out among the Kaalium, each overseeing a different territory.

They'd received something *new*, something untainted.

And me? As the eldest son, I'd received Laras. I'd received our keep, the great keep of House Kaalium. With all its memories. With all its triumphs. With all its grief.

My eyes narrowed on the east wing, zeroing in on a specific stretch of windows.

My body felt depleted. Flying took much of our energy. It was why there was a blood giver encampment on the northern border, so our patrols and soldiers wouldn't have to return to Laras to feed, to renew their strength when they'd been in the sky for hours on end.

Drinking from my wife was inevitable.

How could I begin to set things right for Aina's soul unless I nourished myself with the blood of our enemy?

Raazos demanded it—the god of battle, protector of the three realms. If I strengthened myself on Hara blood, maybe I could reach out to Aina in Zyos. Maybe I could *find* her and tether her back to us.

But without her soul gem, without the vessel for her soul to fill, created from her very bones...maybe it would be a wasted effort.

I will still try, I thought.

With a growl, I propelled myself to my bride's rooms, landing with a thump on the balcony just outside her bedroom window.

I shook some ice from my hair, inhaling a sharp, deep breath before I pushed open the doors.

She was in here. I could smell her. She made my mouth water even as nausea crept up on me, bitter and thick.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spied movement. Gemma stood from a plush chair tucked into the corner. I knew it hadn't been placed there. She'd dragged it over to the most private part of the room, facing all the doors and windows. Prey watching for predators. Burrowing and tucking herself away, as if she could hide from me.

Scenting her sudden fear, though she tried to hide it with the bold upturning of her chin, I felt anticipation rise. It coated my tongue, made my venom drip from my slowly elongating fangs.

Though it was obvious she'd been sleeping, she looked at me warily, her eyes tracking my every movement.

"Do you know what it is to be a bride of a Kylorr?" I asked her, keeping my voice smooth and soft as I latched the balcony doors behind me. My own rooms were just next to hers, at the end of the hallway—I had a view of the Silver Sea and the mountains to the north. Though her mere presence put me on edge, I wanted her close. I wanted her near.

I heard her sudden swallow. It looked as if Ludayn had shown her to her rooms and Gemma had immediately fallen asleep in the chair once she'd left. She was still dressed in what she'd been wearing on the ship, a shapeless black silk shift that covered her from head to toe like she was in mourning. But her eyes were bright. Watchful. Observant.

Tilting my head, I studied my bride. She wasn't anything spectacular to look at. Her black hair nearly matched my own though it was pulled back into a tight, unforgiving bundle at the nape of her neck. Her eyes were wide. Her brows straight, dark little slashes across her morose expression. Her cheeks were full, no sharp bones, only a round face.

Her pouting lips were perhaps the most pleasing of her features to look at—plump and pursed—but they couldn't save the rest of her appearance.

Then again, I hadn't chosen House Hara's eldest daughter for her beauty. I'd heard the Hara daughters were well sought-after. I'd heard they were great beauties of their race, but I couldn't see it in Gemma.

And the speed at which her father had given her up to a stranger, a stranger from an alien race I knew he *loathed*...it had given me pause. Perhaps I'd miscalculated. Perhaps I should have chosen another of his daughters, one he seemed to want.

"No," came her quiet reply in response to my question. Whispered in the still room. As if all the air had been sucked out of it. Even the fire flickering in the hearth didn't dare make a sound. "I don't."

My bride bit her bottom lip to stifle her gasp as I gave my wings a small pump behind me, jumping easily toward her with speed that I realized unnerved her.

Good.

The closer I drew, the more I could scent her. That delicious, surprising, tantalizing scent.

My fangs elongated fully in a rush, hunger gnawing at my belly, at my tendons and muscles with sudden ferocity. I could feel the hunger in my wings even, in the blood that rushed in the thin membranes.

There was an inkling of suspicion of what was happening, but I immediately dismissed it. I would make it untrue. The only way I could dispel the nagging dread would be to take my first feeding. Then I would know for certain.

Gemma expelled a harsh, ragged breath when I circled behind her, when I clasped her waist with a hard grip and dragged her in front of a long mirror perched in the corner of the room.

It was jarring to see us both presented there. And for a moment, I caught sight of my own face and didn't recognize it. It was a male with a hardened expression, with unfathomable coldness in his eyes, burning with the need to make her hurt. To make her ache, as we all had.

She was so small against me. So...*different*. I'd fed off human givers before. There were many living in Laras, many spread throughout the Kaalium.

But this was different.

This human was my wife now. My bride.

She was mine by right. By oath. By blood.

For a moment, I thought of Rivin's careful, disapproving expressions. His careful words. His knowing eyes.

Then I shook him from my mind. Fuck Rivin. He wasn't responsible for the lost soul of someone he loved. But I was. He wasn't allowed to judge me as I tried to uphold a promise I'd made long ago.

Gemma's brown eyes were wide as I gripped the high neck of her black dress and tore the material, exposing the smooth column of her throat. Laughable really. Had she thought that simply covering her neck would make me forget my hunger?

Her pulse was dancing and throbbing. My eyes zeroed in on it, listening to the beat and pump. Dizzying and beautiful.

"There is usually ceremony in this. I should have taken my first feeding on Nulaxy," I whispered into her ear, making her shiver as I met her eyes in the mirror, as I ran a dull claw down the side of her throat. Still, they were sharp enough to make her flinch. I was nearly trembling with need, with hunger, grinding my back teeth down in an effort to drag this out. "Would you rather we have witnesses, my bride?"

It was meant as a taunt, but her expression of horror nearly made me *want* to call in Zaale or a nearby roaming keeper.

Then her expression changed completely. To my utter surprise, her own eyes narrowed in a glare, practically spearing me through our shared reflection with her sudden anger. The mirror was ornate. Silver and shimmering with the finest and strongest of Krynn's metals. Still, I thought it might melt with her derision.

"Do it," she hissed. "Get it over with already, *husband*, and stop talking about it!"

This was the Hara daughter I'd expected. Unbending. Proud. Stubborn. Iron-willed.

I flashed my fangs.

"I want you disobedient, little wife," I purred. "Because it will be all the more pleasurable to *break you*."

"You might have bought me, Azur," she told me, her voice strong and even. "But you will never *own* me. You think I am frightened of what you could do to me? Well, I am. Does that please you? But if you think that *you* are the worst thing I've ever endured, then you would be wrong. So do your worst, husband. Feed from me. Make me fear you. *Break me*. But I will *always* be my own."

We held one another's glares in the mirror. In the darkness of the vast room, only lit by the dwindling firelight, I looked like a shadow behind her. One with glowing, hungry eyes.

A shadow that would consume her. A beast. A monster.

She'd drawn the battle lines between us. But didn't she understand? She *would* submit to me. Before I returned her, broken on her father's doorstep, before I took everything else away. I would stop at nothing less.

My wings unfurled from behind me, and she froze when they wrapped around her hips and torso like a cocoon. To keep her still, to keep her from struggling away when she felt the prick of my bite. My wings wrapped around her like a vice, tightening, pressing her soft backside firmly into my front, making her huff out a panicked breath despite her bravado.

But I still wanted her to *see*. I still wanted her to watch what I was doing.

Our eyes met in the mirror as my head lowered to the column of her throat.

Her nostrils flared wide when my fangs pressed into the sensitive, heated skin. But she didn't struggle. She didn't move. If anything, her glare was a dare. A challenge.

Gemma made one desperate little sound as I broke her flesh with my bite.

A rough sound hummed from my chest as the taste of her blood exploded across my tongue. My venom unleashed, flooding into the wound as I drew out her blood.

On a particularly deep draw, ecstasy burst in my mind, momentarily stunning me. My hands went slack on her waist, my eyes sliding shut, my heart beginning to thunder.

Gods. She tasted divine.

My claws bit into her flesh, dragging her closer, wrapping one arm beneath her breasts. Her scent lingered around us like a misty fog, delicious and perfect, almost as sublime as her taste. Rich and thick and hot, her blood spilled over my tongue, and I greedily drank down every last drop.

I need more, came the primal thought. My body was *roaring* to life. My strength was growing, my muscles expanding. A warning went off in the back of my mind.

Too close to the edge, it told me. *Closer than you've ever been.*

I pushed it away, shoving it back, even as my cock throbbed with the sudden overwhelming need of release. I ground into her soft backside, rutting against her like a mindless beast, getting lost in her scent even as I fed *more*. Harder. Longer. Deeper.

Then I heard a moan.

Small and stifled behind a bit lip. *Her* moan.

Reality froze my blood.

Understanding made me want to roar with resentment and rage.

No.

Why *her*?

Why *now*?

Gemma Hara, the daughter of my enemy, whose House I had vowed to destroy, whose will I was determined to break, was my *kyrana*.

My new bride was my *blood mate*.

CHAPTER 9

I'd lied.
I was not my own.

Not right then.

I was *his*.

He controlled me.

He controlled *everything*.

I wanted to sob at the wrongness and the rightness of this unfathomable, taunting, drugging pleasure.

When I'd first felt the sharp prick of his fangs, I'd felt resigned. *This* was what I'd agreed to, was it not? *This* was the price for my family's freedom. And I would pay it. A thousand times over.

Yet I'd also felt determined. Because I'd realized right then that Azur might be able to feed from me, he might be able to make me fear him, he might be able to keep me locked away for the rest of my natural life, but *I* was in control of my own thoughts.

It was my mind in which I would live. He could do whatever he pleased with my body and not even get *close* to touching me.

Azur wanted to break me?

He could try his hardest, but I refused to let him.

Only, at his first dizzying suck, I felt my body tingle and warm. Heat radiated out from his bite, the pinching prick of it already faded in my memory, giving way to something far, far more worrisome.

I panicked when the pleasure began to crest, sudden and alarming, making me gasp. I clawed at the strong, tight arm that was bracketed against my breasts, scratching and tugging, but I didn't know if it was to keep him near or to warn him.

I could feel his warm tongue lapping at the bite. I could feel the sucking pull of his fangs, drawing my blood into his mouth. His wings were holding me in place, my body rendered powerless. Between my legs, I began to throb, flaring to life as my knees trembled.

A moan escaped my throat, unwanted but inevitable. I swore I could feel that mouth on every inch of my body, on my suddenly heavy breasts and tight, straining nipples, to my inner wrists, behind my knees, in the creases of my thighs. And *there*. Right there. His bite seemed to connect directly to my clit, to the aching bud that fluttered and pulsed with every long, deep draw.

What is happening? I thought wildly, straining against him. I was aware of him in a way I hadn't been before. The tease of his hair as it trailed over my shoulder. The hard press of his chest and ridges and valleys of carefully sculpted strength. His ragged breath and the sudden rocking of his body against mine. That was when I felt it...

The unmistakable massive length of his cock. Hard and fully erect.

My eyes widened. When he groaned against me, taking my blood deep, I went to my tiptoes, trying to keep his mouth on me, my head lolling, going dizzy.

I'm going to come, I thought desperately.

I needed to!

Biting my lip, I moaned, feeling a familiar flutter between my legs. I didn't care anymore. My thoughts and needs hinged on his fangs in my neck. Nothing else mattered.

So, so close!

Then Azur froze.

I felt every muscle in his body stiffen and tighten until he became a column of stone at my back.

Then before I could part my lips in protest, he was tearing away from me.

I nearly cried out in frustration in my dazed state. My neck felt empty where his fangs should have been imbedded deep. I was shaking with my need to orgasm and suddenly so angry with him for denying me that once-in-a-lifetime kind of pleasure. Because I knew, undoubtedly, that was what it would've been.

Then I remembered myself.

When I did, I gasped.

When the reality of our situation crashed onto me like a pile of bricks, I felt deeply, deeply ashamed. Mortified. Disgusted.

My knees gave out from underneath me, and I tumbled to the soft rug that covered the stone floor, sitting splayed. I stared up at Azur in shock and disbelief, even as arousal still coursed through my body, even as my blood *sang* from his bite. Pressing the pads of my fingers hard into the twin wounds near my jugular, I focused on evening my breaths.

Never in a million years had I expected this from a Kylorr's feeding, I thought quietly.

I almost laughed. Maybe it was their best kept secret. Maybe it was intentionally done.

Azur's shoulders were heaving as he stared down at me. His eyes were *glowing* red. Like rubies in the darkness, illuminated like a blaze. And...had he *grown*? He filled more of the room, which seemed to have shrunk three sizes.

I watched as a tiny drop of my blood, red like his eyes, rolled off one of his ivory fangs. He caught it with the pad of his thumb, sucking it cleanly off as I sat, shivering, waiting.

The tension in the room was thick. So thick I could barely breathe. Like heavy heat during summer in the Collis.

I expected panic to rear its head after the embarrassment.

Strangely enough, I began to feel *calm*.

Maybe it's from the blood loss, I thought. He'd fed from me *hard*.

Swallowing, I lowered my hand from the bite mark and pushed up to my knees. Azur watched me, tracking my every movement. The longer he stared, the harder and colder his face became.

But something was changed.

Azur was looking at me.

Really looking at me.

I felt the weight of his observing gaze like it was the clasp of his unyielding grip.

Something's wrong, I realized, my instincts telling me so.

When I finally found my strength to stand, I stood before him, meeting his gaze head on.

Quietly, I told him, "You got what you wanted. You can leave now."

His nostrils flared at my bold command. His wings—which were frighteningly strong, as I remembered the tightening hold of them—twitched. The tops of his wings were capped with a single set of sharp, curved talons. They could gut me where I stood if his gauntlets didn't first.

If I thought it was a risk daring to give him an order after what had just happened, it was one I knowingly took. He *needed* to leave. I *needed* to wash him from my body. I *needed* to sleep away this entire day, this entire week.

In the morning, I would begin a new life. One I wasn't certain of, but one I was determined to have a hand in shaping.

Krynn wasn't anything like how I had expected. My own ignorance had played a hand in that, but I wouldn't make the

same mistake again. I needed to be rested. I needed to be alert. I needed to be *ready*.

And if my Kylorr husband's bite promised dark, seductive, unwanted, dizzying pleasure?

Next time, I would be better prepared to receive it.

This was my life now. Whether I wanted it or not.

Turning from him, showing him my back, I made for the washroom I knew was off the sitting room.

There was a whisper of movement behind me, and then he was there. Spinning me to face him and pushing me up against the wall next to the hallway door, bracketing his hands on either side of my head. My heart pounded fiercely, but I leveled him a long look, the back of my skull pressing into the textured gray stone wall behind me. The bite on my neck gave a throb.

"You don't get to dismiss me, *wife*," Azur growled down to me. His eyes were still glowing.

"You're in *my* rooms, are you not?" I answered in an even tone that made his fangs press against his bottom lip.

"Do you forget who I am?" he hissed, crouching low into my space until we were eye level and all I could see was him. His wings blocked out everything behind him. "And you still dare speak to me like this?"

"How could I forget who you are?" I snapped back, clenching my fists into the silk of my dress. "You're the male who bought me! The male who's made it clear to me that I am an object to him, a plaything, a damn *meal*. I am *nothing* to you but a neck you can stick your fangs into and torment whenever you wish."

"Torment?" he asked, eyes narrowing dangerously. His purring tone was at odds with the hardened glint in his gaze as he asked, "Is that what torment looks like for you? As if you weren't moaning with my fucking fangs in your pretty neck! Which, by the way, is only *one* of the many places I will *feast* on you, little bride."

Fury rose. Shame made my cheeks heat, but it had nothing on the sudden rage.

“Fuck you,” I whispered. I began to shake. I pushed at his chest. “*Fuck you!*”

I never lost it. I was the calm sister. The rational one. The one who didn’t let emotions take over. The one who Piper had called a cold bitch with a stick up her ass. *That* was me.

Circumstance had made me that way. Even *before* my mother’s death.

Nothing about me felt calm. I wanted to claw Azur’s damn eyes out. I wanted to pummel his chest with my fists until they were bruised and raw.

I pushed at his chest again, and though he growled in warning—a low, deep, rumbling sound that made the hair on my arms stand on end—he didn’t budge. So I did it again, throwing my weight into him. Slapping at the hardened wall of his chest with my palms before I curled them into fists.

My throat was tight. My eyes began to sting. I was making small noises I’d never heard before, like a snarling, sad little beast.

I’m going to cry, I realized, and the thought made me even angrier. Because now *he* would see me cry, and I loathed to show him another weakness, another vulnerability after what had just happened between us.

“*Stop*,” he snapped when I banged on his chest harder. He tried to snag my wrists, to keep me still, but I fought against him. There was this hellish thing inside me, a beastly thing that wanted to break free. I *wanted* to hurt him. I was *desperate* to.

But it wasn’t truly him I wanted to hurt, was it?

It was everything else that had led me to him. My deep-rooted anger that had festered for years and years and years was beginning to surface.

I had no idea how to handle it.

I had no one to turn to.

I was completely and utterly...*alone*.

That realization made the first sob tear from my throat. The blur in my vision made my fists finally slow from their frenzied whip, and Azur caught them up, holding them strong. I fought against him half-heartedly as my grief and a bizarre sense of loss finally caught up with me.

I cried until my throat ached, trying to hide my face from Azur.

“Gemma,” came my name, spoken in a tone that was so unlike his cutting hiss.

My name alone gave me enough strength to break away from his hold. I stumbled away, toward the chair I’d dragged into the corner, turning my back on him. Wrapping my arms around my body, I felt the bite on my neck give a twinge, a constant reminder I couldn’t erase.

“Go away,” I whispered.

“Gemma—”

“I’ll beg if I have to,” I informed him, my voice shaking, trying to hold back another sob. “*Please*, just go away!”

Silent tears tracked down my cheeks as I stared at the shadows flickering against the stone walls. I could see his shadow there too, long but wide.

So, so alone, I thought. What I wouldn’t have given for my sisters right now. For Fran. For a familiar face, even my father’s. Because the heart was a fickle thing and I couldn’t simply erase the love I had for him.

I felt my face crumple. My shoulders shook as the deep sobs clawed up my throat.

Finally, though not soon enough for my liking, I heard Azur retreat. His heavy footsteps boomed across the floor, sounding quick and angry.

When the door closed behind him, I cried even harder.

At least he was gone.

Truly alone now, I thought.

CHAPTER 10

There was a smooth, flat perch on the stone roof of the keep. My father, when he'd been a young boy, had chiseled out the stone with his claws so he might sit comfortably to escape the house.

My father, the great Thraan of House Kaalium, had come into his wings later in life, a failing that his own father had never failed to remind him of.

As such, he'd liked to escape the house, to go up high to satisfy his instincts, though he could not fly there. Instead, he'd escaped out the top window from the east wing's watch tower and navigated over a perilous, narrow stretch of roof line, before he'd chosen his preferred spot. It overlooked the Silver Sea, glittering and beautiful, especially with the moon rising overhead.

Whenever he was on planet, he still came up here. Last time he'd been on Krynn—though it had been five years—we'd shared a weighty pipe of *lore* and said absolutely nothing to each other the entire time as we'd listened to the echoing sounds of Laras behind us and heard the waves crash against the cliffside below.

Kythel and I would come out here in our younger years, after Father had shown us this place. Those moments had brought me peace. After what had occurred in Gemma's rooms, I found that I sorely needed peace.

After plucking out some *lore* from my cabinets, I flew out the balcony windows of my own private rooms, catapulting

myself into the sky, and for one blissful, impulsive moment, I allowed myself to freefall. My stomach curled in on itself, and then I flared my wings wide, heaving them down with zero effort, which surprised me for a brief moment until I realized *why—why* I was so strong right now. I caught the wind, gliding with it until I circled the keep and landed neatly on the roof. The stone had been worn with time and ample use. I settled into it, tucking my wings behind me and stretching my legs out along the sloped stone tiles.

It was familiar, a comfort.

Taking the small, cylindrical, clear pipe and the vial of *lore* from my pockets, I stuffed the plant inside it and sparked the inner chamber. Smoke drifted from the tip, and I brought it to my lips, inhaling deeply. The heady, soft smoke whistled down my throat.

A rumble of relief followed. I drew one of my knees up, draping my arm over it, wondering if I would sleep out here again. I inhaled, tasting the earthiness of this particular harvest, a pleasant sweetness that tinged my tongue. It was more flavorful, I realized. I could identify different notes in the *lore* that I could not before.

Then again, I had my *kyrana's* blood flowing through me, nourishing and strengthening me. Strong and impossibly powerful. The moonlight was brighter. The air more crisp. I could fly to the edges of the Kaalium and back without so much as a shuddered breath.

My mood darkened. When I closed my eyes, I could hear her sobs, desperate and aching. A part of me wanted to relish in her misery. She *should* have been miserable. That was what I'd wanted.

The other part of me...every clear tear dripping down her cheek had felt like a punch in the gut. It had felt like she'd been beating her fists against me with the power of Raazos, stealing my breath and making my heart squeeze with discomfort and restlessness.

My blood mate viewed me as a monster.

Right then, I *felt* like one.

I wondered if Rivin was right. I wondered if I had gone too far.

It's too late, I couldn't help but think. *She is already mine.*

A shadowed figure in the sky caught my gaze as I peered out over the Silver Sea. Straightening, I frowned, but then I recognized the flying pattern, the gentle sway of small wings.

Grumbling under my breath, I saw Kalia spot me as she flew closer and closer to the keep, the burning blue end of my pipe an easy giveaway.

When she neared, she swooped and I shook my head. Fighting the twitch of my lips, I huffed when she swooped again, as if she were trying to put out the spark on my *lore*.

“Enough,” I growled out, though the word barely held a hint of bite. “Get down here.”

Kalia dropped down to the roof and wrinkled her nose as she sat beside me, her wing bumping mine, cold from the wind.

“Thank you for informing me of your return, *Kyzaire*,” she said, her tone sarcastic and cutting, but I knew she was happy to see me. “I had to discover that you returned because I happened upon your *bride*.”

The last word was spit out into the air as if it were poisoned, and a knot of tension bundled between my shoulders.

“You met her?” I asked. “When?”

Kalia leveled me a narrowed gaze. “At the north entrance. Ludayn was showing her up to her rooms. Which, can I just say, is downright *cruel* that you put her beside us! In *our* wing. Our family's wing, Azur! Why would you do that?”

“Because she is my wife now, Kalia,” I said, my tone curt and clipped.

“Not in the true form,” she argued sullenly.

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her. To tell her what I'd discovered tonight. That Gemma was my *kyrana* and as such, she was *more* than just my wife, my bride.

The Kylorr held their *kyranas* in the highest regards. And not only because of our bloody history and the importance of the *kyranas* during the warring times.

Laras would celebrate her. A blood match for their *Kyzaire*? It was a blessing from the gods. *All* of them. For surely, with a *kyrana* at my side, House Kaalium would be *unbreakable*. Especially if war came with the Kaazor.

If only they could see how much we despise one another, I couldn't help but think.

"Kalia," I said softly, taking her hand in mine, even as I took another drag from my pipe. The smoke loosened that tension, right where my wings met between my shoulders. "Promise me that you'll behave yourself."

"You sound like Father," she accused.

I chuffed out a harsh breath, dropping her hand.

"That's what he said to me when he left Krynn. To *behave*. To follow your orders, to not stand in your way or our brothers' ways," she said softly. "Like I was just *waiting* to make trouble because that's all he saw me as."

"I didn't mean for it to sound like that," I told her gently, knowing it was a soft subject for her. "And you know he doesn't believe that. He loves you more than he loves all of us combined."

She scoffed, but I knew the words pleased her, that preening little part of her that needed to be first in something. The curse of the youngest child, the only sister among a long line of brothers.

Kalia sighed, turning her finely boned face to look out over the sea. My chest squeezed and I nearly lost my breath. She looked so much like our mother in that moment, dappled silver in the moon, that it was frightening.

Clearing my throat, I asked, “Would you rather live with Kythel? Or Lucen?”

Lucen was our youngest brother—five years younger than Kythel and me—though he was still five years older than Kalia. Since they were closest in age, they’d been attached at the hip when they’d been children. Kalia was closest to Lucen, and I knew the distance from Laras to Salaire, where Lucen was *Kyzaire*, was great.

“You wish for me to leave?” my sister asked. Though she tried to mask it, I still heard the soft hurt in her voice.

“No,” I said truthfully. “But if Gemma’s presence is uncomfortable for you, you could spend the harvest in Salaire and the winter in Erzos with Kythel.”

“I don’t want to leave Laras,” Kalia said, a hint of relief in her tone. “*This* is home.”

I nodded, reaching out to drag her closer. I pressed my cheek into her hair as she embraced me back. Affection thrummed through me. Though we’d been born a decade apart, I still remembered the day she’d come into this world, the awe I’d felt at seeing her for the first time. A female. A blessing. Our mother’s wish had finally come true.

“Then you will stay,” I told her. I thought of Gemma’s sobs, the aching, desperate, raw sounds tearing from her throat. I hadn’t been gentle when I’d ripped my fangs from her neck, and I nearly winced at the memory. I surprised myself when I said softly, “Try not to be cruel to her, Kalia.”

She pulled away. “Save the cruelty to you?”

I started as the words hit me square in the chest. Quickly, I took another drag on my pipe, blowing out the silver smoke of the *lore* when I could hold it no longer.

“Stay away from her,” I said instead. “It’s for the best.”

“You’ll allow her to wander the keep?”

“She’s not a prisoner here,” I reminded her sharply. “You will encounter her. So the offer still stands if you wish to visit Lucen for the harvest.”

“She’s your wife, Azur,” she pointed out with a sag of her shoulders. “She’ll always be here now. So why should *I* have to run away from *my* home?”

We lapsed into silence. I was buzzing with the energy from the feeding. Not even *lore* could suppress it.

In the darkness, hunched over as I was, Kalia didn’t seem to notice I’d grown or that the seams of my clothes were perilously close to ripping. A mercy. I didn’t want to face her horror if she realized it. I couldn’t bear it right now.

“You want any?” I asked Kalia, the question meant to lighten the mood.

Her eyes went to my pipe, and she rolled her eyes in a very human way. Something she’d learned from her friend in the village, no doubt.

Kalia didn’t like the taste of *lore*. One of the few Kylorr I knew that didn’t partake in traditions that went back to our ancestors.

“Isn’t it strange?” she asked quietly next. “That a *plant* created all of this?”

Peering into the clear pipe, rolling it between my fingers, I inspected the gently burning dried *lore*. Blue in color, it shimmered with an iridescent sheen. A foundation of our culture, our history, it had been used for *centuries*.

The strange and perhaps miraculous thing about *lore* was that it affected species differently. For the Kylorr, it was a relaxing way to unwind, a way to take the edge off a rage—or to prevent one from happening entirely. For humans, it was an aphrodisiac, a powerful sexual stimulant. For the Jetutians and Bvaro, it was a hallucinogenic. For the Horrins and the Killups and a handful of other species, it was a powerful medicine. One that had cured strange diseases and saved hundreds of thousands of lives throughout the Quadrants.

No matter what the effect, *lore* was in high demand. Clamored over for its wide array of uses. Something so simple to the Kylorr was something greater to everyone else.

Species had tried to grow *lore* on their planets or tried to reproduce it within a lab. They'd all failed. *Lore* could only grow *here*, on Krynn. It grew best, however, in the Kaalium. Farther up north, in Kaazor, the yields were small though possible. Across the seas, they used different species of it which grew better in their soil. But it was the Kaalium's *lore* that the entire universe desired.

Lore had built the Kaalium.

Lore had built our family's legacy and our rule.

And the Kaazor wish to take it from us, I couldn't help but think. My mind always seemed to stray to the north these days.

"I'll return to the border tomorrow," I informed Kalia. "I'll only be gone a couple days."

"Can I come?" she asked hopefully, though she already knew my answer.

"No."

A weary sigh drifted from her lips.

"The harvest festival and ball is coming up," I reminded her. "Aren't you on the planning committee with your friends from the village?"

"Do you know how *condescending* you sound when you say that?" she huffed.

I blinked, bewildered. "You *like* the harvest ball."

"I do! But..." She trailed off. "I'm not a child anymore, Azur. I have just as much right to defend our House as you do!"

"And the Kaazor have made threats against our House, Kalia," I growled. "For decades. Even against *you*. Don't forget that."

She pressed her lips together.

"You're safer *in* Laras," I grumbled, all ease from the *lore* gone. "Make no mistake, I will do whatever I can to keep you safe, even if you think I'm being a condescending bastard while I do it."

“I heard that the Hop’jin let their females be soldiers in their wars,” she argued.

“And the Hop’jin have the females to spare,” I argued. “*We* do not.”

“This argument again,” she mumbled.

“*Yes*. This argument again,” I growled, feeling a prick of annoyance. Why couldn’t she understand?

“*Fine*. I’ll be a good little female and do what I’m told. I’ll plan the harvest festival in the village and pass out steam cakes and bouquets to the children. I’ll host the ball at the keep and smile at the nobles as they pass through our halls. I’ll stay far away from any important matters that might actually affect my life. Wouldn’t want me *dying* to inconvenience you. Just another soul you’ll have to save for our family.”

She hadn’t meant to say that last part, but anger had loosened her tongue.

Kalia’s breath hitched and she went silent as I stiffened.

A weighty silence lapsed.

Finally she blurted, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“I know,” I said, cutting her off. “It’s all right, Kalia.”

Her fangs prodded at her bottom lip. “Azur...”

Females were treasured among the Kylorr. Protected above all things because they were so rare. And Kalia...

Kalia was our only sister. The only daughter of House Kaalium, born after its five sons. If anything ever happened to her...

Softly, I said, “I don’t want your fate to mirror Aina’s. I will *die* before that happens. And I would rather you hate me if it means keeping you safe. Please don’t ask me again. At least until the worst of this mess is over.”

She said nothing.

She only watched the plume of the *lore*’s silver smoke as it floated before us.

CHAPTER 11

“*T*he *Kyzaire* requests you at breakfast this morning,” Ludayn informed me, making my stomach cramp into knots, as she shamelessly rifled through my trunks. Then I heard a frown as she asked, “Is this all you brought with you? But where are your nice dresses?”

“These *are* my nice dresses,” I corrected her, feeling strangely defensive over my clothes. They might not have been as pretty as the ones Piper and Mira wore, but they were practical garments, well made, and durable for the constant travel to the blue salt mines. “And don’t you mean my husband requests me *for* breakfast?” I grumbled under my breath.

While my mood had improved since last night with a good night’s rest...I was still feeling a little surly. Admittedly.

Ludayn’s brow furrowed. Her wing gave a little flutter behind her, and she said, “No, he always takes his morning meal on the terrace. It will be served soon, so we must hurry.”

Served? I wondered, that sick feeling growing in my belly. Did he...did he feed from others too? Would I have to *watch*? Was this to be the next torment he had planned for me?

My spine straightened. Even if it was...I would endure it. I would endure anything he threw at me, just to spite him.

Ludayn helped me dress quietly and quickly. As she did, I couldn’t quite help but study her mouth—trying to spot her fangs and failing—and the way her right wing dragged on the

ground. I tensed when her yellow eyes flickered up to mine as she inspected the front of the dress. She was dressed in sleek blue trousers and a simple white top, metal shimmering beads sewn into the neckline. Her clothes were well made and well pressed. Neat and orderly.

Her midnight-blue hair was braided down her back today. Female Kylorr were much, much smaller than the males. Ludayn and I were nearly equal in height, and there was a willowy grace to her movements, despite her noticeable limp. I wanted to ask what had happened but thought it might be considered rude.

Still...

“Can I ask you something?”

She cocked her head to the side as she tried to smooth a wrinkle from the blue silk and failed. This was one of my nicer dresses. One of my favorites because it was, perhaps, my prettiest one. A sheath of light sky-blue silk, though one meant for evening dinner parties with visiting lords and ladies, not morning meals with my—terrifying—Kylorr husband.

“Yes?”

“How often do you need to feed?”

The question was steady and careful, and I waited with bated breath. Ludayn’s yellow eyes pinned me in place.

“How often do *you* eat, *Kylaira*?” she asked.

“Every day,” I said quietly. “Multiple times a day.”

“For us, it is the same, though we can go longer stretches if necessary,” she replied, freezing my heart in my chest. *Multiple times a day?*

Aghast, I bit my lip, my gaze straying past her shoulder to look out the window. The view was beautiful in the morning light, I realized belatedly, and I couldn’t find it in me to enjoy it.

Changing the subject, I asked softly, “Is that a lake or a sea?”

Ludayn followed my gaze. “That is the Silver Sea. It stretches north, even beyond the border. We share it with the Kaazor.”

“The Kaazor?” I asked quietly. Was that a place? Or a people? I knew so little about the Kylorr—about their planet, Krynn—that it made me restless. Frustrated. I wanted to rectify it immediately, and I wondered if there was a library or if I would have access to the Quadrant’s databases.

Or would I simply be locked away, taken out for my husband’s *feedings*—like a bird in a gilded cage—as I feared he intended?

“Yes. We should leave. The *Kyzaire* does not like to wait.”

Unconsciously, my fingers trailed up the column of my neck as I followed behind Ludayn, who led me out of my bedroom, out of my rooms, and into the hallway.

I could still feel the indentation of his fangs, the bruising ache when I pressed there. Was I to be covered in bite marks for the rest of my natural life, feeling the sting of breaking flesh and the memory of his scent and the maddening throb between my thighs with every one of his pulling, deep draws?

We passed keepers as we ventured to the lower floors, but I hardly saw them, though they paused in their tasks to make way, inclining their heads in small nods of recognition. Ludayn traced the familiar path back down to the entrance and out onto the back terrace. It was a bright, pleasantly warm day. This time of year, the Collis was beginning to cool, making way for the winter season. But on Krynn, it felt like summer. Warm and balmy.

Instead of cutting down to the courtyard—where we’d emerged from the transport tunnel yesterday—she guided me alongside the back of the house, going up another set of short stairs to our right and journeying down an open-air hallway, framed by rounded arches, which revealed a stunning view of the Silver Sea to our left, glittering in the sunlight.

I’d never thought a place could be more beautiful than the Collis. Than home.

Then again, I'd never thought to be the bride of a Kylorr and living on Krynn of all places, I added silently to myself.

The covered path led to a large, half-circle terrace that had a wonderful, unobstructed view of the sea. The same indigo blooms and curving, black vines from the courtyard spilled over the white stone banisters. They desperately needed a trimming, to cut back the dead, rotting weight piling on the ground, but it was still a lush and beautiful sight.

And it was there that Azur sat.

At a small table, seated in a chair that had cutouts for his relaxed wings. There were four seats in total, all surrounding the white stone table, its rounded edges smoothed from age and use, just like the rest of this place.

Azur's eyes flitted to me, tearing his gaze away from the Halo tablet, which he had a lazy grip on. His other hand lifted and he beckoned Ludayn forward when she paused on the steps leading up to the small, private terrace, dipping her head in a small bow.

My heart sped, but I squared my shoulders as I approached. Strangely, I felt placid seeing him this morning, considering last night. Considering the feeding, the confusing and alarming sensations that it had brought to the surface, the snap of my temper and fear in the aftermath, and the mortifying knowledge that he'd seen me break down...I felt resigned.

Azur's gaze was pinned on me, tracking me as I took a seat opposite him, the farthest seat I could take from him. He looked deceptively relaxed, leaning back in his chair...and was that *tea*? His hand curled around a small, black, glossy cup, and he watched me over its rim as he lifted it to his lips.

Ludayn seemed to melt away, leaving without a word. Until it was just the two of us on this bright, sunny morning, on this beautiful terrace that was spilling with blooms and greenery.

And I could enjoy none of it.

Sitting tall, holding myself tightly, I squeezed my fingers in my lap, eyeing the Kylorr across from me. We stared. And the longer we stared, the more I remembered the heat of his body pressed against me, the unyielding thickness of his cock at my back, and the wet, slick sounds as he'd drunk from me.

The rough tumble of his surprised groan against my flesh.

My cheeks reddened and I squeezed my fist tight. So tight that I purposefully dug my fingernails into my palm, hoping the sting would help focus my thoughts.

“Why am I here?” I finally asked, shaken from the silence.

Azur's brow lowered. His horns looked especially sharp this morning. I saw his gaze dip to the bite mark on my neck.

Without thinking, I'd pulled my hair back into its usual bun before Ludayn had entered my rooms this morning. Which meant, with the dress she'd chosen—a dress I hadn't had the energy to protest—it left my neck on full display. The warm breeze drifted over my exposed collarbones and stroked down the valley of my breasts, given the dramatic cut of the neckline.

Alarm went through me when I saw his catlike pupils dilate. I swallowed, highly aware that he studied every movement as my throat bobbed.

Then his gaze returned to his Halo tablet, his claws curling around it tighter. He had a privacy filter on his tablet, so I couldn't see what held his attention or what he was working on.

“You need to eat, don't you?” he asked, the dark drawl of his voice making my breath hitch.

He was in an unreadable mood. Cold and detached, and yet...he wasn't being cutting or cruel. Not like last night.

“You think I will starve you into submission?” he asked, a dangerous glint in his voice when he peered up at me again.

Or maybe not. He was still testy.

At his words, I finally took note of what was before us. Eating utensils and silver-edged dishes. Set for a meal. For

both of us.

And there was indeed a teapot, set on a warmer, in the very center of the table. Faceted and black like obsidian, I saw my reflection in it.

The appearance of Zaale saved me from answering. A hovering tray trailed behind him, laden with platters of food.

“*Kylaira*,” Zaale greeted, inclining his head in a nod, his voice measured. “I trust you slept well.”

The words were so normal and polite that they momentarily knotted my tongue. Ludayn had called me *Kylaira* too. I assumed it was a title.

“I did, thank you,” I replied, briefly meeting Azur’s eyes, seeing them tighten on Zaale. “Good morning,” I added.

“Where’s Inasa?” Azur cut in. “You shouldn’t be serving us.”

Zaale placed the platters down gently. Beautiful dishes, bright in color and variety. My mouth watered as I looked at the strange things perched almost artfully among the platters, decorated with small blooms and thick sauces. One platter was stacked high with rounded cakes, though the texture looked... gritty. The color was dark, nearly black, but bright blue oval-shaped flowers decorated the rim of the serving platter.

“Kalia intercepted him,” Zaale told Azur. “She dragged him into the village. Likely for help with the festival and the ball. She told me she was meeting with Yeeda.”

The...festival? The ball? Yeeda?

Kalia was the female we’d encountered yesterday, if I wasn’t mistaken. The beautiful one. Who’d cried mercury-colored tears and glared daggers at me.

I wondered if she was...

I wondered if she was another of Azur’s wives. I’d thought before that he might have multiple, that there hadn’t been a stipulation of monogamy in our marriage contract, not that I would have asked for one regardless. I knew nothing about the

Kylorr's customs, but it would certainly make Kalia's anger and disgust yesterday justified.

Azur grunted. "Make sure she's back in the keep by nightfall."

"I will," Zaale promised, reaching forward to take the teapot from the center of the table. He centered it over my own glossy cup and poured...only it wasn't tea. It looked thick and dark, whatever it was. Like gray sludge. Then he took a small pot made of gleaming crystal and poured its contents over the sludge, a milky cream that pooled in the divots and cracks of the "tea."

Seemingly pleased with the presentation, Zaale left us after straightening a spare platter.

"Eat," Azur grunted, spearing two of the dark, gritty cakes from the stack and placing them on his plate.

My heart pounded in my chest as I watched him eat a large bite, half in disbelief.

"You...you eat *food*?"

His hand stilled, his single-pronged utensil—sharp and shining—poised on the path to his mouth.

"The Kylorr eat food?" I couldn't help but stammer out in my shock. The relief I felt as I watched him chew!

"Of course we eat food," he snapped, a glare gliding into place.

"But..." I trailed off, not quite knowing what to say. I licked my lips, processing this new information as swiftly as I could.

He put his silverware down. A knowing, mocking smile appeared. "Ah, you wish to know why we choose to drink blood if we can get our nourishment elsewhere," he murmured.

"Well...yes."

"You drink wine, do you not?" he wanted to know, tilting his head. Was it me or had his fangs elongated with the

question? They were pressing into his bottom lip, longer than they'd been before. "Now imagine that the wine you drink gives you unfathomable energy and strength. Imagine that it tastes like the best meal you ever had. Imagine that it fuels you in a way that mere food cannot."

Realization hit.

"Food is merely a supplement," Azur told me. "But blood..." My stomach tightened. "Blood is *life*. No Kylorr would ever give it up."

His words were tinged in warning, and he gave me a maddening dark smirk that straightened my spine like a rod of steel.

"And maybe I'll wash down this morning's meal with another drink of it."

My jaw set. My chin lifted.

"You never answered my question," I informed him. My superpower was working for me today. My voice sounded as cold and strong as a glacier.

A huff of amusement left his throat. His laugh even sounded cutting. "Remind me what it was, wife."

"Why am I here?"

He resumed eating, throwing me an icy look. "I told you. *Eat.*"

I was *starving* for food, but I didn't make a move toward any of it. My mother used to read me ancient faerie stories, ones that had traveled all the way from Old Earth—the original planet my race had once inhabited. And in those faerie stories, a human girl knew better than to eat faerie food. For once she did, she would be trapped forever, bound forever to that strange world.

Which is ridiculous, I couldn't help but think.

I needed to eat. I would need to eat soon. I was *already* trapped here forever.

I didn't know why that old story suddenly popped into my head, but it made my appetite nearly vanish.

"Why did you single out my House?" I demanded softly, keeping his eyes. "Why did you demand a daughter of House Hara?"

Azur studied me from across the table.

For such an arrogant, cruel monster, I *hated* that I found him handsome.

The warm wind that blew across the private terrace tangled a strand of thick, dark hair around one of his frightening, spiraled horns. He was dressed finely this morning, in a blue leather vest, molded to his chest with a series of intricate silver clasps. He wasn't wearing his gauntlets, exposing strongly corded gray forearms and black nails that *just* formed the tip of what could be considered claws.

His shoulders were impossibly broad. It was only fitting that his wings needed to be just as expansive to carry such bulk and heavy muscle. I wasn't under the false impression that he *couldn't* snap me in two if he so wished.

Yet I didn't cower from his cool and assessing gaze.

"Instead of questioning *why*, wife, perhaps you should be kneeling at my feet and bestowing your gratitude however you see fit, considering what I did for you and your family."

That casual, flippant arrogance *burned* me up inside.

"You think I won't?" I asked quietly.

He actually snorted, a sound of amusement just as it was one of derision. He took a casual sip of the sludge in his cup before replacing it with a bright *clink* on the table.

"You have too much pride for that, Gemma Hara," he said.

His tone was matter-of-fact. It grated my insides. It cut me to think that he had gleaned anything about me at all. I didn't want him to know me. I didn't want him to *think* he did.

That was more important to me than my damn pride.

I rose from my chair.

Azur stilled, his hand poised between us, reaching for the platter of what looked like a type of fruit—the rind a dusky purple and the inside flesh a midnight blue with plump black seeds as big as marbles.

Holding his eyes, I rounded the table slowly, every step bringing me closer to his side. Resignation and triumph both warred inside me when I saw his brief surprise until he smoothed it away. His hand retracted, watching me, waiting.

Challenging me.

When I was at his side, I set my jaw as I slowly lowered to my knees. The terrace stones were warm through the blue silk of my dress, which tightened over my hips and thighs with the uncomfortable position.

“Is this what you want, husband?” I challenged, my voice low. Inside, I was struggling to keep my resentment bound in a tight, manageable ball. It took everything in me to show him my wrist, to reach up and present it to him. “Why don’t you just take what you really want? It’s what I’m here for, after all.”

His expression flickered.

It morphed from cool understanding to *desire*. Desire mixed with a sudden rage.

He *wanted* to drink from me again. He wanted it *badly*.

And that sudden realization was almost enough to make me want to snatch back my wrist and stumble away. It made me want to flee.

But I couldn’t. I had nowhere to go and I was trying to prove a *point*.

Only, as he shoved his chair back and slowly rose to his full height, casting me in shadow...I forgot what it was I was attempting to prove.

Fool, I thought, my mouth going dry, staring up at him as he towered over me.

I was the only one to blame for this. Me and my *stupid, stupid* pride.

Azur took my hand. I shivered as he ran his black claw down the green-colored vein in my wrist, his pupils flaring, his fangs elongating. His touch was electric, zapping tingles down my arm in its wake.

“Be careful what you offer me, wife,” Azur rumbled above me. His teeth flashed and he bent low. His hot breath spread over my delicate and sensitive inner wrist as he said, “Because I will take it. When it comes to you, I will take *whatever* I want.”

The first sharp prick of his fangs came, making me gasp.

Then I watched as they sank deep into my wrist.

CHAPTER 12

I'd prayed to Alaire that I'd been wrong.
That my human bride wasn't my *kyrana*. My blood mate.

That she didn't taste as mind-numbingly good as I'd believed.

That I wouldn't feel wonderful relief and dizzying need and primal hunger crash into me as I took my first deep draw of her rich blood.

Vaan, I cursed silently as her taste registered, as my hand tightened around her wrist, holding her in place, as my wings flared with a violent *snap* behind me.

On Raazos...she tasted even better than I'd remembered last night. I'd dreamed of her blood. With the memory of her scent swarming my mind, I'd woken this morning with my fangs lodged into my own arm because I'd dreamed of her, waking with a throbbing cock and half held on the edge of release, grinding my hips into my bed.

The blood madness was already taking hold.

It would not be sated for quite some time. And even then, I would endure stretches of it when the moon winds were strong. Even when I sent her back to the Collis, back to her broken House.

My swallows were greedy as I held her widened gaze. A dusky red flush swarmed her cheeks and the bridge of her nose. Her lips parted. As surprised as she was unnerved. I

could see her wild panic just as I saw the wild pleasure begin to spread. On a particularly deep suck, one that made my cheeks hollow, I watched her eyelids flutter.

In the back of my mind, I knew I'd already taken a lot of her blood last night. I could not take much more. This had been intended as a warning. I hadn't been planning to feed from her again until I returned from the northern border, but she'd raised the challenge herself.

And if there was one thing she would come to discover about me, it was that I *never* backed down. She didn't fear me enough. Perhaps that was my own mistake.

A desperate moan escaped her throat, and I felt that sound travel straight to my cock. I didn't *want* to want her. I didn't want this desire, this lust that came from feeding off a blood mate.

But the *kyrana* bond was powerful. It had been powerful for our ancestors, for the ancient warrior berserkers who'd sated themselves on their enemies' blood after a victory and then taken out their lusts and the remainder of their rages on their mates in the aftermath.

The act of feeding itself was not sexual. Not usually.

For most, it was as impersonal as fueling ourselves with actual food from our lands. Pleasant but ultimately, a way to satisfy a necessity.

But *this*...

I'd never felt the act of feeding tied to my own sexual pleasure before.

Especially when the object and source of my pleasure was *Gemma Hara*.

My wife was gripping my wrist. Squeezing. Encouraging me? Or warning me?

It can be both, I decided, feeling my own maelstrom of emotions as they roved and swirled and pricked and soothed me.

When she swayed on her knees, I retracted my fangs in a rush, growling that I was denying myself, not nearly as sated as I needed to be on her blood. I wanted to gorge myself on it.

Swiping my tongue over my bottom lip, one last hit of her blood nearly making my eyes roll back, I looked down at her, still on her knees before me.

My cock was throbbing. The swell of my seal, my knot, at the base of my shaft was engorged. When I shifted, I nearly groaned as it rubbed against the smooth material of my pants.

For a brief moment...I allowed myself to imagine it. Seating myself so deep inside the daughter of my enemy that my seal rooted into place, keeping every last drop of my seed stoppered within her, as my fangs were imbedded in her neck, drinking deep as ecstasy exploded through me.

What would that even be *like*? I'd fucked and fed at the same time before with past lovers. But with my *kyrana*?

Not many could claim they'd experienced *that*.

Gemma was leaning to the side, holding herself in place by the leg of one of the chairs. Dazed.

Crouching low, I studied her face as the hit of strength from the brief feeding made me feel like I could fly to Koro and back. I could cross *oceans* with this strength.

Unbelievable, I thought to myself. No wonder the berserkers of old were said to be unparalleled in their rages. The mightiest of the berserkers had already found their *kyranas*, or so the histories claimed.

Now I believed those accounts.

Because *this* kind of strength was unfathomable until it was experienced. This kind of strength could win entire wars.

Taking Gemma's wrist in my grip once more, I studied my bite. She didn't move away from me. She didn't even flinch at my touch. She met my gaze steadily, even though her eyes were still half-lidded with residual pleasure.

Stubborn female.

My wife would make me work harder than I'd thought I'd have to to make her submit.

Leaning forward, my tongue slithered out, and she froze as I lapped at the bite, dragging it up slowly, my venom stopping the bleeding, coagulating her blood, but I decided against healing the flesh.

My mouth watered as I got one last aching taste of her.

"When you look down at my mark today," I murmured to her, reaching forward to tilt up her chin so she met my gaze, "I want you to remember your pride. I want you to remember how it shattered as you went down to your knees before me. And remember it well."

Her glare snapped back into place, her spine straightening.

A dark grin stole over my face.

Gemma had surprised me. She'd intentionally tried to throw my words back in my face by doing the unexpected.

But pride was pride.

I had enough of it, too, to know that my words would infuriate her.

Smoothing my thumb over her cheek one last time, I rose without a whisper of a sound. She climbed to her feet angrily, gripping the edge of the table until she stood, fists clenched at her side. I imagined that it also enraged her how much larger I was. I imagined it cut that she had to crane her neck back so far to meet my eyes.

My body was still humming with desire, and judging from the hard press of Gemma's nipples against the silk of her dress, she was just as disgusted about it as I was too.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Zaale coming back to the terrace, a fresh pot of thickened tea one of my brothers had sent from Vyaan perched in his hands.

His step stuttered when he saw me, and I ground my back teeth. Could he tell? Could he see the change in me, the difference that my *kyrana's* blood made?

Of course he can, I thought. Zaale had been a keeper in my family's estate since before Kythel and I had been *born*. He would be able to tell.

And I saw when realization hit him. When his gaze flickered to Gemma, assessing her in a way he hadn't before.

"We will speak when I return," I told Zaale gruffly as he approached the table. "I need to leave. I'll be back tomorrow night."

Gemma's head snapped to me. Was that relief in her expression?

"Very well, *Kyzaire*," Zaale murmured, setting the tea down, his movements stiff.

Because he knew what this meant.

I wanted to tell him that he didn't need to worry. I had made a promise to my family. I had prayed to our gods and goddesses at House Kaalium's shrine. I would not turn my back on Aina. I would secure her vengeance and her justice for us all.

"Tell Maazin I need the *lore* yield reports upon my return," I added. "I've reminded him once already and am reaching the end of my patience."

"I'll make sure it gets done," Zaale replied.

Turning back to Gemma, I informed her gruffly, "Stay out of the keepers' ways. You may roam the estate, but do not venture into the villages below."

Her jaw tightened. "You'll have me watched?"

"Would you rather be locked up in your rooms?" I asked, quirking my brow as I stepped toward her, my belly heating with the thought. "Because I can certainly arrange that in my absence."

Wisely, she kept her mouth shut. Bit her tongue actually, judging by the small clench in the sides of her cheeks.

"Good wife," I purred, savoring the spark of fury that lit up her gaze at the words. Leaning forward, my lips brushing the

shell of her ear, I murmured, “Rest up. I’ll be *ravenous* when I return.”

CHAPTER 13

Leaning against the banister of the terrace, pressing my belly into its front, I sighed, lovingly tracing the view of the Silver Sea, memorizing every lapping ripple and wave that came my way and crashed into the cliffs below, sending a salty spray upward that misted through my hair.

Even with the peaceful view and the surprising freedom that I'd been afforded around Azur's keep, I found that I was getting restless.

Bored, even.

I'd been working myself to the bone for the last five years, hauling myself up before dawn to oversee the work in the blue salt mines, before trudging back to our estate at nightfall to run through inventories and export schedules and ledgers of balances and debts. Worrying myself sick over when the next debt collector would come. Wondering if I'd find my father beaten and bruised again when it came to light that he couldn't pay.

And now...

I'd been sold to a Kylorr male. My only fears now were when was the next time he'd feed from me...and if I would embarrass myself by succumbing to the tantalizing pleasure that his bite wrung.

I didn't want it.

I would *rather* be afraid.

I would *rather* his bite hurt and pinch and ache.

Only it didn't. It didn't hurt me. It was the opposite.

Azur would be returning tonight. He'd been gone two days, and I'd spent yesterday roaming the endless halls of the keep, mapping out the corridors in my head, memorizing them so I could navigate them with Ludayn. I'd poked my head in doors that I probably shouldn't have, even the keeper's quarters, much to the bemusement of the Kylorr who'd been dozing there.

Today, taking further advantage of Azur's absence, I would venture to the west wing. I'd already explored the east, north, and south wings of the keep, admiring the almost gothic architecture with its bold yet delicate lines. I'd run my hand over carvings in the walls, images depicting scenes of battle or of alien, though majestic, landscapes on Krynn. I'd uncovered a circular, wide set of stairs in the south wing that led up to an observation tower, affording an even grander view of Laras than I'd thought possible. Nearby I'd found a library, filled to the brim with books and ancient tomes, written in both the universal tongue and the Kylorr's language. I'd spent a good portion of the evening thumbing through brittle pages and running my finger down leathery spines, searching for anything having to do with Krynn's history but finding nothing relevant to my own interests.

The keep of House Kaalium was beautiful.

More elegant and grand than I'd ever expected, with a deep-rooted history living in its walls. At times during my exploration, I swore I'd felt a touch or a cool prickle at my back or across my arm. Only when I'd turned, no one had been there. There had been a hum of awareness in the air, though I hadn't been threatened by it. Only cautious.

Old souls were still living here, I'd decided. And they were as curious about me as I was about this place. I wondered how long the family had lived in Laras. A long time, I guessed, considering the age of the keep alone.

Footsteps sounded behind me, coming down the stone steps toward the private corner of the courtyard I'd discovered. A female was humming, though it wasn't Ludayn. Near the

transport tunnel doors—which had been locked, I’d discovered—I was shielded from sight of the stairs considering the tumbling blooms and vines that needed desperate care.

When I craned my neck around the corner, I stilled.

It was Kalia.

The Kylorr female hadn’t seen me yet. She was twirling an indigo flower in her hands, inspecting it as she pinched the stem. Like the first time I’d seen her, she was dressed in tight-fitting pants and a beautiful forest-green top that was encrusted in shimmering gems and inlaid with metals. They made an intricate swirling pattern down her breasts and over her abdomen, the thick hem flaring out slightly over her hips.

The females I’d seen in the keep didn’t wear dresses, and I realized that it was probably difficult to fly in one. It was frowned upon for human females to dress in such a way—in pants and tunics—especially from the noble houses. *I’d* always been annoyed when my dresses got tangled around my ankles as I’d stepped over boulders in the mines. How much easier it would’ve been had I been free to dress like Kalia.

“Hello,” I greeted softly, stepping out from my hiding place. I had on my gray dress this morning. Since I’d decided to continue exploring the keep, it was also my most comfortable, the material soft from wear, though there was a large hole Piper had sewed closed for me with white silk thread, right at the side of my waist.

If Kalia *was* another of Azur’s wives, I could see why he’d chosen her. She was beautiful. Standing close to her, I was highly aware that the sea wind had swept tendrils of hair out from my tight bun and that my dress was terribly, terribly drab in comparison to the sparkling metals sewn to her tunic.

Kalia froze. She’d been approaching the terrace banister—to *go flying*? I wondered—but she stilled next to the small bubbling fountain in the very center.

For a moment, she looked flabbergasted, blinking at me in such a way that made me wonder if she’d *forgotten* who I was.

Then her lips pressed. The bloom in her hands dropped and I watched it fall.

Clearing my throat, I took a step toward her, my heart beginning to thump in my chest. “What are these flowers called? They’re beautiful. I’ve never quite seen—”

Kalia turned her back on me. Though she could fly, she took to the stairs, one angry step at a time.

“Wait!” I called out behind her. “I just...”

I trailed off with a sigh, watching her quick retreat.

Biting my lip, I turned back to the Silver Sea.

Deal with it, I told myself, even when I felt my throat tighten. It was probably ill-advised regardless to try to make friends with Kalia, since she obviously detested the mere sight of me. But even on the Collis, when I’d felt alone, I’d truly never *been* alone. I’d had my sisters. I’d had Fran.

On Krynn I was alone. Truly alone. With no way to even contact my family. To see how they were.

“They’re called starwood flowers,” came Kalia’s voice.

I turned with a hitched breath, but she was already gone, the tops of her wings disappearing as she retreated. But she’d answered me. I hadn’t made her cry like last time by just speaking to her. I considered that progress.

Glancing at the flowers spilling next to me, I touched one of the blooms. With velvety soft petals, the stamen was dark, almost pitch black. The indigo color of the bloom had intermittent white dots peppered along its surface, giving the appearance of a starry night sky.

Beautiful, I thought, making a mental note to look up books on Krynn’s plant life in the library, if I could find any.

Peering around the filled courtyard and remembering the private terrace where I’d taken my morning meal with Azur yesterday—though he’d done more of the eating than I had, I remembered with a flush—I thought that the flowers could use a little care. The ones that were trailing on the ground had begun to rot. The vines from which they bloomed were tangled

and wild. Some curled around the stones but others jutted upward, swaying in the wind.

It's a project, I thought quietly. It would give me something to *do*. And to distract from the reality of my situation, I would need *a lot* to fill my time.

I FOUND ANOTHER PROJECT TO WORK ON LATER THAT DAY AS I explored the west wing of the keep.

I came across an open, arched door, slightly ajar. The sounds of frustration coming from within were what made me push it open and peer curiously inside.

Within, I discovered a Kylorr male, hands running through golden-yellow hair, which got tangled around his twisting ivory-colored horns. Sitting slumped over a metal desk, scribbling away on parchment, he was wearing a deep frown and mumbling under his breath. Piles and stacks of paper were all around him, and I watched as he paused in his scribbling to pluck a sheet from the stack, scanning its contents with a shrewd eye.

That was when he saw me lingering in the doorway, and he straightened, blinking.

“*Kylaira,*” the male greeted with a slight bow of his head, standing up from the desk.

“I don’t mean to intrude,” I told him, eyeing the room.

And it was a pretty room at that. High, vaulted ceilings and tall, arched windows, with latticed panes that made a delightful diamond pattern. A desk was situated in front of the windows, which I imagined would let in warm, glorious sunlight in the afternoons. Heavy shelves of stacked papers were stuffed up against all the available space. It was chaotic and disorganized, but it smelled like the library my mother had kept in the Collis. The scent of old parchment and earthy ink would always make me think of her.

Upon closer inspection, I saw the papers were *records*. Shelves and shelves of them.

Distracted, I murmured, “I thought you were in distress from the sounds, so I came to see if anything was wrong.”

The male’s shoulders relaxed. His grin was lopsided, charming, even. “This time of the year is always busy. I’m afraid I misplaced my original calculations for the harvest, so I’m trying to re-do them.” His face dropped. “But I beg you, do not tell the *Kyzaire* that.”

It was strange. There were some in the keep who didn’t seem to know the nature of the marriage between Azur and myself. Most knew it had been arranged. But some seemed to believe that there was respect or even *affection* in the relationship when they could not be further from the truth.

Another thing I found strange, which had never been more apparent to me than right then, staring at a records room full of *parchment*, was that there was a lack of tech utilized in daily life here.

Even in the Collis, I would never *imagine* keeping physical records. All records and accounting were done and stored through our Halo system. I knew that the Kylorr, at least the Kylorr of the Kaalium, were a wealthy people. The obvious wealth of my own husband and his family was apparent. I’d seen the nature of his space vessel—it was top-of-the-line luxurious. He even had a private docking bay on planet and a private high-speed transport tunnel straight to the keep.

But the keep itself seemed to be run in the old tradition. The keepers cleaned, cooked, and did their chores by hand, forgoing the use of programmed tech. There were no automated systems within the rooms, like the washroom. The showers had to be switched on by hand. If I washed my hair, I had to roughly dry it with a cloth and finish in front of the fire, which I couldn’t turn on with a wave of my hand.

Beds needed to be made manually. Windows needed to be opened at the start of every morning. And there were no messaging systems in place to reach another being in a different section of the keep, if need be.

When was the last time I'd ever done our accounting by hand? I wondered, staring at the silver pen lying innocently across the Kylorr male's parchment. Even for quick calculations, I couldn't remember.

Stepping forward into the room, I said, "I can help you. I'm good with numbers. I did all our record keeping for—"

"That's not necessary, *Kylaira*," the male said quickly. "I can handle it. I'm sure you have too much to do to bother with these old records."

"I'm quite bored, I assure you. I would love to help," I said softly, giving him a small smile. Which died when I added, "If you don't mind the company, that is."

Numbers. I loved numbers—even when I'd hated them in connection to our debts. Because numbers never lied. Math was the foundation of our universe and one of the *only* commonalities between the vast amount of races in the Four Quadrants.

I found that *incredible*. There was beauty in that. Unfathomable beauty and connection.

I was already stepping around the desk, peering down at the parchment, which I discovered were balance sheets.

Lore.

Another surprising discovery about the Kylorr was that *they* were responsible for *the* most sought-after commodity in the universe. During one particularly low harvest year, I'd heard a single leaf of *lore* had sold for 25,000 credits.

Lore was no blue salt, which could be harvested on many planets, that was for certain. But this seemed like a lot of work for just one being. And I had nothing better to do than roam the halls and tidy up the starwood vines out on the terrace, which I planned to do in the coming days.

Anything to distract me from Azur's return tonight, I thought to myself, running my finger down a particular column which was labeled *tun*, which I knew was a universal measure of weight.

Excitement rose in my breast just as I remembered something.

“Are you Maazin?” I wondered, looking up at the Kylorr male. The male who was in charge of the *lore* yield reports, who Azur had already reminded once about their completion.

He was studying me carefully, the twitch of his wings behind him the only indication he’d heard me. He was still frowning, looking down to the parchment over the desk, before up at me.

Suddenly, his shoulders relaxed again. He gave me a half smile and said, “Yes. Yes, I am. And I would be delighted if you joined me here, *Kylaira*. Of course you can help, if you truly wish to.”

I smiled. Perhaps the first genuine smile I’d given someone since I’d left the Collis.

“Call me Gemma.”

“Gemma,” Maazin repeated, inclining his head in acknowledgment. He gestured to the stacks of parchment along the far wall. “Would you like to start there? I’ll finish these.”

Looking out the wide window, which had a partial view of a village below with a peak of the sea, I saw that the sun was sinking, casting brilliant rays across the sky.

Soon, night would arrive.

And so would Azur.

“Let’s get to work,” I said, turning back to Maazin, smiling.

CHAPTER 14

Every single flicker of starlight made my heart stutter as I waited.

Though I'd been half tempted to return to Maazin's office to continue sorting through the disorganized mess of papers and records, I had decided to venture to my rooms after dinner. I'd taken the meal in an empty dining room, though a Kylorr male named Inasa had lingered nearby, just in case I'd requested anything further. He'd poured my wine—thick and sweet and tasting vaguely of the apples that had grown in the Collis—and I'd had more than I probably should've, considering the pleasant buzz in my head and the way my limbs felt loose.

Maybe it's for the best, I thought, laughing softly to myself. *Maybe I was more like my father than I thought.*

A little after midnight, as the fire popped in the hearth, a loud *thump* came from outside my balcony window in my room, making me stand.

The doors burst inward, nearly shattering the lock, making me gasp in alarm.

Then suddenly...Azur was there.

And when those red, molten orbs found mine? They were feral. Angry.

My first instinct was to *run*.

At first, I actually *did*.

There was a ferocity, a wildness in his usual expressionless, cold face that made me want to flee like prey. I made to run for the door that led out into the hallway, my heart sparking to life, throbbing with every dizzying pump of my blood.

It didn't make sense, this reaction. I'd *expected* his bite. I'd known he would come for me tonight. His threat had been tinged in promise when he'd left the keep yesterday morning.

When my hand found the brassy, solid, globular handle, I had *just* twisted it, had just managed to crack it open when his body crashed into mine.

I let out a wild, desperate little cry as he flipped me, caging me in with his body as he pressed me back into the door. His wings shielded us. Trapped. I was trapped with nowhere to run.

"I hate this," Azur hissed down at me. His voice was thick and guttural. *Changed*. "You think I want this, *kyrana*?"

My brows furrowed in confusion even as I struggled against him, bucking to try to get away.

He groaned, pressing his hips low, and I stilled when I felt the thickness of his cock, the shadowy outline of it pressed—I assumed painfully—against the vertical metal clasps of his pants.

"You think I *want* to crave your blood like this?" he growled. "I've thought of *nothing* else!"

He pounded the door behind me to emphasize his point, to release his frustration in a physical way, and I felt the impact vibrate down my spine. Disbelief went through me, meeting his eyes, the wine and his words making the room sway.

His grip wasn't gentle. His hand moved to my hair, and he gathered it in one fist, tugging it back, making my scalp pull.

A whimper escaped me as he exposed my bare neck. I should've been pushing him away, right? I should've been fighting him with everything I had in me, like a wild hellcat trying to get *away* from this beast!

Instead, there was an immediate, alarming switch that seemed to trigger inside me at his dominating touch. There was fear, yes...but there was also a sharp pinch of *need* that mingled with it, binding close to it like a braided thread. I would be lying to myself if I said I hadn't thought of his bite in his absence. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought of the way it made me *feel*, how every dragging pull felt like a suckle on my clit, and how my body responded to such a physical, vulnerable act.

When he tugged my hair harder, baring more of my flesh for his gaze...a sound escaped me that sounded like a breathy moan.

Azur stilled, those eyes snapping tight and narrowing on me. I felt his fist tighten, and maybe it was the wine flowing hot in my blood or his delicious scent but I found myself relaxing in his grip. *Submitting*.

A soft chuff emerged from his throat. His head lowered. He dragged the tip of his nose along the column of my neck, breathing me in. The smooth slide of his fangs followed, but he didn't break the skin. He only taunted and teased me with them. I found myself holding my breath, anticipating the sharp prick that would melt into sublime pleasure.

“Who would've thought?” came his dark growl, the velvety, rich rasp of it winding down my belly, tightening my nipples. What was happening? “Who would have thought that you would crave this too? What would your father think, Gemma Hara? Knowing his eldest daughter is a greedy little slut for a Kylorr's bite?”

I flinched at the crude words—even as a rush of heat pooled low in my belly—but Azur's fist tightened in my hair, keeping me steady. The world swam. There was shame, but it was drenched in desperation.

He didn't give me a chance to reply, not that I could've with my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth.

The sharp pinch of his fangs registered. I felt a flood of startling heat where he bit my neck.

Then...I was *floating*.

Azur's groan reverberated in the protected cluster his wings made around us. My back arched off the door, my eyes sliding shut as I tilted my neck even more, making space for him. Maybe I would hate myself in the morning. Maybe the self-loathing would take root the moment the sun rose. Or perhaps even the moment he was done feeding.

But right then...if pleasure was what I received from this transaction—because that was what it was—then I would take it. I'd been restless all day. I didn't care what he thought of me. A part of me *needed* this.

If there was a shred of something besides fear and hatred on Krynn, I was going to grab on to it with both hands.

I almost laughed in my delirium. He'd called *me* the slut when by his own admission, he craved my blood to the point that it infuriated him?

“What does that make you, then, Azur of House Kaalium, son of Thraan, and the High Lord of Laras?” I asked, my voice throaty. He didn't even pause in his feeding, but I felt a rough exhale through his nostrils over my skin. “What does that make you, knowing you can't get *enough* of my blood? Do you hate that too? Does it make you hate me more?”

Azur pressed into me harder, sliding his hard thigh between my legs, sparking a new kind of pressure and pleasure, though I wondered if he'd meant it as punishment. Or a warning.

His feeding turned into something new. Something darker. Something ravenous. He sucked *harder*. He drank more deeply, like he was determined to drain me dry.

I moaned, little gasping breaths flying from my throat, my eyes widening in disbelief. I felt one small flutter between my thighs.

Oh gods!

I struggled against him, knowing what would happen. Knowing what he was steadily driving me toward. But he

didn't let me go anywhere. If anything, he held me tighter. An unyielding wall whose stubbornness matched my own.

And when that pleasure burst?

"No, no, no," I moaned, ragged, clawing at the tops of his shoulders, trying to keep my legs from giving out beneath me.

Crying out, I couldn't help it as my hips rocked of their accord, as an orgasm ripped through my body, tearing me up from the inside out. Powerful and deep. Wanted and hated. Sublime and mind-numbing.

Azur laughed, but it was muffled against my neck, where his fangs were still imbedded deep.

His dark chuckle sparked my blood with fury because he *knew*. He knew what had just happened.

Can he feel it? I couldn't help but wonder, dazed. *Can he taste it?*

He pressed his hips harder into my belly, grinding against me. Letting me feel the drag of his swollen, hard cock.

He's affected by this too, I thought, feeling my lids go heavy.

That was when I felt it.

The unmistakable sensation of another orgasm building, right on the heels of the first. My legs tightened. The gentle pulsing deep inside my sex was turning into a steady, maddening need. My clit was fluttering and sensitive, but I dug my fingers into Azur's shoulders, raking them down his thick leather vest. It was still cold from the wind outside.

His laugh abruptly died.

"*Raazos,*" came the soft word. Like a whispered curse. He was steadily rocking against me now, the grinding of his hips almost violent, rough. He groaned, muffled against my neck, "*Fuck.*"

Almost there, I chanted in my head, my head lolling against my shoulders as his grip on my hair loosened. *So close!*

And then...just as I was about to tumble over the edge, Azur pulled his fangs from me in a dizzying rush and retreated so fast that my head spun.

“*No!*” I couldn’t help but cry out, nearly on the verge of tears in frustration, already feeling the pleasure he’d built begin to slip away.

And then in the silence that followed...reality slowly crept back in. In sluggish, hazy moments until I felt my cheeks begin to burn.

Not again, I thought.

Azur had flung himself a few paces away, clutching the back of the chair that was perched close to the roaring fire. His grip was so tight that I thought his claws would tear through the material. His shoulders were heaving.

I hadn’t imagined it the first time, I realized, staring at him in shock as I clung to the handle of the door, using it to keep me upright. I’d have a bruise on my back in the morning from where it’d dug into me.

Azur was definitely bigger. Though he hadn’t grown taller, he was larger. *Everywhere*. His vest was nearly ripping open at the seams. And his pants might have been made of latex for all the detail they showed, including the *veins* on the underside of his cock and a strange, thick swelling at the very base of his shaft.

Suddenly, I felt overheated. The material of my night dress felt heavy and thick, though it was anything but. The bite mark on my neck *throbbed*. Between my legs, I felt slick and wet, evidence of my arousal and of my unexpected orgasm.

I waited for the self-loathing to come.

I waited for the disgust to rear its ugly head.

Only it never did.

As I straightened, the movement dragged Azur’s glowing eyes to mine. He was hunched over slightly, like he was catching his breath, using the back of the chair to support him. We regarded one another in the silence.

Even the fire popped with the tension filling the sitting room.

I waited for him to mock me.

I waited for him to sneer at how I'd come against him, moaning as he'd drunk from me.

Only he never did.

Instead, he said nothing at all as he straightened to his full height, his wings folding neatly behind his back.

"I won't be shamed," I warned him, the husky words breaking free from my throat. "Not by you. Not by anyone. I've dealt with it enough in my life that I refuse to feel it with *you* too."

It was difficult to look arrogant and downright *regal* with a raging erection in supremely tight pants...and yet Azur somehow pulled it off. His eyes even narrowed on me, his lips pulling down into a familiar scowl.

Maybe if he knew that I received pleasure from the feedings, he would back off. He seemed to want to hurt me. He didn't want to *please* me.

"For Alaire's mercy, tell me, wife, exactly what *shame* do you think you've had to endure in your lifetime?" he growled. "The shame of your father's greed? The shame of hiding your family's ruin from the nobles in the Collis, fretting over the loss of your jewels and your estate and your precious keepers?"

My cheeks went even hotter. "You know *nothing* about me."

His laugh was biting as he approached. "I've heard about the Hara daughters. I've heard you're all spoiled rotten. Little grasping vines climbing up to stations high above them, spending credits that they don't have on frivolous things that mean *nothing*, while their father begs for money from whoever is foolish enough to give him some. But let me tell you one thing, Gemma Hara. Desperation has a particular *stench* to it. It will warn everyone away. I could smell it before I ever laid eyes on you."

A shocked breath escaped me.

The image he'd conjured...that wasn't me. That wasn't Mira. And for all her faults, if Piper had known about the debts, she wouldn't have been so careless with our money. She would've been the first one to step up to try to *fix* our situation.

And that was on me. That was on Father, desperate to keep the truth from both of them.

“It didn't seem to warn you away, *husband*.”

CHAPTER 15

*R*aazos's blood, had a female ever made me so fucking infuriated before? I felt like I was on the verge of a rage, but I couldn't tell if it was from the high off her blood or because she made *mine* boil.

Maybe both.

Likely both.

"You've heard wrong," she added, glaring, even when her cheeks were still flushed from her orgasm.

I had half a mind to push her back against the door and feed a second time. I would laugh as she moaned her pleasure because at least an orgasm would tie that tongue into knots and she would stop *lying* to me for a damn moment.

"Do you always have to have the last word, *wife*?" I bit out.

"Do you?" she snapped back.

When I left this room, I was going straight into mine to rip off my pants that felt three sizes too small. Then I would furiously fuck my fist so that I could *think straight*.

I had never expected for the blood madness to be this *distracting*. To be this frustrating.

This is a problem, I couldn't help but think.

When I'd taken a Hara daughter for my own, I hadn't expected to *want* to fuck her.

Instead, I had wanted her fear. I had wanted her submission. I had wanted her coward of a father to know that I would enjoy tormenting her. That I would find pleasure in it.

Because blood was blood.

If he refused to pay for his injustices, then I would make his eldest daughter pay instead *before* I destroyed his entire House in the eyes of the universe. For *seventeen years*, my family had been left in the dark. My mother's heart had been broken when she'd passed into the next realm. Only until recently had we known the truth about what had happened to Aina on Pe'ji.

Who could have foreseen that Gemma Hara would be my *kyrana*?

It was a sick joke. Another injustice against House Kaalium.

But I wondered if it was a lesson from our gods and goddesses. I wondered if this was meant to humble me. An obstacle that needed to be overcome...or a warning that this was not the way to redeeming Aina's lost soul.

With a dawning grim realization, I realized that this punishing desire—hot and needful and frustrating—meant one thing.

Eventually, I would fuck my wife.

Either during one of my rages, fueled by her own blood, when my restraint and control was at its weakest. Or I would fuck her to make a *point*. To show her that she could give me that sharp tongue but that *I* could still make her scream for me. That *I* could control her, that I could make her weak and needy, that I could make her submit.

Resignation—mingled with the alarming sensation of anticipation—thrummed through me.

Gemma was still glaring at me in her thin dress. Kylorr females rarely wore such garments. Flying in dresses, I assumed, would be considered an inconvenient annoyance, as Kalia had often grumbled to me.

But on Gemma...I found the sight of her pointed nipples through the soft material arousing. And there was a certain illicit thrill in my belly, knowing that I could push up the hem and she'd be bared to me, ready for a rough, punishing fuck.

The taste of her blood was still on my tongue, and already, I was hungry for more. I wondered how much more of my venom she could take. So much that a simple brush of my claws against her skin could trigger an orgasm?

I took a step toward her.

I heard her harsh swallow, saw the way her gaze flitted over my body, gauging the new swelling of my strength.

I nearly grinned.

“Do I make you nervous?” I asked her, continuing to approach. There was something infinitely appealing about hate-fucking her. Perhaps because for the Kylorr, going through a rage and having sex were—more often than not—intertwined. It was what our ancestors had done. Gone out battling and come back to their wives and lovers and *kyranas* to unleash the pent-up aggression and savor their victory. Sex had been a *celebration*.

And with Gemma?

That was what it would be.

A celebration of her submission.

Venom dripped from my fangs at the thought.

I heard the door knob rattle behind her when her back met it again.

“We can come to an understanding, Azur,” she murmured quietly, her voice oddly calm. “An agreement.”

Intrigued, I cocked my head, stepping into her space. Her breath hitched when I brushed the pads of my fingers over her bite mark, staring at the small wound. A human gentleman, if he had the power to, would heal the skin for her. All it would take was a little of my own blood, mixed with my venom, and the wound would be gone within moments.

But I didn't. I wanted her to feel me. I wanted her to remember me, all of her waking moments.

"An agreement," I repeated. On her next inhale, the swells of her small breasts brushed my chest. "Are you bargaining with me, little wife?"

"Yes," she said quietly, her eyes darting between my own. My left wing twitched briefly. "You want to feed from me. And you know you can. Whenever you want. But I won't fight you. Not unless..."

She blinked, lifting her chin slightly.

"Not unless you want me to," she finished. "If you want me to be afraid, then I'll be afraid."

She thought I got off on her fear.

She wouldn't be wrong, came that treacherous little voice in the back of my mind. I *had* found pleasure in her fear.

"Sometimes a Kylorr wishes for blood feedings multiple times a day," I couldn't help but growl. Her scent swam in my nostrils, making more venom drip on my tongue.

Her voice was quiet and strong as she said, "And I would give you those feedings."

"You would be on a supplement to replenish your blood quickly," I rasped. "On *baanye*."

"I'll take it," she answered.

I grunted. Reaching forward, I clasped her chin, tilting her face up. Her cheeks were still flushed. I could still smell the remnants of her arousal and the thick, maddening scent of her orgasm, slick between her thighs.

"I won't ask for much," she told me. "It may be what you were willing to give me anyway."

"And that is?" I asked quietly, strangely fascinated by this little exchange between us.

It wasn't often that a female challenged me. I was used to obedience. I was the *Kyzaire* of Laras. A High Lord, born as the eldest heir into a legacy. All of Krynn, even the nations

beyond the seas, knew of House Kaalium. They knew of my bloodline—the dark, the bright, and the bloody history of it.

Most wouldn't *dare* to go against my wishes. My orders.

But here was my human bride, daring to strike a deal, one she was powerless in. She knew it. But she dared to try anyway.

I couldn't help but be impressed. She was brave, I'd give her that.

"You won't keep me as a prisoner here," she murmured, a small swallow punctuating her words. "I would be free to spend my days as I wish."

A lengthy silence stretched between us as we stared at one another.

"I can take multiple feedings if I wish and when I wish to," I informed her, wondering what she'd do with the words. "I don't have to give you anything in return."

Quietly and slowly, she said, "And during those feedings I can be afraid. Or if you don't want me to be afraid...then I can be anything you want."

My cock *throbbed* at her words, the knot at the base of my shaft swelling even further.

A ragged breath left me, unexpected and rough.

There was no mistaking the hidden meaning of her words. There was no mistaking the sudden rush of blood that traveled straight to my cock, making it difficult to think. And around her? I knew that was dangerous.

My hand left her chin, sliding up her cheek and into her hair. Cradling the back of her head, I stared down at her.

"If I wanted you afraid..."

"Then I would try to escape you," she whispered.

"If I wanted you to fight me..."

"Then I would fight you."

"If I wanted you to submit..."

A short inhale whistled through her nostrils. “Then I would kneel before you and bare whatever part of me you wished to feed from.”

An erotic fantasy rose, conjured by the words. Of her with her legs spread for me, her cheeks flushed, those heavy breasts bared. Of my fangs piercing the soft, sensitive flesh of her inner thigh, sinking deep.

This was new for me.

Feeding off a giver...it was a need. Like breathing. Like flying. Visiting a giver’s establishment was no different than visiting a local tavern in the village. A Kylorr went there to feed, to drink, and then they would pay and go. There was nothing sexual about it unless it was with a lover. And then there might be blood play and biting involved.

With a *kyrana*, however, *everything* about it became sexual. A *primal* need that spoke to the baser instincts of our berserker natures. Wild and untamed. The push and pull of submission and power, the crazed desire and the unfathomable hunger.

She was offering to play whatever role I wished for her to play. To satisfy *those* needs, though she couldn’t possibly understand what she was offering me.

I pretended to deliberate. I pretended to weigh her words even though my heart was suddenly beating furiously in my chest.

The longer I deliberated, the more she fidgeted. And so I waited even longer.

“I won’t go anywhere you absolutely forbid me to,” she murmured, suddenly nervous I’d deny her. “But outside the keep, I would like to explore the village. And go down to the sea.”

The obvious desire in her words created a vice of guilt and unease, tight and uncomfortable. I didn’t want to feel it. But I did. I didn’t want to soften toward her.

I’d dragged this out long enough.

“You may go into the village and down the coastal trail but only with a guard,” I told her. “You will not leave the keep’s grounds without my permission, do you understand?”

There was still a burning little flare of frustration in those eyes. This was a female who wasn’t used to being told what to do. Already, I knew she would fight me on this. I knew she would challenge me at every step, and I wondered if I’d made a terrible mistake.

Regardless, I’d never intended to keep her locked up. But I had hoped to keep her from the village. From the eyes of Laras, so questions weren’t raised when I eventually returned her to the Collis.

It’s inevitable, I knew. With the festival and harvest season approaching, she would be discussed liberally, our sudden marriage speculated on endlessly.

“And...and when would you like your next feeding?” she asked.

My eyes narrowed. I felt restless. I felt, strangely, like I’d been defeated, whilst also feeling the thrum of victory at her small surrender. A thoroughly odd mixture of emotions.

“Whenever it pleases me,” I growled, reaching for the handle of the door behind her. “I don’t have to give you a schedule.”

Was it my imagination, or did she *huff*?

She stumbled away from the door so I could leave. My skin felt tight. My wings were twitching. My cock was still as hard as stone.

I turned around just before she could shut the door in my face.

Dropping low, I murmured harshly, “And at the morning meal tomorrow, I want your neck on display. I want everyone to see my bite on you and all the others that will join it.”

Gemma’s breath hitched. I felt the beginnings of my seed push from the tip of my cock, my thick seal pulsing at the base of my shaft.

This is a problem, I couldn't help but think again, gritting my jaw as I turned, leaving her slack-jawed and flushing.

This dangerous, dangerous game could ruin everything.

CHAPTER 16

In the end, Azur wasn't even at breakfast.

Regardless, I'd worn my only high-necked dress, one that nearly went to my ears, in defiance. I'd already picked it out the night before, smoothing the wrinkles out over the chair. This morning, I'd been dressed before Ludayn had even knocked, mentally prepared for another sparring round with my maddening husband.

But he hadn't showed. I'd eaten in peace, gazing out from the private terrace, admiring the ridges and dips of the northern mountains as I'd nibbled on a sweet bread spread liberally with a shimmering blue jam. A slab of delicious cheese—mottled with black streaks and encased in a tough red rind—had accompanied the small meal, weighing me down and sticking to my ribs as I'd planned out my day. The tea sludge had gone untouched, however.

Truthfully, I was itching to return to Maazin's offices, to sort through the records. To get them organized, perhaps even uploaded to a secure Halo system for easy accounting.

To anyone else, record keeping might've been frustrating and dull work. But I quite enjoyed it. At least, I enjoyed it when my family's own well-being and safety wasn't at the stake of those numbers.

And that was exactly how I spent my morning and afternoon.

Azur had given me freedom around the keep—though I didn't disclose what I was doing within the walls. I only

needed his permission to *leave* the grounds.

If Maazin was surprised to see me, he didn't show it. He'd only directed me to a stack of papers he had set aside, his brows furrowed in concentration—a little bead of sweat dotting his brow—as he made manual calculations over a scrap piece of parchment.

We worked mostly in silence. It was almost *peaceful*.

“Why don't you upload all the records to a Halo database?” I asked him, just as the sun began to sink in the sky, stretching my back. “You would have the calculations almost instantly, and if you programmed the system to account for new harvest yields, it would take no time at all to get these reports done.”

Maazin swallowed, shifting back in his modified chair. Most had a slim, vertical back so there was enough room for a Kylorr's wings. He rolled his neck. I heard a *pop*.

“This is how it has always been done,” Maazin said, his voice low. “To House Kaalium, tradition is important.”

“So is progress,” I argued, though it was under my breath and my tone was a little distracted as my eyes caught on a string of numbers. “How long have you worked for the family?”

“A few years now,” he said.

“Did you grow up in Laras?” I asked. “In the villages below the keep?”

“No,” he said, frowning, a harsh tone in his voice making my gaze jump to him. When he saw me watching, his lips quirked up, and he ran a hand over his ivory horn. I hadn't seen another Kylorr—at least within the keep—with light-colored horns. Whatever I'd heard in his voice smoothed away, his pleasant tone returning to fill in the silence, “But I would've liked to. The harvest season is especially exciting. Kylorr come from all corners of the Kaalium to celebrate it. Just last year, I met a female from a northern village outside of Laras. She made me try her family's brew, a recipe passed

down for generations, and promised me a kiss for every sip I took without retching.”

“And how many did you manage?” I asked, biting back a grin. “Kisses, I mean.”

Maazin chuckled, his expression becoming sheepish yet conspiratorial. “I couldn’t tell you. Whatever was in that brew made me forget the whole festival entirely. She’s just a shadow in my memory now.”

My laugh rang through the library.

The day flew by quickly. I hardly even noticed, too consumed in tracing the path of the unexpected history of *lore* and all its exports from the Kaalium.

“The bulk of the harvest isn’t complete yet,” Maazin warned me, standing from his chair to touch a light orb. It illuminated the darkened room almost immediately, and for a moment, I was confused. Was it night already? “Laras’s harvest hasn’t even begun. These reports are from the other territories.”

“The other territories?” I asked, my eyes going a little bleary. I’d been staring at parchment all day, kneeling on the ground in my dress since I’d made multiple stacks of records around me, sorted by year. “Of the Kaalium?” I questioned.

I was starving, I realized. My stomach was growling, though a tray of food had been brought in for us sometime in the afternoon. Ludayn. Ludayn had brought it in for us, though she’d been frowning at my position on the floor. Maazin and I had devoured it, chatting about the village as we’d munched on fruit and dried meats. He’d listed off his favorite food stalls, which I’d made a mental note to track down. Maybe Ludayn could come with me.

Stretching, hearing my back pop, I listened as Maazin said, “Yes. Erzos. Kyne. Vyaan. And Salaire.”

So that was what those names were. I’d come across them in the records.

“And Laras is the capital,” I said quietly, filing those names away, itching to find a map of the Kaalium in the

library if I could. “Who runs those territories if Azur is here in Laras?”

“My brothers,” came the dark, familiar voice. I jumped, swinging around to face the door.

Just like that, all the ease left me, replaced by a sensation of tight and heightened awareness. My heart started pumping. I wondered if my husband could hear the sudden rush of my blood as he silently stepped into the room.

“*Kyzaire*,” Maazin said quietly, scrambling to stand, inclining his head. “I hope my report was to your satisfaction.”

“It was,” Azur said coolly, “though it was late.”

I pressed my lips together as Azur’s gaze landed on me.

His brothers? I wondered.

There were *more* highly arrogant Kylorr males ruling the Kaalium, who looked like him, all dark and brooding and frightening?

“What are you doing here?” he asked me, the question pointed and low.

I couldn’t get a read on him. I couldn’t tell if he was upset, angry, bewildered, or indifferent. Or maybe he was just hungry.

My cheeks flushed, remembering our agreement.

“I’m organizing these records with Maazin,” I told him, craning my neck back to meet his eyes. My legs were asleep beneath me, so even if I stood now, I’d look like a wobbling fool.

Azur slid an assessing gaze around the room, noting the stacks of parchment, some clearly older than others judging by the yellowing of the pages and the dusty, torn edges. I was working on the oldest stacks—labelled dates going back nearly a hundred years, written out in faded blue ink—and Maazin said he would handle more recent years. We would meet somewhere in the middle.

Azur’s jaw hardened.

“You’re not allowed in here, Gemma,” he finally said, his tone unmistakably sharp and clipped. “Come. *Now.*”

Tension sank into the room.

When I didn’t move, Azur stepped farther inside, his movements quick. His eyes cut to the high neck of my dress, and I watched as his fangs elongated. Maazin stepped forward, but Azur didn’t even look at him as he ordered, “Leave us.”

Maazin was skirting around the desk before I could even think to be frightened. He met my eyes as he passed. I saw him hesitate, briefly, before Azur growled out, “Maazin.”

The ivory-horned male passed Azur, inclining his head, before he finally left the room, closing the door behind him.

Leaving me alone with Azur, who looked like he was in a foul mood tonight.

“Is this your idea of submission, wife?” he asked, stepping closer, weaving effortlessly around large stacks of parchment like they were ancient columns. His tone was deceitfully gentle, and it sent alarm bells ringing in my mind. “Disobeying me?”

“I’m just trying to be useful,” I told him, steeling my spine despite my kneeling position on the floor. “I’m out of your way, aren’t I? And this room is a mess. There’s no order or—”

“If I wanted you to work, then I would put you to work,” he growled. “These records are off limits to you. Or do you not see the irony in letting *you* handle our record keeping for the Kaalium’s most profitable export?”

I nearly flinched at his unspoken barb.

“The debts were my father’s,” I said, narrowing my eyes. I had the sudden fear that he really *would* forbid me from this place, when *this* had made my day feel full and satisfying. I enjoyed being in here with Maazin. Enjoyed the idle chatter in between bouts of concentration. “I did what I could to keep us safe, and I *succeeded*. Don’t doubt my abilities, Azur. I *know* numbers. I know they don’t lie.”

“You succeeded?” he repeated softly, crouching in front of me so that we were eye level. “Is that why I had to pay off two hundred fifty *vron* worth of debts to numerous collectors who were salivating at the thought of you defaulting? Is that what you call succeeding?”

Every conversation we ever had always made me feel a little lower than I had before. But I was determined not to let him.

“Why do you hate me so much?”

The soft question was out of my mouth before I could think better of it.

I had my suspicions about why I was here. Truthfully, I didn’t think it had anything to do with *me* specifically.

Azur stilled.

“Have I done something to you? To hurt you?” I wondered. “To make you want to hurt me like this?”

We stared at one another. His brows pulled down. His scowl was menacing.

“Tell me,” I pleaded softly. “Tell me what it is. Because the marriage contract I signed in blood was for *life*. There is no escaping this, and so I’m *trying*, Azur. I’m trying to make this life meaningful so that it doesn’t hurt every day. What would you have me do? Do you want me to wander these halls and do nothing at all? Only await whenever you wish to feed from me next? What about all the other moments in between? Because there are so many, and they would feel endless without a *purpose*.”

Azur’s gaze flickered.

For a moment—a moment that nearly made the air rush from my lungs—I thought he looked discomfited. A brief flash of remorse, of guilt, before it was gone.

He was silent.

For a long time, he didn’t say anything at all. Just regarded me with those molten eyes.

But when he spoke next, his tone didn't hold the same cutting edge. "Tell me how the debts came to be."

That...that wasn't what I'd been expecting him to say.

His voice was still gruff. It felt like I was tearing the words straight from his throat. He didn't want to ask...and yet, I felt like he was trying to *understand*.

Maybe—just maybe—my words had some effect on him.

My feet tingled when I shifted on my knees. There was still a hardened lump in my throat, but I tucked a stray hair behind my ear that had escaped from my bun throughout the long day.

There has to be some give between us, I realized. Unless we want to live in a miserable existence, we need to try to understand one another.

The only thing I could do was try.

"I suspect that my father has had a long history with collectors," I began slowly, hesitant. *Tentative*. "My mother would have known, I suppose, but if she did, she hid it well. The signs were there though, even when I'd been young. Too young to even understand."

"What signs?" Azur asked. There was a part of me that felt like he had a right to know these things. He'd paid off the collectors on behalf of my family, after all.

"Even before the war," I said, casting my eyes down to the stack of parchment between us. Did he flinch? I didn't look up to check. "We didn't live in the Collis then. My sisters had just been born.

"We lived in a place called New Inverness. A small planet, though deeply divided by wealth and poverty. My father was a poor soldier from an even poorer family. My mother was the daughter of a nobleman. As such, when they married—though my grandfather protested the match at first—he still wanted his daughter to be secure. He still bought them land. A small house. A stable with three horses because my mother had grown up riding and her father knew she loved them. And me too. She taught me how to ride. But one day, one of the horses

was gone. Two months later, another one. My horse was the only that remained. Then I had an accident. She got spooked during a ride, and I got thrown off her back. I broke my arm.”

The story came pouring out from me, a memory that I hadn't thought of in *years* until this moment. And I didn't know why I was telling Azur this particular, vulnerable memory. Likely he would use it against me. But I still found the words coming out, drifting into the quiet space between us and echoing up in the tall room.

His ember eyes were pinned on me. I couldn't read him. I couldn't determine what he was thinking.

There has to be some give, I thought again, pushing forward.

“A few days later, my horse was gone too. My father claimed it was because riding was too dangerous, that he didn't want me to get hurt. But now, especially in recent years, I think he was selling them. They're expensive animals. Rare too. New Inverness is one of the last places that breeds them in all the Quadrants. I think someone paid him very well or he owed money that he couldn't pay back.”

It still ached to think about. It ached to think what happened to her. I'd loved my horse. I'd called her Min. I'd spent hours and hours with her, every day for *years*. She'd been there before I could even walk. Thinking about the sudden loss of her, I knew it had been my first experience with heartbreak.

Truthfully, it felt cruel to me, looking back on it now with knowing eyes.

“Things would go missing from around the house. Valuables. Gold. Heirlooms,” I said, my voice nearly dropping into a whisper as shame built up in my chest. “Then the war happened, and it was like we forgot. We were only concerned with his return. If he'd come back at all. When he did, decorated in medals and accolades, we moved to the Collis. A gift from the New Earth forces. And for a brief time, everything felt perfect. It felt as it should.”

Then my mother's depression had returned. Everything had changed again. But I didn't voice that.

"Things began to disappear again," I told him. "My father's medals. Silverware. A necklace that my grandmother gave to my mother. Old family portraits."

I forced myself to meet Azur's eyes, afraid of what I'd find there. Judgment, perhaps. Disgust. For someone so wealthy, how could he understand the desperation? The constant, clawing worry of piles and piles of debt until you felt like you were drowning in it, unable to escape?

He was expressionless, however. His face was a cold, blank slate, as if I were speaking to a wall and not a living, breathing male.

It was a small relief, truthfully.

Swallowing, I said, "You have to understand that I didn't discover the debts until five years ago."

After Mother had been gone.

"My father was over five hundred *vron* in debt then," I whispered, feeling my nostrils sting as I forced myself to say the number. "A collector had come to the estate. He...he hurt my father. Made him bleed, broke his arm. Only then did he tell me the truth."

Azur's gaze finally flickered. He finally moved. His wing twitched behind him and he ran a rough palm across his left horn.

"*Raazos*," he murmured under his breath, looking away from me for a brief moment before his eyes cut back. His lips pressed together.

"I cut the debt down to two hundred fifty *vron* since then, even with the added interest."

He rumbled, "How did you do that on your own?"

"I took over the management of the blue salt mines on our land in the Collis, which was our only source of new income. Coordinated all the exports. Negotiated with the collectors. I

cut back our staff and tried to curb my family's spending. I kept my sisters safe, protected. I...I..."

This was mortifying. It truly was. Admitting all this to Azur.

But I had done what I could for my family.

And while I didn't quite feel *proud* to have paid off half of the debts on my own, I felt that I had at least done *something*.

"And then I married a Kylorr, who offered to make it all go away," I finished softly. "Though I didn't know what to expect. And in many ways, I still don't."

If there was nothing else, I would always be grateful to him for that. Regardless of what he wanted from me or how he treated me...he had thrown my family a lifeline. A way *out*. A fresh start for my father and, most importantly, my sisters. Fran too.

"And I know there is something more happening here," I added softly. "Something I don't understand or even see. Something that you gain from this."

Azur's eyes glowed as we regarded one another. It was a prodding statement, though I thought we'd both heard the question in it. Not that I expected him to answer it.

In the end, he didn't.

Azur slowly rose from his crouch, silent and graceful for someone so large. His gaze cut away from me, quick and flitting, like he was...*uncomfortable*. Uncomfortable with the sudden shift of energy between us. Because I felt it. He must have too.

Dropping my gaze back to the pile I'd been sorting through, I ran my eyes unseeingly over the structured columns, filled with information that I wanted to learn about. *Origin. Type. Soil. Weight. Plant Health. Stalk Width. Plume Span.*

"I work hard," I said. "And I would like to help. This way of record keeping is outdated and inefficient. I can make it so much easier. I know the Halo systems well. I can upload

everything to a secure database that you can set up yourself, if you'd like, if you don't trust me to do it."

When I met Azur's eyes, his nostrils flared.

"These are all just old harvest records anyway," I said gently. "What harm could I possibly do?"

My heart was beating fast. I wanted this. Would he be cruel for no other reason than to deny me what I wanted?

"Don't distract Maazin while you're in here," Azur *finally* said. "And stay out of his way once Laras's yield reports come in."

Hope rose.

"He's already distracted enough."

I'd noticed.

"I'm very good at keeping to a schedule," I told him. "I can keep him on track."

Azur grunted.

Frankly, I was astonished. But I held it together. This was also the longest we'd gone without flinging insults back and forth at one another.

There was a smoothing hum that was coming from the orb light Maazin had flicked on once the sun had set. They were meant to be silent, but like everything in this room, there was something disorganized about its innards.

Likely a frayed coil. I'd replaced enough in our estate in the Collis when we could no longer afford to have a tradesman come for repairs. I could probably fix it myself if I had—

"Your father will never stop, Gemma."

I stilled, flicking my gaze from the orb light to my husband, who stood tall and proud in front of me.

"But you know that. Don't you?" he asked, tilting his head to the side.

CHAPTER 17

There was a flash of despair on her face that she couldn't quite hide.

“He promised he would,” she murmured quietly. “He promised he'd stop taking credits. That he'd cut ties with the collectors.”

My jaw tightened.

It was odd.

Feeling this tight ball of sympathy in my chest for a *Hara*.

Even when it was filled with a blooming satisfaction, knowing that life hadn't been kind to Rye Hara since the Pe'ji War. Only it wasn't enough. It wouldn't be enough for me.

“Do you truly believe that?” I wanted to know.

Gemma wasn't a fool. It hadn't taken me long to see that.

She didn't answer. Which told me everything I needed to know.

“He doesn't know about the credits I paid into your personal account, does he?” I grunted.

“No,” Gemma whispered, dropping her gaze briefly.

It had been a stipulation of her agreement to this marriage. That in addition to the debts being paid off, I'd pay her 200 *vron* into a separate account.

At first, I had thought it mere greed. That she'd wanted to wring out whatever she could from me.

Now...I wondered if I'd been wrong.

“Why?” I rasped, needing to know.

She confirmed my suspicions when she said, “It’s security for my sisters. Just in case...just in case my father...”

She didn’t need to finish the sentence.

For once, her voice went wobbly. She had the uncanny ability to keep her voice sword-sharp, even when she was crying or upset. But hearing it waver now made my chest squeeze.

No.

I didn’t *want* to feel anything for this female. Dislike and mistrust I could handle. Lust? It came with our unfortunate and unlucky bond, but it could easily be compartmentalized and tied only to my feedings.

This?

Seeing her on the floor, miserable? Telling me what I knew in my gut was the truth? That she had worked hard to try to turn her family’s situation around? That she had thought of her sisters’ futures only when she had accepted this marriage?

To the Kylorr, especially to House Kaalium, family was more important than anything else. Loyalty to family, to blood ran strong, the lines forged with steel and strength. I would die for anyone in my family. In a single heartbeat. I knew they would do the same for me. I would give up *everything* to ensure their safety.

I was coming to the uncomfortable realization that Gemma would do the same for hers.

That, I could respect. That, I could understand.

When she wiped at her cheek, I realized a stray, clear tear had fallen. She took in a deep breath, and to my fascination, she looked *annoyed*. Her lips pinched down and she frowned up at me.

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” she informed me. “I don’t like to think of my sisters when I know—when I

know that it doesn't matter. I'm here. And they are...far away."

A little sound of frustration followed. My eyes were rapt on her.

"Aren't you hungry?" she demanded quietly.

My brows rose at her unexpected question.

And just like that...I felt my fangs begin to drip with venom, elongating in a rush. My body went tight, bracing in anticipation as I watched her struggle to stand from the floor. She swayed, stumbling a bit, limping until she could feel her limbs again. But then she was standing tall. Proud. Her chin lifted even though she looked ridiculous in her high-necked dress.

And oddly appealing, I couldn't help but think next.

Her eyes were glassy from her sudden tears, but her full, pink mouth was pinched in a scowl that made my cock thicken and my knot swell. Her hair was disheveled from her long day, untucked strands falling around her cheeks, softening her face. I wanted to see her hair unbound. I wanted to fist my hands into it when it was wild and untamed.

And she smelled *divine*.

My claws curled inward as she stepped toward me. I was watching, waiting to see what she would do, trying to understand the sudden shift in her.

"Isn't that why you came to find me?" she asked next.

"Is this you wanting a distraction?" I rumbled, realizing what she was doing.

"We have an agreement, don't we?" she asked, brushing off my words though I knew they were sticking in the air between us.

She *wanted* me to feed on her because she knew that the moment I did, she could get lost in my bite, in the pleasure. She wouldn't have to think about the debts, about her father and her sisters. She could forget. She could forget everything, if only for those brief moments.

She was using me.

Just as I was using her.

Coming to that realization, I couldn't help but feel a begrudging respect rise for my wife. At least she knew what it was she wanted from me.

“And what else did that agreement include?” I asked, deciding to play along.

Her lips parted, but I watched the tantalizing pink of her cheeks deepen.

“Was I meant to see this?” I pondered, reaching out to snag the high neckline of her dress, savoring her surprised gasp when I dragged her closer by it. “Did you *want* me to see this?”

She had a spine of steel, I'd give her that. For blatantly going against my orders. I'd told her to leave her neck bare. She'd covered it up until the material blended into her damn hair.

“Yes,” she answered.

I would've laughed had her answer not sent a dizzying rush of blood straight to my cock. Who would have thought that I'd be aroused by her bold disobedience?

Because I know how enjoyable it will be to make her submit, I thought.

“Take it off,” I growled.

“What?” Gemma whispered, her soil-colored brown eyes going wide.

I trailed the tip of my claw along the hem of the neckline, where it bunched under her chin.

“How do you expect me to feed with this covering you up?” I asked. “Take it off.”

She presented her wrist instead, but I gave her a dark smile, flashing my fangs.

“I think we agreed on submission, did we not, wife?” I pondered. “Is this what you call submission? Going against my direct orders and then denying me what I wish?”

She was a curious thing. Just last night, after she’d rocked against me, on the verge of a second orgasm, she’d actually cried out in protest when I’d pulled away. Perhaps she was *starved* for pleasure.

Gemma swallowed. “There are fastenings in the back, and I—”

My claws sliced through them before she could finish her sentence.

“Take it off,” I growled at her, the order unmistakable in my voice. I heard her shaky gasp. Afraid now? *Good.*

The dress was ruined, sagging down around her neck. I wasn’t sorry. It was hideous, and there were plenty of qualified clothiers in Laras who would be eager to make her a new one.

Her cheeks were red now, and she didn’t quite meet my eyes as she pulled the material away from her neck, baring it to me.

She stopped there, however, clutching the material to her chest, though in the reflection of the darkened window behind her, I could see the smooth expanse of her naked back.

How far would I push her?

She *had* disobeyed me, after all. She needed to be punished. She needed to *learn* not to challenge me, even if her defiance made my cock hard.

“Lower,” I ordered.

Her breath hitched. Primal satisfaction heated my belly when I saw my bite marks in her neck. Like an imprint of my fingertips, my mark on her was unmistakable.

She shifted the material down—so much *fucking* material—baring the valley of her breasts, smooth and unblemished. More venom flooded across my tongue, thinking of biting her there too.

Maybe I would.

She needed to learn this lesson.

“Lower, wife,” I ordered again.

She wanted a distraction? I would give her one.

Wrapping a hand around her hip, I dragged her forward. Her breaths were heaving, but she finally let her dress slip. I swallowed my groan, my gaze briefly catching on the tipped peaks of her brown nipples before I lowered my head.

Before I sunk my fangs deep, I nipped at the fleshy mound of her breast, holding it tight in warning. Gemma froze. Her nipples went so tight and puckered that I thought it must feel painful.

Good.

Need was riding me hard, and I didn't wait any longer.

With a rough huff, I sank my incisors into her, feeling her body jerk beneath my grip as my venom flooded into the wound. I had hungered for her blood since last night. Though I'd had the best damn sleep of my life, I'd woken craving her scent and the heady, almost spicy taste of her blood. I'd been called into the village that morning, forgoing the morning meal, and had made my rounds in Laras, fangs elongated, venom dripping for her taste. If the villagers had noticed, they hadn't said anything about the tightness of my clothes or the fact that I'd been clearly on the verge of a rage. Instead, they'd steered clear.

Though...I actually felt in control of a rage. I felt like I could trigger it at will if necessary, which had *never* happened in my lifetime. That was powerful in itself.

Blood-mated Kylorr were always easy to recognize, and I'd caught more than a few envious stares from males and females alike as I'd journeyed through Laras.

Gemma couldn't hold her moan, just as I'd known she wouldn't be able to. For one so tightly wound, for one who held her emotions incredibly close, she was a loud and expressive little female when it came to *this*. To pleasure.

And truthfully, right at this moment, that knowledge made my cock thicken more than the taste of her blood, more than the actual act of feeding, of consuming.

I closed my eyes, my cheek pressed against the valley of her heavy breasts, as I feasted. As I pulled and sucked and licked. I wrapped my hand in the neat knot of her hair, tugging her head back, while keeping her steady on her feet, ensuring that my horns didn't accidentally gouge her face. My jaw scraped her nipple. She shuddered, a violent trembling of her body, when my tongue flicked out to catch an escaping drop of blood. I wanted everything. I would allow nothing to go to waste.

Her hands were biting into my forearms. My body took on a mind of its own, grinding my cock into her fucking thigh, as hunched over as I was. I hissed when a drop of pre-come pushed from my tip and wet the front of my pants.

Vaan, I couldn't help but silently curse. I'll never be able to feed from anyone else again.

And *that*...was a frightening, grim realization.

In response, I drew her blood even deeper, the sounds wet, even obscene. I was usually neat when I fed. With Gemma? I was worried I wouldn't be able to get enough, worried she'd pull away before I sated myself.

Her breathing changed. Her rough pants were coming out in tiny gasps. She was close, on the edge of climax. I could bring her there. I could push her over that edge and make her fall.

But this wasn't about her pleasure.

Though it was one of the hardest things I'd had to do, I released her with a gruff growl of frustration.

In shock, her eyes found mine, her expression twisted in need. The front of her dress was slumped, baring her breasts... which I found surprisingly erotic. Especially with the mark of my bite adorning one. They were a perfect size to cup fully in my hands. Her nipples were tight, high, and brown, though the flesh around them was flushed pink.

When I shifted, she gasped and scrambled to cover herself, clutching the front of her dress to her chest. I felt the back of my vest give, a little tear forming near the seam where my muscles were growing, shifting.

“Don’t disobey me,” I rasped, enjoying the way her eyes narrowed on me, “and I might let you come next time, wife.”

Outrage sparked in those eyes, lighting them up in a fascinating way.

There was a sudden *bang* at the door, and my head whipped behind me, fangs bared, a purely primal instinct. Someone was close. Close to my blood mate, so soon after I’d fed from her.

I nearly ripped the door off its hinges, a growl building in my chest.

Kalia’s dark glare met mine in the darkness.

All the fight left me.

“Kalia,” I hissed. “What in Raazos’s blood are you doing?”

“I can ask you the same thing,” she snapped back. Her eyes tracked to Gemma, who stood, wide eyed, in the center of the records room, half-undressed. My wife’s cheeks were flushing, though instead of in pleasure, this seemed to be in mortification. Kalia looked disgusted when she glared at me and said, “You *promised* me that...that you...”

My sister’s words trailed off.

Because she’d finally *looked* at me.

“No,” she breathed. She froze, her own eyes bulging. “Are you...are you—”

Kalia didn’t even finish her words. She spun on her heel, giving her wings a pump to propel her quickly down the hallway.

“Kalia,” I growled. “Fuck.”

With a brief glance back at Gemma, I stepped out into the hallway, going after my sister without another word.

“Kalia!”

But when I reached the entrance hall, she was already gone, the doors to the terrace outside thrown wide open.

I went out into the night to find her.

CHAPTER 18

*K*alia was on the edge of the Silver Sea, one of her preferred quiet places to go when she wished to be alone. Mine was the roof of the keep. Kalia's was here. Or in the northern forests.

She refused to look at me when I landed next to her, though her nose wrinkled.

“You smell like her.”

And I still taste her on my tongue, I couldn't help but think.

I exhaled a sharp breath. “Kalia.”

“What?” she hissed.

I didn't know what to say other than, “She's my *wife*.”

“You don't have to *feed* from her!” Kalia yelled, her voice rising, carrying over the lake.

“Raazos demands—”

“I don't bend to Raazos!” Kalia argued, glaring at me in the moonlight. “I never wanted her here. Aina's soul can be guided back to us without your foolish sense of vengeance! We should've been searching Pe'ji all this time for her body. We just need her soul gem. *That's* why she's lost. Kythel didn't want this either. Neither did Lucen or Thaine. But *you*. You and Kaldur. *You* wanted her here. *You* brought her here. Now I can smell her all over the keep. In our family's halls.”

“I *never* promised you that I wouldn’t feed from her,” I growled. “I was always going to strengthen myself on her blood. On Hara blood.”

She breathed out a disbelieving laugh. “And look at what you’ve done, Azur. Look at what you’ve done by *strengthening* yourself on her blood.”

“What I’ve done?” I asked, narrowing my eyes on her. “You think I had a *choice* in this?”

“You’re bonded now,” Kalia hissed, her silver tears welling in her eyes. “This can’t be undone!”

“You don’t think I know that?” I asked, gnashing my back teeth.

“Well, you got what you wanted,” she flung back. “The blood of our enemy in the Kaalium’s bloodline. Only now your sons and daughters will share Hara blood too.”

I stiffened. A growl of warning rose from my throat, violent and quick, making Kalia still. She was too loose with her tongue. Her temper often got the best of her, and I saw the flash of guilt on her face before she looked away from me.

“My plans haven’t changed,” I informed her gruffly. “This changes nothing.”

Kalia shook her head, disregarding my words. “Then you’re a fool. And I never thought you a fool before now, brother. This changes *everything*.”

Running a palm over my horn, I cursed low under my breath.

Kalia sniffed and said, “Maybe I will go to Salaire after all. To live with Lucen.”

My lips pressed.

“Maybe that would be for the best,” I told her, ignoring the twist of hurt on her face. “Her presence here obviously upsets you. Regardless of what you believe, Kalia, the last thing I want to do is hurt you.”

“Then send her away,” she pleaded softly, blinking up at me. “Send her away before the blood bond grows too strong.”

If Kalia could feel what I felt, she would know how laughable her words sounded to me. Which should’ve been my first hint that I was *already* in too deep.

“I can’t do that.”

Kalia nibbled on her bottom lip, her small fang poking out. When she’d been younger, she couldn’t quite learn how to retract them properly and now often forgot when they were out.

“Then I’d better get used to her being here,” Kalia finally said. Softly. Resigned.

The thing about my sister was that she had a big heart. Yes, she had a quick temper, like our father, but she had the ability to forgive and accept just as quickly. She was the kindest soul I knew too, though she could have a cutting tongue.

The side of Gemma I’d witnessed tonight—vulnerable and honest but proud—I had a feeling that Kalia and Gemma would get along just fine. More than fine. If she opened herself up to Gemma, they might even find themselves friends.

And *that* honestly worried me more than the blood bond.

“Have you even told our brothers yet? About what she is to you?” she asked quietly. “Have you told Kythel?”

Unease slid in my belly. “No. Not yet.”

Kalia shook her head slowly.

“I’m sure he can already feel it,” she said.

CHAPTER 19

*I*t was early afternoon, and I was plucking dead flowers from the underbrush of the rotting vines, tossing them haphazardly behind me.

The thought of being inside the keep that day—even returning to the records room—filled me with restlessness.

I needed to be outside. I needed to be doing something with my hands, my attentions diverted, the sunlight warming my skin.

And it was a beautiful day too. A cool breeze swept through the terrace where I was working, bringing with it the brininess of the sea. The sun was high overhead, and my dress was beginning to cling to my back from the sweat.

For today I'd chosen a loose, thin material.

Which was a lucky thing, I realized shortly after I'd begun cleaning the banisters.

Because with every small, minuscule movement, the smooth fabric would brush Azur's bite across my breast.

It didn't hurt, but the flesh surrounding the two fang marks was overly sensitive.

Every touch against it brought a spark. A memory of awareness, of arousal and frustration spiraling through me.

I was confused. Terribly, desperately confused.

Which was why I didn't want to be cooped up within the keep, no matter how desperately I wanted to continue sorting

through the old *lore* records.

I didn't *want* to feel desire and pleasure whenever Azur drank from me. I didn't *want* to feel anticipation. Yet last night, I'd been holding my breath, impatient, as he'd taunted me.

I'd sparked that feeding. I'd pushed the subject of it because it had been easier than having to talk about my father and the sisters that I loved and had left behind.

There was another strange emotion I'd discovered too.

Because in the aftermath of Azur nearly flying out of the room, chasing after Kalia once she'd discovered us, I had felt my throat tighten. I had felt my belly lurch.

And the *pinch*.

The terrible pinch of what I knew was jealousy had alarmed me almost as much as my eager submission for Azur's bite.

The betrayal on Kalia's face had haunted me late into the night. I should've been *grateful* that her interruption had propelled Azur from the room—leaving me to process what had happened between us—only I wasn't.

I felt like a damn mistress.

Something dirty.

Something hidden away.

Grumbling under my breath, I tore at some blackened vines that were wrapped around the legs of the banister. They were brittle in my palms and nearly disintegrated into dust when I tugged.

A shadow flew over me, briefly flickering the sun, dappled along the terrace's worn stones.

Looking up, I didn't see anything, and I wiped my sweaty forehead, likely smearing vine rot over my skin. My dress tightened uncomfortably around my legs when I shifted, and I grumbled again, wondering if I could make some pants and

some loose tops, like Ludayn's. Hers seemed more comfortable than—

A loud *thomp* just behind me nearly made me screech in alarm.

“*What are you doing?*” came the loud, anguished cry.

Kalia.

I froze as she came into view. Her hair was wind swept. Had it been her shadow I'd seen flying above?

“Good afternoon,” I found myself saying, my brain not quite caught up with my tongue, “I'm just—”

Her glare rivaled Azur's, cutting me to the bone.

And that glare made me freeze all over, making my lips part.

Because for the first time, I could see something that I hadn't before.

She and Azur had the same eyes.

The *same exact* eyes.

It was *his* glare spearing me right now.

“Oh,” I breathed, refusing to acknowledge the *relief* that spread through my chest at the realization. That was incredibly alarming. “Oh, gods, you're—”

“Put them back!” Kalia growled. “Put them back now, and don't touch these *ever* again!”

“Put them back?” I asked, still reeling. I frowned, looking down to the rot. “There is nothing to put back.”

When I looked up, I stiffened because tears had pooled in her gaze. Though she was glaring daggers at me, she looked like she was on the verge of breaking down.

“Kalia, I'm sorry,” I breathed. I didn't understand what was causing this. “I'm trying to help them grow, not hurt them! Look at all the rot under here.”

I lifted a section I hadn't yet reached. The underside of the banister was nearly stained black with it.

“I’m clearing it all out so more will grow,” I said hurriedly, seeing her examine the rot, blinking. “But these plants haven’t been tended to in a very long time. They need a little help, and then they’ll be even stronger than before, I promise.”

My words seemed to mollify her. It took long, tense moments of dragged out silence for her shoulders to finally slump forward. She prodded at a deadened vine with her booted foot, refusing to meet my eyes, even as she wiped at her silver-streaked cheeks.

And in that moment, she reminded me of Piper. Piper with her vibrant though mercurial emotions. She ran hot, but she could also be achingly sweet. Even shy.

Kalia’s gray skin looked lightened in the sunlight. Smooth like suede. Reaching forward, she touched a drooping bloom of one starwood flower, running her black, sharpened claws over the delicate petals.

“You know about plants?” Kalia asked me, her tone mistrustful, like I was lying to her. “Plants like these?”

Hesitantly, I said, “In the Collis, we had spreading vines that crawled up the walls of our house. They had these bright purple flowers that bloomed when it rained. Plants like these...they grow incredibly fast, so you need to be diligent about caring for them.” I let the bundle of dead vines drop to the terrace floor, hiding the decay one more. “Or else you end up with a tangled, overgrown mess like this. The vines can’t spread. They get choked out. And if they can’t spread, then new flowers can’t grow.”

I was peering at Kalia closely as I rambled. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t seen it before.

Kalia was his *sister*. Or a close relative at the very least. They had the same shade of black hair, which had a blue hue in the sunlight. The same eyes. Even her observant expression reminded me of him, the way he’d watch me like prey, tracking my every movement.

Only, on Kalia, it came across as mistrustfully curious. Not predatory.

I wanted her to like me, I decided. Because she reminded me of my own sister?

I was alone here. Except for Ludayn and Maazin, I rarely spoke to anyone else. The keepers gave me space, bowing their heads when I passed. And Azur...that was another kind of interaction entirely. He wasn't my friend. Then again, he wasn't quite the enemy I thought he'd be either.

"The starwood flowers are important to you?" I asked gently, cocking my head to the side.

Kalia sniffled. Her eyes flitted to me once, peering at me, before she looked away. Like she didn't want to stare at me too long.

"They were my mother's favorite," Kalia finally said, a deep sigh escaping her. She seemed to shake herself, straightening her spine. When she did, she regarded me steadily, two of her small fangs peeking out behind her top lip. She really was quite beautiful. House Kaalium had strong, strong genes. It shamed me that I'd always pictured the Kylorr as hulking, terrifying, ruthless beasts before. I'd been very, very wrong. "She had a gift for these things. She tried to teach me to care for the plants. These and in her garden too. I never could. And now I wish I had listened to her better."

There was a tendril of grief in her voice. Grief that I recognized well. It pulled at me, making me soften in a way that went beyond mere understanding.

"My mother died too," I told her. Kalia regarded me carefully, though she blinked in surprise. "Five years ago. And every day I wish that I could revisit our memories. Because I'm sure she tried to teach me a lot and I didn't know how to listen. Not then."

Kalia processed my words, casting her eyes skyward for a brief moment in apparent thought. Then she looked back to me, even taking a step closer.

"We stopped having the flowers tended to last year," Kalia admitted, kneeling beside me, reaching out to touch a deadened stalk I'd pulled earlier. She traced the withered

fibers with her claws. “One of the keepers accidentally ruined an entire wall of them. I didn’t trust anyone else to touch them since.”

She gestured behind me, to my left. There was a little alcove in the stone wall that led down to the courtyard. A small bench was perched there, but behind it, the starwood flowers were simply gone. The stone was stained black where they’d once been.

“Azur promised me he wouldn’t let anyone else touch them. Because if they were destroyed...another part of her would be lost. These are memories of her,” Kalia said, reaching out to stroke one of the healthier vines. “Tethering her here. With us. They belong at the keep.”

I folded my hands in my lap. I felt a drip of sweat roll down my back, and when I shifted, I felt Azur’s bite spark against the material of my dress.

“I can understand why you were upset when you saw me tearing at them.”

Especially since she’d made it obvious she didn’t like me. If I’d been in her situation, I would’ve reacted worse. How would I feel if I saw someone digging around the lake on our estate?

“I’m sorry. I should’ve asked before I touched them.”

“You can make them healthy again?” Kalia asked with hesitant hope in her voice.

Behind me, there was a pile of decay and dead, shriveled blooms. I scanned the perimeter of the terrace, which stretched almost as long as House Kaalium’s keep, not including the courtyard below. And there was still the western and eastern ends of the house that I hadn’t even explored yet. Kalia had said there was a garden? I wondered where.

A undertaking like this would take days, possibly even a week. I’d been determined to do it alone, considering I had a lot of time to fill.

“How about I teach you how to care for them?” I suggested. “My pruning method might be a little aggressive

for your tastes, so we can be more gentle with the rest. And once you see that they start to bloom again and you know the vines aren't being harmed, we can go back through and clean up the rest."

Kalia looked bewildered. She blinked quickly. "You...you would do that?"

"It's long work," I warned her. I gave her a hesitant smile. "But there is something immensely satisfying in it."

Kalia stared at me for a long time. Long enough to make me think I'd said or done something wrong.

But she wasn't glaring at me. She wasn't crying. She wasn't even frowning.

She was assessing me. Her gaze went to the starwood flowers.

"I would like that," Kalia finally said, sighing, her shoulders dropping again. I felt her gaze drift downward, stilling on the column of my neck, and a part of me tensed when her lips pressed together. Because I knew she saw it. Azur's bite. Not from last night, but the night before. It hadn't quite healed yet, though it had nearly disappeared, strangely enough. "I'm sorry for yelling. And for last night," she mumbled.

I adjusted an escaped tendril of my hair, hoping to shield a little of the bite mark, though I knew it was fruitless. Kalia seemed embarrassed too.

"Let's forget about it," I said quietly.

There was movement behind her, and my eyes sharpened on the keep. Specifically on a balcony of the west wing.

My breath hitched.

Azur.

He was watching us.

Judging from the windows, the balcony was only two rooms down from the records room in the west wing. He had

his hands braced on the stone ledge, his wings flared wide as if he'd just been about to take flight.

I realized he'd probably heard Kalia yelling and had come out to see what the commotion was.

Or he'd been watching you before then, came the stray thought.

Even from this distance, I could feel his eyes on me.

As if on cue, the mark at my breast burned and heated. The memory of pleasure—hot and tight and aching—returned, but I swung around quickly, firmly pushing it from my mind.

“Let's get started,” I said, keeping my voice light and airy.

Kalia gave me a tentative smile in return.

If she noticed the way my skin heated, she didn't comment on it.

It didn't help that I could still feel Azur's gaze on my back.

CHAPTER 20

“*T*he deed to the estate was finalized yesterday,” Zaale informed me, hovering next to my desk, though I had my back to him, peering out the window down to the grounds below.

Gemma and Kalia were down there.

Again.

The third time in three days.

“It was approved by the New Everton Council. The Nulaxy representative uploaded it to our Halo. He apologized for the delay,” Zaale continued.

The soft raspiness of his voice was growing more pronounced every day. I wanted him to give up his post. I wanted him to *relax*, but he had refused. I knew that Zaale wouldn't know what to do with himself if he stepped down at head keeper.

The deed.

“Good,” I grunted. “Mr. Cross has his uses, it seems.”

“Does the *Kylaira* know?” Zaale asked.

“No,” I said, turning from the window. “She doesn't.”

He inclined his head in an affirmative nod, his horns, streaked with silver tendrils, glimmering with the high afternoon sun.

“Do you plan to inform her?”

Having the Hara's estate under my control had always been a part of the plan. Gemma likely hadn't known that Rye Hara had already lost it. Over a year ago. He'd given the deed to a collector as collateral for a gambling debt.

When he'd first heard of my proposal, the first thing he'd had Mr. Cross amend to the marriage contract was a stipulation for the recovery of the deed. To pay off yet *another* collector—a toothy Binshay who also dabbled in vessel scrapping—to reclaim it.

But I'd had an amendment of my own, one Rye Hara hadn't liked.

In the end, it had come down to whether he wished for his deed to be owned by the Binshay...or to be owned by the Kylorr who married his eldest daughter.

As of yesterday, the Hara estate in the Collis of New Everton was *mine*.

After I'd originally brokered the deal, I'd had malicious thoughts of selling the deed to whatever greedy-palmed, beady-eyed, salivating dealer I could find. The Haras would be kicked out of their own home with nowhere to turn. The estate would be overrun by leeches looking to profit off their belongings. All of New Earth would know their shame because I would ensure that it would be plastered on every inter-Quadrant database and news com network I could find.

And *then* I would turn the video feed over to War Crimes. Rye Hara would be tried and imprisoned. He'd rot away on a prison planet for the rest of his life, and thinking about *that* had made venom leak over my tongue, delicious and sweet.

Now there was only one problem.

My wife.

"No," I finally answered Zaale. "She doesn't need to know."

"What should I do with the deed?"

"Put it with the others," I told him. In our family's secure network on our Halo. "And have a parchment copy placed in

our vault.”

“I will,” Zaale said.

When I returned to my desk, however, I saw him hesitate on the threshold of the room.

“Anything else?” I asked, peering at him closely.

“The alerts you had Setlan set up,” Zaale started.

Setlan was our family’s private ambassador and advisor. If we needed *anything* done off planet, he would take care of it. It had been him who’d approached Mr. Cross with my proposal, after all.

I straightened as Zaale let out a mighty huff.

“It seems Rye Hara opened up a credits line with a collector on Vrano.”

“*Vaan*,” I cursed under my breath, dragging a hand over my horn. As if on cue, I heard Gemma’s laugh echo up from the terrace. I had the windows propped open, allowing a warm breeze to blow through my private offices. Every now and again, I’d catch a spare word of my wife and sister’s conversation. A laugh or two, even from my sister, which made a strange tightness in my chest snap and pull. “When?”

“This morning.”

Gemma would be devastated by the news.

When I’d first married her, I would have delighted in that misery. I would have fed on it like blood, lapping it up and feeling it warm me from the inside out. Rye Hara’s desperation—which I now knew was mingled with an addiction—would have felt *sublime*. Better than sex and more satisfying than a long drink from a blood giver after flying all night.

Now?

Now the announcement was accompanied by an uneasy twist in my gut. Because now I knew what Gemma had given up to try to help her family. Of which, I had a feeling she’d only revealed a fraction to me. Her loyalty to her sisters, especially, made the news all the more discomfiting.

He will never stop, I thought.

I'd told her as much four nights ago. In the quiet of the records room. Though I'd fed from her every night since—just thinking about her shuddering and gasping last night as I'd fed from her neck, feeling her squirm against me, filled me with sudden and alarming need—we hadn't returned to the subject of her family. Or her father.

She seemed to believe he could stop.

Or at least a hopeful, optimistic part of her did.

I believed differently.

“Have Setlan stop the deal,” I growled to Zaale. “Immediately. Make sure whoever it is on Vrano knows the Haras' connection with House Kaalium.”

That would be enough to warn any collectors away.

“I'll alert him now,” Zaale said, studying me with an expression I wasn't used to. One he often used with Kalia, however, because while he loved her, he could never quite figure her out.

“Send word to Rye Hara too,” I rasped, my fists clenching on the surface of my desk. “Tell him that if he approaches another collector, it will be a breach of his agreement with us. And with his daughter.”

The only piece of the Collis estate that Rye Hara refused to give up was a *lake*. A disgusting, slime-ridden little lake in the back of the house. But any breach of contract would ensure that I would own that too. My words would be a warning. A reminder that there was still much, much more that I could take.

If I had insinuated that I'd also take out my aggressions and frustrations on his daughter should he anger me?

Well...I'd let him continue to think that.

Fear was a powerful motivator.

There was a buzzing starting up underneath my skin. I took in a deep breath after Zaale departed with a sharp nod. I

clenched the edges of my desk, but the frustration wouldn't leave and there was venom dripping on my tongue.

Now I was restless. Thinking of that useless sack of bones who had ruined himself and his family. Who had torn *mine* apart.

Raazos.

With a muted curse, I rose and went to the balcony. I opened the wide gate and launched myself into the air, flaring my wings wide, circling down to the terrace. My eyes were locked on Gemma. Another dress today, this one beige in color. Hideous. Again. Even so, each day, the punishing fantasy of slipping whatever ugly dress up around her waist and drinking from her cunt was becoming more and more distracting.

Kalia caught sight of me before my wife did. She narrowed her gaze on me, and I landed with a loud *thump* behind Gemma. Who gasped and turned, her hand pressed to her chest.

When she saw me, she stilled. Her tongue darted out to swipe at her plump lips, tightening my belly with need. Did she realize that her neck had begun to flush red whenever she saw me? Blood rushing. *Preparing*. Like her body knew who it belonged to and it was doing whatever it could to please its master.

“Leave us,” I growled at Kalia.

My sister didn't like that. Even still, she grumbled and rose to her feet. “Just because you're the *Kyzaire*, doesn't mean you can order me around, *brother*.”

“Kalia,” I bit out, though my eyes had never left Gemma's. The need for my *kyrana*'s blood was like an addiction. I needed my next fix. And I needed it *now*. Yesterday had been the first time I'd drunk from her twice in one day. Today would likely be the same. It was only afternoon.

It would only get worse.

Kalia rolled her eyes. Another human reaction she'd probably picked up in the village, likely from Neela...or even

from Gemma.

“You’re even worse than Kythel,” she grumbled, stomping off before she eventually took to the sky, flying around the front of the keep, out of sight.

“Who’s Kythel?” Gemma asked, her voice soft and measured.

She was a mess.

Her hair was wild, trying to escape her ever-present bun, sticking to the dampness of her forehead and the back of her neck. It was much too warm for her to be wearing that long-sleeved monstrosity, even if I liked the wide neckline, showing off my plethora of bites from the last few days.

I jerked my chin up, gesturing for her to rise from her knees. Her hands were filthy and she had scrapes across the backs of her fingers from the starwood vines.

“Now?” she asked, nibbling on her bottom lip. She looked back to the section of the banister she and my sister had been working on tearing out. “But we’re almost done, and—”

“Gemma,” I growled.

She huffed, making my lips twitch, though I hid it with a scowl.

“Very well. You’re awfully bossy, you know that?” she asked, her tone positively *prim*, as she rose, wiping her hands on a nearby cloth before throwing it to the ground. “Who’s Kythel?”

Won’t let that go, I thought.

“My brother,” I grunted.

My twin, was what I left unspoken.

Fire and ice, our mother used to called us. Me? I could burn anyone with my scorn. Kythel? He’d speared them straight through the heart with the ice in his gaze.

Sometimes, we could be either. Or we could be both.

“One of your many brothers,” Gemma murmured, eyeing me as I approached. “Which territory does he oversee?”

Was she trying to distract me?

I wouldn’t allow it.

“Erzos,” I rumbled, twining my arms around her.

“Oh. You—you want to feed *here*?” she asked, her gaze flitting behind me. Nervous.

I felt my lips curl. Leaning down, I bit at her neck but didn’t break the flesh with my fangs. Only gentle nips meant to warn.

“Why not here? Afraid all the keep will hear your moans as you come?” I questioned, my voice deepening and roughening with every word.

Fuck, I wanted that. Hearing her come...it no longer filled me with a sense of restless shame. Knowing I was giving pleasure to the daughter of an enemy. Instead, it made me feel victorious. Like I’d slaughtered my way across a battlefield and come out the other side.

Her breath whistled through her nostrils. “All the windows face this way, and the keepers will see—”

My arms tightened around her waist and then I leapt up, whipping my wings down to propel us forward.

Her muted scream was muffled in my vest. I’d been training earlier this morning, and as such, her hands scrambled over my gauntlets, trying to grip the smooth metal.

Was she worried I’d let her fall?

That I would fly her up miles above the keep and just...let go?

I would do it to her father, I realized. In a heartbeat.

Then her scream stopped. I hadn’t meant to fly us far. Just to the private alcove of the courtyard below, away from the prying eyes of the keep, where we wouldn’t be disturbed for a handful of moments.

Yet I found myself journeying over the Silver Sea until we were skimming just above the water, clear and calm that afternoon. Perfect.

Gemma had had her legs wrapped around mine in her initial panic, but when she realized that I had a strong grip on her—holding her waist and back in the vice of my arms—I saw her tilt her head back hesitantly.

I picked up speed, wondering what she would do as the wind whipped around us. I tilted our angle so that we were parallel to the water and so that her back was to it. Like I could lay her down among the reflections and small waves, a bed of our own making.

In the wind, whatever tie that had gripped her hair in that damn bun came loose, disappearing into the sea below. Her hair tumbled down, a black waterfall of tangled silk, and she gasped when the ends skimmed across the surface of the sea, her eyes flying to mine. A bloom of her scent reached me now that her hair was no longer bound. She smelled like the soap the keepers purchased from the village. Made from the leaves in the northern forests, clean and fresh, and it mingled with her own tantalizing scent that had venom dripping from my fangs.

We were getting farther and farther from the keep.

I saw the exact moment that wonderment sprang to life in Gemma's eyes.

It hit me square in the chest, making my hands tighten on her.

She looked up at me with parted lips that slowly curved into a smile. Suddenly, a reverberating bolt of energy jolted through my whole body, ringing through my blood, quickening my heart, and steeling my cock.

Her head lolled back, pushing her breasts up, baring her neck, which was covered in my bites. She wanted to watch the Silver Sea passing underneath us, but she didn't realize what an erotic image she presented, stretched out with delight on her lips as her breasts rose and fell in excitement. A graceful arm reached out, and I watched with bated breath as she

skimmed her fingertips across the water, sending sparks of the salty sea rising in their wake.

Gemma laughed, low and husky before it was carried away by the wind.

She was *burned* into my memory. Just like this. I didn't think I would *ever* forget this.

How could I have ever thought her plain?

My cock gave a warning throb. The bulge at the base of my cock fluttered and tightened, a rhythmic pulsing that made me gnash my teeth together.

Abruptly, I changed directions, making Gemma gasp. Hurling back to the keep, I flew faster and faster, pumping my wings until all I heard was a rushing in my ears and all I could see was Gemma's delighted grin, her white dull teeth flashing in the afternoon sunlight, which spread over her skin and made her glow golden.

"*Vaan*," I cursed under my breath, feeling like I was on the verge of coming in my damn pants with no physical stimulation at all. I would come as I drank from her, I knew. It hadn't happened before, but it would this afternoon.

Gemma gasped when I landed on the courtyard terrace, the impact no doubt jarring and sudden. In the next moment, I dragged her into the small space where we'd be hidden from view of the keep, tucked away among the tangled starwood vines and the stone wall of the staircase at our backs.

Gemma was gripping my vest, bunching the stiff material in her hands. Her hair was a wild, windswept mess, lovely and chaotic. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright, and she was still smiling, those plump, soft lips curling.

And suddenly, I needed to taste them almost as much as I needed to feed from her.

Pinning her up against the wall of the staircase, I ducked my head, the sensation of wild and feral desire, one that bordered on madness, overcoming me.

“Azur,” she gasped, her smile finally dying, replaced by a spark of awareness at our closeness and the roughness of my grip on her hips.

My cock pulsed with my name.

This is madness, I thought.

When our lips met, it felt like a violent thing.

Her lips were perfectly soft. Tender. She gasped into my mouth, and I groaned, digging my claws into the flesh of her hips, dragging her closer. I devoured her until she was clinging to me, until I was stroking my tongue across hers, finding her impossibly soft there too. Slick and needy.

My fangs pricked her bottom lip, and I growled, tasting the bloom of her blood. Just a small tease. A small taste.

This is madness, I thought again.

I couldn't stop.

CHAPTER 21

A swirl of golden pleasure was tightening and tightening in my belly. Tightening into a single solid thread that threatened to snap at any moment.

One glorious moment, we'd been flying. I'd felt free. I'd felt *other*. Like I'd been this entirely new being, whose world had just opened up to endless possibilities. I'd felt powerful.

Now I had my back against a wall and a Kylorr between my thighs, wedging himself against my body like he was trying to come into my skin.

And I was *parting* for him.

I was breathing into his kiss, tasting my own blood, feeling my head swirl whenever he licked at my tongue.

He tasted divine. There was a roughness to his kiss that made me *crazed*. I didn't know what was happening. All I knew was that I expected my pleasure and I would damn well get it.

When he tore his mouth away, I nearly groaned at the loss. My back left the warm stone of the staircase wall. The alcove we were in made a private little square, only big enough for us. Our only witness was the sea. It stretched wide, glittering and perfect, and I found myself blinking at it with a heavily lidded gaze as Azur turned me forward. As he pushed me over the banister railing of the courtyard terrace.

The stone was pushed under my breasts, and I gripped the railing hard. Azur bent over me, tugging hard at the neckline of my dress, and I heard it rip. He pushed the material down,

and my breasts spilled out, the warm breeze drifting over them, making them pebble and stiffen.

His hot, roughened palm cupped one, and a ragged, shocked moan tumbled from my throat. His fingers pinched at one nipple, twisting it hard enough to make me squirm and my clit flutter, and I dug my nails into the stone, biting my lip, tasting my blood.

When he pinched again, I felt my knees tremble. My eyes flew wide, feeling the beginnings of my orgasm rising, hot and fast.

“Oh gods,” I whimpered.

His chuckle sounded strained and tight.

“I can make you come like this,” he breathed in my ear. “You don’t need my venom at all, do you, little wife?”

His venom?

I whimpered, dragging in lungfuls of air.

Our feedings were getting more and more *physical*.

Ever since the night in Maazin’s office, when he’d sunk his fangs into my breast and I’d felt the rasp of his chin abrade across my nipple, the feedings had been different. Like we were toying and playing at the edge of what could be. Like Azur kept pushing me and pushing me until he found my limits. Then he’d push some more.

We had an agreement. I would be whatever he wanted me to be during our feeding. I would act however he wanted me to act: fearful or submissive. I would play a role.

Only, Azur hadn’t demanded anything from me. He liked me needy though. He liked when I moaned for his bite.

The frightening thing was that I wasn’t playing a role.

Azur was bent over me, his front plastered to my back, as he tugged at my pebbled nipples. Every pull sent a flurry of sensation hurtling straight to my cunt.

Then Azur was groaning. He moved closer, and I was gasping for breath, tilting my head to the side, awaiting—no,

needing—to feel that prick of pain, followed by the hot blur of pleasure.

I didn't have to wait long.

But just as Azur bit my neck, as that first dizzying pull made me hiss, I felt his hand leave my breast and dive under the skirts of my dress.

I didn't even tense when I felt his hand find me, so slick and warm that it was dripping down my thighs. I was lost. I spread my legs wider, sharp *zaps* of wicked desire skittering up my spine.

“Good wife,” he growled against my skin, and I gasped. “So fucking wet for me, *kyrana*.”

The callouses and the roughness of his fingers abraded sensitive flesh. I jerked and moaned, my gaze half-lidded, staring unseeingly out at the Silver Sea.

The orgasm came swiftly. From the lightest of touches against my clit, Azur made me jerk, and it set me off like a bomb. I broke. *Shattered*. With his fangs deep in my neck and his hand underneath my dress, I rocked and moaned and hissed and pleaded. I might have even screamed, the sound carrying over the water, and his dark laugh abruptly cut off when he ground his cock into the deep cleft of my ass.

His curse was a muffled whisper across my skin as he drank deep. As he ground that thick shaft, hard like steel, into me.

I was *other* again.

I didn't feel like myself.

I was entirely new, created from Azur's touch and crafted from the sublime pleasure that flooded me, altering every network in my body, every cell.

A second orgasm sparked between my thighs. A deep clenching that made me feel empty, as my walls spasmed and convulsed around nothing. I groaned, rocking against him. The movement made my exposed nipples drag across the rough,

textured stone. It felt *good*. So damn good. That tiny bit of pain that made me want to hold my breath.

Azur froze. His fangs tore from my neck and every muscle in his body went rigid. His hips jerked. I could *feel* his cock swell. I could feel it twitch and spill in release. But he didn't make a single sound.

With a sharp huff, Azur's hand dropped from between my legs. The skirts of my dress settled. I felt warm. Like I was floating in a dreamy pink haze. Or was I just dizzy?

Azur turned me around. I thought he might leave. That he would leave me hanging over the banister with a ripped dress and flushed cheeks. That was what he did whenever he fed. Though the feedings were *intense*, he *always* left. Though he usually left me in my rooms where I could stumble right to bed afterward.

His expression was unreadable as he peered down at me. Suddenly, a wave of dizziness made me clutch at his forearm, keeping me steady. The world tilted.

Azur's brow furrowed.

"Gemma," he murmured quietly, his voice hoarse. His eyes were bright too. Burning like a roaring fire, embers peeking out at me.

"Hmm?"

His jaw tightened. "Have you been taking the *baanye*?"

My blink was slow. "The *baanye*?"

"The supplement," he said, pressing his fingers to my wrist. His fangs hadn't retracted yet. "To help your body replenish itself after my feedings."

"Oh," I said. Wasn't he going to leave? "I'm not sure. Maybe Ludayn knows."

"*Raazos*," he cursed. "You should have been taking it this whole time! I told you to take it, didn't I?"

I pushed at his chest, hearing the spark of his annoyance. As if he hadn't just ground himself against me until he'd

flooded his pants.

“I don’t know what I eat,” I argued. He’d fed from me twice yesterday. And now this feeding. I’d been a little tired this morning but nothing that would prevent me from working on the terrace all afternoon. “Ludayn brings me my meals, and I eat whatever is there. Except for that sludge tea.”

Azur bit out a sigh, his left wing twitching behind him. Just seeing it reminded me of flying. I wanted to do that again. I’d never felt anything more exhilarating.

“*Baanye* is usually put in that *sludge tea*, you impossible female,” he rumbled softly.

Even though his eyes were sparking with irritation, I wasn’t afraid of him. With the exception of those first couple days...I wasn’t afraid of Azur.

He wasn’t what I’d thought he’d be.

None of this was how I’d thought it’d be.

“You’ll drink it,” he told me, jabbing the finger, which had been pressing and rolling my clit, toward me. I blinked, my cheeks flushing, my gaze fastening on the very tip, which appeared...wet. *Gods*. A deep sound rumbled from his throat when he saw where my attention was directed. “Yes?”

“Yes,” I said softly, feeling the sudden wave of dizziness fade. For now.

He’d grown in size again. I noticed he’d begun to wear looser clothes so that when he did feed from me, he wouldn’t ruin them. I’d tried to ask Kalia about it yesterday, but the subject had been awkward and stilted, considering we’d been speaking about her brother. She’d hummed and merely told me that it happened occasionally but not every time a Kylorr fed.

But *every* time Azur fed from me, he grew. Kalia had said it was the beginnings of a rage. An actual Kylorr rage, the ones that had won entire wars. Kalia had told me that Azur could trigger one at will if he wished. Her words had made me shudder. Had made me realize how *powerful* Azur was and why I shouldn’t go poking at him with my sharp words after he fed.

Only, he'd never harmed me.

Azur rolled his neck and I heard it pop. His gaze drifted down, and it took me a moment to realize my breasts were still out, the top of the neckline ripped open.

I flushed, gathering up the material to shield my nudity.

"I only have so many dresses, you know," I grumbled, unable to help myself from gouching at him even though he was on the verge of a rage. "I'll have to sew this one just like the one from a couple nights ago."

Azur's gaze narrowed. "Don't bother," he bit out. "It's hideous and needs to be burned."

Embarrassment made my cheeks heat. My temper—normally tame and manageable—reared its head, making me snap back, "This dress has lasted me for *years*, even in the mines. Not all of us have the luxury of buying pretty things that aren't practical."

Azur's eyes *burned*. If I was afraid of him, that look would've scorched me where I stood, but as it was, I glared back at him, undaunted.

This was a game between us, I'd begun to realize. When he wasn't feeding off me, when I wasn't coming my brains out, we were usually sniping at each other.

Like a...

Well, like an old married couple.

"You will never step foot in another mine in your entire lifetime, so what does it matter?" Azur hissed back, lowering himself so that we eye level. My eyes flicked to his lips, suddenly jarred because I remembered his kiss. *Oh gods*, he'd *kissed* me, hadn't he? And I'd...*liked* it?

And I wanted to kiss him again.

A rough huff exhaled from his nostrils, and when I looked up to his eyes, I saw that *his* were now on *my* lips.

I held my breath as his dull claw reached forward, brushing the fullness of my bottom one. I was still bleeding a

little from his tiny, nipping bite, and I could taste the metallic tang on my tongue. His touch was surprisingly gentle, and when a dab of my blood came away on his thumb, I watched, with a swirl of dizziness, as he sucked the pad clean. His eyes darkened. There was a new kind of awareness stretching between us now, tight and breathless.

Azur seemed to shake himself. He straightened, towering over me, blocking the sunlight behind him, casting me in shadow.

“Besides,” he continued, clearing his throat, “you’re my wife. The *Kylaira* of Laras. You think you can continue to dress in these rags and not embarrass House Kaalium?”

I bit the side of my cheek to keep myself from snapping at him.

He saw it. Nearly smirked. And that irritated me.

“I’ll arrange for a clothier to come to the keep tomorrow morning,” he told me next, his tone stern. “I’m certain my sister will be more than pleased to help you spend my credits and fill your closets.”

I stiffened even though the greedy part of me—the thread that all the Haras seemed to share—perked up at the notion of *things*. New, glittering, pretty things. New dresses. Clothes. Things I hadn’t allowed myself to have in *years*.

The want mingled with my pride.

“I don’t need new dresses,” I said, sniffing. “I have a few that are perfectly acceptable for—”

“*Wife*,” he growled, cutting me off. He jabbed his black claw at me again, his pointed ears twitching. Which I found... fascinating. “For *once*, do not argue with me.”

I glowered at him but bit my tongue.

“Good,” he rasped, pleased. “Maybe you *can* be tamed.”

To prevent myself from clawing at his eyes, I tilted my head to regard the Silver Sea, fuming. My ire softened when I remembered the skim of the water against my fingertips, the lap of the waves against my hair as Azur had *flown* me over it.

I'd never experienced anything like that before.

I'd never felt so free. So thrilled. So weightless.

And I wanted to do it again.

Drawing in a deep breath, I turned to Azur. He might deny me. But I'd ask all the same.

"Will you take me over the sea again?"

Azur's gaze steadily flickered between my eyes. His expression was unreadable as always, his slitted pupils widening before contracting. His fangs were still elongated and pressed against his surprisingly soft lips.

"If you take the *baanye*, I will," he grumbled finally. His gaze sharpened when my lips parted. "At every meal."

A small price, I supposed, to experience the thrill of flying. I was looking at those wings in a whole new light. A new *world* had been opened up to me.

With a curt nod, trying to hide my blooming excitement, I sniffed and said primly, "That's fair."

Did Azur's lips quirk? I couldn't be certain.

Maybe...maybe my life in Krynn *could* be fulfilling. Maybe my marriage to Azur wasn't completely doomed. We seemed to be taking small steps, small compromises toward one another.

What would happen if we met in the middle?

"Ludayn," Azur called out suddenly, raising his voice.

My brow furrowed.

My indigo-haired keeper suddenly scurried down the steps from the upper terrace. My cheeks reddened. How long had she been nearby?

Likely the whole time, I knew. Gods, had she *heard* us? As my keeper, she was never far, always waiting nearby to serve me food or drinks, especially when Kalia and I worked on the starwood blooms. It was her duty, I'd begun to realize. To make sure I was content, cared for.

“Yes, *Kyzaire*?” she asked breathlessly.

“Take the *Kylaira* up to her rooms,” Azur ordered her, though his gaze never left mine. “She seems to have ripped her dress.”

I shot him a warning glare.

“So clumsy,” he purred, making my heart stutter in my chest, just as a jarring, familiar warmth bloomed between my thighs. He turned from me then, and I gaped after him. “And make sure she drinks her *baanye*. I don’t care if you have to force it down her throat.”

With that, my silver-tongued charmer of a husband disappeared, shooting into the sky, flying toward the balcony that I guessed was his office in the west wing of the keep.

I met Ludayn’s gaze with burning cheeks.

She bit her lip with glinting fangs to hide her smile. “Come, *Kylaira*, let’s get you changed.”

CHAPTER 22

“Ludayn.”

“Yes?” my keeper asked, still admiring the fabrics on my new clothes, running her fingertips over them as she organized them a third time, this time by color. Clothes that had been delivered just that morning, just four days after the initial consultation and measuring with the clothier from Laras.

Luxurious dresses spilled from my wardrobe, in various shades of blues and lilacs and silver, crafted with material so light and airy it felt like I was wearing nothing at all. Another dress was blood red. The plunging bodice shimmered with silver metal swirls which had been sewn so tightly and expertly they resembled embroidery. Kalia had argued that I needed a dress for the harvest ball, though I’d told her that Azur likely didn’t want me to attend.

She’d waved her hand and gotten her way, telling the clothier—who wasn’t a Kylorr at all but a Hindras female, small with nimble, delicate fingers—to add it to the purchase order. Estee was her name. Hindras had always reminded me of faeries from the Old Earth stories, with translucent wings to match, though they didn’t fly. But their bones seemed hollow and they had large, unblinking, black, glossy eyes that I could see my reflection in.

Also added to that purchase order—which Kalia had gleefully helped me fill, as Azur had guessed she might—were pants and trows and beautiful, flowing tops of various styles. Fitted leather vests that clung to my breasts, waist, and hips,

like Kalia wore, inlaid with metals. Even little baubles of silver to adorn my wrists and hair.

Everything together must have cost a small fortune.

And now, I watched Ludayn run her fingers over the clothing that I hadn't had the heart to touch, much less try on.

"Yes, Gemma?" she asked me again, finally noticing my silence. I'd told her to call me by my name. While she'd agreed, she told me she must call me by my proper title among company and especially in front of Azur.

"Will you do me a favor?" I asked nervously, nibbling on my lip as I debated how to ask her.

Her brow furrowed. She frowned, no doubt catching the grim tone in my voice, and said, "Of course. Whatever you need."

I took in a deep breath. Ludayn had been kind to me. We'd been spending a lot of time together, ever since I'd come to Krynn. If Kalia and I worked out on the starwood flowers, she would join us. If Kalia needed to go into the village—citing "harvest festival business"—then I would join Maazin in the records room, like I did most late afternoons, and continue on my work. Ludayn would accompany me. She'd even begun helping me sort through some of the older stacks while Maazin raked his hands through his hair and glowered down at his own.

I even considered us *friends*. Kalia too. Even though she had detested me at first—whether it was because I'd married her brother or because she was merely territorial, I didn't quite know—I thought she liked me now. While it may have been a superficial kind of friendship—since we studiously avoided discussing Azur, my abrupt marriage to him, and *anything* having to do with House Kaalium or their family—we still spent hours every day together, ripping out old, dead things from the terrace. It was therapeutic, I thought.

"Will you feed from me?"

The question popped out of my mouth before I thought better of it. I didn't know how to phrase the question. I figured

it was better to just *ask*.

Ludayn sputtered, her eyes going wide.

“*What?*” she asked, already shaking her head. “*No, Kylaira*, your husband would not like that. At all. It’s...it’s... simply not done. Especially since...”

She trailed off, pressing her lips tight.

My stomach sank, but I tried again. “It’s just that...the way it is with him...” I sighed, deep and long, my shoulders sagging. “I just want to know if what I feel with him is normal. I don’t have anything to compare it to, and it’s not like I can ask Kalia. Only you.”

“*Kylaira...*”

“Gemma,” I corrected softly.

She sighed too, mimicking my deep one. “Gemma...he would be upset. *Furious*, even.”

“No, he wouldn’t,” I protested, narrowly hiding my displeasure.

He hasn’t fed from me in five days.

Five. Days.

Not since what had happened on the terrace.

Even though I’d been diligently taking my *baanye* at every single meal and I felt *terrific*. Like I had enough buzzing energy inside me that I feared it might burst.

At first, I’d thought he’d departed to the northern borders again, like he had when we’d first arrived on Krynn. Then, yesterday, Kalia had told me that he was still at the keep when I’d asked her, much to my bewilderment and churning gut, dashing my theory.

For five days...it had seemed like he was avoiding me. He hadn’t come to me for his feedings, and it made my gut sour, thinking that he was feeding from someone else.

I should’ve been *happy* if he was. Right?

But I wasn't. That was perhaps the most alarming thing to come from this.

"Please," I said softly, tapping on my exposed wrist. I didn't miss the way her eyes lingered on the flesh. "Just here. Just for a moment so I can understand."

Ludayn stepped away from my wardrobe. It was evening. The sun was sinking and glimmering. A blanket of golden light had been steadily sliding across my rooms for the last hour.

She hesitated. "You won't tell him?"

I straightened. "No. Never."

"Truly?"

"I promise," I said, watching her approach. Tentatively, I held out my wrist. "Please, Ludayn."

A burst of an exhale left her lips. I didn't feel any particular emotion when she grabbed my wrist. Not relief or victory or excitement or dread. She was doing me a favor.

"Very well," she said, eyeing my wrist, her fangs elongating quickly. "But I will have to heal the wound, and you should hide it while it finishes healing. Or he will know."

"He hasn't seen me in days," I told her, not quite sure what she meant by "healing." Did my voice sound like I was sulking? I hoped not. "He won't even notice."

Ludayn frowned but lowered her head, though she hesitated as I held my breath. Her midnight-blue hair brushed my skin, her hot breath drifting over my wrist.

Then I felt the prick of her bite.

Something warm flooded into my flesh, making me flinch at the familiar sensation.

Only...it never turned into anything more.

Not pleasure. Not pain.

Truthfully, I didn't feel *anything*. There was only a gentle pressure from where her fangs were imbedded and the pull of

her feeding.

My brow furrowed in confusion. I frowned, though it was one of acceptance and understanding.

Only with Azur, I determined, uncertain how I should feel about that revelation.

Only with Azur did I feel...lost and wild and unbound.

Ludayn's gaze flickered up to me. She took one last draw on my wrist and then released me.

"Thank you," I said softly, lost in my own thoughts.

Ludayn wiped at her mouth, running a finger across her fang to prick it before collecting something that looked clear. She wiped it over the small bite at my wrist, smearing the bead of blood across the marks. With a furrowed brow, I watched the mark begin to fade away. The wound *closed* though there was still a reddened bloom around it and obvious lightened pinpricks where her fangs had been.

Azur...he could have been healing my bites this entire time?

He wanted them to remain. To be a reminder. And for others to see, I realized.

I didn't know how I felt about that—or why it brought a strange thrill to my belly. I was used to seeing the marks he'd left on me in the mirror in the mornings and evenings. I'd stroke my fingers over the healing bites, and just the memory of how I'd received them would make my blood rush. I wanted to hate him, and yet I couldn't.

Ludayn was quiet afterward, returning to my new wardrobe of clothes, but her organizing seemed more jittery and agitated.

"Ludayn," I called softly, rising from my chair to stand next to her. When she turned to me, her bright yellow eyes catching on mine, I said, "I will never tell him it was you even if he finds the mark. Which he won't. It's practically invisible. You don't need to worry."

“I don’t think you understand, Gemma,” Ludayn said softly, and I stilled at the seriousness in her voice. Her dragging wing twitched backward. “But I am your keeper and I cannot deny you anything.”

She sighed and turned back to the wardrobe.

“Are you upset with me?” I wanted to know.

“No,” Ludayn said. “How could I be?”

“Because you’re my keeper?”

Maybe she wasn’t *allowed* to be, and I realized that I would have to navigate this particular relationship more carefully in the future. I didn’t want to get her into trouble, especially with Zaale. Or Azur, for that matter.

“No,” she shook her head. “I’m not mad, because you’re human. And you’re here. I know you were fearful of us in the beginning, but I can see you trying to learn. I can see you trying to understand us. How we are. How we are different than you.”

I flushed in shame even though it relieved me to hear the truth in her voice...that she wasn’t angry with me for asking her to feed from me.

As such, I could only give her the truth in return.

“In the Collis...*gods*, throughout most colonies, I’d say, we’ve always been taught to fear the Kylorr,” I confessed. “Growing up, my governess would tell me fearsome stories of the Kylorr ripping apart their prey, limb from limb. Nothing more than beasts who only hungered for blood to fuel their rages.”

Ludayn’s lips pressed together. The words were jarring, hitting her square in her softened face. And it just felt *wrong*. So wrong to me.

“There were a lot of Killup too, living in the Collis, because of the mines. Their own stories began to circulate throughout New Earth. An old war that was a complete slaughter, for example. And you just...you hear so many

things. And then you begin to believe them as truth. When I came here, when I married Azur...that was what I believed.”

“And now?” Ludayn asked, a hardness in her tone I’d never heard before. “What do you believe?”

“That I was wrong.”

Her shoulders softened.

I touched her shoulder, the back of my neck feeling tight and discomfort swimming in my belly. I didn’t like to admit it. I’d always been proud. But I couldn’t stand to see the look on Ludayn’s face as I spoke of my own ignorance.

“I was completely and utterly wrong,” I said softly. “Krynn...Laras...it’s the most beautiful place. I watch the village from the west wing in the evenings, and it just seems so *peaceful*. And you and Kalia and Maazin...you’ve all been so kind to me. Helping me navigate my new life here. You’ll never know how grateful I am to you for that.”

“We hear those stories too,” Ludayn informed me, reaching out hesitantly to squeeze my hand before dropping it.

“Which ones?” I asked frowning.

“The terrible ones,” Ludayn told me. “Some *are* true.”

My brow furrowed.

“There are other Kylorr. Other territories or nations, if you’d like to call them that. The Kaazor in the north, for instance. The Thryki to the east, across the sea. The Koro. The Dyaar,” Ludayn murmured, her voice softening on the last word. “And some are as terrible as I’m sure most believe. Don’t misunderstand me, there are terrible Kylorr living within the Kaalium too. Plenty of them. No territory is perfect. But outside of the Kaalium there is a culture of keeping to the old traditions of the early Kylorr. They relish the warring. The slaughtering. The bloodshed. For the sake of it, not because it has a purpose.”

I flinched.

“I am a Dyaar,” she informed me after great hesitation. I stilled. Was that why her hair and her eyes were so different

from everyone else's? Her face shape was different too, her horns smaller, her nose more flat. Her skin was a lighter gray than Kalia's. "I am a Kylorr who has never flown. Who has never taken to the skies and felt the moon winds on my wings because my father was cruel. He hated that I wasn't a son. A son he could make into a warrior. So he broke my wing when I was just a child, and he laughed and drank his brew as he did it."

Nausea bloomed in my gut, restlessness rising under my skin.

"Ludayn," I whispered, aghast. I couldn't imagine my father *physically* hurting me. He never, never would.

She drew in a deep breath, blinking the memory from her eyes, and approached me after she draped my dress over the back of a chair.

"My mother and I escaped to the Kaalium. She knew a traveling merchant from Laras, and he brought us here, even across an ocean, along with others that would fit within his ship," Ludayn said. "So I might have been born Dyaar, but my home is the Kaalium. And like you, I've found much kindness and understanding here, though there are those who look at me and sneer."

"Where's your mother now?" I asked, fearing the worst.

Ludayn smiled, and to my relief, it wasn't tinged in despair. "She lives in the village," she told me. "She makes the most delicious steam cakes you've ever tasted and has a shop where the line is out the door every morning."

I heard the pride in her voice.

"I'd like to meet her," I said gently.

"I'll take you into the village," Ludayn declared. "Though your husband might want you to wait until after the harvest festival. It draws many Kylorr into the city, those who live in the outer lands, and he might think it too difficult for a guard to keep track of you."

"He hasn't fed from me for five days," I told Ludayn, unsure why that confession slipped from my lips. I watched

her own bewilderment flash over her face, though she tried to hide it valiantly. “I don’t think he would mind.”

“All the same, we should wait,” she said softly. She cocked her head to the side. “Did you find your answer?”

“To what?”

She gestured to my wrist, to the bite she’d left behind.

Oh.

“Yes,” I said quietly. “It’s different with him.”

Ludayn nodded. She’d already known that.

“Why?” I asked.

She wasn’t as quick to hide her discomfort, her indecision this time. “That’s a question for the *Kyzaire*,” she told me.

“Ludayn.”

“Yes?”

“Thank you,” I told her. “Thank you for telling me. I know it couldn’t have been easy. For you or your mother. But I’m glad you’ve found peace here.”

Ludayn’s smile was small. “Me too.”

She placed her hand on my shoulder, squeezing.

Then she took a deep breath, going to my wardrobe, shuffling around for something in one of the drawers. She changed the subject and asked, “Would you like to wear this band in your hair tomorrow?”

She held up a wreath of shimmering silver and intricately carved flowers.

“We can leave your hair down—which you should because it’s so lovely,” Ludayn murmured, looking at the black strands with *longing*. Like she jealous of my hair when I’d always been jealous of my sisters’. “It’s always tied up.”

“I’m working out on the terrace with Kalia in the morning, so it’s better if it stays up,” I informed her, even though the band was pretty.

Ludayn sighed. “Very well.”

Not wanting to see the disappointment on her face, I compromised with, “Maybe for the ball. If Azur lets me attend.”

She grinned. “Perfect.”

When she said good night a short while later, stoking the fire in my hearth and turning down my bed, I went out to the balcony, my eyes searching the skies for any sign of a maddening Kylorr male with embers for eyes. I didn’t see him.

The restlessness was building again. It was like my body was producing *too* much blood and it needed to be fed from to manage it. My skin felt tight. Aching.

“Enough of this,” I whispered fiercely, determination shooting through me. I was dressed for bed, in a thin shift dress, but I wouldn’t let that deter me.

Spinning toward the door before I lost my nerve, I ventured out into the darkened keep.

Then I went out in search of my husband, wanting answers.

CHAPTER 23

I scented her before she ever appeared at my office door. A delicious, tantalizing, heady scent that made my head swirl and my fangs elongate immediately.

Fuck. She was near. So fucking close.

I was hungry. I could go long stretches without feeding on blood. Food had done a decent job at tamping down the worst of the hunger, especially if a blood giver hadn't been available. Food had kept me strong enough to fly.

Then I'd discovered my *kyrana*.

Food tasted like ash in my mouth now. It could no longer nourish me the way *her* blood did. I felt weak and drained. The power of my wings now felt depleted.

A part of me despised her for it.

Logically, I knew that I could feed from another. Yesterday, I'd choked down a cup full of blood from our reserves and nearly gagged. Reserves had never been particularly pleasant, but now I was physically unable to keep it down.

All because of my damn *wife*.

I was weakened now. Forever dependent on her, which posed its own stretch of problems. Keeping her, staying married to her...that had *never* been my intention.

Now I didn't think I'd be able to let her go.

Gemma must've seen the light coming from the glowing orb hovering in the center of the room. She nudged open the door, endlessly curious and poking her head into places it didn't belong, but then her lips pressed together when she saw me.

I was sitting at the stretch of my gleaming desk. Parchment covered it. Plans for the harvest. Maazin's reports on the yields from my brother's territories. On my Halo screen, bids from colonies and planets throughout the Quadrants for *lore*. Purchase contracts that needed to be reviewed and signed.

But right then, all I could think about was Gemma, who had stepped into my office and crossed the long distance to my desk.

My body tightened. My cock steeled in my pants, biting into the metal clasps. Underneath her dress, I could see the outline of her breasts and her taut nipples, which I now knew she liked pinched and tugged. She'd gone wild when I'd touched her there, and my venom dripped as want flooded me. Not even to feed. But to suckle on those hardened peaks and hear her moans fill my office.

There's nothing stopping you, I thought.

Gemma was angry with me. I could see it in her face, though she tried to conceal it with a cold expression. I nearly laughed because I saw right through it. I would have too, if that expression didn't make my cock throb and pulse.

"Where have you been?" she asked, glaring. No—*demanding*.

Her tone immediately made my hackles rise. Images of punishing her for that mouth flooded into my mind. I would make her kneel at my feet. Shove my cock between her lips to keep that mouth stuffed and full so she couldn't sass me.

"Go to bed, wife," I growled, scowling down at my papers. My skin was buzzing. Excitement and expectation built within me. Arguing was practically foreplay for us, and my body knew it. She had me trained.

I wondered how much longer I could hold out before pushing her down to her hands and knees and feeding my cock into her slick cunt. Before fucking all of my aggression and frustration and need into her until I was limp and sated. It was all I dreamed about. That and feeding on her delicious, soul-changing blood.

I nearly groaned.

Her glare was making me even harder, until I felt warm pre-come drip from my cock head.

I'd watched the video again. Of Aina's murder. A sick reminder to keep me away from Gemma. It was twisted, really. I was fucked in the head to use it as an excuse to keep my distance from my wife.

Because that was what I'd done. Ever since I'd lost control on the terrace with her, I couldn't stop thinking about the wonder and delight on her face as I'd flown her over the Silver Sea. Something had *aligned* in my chest in that moment, or perhaps slotted into place, and it terrified me. More so than the fact that Gemma Hara was my blood mate. I could deal with that. The other thing? The thing that felt strangely like *affection* and warmth and gentleness? I couldn't do that to my family. I simply couldn't.

Feeding from and fucking a Hara was one thing. Falling in love with one and getting her heavy with my heir—a child that would share the blood of Rye Hara—was unfathomable. I refused to let it happen.

But I feared that the longer I continued to feed from her, the more ingrained she would become in my life. She was already my damn *wife*. What more would the Haras take from me?

Gemma had come around the desk to glare down at me. Her hair was down, a waterfall of black silk which brushed over her nipples. There was a scent on her I couldn't place but one that made my neck prickle, irritation rising.

“Why have you been avoiding me?” she asked. Demanded. Again.

I rose from my chair in a swift movement that forced her to stumble back. Instead, I caught her wrist to keep her close.

“Why do you care, wife?” I purred, watching her eyes widen at my sudden nearness, a thread of uncertainty lacing in her eyes. *Good.*

Then her spine stiffened, and I was fascinated to watch determination rise in its place.

“Have you been feeding from someone else?” she wanted to know.

I flashed her a grin I didn’t feel, and her eyes trailed to my lips, to my sharp fangs glinting in the floating orb’s light. Her breath shallowed.

“Perhaps,” I murmured, releasing her wrist.

She gaped at me. Unless I was mistaken, I swore *hurt* flashed over her features. “Who?”

“If I didn’t know any better,” I began, pressing her back into the desk until she was forced to bend, “I’d say you were jealous, Gemma Hara. Can it be that you’ve grown addicted to my feedings? Just like the little bite slut I knew you’d be?”

She leveled me a look that told me she knew *exactly* what I was doing.

“Maybe I am,” she said, surprising me. In all her pride, I’d never expected her to *admit* to it. “Maybe I’m both.”

Heat *burned* in my blood, rushing straight to my cock.

Between us, she rubbed her wrist where I’d grabbed her. My eyes caught on something that made me still.

Snatching her wrist, I saw her eyes widen in alarm as my gaze landed on an obvious bite mark. Healing but *present*.

Most importantly, it was one I hadn’t given her.

A Kylorr had fed from *my fucking blood mate*.

Rage unlike I’d ever felt *unleashed* inside me. *Raazos*, I narrowly avoided going completely berserk, right there in my office with my wife pressed against my body.

“*Who fed from you?*”

I didn't recognize my own voice, and Gemma shrank back, though only for a moment.

“Who *fucking* fed from you?” I roared. I seethed, “Because I will tear them apart for daring to taste your blood! Until there is *nothing* left of them!”

She was silent, staring back at me with a stiffened upper lip.

“*Tell me who. Now!*”

“It wasn't you,” she finally bit back, right in my face. “If I didn't know any better, husband, I'd say you were jealous.”

I froze with the fury as my words were thrown back into my face. For her daring to taunt me like this. In *this* state. And fucking hell, I *was* jealous. Never before had I felt anything like this. Not for past lovers. This was unparalleled.

The ties to a *kyrana* were extremely dangerous, and I was only now realizing it. I'd give any mated Kylorr a wide berth from now on. It was only wise.

“You play a very dangerous game, wife,” I said. “I can play it too. Right now, you better fight me.”

Her brows furrowed at my words.

I snatched her dress clean from her body, shredding the material like it was mere parchment. She blinked, her lips parted, unable to comprehend that she was now naked against me. That was when I saw it. The first flicker of wariness. The first flicker of understanding, perhaps.

“Because I will *fucking* feast on you until I drain you dry,” I growled, pushing her roughly back onto the surface of my desk.

Her legs kicked out in surprise, but I caught her ankles in a punishing grip, spreading them wide. A whimper escaped her throat as she thrashed, sending papers scattering to the floor around my desk. I'd toyed with her cunt on the terrace, feeling her slick and hot and needy, but I'd never seen it. Parted, puffy

lips, with black, silky curls. I'd never scented her this close either.

It made my mouth *water* and my venom drip.

“Who fed from you?” I growled, letting my grip slip from her ankles, *needing* to feel her fight me. I wanted her to make me bleed because it would be the only way to get my rage under control. “Maazin? Ludayn? Inasa, who you have wrapped around your finger at your meals? Was it him? Because I will fucking *end* him.”

Her bare foot kicked out and caught the bottom of my jaw. She froze, her cheeks flushed, her breath heaving.

I gripped her ankles again, feeling my jaw throb pleasantly, feeling a bit of control return. I spread her legs wide, even as she tensed and squirmed. She was spread uncomfortably wide, judging by the panic on her face as I exposed the pink slit of her cunt, rushing with blood.

As retaliation, I lowered my head. Her hips moved beneath my strength, desperate to get away—though I caught the gleam of excitement in her eyes. She seemed to hold her breath as my lips *nearly* grazed over her budded clit.

Then I lowered my head to her inner thigh, sinking back in my chair, as I found the place I wanted to feed from her.

I sank my fangs deep, more roughly than I might have otherwise. Gemma didn't seem to mind. She couldn't stop the moan of relief that fell from her throat or the way she stopped struggling in my hold. Her hair was spread out among my remaining papers before cascading over the end of the desk, her hands roaming desperately to hold on to something.

At the first hit of her blood, the sensation was like sinking into a hot pool of water when I'd been freezing before. *Sinfully right*. Luscious. She tasted so *fucking* good, like in my dreams, the heat of her blood flowing thick over my tongue like a wine. My hips rocked in my chair, desperately needing friction as the tight pleasure spiraled in my groin, spearing straight through me.

I groaned, the sound muffled against her inner thigh. Her skin was hot there. Blazing hot. I drank deeply. Greedy. I felt her come, the orgasm making her thrash as she cried out, as her hands unconsciously flew to her breasts, tugging and pinching her nipples which only made me *crazed*.

I retracted my fangs, lowering my head to her other thigh. I'd drink from her here too.

"That's my good little bite slut. Come for me," I purred. She gasped, her back arching, eyes flying open in disbelief and pleasure when I trailed my fingers over her cunt. I chuckled, the sound humorless and dark, as I taunted, "You love this. You fucking love this. You're so wet, wife. Wet and slick and needy and hot for me. You came looking for me because you needed your relief, didn't you? You were *craving* my bite, my fangs because now you know I'm the only one who can make you feel like this."

"And w-why is that?" she had the audacity to ask, still in the throes of her long orgasm. "Why is it only *you*?"

I shoved a finger into her cunt, forcing a chuffed groan from her plump lips, even as her hips bucked against me. She *was* hot. Like a furnace. And so slick that I slid another finger into her easily, stretching her. *Feeling* her inner walls clasp and pulse around my fingers, her greedy little cunt trying to draw me deeper.

I didn't answer her. Instead, I thrust my fingers into her in a steady, pumping rhythm as I lowered my head to her opposite inner thigh. I bit. *Hard*. It made her whimper—her cunt tightening around my fingers, squeezing them—and I was pleased. I wanted her to feel me in the morning. Every brush of her thighs against one another, she'd feel me, that delicious ache that would probably keep her on edge all day long.

I drank and drank and drank. Gorging myself as if I'd been starved for her, which I had been. Already, my strength was returning. I thrust my fingers into her harder, curling them in a way I knew human females liked, and she keened as she came again, bucking and thrashing hard.

When I had my fill, when my seal at the base of my cock was throbbing and I was a stroke away from coming, I finally let her thighs go. I retracted my fangs and stood up from my chair, shoving my pants down, nearly ripping the material in my haste.

Gemma was lying back, thighs still spread wide, though they were limply hanging over the edge of my desk. Her cheeks were flushed, her gaze half-lidded, her cunt dripping onto my purchase contracts.

I groaned at the mere sight of her. Her eyes went wide when she saw my cock for the first time, her legs automatically closing, as if she hadn't realized how *big* I was and was trying to protect herself.

"No. Open them wide," I rumbled down to her. Fuck, it was hard to think with this pressure building in my knot. "I'm going to come all over your needy cunt, and you better not wash it away until morning."

Hesitantly, she opened her thighs back up, my bite marks gleaming on her pale flesh. There was an uncertain but curious gleam in her eyes, one that nearly made me pause. I'd never considered it before, but I wondered if my wife had ever been with a male.

And why did I feel jealousy rising for faceless human men if she *had* been with others?

I gripped my cock, running my fist up and down the thick length of my shaft with the taste of her blood on my tongue. I hissed out a breath, feeling her gaze on it. My seal spasmed, beginning to pulse. Heat was rising. Rising. Hurling up the length of my cock.

When I came, I placed my palm on her thigh to steady myself, tossing my head back, grunting out my pleasure, my hips moving erratically. Imagining I was fucking her tight cunt, releasing my seed inside her, which I knew I couldn't do. Not unless she was taking marroswood.

I groaned, tilting my head back down to watch the streams of my silver seed coat her cunt. One lash shot right over her

swollen clit, making her bite her bottom lip and twitch, as more followed. Making a mess. Dripping down to my desk. Spreading over her smooth belly.

When I was finished, I felt better. Clarity returned. My clothes were already tight from my growing strength, and I thought there was no way I'd be able to fit my pants back over my hips. The gnawing, aching hunger was satisfied, and I blew out my first breath of relief in five *fucking* days.

Gemma was staring up at me, her chest still heaving, her nipples pebbled and tight.

My eyes caught on her wrist again and my ire returned, though I didn't feel the intensity of the rage as I had before. I felt in control again. *I* could trigger a rage if I wanted to, but I no longer felt like I was spiraling.

“Who fed from you?” I asked for the final time, ignoring the fact that she was covered in my come as I leaned over her. My cock pressed to her bare belly, making her gasp, as I wound my hand around the front of her throat, keeping her still so she wouldn't try to flee. “Don't lie to me, *wife*.”

CHAPTER 24

I was satisfied. I felt warm and sated, like a sleepy, smug cat. I nearly arched off the desk in contentment, not at all fearing the warning in my husband's voice.

It was inconvenient, I decided, to be attracted to my husband. Unfortunately, I was. *Terribly.*

Every part of my body felt scorched by him. I didn't know if I'd ever be the same.

He'd been blazing hot like a forge just now, I thought, nearly shivering just remembering his intensity.

I felt calm. As if the two orgasms had helped rewire the anxious part of my brain.

"I won't lie," I informed him. "I just won't tell you."

Azur stilled, looming above me. His hand flexed at my throat, but I was beginning to realize that my husband was all bark and no bite, as the Old Earth saying went.

Well, he has a lot of bite, I thought. A bite that I craved, *needed,* like food and water and air. Food and water and air and Azur's fangs.

"Gemma," he warned, his tone low, filling my senses with his glare and his heat and the scent of his skin. "*Do not* stoke my ire right now."

Azur was stubborn. He wouldn't let it go, I knew that already. But I'd promised Ludayn I wouldn't tell, and I would keep my promise.

He would have to be satisfied with the answer I gave him. Though I had the gnawing sensation that he might've already known who it'd been. There were just a few Kylorr in the keep who I saw and spoke to every day. Even fewer who I trusted to ask for help.

"It's not important who it was. I just wanted to know how it felt," I told him, a little embarrassed to admit this to him. More embarrassed than lying spread out on his desk with his seed—which was *silver*—covering my lower half. "How it felt with someone else. If I would feel..."

Azur rumbled. His hand left my throat, and he rose, my skin rapidly cooling in his wake. I closed my legs quickly, feeling the squelch of his come, which made my cheeks burn and my clit *throb*. I sat up quickly, the papers beneath me wet, and I hoped we hadn't ruined anything important.

Azur glared but he didn't speak. His enormous curved cock was still half-hard, hanging out of his black pants. My fingers nearly curled at the sight of it. Long and impossibly thick, he would stuff me full. Not to mention the strange, curious swelling at the very base, a bulbous bulge that I didn't know would even *fit* inside me.

And because I was feeling level-headed and satisfied—even a little loopy, pleased as hell that the agitating buzzing beneath my skin was gone—I tentatively reached out to touch his chest. Wondering what he would do.

His pupils only slitted tighter, but he didn't move away.

"And what were your findings, wife?" he rumbled, his voice dark and husky. He reached forward to slide his hand into my hair, pulling gently so I met his gaze. "From your little experiment?"

I curled my fingers into his shirt. He wasn't wearing a hard, structured vest tonight. The material was soft beneath my fingertips. "That it felt like nothing at all. Nothing like *this*."

"And it never will," he hissed softly. "If you ever allow anyone to feed from you again, I *will* retaliate against them. Consider this your first and only warning."

Jealous, indeed, I thought with parted lips, realizing why Ludayn's hesitation and fear had been so pronounced when I'd asked her.

"Your blood is *mine*, Gemma," he growled. "I will not share it. I will not let anyone feed from *my* wife. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I whispered. Feeling a spark of pleasure which mingled strangely with annoyance. "But who have *you* been feeding from?"

Azur grunted. His hand left my hair and settled over mine where it was burrowed in his shirt. He tugged it away. Even still, he didn't drop it. He clasped my hand in his.

"No one."

I blinked. All the fight leaving me. "You're lying."

Though I knew he wasn't.

He shot me an irritated glare. "I told you before. Kylorr can survive on food alone. Blood is a luxury that some cannot even afford."

That...softened me. Here I'd thought he'd been drinking from others, giving that sublime pleasure to faceless beings, and I could finally admit that it had cut me up more deeply than I wanted to admit.

Only in my relief could I admit it.

"Oh," I whispered, brows furrowing. "Then why haven't you come to me? Isn't that the whole point of this marriage?"

He looked away from me, making me regret the words. Dropping my hand, he finally stepped away, and I watched as he attempted to tuck his cock back into his pants, which were suddenly very, very tight on his massive thighs.

"*Raazos*," he cursed softly, gritting his teeth when he finally got the waist band clasped again. I flushed when I saw his fingers were glimmering in the light from my arousal.

It made me remember that I was entirely naked, perched on the edge of his desk, and I saw the tattered remains of my

dress—*another* he'd ruined—lying innocently on the floor at his feet.

He scooped it up.

“Azur?”

“Have you ever been with a male before?”

The question was so unexpected that it caught me off guard. As I blinked at him, he unraveled my dress. He had ripped it straight down the middle, and I took it from him wordlessly, slipping my arms through the thin straps. It was like a robe now and I clutched the middle, holding the edges together to cover my nakedness.

Not that it mattered. I was sticky with his come. I could feel it, slippery and still warm between my legs.

“You...you mean sex?” I asked.

“Yes,” he grunted, waving his hand impatiently.

I nibbled on my lip. And I hated that the instinct to lie pressed hard on my tongue. An old instinct instilled in my society in the Collis, on all the New Earth colonies. That a woman should be *pure* and *untouched* until she got married. A virgin.

And I hated that I was tempted to lie at all. I'd done nothing wrong.

So I told him the truth, wondering how he would react.

“Yes,” I answered though the mere memory of it filled me with discomfort, dashing the calm that had settled in my bones. “A long time ago.”

His eyes narrowed. “How long?”

Hugging my arms around me, I told him, “About five years ago.”

He stilled. “*That* long?”

His tone made me study him, my gaze flitting between his.

“Please tell me that it wasn't just once,” he murmured.

“I...” I trailed off, feeling like my world was tilting. He... *wanted* me to be more *experienced*? “Yes, it was—”

He cursed, running a hand over his curved horn. “Human? A male?”

“Yes,” I whispered, trying to understand what was happening. “You’re not upset?”

He scowled. “About what?”

“That I...that I’ve been with another man when I was unmarried.”

Azur froze. His nostrils flared. But there was something else that entered his expression. An expression that resembled sympathy. Or perhaps even pity.

“I’m upset about the fact that when we do fuck, Gemma, I’ll likely tear you in two,” he growled. “Because in case you haven’t noticed, wife, a human man is not built like a Kylorr.”

My breath went shallow. He’d said *when*. Not *if*. I’d known sex was a possibility. A pretty good one, judging from the escalation of his feedings.

He was upset that he would hurt me.

That was where his ire was stemming from.

“Don’t you want to?” I couldn’t help but ask, unable to keep myself from *poking* at him even though my brain told me to keep my mouth closed. “I thought you *wanted* to hurt me.”

Azur was in my face in the blink of an eye. I gasped but it was caught in his mouth as his lips crashed into mine. My mind went pleasantly blank, and I felt the sharp glide of his fangs as he kissed me almost angrily. It was a mean, hard, punishing kiss...

Until it wasn’t.

Moments ticked by but they felt like an eternity I never wanted to leave. His kiss gentled as I clung to his tunic, my dress slipping open again. His arm wrapped around my hips, tugging me more fully into his hardened, massive body as he stepped between my thighs. I learned how to move my mouth

against his so his fangs wouldn't snag on my bottom lip. I relaxed in his arms, feeling the back of my neck tingle pleasantly as his other hand raked through my hair, his dull claws scraping against my scalp.

A deep groan left his throat. His cock felt like a thick, hot rod, resting just above my sex against my lower belly. Heat bloomed, my clit beginning to warm and pulse.

Azur broke the kiss first, lowering his head so that it hung in front of me, his horns nearly scraping my cheeks before I leaned back.

Silence dropped between us as we caught our breaths. My lips felt swollen, my eyes half-lidded from the gentle sensation and memory of his kiss.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I shouldn't have said that."

Azur finally tilted his head up to regard me.

"I *did* want to hurt you," he informed me, and I swallowed at the gruff *turmoil* in his voice.

"But not now?"

I held my breath as he shook his head.

"No, not now."

"And you won't tell me why?" He stiffened against me, but I pressed forward. "You won't tell me why you wanted to hurt me? A daughter of House Hara?"

Azur studied me, his slitted pupils darting back and forth, before he lowered them down my neck to my exposed breasts to the mess he'd made below them. I felt that gaze like a caress, hot and firm.

"No," he said.

He was retreating already, closing himself off once again. Dread pooled low, but it was what I'd expected.

I thought that maybe I should leave. It was clear he wanted me to, waiting until I hopped off his desk and hightailed it out his office door so he could work in peace once more, late into night.

Instead, I found myself saying, “The man I had sex with was named Petyr. He came to work in my father’s mines one summer, looking for work as he was traveling between the Quadrants.”

A sound that resembled a growl rose from Azur’s throat, but he pinned me with a cool, assessing look.

I raised my chin to meet his eyes. “I had just turned twenty-five. So incredibly young and yet in the Collis, my purpose was over. Women are expected to be married at twenty. Every year that passes after twenty, people begin to look at you with a little more distaste. And if you aren’t married by twenty-five...you never will be. I was a disappointment to my family.”

Even saying it sparked familiar bitterness I’d thought I had long forgotten.

“Overnight, I lost all my value in my terrible, terrible society. And it hit me hard. Really hard. I was angry. I was restless. So I went to the mines and I picked the first human man that I saw. I took him to my bed. Afterward, I never saw him again. He stole a few trinkets from my room, and he was off the planet by the time I realized it.”

A wry smile lifted my lips.

“The whole experience was lackluster to say the least. But I don’t regret it. It made me feel better in that moment. But it made me realize how meaningless the act truly was. How foolish I’d been to believe that if I remained untouched before marriage, then I would get everything I’d ever wanted. That idea had been so ingrained in us. Since childhood. And it makes me *sick* to think about it now.”

Azur was watching me carefully. Only listening, though I had no idea what he was thinking.

“Shortly after, my mother died,” I said, looking down to the floor, my tongue sticking to the roof of my mouth. “Then I found out about the debts and I poured my disappointment and shame and grief into something else entirely. And it was easy to forget.”

“How did she die?” Azur asked me.

There was a stone lodged in my belly. A heavy weight that would never quite disappear.

Instead of answering, I shook my head. Because the truth was too terrible to say out loud. Truthfully, I’d *never* spoken it out loud. Not once. Not ever.

My eyes went to the Halo screen, which was still flickering on the edge of his desk. Longing went through me like a spear straight to my chest. I’d nearly forgotten it.

“Would you let me call my family?” I asked quietly, meeting his eyes. “On the Halo? Just to see them? I’d like to see my sisters’ faces. My friend, Fran. My father.”

Azur reared back. I’d managed to shock him. He hadn’t expected me to ask that, and I watched, with a lump in my throat, as he scowled. All trace of his former expression, however gentle, was gone.

“No.”

“But I—”

“I said *no*,” he growled. “If you think you can manipulate me and make me feel *anything* for you just so you can try to get your way, you should know better. You should know that that will not work with me.”

I gaped. “That’s *not* what I was trying to do.”

“Weren’t you?” he rasped, stalking toward me. “Giving me your sad story about your fucked-up race, trying to make me sympathize with you when you told me your mother died and how hard you worked to save your family from all the debts. I see right through it, Gemma Hara.”

Where was his anger coming from?

That sudden anger made my mouth go dry. He thought I was *using* my mother’s death to try to get something out of him?

I was asking to *call my family*. Not to leave Krynn. I’d thought...I’d thought we’d been making progress. Seeing eye

to eye. I'd thought that we could at least be *civil* with one another if we were to be married for the rest of our natural lives, dammit, but that didn't seem to be the case.

I was *trying* to make this work with him.

But he fought me at every turn, and I was getting incredibly demoralized by it.

"You'll never see me as anything else," I breathed, a surprising sensation of pain at the realization stabbing at my chest. "You'll always see me as this conniving person trying to *take* something from you. You'll always look for the worst in me, won't you?"

Azur's glare seemed to falter, but then it doubled in its intensity, as if he was steeling his mind.

"Hara blood is Hara blood, after all," he said.

The words stole my breath.

I jumped off the desk, now finding the slick sensation between my thighs—his come mingled with my own—*mortifying*.

I wouldn't do this with him anymore.

He could fucking *starve* for all I cared. I wouldn't make an effort anymore.

"And you can't get enough of this Hara's blood," I snapped back, throwing him a dark glare at the door. "Can you, *husband*?"

Then I stormed from the room before he could see the tears welling up in my eyes, threatening to fall.

CHAPTER 25

“*R*aazos’s blood,” came a familiar voice, standing on the precipice of my office. “You look like you got moon fucked.”

I scowled, spearing Rivin a dark look as he sauntered inside, *uninvited*.

“I thought you would be at the northern border until tomorrow,” I grumbled, turning my attention back down to my desk. I was standing, stretching my wings, rolling my neck out.

“I didn’t want to miss the moon winds tonight,” he told me. “I missed the last one because *someone* made me act as a witness at his wedding.”

Vaan, had our marriage been nearly a month ago? Already?

“Rivin. I’m not in the mood.”

“I can see that,” my oldest friend commented, grinning as he studied me. He already knew that Gemma was my *kyrana*. He’d been the first to see me after I’d fed from her that first time, when I’d sped toward the northern borders.

More like fled, I couldn’t help but think. I’d fled to the northern borders after the discovery.

“Looks like you haven’t fed in a while,” he said next, which only sparked more irritation.

“If you saw the look my wife shot me yesterday, your fangs would’ve shriveled in your damn mouth,” I couldn’t

help but grumble.

It had been four days since the night she'd come into my office.

Needless to say, Gemma was still pissed after our argument.

Rivin laughed, the sound loud enough to be grating. My head was already pounding from the *lore* harvest work spread out across my desk and the serious lack of my wife's blood in my diet.

I was *pinning*. At night, I stood outside the door to her rooms, hoping to catch a tendril of her scent, debating with myself in silent, drawn-out, maddening arguments right in the hallway.

"How's the border?" I asked, changing the subject. "Any of the Kaazor give you trouble?"

Rivin shrugged. "We had one try to slip beyond our patrol. He had a message on him. In code. I think he was trying to deliver it to someone."

"To someone at the border?" I asked, my attention sharpening on the words.

Rivin shook his head. "The path he was taking would only lead him to Laras."

I cursed under my breath. "A spy?"

"There's bound to be. But what does it matter if there's a Kaazor in the village? The worst they could do is sabotage the *lore* harvest, but we already have so many shipments coming in from the other territories that we will be able to make our purchase contracts regardless."

That wasn't what I was worried about. The Kaazor were smart. If they thought they could get a spy into Laras undetected, they wouldn't place them in the village. They'd place them in the *keep*.

"Have Zaale get me a list of everyone who has access to the keep," I told Rivin. "I need to review it again. And make adjustments if necessary."

Rivin sighed. “Azur, I really don’t think there’s a spy *here*. Zaale vetted everyone himself, and you know how thorough he is.”

“Still, I want that list,” I said. “And having to request anything from him will be punishment enough for you, for disturbing me in the middle of my work.”

“*Vaan*,” Rivin breathed, “what did you do to your wife? And can you *undo* it so that you won’t be so damn unpleasant all the time?”

I growled.

But hadn’t Kalia said something similar? My sister had come storming in here two days ago, with her lips pressed in displeasure, an expression that reminded me eerily of our mother.

“What did you do to Gemma?” she’d demanded, her wings twitching in agitation. When I hadn’t answered, Kalia had continued with, “She’s upset about something but won’t tell me what. I *know* you had something to do with it. She’s quiet. It’s *strange*.”

“What happens between us is none of your business, Kalia,” I’d told her, much to her annoyance, even though my chest had squeezed in discomfort at my sister’s announcement. “Besides, I thought you were going to stay far away from her. Instead, you two spend practically every moment together out on the terrace.”

Even Kalia had detected the jealousy in my voice because I’d watched as she’d gaped at me.

Then a smug look had entered her expression. A look that had made my own lips press together.

“Fix it,” Kalia had ordered me. “I don’t like seeing her upset.”

It should’ve worried me that Kalia was getting attached to Gemma. It should’ve worried me that they were bonding more and more every day. That the whole damn *keep* was getting attached to her. Even Zaale, who had begun to look at *me* with shadowed disapproval. No doubt he’d heard the rumors

circulating among the keepers that my wife was freezing me out.

Not that I could blame her.

You'll always look for the worst in me, won't you?

I gritted my back teeth as Rivin watched me.

“Have you decided what you’re going to do with her yet?” he asked me. “Or how much longer you’re planning to stay married to her? I’m sure Mr. Cross can find her another husband.”

The breath practically squeezed itself out of my lungs. Rivin had said it so casually, perhaps intentionally so.

My wings were already flaring, and the last strength I had from the feeding with Gemma began to *burn*, my pupils constricting, my muscles contracting, rebuilding themselves.

“Raazos’s blood, Azur,” Rivin said quietly, slowly beginning to back away. “*Don’t*. You’ll bring down the whole fucking keep. I only meant it in jest.”

I backed away from my desk, turning my own back on Rivin to get myself under control.

“You’re a bastard, you know that?” I breathed, leaning my forehead on the cool glass. I didn’t know if I was speaking to Rivin or to myself.

“I know,” Rivin replied, his voice still hesitant. “Then again, I don’t have a *kyrana*. I shouldn’t have said that. Forgive me.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, dragging in a deep breath. I could still taste Gemma in here. The scent of her floated over my tongue with every breath. It didn’t help that I could still smell her arousal on my desk too. Right where I had to sit, every single day. I could barely concentrate.

All I thought about anymore was her.

Frustration, unlike I’d ever felt before, had been riding me for days.

I felt ashamed. I felt guilty. I felt angry.

I felt like I was a trigger away from a full-blown rage, as Rivin had just discovered.

I couldn't go on like this.

We couldn't go on like this.

So I either had to continue making both of us miserable... or I'd have to give in to my wife and try to make her happy.

All she'd wanted was to call her family, came that nagging voice in my mind.

If our situations were reversed, I thought I would handle it a whole lot worse than Gemma. The thought of being cut off from my brothers, my sister, my entire *life*... Frankly, I didn't know how she did it. How she had even had the strength to come to Krynn. To accept my proposal without knowing what her future would hold. To hold her head as high as she had.

She did it for her family. She would do anything for her family, and you tried to use that against her, I knew.

I slammed my fist against the window, pushing the last of my rage down, before opening my eyes.

Gemma was down on the terrace. With Kalia and Ludayn. I even saw Zaale, hovering nearby, no doubt frowning as he monitored what they were plucking away from the banisters as he swept up the decaying debris. They'd made a lot of progress in the last few days, now working their way down the eastern wall, toward our mother's old garden.

My gaze lingered on my wife. Her hair was down today, gleaming in the setting sun, and my hands twitched, wanting to thread my fingers into it, to feel the silky strands pass through them like water.

Then I turned my attention skyward. Dark clouds were gathering in the north, drifting toward Laras with the wind. The storm would be here at nightfall, followed by the moon winds.

There was a calm hush in the air outside, as if Laras was readying itself. The weather would turn cold and biting soon, the late evenings turning dark.

“Are you going to fly tonight?” Rivin asked behind me, softly. Quietly. “It might take the edge off. I think you need it.”

Gemma liked it when we flew over the sea, I thought.

Maybe as way of an apology, I could help her experience the moon winds tonight. Surely *that* would make her happy.

I was rotten at this. I’d had lovers in the past, not relationships. Now I had a *wife*. A wife who knotted me up with a thousand different threads of ever-changing emotions. Most of the time, I didn’t know whether to punish her for her sharp tongue or kiss her until she was clinging to me, soft and breathless.

“Maybe I will,” I told Rivin.

Something needed to change—and Gemma had already adapted to Krynn.

This time, I knew it would have to be *me*.

CHAPTER 26

That night, a storm hit.

It was a full moon, a bright silvery orb hanging low in the sky. It would have been a perfect night—until the windows began to rattle. Until the wind began to howl like a lowing wolf outside, setting my teeth on edge, my breaths coming quicker as I paced the floors of my bedroom.

Ludayn was long gone for the evening. She'd had a hollow look in her eyes for most of the day, distracted and quiet. Truthfully, the whole keep seemed to be on edge, but the energy held excitement. Anticipation.

For the storm? I wondered, grinding my teeth together, squeezing my hands tight when I heard another strong gust tunneling right toward the keep from across the sea. I'd never experienced winds like this before. I could hear them coming, like a wave about to crash.

My rooms were in the northeast wing, ones that looked right out over the Silver Sea. The view was breathtaking and thrilling normally...but not tonight. Tonight there was an edge of malice, of dread, of clenching grief that I couldn't escape from.

The library, I remembered.

The library was in the south wing. The winds were traveling toward the keep from the north, but in the south wing, it might offer a reprieve. Perhaps I could seek safety from the worst of the storm, bury myself in the stacks and towers of books in the library until it was over.

Caught on the idea, I left my rooms, navigating the familiar route down a series of hallways and staircases, cutting through a passage Ludayn had shown me, to reach the south wing more quickly. There wasn't a single soul in sight, which only made my breaths come quicker. Not to mention there was a chill on the back of my neck like a touch, something I couldn't shake.

When I reached the library, I shut the heavy doors with a trembling hand, my breaths now coming in gasps. My gaze immediately sought out a little alcove in the wall, a rounded arch that at one time might've been filled with a shelf or a bookcase. Now it lay empty and I sat on the floor, my hands coming away dusty when I positioned myself against the wall. It helped block out the sounds, and when I closed my eyes, I tried not to see the memory of my mother, dancing and screaming and laughing in the wind. *That* night.

During the storms in the Collis, I'd always taken on the role of protector for my sisters. My father would steadily drink himself into a stupor during the worst of them, locked in his office, his veins filled with thick liquor. But with my sisters, we would bury ourselves under mounds of blankets in Mira's room and distract ourselves with ridiculous stories or giggling over videos on the Halo orb, in languages we couldn't even speak.

I'd always been so focused on making sure my sisters were watched over during a storm that I'd never truly noticed my *own* deep, deep fear of them. Until now. Right now. In this place, in this keep.

The library's alcove helped shield some of the sounds, but when a particularly strong gust seemed to whistle straight through the keep, I couldn't stop the whimper that escaped from my throat.

My heart was throbbing like a wound in my chest. I was so focused on trying to calm my breaths that I didn't hear the door creak open.

"Gemma," came Azur's voice. "What are you doing in here?"

To my mortification, my eyes were blurry with tears when I looked across the room, watching as Azur began to step toward me.

“How did you know I was in here?” I couldn’t help but ask, trying to hide the wobbliness in my voice.

“I tracked your scent here. You smelled strange,” he murmured, his red eyes furrowed as he studied me. He paused at the alcove, his wings flaring behind him briefly, and he frowned. “Different.”

I wanted to laugh, but another gust of wind slammed into the large, arching windows that overlooked the village of Laras below.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I repeated softly, “Different.”

He could smell my fear.

It always amazed me how sensitive other alien species’ senses were compared to humans’. We’d gotten the short end of the stick.

There was a creak of stiff leather as Azur crouched in front of me. When I moved my legs so that my knees were drawn up my chest, I hated that I could still feel the tenderness of his bites along my thighs. Loved and hated it.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, his voice oddly soft. Gentle.

My eyes snapped open, saw he was closer than I’d realized. The bulk of him cut out the view of the library behind him. I hadn’t turned on the orb lights when I’d come in. I’d only wanted darkness to hide in.

Then his wings spread, nothing more than a whisper as they stretched. Completely encasing us within the alcove, his wings were like a barrier, a door, that allowed nothing else in. Even the wind outside seemed to soften, as if it didn’t dare to disobey him.

My shoulders relaxed. I might’ve been wary of my husband and disliked him when he was cruel...but it seemed that my body trusted him to protect me from the storm.

My eyes caught on his fangs, sharp and glinting. I didn't even care that I was supposed to still be mad at him. I knew that those fangs could offer a much needed distraction.

"You want to feed, don't you?" I asked, my voice coming out breathless. I reached for his hand. "Come here."

Azur's eyes glowed brighter. Twin embers nestled among the smokiness of his skin.

He shook his head. Even though he allowed me to pull him deeper into the dark alcove, he resisted when I tilted back my neck, wrapping my hand around his shoulder and tugging.

"Gemma," Azur said, his voice smooth. Full of want and need, but his tone was endlessly patient. It set my teeth on edge. "Tell me what's wrong."

I bit my lip, suddenly on the verge of tears. "Just feed from me already."

"No," he answered, the word softened by his gentleness as he slid his hands beneath me, lifting me until I was settled in his lap. He turned us until his spine was pressed firmly to the alcove wall.

I blinked in astonishment but my hands delved into his vest, clutching tight, when I thought the next gust of wind would blow the glass windows right in.

"You don't like the storm?" Azur guessed. I felt the rumble in his chest before I heard the words.

"I'm still mad at you," I whispered, lowering my face to press my cheek into his chest. His warmth, his strength against me—which I felt in the ropes of his arms, and his scent wrapped all around me.

"I know," he replied. With his back to the alcove and me in his lap, he stretched his wings around us. Cocooning us in.

Quiet. There was quiet. Only the steady, reassuring thud of his heartbeat beneath my cheek and my own shuddering breaths as I fought for control.

I was still upset with him—what he'd said to me had been cruel and cutting, and he knew it—but I was thankful he was

here. He was...*comforting* me. And Azur had been the last person on this entire planet that I'd thought would do that for me.

Slowly, I began to relax.

"Tell me," he murmured gently.

"So you can use it against me?" I couldn't help but ask. Then I immediately felt guilty, a strange unhappy mess tangling in my chest, making me even more miserable.

"You have every reason to believe that," he told me, sliding his arms around me until one bracketed my lower back and the other rested along the stretch of my legs across him, a heavy palm cupping my outer thigh. "But I won't."

A soft huff left my lips. Azur was telling me the truth. Because if there was one thing he wasn't, it was a liar. He'd only been honest, even if his honesty made me want to fight against him.

"I don't like storms."

"These are the moon winds," he informed me. *Moon winds*. Ludayn had mentioned something about them before, hadn't she? "Every full moon, they come. When the barriers between our realms are thinned."

My brow furrowed, my mind catching on that phrase. Realms?

"And Kylorr take to the skies and the winds carry us wherever it pleases. We go with it, letting it guide our wings," he continued. "There's no description that seems appropriate for the sensation of it. I had hoped to show you instead."

I tensed. "What?"

"I promised you I would take you flying again," Azur said softly.

"In this storm?" I asked, my stomach bottoming out at the implication.

I was shocked when a small chuckle left him. The sound was soft but gruff, as if the laugh had to be pulled from him.

All the same, the back of my neck tingled at hearing it.

“Perhaps next month,” he told me.

“This happens *every month*?”

“Yes,” Azur answered. “Rest assured, wife, the keep has withstood the moon winds for generations. And it will be strong for many, many more. Tonight, it will not fall.”

I licked my dry lips. The confidence in his voice made my shoulders relax.

“Really?”

“Yes,” he answered, dipping his head.

“What did you mean when you said the barriers between the realms are thin tonight?”

He was a wealth of information I so desperately craved, wasn't he? He was the heir to the Kaalium, one of the oldest families living on Krynn, or so Kalia had proclaimed one afternoon.

He had the answers to questions I didn't even know to ask yet.

“Our souls live in different realms here on Krynn,” he told me. “The living realm. This realm. We call it the Nyaan.”

The Nyaan?

“Where we are all born into this universe, the common realm we all share,” Azur said. His voice was just as pleasing as when I'd first heard it. Deep and gruff, it felt almost *sinful* to listen to. “When we leave this realm, in death, we pass into the next. We call that realm the Alara. The after realm. You might have already felt it. There are places in the keep where it feels tangible, at certain times through the month.”

I whistled out a long breath, my mind catching on the possibility and realization that I *had*. And the knowledge of that alone made me nearly forget the storm raging beyond his wings entirely.

“I think I have,” I said softly. I remembered when I'd been exploring the keep those first few days, of feeling not entirely

alone. “Even just now. Tonight, when I was coming to the library.”

The chill on the back of my neck. A touch like a whisper.

Azur inclined his head. His black hair was shoulder length. Usually it was tied back, but now it brushed my cheek. I felt his exhale float between us.

He was different tonight. Calm.

“The Nyaan and the Alara,” I repeated, feeling the words over my tongue.

“There is a third realm,” he told me after a moment of tangible hesitation. “Zyos. We don’t usually speak of it.”

“Why?” I asked, wondering if it was similar to some humans’ beliefs of heaven and hell.

“It is the realm of the lost. Or even the forgotten,” Azur said, his voice tightening with his arms around me. “Those whose souls have been stained. Or taken. Souls that need to be guided back to Alara, or else they face an unfathomable eternity.”

I shuddered. “An eternity of what?”

“Of wandering. Of despair. Forced to relive their darkest moments. Over and over again until their souls are pieced back together and they are guided back to their families. To their blood,” Azur told me.

“And that’s possible?” I couldn’t help but wonder.

“Yes,” Azur said. There was an unreadable tone in his voice. “It is.”

In the silence that followed, I heard the moon winds grow stronger, raging against the keep. I couldn’t fathom that the Kylorr enjoyed flying in such utter violence.

Had he been trying to distract me? By telling me about the realms?

“I don’t like storms,” I said again, staring at the thickened membrane of one of his wings, reaching forward to trace the veins, feeling it flutter beneath my fingertips. My hand

dropped. I didn't know why I said it, but the words came tumbling from me all the same. "My mother died in a storm."

Azur stiffened beneath me, tangible and sudden.

His reaction made a thick lump rise in my throat. And I told him something I'd never even *voiced* out loud.

"She drowned herself actually. In a lake behind our estate. Five years ago," I whispered raggedly. "We found the stones in her dress when her body was discovered the next morning."

"*Raazos's blood,*" Azur murmured.

"We didn't let my sisters see her like that. Only my father and me," I confessed. "I'm the eldest. Mira was only eighteen at the time. Piper was fifteen. We thought it best."

"Instead, you bore that burden, that grief in seeing her like that," Azur said. "With no true outlet for it."

"I would do anything for my sisters," I told him, suddenly tired. "You know that."

"Do you know why your mother did it?"

I remembered that night like every breathless moment was imprinted in my memory with the finest of details. I couldn't forget it even though I wanted to. Five years had done nothing to soften the torment of that night.

Mother had been drinking. She'd just gotten a treatment from the doctor, a fresh implant under her skin. I remembered the storm blowing in with a deep, booming rumble of thunder. I remembered her beautiful voice, singing through the halls, a haunting melody that didn't have a predictable rhythm. She'd been matching her pitch to the storm.

When she'd gone outside, it had been me who'd told my father. I'd seen her twirling and dancing in the downpour, stumbling over the grass, laughing into the wind. I'd been scared. I'd never seen her like that.

And perhaps in my own selfishness, I'd been too wrapped up in my own ridiculous sorrow. My twenty-fifth birthday had been a week before. I'd just slept with Petyr and awakened to find him gone. I would never marry. I would never have a

home, a family of my own. I would likely grow old caring for our crumbling estate in the Collis and trying to manage my parents' drinking.

Perhaps I had turned a blind eye to my mother's own sorrow. Because looking back now, it had been apparent she'd needed help.

And we'd failed her.

I'd failed her.

Father had gone outside in the pouring rain, trying to drag her back inside. They'd fought in the front garden. My mother had been screaming words at him that I couldn't make out as the wind howled against the panes of glass, as I'd pressed my face against the windows to see them better. Then Mira and Piper had woken up and I'd done my best to shuffle them back to their rooms.

Father had come back inside. Alone. Soaking wet. He'd been furious, a red tinge on his cheeks that told me he was in a foul state.

"She's in one of her moods again," he'd told me bitterly. "Ignore her. She'll come back inside once she gets cold. I'll call the doctor in the morning to get her dose adjusted."

One of her moods.

That was what my father had always called her depression. She'd struggled with it her entire life. It had only seemed to get worse after Father had returned from the war, even though we'd moved to the Collis, even though she'd had everything her own father had ever wanted for her. Money. Children. Prestige.

The horror of the next morning...how could I ever forget it? I hadn't found her. Father had discovered her, and I'd woken to a deep roar of grief that had nearly shaken the entire house.

Our lives had changed that night. We hadn't known it at the time. But as we'd slept, as a storm had raged outside, my mother had filled her pockets with rocks and stepped into her

beloved lake, where she'd taken her afternoon swims. She'd never surfaced alive.

I told Azur all of this.

I wasn't even sure why.

Once I started, I couldn't stop.

It was like draining an oozing, pus-filled wound until it ran clear again. Getting all the rot and muck out of my brain that had been festering for years.

I hated my father. I blamed him for that night. But I hated *myself* more. For not going outside in the rain to retrieve her, to make sure she was tucked in her bed and warm. How many nights had I stayed awake, sobbing into my pillow, thinking that if I could just go back to that night I could take *five* minutes to save my mother's life?

Instead, I'd hid.

"Don't, Gemma," Azur said, his voice cutting through my words when I told him *why*. "You will gain nothing from thoughts like that. They will eat you alive and never stop feasting until there is nothing left."

He sounded certain in his proclamation. As if he knew *exactly* what it felt like.

But whatever that might've been...he didn't tell me.

"I thought she would get better," I whispered, drained and tired, my throat raw from talking and my emotions strung out. "We were happy once. Before the war. Even when my father was gone. She felt present. She felt *there*. But it was always lingering just under the surface. I can't imagine the pain she must've been in."

Azur was silent for a long time. I felt calm, strangely, considering what I'd just told him. Before tonight, every time I'd encountered him in the keep these past few days, I'd glared and turned away. Still stung from his words in his office.

But right then...my ire felt silly.

“I’m sorry, Gemma,” he whispered against my temple. “I’m so sorry for your mother. I’m sorry you lost her much too soon. I’m sorry you had to deal with her death when you yourself were still so young.”

I recognized that he was trying to comfort me. My foolish, prickly heart was beginning to soften at that realization.

“Thank you,” I said quietly, turning my face into his chest. I sighed, relaxing. “Thank you, Azur.”

“But please,” he said, “recognize that your mother was her own person, too, with flaws and hurts and pains. Recognize that her death was a tragedy, but please do not put that burden on your shoulders. You don’t deserve that, Gemma.”

I processed his words. It wasn’t anything I hadn’t thought myself.

“I’m still trying to do that myself,” he confessed. “I know it’s hard, to silence those thoughts. To forgive yourself. But you’re not alone.”

Whatever it was from his own past, however, he didn’t tell me, and I didn’t push. He would tell me in his own time, if he wanted to.

“Maybe...maybe we can try to learn together,” I whispered. I was tired. I felt like I could let my eyelids droop, that I would be perfectly content to sleep in his lap for the rest of the night.

His lips pressed to my temple. He grunted, “Perhaps we can.”

Silence lapsed. I listened to the wind howling but strangely, the edge of terror had softened.

Azur shifted. He pulled a familiar orb from his pocket. He held it in full view, small and silver. A model so new that might’ve not even been *released* onto the market yet.

A Halo orb. I recognized the delicate pattern of the striations on the orb’s surface. I stilled and pulled back to look up at him, my sleepiness forgotten.

“For me?” I asked.

“For you,” he replied.

CHAPTER 27

Fascinated, I watched the way the emotions flitted over my wife's face. The bewilderment, the realization, the hope, the joy. Even the wariness when she thought I might pull my hand away. *That* reaction had cut me deeper than I'd thought it would, making me realize just how much of a monster she thought me to be.

She still didn't trust me because I'd never given her a reason to.

"I am sorry," I told her. Apologizing the way my own mother had taught me to. Holding one's eyes, looking deep, and not rushing the words. Elongating them, even, dragging them out until they were gentle and soft.

Gemma's gaze widened but she never looked away. As if she'd never even *fathomed* that I knew how to apologize for my actions. If only she'd known the terror that Kythel and I had been growing up in this keep, making trouble wherever we'd gone.

"I was cruel that night. And all the nights before," I added gruffly. "I had no right to say that you were trying to manipulate me. What I *do* think is that you're trying to adapt to Laras...to me. I haven't made it easy. I had my own reasons for it. But I know that we cannot continue like this or else we will tear each other apart."

Her eyes flickered in knowing. Understanding.

"You are not a prisoner here," I said softly. "You are my wife. The *Kylaira* of Laras. No one is allowed to deny you

anything. Least of all me.”

Gemma’s lips were parted. She seemed to have forgotten the storm because when a booming howl of wind—which sounded like thunder in the distance—shook the windows, she didn’t even blink.

“You’ll let me call my sisters?” she asked, as if she needed to make absolute sure what I was offering.

“Yes,” I said.

Gemma snagged the Halo from my grip before I could blink, cradling it into her hands like it was a precious gem. She was wearing one of her new dresses, I was pleased to realize. Though I knew dozens of pants and vests and tunics had been among her massive order—no doubt thanks to my sister—she still chose dresses during the day. Which, in my endless frustration, had led to rampant fantasies of slipping my hand up her skirts to find her bare.

“I—I didn’t tell you about my mother to make you feel... to make you feel like...” She trailed off, biting her lip in indecision as she floundered for how best to say the words.

I pressed my lips tight, feeling my fangs dig into my bottom lip. “I know, Gemma.”

She looked down at the orb, which fit perfectly in her palm though it had felt like a marble in my own fingers. It should’ve been concerning how perfectly she fit in my arms, how soft and comforting her weight felt nestled in my lap, how quiet it was in the confines of my wings. The hunger was difficult to ignore, given how her scent filled the space, how the heat and rush of her blood called to me, beckoning me forward.

“I don’t want to continue like this either,” she said softly. She tilted her head back up to meet my eyes. “It will make for a miserable life, and I don’t want that.”

I swallowed hard. Accepting a life with her, as my wife and *kyrana*, would mean that Aina might remain in Zyos. Unless Raazos set her free, which he likely wouldn’t do without her soul gem in place. And without vengeance against House Hara.

“Do you think we could learn to be with one another?” Gemma asked. Uncertainly. Carefully. Even I heard the vulnerability in her voice. “Do you think we could begin again?”

I likely didn't deserve another chance. Just as Aina hadn't deserved to have her life cut brutally short.

But Gemma didn't deserve this either. The realization that she was just as much a victim of her father's crimes as my family was...it was beginning to weigh on me. Painfully. It felt like the sharp point of a blade slipping beneath my ribs, making it hard to breathe.

She didn't *know* what her father had done. I knew that with blazing certainty. The Gemma I knew wouldn't stand for it.

I pulled out my dagger from the sheath at my hip. Briefly, Gemma's gaze dipped to it, her breath hitching, but then met my eyes again, waiting patiently to see what I would do.

I took her palm and she held it flat, watching as I lowered the blade. Just like at our marriage ceremony, I intended to draw blood. She flinched but didn't make a sound as I slashed a shallow cut over her palm, ignoring the way my venom began to drip, ignoring the tight heat that unfurled in my belly as the scent of her blood filled my nostrils.

Quickly, I slashed my own hand and then the dagger clattered to the floor. Pressing our palms together, so that our blood mingled, I drew in a shuddering breath.

Gemma's lips were parted. We were close. So incredibly close, and I heard her set aside the Halo orb. It joined the dagger on the dusty floor of the library as Gemma shifted in my lap, positioning herself until she straddled my hips.

“Is that a yes?” she asked, her voice oddly guttural and husky, making my cock stiffen and my throat bob.

Our hands held fast, growing hot with the trickle of our blood, but Gemma didn't seem to mind.

She reached up with her other hand to take one of my horns. A rough breath escaped my throat as she guided my head down to her tilted throat.

“Yes,” I hissed, brushing my lips over the flutter of her heartbeat. I pushed her hair back over her shoulder as she exposed more of her throat for me. “I need you, *kyrana*.”

Gemma gasped when I sank my fangs deep, but I was determined to take this slow. I would be gentle.

And so I took gently. As the moon winds rose to dizzying heights outside, Gemma moaned and gasped as I fed from her, taking little sips as opposed to long draws, dragging out her pleasure.

When she came, her orgasm seemed endless. She rocked softly against me, her eyes wide in wonderment, her cries cresting with the peak of the wind outside the keep.

And all the while, our hands held fast.

A new beginning.

Forgive me, Aina, I couldn't help but think, breathing hard against my wife after I'd taken my fill, as her ragged breaths slowly calmed and I saw her eyes droop in drowsiness.

Forgive me.

CHAPTER 28

“*H*e’s traveling?” I asked, frowning. “Where?”

Mira’s lovely face looked back at me from the floating Halo orb. Like I’d suspected, it *was* the latest model, and it cast her image perfectly and in color, unlike the blue projection on the orbs we’d had in the Collis.

It had been a few days since the moon winds. A few days since that night with him in the library. A few days since Azur had gifted me the Halo.

I’d wasted no time in contacting my sisters. Even Piper had been delighted, bursting out into tears when she’d first seen me. I knew how much her ugly words in Father’s study had been haunting her. I could see it plainly on her face.

We talked in the mornings as I dressed with Ludayn, though it was evening for them. Fran liked to hop in on the calls, and all three of them gathered in the front sitting room as we chatted. I’d spoken to my father too, though the call had been brief and I’d been worried when I’d seen his flushed cheeks and wide grin.

It was only Mira and Piper this morning.

Both of my sister’s exchanged a look I knew all too well as Ludayn brushed through my hair. It very rarely tangled, but I must’ve slept restlessly last night. Azur had been particularly ravenous, and I’d tossed and turned with erotic dreams, waking up wet and slick and aching.

“He left yesterday. He said he would be back in a few days,” Piper answered.

“And you didn’t ask him where he was going?”

Piper shrugged. Her gaze flitted over my shoulder, no doubt to Ludayn, whom she still eyed with mistrust. A mistrust that set my teeth on edge, though I knew that not long ago I would’ve been equally wary of a Kylorr. It shamed me now. Sweet Ludayn, who I now knew smelled like her mother’s steam cakes because she helped her prep them in the mornings before journeying to the keep.

She’d brought me one yesterday, and it had been the most delicious thing I’d ever tasted. Like ambrosia. A cake that had melted on my tongue and left a sweet, thick coating behind that had made my cheeks tingle.

“You know Father,” Mira chimed, though her shrug struck me as nervous. “He likes to travel.”

A stone lodged itself in my belly as anger rose. The old me would’ve pasted on a smile, reassuring my sisters not to worry.

I couldn’t bring myself to do it now, even though I wasn’t there to protect them. Piper let out a long yawn and my sisters promised to call tomorrow. I said my goodbyes with a lump in my throat.

Long after the Halo call that morning, dread continued to nip at my heels throughout the rest of the day. Father had promised me. *Why* would he do anything to jeopardize our security and safety again? He had *daughters*. Mira and Piper were beautiful. Though Mira was twenty-three, nearly on the cusp of marrying out of an acceptable age in the Collis, her ethereal beauty would grant her reprieve—especially beyond the Earth colonies. How many times had I heard the collectors threaten to take their payment with her? With Piper?

There was a hatred that mingled with my rage now. One that scared me. Because I wasn’t sure I’d ever felt it quite so well formed. It became a tangible thing in my chest. Something I could hold on to.

If Father had begun borrowing credits again, my sisters weren’t safe. I had the spare money in my own account from Azur—a stipulation in our marriage contract. I could use it to

get them off New Everton, out of the Collis. But where would they go? They could go to my grandparents', my mother's parents, but they hadn't spoken to us in years.

They could come here, I thought, my mind wandering as I looked through the *lore* records late into the afternoon. I was nearly done organizing my section of records. Maazin was absent today. I wasn't certain where he was, but I had noticed him disappearing sporadically, then reappearing like he'd never been gone. Kalia was in the village since the harvest was drawing nearer and nearer. I'd barely seen her in the last two days, and we'd put the starwood vines on hold until after the ball.

They could come here. To Krynn. To Laras, I thought, stilling and looking around the darkening records room with unseeing eyes.

Would Azur allow it?

Would Azur grant my sisters a residency contract on Krynn?

I didn't know.

And what about Fran? We were her only *family*. She had no one else in the Collis, and she'd only stayed on at the estate because I'd begged her. She'd stayed out of loyalty to us. I couldn't leave her behind.

A decision for another day, I thought, wandering over to Maazin's desk.

I was alone. Ludayn looked tired that day. She'd told me there had been a mishap that morning in her mother's shop and so I'd waved her off early, telling her to go rest. I hadn't seen Azur since breakfast that morning. Ever since the night in the library, we'd taken our morning meals together out on the terrace, though they usually ended with me being *his* meal. Just that morning, he'd pressed me up against the wall of the keep, his claws digging into my hips, holding me in place, and I'd tried to stifle my moans in case Inasa came out to check on us.

Blowing out a long exhale, I felt a familiar throbbing begin between my thighs. He had me trained. As soon as night fell, as soon as darkness began to crawl across Laras and the Halo orbs began to glow with their golden light, illuminating rooms and hallways...I knew he'd come for me and so my body readied for him.

To distract myself, I began to look through Maazin's records. We'd decided that I would organize the older ones, he would start with the previous year, and we'd meet halfway. He was a slow worker, however. It looked like he'd only organized the last two years' worth, while I'd finished about twenty years.

Sighing, I sat down at his desk, dragging the nearest disorganized stack toward me. I didn't understand how Maazin could work in such chaos. It made my skin crawl.

I began to sort through the records, scanning my eyes over the columns, finding it fascinating to see the purchase agreements, the place of harvest, the type of *lore*—of which there were many varieties, I'd discovered—the sheer amount of credits exchanged, the weight, the buyer. Even the name of the records keeper, Maazin's illegible scribble present in that particular column.

I liked the feel of the thick parchment under my fingers. There was something to be said for doing this the traditional way, for keeping records with ink instead of through the Halo.

It was on my second pass of Maazin's records when my eyes caught on numbers.

Numbers.

Numbers that didn't *quite* make sense. Enough to warrant a second look.

I was a stickler for numbers. Because my own family's safety had relied on those numbers.

I fished out my own Halo from my dress pocket, frowning, and uploaded the numbers, running them through a variety of calculations before I came to the conclusion that Maazin must've made a recording error.

For the weight of *lore* that was sold—to a buyer called “Zor Koreen”—there was a discrepancy of nearly 150,000 credits. Credits that weren’t accounted for, a simple dropping of a digit.

Frowning, I set aside that particular record. It was dated from last year and was tucked amid larger purchase agreements, on the tenth page out of fifteen total for Laras’s harvest.

There was no way for me to check the accounts. No way to verify that the full payment had been made to House Kaalium.

It’s likely just a recording error, I thought. Maazin could be scattered at times, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t thorough in his work. He had a mind for numbers too, and Azur seemed happy enough with his work, even if he got the reports to him late.

But the nagging at the base of my neck wouldn’t cease, so I dug into the next stack of records. From two years ago. It took me nearly an hour of looking through endless documents—a larger harvest year than usual due to favorable weather, according to the notes at the top—until I saw it.

The dread I’d felt from earlier in the afternoon—from the news my father was traveling—returned to me, weighing me down.

“Zor Koreen,” I whispered, tracing the buyer’s name with my fingertips, scrawled out in Maazin’s messy script. A shipment that had been sent out through the northern port, in three metal crates, stuffed to the brim of *lore*. Nearly 200 *vron* worth of *lore*, given the weight in the column.

The buyer had paid 20,582 credits—the equivalent of 20 *vron*—only. A zero had been dropped. 180 *vron* were missing. Just to be sure, I went through the nearby purchase agreements, double-checking their weights and payments.

Nothing jumped out as being out of the ordinary.

What is going on? I wondered, slumping back in the chair.

And if Maazin had knowingly charged the buyer less than the value, why had he *recorded* it? Why had he left evidence

of it? A trail that would lead right back to him?

Because he'd known that House Kaalium didn't keep their records in the Halo, where these discrepancies would be discovered almost immediately when matched up with transaction history?

I didn't want to jump to conclusions. I didn't want to accuse Maazin of anything, especially without seeing the transaction payments through House Kaalium's actual accounts.

Not that Azur would *ever* grant me access to those.

But didn't he have the right to know what I'd found?

I need to be certain, I thought, rolling my neck. There were thousands of documents in this room, the thought making me dizzy.

I set my sights on another stack of records, pulling them toward me, double-checking that the door was still closed. Blowing out a breath, though my eyes were nearly going cross-eyed and bleary, I searched for Zor Koreen.

I didn't find it.

But I did find Koreen Kos.

Same deal.

Five crates of *lore* this time, valued at 400 *vron*, due to incredible high demand for that particular year.

"39,560," I whispered, rubbing at my eyes as I saw the amount of credits Koreen Kos had paid. This time, 360 *vron* were missing from the records.

When I went back another year, I saw the pattern. It had started small, likely that same year Maazin had begun to work at the keep. He'd only recorded a single crate that first time, but nearly 30,000 credits that should've been there weren't. Last year had been the largest payment to date.

I was still deep in the records, hoping that I was wrong, when Azur's voice made me jump out of my skin.

“I’ve been looking for you,” he told me, stepping into the room.

Just his voice made goose bumps break out over my flesh in anticipation. Deep and guttural. I could hear the need in it.

My gaze flitted to the records. My neck was stiff, my back aching since I’d been hunched over. How late was it?

Azur came to me, his hands plucking me easily off the chair, before pressing my backside into the desk. My hands quivered over his shoulders, but just as he leaned down to smell my hair—something he’d been doing a lot lately—I stopped him.

“Wait,” I breathed.

Azur stilled, pulling away though his eyes were already darkening with his hunger.

I took in a deep breath, uncertain if I should say *anything*. I hadn’t wanted to at first. But I’d found a *pattern*. And patterns—abnormal ones, especially—didn’t lie. Just like numbers.

“Does *Zor Koreen* mean anything to you?” I asked quietly, meeting my husband’s eyes. He frowned. “Or *Koreen Kos*?”

“Koreen?” he asked quietly.

“Yes.”

“It’s an old Kaazor family name. Why do you ask?” he demanded, his eyes suddenly pinned on me with careful, cold observation.

Kaazor?

“I—I found discrepancies,” I told him, shoulders sagging. I didn’t want to get Maazin in trouble. But if he *was* stealing from Azur, from House Kaalium, then I couldn’t help him cover it up. I turned away from Azur, reaching out to straighten the documents, tapping them with my pointer finger. “In the *lore* records. Dating back four years, but I haven’t checked beyond that.”

“What kind of discrepancies?” Azur asked me, his expression carefully blank, his hands leaving my waist to press

against the desk, lowering himself down so he could scan the columns.

I pointed out one. The first one I'd found.

"The purchase price doesn't make sense for the weight of *lore*," I told him, worrying my bottom lip as I watched his gaze flit over the ink, suddenly nervous that I was making a fuss over nothing. But whatever Azur found, I watched as his shoulders tightened. "And here."

I pulled the next year, navigating to the offending row, ten pages back in the stack.

"And here," I said softly, going to the next one.

And then the next one.

A part of me was worried that he wouldn't *believe* me. That he thought I was trying to simply make trouble, and my heart was pounding against my breastbone as I waited for him to say something.

"*Raazos*," Azur said quietly, tension tight in his shoulders, and he ran a hand down his face—his suddenly tired face, and I couldn't help but feel a twinge of sympathy for him. Of understanding.

He was the eldest son to the Kaalium. He had this entire keep to run. Entire *villages* of Laras below to oversee. The nation of the Kaalium that he managed with the help of his brothers. I knew there was trouble brewing in the north with the Kaazor.

This was just one more thing.

One more thing that added weight to his shoulders, especially with Laras's harvest coming up.

"You...you believe me?" I asked, unsure of what to say.

"It's blatant," he rasped, turning his gaze to me.

Was that relief I felt? Relief mingled with dread because I didn't know what this meant for Maazin. He'd been kind to me. He'd let me barge into his records room so I'd felt a little

less lonely, so I'd felt like I had some small purpose in the keep.

"I...I can't imagine that Maazin would do this," I said, saying the name that hung between us in the quiet room. "I don't understand it."

"But he didn't try to hide it, did he?" Azur murmured, pushing up from the desk. "Only if someone was *really* looking at these records. And he's the only one that works on them. Until you came along. You were right—I should have had them uploaded to a secure system on the Halo long before now. If I had, then this wouldn't have happened."

I bit my lip. "What are you going to do?"

"I'll take care of it," Azur said firmly.

Just like that.

My lips parted. "But..."

"Put it from your mind," Azur continued, collecting the documents into a neat stack and taking them from the desk. "I'll take care of it, wife."

I reached out to touch his arm. His gray skin was warm and hard beneath my fingertips. I held him, feeling something lodge in my throat. There was trepidation for Maazin. Relief too. Disbelief?

For so long, I'd been the one to solve all the problems in our household. I'd grown to hate it because it had *always* fallen on me, weighing me down until I'd wanted to sink straight into the earth and let it swallow me whole. Even when I'd wanted help, I couldn't ask for it.

And so when I'd found the discrepancies in these records, I'd felt that familiar creeping of nausea and dread. Another problem to solve. Another anxious ridden thing that would eat me up inside until it was dispelled.

But not with Azur.

He'd taken it from me in the blink of an eye.

He'd taken control.

It was freeing.

Still...we were married. If I wanted this to be a partnership, I didn't want him to bear all the problems alone.

"If you set up the secure database and guide me to it through the Halo, I'll upload the records," I told him quietly. "You don't have to worry about doing that. I'll take care of it."

I held my breath. I knew I was asking for his trust. His trust when he'd just realized he'd been betrayed.

Azur eyed me. I watched the moment that hardened gaze softened. If I was shocked when he dipped his head to capture my mouth in a kiss, I showed it by clinging to him.

"Do it," he rasped into the kiss. "But leave Maazin to me."

CHAPTER 29

Two days later, Azur appeared in my rooms as Ludayn was fussing over wrinkles in my dress.

“*Kyzaire*,” she gasped softly, wide eyed with surprise before stepping away from me, dropping back from view to allow my husband to stride forward.

“Good morning,” I murmured, meeting his eyes, feeling my belly flutter with anticipation.

“We’re going down to the village today,” he told me. His red eyes swept my body, nostrils flaring when he saw the slit that ran up the length of the sky-blue dress Ludayn had insisted I wear today. I’d given up trying to fight her on my outfits about a week ago. She was incredibly strong willed, I’d come to find.

“Oh,” I said, a wiggle of excitement making my fingers twitch. “Really?”

“The marriage was announced to the Kaalium yesterday evening. It’s expected we make an appearance in the village.”

That deflated my excitement a little bit. This was a duty for him. Not because he *wanted* to take me down to the village, even though I’d been hinting the last couple days at breakfast.

“Just yesterday evening?” I asked, tilting my head. “But we’ve been married for close to a month.”

Azur didn’t say anything. He stretched his neck, and I heard a small *pop*.

“All right,” I murmured, shrugging it off. “Will this dress be suitable?”

He’d called my others *hideous*, after all. I knew perfectly well that this dress was more than suitable for a visit to the village, but I wanted to hear him say it. It was made of a light, buttery-soft material that hugged my breasts and hips. The neckline was open, and Ludayn had left my hair up at my request, though she’d tucked the strands into a soft bun, decorated with a glimmering silver pin, instead of the severe bun I usually raked it back in. My neck was on display, and I knew that Azur could *just* make out the bite he’d left on me last night, the one on the top of my right breast.

“Yes,” he grunted, those red eyes sweeping me again, and my toes curled in my slippers, trying to ignore the little bloom of desire between my thighs. In a dark, husky tone, he said, “Perfectly suitable.”

A thrill went through me.

I might not have been a great beauty, not like my sisters, but Azur could hardly take his eyes off me. It was a heady sensation. Addicting like the pleasure that coursed through me as he fed.

With Ludayn trailing us, though at a great distance, we left my rooms and the northeast wing entirely. Keepers bowed as we passed, and when he reached the landing that opened up to the bottom floor, Azur stepped up to it. His arms came around my waist. Over his shoulder, to Ludayn, he said, “Meet us at the village.”

All I heard was, “Yes, *Kyzaire*,” and then Azur was stepping us off the edge.

I clung to his shoulders and gave a little shriek when the skirts of my dress billowed open. Azur actually *laughed*, a brief, huffing sound, as he watched me scramble to cover my exposed sex, flaring his wings wide about halfway down the core of the keep to stop our quick descent. My skirts settled, though his warm hand slid up my thigh, getting dangerously close to where he’d find me wet and slick for him.

“Now I know why Kylorr females don’t wear dresses,” I grumbled, my cheeks hot, hoping that no keepers had seen. Or worse, *Zaale*. I shuddered to think about that.

I slapped at Azur’s hand when it strayed too close, and his lips twitched. “I’ve never noticed how enticing dresses are until just recently.”

My cheeks burned hotter. Was he...was he *flirting* with me?

We landed gently on the bottom floor. The stretch of the grand staircase was to our left. Poor Ludayn, she’d probably just made it to the second floor. I’d seen keepers use the landings and watched them fly up to the different levels, but I’d never experienced them myself.

Instead of taking the back entrance, however, Azur led me down another wide, bright hallway just to the right of the staircase. I’d never liked traveling down this particular one, though I’d discovered it a couple days into living here and it was the easiest path to the front of the keep. The carvings on the walls depicted Kylorr in various stages of battle. Panels in the stone that had been smoothed with time—but time that had done little to soften the gruesome scenes and the expressions of blood-splattered victory.

I kept my eyes away from them until the hallway funneled us to the front of the keep, to the grand and awe-inspiring foyer. The main entrance of the house. The neck-craning, tall double doors—inlaid with silver leaves and polished regularly—would be open wide for the harvest ball, as Kalia had informed me.

Azur opened them for me now.

Outside, the morning sun was warm and inviting. I smiled, breathing in the crisp air, the scent of the sea drifting over my tongue.

“*Kyzaire*,” came *Zaale*’s voice behind us.

Azur’s hand was on the small of my back, leading me down the flared stone steps. Beyond the keep, I had a breathtaking view of Laras. The villages were spread out on a

wide, sweeping stretch of land before the keep. Even still, some of the buildings were tall, spectacular in their architecture, and I saw defined, well-used roads, a haphazard pattern that wound around Laras, connecting it like the pathway of veins in a body.

Zaale stopped at the door, and Azur climbed the steps he'd just descended to meet him. The keeper spoke close to Azur's ear, and I watched my husband's face tighten, a brief downturn of his lips, before he nodded at Zaale.

"Inform Rivin," he said. "I'll be back within the hour."

Zaale inclined his head, disappearing back into the keep and sealing the doors behind us.

Worrying my lip, I watched as Azur returned to me, guiding me down the last of the steps. Small white stones crunched underneath my slippers. There was a tree-lined path a short distance from the stairs, shaded and cool as we walked beneath the canopies.

"Is something wrong?" I finally asked. Azur's hand was on my back again. The heat of his palm felt like a brand, and I couldn't help but press into him.

Azur didn't say anything at first. The gravel disappeared beneath my feet the farther we walked. On the tree-lined path, the cobbled road was worn with time and use. On either side of the aged stones, between each of the trees, I saw flowering bushes, thriving in its shaded condition. Bright red blooms, unfurling into thick, plush petals. And at the very center, the stamens *glowed* yellow. Like a Halo orb's light. They lit up the path like little beacons.

Beautiful, I thought, having never seen anything like it.

"Maazin has disappeared," Azur finally said, his voice cutting through the silence.

I stilled, coming to a stop beside him. "What do you mean?"

"He likely came to the keep yesterday, saw that the records were missing, and slipped out," Azur said. "I had all the doors watched, but there's been no sign of him. Zaale just informed

me that his room in the village has been cleared out. His neighbor said he left in a hurry yesterday afternoon.”

My hand came to my throat and I felt my hard swallow. “So...so you think he *was* stealing from you?”

“I checked the transactions from the accounts he managed the morning after you found the records. The payments were just as they were written. Hundreds of thousands of credits that should have been there. My only guess is that he has connections to Kaazor. Connections that didn’t show up when Zaale vetted him for the position at the keep. He’s been funneling cheap *lore* to them for years. Crates of it that they might have been selling themselves to interested buyers.”

I breathed out an incredulous breath.

“We only sell *lore* to reputable and trusted buyers throughout the Quadrants,” Azur informed me next. “Those that cannot get it directly from us...they would likely pay exorbitant fees for genuine *lore* from the Kaalium. Perhaps that’s what the Kaazor are doing.”

“Why can’t they just grow their own?” I couldn’t help but wonder. “Why steal it from you?”

“Because of the land. It’s always about the land. The Kaalium,” Azur answered. His fingers pressed into my back, his claws digging slightly, but I didn’t mind it. “There’s a long history there. Between my ancestors and the Kaazor. Bloody too. This land is soaked with Kaazor blood. And Kaalium blood. It’s only in the Kaalium that *lore* grows strong. The Kaazor can grow it. As can the Thryki and the Koro and the Dyaar across the seas. But it’s *our* soil and *our* earth that make it renowned across the Quadrants. And we’ve fought many wars over this land because of it. We’ll likely fight many more.”

My lips parted. Again I felt a dizzying wave of overwhelming ineptitude. That I truly didn’t understand anything about the alien race I’d married into.

“War?” I whispered.

His face softened. My heart thudded and skipped in my chest when I saw it.

“Do not fear, wife,” he told me. “Between Laras and my brothers’ territories, the Kaalium has the greatest army on Krynn. If war does come, it will be over swiftly.”

“That doesn’t make me feel any better,” I informed him.

He grunted and turned us so that we could continue walking down the path, getting closer and closer to Laras. I could *just* make out a bell ringing, the deep chimes spreading over the land. It rang at the same time every morning. I’d often heard it from the back of the terrace, even over the crashing of the waves below.

“Then it’s a good thing that your husband is a berserker,” he answered me. “Because I would tear anyone in two if they came for you.”

I barely stifled my gasp. His words had been so flippant. My mind flashed back to carvings in the hallway, depictions of bloody battles and endless violence.

It was easy to forget that the Kylorr’s brutality was infamous. When humans fought in wars, we used weapons. Tech.

But the Kylorr?

They used their bare hands, their fangs, their claws, their blades.

So why wasn’t I frightened by his words?

To distract myself from that startling realization, I asked, “Will you go after Maazin?”

“Yes.”

I couldn’t help but imagine Maazin being torn in two.

“Don’t,” I pleaded softly.

Azur growled, stopping on the pathway again. “Don’t?”

“He’s young,” I whispered, meeting his eyes. Maazin was younger than even me. He’d been kind to me. He hadn’t

needed to be. In fact, it would've served him better if he'd kicked me out of his office entirely from that very first day.

But he hadn't.

"He made a mistake. Does he deserve to...to *die* for that?"

"It was a betrayal, not a mistake," Azur told me, his voice hardened like steel. "No one *takes* from House Kaalium and gets away with it. There must be punishment for any wrongdoing, or else the balance of the realms is threatened."

There was an edge in his voice that felt *off*. His gaze burned into mine. My lungs suddenly felt tight.

"Please," I whispered, reaching out to take his hand.

A rough sound rose from Azur's throat, guttural and raw. His eyes were angry, but he pulled me closer until I could feel the strength of his body against mine. My back arched so I could look up at him.

"And what would you do, *wife*, to ensure his life?"

I sucked in a sharp breath. There was a dangerous gleam in his eyes, one I was bewildered to say made my pulse flutter and my thighs squeeze together.

"Anything you want," I answered. Softly. Carefully.

Another of our games. Only this time, it felt much, much more serious.

His hands tightened on me as his nostrils flared. His cock was thickening against me, hard like his voice but hot like the fire in his gaze.

He leaned down and I held my breath, tilting my neck back. He liked it when I submitted to him like this. And a part of *me* liked it too. To let him take control. It felt freeing to just *let go*.

I was thrumming in anticipation, but his bite never came. Instead, he leaned back.

He grunted, "No. There is no time."

Disappointment crashed into me. Azur saw it, and the maddening male actually smirked.

Then I watched it slowly die.

“We’ll discuss Maazin later,” he told me, straightening.

Relief threaded through me. “All right.”

He pulled me along the path, and I stumbled after him. The path was widening, more light filtering in, and I saw a silver gate at the very end. Was this the only path up to the keep? I wondered.

“Thank you,” I couldn’t help but say quietly.

“I haven’t decided to spare him yet, Gemma,” Azur informed me, frowning down at me.

“No,” I said. “I meant thank you for telling me about Maazin. You didn’t hide the truth from me. You told me when I asked. I...I appreciate that.”

Azur went quiet, but I was proud that I’d voiced the sentiment. There were too many lies in my life. From my own parents. Lies I’d told my sisters. I appreciated the *truth* for once, even if it led to unfavorable conclusions.

“I will endeavor to be honest with you, if I can be,” Azur finally grunted, leading me through the silver gate at the end of the pathway. “Now, come. We’ll take our morning meal in the central square.”

Now that we’d broken through the line of the trees, it seemed like the sounds of the village hit me in the face, though it was still early in the morning.

“Can we get steam cakes?” I asked instead. “From Ludayn’s mother?”

Azur stilled. “Steam cakes?”

“Yes,” I said, want threading through me, my belly rumbling at the mere thought of them. “Please? I’ve wanted to visit her shop. And it’s still early, so the line might not be too long.”

Azur sighed. “Very well.”

CHAPTER 30

*K*alia had been working hard, I saw, when we stepped into Laras. I'd flown into the village nearly every night but hadn't stopped to really notice all the changes. The banners for the harvest festival were on full display, glimmering in the sunlight, stitched with silver.

I knew the north end of the village would be cleared already, vendors setting up their temporary shops to accommodate the influx of travelers and visitors who lived beyond Laras's borders. Even those who would travel from all stretches of the Kaalium to journey to the capital for the week-long festivities. The inns were preparing too, though I knew they'd likely been booked up for the last month at least. The blood givers would be taking extra doses of *baanye*. The food stalls and shops would be preparing for the longest week of the season, working tirelessly. The seamstresses were likely bleeding from their fingertips to get all the orders out for the upcoming ball.

My own brothers would be coming for the harvest ball at the keep. The single event of the year where we were all together, though my father wouldn't be in attendance.

My brothers would finally meet Gemma.

I still didn't know how I felt about that.

I turned my gaze to where my wife was chatting quite happily with Ludayn and her mother, who plied her with yet another steam cake, one she was all too happy to accept. I

knew the female's name was Yeeda, with blue hair like her daughter's and small horns to match. Dyaar males, in comparison, had some of the largest horns of our race.

Looking toward Ludayn's limp wing, my lips pressed as I thought, *And the Dyaar have some of the most brutal males.*

A crime like that, especially against one's own blood, would be punished in kind in the Kaalium.

Ludayn's father would have had his wings ripped from his own body as penance. Then he would've been put to death.

Nyravila.

An eye for an eye.

The Dyaar's laws were lax about such things.

Gemma laughed, husky and soft, at something Yeeda said. I didn't care much for steam cakes. I thought the sweetness was sickening, but I had forced one down my throat when my wife had handed me one, watching her smile widen as I did.

Since when did it please *me* to see *her* pleased?

I frowned, my hand tightening on Gemma's arm. She cast me a long look, and Yeeda's words finally tapered off.

"Forgive us, *kya*," I murmured to Yeeda. I watched a pleasurable flush darken her cheeks black at the word. A word of respect for a female acquaintance, considered formal but proper. Yeeda shot Ludayn a pleased look, a secretive smile aimed at her daughter that seemed to embarrass Ludayn. I gave the elder female a smile to soften my interruption. "We must make our rounds."

"Of course, *Kyzaire*," Yeeda breathed. Her face had a streak of powdered yellow grain from her baking. She wiped her hands on the cloth tucked into the waist of her pants. "Forgive me for keeping you. My Ludayn says I can keep myself company by how much I talk."

Even though it was early, there was a line outside Yeeda's door. A line that had parted me—for *us*—as Gemma and I had drawn near. Whispers and stares and excited smiles at seeing the new *Kylaira* of Laras first. Envious stares too, especially

from some of the daughters of noble houses, females I'd recognized from the harvest balls and the dinners my mother had often hosted at the keep.

I'd recognized the bulging eyes of realization as we'd walked through the village too. The knowledge that I was in the grip of the blood madness. That my wife was my *kyrana*. They'd likely assumed that *that* was why I'd married her—this unknown human female who had seemed to fall out of the sky. It made *sense* to them now as expressions of knowing, of understanding passed us by.

The line behind us had seemed pleased enough to wait. To eavesdrop on Gemma and Yeeda's conversation. They would report to their friends and family that the *Kylaira* had a quiet laugh, that she loved steam cakes, and that the *Kyzaire* was feeding from her regularly and wasn't healing the marks he left behind. I would likely find baskets full of steam cakes placed as gifts at our gates come morning. Zaale would grumble as he brought them inside, his distaste at the clutter left at the gates evident. Yeeda would be busy with all the orders from the noble families, all clamoring to meet the new *Kylaira*, the blood mate to the heir of the Kaalium, to get in her good graces and gain favor among the House.

"Don't you like them?" Gemma asked as I pulled her from Yeeda's shop. Ludayn fell back into step behind us, though a respectable distance away so that she couldn't hear our quiet conversation. I watched as my wife licked her fingers, her pink tongue flicking out to catch a stray crumb from the pillowy cake in her hand, as my cock tightened in my pants.

"No," I replied. "I hate steam cakes. I have since I was a child."

Gemma blinked and then laughed. Louder than I'd ever heard her laugh before, stopping nearby Kylorr in their path.

"Then why did you eat one in the shop?" she asked, her smile wide. Wide enough that I rubbed at my chest, feeling a strange flicker there underneath the bone.

Because you wanted me to, I thought.

“I didn’t want to offend Yeeda, now did I?” I grumbled instead.

“Oh, I don’t think you could have,” she murmured. “You were perfectly charming. She nearly swooned at your feet.” She lifted her nose into the air, catching a scent on the breeze. And here, I’d thought that humans had terribly dull senses. “What’s that?”

I smirked. “Blood cake skewers. Mixed with meat and innards.”

She wrinkled her nose, but I was already dragging her to the stall. Smaller than Yeeda’s shop, it was a tiny little cart perched on the corner of a busy road, though it was still early. The vendor—a Bartu male, not a Kylorr, with a long beak-like mouth—gaped at me.

“*Kyzaire. Kylaira.* It is the highest of honors to feed you from my humble cart,” the Bartu said, his voice accented with the universal tongue, dragging out the *z* and the *s* within the words.

“Whatever it is you’re making has proven irresistible to my wife here,” I informed the male, tossing him a smile. “Two skewers, if you will. She cannot wait to try them.”

Gemma jabbed her elbow in my side, but she smiled brightly at the Bartu all the same. Yeeda’s steam cake still hung between her fingertips, and she gulped when she saw the blackened mash, roasted on the sticks, as he presented them with a flourish.

When I tried to pay, the Bartu waved me off, the scales around his neck ruffling, and I decided not to press, in case he found it offensive.

“Thank you very much. They look delicious,” Gemma said, waving back at him as we left. I smirked. Shortly after, I saw a flock of Kylorr flood the poor Bartu’s cart, each clamoring for a skewer of their own.

“You’ll pay for that,” my wife grumbled, though her spirits seemed high enough and she looked to be fighting a smile.

“How?” I pressed. “Will you force feed me the last of your steam cake as punishment?”

She peered down at it, seemed to deliberate doing just that, before she popped it into her own mouth. Around the sticky sweet mess, she said, “No. Wouldn’t want to waste it on you.”

I chuckled. “Eat your skewer, wife.”

She threw me a dark look, but I was surprised when she plucked off the first misshapen blackened ball and popped it into her mouth.

“Oh...” she murmured, the word muffled as she chewed. She held my eyes, defiant and stubborn even now, and I found myself stopping in the middle of the road to watch her. She swallowed. “That’s, um, grainy.”

My lips twitched.

“But *good*,” she said, her tone triumphant, her eyes shining in the morning sun. Her gloating expression made my cock pulse.

“You like that?” I rumbled.

Her smile slowly died, suddenly realizing how near I’d drawn to her, the way my wings flared subtly behind me.

“Yes,” she answered quietly, tilting her chin up to meet my gaze. Awareness passed between us. I could smell her. Even if she did smell like steam cakes, my venom flooded over my tongue, hungering for her.

“Mmm.”

Over her shoulder, I caught heads poking out of windows and people lingering on the streets to watch us. Now was not the time to get entranced by my wife. Too many eyes were on us.

Gemma seemed to realize this, too, because she took a step back. “Can we go see the *lore* fields?”

“It’s a long distance out from the main center here. Most fly,” I answered. The purpose was to be seen. To show the *Kylaira* to the villagers in Laras before the harvest ball so

hopefully the worst of the gossip would be behind us then. “But there is a good vantage point from the shrines.”

“The shrines?” she asked frowning.

“I’ll show you,” I told her, though I didn’t know if I would show her *our* shrine. Showing her somehow felt like a betrayal to Aina, whose own beacon was still lit every single night by myself or Kalia. The ever-present knot in my chest tightened. “Come.”

I ate my skewer with lightning-fast speed, though it did nothing to diminish my hunger, and guided her through the streets, taking the longest possible path. One that led down the Row, as we called it. The noble houses. Descendants of the great families that had worked closely with my own ancestors to create the Kaalium. Families that had stakes in the *lore* yields as payment for their services and their loyalties.

I took Gemma down the busiest stretch of the village too, a street with shops on both sides, bustling with activity, though most of it stopped at the mere sight of us.

We encountered Kalia there, speaking with a female I knew was decorating the keep for the ball. Neela, her name was, a friend of Kalia’s. She was human with warm golden skin and soft, wavy hair. She’d come to the Kaalium originally as a blood giver, seeking refuge from a nearby colony. Now she helped with the harvest festival and all the other festivals in between and after.

“Sister,” I greeted as we passed.

Kalia looked frazzled, as she always did this time of year.

“What are you two doing here?” she asked, mouth agape, as Neela looked on with delight. My sister glared at me. “I wanted to show Gemma the village. How could you go without me?” she whined.

Gemma couldn’t help but stare at Neela. She’d known that there were humans in the village. Maybe she just hadn’t believed it. There were many different alien species living on Krynn—not just in Laras but throughout the Kaalium.

“Good morning, *Kylaira*,” Neela greeted, blinking her green eyes at Gemma and smiling. Showing fangless, white teeth, just like my wife’s.

“Good morning,” Gemma said, processing the words quickly. She smiled back and acted like this was just another everyday occurrence. It always struck me how adaptable she was. How easily she could mold herself into a situation, however unexpected. She held out her hand. A human gesture of greeting, I knew from experience. “Gemma Hara. Pleased to meet you.”

“Neela Thorne,” she replied, taking Gemma’s hand and shaking it. “Pleased to meet you as well. I heard you come from New Everton.”

“Yes,” Gemma replied, her smile serene and soft. “From the Collis.”

“It’s beautiful there,” Neela said. “I visited once. Long ago.”

I couldn’t read the expression on Gemma’s face. It looked like longing, perhaps. Did she miss her home? How could she when it had only ever brought her grief?

“Yes, it is,” Gemma said softly.

Kalia cut in. “Where are you going now?”

“She wants to see the *lore* fields. I’m taking her up to the shrines to see them better.”

Kalia exchanged a look with me. Finally, she nodded. “I’ll leave you to it, then. Neela and I are just finalizing the floral arrangements and the *lore* vendors for the ball.”

I inclined my head, guiding Gemma forward. “Make sure there will be *lore* from the harvest five years ago. It’s Kaldur’s favorite.”

Kalia rolled her eyes. “Yeah, well, at the rate he goes through it, he’ll have nothing left soon. He’d smoke his way through our entire vault in one night if he could.”

Gemma was quiet as we strode farther and farther away from the shops and closer to the temple, sitting at the highest

peak of the village. It had been built by my ancestors. The same ones who had built our keep so the sweeping lines of stone and the arched roof were similar in style. Beneath the temple, underground, were the shrines. Thousands of them and ever expanding, should a citizen of Laras request one for their bloodline. The shrine of House Kaalium, however, was in a private vault at the back of the temple, at ground level.

“Will I meet your brothers?” Gemma finally asked. I’d flown us up the steps to the temple, telling Ludayn to wait for us below.

“Yes,” I answered her. “They’re coming for the harvest ball. You’ll meet them that night. But they rarely stay long.”

She swallowed and nodded. She didn’t even seem to register the view—the one of the *lore* fields that stretched to the south. Bright blue and twinkling in the sunlight, nearly ready to be picked and processed. Workers were in the fields, even this early, tending carefully to their precious crops.

“All...four of them, is it?”

Had I never told her how many I had? She must’ve learned it from Kalia.

“Yes,” I murmured. “Kythel and I are the eldest. Then there is Thaine. Kaldur. Lucen. Kalia is the youngest. The only daughter of House Kaalium.”

Her brows furrowed. She leaned against the gray stone of the banister. We were alone up here, not a soul in sight near the temple at this time of the morning.

“I thought you were the oldest son.”

“I am,” I answered. “But Kythel was born mere moments after me.”

“You have a *twin*?” she asked, gasping softly, her eyes rounded. “Another one of *you*?”

I grunted, fighting the quirk of my lips. “We look nothing alike, I assure you. And *are* nothing alike. But we are close. Very close.”

Gemma studied me. “So many sons,” she murmured. “Your mother must’ve had her hands full.”

“She did,” I answered. “The curse all Kylorr females must bear.”

“A curse? To have sons?”

“In case you didn’t notice in the village or at the keep, Kylorr females are rare,” I informed her, leaning back against the banister. Not facing the fields like she was but facing the temple. “Males outnumber them nearly four to one.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed, and I watched her brows furrowed. “I...I had wondered why there were so many male keepers. I didn’t realize.”

“There are many females in the village but not necessarily Kylorr females.”

“Like Neela,” she commented softly.

“You were surprised to see another human here,” I guessed. “There are over two hundred humans in Laras alone. Even more beyond our borders. In Kaldur’s territory, there’s even a food shop that sells human food, imported from the Earth colonies.”

Gemma’s eyes widened.

“I...I guess I’m just trying to make sense of it all. You must know the rumors and stories that circulate through the Quadrants about the Kylorr,” Gemma said, her tone soft. She didn’t want to offend me, I realized. “Is that done purposefully? Keeping those rumors alive and well? Making others fear you?”

A loaded question. But my wife was intelligent. She would want to know *why*.

“We like our way of life,” I told her, lifting my shoulder. “Fear is a good motivator—as good as any—to keep most away. We open up the borders when we have need for it. But residency contracts are rare and hard to come by in the Kaalium. I can’t speak for the rest of Krynn. They govern their nations independently.”

Gemma stared at me. She looked like she wanted to ask me something. That it was just on the tip of her tongue, but she was holding back. And that fascinated me. For someone whose expressions could be as closed off as mine, I could *see* the indecision and vulnerability on her face, and I wanted to know what was causing it.

“My sisters... Would you...would you consider—”

Before she could finish, I heard a ripple of screams from the south. Shouts of alarm, and suddenly the alarm bells were sounding from the fields, reverberating through Laras.

Gemma’s face paled, her eyes glued to something on the horizon. “*What is that?*”

I growled, a pulse of the rage swimming in my veins, readying to be let free, when I saw it.

“*Kyzaire!*” Ludayn shouted in alarm, already racing up the steps of the temple to reach Gemma.

To Ludayn, I ordered, “Get her back to the keep!”

Taking Gemma’s wrist in my hand, I pushed her toward the stairs to meet her keeper. “Go to her. *Hurry.*”

“Azur, what—”

“*Now!*” I snarled. I didn’t wait to see if Ludayn reached her. “Go back to the keep and stay there!”

With that, I launched myself off the high peak of the temple hill, using the banister to help propel me into the air, my wings flaring wide and pumping hard.

I veered south.

Toward the *kyriv*, whose deafening roar echoed in the morning skies as it flew straight toward Laras.

CHAPTER 31

“*L*udayn,” I gasped out, running back up the tree-lined pathway Azur and I had just walked down earlier that morning. “Ludayn, what was that?”

I shuddered just remembering. A terrible dragon-like beast, its wingspan formidable and its roar deafening. Its gray scales had reflected the morning sun, and I couldn’t believe that just mere moments ago, there had been peace through Laras.

And Azur went barreling straight for it, I couldn’t help but think.

Ludayn’s limp wing didn’t deter her speed as we raced back toward the keep. She had a firm grip on my arm.

“A *kyriv*,” she answered, breathless and panting. “From the north. From the Kaazor.”

“What about the villagers?” I asked. “Your mother! Kalia!”

“The *Kyzaire* will cut it off before it reaches Laras. But he won’t be able to battle if he’s worried about *you*, Gemma!”

Battle? I thought, my blood running cold.

I swallowed the huge knot in my throat just as we burst from the shaded, cobbled road, only to find Zaale hurtling toward us from the keep.

“Get inside,” he ordered me. “Ludayn, take her up to her rooms and—”

“No, I need to make sure that he’s okay,” I argued, already striding past him. The observation tower in the south wing—I

would be able to see Azur from there. I would be able to see the *kyriv* from there.

I sprinted, nearly knocking over keepers in my path, cursing my lack of wings in this enormous keep. For the first time, I was jealous of the Kylorr.

“Gemma!” Ludayn called after me, but I paid her no mind. My legs were pumping. My lungs were tight as I raced up seemingly endless flights of stairs and down long corridors. But finally, I made it up to the south tower, bursting into the circular, empty, dusty room.

I went out on the balcony, gripping the banister as I peered south.

A gasp escaped my lips at what I saw, a thread of surprising terror winding its way into my chest, gripping my heart.

Azur was fighting the *kyriv*.

High in the sky over the *lore* field, though I saw Azur trying to draw the *kyriv* away from the village. There was a *rider* on the winged dragon’s back—another Kylorr, dressed in black garments and riding low, holding on to what looked like chains.

A Kaazor? They could control the *kyriv*?

The *kyriv* swooped low, heading for the *lore* field, his clawed talons unfurling from underneath him. They wanted to destroy it, I realized, my heart pumping. They wanted to destroy it just before the harvest.

Azur was there, the gauntlets he wore on his forearms flashing in the morning light. I’d always wondered why he wore them when he left the keep. Now I knew why. How many *kyriv* had he faced before?

The blades extended from his gauntlets, long and terrible and wickedly sharp. A muted roar, an aching screech shook the land as the *kyriv* felt Azur’s blades. They sliced long lines down the beast’s chest as Azur flew beneath him, quicker than I could blink. Black blood leaked over the land as the *kyriv*

veered, retreating back from the field, though still near the outer walls.

Azur shot up into the sky until he was blocked out by the rising sun. The way he moved was incredible. *Different*. I watched as he hurtled straight over the *kyriv*, dropping vertically so he could dislodge the Kaazor rider.

A burst of sound came from behind me as Ludayn finally reached me.

She joined me on the balcony, her lips parting, her eyes widening at what she saw.

“*Raazos’s blood,*” she whispered, her gaze flitting to me. “He’s in a rage. Because of you.”

Because of me?

A *rage*?

I froze, my eyes swinging back to my husband. Was *that* why he was moving so fast? Or why he’d been able to pierce the thick hide of the *kyriv* with just his gauntlets? As I watched his closer, I saw what I couldn’t see before.

He was larger. Much, much larger. The seams of his clothes were ripped. Even his wings seemed like they’d grown.

I thought back to the carvings in the hallway. The Kylorr were berserkers at their very core. It was what made them so dangerous, because they could tap into unfathomable strength.

And Azur had just released his.

The *kyriv* was going to die.

Now I knew why Ludayn hadn’t been worried about her mother. About the village.

Because she’d known that Azur would protect it. His home. His territory. His family’s keep.

Perhaps the *kyriv* or its rider didn’t realize their own doom because I watched as they tried to press forward into Laras, circling back over the *lore* field and making for the village.

The giant shadow of it spread below, so dark that it looked like a stain on the land, until I realized that it was its own blood.

But Azur didn't let it advance toward Laras. I watched with bated breath as my husband tangled with the *kyriv* in midair. Swinging his blades, jumping back with a mighty gust of his wings, before darting around the beast. Quicker than the *kyriv*—or its rider—could react.

I gasped, dread pooling in my belly, when I saw the *kyriv* manage to swipe out with its bottom talons—merely by chance—catching Azur across the chest. A bellow sounded from my husband's throat, though it wasn't one of pain. It was one of fury. His movements sped. In disbelief, with my hand clasped to my throat, I watched his speed become so fast it was almost like a blur. But I saw the *kyriv* react. Flapping its wings, trying to dodge, snapping with its long snout and sharp teeth but catching on nothing but air.

Then Azur appeared over its neck. As if he'd appeared out of thin air.

It happened slowly. I watched Azur catch the rider across the throat with his gauntlets. I watched the rider fall off the *kyriv*'s back, plummeting to the land, though I knew he was already dead.

Then I watched as Azur brought those blades down with one mighty roar that seemed even louder than the *kyriv*'s.

The blades sliced cleanly.

The world seemed to sway as I watched the *kyriv*'s head separate from its body.

In his rage, with his berserker strength, Azur had sliced a dragon's head clean off.

The slain *kyriv* shook the earth when it *boomed* onto the ground, missing the *lore* field entirely but crushing the walls that the delicate plants lay within. Its head rolled.

This land is soaked with Kaazor blood, Azur had told me just that morning. And Kaalium blood.

I wondered if this was part of what he'd meant.

A deafening cheer rose up from Laras, reverberating all the way to the keep, snapping me from my daze of disbelief.

Ludayn's shoulders sagged. She took a deep breath for the first time in what had seemed like hours. The moments had passed slowly and yet lightning fast. I was dizzy, perhaps even in shock as I stared at my husband, who I just now realized was racing back to the keep, his wings pumping mightily. Gaining and gaining.

And *blood*.

Blood was dripping from him. His own?

Gods, I thought, a choked sound emerging from my throat.

"Go to him," Ludayn urged. "He needs you."

I didn't hesitate. I didn't even truly comprehend her words as I ran back into the tower from the balcony and raced down the stairs.

Before I ever reached the landing, I heard Azur land in the foyer, flying straight through the doors, which Zaale had had the good mind to keep open. Zaale hesitated, staying back. As were the other keepers that had flooded the entryway, all wondering what they should *do*.

I peered over the railing, gripping it tight with both hands, my heart pumping in nerves and anticipation and worry and fear.

I was gasping for breath as Azur roared, "*Where is my wife?*"

Blood was dripping down his chest. A deep wound was soaking the front of his vest from where the *kyriv* had caught him with its talons. But he didn't even seem to feel it.

He was *massive*. In a full-blown rage that I should've been *terrified* of. He looked twice as big. His clothes were ripped at the seams, and I watched as he tore off his vest and dropped it in the entrance foyer, shredded like parchment in his big palms, a mere annoyance to him. Exposing an impossibly muscled chest that looked like it had been carved from marble.

His wings were stretched wide. Tension strummed through him. I could actually see him *shake* from it.

He needs you, Ludayn had said.

“Azur,” I called out from above, looking down at my husband, determination coursing through me.

His head snapped up to me, a loud growl echoing all the way up to me. A predator. And he’d just sighted his prey.

“I’m here.”

CHAPTER 32

I had no warning.

He launched himself up quicker than I could blink, hurtling through the core of the keep to reach the upper floor. To reach me.

Azur swept me clean off my feet, dragging me against his blood-soaked chest until it seeped, hot and thick, into my dress. His strength wrapped around me, his arms like a vice.

“Azur,” I breathed, eyes wide. Clearly, I wasn’t squeamish about blood, but I was worried about the depth of the wound. “You need to see a healer!”

His voice was unrecognizable as he grunted, “I just need you, *kyrana*.”

My blood.

Would it *heal* a wound like this?

I breathed out a shuddering breath as Azur tore through the keep with me in his arms, heading toward the northeast wing. Toward our private rooms.

But instead of my own, he shouldered into his, slamming the door behind us so hard that I thought it would splinter in the frame.

I barely had time to register my surroundings. Barely had time to register the grand sweep of the darkened room, similar but larger than my own, but I did smell him. *Everywhere*. That clean, woody musk that made me sigh in contentment. It threaded down my throat and made need rise.

I gasped when he tore my dress clean off, his large, warm, calloused palms shredding it like he'd done with his vest. He was still wearing his gauntlets, but the blades were retracted. The blades that had decapitated a *dragon* mere moments before.

Azur pushed me down to the floor of his sitting room. I was naked, trembling, gasping. Watching him as he loomed in the darkened room, those eyes burning like twin fires, as he ripped his pants off his body, the clasps flying off, scattering across the floor.

I'd wondered when this would happen. Had dreamed of it, truthfully, those early, aching hours of morning when I'd wake, slick and needy between my thighs.

Magnificent, I thought, a gasp escaping my throat as I lay on my back on the rug near the unlit hearth. My hair was wild, my chest heaving, my nipples pebbled tight.

My husband was magnificent.

Fearsome. Terrible. Beautiful.

I couldn't take my eyes off him. Every shadowed divot of his body, every bulging muscle, carefully sculpted like he'd been created by the expert hand of an artist. His gray skin was smooth, though I spied silver scars scraping his flesh. The black blood that streamed from his chest gleamed, another scar he would bear. The breadth of his shoulders were awe inspiring. His sharp fangs, prodding his lower lip, made my core clench tight.

And his cock...

A small sound escaped my throat. A cross between a whimper and a gasp.

His cock was heavily veined with a strong upward curve. The head was glimmering with pre-come, rivulets of seed, silver in color, running down the length of him and *dripping* to the floor. I watched the length of him bob against his abdomen when I bit my lip, thinking that he wouldn't fit, just as I had when I'd first seen his cock in his office, when he'd stroked himself to orgasm between my thighs

The bulging, rounded swelling at the base of his thickened shaft was *throbbing*.

His *knot*.

Oh gods.

“*No control right now, wife,*” he rasped, his voice coming out in rough pants, making goose bumps spread over my arms. “*I won’t be gentle.*”

A warning.

No... Permission? I realized.

My eyes trailed slowly from his cock to his eyes.

Was I afraid?

Yes.

But I also felt a responsive pull within my own body. Tugging and tight. I wasn’t afraid of the pain. I was afraid that I might *like* it.

“You won’t hurt me,” I told him, my voice even and calm. My superpower—and I’d never needed it more. His nostrils flared wide as I parted my thighs and tilted my neck back, baring my throat. “Come. Let me ease you, Azur.”

“*Raazos,*” he cursed. He ran a heavy palm down his face, shaking his head like he was fighting for control, even as those eyes were greedy over my bared flesh. “*Like a dream.*”

My heart skipped.

Had he dreamt of this too?

Of me?

He growled.

That was my only warning as he dropped down on top of me. My mind barely registered the heavy press of his thick body, hardly registered the heat of his blood spilling between us before I felt a sharp pinch at my neck. Familiar heat flooded me.

I moaned, arching up into him.

“Yes,” I gasped. “Azur!”

He was drinking deep. Long, heady draws from my neck that made the room spin beneath my closed eyelids. My hands grasped his shoulders, holding him to me as if afraid he’d pull away too soon.

His hips began to rock, sounds of roughened need vibrating across my skin where he was feeding. His cock prodded at my entrance, shockingly hot, and I gasped when he nudged into me. Growling, he thrust almost mindlessly, as if he was giving into primal instincts.

There I was, pinned to the floor by my fully turned Kylorr husband. He was feeding on my blood, his long, sharp fangs lodged into my neck and his thick cock shoving into me.

And I *loved* it.

I couldn’t move, but it didn’t stop me from trying to tilt my hips, my own body squirming on instinct beneath him.

My toes curled on a particular deep draw, my eyelids fluttering shut when I felt a familiar heat in my pussy, building and building.

His cock thrust into me, quickly and powerful and entirely unexpected.

“*Oh gods,*” I keened, my fingernails curling hard into his shoulders until I wondered if I would make him bleed even more.

I barely had time to draw in a breath before I was climaxing around him.

The pain registered. The tight burn of him. The way he stretched me so completely, filling me in a way I’d never experienced before, not that I’d had much experience when it came to sex.

There was a part of me in utter shock that I *could* take him. That he *could* fit inside me with that massive, massive cock.

The pain mingled with the intense pleasure from his feeding, and I screamed—a vocal reaction that surprised me

just as I wondered if it surprised Azur—as the orgasm raked through me, scorching a relentless path through my body.

Azur growled and groaned and huffed into my neck. He retracted his fangs. His arms came down on either side of my head, and he loomed above me, those ember eyes burning into me. With his rise, my hands fell from his shoulders, my back arched off the floor, my nipples slipping in the blood coating his chest. I needed something to hang on to, so I latched on to his thick wrists next to me, just as he began to *fuck*.

Because that was the only word I could think of that suited what he was doing to me.

Azur was fucking me.

Hard and long and deep, his thrust were endless. Every single one made the curved length of him drag against a spot inside me that made me see stars. Blinding little stars that made my sensitive clit quiver and made my cunt tighten even more around him.

“I knew you’d take me well, wife,” came that dark voice above me. It wasn’t *quite* Azur’s voice. It was more guttural. Darker. Rougher. It made me squeeze his wrists just as I heard a scraping sound ring in my ears. When I looked to the side, I saw that his claws had gouged straight through the rug, had imbedded into the stone floor underneath it. “Your cunt feels so *fucking* good, *kyrana*. Wet and hot and tight for me. *Perfect*.”

He groaned out the last word as I gasped and squirmed beneath him, moving my hips in a mindless rhythm, trying to match his. But he picked up speed just as I managed to meet it, changing the intensity. His hips slammed between my thighs, shoving them even wider so he could get deeper.

His head lowered and I tilted my neck back to avoid his horns. I whimpered when he suckled on my nipples, when he teased his sharp fangs across them. Never before had I thought them so *incredibly* sensitive.

“You’re going to make me come again,” I gasped out. “Oh, *please please please*.”

“You beg so well, wife,” he growled, lifting his head, meeting my eyes. “Beg me more.”

His order sent fire through my veins. It was strange to see him like this. His body might have grown, his strength even more fearsome, but his features weren't any different. Still, he *felt* changed. His focus was entirely pinned onto me. I felt like he could see every glimmering facet of my soul, like he demanded that it was his.

It felt like his. Right in this moment.

I wouldn't beg him, per se, but I would still give him what he wanted.

“Make me come,” I ordered him, my own voice coming out as a small little growl that made Azur's nostrils flare and his hips snap forward.

That was when I felt it.

His knot.

The bulging, rounded flesh that would effectively seal us together if he managed to get it inside me.

Which he seemed intent to do, with fire in his eyes and a punishing thrust of his hips.

“My stubborn little wife,” he hissed, his head lowering, fucking me so powerfully that I would've slid across the rug had the bracket of his wrists not held me in place. “You won't be able to walk for an entire week. I'll ensure it.”

“Make me come. Make me come,” I commanded him again, but this time it came out as a pleading whimper. Suddenly, his fangs pricked my neck again and he took a dizzying pull of my blood. My eyes rolled back into my head and I curled my nails into his wrists. “Azur!”

The burn of his knot came.

I began to sob, desperate little gasps of air as I rocked against him. I wasn't sure if I was trying to get away or if I was trying to get it *inside*. I flinched at the pain, but it felt so good, mingling together until I couldn't discern one sensation from the other. Until they became an entirely new thing, a new

sensation I'd never felt before, infinitely better than anything I'd experienced.

When I orgasmed, Azur fully seated himself in my body.

I heard his roar echo through my very bones.

CHAPTER 33

Sublime, magnificent pleasure ate me up from the inside out.

As I unleashed thick ropes of come into my wife, every thrust made my engorged seal rub inside her tight cunt, making more and more burst from my cock. The pleasure was too intense. It was nearly pain. Yet I couldn't stop. There was a primal need within me, urging me to drink, to fuck, to mark, to claim my blood mate. *Mine*. She was fucking *mine*.

I jerked, mindlessly continuing to slam into her with rough, long thrusts, hearing Gemma's hoarse scream, feeling her dull little nails dig themselves into my flesh, anchoring me to her.

As if my seal wouldn't do just that.

My first rage during the blood madness.

I never would've been prepared for its intensity. I knew this was only the beginning. *This* had nearly sucked out my entire soul. *She* had nearly sucked out my entire soul as her cunt had spasmed around my cock, tight and hot and slick and greedy, trying to drain me dry.

But already I felt the power of the berserker rage rise. I'd unleashed it to take down a *kyriv*. I'd been in awe—and trepidatious—of how easy it had been, when before it had taken intense, almost meditative, concentration, mingled with the lust for battle, for blood but also with fear.

With the *kyriv*, I had done it at will. Like a flipped switch. I was strengthened on Gemma's blood. Her life's soul was in

me now. Our souls in the Nyaan realm were entwined.

I shuddered with the last of my orgasm and finally retracted my fangs from her neck, full and sated and yet ravenous. When I pulled back to look down at her, I saw her eyes were half-lidded, and she continued to pulse and flutter around my cock.

My hand went to her throat, gripping it softly, feeling her heartbeat against my palm. Her lips were parted, and I leaned down to lick her jawline, nipping at her flesh, rubbing my horns against her.

I maneuvered her neck back and trailed my lips to hers. Our tongues tangled. She could taste her blood on my tongue, but instead of disgust, she made a small sound that resembled a moan. Her shy exploration of my kiss made my knot throb between us.

I could already feel the wound down my chest was closed, the skin already mending itself though the blood would need to be washed away.

Not before I fuck her again, I knew. Now that this last barrier had been breached, I didn't know if I'd be able to *stop*.

She gasped when she felt me thrust, testing her stretch around my knot.

Her eyes were wide, her pink, full lips parted. "A-Again?"

"Again," I rasped, my voice practically grim. "I told you, wife. You won't be able to walk for a week when I'm done with you. Blame that stubborn mouth of yours."

She glared. Yet I felt primal delight when her brows furrowed in a different expression entirely when I reached between us, running the backs of my fingers against her sensitive clit. Gemma jerked, spine arching.

"Too much," she whimpered. But there was a fire building in her eyes.

I growled. "Too bad."

The swelling of my seal hadn't gone down enough to truly fuck her the way I wanted. Until then, I'd hold her on the

edge.

When I stroked her clit again, she ground her teeth together, but I didn't miss the way she began to spasm around my cock. I didn't miss the flush that spread over the tops of her cheeks or her breathy gasp when I pressed and teased the little bud of flesh, exposed to me since her cunt was still stretched so, so tight around me.

I couldn't take my eyes off her.

“Is...is your rage over?”

I bared my teeth at her in a savage smile. “Does it look over?”

Her gaze flickered down my body when I went to my knees between her thighs, letting her see the hulking strength she'd unleashed within me. Her eyes widened. “How long?”

How long would the rage last?

“However long I want,” I rasped. Not entirely true, I supposed. Rages typically lasted a day, but a Kylorr could extend them up to two if they had the proper stimulation, if they were in the heat of battle, just like our ancestors.

This felt like a battle all its own.

A claiming.

A victory that I intended to take.

Come was beginning to leak from her body, running down my shaft. My knot was still throbbing, but some of the swelling had eased.

Experimentally, I gave a soft thrust into her slick heat. Her body shuddered and she gasped. I growled. There was a pent-up need flowing in my veins. I was about to unleash it onto her.

Going berserk always felt like a monster was coming out of me. A beast rising to the surface, a beast I embraced and let guide me. It was instinct. There was a film that glazed over my eyes as I looked down at my wife: her thighs splayed wide, her

brown nipples puckered and tight, with a feral look all her own shining up at me.

Beautiful.

The monster inside me was ravenous for her. I wanted to drain her dry. I wanted to fuck her into the next realm, fill her womb with my seed, and lay my claim.

I should have been fucking her from the very beginning, I thought, easing my cock out of her, shimmering with our combined fluids. I blew out a long breath when I ran my hot palm down the length, holding the root of it. The cool air in the room rushed over my exposed shaft, making chills run down my spine.

Gemma groaned when I slapped my cock head on her clit, her body jerking, her thighs trembling. *Slap, slap, slap.* She huffed. The sound was obscene. Wet. Delicious.

“Learn this cock,” I growled, palming her hip, dragging her closer. “You’ll come to know it well, wife. You will take every inch of it with your cunt, with your mouth, with your tongue, with your hand. You’ll know it so well by the time I’m done with you.”

And even then, it will not be enough, I knew. Would I ever get this need, this lust, this hunger for my wife *out* of me?

I guided her hand to my cock. I hissed out a rough curse when I felt her soft palm close around the thick girth of it. When I let her palm go, she slid it down the length, testing the weight.

“Heavy, isn’t it?” I purred.

“Yes,” she said, biting her lip, her eyes practically glowing.

Her eyes were greedy on it, and that expression *nearly* made me come all over again.

“Lower,” I growled out, huffing out a quick groan. When her hand nudged my seal, I rasped, “*There.* Squeeze my knot. Right there.”

Every muscle in my body twitched when she did as I ordered, a breathless curse flying from my throat.

“*Harder.*”

Gemma was watching me as she squeezed tight. A hoarse cry left me, my hips bucking into her grip. That grip was enough to make my fangs prod into my bottom lip, drawing a bead of black blood before I licked it away. She squeezed and then ran her fist up the long curve, making words rumble from me, words I didn’t even quite hear myself.

The haze was rising. The film beginning to cover my eyes as the beast burst from me.

I could smell my seed in her cunt. I could smell it as it leaked onto the rug, mingling with her own cream. I needed her again. And again. I wouldn’t be right until I was seated deep—and as her delicious blood flowed over my tongue.

In the blink of an eye, I had her flipped. Gemma cried out, surprised. She weighed nothing to me as I positioned her on her hands and knees.

With one hand gripping the back of her neck, pressing her cheek into the rug, and the other guiding my cock into her tight sheath, I groaned in satisfaction as I sunk deep. Gemma grunted. A savage grin came over my expression, one she couldn’t see. My prim and proper human wife. With her ass in the air and moaning into the rug as I fucked her.

I ripped the tie that held her hair in place, watching the glorious length of it fall around her. I wrapped my hand into that silky mess, and she moaned, rocking her hips back to meet my measured, deep thrusts. Not deep enough to get my seal inside her but deep enough to *just* tease the sensitive edges of it.

“Fuck,” I rasped, gritting my teeth tight. Her own pace was desperate, but her enthusiasm made my knot swell. “Fuck. *Yes.*”

With one hand, I gripped her hip tight. Brought her back *hard*. I maneuvered my knees around her, spreading them wide for leverage.

Then I didn't hold back.

"Oh gods, *Azur!*" she cried out, the sound muffled. "*More, more, more.*"

"You love this, don't you?" I growled, hardly recognizing my own voice. "My greedy little wife. *Raazos's* blood, your cunt is greedy for my cock."

"Yes," she moaned. Feral little sounds emerged from her throat. I saw her hands scrambling across the rug, trying to find purchase. The force of my thrusts were making her knees drag across it. "Yes," she gasped.

"Tell me," I ordered. I wanted to look into her eyes as she said it, so I pulled her up, hearing her choked gasp as the change in position forced her even lower on my cock. Her back met my chest, which was still covered in my blood, and I nudged her knees wider. My hand wrapped around her lower jawline and turned until I could see half of her dazed expression. "Tell me. *Now.*"

This was about her submission. She'd fought me before. Now I would demand it of her. I wanted her to be a mess for me. I wanted to make a mess of her.

This was a game we played. Toe-to-toe. It had been like foreplay before. I'd gotten a little thrill whenever she'd disobeyed me. Whenever she'd done something unexpected, giving me everything *but* her submission.

But now...

I was buried in her cunt. Now I would *demand* her obedience...even when her blatant disobedience made my cock even harder for her.

Her face was soft. Open to me. I felt a wiggling in my chest, a warm affection that should've made my guard go up. But it didn't. Not when we were like this. Not when it felt like we were on the cusp of something fated. A fate we couldn't escape.

"Tell me," I ordered, though my voice was quiet.

“I love it,” she breathed, holding my eyes with hers. I nearly closed mine at her admission. In relief. In triumph. “*I love this. Please, Azur.*”

“You want more?” I growled.

“I want more.”

“You might regret your words by the end of the night,” I warned, shoving her thighs even wider, thrusting inside her to punctuate my words. My hands skimmed down her front, teasing her nipples, plucking them until she gasped, before my fingers trailed between her thighs.

A sob broke from her throat when I teased her clit. “It’s only morning.”

“*Exactly.*”

“Gods,” she whispered, her head lolling back until it rested against my shoulder.

Her whole body shook with my powerful thrusts. As I pounded between her thighs our flesh slapped together, so loud that I wondered if it could be heard down on the lower floors.

Never before had I felt this need. This driving, aching force that demanded I claim her body as my own. I thought I would be forever doomed to this rage if I didn’t fulfill that need.

“*Kyrana,*” I groaned, feeling my seal begin to swell when every thrust dragged her cunt closer and closer to it. A tease. A magnificent little tease. “More? I’ll give you so much more. More than you could ever want.”

A promise.

Or perhaps a warning.

Because after this, nothing would be the same between us.

CHAPTER 34

*A*zur was sleeping when I woke.

Judging from the cerulean cast across the floor, it was midnight or a little after, the moon bright overhead outside the stretch of his wide windows. They were pulled open, a cool breeze sweeping over my overheated, sensitive skin.

In the quiet, the events of the day returned to me, slow and thick like golden honey. I didn't dare move my body. It was well used. Bruised and bitten and licked and kissed. There wasn't an inch of it that Azur hadn't explored with a determined, erotic gleam in those red eyes.

My belly fluttered as I watched those eyes dart behind closed lids now. His black hair was tangled in his horns. He was scowling even in his sleep, his brows drawn down. The sharp slices of his cheekbones were more prominent in the moonlight, casting shadows in the hollows of his face.

Lying side by side, I realized we were still *joined*. I must've passed out after my last orgasm. Maybe he had too. I winced when I shifted, feeling muscles tug and pull deep inside me, muscles I'd never even been aware of before now. Slowly, I backed my hips away, and his cock slid from me, though it burned as it dragged against my sensitive flesh.

Azur's eyes opened, a flicker of red in the darkness, his body tensing, all his relaxation from sleep gone. Then I felt him soften. A deep huff left his lips. His arms tightened around me.

“Hurting?” he asked, his voice quiet.

There was a time when, perhaps, he’d *wanted* to hurt me.

Now I heard the muted worry in his tone, in the way he studied me, his face turned toward me on his pillow.

“A little worse for wear,” I whispered back, not trusting my hoarse voice. Half the keep had probably heard my moans and screams. But I didn’t regret it. I didn’t regret a single moment.

Except if Kalia heard, I thought, cringing. I prayed to all the deities in the universe that she’d stayed at the village.

When I felt something twitch beneath me, I exclaimed a surprised, “Oh!”

I was lying on one of his wings.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, suddenly feeling shy, which was ridiculous considering everything we’d done to one another throughout the course of the day.

But this was new, wasn’t it?

This kind of intimacy.

The quiet between sleep. The study of my slumbering husband’s darkly handsome features. The unspoken choreography of wings and horns and limbs as we lay beside one another in his bed.

This made me shy. I almost preferred that he was seated deep inside my body because then I could lose myself in *that* pleasure and not feel uncertain about it.

Now that his rage seemed to have passed—his body returning to its normal state and the urgency of his feedings receding—I worried that he’d turn me away from his bed. I worried that he’d turn cold again.

After today, I didn’t know if I could withstand that. Now I knew how hot he ran. How passionate he could be, determined and driven. I knew the dark curl of his smile when I challenged him. I knew the blissed-out expression on his face when I squeezed his pulsing knot—which he called his seal—

in my palm. Now I knew that he liked to hold my hand when we were recovering in between sex, running his calloused fingertips over my knuckles as if trying to soothe me.

I couldn't bear it if he took that male away from me. I wanted more of *him*. I didn't know if I'd ever get enough.

In the end, I didn't need to worry at all. Azur leaned up on one elbow when I released his pinned wing, his eyes scanning over my bared flesh. I was covered in his bites, twin fang marks lining my neck, my breasts, my arms, between my thighs. Even with the *baanye*, I was still feeling sleepy and weakened.

But *he* was healed at the very least. The large gash down his chest was gone, revealing smooth skin once we'd finally bathed. Gone like magic. A faint, lightened mark—raw, healing flesh was the only evidence it had ever been.

I'd done that. My blood.

“I was too rough with you,” he grunted, his voice tinged in regret and apology.

I smiled, and Azur stilled when he saw it. “I wouldn't change anything.”

Some of the tension in his shoulders released. His fingers brushed my swollen lips, and I felt some of his silver come leak out from between my thighs. He'd filled me up over and over again. I wondered how long it would be before nothing of him remained inside me.

Even though I felt like my body had just been through a battle, I felt infinitely relaxed. Like I'd been massaged a thousand times over or I'd just had a jug of Drovos wine. I felt like I was floating.

Then he was skimming his finger over one of his fangs—which hadn't yet retracted fully. A pinprick of his blood mingled with the clear fluid I now knew he called his venom. Painstakingly, he dabbed his fingers across the bite marks, gentle and light. Ludayn had done that but only with her venom. With blood, however, I felt a tingling warmth.

When he dabbed at a mark on my arm, I watched as the bite healed itself entirely. When I smeared away his blood, I saw nothing remained. It wasn't tender to the touch either. It was simply gone.

It wasn't that the bites had hurt. But I realized he was trying to ease my pain, my soreness, however he could, no matter how small.

Azur worked methodically. Slowly. Deliberately. His touch turned into something else entirely when he finished between my thighs. His fingers traced up the sticky mess between my labia, and my breath hitched, a familiar curl of desire making me reach for his hand.

Azur grunted but pulled away.

"Let me draw you a bath," he murmured.

"You don't have to do that," I told him. "It's after midnight."

"I'm not tired," he responded. He was already rising. Azur's bed was large and incredibly comfortable. It had a dark canopy over the top, held up by four, large columns, on all corners of the bed. "I'll have a keeper bring some binding root in tea too. For the pain."

"Let them sleep. I don't want to disturb them at this hour," I told him. "I'll be fine."

"Do you have an aversion to letting others take care of you?" Azur asked me softly, eyeing me as he rounded to my side of the bed. Still incredibly, incredibly naked. My eyes strayed to his thick, curved cock. *Still* hard.

I blinked, my brow furrowing. "What?"

His claws tilted my chin up so that I was looking at him and not distracted by the tantalizing length of him.

"Do you have an aversion to letting others take care of you?" he repeated. Firmly. Intentionally.

I swallowed.

“The keepers are only too happy to do their *Kylaira*’s bidding. There is a reason we have a few who stay on during the night. And if my wife is in pain, I will see her well. I don’t give a damn about anything else or if I’m disturbing any of my keepers’ sleeping patterns.”

His words made my heart skip.

“You’re incorrigible,” I said with zero malice. “Very well. Wake the entire keep, then. I’d like food, too, while you’re at it. I’m starving.”

Hearing Azur’s soft laugh was a reward in itself.

“Yes, *Kylaira*,” he rasped. “I will make sure you are well fed.”

“And if *you* intend to feed anymore, you better make sure some *baanye* is brought up too,” I added quietly.

Want flared in his eyes, but then I watched him rein it back in.

“I’ve taken too much from you,” Azur told me. “No more feedings until your strength is returned.”

A flicker of disappointment sank in my belly.

We’ll see, I thought silently.

“I mean it,” Azur said firmly, eyeing me like he could hear my thoughts.

“I didn’t say anything.”

He mumbled something under his breath and then swept me into his arms, making me exclaim my surprise and grapple for his shoulders. He walked us over to his washroom. *Kylorr* bathing rooms, I’d discovered, were nearly identical to human ones. Though much, much larger to account for wings.

Azur’s washroom, however, had a large sunken in bathing pool. Deep enough to stand in. One he unveiled with a swipe over an invisible sensor, and I watched the floor slide silently away. One of the higher-tech items I’d seen in this entire keep.

“Do I have one?” I asked, gaping at it. I’d never considered that one might be hiding under my floor.

“No,” he grunted. “Not in that room.”

When we’d bathed off Azur’s blood earlier, we’d done it in the shower pod. But I was all too happy to soak my tenderness away.

“Though, these rooms are where you’re likely to stay,” came that husky voice. I didn’t dare breathe when I glanced up at him, though he was focused on filling the bathing pool, the water coming out steaming from the silver tap. “Don’t you think?”

I hadn’t given much thought to our sleeping arrangements. I couldn’t deny that his words filled me with pleasure. Now that I knew what sex was like with him, I wanted to take full advantage whenever I could.

“Yes,” I said softly. “I believe so.”

There were stairs that led into the pool. Azur stepped down them as the water lapped higher and higher. He placed me on a ledge seat lining the wall.

“I’ll be back,” he told me once he made sure I was situated. “My *Kylaira* demanded food, I believe.”

My lips twitched as I watched him leave, the heavy bulk of his black wings disappearing into the moonlit bedroom. He wasn’t gone long. He returned with food for me and a steaming kettle of tea, displayed on an intricate tray, a mere moment later. As if the keepers had been *waiting* with one at the ready outside the door.

Azur lowered the tray so it was perched on the edge of the pool. He made sure to turn off the taps when the water came to the tops of my shoulders, though the water level wasn’t nearly enough for *him*, and then he waded in.

My husband took the seat directly across from me. His wings spread wide, as did his arms, lazily draped over the stone edge, presenting the bulk of his finely muscled chest. On full display.

“You’re so far away,” I teased softly, eyeing him. I nearly sighed in contentment as the heat of the water loosened tight muscles and soothed small aches.

“For good reason,” he grunted, those red eyes pinned on me with the intensity I’d grown accustomed to. “If I were any closer, you’d be bent over the side of the pool already.”

I gasped. Heat pooled in my belly. I’d thought I was tapped out. Apparently I’d been mistaken.

But I knew my body couldn’t take much more and so, perhaps, it *was* a good thing he kept his distance. For now.

To distract myself, I ate from the tray. I smiled when I saw the small platter of steam cakes, decorated with blue-and-pink blooms, still hot as if Ludayn’s mother had just taken them from the clay oven herself. Another platter of herb-crusteD meat, black in color, sat beside it. A compote of purple berries with mashed black seeds were spread over glistening, roasted brown roots. To top it off, there was a creamy custard, savory and warm and bright yellow like lemons from the Collis.

When I poured the tea into the garnet-colored crystal teacup, I saw the liquid was blue.

“Binding root,” Azur explained. “But I also had the keepers blend in marroswood.”

“Marroswood?” I asked, frowning, not recognizing the name.

Azur tilted his chin down. He’d kept the light in the bathing room low. Soothing. Steam curled between us, all around us, like we were in our own little world. The gentle golden glow from a nearby hovering orb light cast deep shadows across the wall.

“Getting you pregnant with my child is *not* an option,” he informed me.

Shock made me freeze.

Gods... I’d never even *thought* about that.

It was clear Azur had.

“Not for some time,” he finished softly. He nodded to the tea. “That will keep my seed from taking. If you choose to drink it,” he added quietly.

Because he realized he couldn't force me to drink it?

"It's not the right time for me to conceive," I told him, flushing when I thought about the amount of come he'd spilled in me in the last day. Even still, I took a long sip from the cup, the hot tea soothing on my scratchy throat. "It would be my child too. I'm not ready for one either. Not yet."

His shoulders noticeably relaxed as I drank, even though I felt a spark of annoyance.

The silence that followed was tense and lengthy. I was unsure why him slipping marroswood into my tea bothered me so much even when I knew it was the logical decision, even when I *agreed* with it.

"I'm still learning, Gemma," he said quietly.

"Learning what?" I asked.

"Learning to be a husband," he said, his voice gruff.

I stilled. The tea *was* soothing. A little bitter but nothing as unpleasant as *baanye*. The binding root would help with the soreness at the very least.

"I will misstep. I have already with you. Many, many times," he told me, softening my ire. "This is new to me. In case you haven't noticed, you are my only wife. Before, I have only taken lovers. Brief and short-lived affairs because I didn't have time for anything else."

The words hung between us like the steam floating in the air. I sighed.

"How many?" I asked, unable to deny my curiosity.

"Lovers?" he asked. When I nodded, he ran a hand over his face, his expression wary. "Enough."

"Enough?" I repeated, my eyes widening, my spine straightening. "You won't tell me how many?"

Azur blew out a short huff from his nostrils. "I might still be learning, but I'm no fool, wife. I've had enough lovers. Enough to know how to please a female."

I rolled my eyes, snagging a steam cake off the tray.

“Were you not pleased?” he murmured, that silky voice floating toward me, no doubt trying to distract me. I wasn’t falling for it.

I couldn’t help but glare even as I munched on a huge mouthful of the decadent cake.

“I won’t be angry,” I told him. “It angers me that you won’t tell me. Just like with the marroswood, I know that it’s right. You made the right decision. But we can at least discuss it honestly *beforehand*. That’s all I want.”

Azur regarded me carefully.

“Two a year since I was fifteen,” he finally told me, his tone quiet, studying me. “Approximately.”

That was...that was likely around *forty* lovers. He had to be five years older than me, at least.

Forty to my *one*. If Petyr could have even been called that.

But I’d told him I wouldn’t be mad. Still, I hadn’t expected to feel disappointment sinking in my belly.

It made me feel...inconsequential, I supposed. Because surely, out of those *forty* females, he’d experienced days like these with *them*. Forty females who knew the way he groaned, who knew the prick of his fangs and the way he gritted his teeth when the sensitive membranes of his wings were stroked, making his hips buck faster, harder.

“Oh,” I said. Because that was all I could think to say. I’d asked for this.

“Gemma.”

“Hmm?”

I met his eyes, blinking back the sudden glassiness in my gaze and reaching to the tray for anything to shove into my mouth. I’d take a gallon of *baanye* right now if it meant I didn’t cry in front of him.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing,” I said softly after I swallowed the herb-crusting meat that tasted like ash on my tongue. “Thank you for telling

me. That's...that's what I wanted."

I'd thought we'd had pretty *spectacular* sex today. But maybe this was simply normal for him. Maybe it was nothing out of the ordinary. It wasn't special to him like it had been to me. How could it be when I was so incredibly inexperienced next to him?

I heard the gentle whoosh of his wings and then the trickle of water as he approached me.

"It bothers you," he murmured, drawing me into his arms. Pinning me in place even when I tried to turn away. "Why?"

I pressed my palm to his chest. Trying to push him away? But when I felt his warmth, his steady strength, my fingernails curled into him instead before I traced the line of his fresh scar between his pectorals.

"I didn't think it would," I told him truthfully. "I promise you that."

"But it does."

I swallowed. "Yes," I whispered. "And now I feel so stupid for even pushing the subject." I laughed. "*Gods*, how predictable."

Azur frowned. "You have nothing to be jealous of."

A muscle in my cheek jumped. "How can I not be? I'm feeling a little insignificant here."

"Insignificant?" Azur repeated slowly. Now *he* was getting pissed. I could see it climbing, stiffening his spine, and sparking his eyes. "I didn't marry any of them, now did I?"

"Our marriage was not a love match and you know it," I replied, turning my face away, not at all pleased with how I was handling this. But my eyes were beginning to sting again. "Just forget it. *Please*. I don't want to argue. Not after today. I'm sorry for pushing."

Azur was quiet for a long time but he didn't retreat. I stayed locked in his arms, red faced and tense.

"You're my *kyrana*."

I chanced a peek up at him. He'd called me that before.

"Do you know what that is?" he asked. He wasn't glaring at me, like I'd expected. Instead, his expression was patient. Like we had all the time in the world.

"No," I said softly.

"We don't know why or how it happens," he said quietly. "Whether it is by Raazos's or Alaire's or Gaara's or Zor's design. Or maybe none of them."

"I don't understand."

"A *kyrana* is a blood mate," Azur told me, his voice smooth and rich. "Whether it is by divine selection or science or magic or even fate, whatever you wish to call it, you are my blood mate."

"All right," I said softly. Still confused, though Ludayn's small comments here and there were beginning to piece together in my mind. "And what does that mean, exactly?"

"That there is no other female in this entire universe who is better suited for me than you."

I stilled, hearing the ragged truth in his words.

"Is that...is that why you married me?" I asked, lips parting. "Because you somehow found out that—"

"No," he said. "I did not know when I married you. I denied it at the ceremony when you signed in blood, though I could smell it even then. I began to suspect it on the flight back to Krynn."

My mind flooded back to those lonely, empty days.

"I'd drunk myself into a stupor in my room," I said. I leveled him a long look and dryly added, "And you pulled my hair and tried to scare me."

It was difficult to reconcile *that* Azur with *this* one. Because I now knew I had nothing to fear from him—even though I'd watched him decapitate a dragon with his gauntlets alone earlier.

His lips rose in a wry smile. “And you smelled *fucking* divine,” he rasped. “I could smell your blood, just beneath your skin. I’d never smelled anything better. In my entire life. You don’t know how little control I had in that room.”

His voice was ragged.

“And then when I fed from you? That very first time?” he asked, running his hands down my arms. I felt his cock pulse against me.

I gasped.

He growled, rough and raw.

“It was like coming to *life*.”

CHAPTER 35

“*I*t was?” Gemma breathed, staring at me, wide eyed.

I stroked my hand through her hair.

“Did you know that the Kylorr didn’t always feed on blood?” I murmured. “We evolved into what we are now. After thousands of years of endless battles and blood-soaked wars. Our ancestors used to celebrate their victories by drinking the blood of their enemies, of the ones they slayed on the fields of their conquests. It was an honor. A right, however brutal and savage it might have seemed. Over time, our bodies learned to use that life force. To metabolize it. Adapt to it. Making us stronger. Faster. Larger. Making us dependent on it, though the wars became far and few in between.”

“I didn’t know that,” Gemma said quietly.

“We were always berserkers,” I told her. “But the blood became a pathway to unleashing our strength. The berserkers of old were said to have found partners. Blood mates. Whose blood strengthened them unlike anything they’d ever felt before. They attached themselves to their mates and never strayed. Entire battles were won at the hands of a single mated Kylorr.”

Her lips parted. Understanding was entering her gaze.

“Ludayn said... She said earlier that you were in a rage because of me,” she told me.

“Yes. I took down a *kyriv* alone because I was fueled on your blood. The blood of my mate. Of my *kyrana*,” I said,

inclining my head. “Normally, that feat would take a dozen Kylorr or more. Never before has the strength come so easy. Never before has the act of feeding been so consuming. Never before have I felt so aware of life, of sound, of scent, of touch. So to say that you feel *insignificant*...”

Gemma bit her lip, lowering her gaze briefly.

“It is the furthest thing from the truth,” I finished, willing her to understand. I hadn’t expected to explain this to her. Not tonight.

Yet I hadn’t been able to withstand the dejected look on her face.

“Well, when you put it like that, I feel silly,” she murmured, giving me a half smile. One thing I appreciated about my wife was that she could move forward with a shrug of her shoulders. Her smile died. “I suppose I was speaking more about...about sex. Compared to your, um, extensive experience, I can’t exactly measure up.”

Realization bloomed. Affection made me rub at my chest, right next to where her fingertips were tracing.

“Gemma,” I grunted.

“Yes?” she breathed, trying to hide her pink cheeks.

“How many times did you make me come?”

The pink only deepened. “I don’t know.”

“Exactly,” I growled. “Tell me, is my come still leaking out from your cunt?”

She gasped when I reached below the water to pet her sensitive slit.

“Likely,” I decided, taking my hand away when I saw her eyelids flutter. “Given how many times I filled you up with it.”

“But—”

“Sex with a *kyrana*...” I trailed off, shaking my head. “Nothing else will *ever* compare. Ever. Do you understand me?”

Gemma was staring at me, her eyes flickering back and forth between mine. It wasn't often that she showed vulnerability. I didn't want her feeling like the sex, for me, had been *lacking*.

It was the opposite.

It was more than I'd ever expected.

She'd drained me dry. Toward the end, I hadn't known if I'd had any come *left* to give her.

"So you liked it?" she asked.

I would've laughed in her face had that hesitant question not nearly cracked my chest wide open.

"No," I said. Before her face fell, however, I growled, "I loved it. I crave it. I need it. Do you know how difficult it is not to wrap your legs around me and sink deep inside you? Right now? To fuck you into oblivion and sink my fangs into your pretty neck and lose ourselves together? Raazos's blood, I might be addicted to it, wife."

She was breathing hard, her eyelids going heavy, her fingernails curling into my thick flesh.

"Oh," she whispered.

"And that pleasure when I feed? You know the one and I know it too. That is only for us. Only for us. Not many will *ever* experience that. To experience it during sex too? Gods, wife, it is the closest to the Alara realm we will get in *this* one."

I nearly hissed in relief when she gave me a confident little grin, one that made me want to bend her over the bathing pool wall like I'd warned her before.

Her voice was husky when she asked, "So what you're saying is that I'm the *best* lover you've ever had? Over your entire lifetime?"

I barked out a laugh, and her responding chuckle made a lightness spread in my chest, warm and consuming.

“Yes,” I said. Teasing, I said, “You’re the best wife I’ve ever had too.”

After hearing her outraged gasp, I silenced it with a kiss.

It was easy to forget, I realized. When we were like this, it was easy to forget the circumstances that had brought us together. It was easy to forget who her father was. It was easy to forget my vow at the altar of our family shrine, made in blood and bound in vengeance, and the promise I’d made my mother.

I had married Gemma Hara hellbent on destroying her family.

Only I couldn’t anymore.

She was mine. Claimed and protected.

She wasn’t a Hara anymore.

She was of House Kaalium now.

“Enough of this,” I rasped, lifting her from the water, desire riding me high. She gasped when I settled her outside the bath, and I kneeled on the ledge where she’d been sitting. “I’ll be gentle, wife. But I need a taste of you. I need it now.”

Briefly catching sight of her pebbled nipples and her surprised expression, I pushed her thighs wide.

Then, without hesitation, I buried my face between them.

Her shocked moan echoed in the bathing room. Splashing sounded when my wings gave an unconscious pump behind me. The taste of her cunt made my eyes roll back. I sucked and licked and laved until she was squirming underneath me, moaning out my name, her head thrashing and her thighs trembling around my face.

“Just as good as your blood, *kyrana*,” I growled, ravenous for her, my eyes dilated and completely focused on her. “Your cunt was made for me.”

When Gemma orgasmed, she came with a bright cry, her abdomen clenching, her hips bucking into me. I would never

get tired of it, I realized. I would never get tired of watching her fall apart in my arms.

CHAPTER 36

“Oh, Azur,” I breathed. “It’s *beautiful*.”

It was a week later.

The evening before the harvest ball.

Even though Kalia was running around the keep and the village like a frenzied hare, and even though she’d been employing my help whenever she could snag it, Azur had snuck me out of the keep and flown me across the Silver Sea to a small, forested island far from the coast.

“What is this?” I wondered, in awe.

The island had looked tiny when we’d been high overhead, but upon our descent, I’d seen that it was a forest by design. The trees had been planted in an arch at regular intervals before swirling out in a flourish toward the edges of the island. In the very center of the wall of trees, shielding the waves and the expansive view of Laras beyond, was a round, stone pavilion. Familiar starwood blooms were creeping up the white stone. Little white flowers dotted the moss-covered ground, which was bright blue, instead of green like in the Collis. The moss contrasted sharply with the white stone of the steps that led up to the structure.

There was something eerily beautiful about this place.

Haunting. Quiet. But peaceful.

So unlike the bustle and chaos of the Kaalium keep right now, as keepers under Zaale’s orders rushed to clean and prep

for the influx of Kylorr that would be arriving in a little under a day.

Including Azur's brothers, I thought.

The pavilion was open air with delicate columns that climbed skyward. There was no roof, nothing to protect from a storm. Overhead, the stars were beginning to peak out, and I thought it would be glorious to lie there and watch them glimmer and gleam.

As we ascended the steps, Azur explained, "My grandfather built this for his *Kylaira*. When they passed, my own mother planted the trees and the starwood blooms in honor of them."

I tilted my head to look back at him, feeling his wing brush the back of my arm.

"With Kalia barking orders, I figured you might need the reprieve," he added dryly.

I laughed. I'd been doing that a lot this last week, and I leaned forward to press a kiss to his bicep since his mouth was too high for me to reach.

"Thank you," I breathed, though I would've been happy to have him fly me anywhere. The rush was exhilarating. My hair was wild around my shoulders, my cheeks raw from the wind, but I was grinning.

When I pulled away, Azur's arm flashed out and he pulled me back, closing the distance himself to take my lips. I sighed into his mouth and then felt his hands settle on my hips, pulling me tight against his hard body.

I moaned and said against his lips, "Or maybe you just wanted to find somewhere we wouldn't be disturbed."

"That too," he said roughly. "It's hard to properly fuck one's wife when one's sister is constantly barging into rooms unannounced."

I cringed and pulled away. Kalia had walked in on us yesterday in his office, and I would never forget the bulging horror in her eyes when she'd seen that Azur had had me

splayed out on his desk. I'd been holding his horns tight, using them to grind my cunt into his mouth.

Kalia hadn't quite been able to meet my eyes that evening. But this morning, she'd interrupted my Halo orb call with my sisters to demand that I go into the village with her. Something about a food disaster in the keep that seemed to have resolved itself before we'd even reached Laras.

"I should have sent her to live with Lucen when I had the chance," Azur rasped, trying to pull me back into the circle of his arms, trailing his mouth down my neck.

"You don't mean that," I told him. "You would miss her too much."

He grunted but didn't deny the words. I was discovering that my husband was truly one big pile of mush beneath his glaring, haughty, maddening exterior. At least when it came to his family.

And maybe even me, I added, feeling a flush burn on my cheeks.

The last week with him had been...

Wonderful.

Truly wonderful.

And no one was more surprised about it than I was. Perhaps even Azur too. I caught him looking at me with this perplexed expression on his face, in the aftermath of sex or in the quiet of night when he thought I was sleeping. Like he couldn't understand how we'd come to be *this*.

We'd fallen into a small routine, even with the craziness of the harvest in Laras, whose celebrations I could hear linger on into the night. After the *kyriv* attack, I'd never returned to my rooms to sleep. I'd stayed in Azur's bed, waking next to him, usually lying on one of his wings—which I'd found couldn't be helped. We'd take our morning meal on the terrace together. We'd go into the village afterward to make our appearance for whatever festivities were being held that day. Just yesterday, there had been a blood cake-baking competition of all things with little cooking stations set outside for the contestants. The

day before there had been a play—a retelling of an ancient battle, of Raazos, the god of battle and the afterlife, when he'd first clashed with Gaara, the goddess of fertility and healing.

After we returned to the keep, Azur's attentions would be called away by whatever reports were coming in from the northern border patrol and the accounts he'd taken over for the *lore* harvest. The border had been quiet since the *kyriv* attack, as if the Kaazor had retreated for the time being. But Azur had admitted to me, in the quiet of his bed, that the retreat set his teeth on edge. His fangs *had* been out in full view the last week or so, a nagging worry that he didn't seem to be able to shake.

He would find me late into the night. Or I would find him, still in his office. He'd take me flying, no matter the hour, which *always* ended with my dress pushed up to my waist wherever he found a private place to land, with me digging my nails into the back of his vest as he rutted ferociously between my thighs.

Then we'd go back to our rooms, where he'd take me all over again, long into the night. I'd fall asleep and not move until morning. Azur told me I slept like the dead, whereas he was the restless one, not that I'd noticed.

“What is this?” I asked, trying not to let him distract me with his roving hands as I danced away from his grip. There was what looked like a bird bath in the very center of the pavilion. When I looked within it, I saw that it was deep but empty, the bowl glimmering with what looked like a film of silver.

Azur followed after me, dragging his dull claws through the back of my hair, making goose bumps rise along my flesh. Just his touch could set me on fire.

“A *zylarr*,” he finally answered. “An opening into the other realms.”

I stilled, my heart pumping, but slowly lowered my hands away from the stone bowl. “It is?”

“We rarely use this one,” he informed me. “There is another. At our family’s shrine in Laras. When the moon winds are strong, we can make the bridge to Alara.”

The after realm, he’d told me.

“And Zyos?” I asked. “What about that one?”

“I have tried to reach Zyos more times than I can say,” he said, his expression closing briefly. Going cold. “I have failed every single time.”

“Who is in Zyos that you are trying to reach?” I asked, softly.

He blew out a sharp breath. “Someone lost. Someone lost for a long time.”

There was a gruff softness in his voice. A softness that nearly broke my heart.

Azur took my hand and guided me away from the *zylarr*, even though I had a flurry of questions flooding my brain.

I had a sick feeling in my gut as he led me back down the steps of the pavilion, heading toward the forest line.

“It’s not your mother, is it?” I asked, unsure if I should. Azur rarely spoke of his mother. Kalia mentioned her often enough. “Your mother isn’t the one who is lost, is she?”

“No,” Azur bit out. “My mother’s soul is deeply rooted in Alara.”

A small relief, then. “Do you speak to her during the moon winds? Through the *zylarr*?”

Azur’s hand tightened on mine. “That’s not how it works, *kyrana*. It is only the sensation that they are there, that they walk with you. There is no breaching the realms unless it is through death.”

“But you said it’s like a bridge.”

“The *zylarrs* are focusing points only. Places on Krynn where the stretches between the realms are already thin. Have you felt the one in the south wing?”

I swallowed. “Yes. I think so.”

“The only reason we haven’t placed a *zylarr* there is because the hallway is narrow and we’d have to level the entirety of the room just beyond it,” he informed me. “But there are other points. Throughout the Kaalium. Throughout Laras. *Here*. Which is why my grandfather chose this island to build on. Truthfully, you don’t need *zylarrs* if the moon winds are strong enough. But using one helps channel the energy to feel the Alara realm, to find the souls you seek. Otherwise, it’s like wading through an endless sea, seeking that one warm spot where you can *feel* your loved one. That is all it is. A comfort. A small one. And it takes a lot of energy.”

“What about other souls?” I asked quietly. “Other souls that never died on Krynn? Are they there too? Can you find them too?”

Azur stopped walking and turned to face me. “Your mother?” he asked.

“Yes,” I whispered, feeling hope rise in me. “If I could—”

“I’m sorry, Gemma,” he said, cupping my cheek. “I have only ever felt the souls of the Kylorr in the after realm. This is Raazos’s realm. Alaire’s. Gaara’s and Zor’s. I doubt you would find her there.”

My shoulders sagged, but it was the answer I’d expected. I nodded.

“If you’d like, I can help you look,” he said after a long silence. His voice soft and gentle.

Big pile of mush, indeed, I thought, lifting my face to his and seeing the concern reflected in those ember eyes.

“You would?” I whispered, feeling a sensation squirm in my chest that was beginning to feel permanent.

“Yes,” he said, inclining his head.

“I would like that,” I said softly. “It wouldn’t hurt to try, I suppose.”

“The next strong moon-wind storm will likely come in another three months. Would you like to try then?”

I didn't answer him. Instead, I pulled his neck down and kissed him gently, having learned to avoid the sharp prick of his fangs, and sweeping his tongue with mine.

He groaned, his fist tightening in the cloth of my dress. He liked me in dresses. Liked how easily he could slip between my thighs, with nothing between us, and so I wore them for him even though I had to keep the material gathered up whenever we flew.

"Thank you," I whispered, smiling. "How can I show my gratitude?"

He roughly exhaled at my deliberate tease. "I think you already know, wife."

When Azur pushed me up against the nearest tree and tugged my dress up nearly past my breasts, I fumbled with the clasps on his pants, freeing his cock. He sunk into me a moment later, both of us groaning at the sensation. For some time, there were no words said between us at all. But he held my eyes the entire time, and when we both came, it was together, a wonderful crescendo of sublime pleasure as his fangs sank into the side of my neck. I squeezed my legs around him, clasping him to me as his seal seated deep, that dizzying burn feeling like a *relief*.

Afterward, we caught our breath, lying in the moss. Above us, the sky was black, the stars bright. Little white gems nestled in the night, waiting to be found. I wondered where the Collis was among them, where my mother was buried and how far souls could stray from their home.

I already knew it was unlikely I would find my mother on Krynn. But it was touching that Azur would at least try for me. *That* was what made tears sting the back of my eyes.

"Will your father be at the ball tomorrow night?" I asked sleepily, lazing in my husband's arms as he dragged his claws down my side. He hadn't torn this dress, for once, and he smoothed the material down my hips.

"No."

For how close Azur was to his family, he didn't speak of them much. And he tightened up like a clam shell whenever I pressed.

"Does he live on Krynn?" I asked. There was a gentleness in Azur's expression that told me he might actually give me the answers I'd wondered about for so long.

"No," Azur replied, a deep sigh lowering his shoulders. "He lives on Urania. He's an ambassador for our Quadrant."

I scrambled up onto my elbow, which sunk deep into the moss, to get a better look at him. "Your father sits on the Uranian Federation Council?"

"Yes," he replied. I heard the pride in his voice even though it mingled with something I couldn't identify. Something that made my heart sink for him.

That was...impressive. Greatly so. No easy feat, and yet with a son like Azur, it was all too easy to imagine his father in such an esteemed and highly respected position.

"When was the last time you saw him?" I wondered.

"He came home to Krynn five years ago. For Laras's harvest. Otherwise, we speak through the Halo when our schedules align."

"Five years is a long time," I murmured, with a pang of understanding.

"He's long held his seat on the council. He's always been off planet for long stretches of time, though he took on more responsibility after my mother's passing," Azur told me gruffly. The relaxation in his face was gone, replaced by a furrowed expression. "He didn't want to be here. In the keep where they lived together. Where they'd made their home. I understood. It was my duty to step in. My brothers' duties. He gladly passed Laras to me. He departed for Urania. He very rarely returns."

My lips parted, hearing *so* much in such few words.

"When...when did your mother die?" I asked.

“Ten years ago,” he told me. “A strain of blood sickness. A rare disease for our kind. It took her quickly.”

“I’m sorry,” I breathed. A blood sickness? “I’m sorry, Azur.”

He said nothing. His face turned to the stars, and I studied the strong line of his jaw, hesitantly reaching out to run my hand through his hair, spread out on the moss beneath him.

“It must have been difficult for you,” I murmured, feeling like my heart was caught in an ever-tightening vice. “To lose your mother so suddenly. To have your father leave an entire nation behind for you and your brothers to protect and serve. I couldn’t imagine the weight of that responsibility.”

“We’ve managed well enough,” Azur finally answered softly. “The first year was the hardest. Every year since has come easier.”

“Your father must’ve loved your mother very much,” I commented, sighing. “To be bound in his grief in such a way.”

“He did,” Azur said. “He *does*.”

The words made my chest ache. My father, for all his faults, had loved my mother too. When I’d been a child, I remembered he could make her laugh with his roguish grin, even when she’d been upset with him. They’d dance in our small kitchen on New Inverness, swaying slowly together to music only they could hear. Father would wink at me over her shoulder whenever his face had turned my way, as I’d watched them, bundled up by the fire.

But time had eroded everything, chipping away at my mother’s genuine smile, especially when we’d moved to the Collis, especially in the later years of her life. The vacant gleam in her eye had become more and more commonplace. Even my father couldn’t bring her back anymore.

“Though, perhaps it was a small blessing that they were not blood mates,” Azur added softly, the unexpected comment making me still. “For surely, he would’ve been driven mad by now.”

“What do you mean?” I asked quietly.

He shook his head. He turned to regard me, a wry smile on his lips that didn't quite belong. "Nothing." When I shivered against him, he asked, "Are you cold? We should head back to the keep."

"Can we stay a little while longer?" I asked quietly, not ready to leave. Not ready to leave the solid press of his body next to mine. It was peaceful here. Even if we weren't talking about peaceful things. I still wasn't ready to give him up.

"Yes, of course," he answered.

As I studied him, I realized he was nothing like how I'd imagined him to be. He could be biting and cold. His temper could run hot, while the ice in his eyes could freeze me in place. But the male I'd come to know this last week was gentle with me. Infinitely passionate. Exceedingly patient.

That wasn't to say we hadn't argued this week. Because we certainly had. Just a few days ago, he'd griped at me because I'd pushed into his office, wanting to help him with the *lore* accounts since Maazin had, effectively, fled the keep. He'd said it was *his* responsibility to see the accounts investigated, when I'd only wanted to help. I'd called him stubborn. He'd called me maddening. We'd glared at one another over a mound of parchment.

And then we'd nearly torn the stacks to shreds as we'd jumped on one another, clothes flying, clasps flinging themselves across the floor. Our argument had ended in gasping moans and deep groans, with the pleasurable stretch of his seal rooting into place inside me and with his lips at my breast.

Afterward, I'd been too boneless and sated to even care about the *lore* accounts. Maybe that had been his intention all along.

I wondered which version of Azur was the truest form of my husband. And *why* there had been such a great discrepancy between them to begin with.

I knew it had something to do with my father. Whether he'd taken money from the Kylorr that he couldn't repay or

pissed off the wrong noble, I wasn't certain. Now, knowing that his father was on the Uranian Federation Council, I wondered if *that* had anything to do with why Azur had married me. My father belonged to the United Alliance. The Kylorr had been defending the Pe'ji in the last war. My father would have been their *enemy*.

What I *was* certain about was that Azur wouldn't tell me. I'd hinted. I'd pressed. His eyes would narrow like he knew what I was doing, and I got no further with him.

"Are you ready for tomorrow night?" Azur asked me softly.

"I'm ready," I told him, not wanting him to know that I was actually very nervous. Nervous and excited. About meeting his brothers. About meeting the nobles of Laras, old family friends of House Kaalium, with deeper ties to this land than I could fathom.

Then again, I'd held off loan collectors who were probably five times as terrifying as any noble on Laras. I could handle it. I knew it.

His *brothers*, on the other hand...

"Kalia wasn't exactly my biggest fan when I came to Krynn," I said softly. "I wonder if your brothers will feel the same."

"You can handle my brothers, wife," he told me. "For the most part, they're more charming than I am."

I laughed at his obvious tease. Because I'd seen Azur charm the surliest of Kylorrs throughout the last week in the village.

"And what about Kythel?" I asked. Perhaps the brother I was *most* anxious about meeting was Azur's twin. He'd said they were close. I wanted to make a good impression since I'd obviously failed with both Azur and Kalia upon meeting them.

"Kythel..." Azur huffed, long and slow. "Kythel will see what you are to me. He will understand. They all will."

My brow furrowed.

“You have nothing to fear,” he said, his hand lazily dragging across my shoulder. “And if you wish to leave early, we can sneak upstairs to our rooms and let the nobles smoke through the House’s supply of *lore* in our wake.”

Our rooms, he’d said.

My heart fluttered at that, a dangerous thing.

“I like that plan,” I told him, leaning down for a kiss. “Very much.”

CHAPTER 37

“*A*zur,” I moaned, my eyelids fluttering wildly, pushing at his shoulders. “You’ll leave a mark!”

In response, he drank even deeper, and I felt my clit tingle, a warning.

He wants to leave one, I knew just as my orgasm crested, blinding and fast. I clutched on to him, my legs shaking, biting my lip to stifle my loud cries because I could already hear the music funneling throughout the keep.

Guests were arriving. The *lore* harvest ball was underway, and here I was, hidden in a dark alcove on the second floor of the keep, with my husband’s fangs deep in my neck.

When he was finished, he pulled away, licking his lips. I was flushed, panting, staring at him with a half-lidded gaze. There was an odd scent drifting in the air, one that smelled strangely like cinnamon but spicier. One that made me feel dizzy, that made my heart speed and the muscles in my thighs quiver.

Azur had been leading me down the stairs, his hand presumptuous and wandering over the dress he’d purchased for me. The most beautiful thing I’d ever worn. The Hindras clothier was truly skilled to craft such a work of art. The material was human-blood red and light as air, skimming close to the curves of my body. Yet it was sturdy enough to hold the silver metal that had been hand sewed into it, metal that had been shaped into delicate swirls and curving lines in the bodice and sweeping down toward my hips.

The neckline was low, showing the expanse of my upper chest, the valley of my breasts, and the line of my neck. Ludayn had swept my hair up in a soft, braided bun, pinning it back with silver pins encrusted in ruby-like gems. The final touch was the headband of silver flowers—which resembled starwood blooms—that she had been eager for me to wear.

I'd felt a thrill go through me when Azur had first seen me. He'd stilled, his nostrils flaring, those fiery eyes *roving*. A low, unconscious growl had reverberated up his throat before he'd swallowed it down. That sound had made my toes curl in my silk slippers, and I'd just narrowly managed to dodge his lunge for me, laughing breathlessly because I hadn't wanted us to be late.

And I'd known that if my husband had gotten his hands on me, we would've been very late indeed.

He'd behaved until the second floor.

Now he peered down at his bite with a smirk that nearly made me whimper.

“Perfect,” he purred, his hand cupping my cheek. “You’re beautiful, wife.”

My throat burned. I'd never heard that before. Not once in my entire life. It was my sisters who other people had called beautiful.

But the way Azur was looking at me...I knew he meant it. He truly meant it.

I wasn't very good at accepting compliments, but I smiled at him, managing to hold back my tears. “Thank you. You’re very handsome tonight too.”

My husband, however, had likely heard compliments his entire life from females who'd clamored over one another to reach him. Azur was dressed finely in a black structured vest that molded to him and black pants. The material of both was strong like leather but held the supple softness of suede. Similar metal work was sewn into his vest, though the accents highlighted the breadth of his shoulders and the width of his chest. He wore his gauntlets, gleaming and freshly polished. A

dagger—the same one we’d used at our marriage ceremony and to cut our hands again the night of the moon winds—was sheathed at his hip.

His shoulder-length black hair was left down and unbound, completing his roguish look.

If we’d met at a ball like this, in another place, I’d likely have been unable to keep my eyes off him.

To think that he was my *husband*, that he was *mine*...it was hard to wrap my head around. Once, I’d been terrified of him. I’d recoiled at the sight of him, frozen in place, fearful of what my fate with him might be.

Now I skimmed my hand up his chest and leaned into him as he studied his obvious bite mark with masculine satisfaction and primal pleasure.

I was falling in love with him. Swiftly and hard. It didn’t scare me as much as I’d thought it would.

“Brute,” I whispered, teasing. “What is it with you and marking me? Now I’ll feel everyone’s eyes on it tonight.”

“Good,” he rasped, taking my hand and continuing on our way. “At least the males will know to keep their distance.”

The nerves kicked up in the notch of my throat the closer we drew to the front of the keep. There were two keepers stationed at the private hallway doors that led to the main foyer, making sure no guests strayed into the private areas of the house. After they inclined their heads at us, they opened the doors, and a flood of noise and light and laughter briefly startled me enough that I forgot my fear.

We entered the foyer with little fanfare, slipping among the growing crowd, who were waiting to be let into the extravagant, massive dining room just beyond the entrance doors. A dining room that we never used, which had been cleared of the table that must’ve sat nearly a hundred guests.

I heard the murmurs as our appearance registered among the crowd. Villagers from Laras. Nobles too. Travelers from all around the Kaalium, for an entire portion of the village had been cleared for their traveling tents. The keep kept its doors

open on this night for any who wished to attend, but that meant the line went out the doors and down the tree-lined path toward Laras. It meant Kylorr guards were out in full force tonight, guards I'd seen patrolling throughout the village on occasion, in case trouble arose, and who I'd later learned had dealt with the aftermath of the *kyriv* attack.

Azur smiled and greeted all who called out to us. And when we bypassed the line to step into the dining room, which had been transformed by Kalia and Neela into a ballroom, I was too entranced by the beauty to notice that most guests turned our way when Azur guided me inside.

Overhead, there was a projection of a starry scape. Gone was the towering, vaulted white-stone ceilings of the keep. In its place was the indigo night sky, dotted with twinkling stars that looked so incredibly real. The orb lights were soft and dim as they weaved and swayed around the room. Candles had been brought out too, old fashioned and tapered, black in color with golden flames.

Haunting music echoed through the ballroom with instruments that sounded like human harps and violins but were somehow muted, their notes drawn out and wispy like smoke. Beautiful. Couples were dancing on the floor, swaying and gliding across the stone. I was relieved to see that it looked like a universal dance, the basic steps of which I knew well.

Flowers spilled from all corners of the room. Decorating the food table or perched on tall columns, vines trailing down like ivy. Beautiful blooms. *Starwood* blooms, I saw too, likely in remembrance of their mother, mixed in with creamy white flowers with large, velvety petals. They had a wild look about that, but the effect was glorious. It looked like we'd stumbled onto a ball deep in the woods of Krynn, lit up golden and glittering in the night.

"Kalia has outdone herself this year," Azur murmured.

"Neela too. It's beautiful," I said. I took a deep breath, finally registering the multitude of eyes on us and the speculative expressions on their faces as they whispered

behind hands. I swallowed hard, squeezing his forearm, finding his presence next to me comforting. “Are your brothers here?”

Azur scanned the crowd, moving me forward, skirting the dancing couples and making his way toward the left side of the ballroom. He wore a cool expression, seemingly unfazed by the sheer amount of looks being cast our way. As if this were a common occurrence in his daily life—which, perhaps, it had been. Kalia had told me their mother had thrown all kinds of parties and dinners at the keep in her time as *Kylaira*.

I wondered if the same was expected of me. Somehow, the idea of it made a stone lodge in my belly. It didn’t appeal to me. At all. It was what human women were expected to do when they took over great houses just like this one, when they married into wealthy, respected families. I’d much rather be deep in the records room up to my ears in numbers or flying across the sea with Azur. Or pruning gardens and visiting the village and walking the terrace walls, admiring the crash of the waves below, with Ludayn and Kalia.

“Kythel and Kaldur are likely in the smoking room,” he told me. *The smoking room?* “I don’t see Lucen or Thaine. Mm, there’s Kalia and Rivin.”

He pulled me toward his sister, who was dressed in a stunning midnight-blue dress, the first dress I’d ever seen her wear. Simple and delicate and understated, but I saw the eyes of Kylorr males practically *glued* to her, males I recognized from the village.

Males who averted their eyes the moment Azur stepped into their path, and I bit back a smile.

“Alaire’s mercy, look at you,” Kalia breathed, practically squealing with delight when she saw me on her brother’s arm. “Estee’s shop will be booked for *months* after tonight.”

I flushed at her praise, sliding closer to Azur. Rivin, who had shown up at the keep just a few days prior, gave me a wide grin. “*Kylaira*,” he greeted, and I couldn’t help but notice that his eyes dipped to the bite mark on my neck before that smile widened. “Shall I claim your first dance of the night?”

“Only if you wish to greet Raazos,” Azur cut in smoothly, clapping his friend on the back, making Rivin wheeze. My husband bared his fangs, which he hadn’t retracted, and added, “Behave and keep your hands off my wife while I go make the greeting to our guests.”

Kalia stifled a snicker but took my hand as I watched Azur stride away, making his way toward where the musicians were plucking away on their instruments on a raised dais at the front of the ballroom. He signaled for them to stop and turned to face the crowd with a charming smile that didn’t quite match him as the noise quieted considerably.

“Welcome,” his voice rang out once the room fell silent. I could feel the energy pulsing in the room, the buzzing. The Kylorr, I’d found, *loved* the harvest season. Everywhere we went in the village, there had been a childlike merriment and joy in the festivities. “Welcome, friends of House Kaalium. You honor my family by being here tonight, whether you have traveled near or far.”

Heavy feet stomped on the ground, a trembling roar in the room. A way of clapping, I realized, for the Kylorr, as their wings began to flurry in time with the beat.

“This was a year of blessings for our country. Our greatest *lore* harvest in our history. For Erzos, for Kyne, for Vyaan, for Salaire, and for Laras.”

Choruses of cheers rang out when Azur listed off his brother’s territories—cheers from their residents who had traveled to be here tonight—but the wing flapping and foot stomping when he said *Laras* drowned them all out. Azur waited patiently until the noise died down once more.

“Another blessing of this year is that Laras welcomed its new *Kylaira*.”

I froze as seemingly thousands of eyes swung to me, squeezing Kalia’s hand in my own, but I only watched Azur when his own red gaze locked with mine.

“My wife. My *kyrana*,” he said as whispers broke out among the crowd mingled with cries of exclamation and

surprise, possibly from those outside Laras, “who will bring prosperity and perhaps reflection to our keep and to my family.”

There was a softness in those last words as he regarded me from across the room.

“I introduce her to you now, our friends. Gemma of House Kaalium, *Kylaira* of Laras.”

I pasted on a smile as the ground quaked my very soul, as the cheering echoed throughout the massive room. But I only watched Azur as shock reverberated through me. I’d never heard my name any differently. I’d always been Gemma Hara. And to hear my name attached to his own, to his family, to Krynn and this keep...it made me want to be alone with him. So I could feel the steady heat of his arms and savor the feel of his wings wrapping tight around me.

So much had changed between us in such a short amount of time. And while I felt grief—surprising and strange—at knowing my old life in the Collis would only be a memory from now on, that I would no longer share the name of my sisters, my mother, my father, I knew that I would forge my own path here on Krynn.

My fate made new.

“May our gods and goddesses bless her as they have blessed us all,” Azur continued, his jaw tightening on the words, but the expression vanished quickly, a smile taking its place. “A year of blessings that I know will continue as we grow the Kaalium into an even greater nation. So please... feast, drink, smoke, dance, and enjoy one another’s company. Our keep is yours tonight. There is much to celebrate.”

Azur stepped down to rising cheers as the musicians started up again. A Kylorr word, one I didn’t recognize, seemed to ripple through the crowd, chanted and following him as he made his way back toward me, his gaze pinned on my own.

“What are they saying?” I asked.

Rivin was the one who replied. “*Dalkye*.”

“It’s an ancient war cry,” Kalia explained, her voice soft, her eyes speculative as she watched her brother make his way through the crowd, though many Kylorr were approaching him, vying for his attention. “It’s difficult to explain. It’s a...a comfort, I suppose. A word of remembrance and memory of our ancestors but also a word of hope and victory.”

“I see,” I said quietly, watching as Azur got waylaid by yet another pair, an elderly couple from the village, who wore bright smiles on their faces as they greeted their *Kyzaire*. I watched as my husband grinned at them, charming and patient, though his eyes flickered to mine over their wings.

Rivin was regarding me carefully. I still remembered his kindness when I’d first come to the keep, when Azur had been so cold that he’d felt like a wall of ice. Then his expression shifted when Neela found us, his eyes flashing over the human woman, nostrils flaring.

“Hello, Rivin,” Neela greeted, smiling.

Azur’s friend grunted. I had the impression he was holding his breath, and he inclined his head to us all as he said, “I’m going to go smoke.”

I watched as he faded away, bewildered by the sudden change in him. Especially when I saw him grin at a Kylorr female in a slinky dress who bumped into him as he pushed past.

“He still hates me, I see,” Neela murmured, the words dry even though her smile was bright. “If only I knew what I’d even done in the first place.”

Kalia frowned and was just about to say something when I felt a familiar hand wrap around my wrist.

“Let’s go dance before I get pulled away again,” Azur rasped in to my ear, tugging me out of the diminishing circle of people before I could protest.

“You would rather dance than speak with your guests?” I whispered, finding myself in the circle of his arms among the other couples on the floor.

“Hmmm, I’d rather not be bothered while I admire my wife in this dress,” he countered. I bit my lip to keep from chuckling, still feeling oddly shy from his welcome speech. “I’ll commission Estee to make you about a dozen more.”

I shook my head, afraid to see what the purchase charges had been for the wardrobe he’d already gifted me. “Mine are more than enough. You like my hideous dresses, after all,” I teased. “Because you don’t feel so bad when you tear them to shreds.”

A couple close to us choked on their laughter, and my face flamed, not realizing they’d been listening to our conversation. Azur ducked his head and murmured in my ear, “Careful, wife. All of Laras will know my hunger for you by the end of tonight.”

With that, we began to dance as I avoided the eyes of the couple when they swayed away.

“Myraa and Dy of House Nes,” he murmured, his fangs brushing the sensitive flesh of my ear as I shivered. “Nosy gossips. You’ll do well to watch your tongue around them, though they are useful if you ever need information spread throughout Laras.”

Instead of threading my arms around his neck, I placed them on the broad wall of his chest since it was easier to reach. Our height difference was vast.

I memorized their names and their faces. “Will I ever learn all these people?”

“Yes,” he answered, the word confident. “You forget, wife, I have known them all my life. They are as familiar to me as the walls of this keep. You will learn them with time.”

His words were reassuring, and we settled into a gentle rhythm for a while, Azur infinitely patient while I found my footing, nervous that so many eyes were upon us.

“Kylorr dance like humans,” I commented to distract myself.

“Or maybe humans dance like the Kylorr,” he rasped.

I exhaled, still fighting my grin. “I stand corrected.”

With the exception of Myraa and Dy, the other couples around us kept their distance. Wing-distance as I liked to call it, giving us privacy as we swayed in the crowded ballroom. Azur, naturally, was a wonderful dancer. The bulk of his body did nothing to deter his grace, and he guided me expertly through steps that I fumbled over, unused to the timing of the Kylorr music, which held a dark edge to it, accompanied by a primal beat. Still, I smiled at him, beginning to enjoy myself, especially with the firm press of his hands at my hips and lower back and the tease in his dark eyes as he watched me, promising early retirement up to our rooms.

I sensed another presence step forward. I heard a hush from the onlookers, more whispers, and saw Azur’s gaze flick to someone behind me.

“That was quite the speech, brother,” came the voice. Rich and dark. Quiet but firm.

Azur’s hands left me, and I turned to face the Kylorr male, who stood close, his black wings slightly flared.

The male’s eyes were bright blue. Like faceted glaciers. *Or blue salt from the mines in the Collis*, I thought. His dark horns curved back alongside the crown of his skull. His black hair was cut short, curling around his sharply pointed ears. His fangs weren’t elongated, but I spied the glimmer of a scar running through his bottom lip.

His features were achingly familiar. The sharp cut of his cheekbones. The intensity of his gaze. The build of his shoulders, the breadth of his chest, and the imposing strength of his thighs.

I knew who he was as certainly as I knew my own husband’s touch, his scent, his voice.

“May I cut in?” the male asked, turning those icy eyes to me.

Kythel.

CHAPTER 38

“*O*nly if she wishes,” Azur said.

Despite Kythel’s cold tone, there wasn’t any rigidity in my husband’s shoulders. He wasn’t threatened by his brother. By his *twin*. Why would he be? He’d told me they were close, though this was the first time I was meeting him.

“Of course,” I said, finally finding my tongue. Azur handed me off, and Kythel’s palm clasped mine, the strong grip warm and familiar. “I’d be delighted to.”

Kythel’s gaze flickered to the bite mark on my neck, and then he shot his brother an unreadable look. “Subtle,” he drawled, the word tight.

Azur stepped away, holding my eyes, and I watched him go with a flicker of panic. Kythel drew me into the circle of his arms, breaking my gaze.

“Kythel,” I murmured, not able to relax, my spine stiff, though I was proud when I followed his lead when the music started up again. The name was a statement, a fact. Not a question. I kept his eyes, though everything in me wanted to shrink away.

He didn’t smile. Instead, Azur’s twin studied my face. I had the distinct impression that he was memorizing every last freckle, every last line. That he could draw me from memory alone, a perfect likeness, and I nearly squirmed under the scrutiny. I was proud when I didn’t.

Kythel was just as intense as his elder brother. It was like going back in time. To meeting Azur again for the first time

when he'd stood next to me in a Nulaxy courthouse, as rigid as a statue.

I wanted Kythel to like me. Of course I did. He was Azur's *twin*.

"I'm gratified to see my brother hasn't broken you yet," came the unexpected words.

I stiffened.

I didn't quite know how to respond to that. Kythel's eyes left me. They narrowed around the room, observing the couples around us, flickering to the crowd that watched us, to the musicians playing in a lonely corner.

"I'm not a wild animal that needs breaking," I shot back, unable to hold my tongue.

Kythel's gaze returned to me. The corner of his lip lifted in a smirk that was nearly identical to Azur's. Seeing it made me reel.

"My apologies, sister," he said smoothly. I nearly jerked at the familiar word on his lips. "I didn't mean to imply that. You must understand that when I last saw my brother, he had vengeance in his soul and fire in his blood. I expected the worst when I returned to Laras this night."

I didn't dare breathe.

"And why is that?" I asked softly.

Kythel's expression smoothed. He turned me expertly and I spun briefly, the room going dizzy, before he caught me again.

"There are no Kylorr living in the Collis, are there?" he asked instead. "That is where you are from, yes?"

"Yes," I replied, breathless, wondering if I would finally discover the answers I sought from Azur's brother—and wondering if I should feel guilty for that or not. "I am."

"Because humans would rather raze their colonies to the ground than let Kylorr live among them," Kythel murmured. "Especially after what happened on Pe'ji."

“Pe’ji?” I repeated softly.

“How do you find Laras?” he asked me, changing the subject swiftly as he spun me again. On purpose, perhaps, to make me feel off balance. When I landed in his arms again, he was peering at me carefully, not out of breath in the slightest. I’d seen ancient butterflies pinned to boards in museums. Butterflies from Old Earth that had been preserved for centuries and centuries. I felt like one now. My butterfly wings spread wide, his eyes watchful, catching every twitch across my features.

“I like Laras very much,” I answered. “Everyone has been welcoming.”

When Kythel guided us in time with the music, my eyes briefly caught on Azur, listening to a Kylorr female, whose smile up at him could only be described as coy. Azur’s gaze was on *me*, however, and I didn’t have a moment to feel a prick of jealousy before Kythel had reclaimed my attention.

“But not my brother,” Kythel guessed. “Not at first.”

“No, not at first,” I said quietly, meeting those glacier eyes. “He wanted me to fear him.”

“Mmm. Azur is many things,” Kythel told me. “But once you have his loyalties, you have them forever. I do not need to decide if I like you, Gemma of House Kaalium.” My breath hitched. “My brother has already decided for us. I trust his judgment. I know his mind as well I know my own. So you can relax in my arms, sister. I will not bite.”

Heat flooded my cheeks. Kythel didn’t smile. Or laugh. He glided me across the ballroom, and I caught sight of Ludayn, hovering near her mother, who was chatting animatedly with Estee, the Hindras clothier. Ludayn looked beautiful tonight in her silver dress which made her midnight-blue hair shine.

What must the other brothers be like if Azur and Kythel were *this* intimidating?

“What are you thinking?” Kythel asked after a brief lapse of silence. I swore I heard amusement in his tone.

I said honestly, “That your mother must have been an angel with saintlike patience.”

That brought a laugh up his throat, husky and soft. So much like Azur’s that I softened because the sound made me feel safe.

“That she was,” Kythel agreed. “To put up with us *and* our father. Kalia was her blessing. Her reward. Perhaps Thaine too, for he never gave her much trouble.”

“Kalia has been a wonderful friend to me,” I said.

Kythel inclined his head, his eyes skimming the crowd once more, before flickering back to mine. “You’ve won her over. She told me you’re both working to restore the starwood blooms along the terrace.”

“That’s right,” I said with a small smile. Over Kythel’s wing, I saw a group of males gathering around Kalia. Azur included, who’d finally broken away from the female he’d been speaking to. I watched as Azur clasped one male on the shoulder, pulling him forward to whisper something in his ear.

His other brothers, I realized, my heart picking up speed. The remaining three of them. Kaldur, Lucen, and Thaine.

And they were all looking at me, dancing with Kythel, Azur included.

“She didn’t want to like you at first,” he told me. I frowned, turning my attention back to him. “Then again, Kalia has always had a big heart. It’s Kaldur you will need to sway the most. He won’t make it easy for you.”

“Why?” I asked quietly. I took a wild guess, a stab in the dark. “Because of my father?”

Kythel’s features darkened. I held my breath and felt my heart skip when he inclined his head. “Yes. Your father. And Aina.”

Aina?

“Did my father do something to House Kaalium?” I asked softly. “Was it a debt? Credits? Is that what this is all about?”

Kythel paused. He gentled our dancing until we stood still in the middle of the ballroom, and he regarded me with an expression that resembled caution. His gaze lifted to the group of his siblings, but I knew he was only looking at Azur.

“You’ll have to ask your husband,” Kythel finally said. “Come. They’re waiting to meet you.”

Frustration thrummed through me, but I let Kythel lead me off the dancing floor, bringing me back to Azur’s side.

My husband wrapped his arm around my waist, his wings flaring slightly behind me, giving the group of siblings the illusion of privacy in a crowded room as I drummed up a smile for the three brothers I hadn’t met yet.

“Gemma,” Azur murmured, gesturing to each brother in turn as he said, “My remaining brothers. Thaine. Lucen. And Kaldur.”

The weight of their eyes on me was equally as frightening as Kythel’s had been. For some strange reason, I’d envisioned his brothers to be younger. More like Mira’s age.

But I couldn’t have been more wrong. Instead, three grown Kylorr males stood before me, and my heart felt like it would pump clean out of my body with the sudden flood of nerves.

All were incredibly handsome, with sculpted features and imposing jaw lines. All were incredibly massive, towering over me and Kalia like Azur. All were incredibly *daunting*.

“I’m very pleased to meet you,” I said, my voice revealing none of this, smiling. “Azur and Kalia have spoken so fondly of all of you.”

Azur’s hand squeezed at my waist.

“A diplomatic response,” Thaine commented, raising a brow, giving me a smile that couldn’t *quite* be considered warm, but one that was infinitely better than the scowl on Kaldur’s face. “I’m sure Azur has said much worse about us.”

“Not at all,” I countered, shaking my head, feeling Kythel come to my other side. I felt tiny and small in the circle of brothers, but thankfully, Kalia gave me an encouraging grin

and I saw her bump her wing into Kaldur's, who pinned his glare above my head. "I would be lying if I said I wasn't nervous to meet all of you, but I have been looking forward to it. To putting faces to names and stories."

All of them had different colored eyes, I realized. Azur's were red, Kythel's blue. Thaine had piercing green eyes that were incredibly watchful as Azur pulled me tighter against him. Lucen's were gold. And Kaldur...his were gray. So light, like molten silver, that they almost resembled mirrors. I swore I could see myself in them when I met his gaze.

Kalia, however, shared her eye color with Azur. A blazing, fiery red, hot like her temper could be at times but warm like her kindness.

"And we have been waiting to meet you, Gemma," Lucen said quietly, inclining his head to me when I glanced his way. "For a long while."

"They've all decided to stay for a few days before they return to their respective territories," Azur informed me, cutting in. "We were just discussing the room arrangements."

Smiling, I said, "That would be wonderful. Being here for a single night seems so short considering how long you've traveled to get here."

"Or much too long," Kaldur's voice came, tilting his head at me as he watched my smile die, "depending on the disgraceful company we keep."

His voice was smooth. Surprisingly gentle for his harsh words, and I realized that he wasn't at all what he seemed.

Kythel had been right. Kaldur was the one who I'd truly have to win over, though I didn't even know my crime to begin with. But Azur did. They all did. I was just the fool left in the dark.

"Kaldur," Azur growled. "*Enough.*"

There was a lump in my throat and I grew stiff against Azur's side.

Kaldur's glare went to my husband. "I'm not going to stand here and pretend that *any* of this is right," he rasped, that gentle voice becoming rough and raw. "*You* made a vow to us. To *our* family. To *our* mother." His hand flicked in my direction. "And rather than *using* her blood—"

"Kaldur!" Kalia gasped as my heart pounded in my chest, my face drained of color. "*Stop.*"

"—to guide Aina back from Zyos, you're *fucking* her instead."

Azur began to thrum beside me, throwing off shocking heat, and I shot him a worried look, flinging my hand to his chest because I feared he'd go into a rage right there and then. Kythel stepped into the middle of the circle, shielding Kaldur's glare from us.

Guide Aina back from Zyos?

Gods, *this* was who Azur had been searching for.

But what did *I* have to do with it?

"Outside," Kythel bit out to Kaldur. "*Now.* This is not the place."

The swish of Kaldur's wings sounded and the heavy stride of his boots struck the stone as he left the circle.

"Azur, please don't," Kalia said, her voice tinged with apprehension. Her expression flew to me, desperation and worry in it, though I noticed all the siblings kept their distance, even Kythel. "He can't go into a rage right now, Gemma."

Azur's gaze was pinned to Kaldur's back, tracking him across the room.

I stepped forward, reaching to clasp the back of his neck. It took effort but I finally pulled hard enough to make him meet my eyes.

"Azur," I said softly. There were guests looking on, surely, though I heard Kalia break away from the circle, trying to distract from it, loudly asking for a dance partner with a gleeful chiming laugh. Males stepped forward, all too eager,

and she made a grand show of picking one, making the crowd laugh. “Azur, there are too many people here. Please.”

I’d watch him take down a *kyriv* in a rage. What would happen to this ballroom?

Kythel stepped toward us, clasping Azur’s forearm with his. Leaning close to his ear, I heard his twin murmur, “I’ll deal with Kaldur. Why don’t you take your wife and go cool off in the smoking room?”

I felt the shudder go through Azur’s body.

“I will,” came his voice, rough and raw. “Let’s go.”

Azur dragged me away from the three brothers, tracing Kaldur’s footsteps out of the ballroom. I worried that we’d run into him on the way out, but the path was mercifully clear, only the dwindling line of people waiting to get in greeted us.

Azur managed to nod at all who called out to us in greeting, and I plastered on a smile that I hoped looked convincing enough, though my hand was clutching tightly on his arm.

The room Azur led me to was down the entrance hallway and, thankfully, not very crowded.

But nothing prepared me for the haze of silvery-blue smoke that floated over my tongue when we stepped inside. I squeezed his arm, a gasp winding up my throat, when I felt heat pulse between my legs, the reaction entirely unexpected and shocking. The smoke smelled like cinnamon, warm and spicy. *This* was what I’d been smelling throughout the keep all evening. It was *lore* smoke.

That was when I remembered that it was a stimulant for humans. An aphrodisiac. Manufacturers throughout the New Earth colonies used *lore* in pleasure drugs and tonics and fertility treatments. They made a fortune off *lore*.

Gods. This was not the right time, but I clenched my jaw tight and followed Azur in.

His shoulders immediately relaxed and he released a breath in a rush. There was a Kylorr female tending a counter

where we stepped in.

“*Kyzaire*,” she greeted, smiling through the haze, seemingly unaffected by the *lore* like I was, “and *Kylaira*. What would you like me to prepare for you?”

“K10098,” Azur rasped out. He was perhaps more relaxed than he’d been in the ballroom, but he wasn’t off the edge of the rage yet.

“Wonderful harvest year,” the female commented, chatting happily. “One of my favorites too. The season that year was abnormally warm, was it not?”

“It was,” Azur said, his tone tight.

When a throbbing wave began to spread between my thighs, I turned to Azur while the female crouched to retrieve whatever he had requested.

“I don’t know if I can stay in here,” I whispered in his ear. My hand curled into his vest. I felt him stiffen against me, a low growl reverberating in his throat, and I wasn’t sure if pleasure would help dull his rage or not. My priority was making certain he was all right and keeping him calm. What Kaldur had said in the ballroom... That was another conversation that could *not* happen right now.

My eyes caught on the other patrons of the smoking room. Mostly Kylorr. But I did see a couple humans from the village. A human male in particular had his hand on a Kylorr male’s thigh and was kissing his way up his neck.

Another human female was perched in the lap of a Killup, his gray skin gleaming, as he took a drag of his pipe, burning blue at the tip. I watched the human—with curly black hair and light skin—bite her lip with the imperceptible movement of her hips grinding down into him.

There were others watching, but most didn’t seem fazed. There were two Kylorr kissing in the corner. Another older couple was laughing together. A handful of younger males, friends by the looks of it, were chatting good-naturedly around a high table in the middle of the room, pausing intermittently to take long drags on their pipes.

No one seemed to notice that we had entered the room at all, and for that I was supremely relieved. Especially when I felt my knees begin to tremble and slick arousal begin to wet my inner thighs.

The Kylorr female presented Azur with a gleaming pipe, stuffed full of dried *lore*.

She turned her knowing eyes to me. “Anything for you, *Kylaira*?”

“No,” I said, clearing my throat when the word came out a little breathless. She knew—she had to—what effect the *lore* was having on me, a human. “Thank you.”

Azur didn’t waste time in lighting up his pipe. He flicked a switch and the end burned blue. His hand wrapped around my waist, pulling me tight against his body, taking a steady draw of the smoke.

His shoulders released even more tension as he blew out the silver smoke, and I nearly whimpered, squirming in place next to him, trying to get relief from the punishing ache that had begun to strum through me.

“Azur,” I pleaded, biting my lip.

“Let’s go,” he rasped, leaning down to brush his lips against my temple. “I’ll take care of you.”

I thought we might slip back to our rooms.

Once we made our way back down the private hallway, however, guarded by the keepers who pulled open the doors for us, I couldn’t keep my hands off him.

Azur blew out another puff of silver smoke, one that loomed around us like a fog, and my hand went to his finely tailored pants, trying to find the clasps with my fingernails.

“*Vaan*,” he cursed, his voice dark and raw, when I tugged impatiently. The threat of his rage seemed to have passed. While he still hadn’t quite lost the tightness around his eyes, his muscles weren’t *straining* to rip his vest open anymore. “I never quite knew how you would react to it.”

His words held a raw edge. The *lore*, he meant.

A drip of arousal trailed down my thigh. I could feel the slide of it like a touch, and I moaned in the darkened, empty hallway, the music in the ballroom faint. I could *smell* him beneath that cinnamon scent of the *lore*. Gods, I could *feel* the heat of his cock, just below the material of his pants, and I needed him. I needed him so desperately. I didn't care about his brothers. I didn't care about the ball. Nothing else mattered right now except getting that heat into my hands and into my body, however I could.

I didn't know if it was safe for his rage or not, stoking up his pleasure like this when he was on the cusp. But I didn't care. I could handle it. I'd handled the aftermath of his rage before, and we were well away from gossips and onlookers.

It was incredibly silent in the halls of the keep. I managed to get the clasps undone, making his waistband loosen, the dagger sheathed at his hip sag.

"Gemma," he gritted, his voice guttural, the pipe hanging loose between his fingertips, watching me with a heated expression that nearly made me climax on the spot. His cock sprung from his trews. All thickened, veined heat, the scent of him mingling with the *lore*, making my mouth water and my nipples scrape against the light material of my dress. There was metal sewn *just* over my nipples, and I wiggled, trying to find the stimulation I so desperately needed.

Azur groaned when I dropped to my knees before him, his eyes narrowing when he allowed me to push him back against the hallway. His head turned, briefly, toward the doors to the main entrance. They were closed. The guards were on the opposite side of it. We were alone. That didn't mean someone couldn't walk in at any moment—a keeper. Zaale. Kalia. Or his brothers.

Even *that* didn't stop me. With frantic, grasping hands, I tugged on his cock, making him hiss in pleasure.

A harsh cry left his throat when I wrapped my lips around his slick tip, hollowing my cheeks as I sucked.

"*Fuck*," he growled. The burn of the *lore* laced through my veins, as potent as the venom from his fangs. "*Gemma!*"

I couldn't get enough of him.

CHAPTER 39

*M*y head fell back against the stone hallway wall, exposing my throat. The waistband of my pants had fallen around my lower hips, and my wife was sucking on my cock like her life depended on it, wild with need and lust as she moaned around me.

“Gemma,” I groaned, looking down at her, *needing* to see her.

Her cheeks hollowed, as if determined to suck out my very soul from my cock head, and my claws scraped into the stone behind me. The smoke was muddling my brain, mercifully dulling the worst of the rage at my brother’s words. But the dulling only made *this* sensation all the more intense, the pleasure rising and spreading, thickening my seal and wetting her lapping tongue with the beginnings of my come.

“*Raazos’s blood,*” I cursed softly, gritting my teeth as she released my cock with a wet *pop*, catching her breath. Her enthusiasm masked any inexperience. I knew she’d never pleased a male like this, but fuck if I didn’t get jealous regardless because her mouth felt *too good*. “Yes, wife. Suck me just like that. *Aahh*, perfect,” I groaned when her head lowered again.

Unconsciously, I took a drag of my *lore*, watching her with a half-lidded gaze through the thickened plume of smoke. She moaned helplessly when it reached her nostrils, and I hissed, stilling, nearly coming on her tongue when I felt the sudden scrape of her dull little teeth. Just a tease. Just enough to make me tighten and tense.

Her mouth was stretched wide over my cock. She could only get the first few inches in, but I knew her cunt could take *all* of me.

When she pulled back, I bellowed when her tongue traced a line down to my seal, the knot at the base of my shaft, and her hot, eager breath made me *throb*, right before she suckled on the tender swells.

My hips bucked, fangs pricking my bottom lip.

Distantly, I heard noise coming from the core of the keep, a door opening and closing. Footsteps coming our way, likely a keeper on his way to the kitchens to restock the ballroom tables.

Gemma didn't even seem to notice. She might've been too far gone, the haze of *lore* making her blood pound and rush in her ears, but I knew that she wouldn't appreciate getting caught sucking me off in the hallway of our keep, especially when clarity and reality returned.

Even if the idea *did* make my seal pulse with anticipation.

Before she could get those pretty lips anywhere near my cock head again, I lifted her up from the ground, and she wrapped her legs around my waist. I turned off the pipe and shoved it into my pocket, holding my pants up long enough to find an empty room, as she kissed and sucked on my neck.

The nearest one was a storage room, just down the hallway, very near to the stairs that led up to the upper levels. I shoved us both inside and shut the door. It was filled with steel crates, and I flipped her until she was bent forward over one, rough exhales leaving my nostrils as she spread her legs wide, her cheek pressed into the metal.

“Get your dress up,” I ordered, not recognizing my own voice. Gemma gasped and squirmed, wiggling the red material up her thighs and gathering it over her hips. Her lush backside was presented to me, and I ran a hand down her spine before squeezing the swells of her ass with a possessive grip.

Her inner thighs were shimmering with her arousal. Thick and clear, and I couldn't resist crouching for a brief moment,

burying my face in that cunt, inhaling deep.

Gemma cried out, the backs of her thighs beginning to tremble.

“Azur, *please! Gods, please*, I need it so much,” she babbled. “I need you so much, it *hurts!*”

“I told you I’d take care of you,” I rumbled, licking her thighs clean before lavng her clit, teasing her and making her thrash. “I always take care of you, don’t I?”

“Yes,” she cried out. “Yes.”

I rose quickly, savoring the taste of her on my tongue as I gripped my cock, angling myself toward her cunt.

When I thrust inside her, her back arched and her jaw dropped in a silent scream. It didn’t take her long. She *immediately* came on my cock, and I hissed, grabbing her hips and using them as leverage to fuck her deep, my thrusts hard and rough.

“*Yes yes yes yes yes,*” she chanted, her cunt squeezing around me so tightly I thought she’d tear my cock right off. I could come at any moment. I wanted to let go. The *lore* was making the pleasure come easier. *Gemma* was making the pleasure come easier. And even though I had to deal with Kaldur, I would savor this with my wife first.

My climax came fast and I groaned as I emptied my seed into her clenching, hot, greedy little cunt. I fucked her with quick strokes, not deep enough to seat my seal inside her. We didn’t have the time for that, no matter how much my thighs quivered, and I *nearly* gave in to the impulse to shove myself deep.

So fucking good, I thought in disbelief, shaken by the ferocity and intensity of the orgasm and how swiftly she’d wrung it from me.

Gemma’s breaths were ragged as she came down. Gasping little pants, but when I caught sight of her burning cheeks and her furrowed brows, I frowned.

Gently, I pulled out of her and used a clean linen on one of the shelves to wipe her up.

“Thank you,” she said softly. Quietly. Too quietly, perhaps.

When I turned her to face me, I felt like a dagger had just lodged itself in my chest when I saw tears in her eyes.

“*Raazos*. Gemma,” I breathed, setting her up on the crate and standing between her legs, cradling her face in my hands, wiping away the clear tears that ran down her cheeks. “Did I hurt you?”

“No,” she breathed, shaking her head, trying to hide from me. “N-No, it’s not that.”

“What is it?” I asked. “Tell me, *kyrana*.”

“I don’t even know,” she told me. Even though her tone was miserable, she smiled, though her brow was still furrowed in bewilderment. “I guess I didn’t expect that I would react like that to the *lore* and—”

I stiffened.

“Don’t tell me you’re embarrassed,” I growled. “Because you have *nothing* to be embarrassed about. Not about that. Not with me.”

“I know,” she said softly. “And the sex...it’s always amazing, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I hummed. “It is.”

More than amazing, I’d say. The word didn’t feel like *enough* for what we experienced with one another.

I felt some of the tension in my chest begin to unwind.

At least until she said, “Tonight has been a little overwhelming. With the ball and everything leading up to it. And I was nervous and worried that I’d do something wrong to...to embarrass you or Kalia or...or *Laras*.”

“Gemma,” I said softly, hearing her sniff, not liking the ache in my chest as she made herself vulnerable over things that she never had to worry about to begin with.

“And what happened with your brothers! With Kythel. And with Kaldur.”

A rough sound left my throat. I wiped at her cheeks again.

“I’ll deal with Kaldur,” I told her. “He won’t be staying. You don’t have to worry about that.”

“No,” she breathed, biting her lip as fresh tears sprung in her eyes, making me scowl in helplessness. “No, please. I want him to stay. This is his home, where you all lived together. And I know you don’t see each other often. I don’t want to come between that.”

“I will not forgive what he did tonight,” I informed her stiffly, feeling my hackles begin to rise. “He knew what he was doing.”

Gemma was looking at me with round, wet, sad eyes. That dagger returned, sinking deep, and my wings twitched and fluttered behind me, restless.

“Ahh, *laraya*, the way you’re looking at me just makes me ache,” I told her roughly, leaning forward to wrap my arms around her, wishing I could take that look away.

Laraya meant *heart’s blood* in our language. A meaningful word, spoken among mates and lovers, and it fell from my lips easily, as if the word had always been meant for her.

“We have to talk, Azur,” she told me, her words muffled in my vest.

Pressing my lips into her hair, I murmured, “Please. Tell me what you need. I’ll give you anything you want.”

She took in a deep breath. Her fingers came to my vest, squeezing tight.

“Aina,” she whispered into my chest.

The name was soft. It made me freeze against her.

Slowly, I pulled away, feeling my jaw tighten as I peered down at her.

Gemma dragged in a long, steady breath and wiped her hand across her cheeks, smoothing away the fresh tears.

“I want to know who Aina was,” she said, holding my eyes, “and why you married me. I want to know why you hated me.”

I flinched. “Gemma—”

“Why you wanted me to be afraid of you. Why Kalia was so angry with me when we first met. Why I make your brothers wary. Why Kaldur nearly set *you* into a rage in a crowded ballroom. It’s what I want, Azur. I just want the truth. Don’t you think I deserve to know why?”

CHAPTER 40

*A*zur was quiet for a long time.

Every moment that ticked by in silence, my heart sunk deeper and deeper into my belly. I could still smell the lingerings of *lore* on his clothes, but now the heady, spicy scent just made me want to curl into a ball.

But then, bright hope burst in me when he said quietly, “Very well. But not here.”

“I’ll go anywhere with you,” I said.

Azur was restless as we cleaned up. But there was no embarrassment in our actions as we tucked and smoothed our clothes back into place. The dizzying hunger of the *lore* had left me trembling, but I didn’t mind the sensation.

We left the storage room, ventured out into the darkened hallway, where, thankfully, no keepers were lingering. My face burned just thinking about what I’d done to Azur in open view, where anyone could have walked in or strode through the door at the end of the hallway.

Only, I couldn’t find it in me to regret it, even if my jaw ached from the act. I would never forget the look in his eyes as he’d watched me pleasure him. My only regret was not doing it sooner.

I shivered and Azur held me close. When he led me out of the family entrance’s door, out toward the courtyard and the terrace where we took our morning meals, I glanced up at him, feeling a chill in the air.

Kalia had told me that winter was approaching. The *lore* would be replanted then, mere weeks after it had been harvested, hibernating and preparing under a frost-ridden earth before it would emerge at the end of the cold season.

I could feel it in the air. The warm evenings were gone, giving way to a crisp breeze. I liked the cold though. I didn't mind it. Especially when my husband's arms wrapped tight around me to help shield it.

I tightened my hold on him when I found myself swept up in those arms, cradled against his chest, and he launched us up into the air, his wings carrying us easily. He flew up past the third floor of the keep to the roof, where he landed on a flattened, obviously well-worn spot in the stone.

"You come up here often?" I asked softly.

"It was my father's favorite hiding place," he told me. "When Mother threw her dinners with nobles he would rather not entertain. He would bring us out here, too, if we asked."

I loved that. Azur obviously still came out here, judging from the dried flakes of *lore* I spied tucked into the grooves of the roof.

"You smoke out here?" I guessed, trying to lighten his mood. Because it had turned dark and brooding. It made me nervous, the change in him. Nervous about what I might discover, but this was a conversation that was long overdue. I supposed I just hadn't expected to have it *tonight*.

I'm glad we are, I decided, lowering myself beside him as he kept a firm grip on my calf just in case I managed to stumble off the roof. He was slippery like a fish when it came to *this* conversation. I needed to catch him when I could.

The view was breathtaking, similar to the ones from my rooms—and Azur's. Only, it felt even wider because we could see the sky above, the stars twinkling out beyond the dark clouds.

"I feel like I need to smoke now," Azur rumbled, running a hand down his face.

“Is it really so bad?” I asked quietly, feeling a lump lodge itself in my throat.

Now I was worried.

Azur looked over the Silver Sea when he said, “Aina was my aunt. My mother’s only sister. Her *beloved* sister. Her twin.”

I stilled. So twins ran in his family’s bloodline.

“The pair of them were incredibly close, like Kythel and me. Aina lived here with us in the keep. Back then, we were in a time of peace with the Kaazor and with the Thryki across the seas. A tentative peace. It was quiet in the Kaalium—partly because of Aina. Her strengths laid in negotiations, not war strategy like Laras’s other advisors. She brokered a twenty-year treaty with the Kaazor. We would supply them with *lore*. They wouldn’t try to breach our borders in the north and they would keep their *kyriv* away from our villages, even the ones on the outer lands.”

My brow furrowed.

“The Kaazor broke their agreement about ten years in,” Azur added when he saw my confusion. “But Aina at least gave the Kaalium peace during that time. She was my mother’s opposite. Aina was bold and brash. Her laughter filled these halls, loud enough to make Zaale scowl.” Azur’s lips quirked before the brief smile died. “She taught us how to fight from the time we were young. How to use swords and blades. Daggers and bows. But mostly how to defend ourselves.”

“Even Kalia?” I asked softly.

“Never sneak up on Kalia,” Azur told me, shaking his head. He wasn’t touching me, and I found that I missed his heat. “She’ll have you pinned on your back before you’ve realized it.”

I could believe it.

“What happened to her?” I asked, my voice edged in uncertainty. “What happened to Aina?”

Azur's wings twitched.

"She died," he said flatly. "Seventeen years ago."

Seventeen years ago?

"On Pe'ji."

My breath whooshed out from my lungs and I turned to face him. My heart gave a mighty thump, and then it sped and I couldn't stop it.

"On Pe'ji?" I whispered. "But that's..."

"You know that we were their allies. The Voperians had no authority to take the planet from the Pe'ji. They tried anyway. Then the United Alliance got involved. That was how the New Earth forces were called in. Soldiers used to claim a planet that never should have been invaded to begin with," Azur told me softly, his jaw ticking.

Father had never talked about the war or the politics of it. Though he'd been a decorated hero, though I knew that the Pe'ji had been overthrown, that the Voperians had been successful in their war campaign, partly with the help of human soldiers.

During the last battle of the Pe'ji War, my father had led his unit past Pe'ji's defenses while the Kylorr had been distracted on the opposite side of the field. It had been my father to slaughter their war general, bringing panic and chaos to the fight until the soldiers had picked off the stragglers, one by one.

And the Voperians had paid the United Alliance well for their assistance. And then the United Alliance had paid my father well, giving him the estate in the Collis, giving him fame and glory—and money. More money than he'd known what to do with.

Until that money had been gone.

"The Kylorr failed the Pe'ji," Azur told me. "The Kylorr of the Kaalium failed the Pe'ji in that war. But we nearly won it, if not for that last battle."

“Aina was fighting in the field?” I guessed, my throat tight.

“No,” Azur said. “Aina was a peace ambassador only. She was brought in after the final battle to negotiate on Pe’ji’s behalf with the Voperians and the United Alliance, for at least partial claim to their land.”

My lips parted. “I don’t understand.”

“Aina was murdered,” Azur told me, making my breath hitch in shock. His eyes turned to me, bright red in the darkness. “She was killed by your father. Rye Hara. Leader of the Fifth Unit of the New Inverness forces.”

“No,” I said immediately, thinking of my father’s wide grin, his red, ruddy cheeks. Shaking my head, hearing his words sink into my brain but twist and morph until they didn’t feel real. “No, you must be mistaken.”

But there was a burn that started deep in my nostrils and in my throat and in my belly. A burn that made nausea roil in my belly until I thought I would be sick all over the roof.

“No,” I whispered, looking at Azur. “No, why would you *say* something like that?”

Azur’s expression was grim. There had been a time in our brief marriage when he might’ve delighted in telling me this. Where he would’ve enjoyed seeing the horror and the turmoil and the realization slowly begin to contort my features until my eyes stung and tears dripped down my cheeks.

But not now.

Azur reached out to touch me, but I recoiled, pressing my hands to my face.

“We never knew what happened to Aina,” Azur told me softly, continuing. “We were told her death was undetermined. That she went missing a week into the peace talks and no one had seen her. She just *disappeared*. Our family traveled extensively to Pe’ji to try to find her. My father hired every single investigator he could find to search for her. But Pe’ji is a wild planet. Its jungles are dense. It was a month later when we realized that we would likely never find her.

“My mother was broken after that. And she knew what had happened. She said she could feel it the moment Aina’s soul was released. She woke up my father in the middle of the night, crying hysterically. Her face was stained silver from her tears for *weeks*. She said she could feel the emptiness. That she could feel the emptiness where Aina had been. And I know what that feels like because I can feel it with Kythel.”

Azur’s voice was ridden with angst and despair. My shoulders were shaking, my knees beginning to bounce, my hands clenched into my dress. I could still feel the stretch and imprint of Azur inside my body. It felt like too much.

“We knew the United Alliance had something to do with her death, but we had no way to prove it,” Azur said after a long silence. “Still, we brought charges against them in the high courts. For sheer negligence and lack of protection for a peace ambassador in a time of war. They were fined heavily. Laws were written so that every future ambassador has a fully armed unit traveling with them. But none of that brought Aina back to us. Nor did it give peace to my family and especially to my mother. She never stopped looking for Aina’s body. The body is important to the Kylorr. We burn our dead and compress the ashes of their bones to create their soul gem, where their soul lives and is protected in Alara. But we never found Aina. Whether she was buried or burned or hidden or transported off planet, we never knew. Her soul has no vessel within our family’s shrine, and seeing it empty left my mother broken because she knew that they would never be reunited in the next realm.”

A sob left my throat, and I looked up at the night sky, the stars shimmering through my tears.

“My mother died seven years later, but in those seven years she never knew a day of peace. She searched endlessly. *Tirelessly*. Consulting countless investigators, reviewing every scrap of video feed she could find off Pe’ji, of which there was little. But I promised her that I would find Aina. I made my vow to her. I made my vow to our family,” he said, his voice guttural. “And then...two months ago, a black feed was recovered in an United Alliance storage facility on Voperia. I’d

had investigators working in the background for years, *waiting* for anything at all, anything scrap of news that might give us direction. One of the investigators was on Voperia at the time. He broke into the storage facility and stole the video feed. When he unscrambled the code...there she was.”

Two months ago.

“Azur,” I whispered raggedly.

“The video showed Aina. On Pe’ji. With a human male who we later identified as Rye Hara, Lord of the Collis, and his unit. Four human males and two human females.”

My gut twisted.

Azur looked at me as he said, “Aina was a fighter. She fought them as best as she could. But the soldiers swarmed her and they sliced her wings so she couldn’t fly away. And your father took his plasma gun, he raised it to her chest, and he blew a hole straight through her heart. They dragged her body away, off feed, and we never saw her again.”

I was shivering on the roof. The world turned upside down, and I felt like I was thrashing and drowning, trying not to sink, as Azur’s words flooded my body.

I felt raw. Like my chest had been split open and everything was leaking out of me. Until there would be nothing left.

Azur took my face in one of his palms.

“And I vowed right then and there that I would destroy Rye Hara and everything he held close,” he told me softly as big, fat tears tracked down my cheeks. “I would begin with his eldest daughter. I would do everything I could to have her, to possess her...and then I would break her will, her spirit, her hope, just like my mother’s had been broken. Just like ours had been broken.”

“Were you going to kill me?” I asked woodenly. Not that I would’ve blamed him. Maybe I’d had reason to fear him after all. “That’s what Kaldur said, didn’t he? You needed my blood. The blood of your enemy.”

His brows drew down. He actually flinched, horror entering his expression at the question. “*No.*”

I gripped his forearm, squeezing his wrist, as his forehead came to mine.

His voice was ragged as he said, “But I was going to *use* you. Use your suffering as an offering to Raazos, who might lead Aina’s soul back to us even without her soul gem, her vessel. And when I was done with you, I was going to send you back to your father, turn the black feed over to War Crimes at the High Quadrant Council, and let the collectors flood back in to feast on whatever was left. I wanted your family’s name tarnished. Stripped. Destroyed. I wanted House Hara to suffer as we did, and I was so consumed with my vengeance that I couldn’t see beyond it. I couldn’t even see *you.*”

His lips pressed to my cheek, kissing away my tears, but it didn’t comfort me. Everything I’d known had been pulled out from right under my feet. I had never imagined *this*. This horrific tragedy that had befallen House Kaalium at the hands of my father and whatever, or whomever, had driven him to perform such a monstrous act.

It split my very soul, trying to understand.

Tonight, Azur had introduced me as Gemma of House Kaalium, *Kylaira* of Laras.

I’d felt hope then, mingled with my grief and my pleasure.

Now I just felt numb.

“How can you stand it?” I whispered against him. He pulled back to look at me. “How can you even stand to look at me, to touch me, to be near me, knowing my own father did this to you and your family? To Aina?”

“Gemma,” Azur said quietly, his gaze flickering back and forth between my eyes, frowning at whatever he found there. “It was my own mistake to believe you had knowledge of the crime.”

Horror flooded me. My breath hitched. “I *didn’t.*”

“I know,” he growled. “But my mind wanted to believe that you knew because it would be easier to hurt you if you did.”

I thought back to our wedding ceremony on Nulaxy. I wondered how in the world Azur hadn't ripped my father apart right in front of me, tearing him limb from limb.

“Oh gods,” I whispered, suddenly drained. So incredibly tired that I felt sick and dizzy with it. “How you must hate me. How you *all* must hate me. No wonder...”

I began to cry then. Shuddering, aching sobs that I tried to stifle. But it felt like my heart was breaking. Not just the grief at the destruction of my relationship with Azur but also because of my father.

Even worlds away and he could *still* shatter my heart so completely.

“I don't hate you, *kyrana*,” came my husband's strained voice, and I felt the strong pull of his hands come to my wrists when I tried to shield my face. I couldn't even get up and leave. We were on the *roof* of the keep. “I wanted to. *So much*. But I couldn't. I discovered you. I *saw* you. Your bright, unbending spirit. Your resilience. Your loyalty to your sisters. Your grief. I could never have hated that woman. Just the opposite, in fact.”

His words should've comforted me. They'd been meant to. But I couldn't quite meet his eyes.

I'd begun to fall in love with my Kylorr husband.

And I believed that he'd begun to feel the same.

Only now...

I knew that we could never come back from this.

“I want to see the black feed,” I said quietly. My voice sounded hollow, even to me. “I want to see the video.”

Azur was tense beside me. “I don't think that's wise, *laraya*.”

“I want to see it,” I said, my voice firm. “I *need* to.”

Azur's wings unfurled behind us. He debated for a long time.

Finally, I met his eyes—worried and concerned, I saw—and pleaded, “Azur, *please*.”

He finally relented. “Very well.”

I was tense in his arms when he flew us off the roof. I could still hear the strains and haunting melody from the ball still taking place downstairs. A ball that seemed eons ago in my memory. Time was strange. How could it have happened *tonight*? When my whole world had changed since I had been within that ballroom? How had I been dancing in my husband's arms without a care in the world?

We landed on the balcony of his office. At his Halo system, I waited with my heart beating hard against the bones of my chest. Wishing that it wasn't true. Knowing that it was. Azur had no reason to lie. He wouldn't about something like this.

Still, I prayed to all the deities in the universe that it wasn't true. That it wouldn't be my father on that feed, murdering a peace ambassador in cold blood, long after the final battle of the Pe'ji War, and then covering up the crime. Taking away a beloved member of House Kaalium, whose soul was lost to them.

When the video came up, though it was grainy and dark, I still felt a sinking in my belly. Like I was falling into the ground below, being swallowed up by darkness and soil and roots.

I would recognize my father anywhere. Though he was slimmer in the video, though his hair was less gray and Azur had muted the sound of the horrific scene loaded before me...I would recognize Rye Hara anywhere.

I watched it unfold, just as Azur had said, and I refused to look away even though I felt my heart shriveling up with every *single* millisecond.

I watched them cut her wings. Hold her down.

Taunt her as she tried to fight back.

I watched as my father killed Aina.

The bright burn of his plasma gun would be imprinted in my memory forever.

CHAPTER 41

“Can I join you?” came the voice.

I barely heard the words but my eyes focused on Kaldur nonetheless. I was leaning against the terrace banister, watching the fishing boats dart in and out of the western port, which was hidden beyond the sharp curve of the cliff.

“What do you want?” I asked, no true venom in my voice. I looked over my shoulder, to the stretch of windows of Gemma’s rooms, where she’d retreated the night before. I’d slept without her for the first time since the *kyriv* attack, and it had left me restless.

It was nearly evening and despite my attempts to see her, she’d been sleeping every time I’d barreled past Ludayn. She hadn’t eaten anything, given the full trays of food still laid out on the table in the sitting room.

I was *fucking worried* about her. And I didn’t know what I could do to help her through this.

“Everything has changed in the span of moments,” she’d whispered to me last night, once the video feed had cut out. “I—I don’t know what to do, Azur. And I’m so—so incredibly *sorry*. For Aina. And I don’t know how to make it right. *Why?*”

The vulnerable hitch in her voice had nearly torn my chest to shreds.

Kaldur took his place next to me. I caught Kythel strolling along the terrace wall, but my twin gave us privacy and space,

continuing on his way down toward Mother's gardens when he noticed us.

I didn't know what had happened last night after the ballroom. I didn't know what had happened when Kythel had gone after Kaldur after his outburst.

Truthfully, I didn't care. What I cared about was that Gemma now knew the truth and she'd hardly been able to look at me since.

"Kalia told me your wife has fallen ill," Kaldur said.

My shoulders stiffened. "My wife's name is Gemma," I said, my tone wooden, though I turned my glare to him in full force. "You would do well to remember it."

"Gemma," Kaldur amended quietly. "I didn't come here to fight with you, despite what you might think."

"Then why did you come?"

"What I did last night...I'm sorry for it, Azur," Kaldur said, meeting and holding my eyes. Just as our mother had taught us. He reached out to clasp my shoulder, turning me so I faced him. "And when your—when Gemma feels better, I will make my apology to her as well."

"But will you actually mean it?" I couldn't help but wonder. "I don't think you regret what you said. I think you regret when you said it. I don't want you to give her false apologies. I'd rather you just leave. I'd rather that you return to Vyaan before she wakes."

Kaldur's jaw tightened. His hand fell away from my shoulder and he went quiet. He leaned his forearms along the banister, mulling over his thoughts as a tense silence stretched between us.

"She didn't know, did she?" Kaldur asked, after I'd watched two fishing boats disappear around the cliff bend and counted the waves crashing into the walls below.

A dagger of unease slid between the bones of my chest.

"No," I answered. "She didn't."

“You told her everything last night, didn’t you?” he asked. “Because of what I’d said? Is that why you’re standing under her window like a sentinel?”

A sharp breath made my shoulders slump. I didn’t have it in me to hold a grudge against my brother when it was *me* that had dragged out the truth for too long. Shortly into our marriage, I’d suspected that Gemma hadn’t known *anything* about her father’s actions. Yet I’d kept her in the dark purposefully.

Why?

Because I’d begun to fear the repercussions of the truth?

“It’s raw for me, Azur. It’s raw for all of us. Even though it’s been seventeen *years*, it’s this...this dark tragedy and mystery that’s hung over us nearly all our lives. We’ve only just learned the truth, and it’s stirred up memories that I would rather forget,” Kaldur said quietly. “It broke our mother’s heart. She died fearing she would never be reunited with Aina again, and I still *feel* her sorrow. I can still feel it, even now. And I took it out on Gemma last night because it gutted me to hear you call her Mother’s title, knowing what *her* blood did to *ours*.”

Kaldur’s grief and anger was justified. All of ours was.

“Would you have felt any differently,” I started quietly, “if one of the soldiers had lifted their plasma gun from their holster instead of Rye Hara?”

Kaldur stilled. “What?”

“There were others involved,” I said, the words twisting my gut, “but we’ve only set our sights on the male who did the *actual* killing. Not the ones who sliced her wings and pinned her down, holding her steady for that piercing shot. Because *they* killed her too. They might not have pulled the trigger, but they all killed her. And even knowing that...I wonder if we are pursuing the wrong enemies. I wonder if we should be hunting down someone else entirely.”

There was something that Gemma had whispered last night, after the video had cut out and tears had streaked her

face, that had made for a restless sleep.

Why?

That word had hummed through my body late in the night, into the early hours of morning when I'd reached for my wife, only to find her absent beside me.

Why?

Why had a human unit of soldiers targeted a peace ambassador after the Voperian victory had already been claimed? It had been an intentional assassination. And I'd been too blinded by my hatred for Rye Hara to take a step back, to see what would've been gained from Aina's death.

We should be seeking out the one who *gave* Rye Hara the order for her death.

"What do you mean?" Kaldur asked, narrowing his gaze on me.

"They were soldiers," I told him. "And what do soldiers do in a war?"

Kaldur's jaw tightened, but I saw a flicker of understanding.

"They carry out orders," he answered gruffly. "I don't care. They still made her suffer."

"Yes," I agreed. "They did."

"They never turned themselves in to War Crimes," Kaldur added. "What they did was immoral, hateful, and *illegal*. On every level. If they'd had any honor, they would have turned down the orders and reported their superior to the High Quadrant Council. But they didn't. They acted like mercenaries, hunting down someone for profit, when the war was already over."

"You're right," I told him. "I know you're right."

Kaldur was breathing hard, but I watched him take a concerted effort to calm down.

"But I just don't see it in black and white anymore. I don't see it carved in stone," I informed my younger brother. "I

can't. I can't hate Rye Hara with *everything* I have in me if I'm falling in love with his daughter."

Kaldur's wings snapped. He looked at me with surprise.

"And you can hate me for that if you want," I added. "You can hate me for choosing her. You can hate me for bringing her here. You can hate me for breaking my vow. You have every right to."

Kaldur ran a hand down his tired face. "I could never hate you, brother," he said, shaking his head, his shoulders sinking, his eyes closing. "Don't ask me to."

"*Kyzaire*," came Zaale's urgent voice, yelled from the entrance doors.

My chest lurched, and I swung to face him. "What is it?" I asked. "Is Gemma awake?"

"Yes," Zaale replied, his wings propelling him forward quickly. His eyes were troubled, however. "But Azur...she's requesting passage on a ship to journey off planet. As soon as possible."

"*What?*" I rasped, feeling like I'd just been rammed in the gut.

Zaale's features were grim when he told me, "The *Kylaira* demands to return to the Collis."

CHAPTER 42

Azur burst into my room, nearly shattering the balcony doors, which I had expected the moment Zaale had left. I had expected a dramatic—and sudden—appearance.

“No,” Azur growled, fire burning in those eyes, snatching a dress clean out of Ludayn’s hands—one of my older *hideous* ones, as he liked to call them—when she tried to pack it into my trunk. “Absolutely not!”

“I’m not asking,” I informed him, feeling my heart twist at the sight of him.

I felt like an open wound right now. A sore, open, oozing wound.

My throat was raw from crying. I had no tears left. My skin felt tight across my bones, and there was a heaviness in my heart that just *wouldn’t leave*. There was an ache in my body like I’d just climbed up a mountain. I felt hungry and thirsty, and yet I couldn’t bring it in me to eat or drink.

And I was so damn tired even though I’d just slept a full day.

Even still, I felt determination rising through me. I’d woken mere moments before, and I’d *known*, deep in my soul, what I had to do.

I wouldn’t let Azur dissuade me.

He wouldn’t succeed.

Kalia came through the hallway door just then, nearly skidding across the floor with her speed. “What’s going on? Zaale just said...”

A heavy thud landed on the balcony. When I looked beyond the doors, I saw Kaldur. I met his silver eyes before I looked back to my husband.

I wasn’t even certain if I should call him that anymore. The marriage had likely been the most tortuous thing he’d ever had to do, and I didn’t want...I didn’t want him to suffer for it anymore.

The thought hurt, twisting and aching, until it left me breathless.

“I said *no*,” he growled, stalking toward me.

“And I told you,” I said, infinitely patient, “I’m *not* asking. I want you to help me. I want you to get me passage to the Collis or at least to the nearest colony port that—”

“Oh, you think I’d drop off my *wife* at one of those crowded cesspools of—”

“Then give me a ship,” I said simply, meeting his eyes. “But I want to leave tonight.”

Kaldur was watching the exchange, arms crossed over his wide chest, frowning. Kalia too, but she was nibbling on her bottom lip with her fangs, uncertain if she should step in.

“*Why?*” Azur rasped.

That was when I saw it.

The panic he was hiding behind the wall of his anger. His vulnerability.

Was he worried that I’d run back to my father, knowing what I knew now? Was he worried I was *choosing* my father?

No, it couldn’t be. Azur knew me better than that.

“I need to hear it,” I told him softly, wanting him to understand. “I need to hear the truth right from my father’s mouth. I need to hear what he did. And I need to know why. I need the answers. Your family deserves them too.”

Kalia gasped.

I swallowed, feeling my dry eyes begin to burn when I'd thought I had no tears left.

"And he will tell me," I promised. "He'll tell me where they buried Aina's body. I'll find out where she is, try to bring her back to you, back to Krynn. So her place in your family's shrine will not lie empty. And maybe...just maybe her soul will find its way back to you."

Azur's lips parted. Even Kaldur straightened.

"It's the least I can do," I told him, told them all. "The very least after what he's done. And then I'll ask him to turn in himself and his unit to War Crimes at the High Quadrant Council."

"Gemma," Azur began, shaking his head.

"And if he refuses," I whispered, meeting those ember eyes, watching his pupils dilate, "then I will turn him in myself."

All the air in the room seemed to have stilled. It went so quiet that I thought I could *hear* his heartbeat, thunderous in his chest.

"I'll need a copy of the video," I informed him, "before I leave. If it comes down to that."

Which it might, I couldn't help but admit silently to myself. My father had lived with this secret for seventeen years, after all.

"You're not going alone," Azur growled. "I forbid it."

"I need to," I told him. "I don't want you to come. This is something I need to do on my own. This..."

I took in a deep breath when my voice broke.

"I know he has his faults," I said. I laughed, and it sounded hollow and broken as I looked at Azur, standing much too far away and yet too close. "Trust me, *I know*. But I still love him. I cannot turn that off, and I've *tried* before. He's my *father*. He's the man who cried when I broke my arm and who made

me special cakes every birthday even though he couldn't navigate a kitchen to save his life. Who stayed up late every night so my mother could sleep when Mira was born. Who took me hiking through the forests of the Collis when it rained because he knew I loved the smell."

A sob broke from my throat, and I was too sad and heartbroken to be embarrassed that there were witnesses beyond Azur.

"*That* man is my father. The one I love," I told him. "The monster you showed me in the video is not. He's not the man that I recognize. But I realize that he can be both. I realize he can love me and my sisters and my mother...and then destroy us too. Racking up debts left and right until we had no way to pay them, dismissing my mother's depression as something she could control, and murdering Aina in cold blood. He didn't only destroy us, he destroyed so many others too."

I couldn't help but wonder if my mother had *known*. There had been a shift in their relationship. Perhaps not obvious to me at the time, but looking back, things had been different after Pe'ji. She'd stopped dancing with him. Her smiles hadn't come as naturally. He'd started drinking more. She had too.

Maybe they'd both been miserable, forced to keep a dark secret or else it would destroy our entire family. Their children. Our futures.

Silver tears were running down Kalia's face. Kaldur had stepped forward, a deep frown of what I thought was *understanding* on his features.

But it was Azur who captured and claimed my gaze in the end.

I took in a deep breath. I was already dressed. Ludayn had been helping me pack my clothes. I'd come to Krynn with three trunks of everything I'd owned, but I'd be leaving with only one.

Wiping my hand across my cheek, I waited until my tears stopped and then I said, "I need to go alone. I know you understand."

“Your father isn’t in the Collis,” Azur informed me, his tone careful.

Another sharp pain darted through my heart. So he’d been keeping tabs on Rye Hara. Of course he would. Knowing what I knew now, I knew that Azur must’ve been watching closely, tracking him, like a predator with its prey.

“Where is he?”

Azur’s nostrils flared. His jaw unclenched before he answered, “On Jrika.”

A well-known gambling colony, though its reputation had always been dark. It attracted the worst kind of criminals because its corruption ran deep.

“Has he borrowed any credits?” I asked, another crack splitting down my heart. I’d suspected it, though, hadn’t I? When my sisters had told me he was off planet. He *never* went off planet unless he was looking for another collector...or he wanted to drink his weight in whiskey and didn’t want his daughters to see.

A rough sound came from Azur’s throat. He stepped toward me. Could he see the despair on my face? Hear it in my voice?

“He tried,” he told me. “On Vrano. I had a friend, Setlan, stop the deal and warn the collector away. And warn your father. He hasn’t tried again, as far as I know.”

“*Vaan*,” Kaldur cursed quietly, running a hand down his face.

Taking in a deep breath, I pushed away the ache. The hurt. The fury and frustration. “He’ll return if I ask him to. I’ll call him from the ship.”

Azur shook his head. “Gemma, I *don’t* want you leaving. Especially without protection. You’re not leaving this planet without me and—”

“You need to be here,” I argued. “The harvest just ended. There’s still so many people traveling within Laras and—”

“Fuck the harvest,” he growled. “I don’t want to be without my *kyrana*.”

Blood.

Of course.

“I can...I can store some of my blood here for you, can’t I?” I asked, frowning. Looking to Ludayn, I asked, “How is it usually done? In containers of some kind? Will I need—”

Azur barked out a harsh laugh. “You think I don’t want to be without your *blood*, wife? I don’t want to be without *you*.”

All the breath whistled from my throat when I whirled back to face Azur.

“My maddening, stubborn, frustrating, wonderful little human wife,” he finished, his voice a dark deep rumble. “Today has already been hell without you.”

My lips parted. My throat went tight.

I wanted to fall into his arms. I wanted to bury my face into his chest, feel his wings wrap around me, and let the world fall away. I wanted that so much that it *shredded* me.

The imprint of the glow of the plasma gun reared through my mind, making me flinch. Making my eyes lower.

“Some distance will be good for us, Azur,” I said instead, stepping away. “To decide if this is what is right. For your family. For your duty. To decide if this...if this marriage is what’s best for everyone involved.”

That flurry of panic darted across his face. “What are you talking about?” he asked, his hand tilting my chin up.

“There’s still so much pain,” I murmured, my eyes briefly flickering to Kaldur, remembering his words last night. “I never knew how much. Not until now.”

“You’re my *wife*,” Azur growled, his wings lifting to shield away the rest of the room. Until it was just me and him. In the circle of his body.

“I don’t feel like it,” I told him honestly, the words falling like stones from my lips, tears blurring my vision again. And I

was so damn *tired* of crying. “Our marriage only happened because my father *killed* Aina. It began because of grief and sorrow and vengeance and hatred. It feels wrong. All wrong.”

Azur looked like I’d struck him.

“Please,” I whispered. “*Please*. Let me see this right first, as best as I’m able to. I’ll find Aina for you. She can return to Krynn, where she belongs. Her soul can cross into Alara. Let me deal with my father. Then we can talk about us.”

I didn’t have the capacity for anything else right now. I needed to focus on one thing at a time.

It took everything in me not to break down right there in his arms. With his heat against me, his scent filling my nostrils. It would be so easy. He would take care of me, I knew it. He would protect me.

But I would never forgive myself if I didn’t do this.

I wouldn’t hide from this, no matter how much I wanted to curl into a ball and stay in his arms.

“Please, Azur,” I said, my voice breaking.

It took everything in him.

I saw it. Every tight muscle. Every fractured facet in his reddened gaze.

When he said, “I’ll have a ship outfitted for you and get a crew on board. You can leave within the hour,” that was when I knew...

That last little piece shifting into place...

I *loved* him.

And I didn’t know if we could *ever* be together again.

CHAPTER 43

Our estate in the Collis was just how I'd left it.
Dingy, rusted gate on poorly oiled hinges.

The too-bright green grass that never grew, leading to the circular drive, which wrapped around our crumbling fountain that no longer worked.

Beyond, the grand home stood. It looked small compared to House Kaalium's keep, and I'd forgotten how *quiet* it was here. In New Inverness, where I'd lived as a child, little chattering bugs had filled the evenings with their music, especially since we'd lived out in the countryside of the colony planet.

But here...it was silent. Like nothing dared to breathe. Or maybe it was just me.

My father would be here. I'd called him from the ship that Azur had chartered for me, telling him I was returning to the Collis but dodging his questions about why. My sisters had been excited to see me, surprise evident on their faces, especially when I couldn't quite share their enthusiasm, only offering them half smiles that hadn't quite reached my eyes.

I was sick to my stomach. A weight of dread lodged deep in the pit of my belly. The cowardly part of me would've given anything to flee the Collis. The moment the transport vessel had dropped me off at the gates from port, I'd had the urge to turn and *run*. To hide in the blue salt mines and just sink into the mountain. A mountain that had been named after my

father, which was enough to propel me forward through the gates.

I couldn't run from this. I would never forgive myself if I tried, just as I knew I would never forgive myself for what I was about to do to my father. My *sisters*. This would ruin their chances for a future. They'd be shunned from our society, cast out to the wolves. Our estate would be sold. Mother's grave would be forgotten.

It was Piper that I saw first. Running from the house to me. The last time we'd seen one another in person, she hadn't quite been able to look me in the eyes, her harsh, biting words still stinging between us. But it was her arms that wrapped around me first, hugging me tight.

"I've missed you, Gem," she whispered in my hair. We were the same height, and I found it so odd since I was used to being around Kylorr. Around Azur with his towering bulk. "We've missed you. Please tell me you've come home. Please tell me he's let you come back to us."

I saw Mira racing from the house too. It was evening, the golden light spilling from the inside like a beacon, and I felt out of place. I didn't belong here anymore even in my sister's arms. It was a bewildering, dizzying realization, and all I could think, shamefully enough, was that I wished I was in Azur's arms right now.

Mira joined us when she reached us, her breath huffing, her delighted laugh filling the small circle.

"I've missed you both so much," I whispered raggedly.

How would I tell them? How *could* I?

But I was done lying to them. They deserved to know the truth.

Piper and Mira pulled back. It was Mira's laugh that died first. "What's wrong, Gem? Tell us."

The words were stuck in my throat, however. They wouldn't come out. Not right now.

“Is it him?” Piper asked, her defenses rising. “Did he do something to you?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head, reaching out to squeeze her hand. My other was still wrapped around the handle of my trunk. “No.”

“But you’ve come back?” Mira asked hopefully. “You’ll stay?”

Mira’s lovely face looked so much like mother’s that I wondered if it hurt our father to look at her. Sun-kissed skin, golden hair, and glittering eyes. Piper had her features too but had taken her coloring from our father, like me.

I wondered if looking at *me* hurt Azur. Because I wondered if I reminded him too much of Rye Hara.

I wanted him.

I wanted him so much that it hurt, but how could we ever move beyond this?

“I’m not sure,” I told them, uncertain what else to say. “But I’m here now. And...And I need to speak with Father. Then I’ll tell you everything.”

Piper frowned, her brows pulling. She was observant, her eyes flicking around my face, scanning the lines of my clothes. I was wearing pants and a soft tunic that flowed over my hips. Estee had made them for me, and I found them infinitely more comfortable than my dresses.

There was a hole in Mira’s dress, I noticed. My eyes stuck to it because it was so unexpected, near where her hand brushed her side, and I wondered if they’d been hiding things from me, too, during our Halo calls.

“Where’s Fran?” I asked.

“In the house,” Piper said, still trying to read me.

I nodded, relieved. Fran hadn’t been present for any calls in the last week. I’d almost worried that she’d been let go, if there were holes in Mira’s dresses and a tight look in Piper’s eyes that hadn’t been there before.

“Come,” I said. “Let’s go inside.”

When we turned, there was a figure standing in the doorway to the house. A burst of adrenaline and dread and sorrow and grief and anger pulsed through me, freezing my lungs and stilling my heart before it beat so fiercely I wondered if Azur could hear it all the way on Krynn.

Father.

Leaning against the doorway, a familiar glittering glass clasped in his hands and a pink hue in his cheeks.

His grin was wide. He was happy to see me. I even saw tears gleaming before he blinked them away.

He embraced me when I reached him, and I smelled the whiskey on his skin, deep in his pores. My stomach roiled but I had the insane urge to hug him tight, to breathe him in.

“This is cause for celebration,” he told me when we pulled away, his arm looping through mine and pulling me into the house.

The first thing I noticed was that some furniture was gone. Disappeared, the dusty edges still noticeable from where they’d been sitting for years. A marble cabinet; a golden curio display we’d had in the main foyer; an entrance table that had once held a Voperian vase, etched in silver, and a bright display of flowers from town.

When I peeked into the front sitting room, the chaise lounge was gone. As was the rug, a tapestry that had been threaded with gold, and a sword that had been hanging on the wall, its handle encrusted with gems.

They’ve been selling furniture, I realized, turning to meet my sisters’ eyes, who cast theirs away.

How bad had it been? How much had they been hiding from me?

Now I knew the burn of hurt at being kept in the dark. And I’d done it to *them* for so many years.

I had 200 *vron* sitting in a private account. Azur’s money, a stipulation in our marriage contract. I had asked for it with my

sisters in mind, but I hadn't wanted Father to know about the lump of credits, more credits than we'd seen in years.

"No," I said quickly, pulling away from his arm. I couldn't do this anymore. I couldn't *pretend*. As much as I wanted to put this off another day, I wouldn't allow myself to. Aina had waited long enough. Azur, Kalia, his brothers had waited long enough. His *mother*. "We need to talk, Father. We need to talk now."

He frowned. I watched his eyes dart, as if he were cataloguing all his wrongdoings since I'd left, already thinking up excuses for why he'd been on Vrano or Jrika. When what I wanted to talk about was much, much worse.

"What about?" Mira asked.

And as much as I hated to do it, I knew this was a conversation that only needed to be between Father and me. I wouldn't keep the truth from my sisters. I would tell them immediately afterward.

But they didn't need to witness this.

"I'll tell you," I promised. "Later tonight. But this cannot wait."

Whatever Piper had heard in my voice, it was enough for her to pull Mira away. "Fran is making your favorite stew," she told me. The words nearly broke my heart. "We'll go help her in the kitchen while you two speak."

I nodded, unable to tell her that I hadn't had an appetite for days.

Then I followed Father into his office, tracing the familiar path after I set my trunk down by the door, every step closer hardening my heart, my sweaty palm clenched around the Halo orb as I stared at Rye Hara's back. The way he stumbled a little as he took another swig of his whiskey and all I wanted to do was cry.

"What is this about?" he asked when we were safely tucked away in his office. Far from the kitchens. Far from my sisters.

I'd rehearsed on the ship. I'd rehearsed every single word that I would say to him, how I would bring it up, how I would ask him to turn himself in to War Crimes, how I would plead with him to let House Kaalium know where Aina had been buried. If she'd been buried.

But all that went out the window when I felt my throat burn.

There were no words for this.

And so, as my father turned his back to me to head to his glittering bar cart still perched in the corner—something that hadn't been sold yet—and I heard the familiar clinking of his decanter and the swish of alcohol pouring into glass, I tossed the Halo orb into the air so it floated between us.

Then I played the black feed that Azur had given me access to. With the sound.

"He alerted her Nu device. She'll come out soon," came Rye Hara's voice, the sound warbled with time. The black feed angle hadn't been in the best place, an outdated model no doubt, which was why it had likely gone unnoticed by my father and his unit, who had taken out all the other cameras and scanned for others in the vicinity. *"When she does, cut her wings so she can't fly. Cut them quickly. She's strong."*

The decanter clattered on the bar cart, toppling over on the glass. The confusion on my father's face was evident when he turned to me, but when he saw the black feed, projected into the air between us, I watched his face through the pixels. I watched his face pale, becoming sickly. The whiskey glass in his hand shattered across the floor, but he didn't even seem to notice when his footsteps crunched over it.

I watched him through the pixels as Aina appeared. His face crumbled when the first, piercing cry left her throat, as she was swarmed at her door in the deep, deep night, on the outer borders of Pe'ji. Her bellowing cry as a blade tore through membranes and tendons and muscles of her wings made my father's hand clutch the edge of his desk.

“*Get her down!*” Rye Hara ordered, his voice a growl of an order. “*Get her down now!*”

Through the black feed, his eyes came to mine.

I waited until the horrific killing was ended, flinching when the sizzle of his plasma gun burst, giving way to silence before a member of his unit *laughed*, huffing his exertion.

The feed ended. The pixels collapsed like a glittering rain until the Halo stopped the recording.

The silence was *deafening*. My heart was breaking all over again, nausea swishing back and forth in my belly, like the waves crashing against the cliffs of the keep.

My voice sounded hollow, “You look like you’ve seen a ghost, Father.”

CHAPTER 44

*R*ye Hara's face *crumbled*.

His shoulders began to shake. His whole body started trembling. And the sound that emerged from his throat was one I could only describe as animal-like in its wailing.

I began to cry too. Fat, clear droplets that rolled down my cheeks as I watched, as I listened.

I didn't know how long he cried. I hadn't seen him break down like this since Mother's death, his terrible roar echoing outside by the lake, waking me from a dead sleep.

My father wiped his eyes with the heel of his palm. "How...how...how did you find that feed? From the Kylorr you married?"

"Did you know who she was?" I asked. "Did you even know her name?"

His shoulders shook. He dragged in a deep, shuddering breath.

"It was *war*, Gemma," he rasped. "It was war! You can never understand the—"

"The war was over," I said, stepping forward, snatching the Halo orb from the air and pocketing it. "It was *over*. The victory had already been claimed. You didn't answer me. Did you know who she was?"

Rye Hara swallowed thickly. I heard it across his office, and he stumbled over to his desk chair, sinking down, his boots crunching over glass.

“She was a war officer. A Uranian Federation officer,” he told me. “Brought on to try to rally the Pe’ji for one last battle against the United Alliance.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “She was a peace ambassador, tasked with negotiating the terms of the victory on behalf of the Pe’ji.”

His head shook. “No. No, that’s not...” He took a deep breath, wiping at his face. His hands were shaking and he reached for a whiskey glass that wasn’t there on his desk. “That’s not what Nb’aru said. I had my orders, Gemma. I was trying to save lives. *Human* lives. Not Pe’jian lives. So many had already died.”

“The war was already *over*,” I repeated, my heart cracking in my chest. “And you made her suffer. Your unit taunted her as she tried to fight back. And you stood there and *let them*.”

Enough fun, my father had growled at his unit when he’d finally stepped forward on the black feed, raising his plasma gun. *Let’s finish this*.

His expression shuddered. His eyes were so glassy they were practically glowing like an orb light.

“Her name was Aina,” I informed him, her name gentle in the room, where we’d just witnessed her tragic death all over again. “Her name was Aina of House Sorn. She was my husband’s aunt. His mother’s only sister. Her *twin*. She was protected by the Kaalium, and you killed her in the darkened streets of Pe’ji and then covered it up.”

My father swayed in his chair before he planted his palm on the smooth desk to steady himself.

“No,” he breathed. “No, it wasn’t like that. We...we were following orders, Gemma. I trusted my superior. This Aina was a war officer. She was coming to try to take back the victory. To deny the United Alliance and the Voperians their dues. And I...I...”

He trailed off, shaking his head, before he dropped it into his hands.

“Did Mother know?” I whispered in the sudden quiet. A question I’d wondered since I’d first seen the video, since I’d first discovered the ugly truth. “Did you tell her what you had done on Pe’ji?”

I couldn’t see his face. I could only hear his rasping breaths as he dragged them in deep.

“Yes,” he answered quietly. “She knew.”

I bit my lip, a fresh wave of pain stabbing me deep in my gut.

“She was horrified,” he said softly, his hands fisting in his graying hair. “Even after all the Pe’jians I had to kill, it was *this* death that made her not want to look at me anymore. She didn’t have the stomach for war. But she certainly liked the wealth it brought us.”

The bitter words felt me breathless.

Father dissolved into tears again. “I...I’m sorry, Gemma. I shouldn’t have said that. Your mother...she was...”

I went to him, my feet taking me across the room, my thin boots slapping through spilled whiskey on the floor. Placing my hand on his shoulder, I said, “Is that why we were given this estate?”

His body felt like a furnace underneath my touch.

Finally, he said, “*One last task. One last task to win this war. Then you can go home.* That’s what Nb’aru told me. He made it clear. Kill the officer...kill Aina”—he shuddered under my touch—“and I would be rewarded. My whole unit would be rewarded for our service to the United Alliance.”

“So it wasn’t you that killed the Pe’jians’ war general during the final battle?”

Which was what we’d always been told was the reason he’d been promoted through the military ranks. Why he’d been called a *hero*.

The shake of his head was gut-wrenching. “N-No. It was a stray plasma blast that killed the general. We had just been close to him when it happened.”

So everything had been a lie.

My father had been given the estate as a reward for killing Aina. And that realization alone nearly made me want to vomit.

“Where is she?”

Father raised his head. His eyes were bloodshot. He looked drained, exhausted. *Old*. When had the years caught up with him? And why hadn't I noticed?

“What?”

“What did you do with Aina's body?”

“Gemma...I *can't*,” he told me, shaking his head, his eyes suddenly fearful. “You don't understand. I promised my unit we would never tell. If this feed got out...”

“You killed a peace ambassador for the Uranian Federation,” I said. And though I wanted to scream at him, though I wanted to cry with him, I couldn't. “My husband's family. It's *too late*.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, his watery blinking up at me, quieting. “Gemma, what do you mean?”

“I'm asking you to turn yourself in to War Crimes,” I told him, crouching next to his desk so that we were eye level. I kept my hand on his shoulder, squeezing tight, as the words felt like shards of glass coming up my throat. “I'm asking you to turn yourself in to the High Quadrant Council. Along with your unit. For Aina's murder. Because that's what it was, Father, despite what you might think.”

He fell back in his chair, his eyes wide with disbelief and horror. He stared at me.

“You...” He swallowed. “You would turn this feed over to War Crimes? You would put me on trial? Sentence me to live out my life on a prison planet, never to see you again?”

I didn't point out that he'd *already* been prepared to never see me again when he'd handed me off to Azur on Nulaxy.

I hated him. I loved him. I felt pity for him while also feeling disgust and anger. I couldn't make sense of my emotions, and so I focused on his eyes, eyes so much like mine.

I couldn't let me face crumble. Thankfully, I felt like I was out of my body. I didn't feel *present* as I said, "I'm giving you the chance to try to make this right. Even though it can never truly be right."

"It's been seventeen years, Gemma," my father said. "*Seventeen years*. And I've lived that war every day of my life since. I've done my time. I served the United Alliance and I followed orders. I was a soldier. Nothing more."

"You profited off her death," I pointed out softly.

He blanched. Then he argued, "She was marked for death. Since the moment she arrived on Pe'ji. It would have been done regardless."

"But it was *you*," my words clipped. "*It. Was. You.*"

He began to cry again and I cried with him, deep wrenching sobs tearing up my throat.

Through my tears, I said, "I'm *asking* you, as your daughter, to please make this right!"

"I—I don't think I can," he breathed.

"For *us*," I whispered, pressing forward. "For Mira and Piper. For Mother. For me. For *Aina* and her family, who have been kept in the dark for years. You don't know their pain, but it runs deep to this day. *Please*, Father. I'm asking you to make this right. Give them her body back. Let them grieve. And let your fate be decided by the law of our universe. *You are not above that.*"

"We would lose everything," he told me raggedly. "We would lose everything. Your sisters..."

"We've *already* lost everything. You don't see that?" I exclaimed. "Our home is stripped away. Mother is *gone*. Greed and pain has destroyed us already, and the collectors would have taken everything else."

He slumped against me. “I know. I know,” he breathed. “I’m sorry. I’m *so* sorry, Gemma. You will never know how much so.”

Sorry enough to try to borrow again from collectors behind my back, I knew. It was an addiction for him. The credits. He thought it was all he had left. But he couldn’t see what was in front of him. Not anymore.

“Mira and Piper would want you to make this right,” I said, knowing it was the truth. They would be horrified once I told them. Another difficult conversation that would implode their entire reality, just like it had mine. “You haven’t been the same since Pe’ji, have you? This has weighed on you. I *know* it has.”

His shoulders shook.

“This is your chance to come clean,” I murmured in his ear, holding him close when he sunk into me. “*Please*. Please.”

The father I’d known, the father I loved would do the right thing. I *knew* he would. I knew he would with every part of my soul. That man was still deep inside him, and I *needed* to know he was still there.

It still hit me like a boulder in the gut when he finally spoke the words. Whispered into my hair, as his arms tightened around me.

“All right,” he said, his voice fractured, his will broken. “I’ll do it.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. Relief and despair and an aching sadness made the room sway.

His arms were like vines around me, trapping me close.

“I’ll tell you where we buried her,” he said.

I thought of Azur. I thought of Kalia. Of the icy touch in the hallway in the south wing and the moon winds rising in the Kaalium, and I prayed that it would be enough to bring them peace.

“I’ll make this right,” Rye Hara said, his lips pressed to my cheeks as his tears dripped into my hair. “I promise.”

CHAPTER 45

*K*ythel found me on the roof.

He swooped down, circling overhead, before he landed with a heavy thud next to me, sprawling his bulk out.

Wordlessly, he plucked a vial of *lore* from his pockets, packed the glass vessel, and ignited the leaf within. He handed it to me and I took it silently, dragging the silver smoke in deep, but even *lore* couldn't help the tension in my shoulders and the fucking ache in my chest.

Kythel took the *lore* from me and inhaled deeply. We didn't speak for a long time. Only passed the thin, cylindrical glass pipe between us, smoking. Watching the moon sink in the night sky as gentle waves lapped against the cliffs of the terrace.

It had been five days since Gemma had left Krynn.

And every day she was gone brought a new wound, throbbing and stinging and prodding. Today, the hunger had finally made me turn to synthetic blood rations. I refused to drink from another. The thought made me feel nauseous, like I was betraying my *kyrana*. I only wanted her. I would only *ever* want her.

The rations had tasted like thick, muddy sludge and had done nothing to ease the hunger. I'd given up after my third package and locked myself away in my office, growling at anyone who'd tried to disturb me.

Zaale had given up eventually. Maybe he'd sent my brother in his stead. Because Kythel was the only being on this entire planet that I could stand right now.

Kythel finally said, "Thaine and Lucen returned to their territories. They told me to tell you their goodbyes. They knew you didn't want to be found. Not right now."

"You don't need to stay either," I finally spoke. My voice sounded like I'd swallowed rocks, gravelly and raw. "You and Kaldur. You're needed in your own territories. You've already been gone too long."

"Kaldur makes his own decisions," Kythel said. "And if our positions were reversed...you would not leave me, Azur. Why do you expect me to leave you?"

I took a deep drag of the *lore*, feeling the delicious burn before I blew out the smoke. Even smoking made me think of Gemma, and my body tightened, remembering her reaction to the *lore* the night of the ball.

Until everything had changed.

I cursed.

"No news?" I rasped.

I knew there wasn't. I had my Halo orb on me at all times. If Gemma was trying to reach me, I'd be the first to know about it.

"There is news," Kythel told me, making me straighten. He frowned and amended, "Not about Gemma. About the *kyriv* attack that happened before the harvest."

For a moment I was confused. But then I remembered. It just seemed like eons ago.

"Why didn't you tell me a damn *kyriv* had managed to breach Laras's borders?" he asked. "And why didn't you tell me you took it down *alone*? You should've waited for the soldiers to assist you."

"It was too late," I told him. "It was going after the *lore* fields. I'm having barracks built along the wall. I'll station soldiers there instead of keeping them clustered in the northern

end of the villages. But until then, I have patrols stationed there until the last of the *lore* is harvested and packed.”

Kythel shook his head. “There’s much you haven’t told me, brother. And there’s a lot that you don’t know yet—about this Maazin.”

“Zaale told you,” I guessed, raking a hand over my tired face. “Is the news about him?”

“Yes,” Kythel said. “He’s dead.”

The two words were matter-of-fact. Firm, soft, but said without feeling.

My first thought was of Gemma. Her pleading with me to not go after Maazin, saying he was young, that he’d made a mistake. He’d been kind to her, I knew. She’d worked with him for days on end in the records room. She’d enjoyed his company. She’d been shocked when she’d discovered the discrepancies within the records.

She would be distressed to hear about his death.

“How?” I asked, turning my eyes to Kythel, thinking about all the times Zaale had tried to interrupt my work today. Had it been about *this*? “When?”

“His body was sent to us. Delivered to our patrols at the northern borders this morning.”

A shocked breath rushed from my throat.

“That makes no sense. If he was a spy for Zyre, why would he send his own to us? Like a damn *gift* at our gates?”

Zyre was the king of the Kaazor. He’d taken the throne from his father five years prior after his death. While I didn’t *like* Zyre, I knew that he had tried to sway his father’s decision when breaking the treaty with the Kaalium. Zyre had wanted to uphold it. It had been his father who had flown against us ten years into it.

“Zyre said he didn’t authorize the *kyriv* attack on Laras. We received his message with Maazin’s body. He said Maazin was no Kaazor of his.”

I'd had the head of the *kyriv* beast sent to Zyre after I'd felled it. As a threat. As a warning. In a long missive, pinned between the beast's eyes, I'd told him that he wouldn't steal from House Kaalium again and to keep his spies on his side of the border unless he wanted a war.

"What is he playing at?" I wondered.

"Maybe nothing at all," Kythel told me, lifting a shoulder. "Maybe he's telling the truth."

"Then who was Maazin selling *lore* to? And who sent the *kyriv*?"

"Zaale has been trying to speak with you all day," Kythel informed me before inhaling a breath of *lore*. "Would you like to know what he found? He's been quite busy since Maazin's betrayal was discovered."

"I don't want to play games, brother," I said. *Tired*. On edge. Aching for my wife, who might decide she didn't want to be my wife anymore. "Just tell me."

"Maazin was a Thryki."

"*What?*"

Kythel nodded. "In his missive, Zyre said Maazin was no Kaazor of his. Now I think he meant it literally. Not a way to disown him and cast him out beyond his lands, but because he wasn't a Kaazor at all. Zaale managed to trace his passage through the Kaalium. He entered at Salaire's port from across the seas but under a different name. Taking work where he could find it until he paid for passage to my province, to Erzos, where he became Maazin of House Laan. He lived in Erzos for nearly four years, working the ports as a records keeper. Afterward, he disappeared for a year, and I think that's when he must've made contacts in Kaazor. Probably dipping across the border in the northwest to avoid the worst of the patrol."

"Then he came to Laras," I guessed softly.

Kythel lowered his head in a nod. "He had enough history living in the Kaalium that Zaale didn't think to check beyond five years. You should know that he feels responsible. He

blames himself for hiring Maazin to begin with, for bringing him into the keep.”

“Of course he would,” I growled, shaking my head. “I’ll speak to him tomorrow. It wasn’t his fault.”

But if what had Zaale discovered was true...

As if reading my thoughts, Kythel said quietly, “It concerns me that a Thryki came into our lands with seemingly the sole purpose of stirring up trouble between the Kaalium and Kaazor. It concerns me that there’s another participant in this, deep within Kaazor’s borders, and we have no idea who it is. Maazin wasn’t acting alone in this. But I don’t think Zyre had anything to do with this either.”

Kythel and I matched one another’s grim expressions.

We continued to smoke in silence, thinking over the weight of the words.

War was coming. I could feel it. An ancient instinct, deep in my bones. But perhaps it wouldn’t be coming from the north, as I’d originally thought. Perhaps it would be coming across the seas instead.

I knew Kythel felt it too.

“Rest tonight,” my brother finally said, leaning over to clasp my shoulder. “You look like you’ve been to Zyos and back. I’ll light Aina’s way tonight at the shrine. Go to your bed and sleep.”

He stood, stretching out his wings.

“Do you think that her bones are still on Pe’ji?” I asked. “After all this time?”

Kythel stilled.

“Mother believed that they were. She said she could feel them there,” he answered. “So yes, I do. And if your *kyrana* says she will return them to us...then I believe her. You got lucky, brother. You managed to secure yourself a little human warrior for a wife.”

If she still wants me, I couldn't help but think, watching him stretch his wings.

“When I return to Erzos, I'll ask around my territory. Ask about Maazin of House Laan and what exactly he was doing in my villages. Someone will know,” Kythel told me, shaking out his wings. “But I won't leave until Gemma returns to Krynn. I don't think Kaldur will return to Vyaan until she returns either. He's felt quite guilty about it all.”

“And what if she doesn't return?” I couldn't help but ask, the question born of a sleepless night and the memory of her haunted eyes the evening that she'd left. “In the beginning...I was not good to her, Kythel. I didn't treat her well.”

My twin's lips pressed in a firm line.

“I was cold to her. Cruel. I wanted her to fear me,” I confessed.

“And did she?” Kythel asked, towering over me. “Did she fear you?”

“No,” I said, swallowing. “No, I think she's quite fearless. Except when it comes to those she loves.”

Kythel grunted. After a brief lapse in silence, he told me, “She'll come back to you, Azur. I have no doubt. But maybe...”

“What?”

“Maybe it's you who will have to go to her first,” he said, turning his eyes to the sky. Then he left, launching himself up into the air.

He left me with the last of the *lore*, and I inhaled it deep until there was nothing left.

“Come back to me,” I willed softly, murmuring the words to the stars overhead. “Come back to me, and I will give you every reason to never leave again.”

A prayer.

A prayer to the stars meant for one soul alone.

Not for Raazos or Alaire or Gaara or Zor.

But for Gemma.

I had so many regrets when it came to her.

I needed to right them. If only she'd let me.

Just as I was about to push up from the roof, to retreat to my bed, where I could still smell Gemma deep in my pillows, I heard the alert come through on my Halo orb.

I nearly tore a hole through my clothes trying to reach it.

A message.

From Setlan. A close friend who seemingly knew everything about everyone. He was how I'd found Rye Hara to begin with, and it was Setlan who'd made contact with Mr. Cross with the marriage proposal. He'd grown up in Laras but now lived on a planet named Dumera.

Setlan's recorded message popped up on my orb, the floating colored pixels forming the contours of his face perfectly.

"I've just heard it come through my sources, Azur," Setlan said. "Officers have already been dispatched to the Collis. Rye Hara will be arrested by the High Quadrant Council soon, if not within the hour. Com me when you can and we can discuss our next steps."

The message went dark.

I replayed it.

Then again.

And again.

Everything we've wanted, I thought, staring unseeing over Alaire's sea and beyond to the stretches of the mountains in the north.

So why did it feel so empty? A hollow victory?

Because I knew how much Gemma was hurting right now.

Her whole world had changed in the last week.

Again, I forced myself to add. Coming to Krynn hadn't been easy for her either. I had made it less so.

And instead of being with her, instead of comforting her and assuring her that I would take care of her and her sisters, that she had nothing to fear of the future, I was *here*. In the Kaalium. When I should've been with my wife, helping her through this.

My *kyrana*.

My *laraya*.

My heart's blood.

“*Vaan*,” I cursed.

Rye Hara would be arrested for Aina's murder. Charged and prosecuted by the highest council in the Four Quadrants, and he would likely spend the rest of his life on a prison planet, deep in the cosmos, with the rest of his unit.

Instead of relief, all I felt was determination to reach Gemma. Instead of victory, all I felt was a desperate ache in my chest because I knew how much pain she was in, even at this very moment.

On my Halo orb, I connected to Zaale, who looked startled since I'd avoided him nearly all day.

“Have a ship outfitted and get a crew onboard. Something small and fast. I need to leave for the Collis immediately.”

CHAPTER 46

It had been five days since my father's arrest.

And *nothing* would have ever prepared me for the aftermath of it.

Every day, it was waking to a fresh hell. Whether it was my sisters' sobs behind the closed doors of their room. Or the United Alliance messengers who had arrived on our doorstep the following evening, threatening us to keep silent about the circumstances of the arrest. Or the news breaking across the Quadrants, a scandal that others could gawk at and whisper about, snickering and lapping up every detail as speculation had run rampant. Or the crowds that had begun to gather outside our gates. Residents of the Collis who had come to offer their sympathies to the Hara daughters, though they'd just wanted to pry the truth from our lips.

We'd begun locking the gates. Keeping others out.

The news shocked New Earth and its colonies. That much was clear. And it was only the beginning of a long road ahead.

"They'll stop coming to the gates. They'll move on eventually," Fran assured us on the fifth night when we were all sitting around the—mostly empty—dining room. Sorj was here too. Mira's friend, who looked like something *more* now. The Killup male was holding her close, her face tucked into the gills on his gray neck. I was thankful for him. I was thankful he could offer Mira comfort and support.

Watching them made me miss Azur. It made me miss him so much that sometimes it felt like I couldn't breathe.

Piper...Piper, on the other hand, had surprised me.

My youngest sister had jumped into action.

“What do you need?” she’d asked me the morning after Father had been taken off planet. “What do you need me to do?”

She’d contacted our grandparents on New Inverness without me telling her to. My mother’s parents, who had, truthfully, been pulling away from our family since her death. Secretly, I’d thought they’d always blamed my father for it in some way. And I couldn’t help but wonder if my father had asked them for money in the later years, because they’d stopped taking his calls entirely.

But they’d answered Piper’s without question, and they were traveling to the Collis even now. To help us.

“I’m so sorry, Gem,” Piper had whispered raggedly one night as we’d been standing at a darkened window, looking at the crowd beyond our gates. “I never knew how bad it truly was. What you must’ve had to deal with all these years. And I was...I was such a *spoiled bitch* to you. When you were only trying to help us.”

I’d finally come clean. About everything. The loans. The collectors. The debts.

It had felt like a giant weight off my shoulders, being honest with my sisters.

Only, that burden had been replaced with a new one. Guilt. Guilt that I’d pushed my father into his confession, causing this turmoil within our family, causing this grief and uncertainty for our futures, even though I logically knew that it had been the right thing to do. It had been the *only* thing to do.

“Don’t blame yourself,” Piper had told me, her tone harsh but sad. “*He* did this. Him alone. You just held him accountable. I...I don’t even know if Mother had the strength to do that. But you did.”

I’d left a Halo message for Azur the night of my father’s arrest, speaking into the orb he’d gifted to me. I’d told him what my father had told me: the location of where they’d

buried Aina's body on Pe'ji. In a dense jungle to the northeast of the town, at the base of an ancient black tree about one mile down the road where she'd been killed. I'd told him that my father had been arrested, that he was being transported to the High Quadrant Council.

"I..." I'd trailed off when I'd recorded the message, blinking back tears. *I miss you*, I'd wanted to say. *I need you*. Instead, I'd said, "I'm sorry. I truly am, Azur."

I hadn't heard from him. I assumed he'd immediately gone to Pe'ji, or perhaps one of his brothers or even Kalia had, or he'd sent a team there to recover Aina.

We were all sitting at the dining room table this night. Fran. Sorj and Mira. Piper. My grandparents would likely be here tomorrow.

And there was still so much to *do*. It was like a death in our family. I had to make sure my father had no other outstanding debts he was hiding, no other collectors waiting in the wings to swoop in. I had to find the deed for ownership of the house or if the property could be claimed by the United Alliance or the Earth Council. I had to organize the management of the blue salt mines—the manager I'd hired on, I'd learned, had stepped away from the position. The workers needed their wages, and I'd already dipped into the 200 *vron* I had in my account to pay them in full. Most of them had decided to look for work elsewhere in the Collis, and truthfully, I couldn't blame them.

I had to figure out what the hell to do with the estate. I felt restless in its hall. An aching wound and memory. A disgusting reward for a tragedy. I didn't want to be here, but I had to be. I needed to be strong for my sisters. For Fran, who had nowhere else to go too.

We had to clear the media that had been lining up at the gates every single day. The circumstances of my father's arrest would no doubt leak soon. Everyone would know what he'd done during the Pe'ji War, and soon, the Collis would turn against us. I wondered if it was even safe to remain here. We would have to leave eventually.

But this is where she's buried, I couldn't help but mourn. We cannot leave her behind.

“What are you thinking?” Piper asked me quietly, reaching over the table to take my hand. She was different, I noticed. I hadn't been gone long, but it felt like years had passed since I'd last been within these halls.

I managed to muster a small smile for her, one that didn't reach my eyes. It was getting late. We were all going to turn in soon, knowing nothing more could be discussed tonight. And frankly, we were all exhausted.

Just as I opened my mouth, a loud banging came at the front door.

Boom, boom, boom!

My heart froze in my chest.

“Oh no,” I breathed. “They've gotten past the gates, haven't they? Sorj, you checked the lock, didn't you?”

I rose from the table, already striding from the room.

Behind me, Sorj called, “I did this morning. They were locked up tight!”

They must've climbed the fence. Getting desperate for a statement, though trespassing was against the law in the Collis, punishable with imprisonment. We would become a clip in the intergalactic news coms. *A human hero, fallen from grace, his family in hiding.*

I steeled my spine. Piper was behind me. Mira and Sorj and Fran too. We could do this together. We would just tell them to leave or else we'd called the Collis Patrol unit.

The door handle was within reach.

With a deep breath, I tugged it open, a quick burst of movement, already opening my mouth to tell the trespasser off.

Only a gasp left my lips instead.

My nostrils burned.

My throat went tight.

Relief and happiness and shock mingled inside me.

“*Laraya*,” Azur rumbled, those red eyes connecting with mine and *burning*. His wings were flared wide—likely to shield the onlookers’ views from the gates, since I could hear the shocked gossips from here—impossibly large. I’d forgotten how *big* he was. When I made no movement, not a twitch, he drawled, “Are you going to invite me in?”

I launched myself at him.

I felt like I could finally breathe again.

Azur grunted and caught me, those warm arms embracing me tight. His *scent*. His familiar heat. The hard press of his black vest against my cheek. His wings coming around me like a blanket on a cold day.

His head dropped. His lips brushed my ear.

“You’re here,” I choked out, letting myself fall apart against him. My hands shook when I reached up to clutch his vest, holding him to me. “How are you here?”

“Have you already forgotten who your husband is? I’m an heir to the Kaalium. I can go anywhere I please,” he murmured in my ear, as arrogant as ever, and I felt affection burst through me, a laugh of disbelief escaping my throat. The first time I’d laughed since...since the night of the *lore* harvest ball, perhaps.

His words belied the gentle press of his lips to my temple, as sweet as honey. I savored his embrace, nearly forgetting that we had an audience.

“You’re here,” I whispered, wiping my tears shamelessly against his vest, “and I feel like such a mess.”

His arms tightened.

Softly, Azur said, “You don’t have to worry anymore, *kyrana*. I’ll take care of everything. I’ll take care of you. I promise.”

CHAPTER 47

Gemma finally pulled away from my chest, her eyes shining up at me. I felt the tight band in my chest loosen at the sight of her. I'd been worried. I *still* was. But she was in my arms. I was here, in the Collis.

I would make every drawn line around her eyes and mouth, the furrow between her brows smooth away. It was my duty. As her mate. As her husband.

"Come in," she rasped, tugging me forward. "Come in."

I hadn't truly known what to expect in greeting from her, given that some of her last words to me had been that she didn't *feel* like my wife, that she'd thought distance between us would be good.

But I was done waiting. I'd felt the strain of the distance, the lack of her presence on Krynn, the emptiness in my bed, and it had taken all of a few moments to decide that I wanted her. I needed her. She was my wife, regardless of how she'd come to be my wife, and I was bound to her. *We* were bound. Always. Bound by blood.

Judging from Gemma's reaction at seeing me on her doorstep, I was optimistic that she felt the same way. Hopeful, even. And hope was not a sensation that regularly sang through my veins.

"Azur, these are my sisters," Gemma said, wiping at her cheeks. By the looks on the two human females' faces, I wondered if they'd ever seen Gemma cry. "Mira and Piper."

I inclined my head to them as they looked at me with wide eyes. They'd never seen a Kylorr before, at least in person, since I knew they'd spoken often with Gemma in the mornings through the Halo orb. They must've seen Ludayn, though females of our species were much, much smaller than males.

The golden-haired sister—Mira—looked on with shock, her eyes running up my bulk and height. I couldn't help but think that her eyes would pop out of her skull if she saw me sated on her elder sister's blood. The other—Piper—studied me with solemn observation, though it was her that stretched her hand out to me first, stepping forward.

“Welcome,” she said softly. “Though I'm sorry to be meeting you for the first time under these circumstances. In this place.”

The home of my enemy. The home of the man who had killed Aina.

Yet also where my wife had lived. She'd been happy here once, hadn't she?

I took her hand in the way I'd seen Gemma do with other humans throughout Laras, giving it a firm pump.

“Hello,” Mira said quietly, meeting my eyes before they darted away as she took my grip next.

“And this is Fran,” Gemma said, moving me forward to the last remaining human female in the room. A human with freckles across her nose and wide hazel eyes. “My dear friend.”

Gemma had told me about Fran, who was like another sister to her. I nodded at her, taking her hand when she stretched it out.

“And Sorj,” Gemma finished. “Mira's friend, who has been much help to us since...since...”

Since her father's arrest, I knew.

I locked eyes with the Killup male, whose own narrowed on me with mistrust. Grunting, I inclined my head to him. The Killup and the Kylorr didn't have the best relationship. An

ancient battle, long ago, and the old pains of that had never been mended, though we both pledged our loyalties to the Uranian Federation.

Then I wrapped my arm around Gemma's waist, pulling her more firmly into my side, flaring my wings out to tuck her close. Her hand grasped my wrist, curling over my metal gauntlet. I didn't want to be parted from her. Not even for a second.

"I am honored to finally meet all of you," I said quietly. My eyes came to Piper's. "But yes, I do wish it were under better circumstances."

"Did you...did you go to Pe'ji?" Gemma asked quietly, capturing my attention again. "Did you find her?"

"Kaldur is landing there soon with another excavation team set to arrive on the planet for the search," I told her, unable to express the emotion that had risen in me when I'd first received her message. Rye Hara and his unit had buried Aina, after all. She'd always been on Pe'ji and so close to town. "Kythel and Kalia stayed behind to look after Laras. My other brothers returned to their territories but are waiting for news."

She nodded. "Good. Good—I hope they find her. I know they will."

My hand squeezed into her hip. Our eyes held. So much to discuss. So much to *do* until we might have a semblance of peace again. But I wanted to savor this moment. A simple moment of looking into my wife's eyes and knowing that we were together again, after nearly two weeks apart.

Piper cleared her throat. "There's nothing more to be done tonight. How about we all try to get some sleep? We can talk more in the morning," she said, meeting my eyes with a small nod. She wanted to give Gemma time with me, I realized, and I couldn't be more grateful for it.

"Good idea," Fran chimed. Mira pulled Sorj away by the hand. Piper trailed behind them, heading deeper into the house. "Gemma?"

My wife looked to Fran.

“You need anything?”

She shook her head and then leaned against me. “No. Get some rest, Fran. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Fran sent her a small, knowing smile. The human female’s eyes flitted to mine. She nodded to me. Then she turned and followed the sisters and Sorj down the foyer and up the dark staircase.

I looked around the home for the first time. The home Gemma had lived in before coming to Krynn. The home of Rye Hara.

I could see how it once would have been a beautiful home. The architecture was grand, with sweeping ceilings and intricate moldings. The bones were good. But then I saw the cracks. It felt empty. Furniture missing...or sold, perhaps. Cobwebs covered in the high corners and dust pooled on the surfaces I could see.

An estate this size would need at least six or seven regular keepers to maintain it. According to Gemma...they’d had Fran, the poor female.

When we were alone, Gemma turned into me and I took my eyes away from a stain on the wall next to us. She buried her face into my chest and I held her tight.

“How are you?” I murmured down to her. “And don’t lie to me.”

I felt her lips quirk up, though I couldn’t see her tired smile.

“It’s been hell,” she told me, making a brief growl rise from my throat. She lifted her head and tilted her neck back so that her chin was resting in the middle of my chest. “But then I saw you and I knew that I was through the worst of it.”

Her words made my wings want to puff out and flurry. But I tamped down the instinct. Instead, I leaned down and took her tempting lips in a soft kiss, which she seemed to savor like I was.

“I’ve missed you,” she sighed into the kiss. “I wanted to tell you that. When I sent the message. But I...I didn’t know if I should.”

I pulled back, my brows drawing together. “Never doubt yourself with me, *laraya*. You never need to.”

“This is when you say you’ve missed me too,” she whispered, her eyes going soft. Warm and sweet.

I growled. “I’ve missed you so damn much, Gemma.” Was that relief I saw in her gaze? Like she hadn’t been certain that I had? “Did you find your answer? Because I know mine.”

“My answer?” she asked softly.

“You thought distance between us would bring you clarity,” I reminded her. Her lips parted in realization. “You said our marriage felt wrong to you. But I knew in that moment that even with all the mistakes I made when it came to you, even with the way our marriage began, I do not regret making you my mine. We were fated from the very beginning, for reasons I will likely never understand. But I don’t need to understand to know that it’s *you*. That it will always been you.”

Wonderment entered her eyes.

“And whenever you wish to return to Krynn,” I said, my voice gruff, “I’ll have our Nulaxy marriage contract nullified.”

“*What?*” she breathed, panic entering her gaze. “No, Azur, that’s—”

“So that I can marry you again,” I told her, making her breath hitch in her throat. “And we can begin again so that you will always know that I want to marry you because...because you are my heart, Gemma. My heart’s blood. My *laraya*. Not for any other reason.”

“Azur,” she whispered, her eyes going glassy again.

My lips quirked up in a wry smile. “I didn’t plan on discussing this with you in the entrance hall of this home, Gemma, right when I stepped through the door, but you

always have a way of scrambling my mind until I can't think properly.”

She smiled at me. She liked that, the maddening little female.

“And in case it wasn't clear, that was a proposal,” I pointed out to her gruffly, knowing I was making a mess of this. But I knew that Gemma wouldn't mind. In fact, I thought it would be what she preferred. To have me tongue-tied with a muddled brain and crazy for her. “I want to marry you, *kyrana*. I want to be with you until our souls enter Alara. The after realm. Together. Forever. I knew the moment that you said you wanted to leave Krynn that I never wanted to be without you again.”

And I still let you go, I added silently. Because it was what she'd wanted.

Gemma stared at me.

“You don't have to answer me now. In fact, I think—”

Her lips were on mine, muffling my words, her hand firm on the back of my neck, pulling me down as she went to her tiptoes. I sighed against her, relief and joy spilling in my soul. I cradled her close, our kiss sweet enough that it made my fangs ache.

“Yes,” she whispered, gasping into my mouth. She smiled. “Yes, Azur, I'll marry you again.”

“Good,” I growled.

“I missed you as soon as I left,” she informed me. “And I've missed you every day since. I thought I was doing the right thing. Stepping away for clarity, to see if we could move on from the past when it's still so painful.”

I sobered. I ran my hand down her spine and then up again, before I curled my hand in her thick, black hair.

“I want to marry you,” she said. “But we are married now too. You *are* my husband. And you have been since Nulaxy. My mate. I'm sorry for doubting that.”

“Don't apologize for that,” I told her.

“Thank you for coming,” she said, reaching up to cup my face. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

She looked tired. Her eyes were bloodshot. She’d had to be strong for her sisters, I knew. But I wanted her to be able to depend on me. I didn’t want her to feel like she had to put on a brave face for me.

“Oh,” she said, her eyes trailing to my lips. “Are you...are you hungry? You must be. Unless...unless you’ve fed from...”

“*Never,*” I growled, my brow furrowing. “Only you, *kyrana.*”

Her shoulders relaxed. “I’ve been gone almost two weeks. I wouldn’t have blamed you for needing to feed.”

“We have synthetic blood rations for situations like this,” I informed her. “The mere thought of drinking from anyone else left me sick. I didn’t want to. I don’t even think I physically could. I only want you.”

She *liked* that. My possessive little mate. Seeing that little flare of satisfaction light up her eyes made a growl rise in my throat.

Her lips parted. We were close. Incredibly close. I could smell her. I could hear her blood begin to rush under her skin.

Gemma seemed to realize it too.

“Come,” she beckoned, with a small knowing smile, tugging on my arm. “I want to be alone with you.”

CHAPTER 48

*M*y room in the Hara estate had always been my safe haven. When the doors closed, I could forget...or at least try to forget what lay beyond the room. This room had been my only reprieve when I'd lived in the Collis. This room and my sisters, of course.

When I pulled Azur inside, it was like that switch going off in my brain. I let every worry melt away until all I saw was him. I could almost imagine that we were back on Krynn, in Laras, in our rooms with the windows wide open and the moonlight dappled across the stone floor, salt on the breeze from the Silver Sea. I hadn't realized how *free* I'd felt there. Not until I'd returned to the Collis and old memories and fears and worries had begun to flood back in.

I took Azur's hand and pulled him to my bed.

"We don't have to do this, Gemma," he told me, shaking his head, though his red eyes were burning. "This is *not* why I came. I would drink synthetic blood rations for the rest of my life just to prove that to you."

I sat perched on my high bed and pulled Azur to stand between my thighs. I was settled a little higher than I normally would be when standing next to him. Yet he still towered over me.

"I know," I told him truthfully, moving my hair away from my neck and tugging him even closer. He couldn't help his reaction to seeing my bared flesh. His ivory fangs elongated in a rush, his nostrils flaring. "But I missed this. I want this. I

want to satisfy you and make you feel good too. Nothing would feel more right.”

His swallow was audible.

I was wearing a dress today, and I slid the material up my thighs, Azur’s muffled groan following as his eyes were glued to its rise.

“I’ve missed you, husband,” I told him, my heart beginning to pound in my chest when my hands went to the clasps on his pants, tugging at the metal, making him hiss. “I *need* this, Azur. I need to feel you again. Don’t make us wait any longer than we already have. Please,” I whispered, pressing my lips to his jaw before brushing them across his neck.

His deep growl made my spine tingle. He leaned his head back, allowing me access to his exposed throat, an intimacy in itself that I knew he’d only give to me. His hands came to my thighs and he trailed them up, his touch sending fiery sparks across my sensitive flesh.

“Tell me you’ll never leave me again, little wife,” he rasped, hovering.

“I’ll never leave you again,” I promised, gasping when his fingers teased between my thighs.

I kissed his neck as I freed his cock from his pants. He hissed when I wrapped my hand around him, tight.

“Gemma,” he groaned. And when I nudged him closer, teasing the head of his cock between my thighs, he cursed, “*Vaan*, I need you.”

“Then take me,” I pleaded against his skin.

Then, knowing that it would spur him along...I bit his neck.

Hard.

A sharp bellow rose from his throat, strangled and needy, and his hips punched forward with one brutal thrust, sliding that cock so deep that his knot, his seal, nearly seated itself within me.

Whimpering with *want*, I bit harder, squeezing the thick flesh between my fangless teeth. It broke his skin. I tasted the hot tang of his blood, and somehow, it made me even wilder with need.

“*Raazos*,” he huffed, groaning. “*Yes, kyrana!*”

Gods, he liked this. I wondered if it felt like I was claiming him just as his bite felt like a brand on me. His hard, quick thrusts pushed me into a delirium. A fever of madness and acute feeling where I was entirely focused on the spine-tingling, aching slide of his perfect cock and the taste of his blood sweeping across my tongue.

I needed him so deep. I needed him so deep, imprinting himself inside me, the burn of his seal like a brand, so that I would always feel like he was *there*.

“Harder,” I keened, licking at the bite, the laps of my tongue spurring him into a frenzy. “*More, Azur! Gods, yes, just like that!*”

He hit that spot inside me that made me see stars. Then he was leaning forward, never letting up, the subtle shift in position making his seal begin to stretch me.

“Going to come, *wife*,” he rasped. “Going to come so *fucking* hard in your perfect cunt.”

“Oh gods,” I whispered, my eyes going wide, feeling his own fangs tease at the column of my throat. “*W-Wait.*”

Frustration crashed down on me, his words making me *remember*.

“*Wait, Azur, I don’t have any marroswood here,*” I cried out, even as I bit my lip, struggling not to climax as he continued to mercilessly pound and thrust into me, my bed creaking and shuddering with the ferocity of it. “*Ohh!*”

“*Good,*” he growled, making me gasp. “I shouldn’t have given you that damn tea! I should’ve gotten you pregnant that very night. Shot my seed so deep and stoppered every drop inside you with my seal. And that’s what I’m going to do right now, little wife.”

It wasn't the right time for me to conceive, I realized belatedly, but his words unleashed a *fire* in me.

I'd never given much thought to children, but I knew right then that I wanted as many as Azur would give me. Little Kylorr-human hybrids with budding horns, sharp adorable fangs, human eyes, and black wings, so they could fly in the moon winds with their father.

Just then, Azur slid his fangs deep and the pleasure snapped like a tether. It had been so long. The days had passed slowly, each one an entire year without him. The warming sensation of his venom spread, and then I was orgasming. On his cock, with his fangs lodged deep, drinking what I could only offer him, his words ringing in my ears.

"Tell me you're mine," he ordered, muffled against my skin. "Tell me, wife."

"*Yours yours yours,*" I huffed and whimpered, squeezing him tight. "*I'm yours, Azur!*"

I heard his whispered curse, felt the way his muscles tensed, and the way his thrusts became even more frenzied, sinking deep as he continued to drink from me, each dizzying pull of my blood making me gasp. The addicting burn of his seal stretched me. The way the ache mixed with my sublime pleasure made a strangled cry burst from my throat. I orgasmed again, spasming around him as he slotted *deep*.

Azur came, the hot lashes of his seed bursting into me, filling me up. The world went white. Bright and white. I couldn't breathe. All I could feel was him. All I could smell was him. All I could taste was him.

I was his. He was mine.

When reality returned, when I could *see* again, I was up on the bed, cradled in Azur's arms. His pants were still around his thighs. My dress was still bunched around my waist. His cock was still seated deep, the swell of his seal holding me tight.

I was still huffing. The familiar burn on my neck felt like a relief.

“You want me to heal it?” he rumbled, his voice rich and husky. I nearly shivered.

The bite, he’d meant. So my sisters wouldn’t see?

“No,” I breathed. “I want your mark on me. And mine on you.”

That pleased him. The deep, rumbling purr threading up his chest brought a flush of delight, knowing I’d satisfied my husband, knowing he’d satisfied *me*, very, very much.

“Rest, my *laraya*,” he murmured to me. When my hands clutched tighter, he said, “I’ll be here. I would never leave.”

I *was* exhausted. I’d hardly been able to sleep since the night I’d confronted my father. Even before then.

But I was safe in Azur’s arms.

That alone made me close my eyes. I finally let myself *let go*.

IN THE EARLY HOURS OF MORNING, BEFORE DAWN, I WOKE TO the bleary view of Azur standing out on the balcony of my rooms. The crisp morning air made goose bumps pebble my flesh, but I slid from bed regardless. My feet landed on a cold floor. I dragged a thick blanket that was draped across an armchair and tucked it around me. I was naked. Azur must’ve undressed me during the night.

And himself too, I realized, lips parting at the sight of his firm, dimpled backside, naked as the day he’d been born, standing out on my balcony.

There was a pleasant ache between my thighs. I’d been well used, well pleased. Every step toward him made me remember him, and I *loved* it. I craved it.

Coming up behind him, I wrapped my arms around his torso, squashing his wings, which he kept tucked close.

A rumbling sigh left his throat. “I’m sorry, my love, did the cold wake you?”

My love.

Hearing that was like eating a warm steam cake, straight from Yeeda’s bakery. Sticky and sweet and piping hot, leaving me satisfied and wanting more.

“You not being next me woke me,” I informed him. I pressed my lips to his muscled back and to a panel of membrane of one section of his wings, feeling him shudder. *Sensitive?* I wondered, fighting a smile. “I still can’t believe you’re here. It feels like a dream.”

When these last two weeks have felt like a nightmare, I added silently. But I left like I could finally *wake up* with him beside me.

Azur guided me from his back, shuffling me to his front. It was a chilled, misty, quiet morning. There was a fog rolling off of Mount Hara—the sight of the mountain accompanied by a sharp pang of sadness—descending into the pine forests in the valley beneath it, crawling over the land. It was beautiful. A beautiful morning in the Collis as the season began to change.

“I hardly ever come out here,” I admitted softly, feeling his arms drape around my front, warming me better than the blanket could.

Azur shifted. “Because of the lake?” he asked.

My rooms looked toward Mount Hara. But to the right of us, I could just make out the edge of the large, oval-shaped lake toward the back of the house. If I craned my head around to the left, I might’ve been able to make out the front entrance gates.

Strangely, it was *silent*. I couldn’t even hear voices or sounds coming from around the house. There were *always* people at the gates. With Azur’s appearance last night, sending them into a speculative frenzy, I thought there would be even more this morning.

“Yes,” I answered him, even now avoiding looking in that direction. I kept my eyes on the foggy forest and turned my

head the opposite way, brushing my lips across his arm.

“I shouldn’t have left the bed,” he told me. “But I couldn’t resist this view. It’s beautiful here, Gemma.”

My chest ached.

“It is,” I agreed quietly. “And yet...I think I would be all too happy to never lay eyes on the Collis again. On this house. On this estate.”

Azur pressed his lips to the top of my head, breathing me in as I sank deeper into him.

“There’s so much *pain* here. In these walls. It feels haunted but not with souls. With memory. With grief. With lies,” I said, voice soft in the quiet morning. “But my mother will always be here. I didn’t even want her buried on the estate, especially next to where she *died*. Neither did my grandparents. But my father was so...so broken. He was adamant about it. Now she’ll always be here.”

“What do you want to do?” he asked me. “What do you and your sisters want to do with the estate?”

My shoulders slumped. “I don’t know. I don’t even know if we have authority over it to decide. I would assume the estate is in my father’s name, but given the laws of the High Quadrant Council, it would have been forfeit the moment he turned himself over to them. And we can’t find the deed. No traces that he had ever owned it in the first place.”

I felt Azur’s long inhale.

“I own the estate, Gemma.”

Shock made me freeze before I slowly turned in his arms to meet his eyes. “What?”

“I should have told you long before this moment,” Azur said, his gaze *shamed*. An emotion I never thought I’d see etched on his expression. “For that I’m sorry.”

“Just tell me,” I said. “You...you negotiated the deed into the marriage contract? But Mr. Cross never said anything about that.”

“It was your father,” Azur told him, his lips twisting briefly. “He made contact with the stipulation that I recover the deed to the estate before he would agree to the marriage.”

I reared back. “What? Recover it how?”

His lips pressed. He didn’t *enjoy* telling me this, I realized. “Your father put up the deed as collateral for a gambling debt he couldn’t repay. Last year.”

When the world seemed to sway beneath my feet, Azur’s arm tightened around me, not letting me fall.

“The house...the house wasn’t ours? Someone else, a *collector*, had ownership? Who...who was it?”

“A Binshay male on the Qapot’a colony,” Azur told me. I froze. “I told your father that I would reclaim the deed, that I would buy out his debt to the Binshay, but that it would belong to *me*. To my House. He agreed. The agreement was finalized a couple weeks after our marriage. The deed is in my family’s vault on Krynn.”

“My gods,” I breathed.

“Your father, however, still owned a section of land here in the Collis,” Azur told me. “A section of the estate he refused to give up. Not to anyone. Not even to me.”

Azur gestured to our right. To the lake.

Of course, I thought, feeling conflicting feelings stab me in my chest at the realization.

“He wouldn’t give up the lake,” Azur told me. “At least until he was arrested. That deed went to an open auction two days ago.”

“Someone bought it?” I whispered.

“Yes,” he said, his arm tightening. “Us, Gemma.”

“You...you bought it?”

“For you,” he told me. “We already own the estate. Now we own it in full, and I’ll let you decide what you wish to do with it. Whether you want to sell it, destroy it, or keep it.

Whatever you want, whatever you and your sisters decide, I'll make it happen. You don't have to worry about that."

My throat went tight. Maybe he'd bought and kept the deed to the estate out of malice for my father...but he'd bought the lake for *me*, knowing that my mother was buried there. And now he was giving me the agency to decide. He didn't care about the estate. He only cared about me and what I wanted.

"We can bring your mother back to Krynn if you'd like," Azur told me hesitantly, softly, when I didn't answer him right away. "She doesn't have to remain here. We can make her a soul gem, just like how we will make Aina's. Maybe...maybe she'll find her way to Alara."

Soul gems were vessels. Azur had told me they lit up when their soul was near, especially on a night of the moon winds.

"It might break my heart if hers never came to life," I told him honestly, wiping at my cheeks when a stray tear fell. "I—I'll need to ask my grandparents. But I think they might want her to return home. I think they might want her to return to New Inverness, where she grew up. They wanted that from the beginning, but my father denied them their wishes. She was their daughter. They just wanted her back home, to the place where I think she was always happiest."

"Then that's what we'll do," Azur told me, pressing his lips to my temple.

"And then I want..." I began, frightened to say the words but knowing that it was the right thing to do. "I never want to return here."

"You wish to sell it?" he asked.

"No," I said firmly. "My father... This estate was a reward for my father's silence after the Pe'ji War."

Azur's jaw clenched.

"A reward for Aina," I told him, and it broke my heart to do so. "He profited from her death, and I don't want to take a single credit more for it. I want to leave this place and let it crumble to the earth with time. I want it to age and crack and

fall. To let all of New Everton know, let all of the Collis know what he did. What the United Alliance did.”

“You’re certain?” he asked, his voice a rumble.

“Yes,” I said, my spine steeling. “I know my sisters will feel the same. We’ll return my mother to New Inverness. And then I want to go *home*. To Laras. With you.”

He embraced me tight. His horns tangled in my hair when he crouched down.

That was all I wanted. The answer seemed so simple.

“Your sisters, Fran, even Sorj,” Azur started, murmuring in my ear, “they are all welcome to live in Laras. I’ll extend them all citizenship. They can come home with us. Or come and go as they please, if they prefer to live with your grandparents and remain within the New Earth colonies. They can even live in the keep with us, if that would please you.”

I love him, I thought, my chest aching with the sharp bite of the emotion. “You would do that?”

I could feel his frown. He pulled back to look down at me. “*Of course* I would. You forget, wife, that you are the *Kylaira* of Laras. Whatever you wish, you will get. Especially when it comes to me.”

I leaned forward to kiss him, his heat and closeness an incredible comfort, almost as comforting as his words.

“I’ll ask them what they want to do,” I told him.

Azur inclined his head, threading his fingers through my hair.

A brief moment of silence lapsed between us.

Then he said, “Your father’s trial will likely not begin for quite some time.”

I blew out a shuddered breath. I’d had no contact with him, but I knew how long it would take the High Quadrant Council to build the case, to gather the details, to record testimonies and statements, to track down the others involved. And that *didn’t* include having to drag the Pe’ji War back into focus.

“I know.”

“And I heard from a few sources,” he told me next, “that the United Alliance is already trying to get the charges thrown out, though your father confessed to the crime.”

“Of course they would,” I said, the news chilling my heart. “Because his testimony would implicate the United Alliance. That they were involved.”

“Yes,” he said. “It will be a long road for your father, Gemma. A long road for you. For my family. For your sisters. We all need to be prepared for it.”

I nodded, meeting his eyes. “We’ll get through it. I know we will.”

Azur exhaled a long breath. “We will,” he agreed softly. And hearing that quiet confidence in his voice was enough for me.

I turned in his arms again when our words died away. The beauty of the morning felt like a sharp ache. Soon, I would never see this place again. Even still, I couldn’t wait to leave it behind.

“It’s so quiet,” I commented when the sun began to rise over the mountain. “Maybe the crowd has finally died down. Maybe they’ll leave us alone.”

The bands of his arms tightened around me before he led me inside. Back to bed, where I knew we wouldn’t just be sleeping. “I had my ship’s crew disperse them last night when you were sleeping. They’re standing guard on the roads leading from the gates, making sure there are no trespassers. They won’t disturb you or your sisters anymore.”

I let out a small huff of laughter, feeling my heart warm. Such a small thing to do, and yet it felt so *huge*. Just knowing that there weren’t vultures on the steps of the estate, waiting for little scraps made my lungs feel less tight.

“You did?”

“Mmm,” Azur grunted. “You think I wanted my cock plastered all over the news coms come this afternoon? The

crowd would've gotten an eyeful if they'd still been out there this morning.”

And even though it felt strange to do, with the heaviness of this house, with the pain and sorrow that still filled us both, I laughed.

And it felt *good*.

CHAPTER 49

Two days later, my Halo orb startled us out of a deep sleep, late into the night. Gemma stirred next to me, blinking blearily in confusion until she *realized*.

Until I realized.

When I accepted the call, Kaldur's face appeared, perfectly crafted in colored pixels as they floated between us.

Raazos's blood, I thought, my heart suddenly pounding.

"Tell me," I said softly, holding his eyes.

I couldn't breathe. Gemma's hand squeezed my arm. Hope rose. Blinding and tentative but beautiful.

"*Alaire's mercy*, Azur," Kaldur said. The sheer *emotion* I heard in my brother's voice made Gemma press her hand to her mouth, tears beginning to shine in the darkness. "We found her. *We found her.*"

I closed my eyes. Focusing on my breath.

Joy.

Utter, perfect joy and relief.

Mother, she will join you soon, I vowed quietly.

"Bring her home, Kaldur," I rasped. "Bring her home to us."

EPILOGUE

*T*wo months later...

IT WAS THE NIGHT OF THE MOON WINDS, AND THE STORM WAS raging.

Even still, I wasn't afraid. I was in Azur's arms and he was taking me over the Silver Sea, those red eyes reflecting in the moonlight, his look of pleasure and contentment making me grin up at him.

I still wasn't brave enough to chance higher altitudes during the storm. These moon winds were strong this month too, tugging at Azur's wings, though I had no fear that he would lose control over his own body.

I reached out and skimmed my hand over the waves, smiling when a spray came misting up toward us.

Azur was spearing me with *that* look again. The one that made me breathless. The first time I'd seen it was when he'd taken me flying over the Silver Sea. That very first time. Then afterward, the moment we'd reached the terrace he'd pushed me up against a wall and stolen a fierce kiss that *still* made my toes curl just thinking about it.

"Beautiful," he rasped in my ear, the wind nearly carrying the word away, but I still caught it. I held on to it. Held it close.

I laughed, but the wind took that away. Not before I caught his grin.

“Take me back,” I urged, tightening my legs around his waist so he wouldn’t misunderstand my meaning.

A sharp growl left him. He immediately pivoted, the world going quiet for a brief moment as he stilled, and then we were zooming back to the keep.

House Kaalium’s windows were lit up golden. Warm and inviting. It would be a reprieve from the rush of the moon winds, but I wanted to savor the wildness a little while longer.

So when Azur landed us in the courtyard, I pulled on his hand and tugged him into our secret corner. Hidden by starwood blooms, which were growing larger and larger with every passing week, and the staircase that led up to the main terrace.

“Wife,” he breathed, the wind whipping all around us. Azur flared his wings to help shield me from them.

I was already aching for him. Wet and needy. The moment I caught sight of that relaxed pleasure on Azur’s face from flying, my body responded to it. There had never been a time when he’d taken me out flying that *hadn’t* ended with me on my back or Azur on his.

Reaching up to tug on his horns so he hunched down to me, I kissed him, pouring my need and desperation and delight into it. He groaned, his hands squeezing my backside before lifting me up onto the banister so that our lips were level. There, he devoured me as tingles spread across my scalp, making me smile and shiver.

On the wind, I swore I caught the strain of music.

There was a dance tonight in Laras. Every moon winds, there was a community-wide feast and celebration as the storm raged above.

The Kylorr, I’d discovered, took every opportunity to throw a party. There was even, allegedly, a steam cake festival in the spring, one I was very much looking forward to, though Azur was already grumbling about attending.

The moon winds celebration was where Mira and Sorj, Piper, and Fran were tonight. Ludayn and Kalia too.

We would join them later after we stopped at House Kaalium's shrine. I'd picked one of the most beautiful starwood blooms to leave for Lyca, Azur's mother, and Azur was bringing a small, wooden dagger he'd found in an old storage chest for Aina. A wooden dagger that she'd once used to train him, his brothers, and Kalia with.

But until then, *this* moment was for Azur and me. My husband and me.

Azur's grip was getting tighter and tighter, his wings beginning to thrum as his energy rose. *Needful*. Lusting for more than my kisses, and I would gladly give him anything he desired.

I gasped when he flipped me so I was facing the Silver Sea. The full moon was a shining orb in the sky, reflecting beams over the violent waves as Azur's hand pulled at the loose neckline of my dress. The air was frigid. Winter was approaching. And yet my husband felt like a furnace behind me, throwing off heat that melted into my skin.

I gasped when the wind abraded my bared nipples and then moaned when Azur tugged and plucked at them. His metal gauntlets chilled my flesh, making his touch feel all the more intense, making me shudder against him as he nudged open my legs.

"Get me inside you. *Now, laraya,*" he growled into my ear. I was whimpering by the time his fangs brushed my throat.

Mindlessly, I reached back, tugging at the material of his pants, pulling at the clasps until they came undone and his cock sprang forward. I always wore a dress when we went flying for this very reason. Especially during the moon winds when Azur told me the "blood madness," as he called it, felt heightened. When his hunger for me was a pinching and aching thing and he simply needed *relief*.

His fangs descended and I moaned when he imbedded them deep in my neck. That *first* dizzying tug on my blood

always made my eyes roll back, and my movements became frantic, pushing my dress up around my hips before guiding his thick, heavy cock to my entrance. His tongue lapped at my skin, and every teasing lick felt like it was right over my clit.

“Azur,” I breathed, sinking down on him. His hand came up to my throat. I *loved* when he gripped me like this. It made me want to submit, to *let go* in his arms because I knew that he would never let me fall. In our daily life, we always played games. Games where I challenged him, where we went toe-to-toe, sniping at one another because we *liked to*. Usually, we picked fights over how to handle the harvest records. Sometimes I won. Sometimes I lost.

But *this*...

I never minded the submission when it came to our lovemaking. I *craved* it. So did Azur. My wicked, wicked husband enjoyed seeing me at his complete mercy. He could make me do whatever he wished...then again, I could make him do anything too. We both knew it, and it made my submission all the more tantalizing and satisfying.

Azur fucked me hard and fast, keeping me still with a hand at my throat and the other curled around my thigh, holding it up and open as he used the leverage the banister provided. The moon winds were threading over my nipples, looping around them and tightening. I moaned and squirmed. He fed harder at my neck. Deeper. The music from the celebration carried over the breeze, and I wondered if they'd be able to hear my moans all the way in the villages.

When I came, my climax burst through me like a violent wave. I bucked and screamed. *Nothing* would ever come close to this, and I held on to that pleasure tight, for as long as I could. Azur's fangs prolonged it until he, too, fell over that cliff, joining me in sublime oblivion.

He didn't seat his knot inside me. We didn't have time. We were expected at the celebration soon, but I knew he would later tonight when we were in our bed, alone and together with the moonlight sliding across the walls.

Though he was still inside me, still fucking his silver seed into me, I felt my anticipation rise. This was just a taste, something to take the edge off for us both. But the main course would come later.

I huffed out a pleased laugh. Azur sighed and retracted his fangs, kissing my neck and lapping at his bite marks with his flexible tongue.

I shivered as he pulled his cock out gently, the rush of his come spilling out too, coating my inner thighs.

Despite his spine-tingling and wicked words about getting me pregnant when we'd still been in the Collis, we'd both decided that it was best if I continued taking marroswood for now. The last two months had been...stressful, to say the least. Getting pregnant right now—though I wanted a child with Azur desperately—I knew, wasn't the right time for us. Soon, it would be. Perhaps after winter we would change our minds.

For now, I was content to enjoy *us*. Together. To settle into life in Laras and decompress from the whirlwind of the last two—truthfully *three*—months.

My priority in returning to Laras was getting our affairs in order. My sisters and Fran had chosen to come to the Kaalium with us. Sorj, too, since I didn't think he wanted to be parted from Mira, not when they were finally free to explore a relationship with one another. It had surprised Sorj to discover Killup living in Laras, I thought. But he'd found a job easily, working on the fishing boats that journeyed deep into the Silver Sea, and he seemed to enjoy it. Mira complained that he always smelled like fish whenever he returned but would always scream in excitement and jump right into his arms when she greeted him at the docks after an extended trip, kissing him until his fellow fishermen teased him and pounded on the steel docks with their stomping feet. His gray skin would darken, but he wouldn't be able to keep his hands off my sister for days afterward.

Even though House Kaalium supported my sisters and Fran, Azur insisting on giving them a generous stipend every month, all of them had wanted to get jobs. My sisters had

never worked a day in their lives. Not for money, at least, but it made me proud. It was commonplace in Laras, even for the Kylorr of the noble houses, to work. Azur had hired Fran to work in the keep after she'd asked him...to work beside Ludayn as one of my keepers and assist an aging Zaale in whatever way she could.

Truthfully, it was a great excuse to be able to see Fran every day. She and Ludayn had become fast friends, and it pleased me to no end to see Fran happy after so many years.

Mira had taken work at a local tavern, which had surprised me when she'd told me her decision. But her sunny and bright disposition was well suited for the job, and she gossiped with me about all the regulars at our weekly dinners at the keep.

Piper had landed work with Neela, helping her plan extravagant parties for the nobles and the villages—which, frankly, suited my sister perfectly. Piper had helped with tonight's celebration, after all, and even the approaching storm hadn't dampened her mood. Earlier, she'd been barking orders at a poor, grumbling Kylorr male to get the positioning of the feast table *just so* and I'd had to bite back my smile.

Though Azur had offered them rooms in the keep, they hadn't felt *right* about taking them and had chosen to live within the main village below instead. Piper and Mira shared a home, though Sorj often stayed with them too, especially right after a fishing trip. Fran had her own home, close to where Ludayn and her mother lived above their steam cake shop, and they would both walk to the keep together in the mornings, chatting all the while.

As for New Everton, our estate in the Collis had been left behind. We hadn't taken anything. We'd left the furniture. We'd only packed up our personal belongings, and my grandparents had taken what they wanted from my mother's things. We hadn't looked back and we would never return. The deed lay in House Kaalium's vault, and there it would remain.

The *only* thing I'd taken of my father's was a necklace that he'd given my mother, long ago. He'd found a polished blue stone, worn with time, on a walk home when they'd lived in

New Inverness, before I'd been born. And he'd painstakingly made a simple chain from a metal wire, crafting a bail for the pendant by hand, and it had been one of my mother's favorite jewelry pieces to wear. Something so simple. Something he hadn't paid a single credit for.

I didn't know why I'd taken it. Truthfully, looking at it brought tears to my eyes, but I kept it tucked safely away regardless.

My grandparents had helped with my mother's transport to New Inverness when her grave had been excavated. They'd buried her in a little plot of land on their ancestral estate, close to her beloved stables and the forest where she'd often ridden her horse with her father growing up. She would've loved that, I knew, and it brought me and my sisters a lot of peace whenever we thought of her there.

My father, however...I hadn't spoken to him since the night of his arrest in the Collis. Azur had Setlan keeping us updated with any major happenings regarding his trial, any scrap of news he'd heard through the Four Quadrants. As of yet, nothing had happened. He wasn't on a prison planet. He was being held in the High Quadrant Council's private base with the rest of his unit and would likely remain there for a year, possibly even two, as the evidence was gathered.

For now, we would wait. Just as Aina had waited. Just as House Kaalium had waited.

And we would likely wait some more.

But it was important to me to fill that time with *life*. While my emotions regarding my father were mixed, a maelstrom of emotions that ranged from pity to grief to sadness to anger, I refused to waste another day of my life lamenting the mistakes he'd made in his.

When the time for his trial came, I would attend. But that would be the first time I would see my father since I'd last seen him.

Until then, I wanted to focus on Azur, on our future, on my sisters, on my loved ones and friends, on *me*.

“Let’s get you cleaned up,” Azur murmured in my ear, nipping at my lobe, dragging me abruptly out of my thoughts. I smiled as he smoothed my dress over my hips. “We have a celebration to get to. Though we can skip it if you’d like,” he teased.

“Piper worked so hard on it, we can’t,” I informed him, my legs feeling wobbly when I turned to face him, looping my arms around his neck. “Besides, all your brothers will be calling in on the Halo soon, so we need to get to the shrine.”

Azur inclined his head. We were visiting Kythel in Erzos next week, a trip I’d been looking forward to for nearly a month ever since Azur’s twin had extended the invitation. I wanted to see the Kaalium. I wanted to see and explore the different territories.

I knew that Azur was going in part because they were investigating Maazin, whose death had left me *reeling*. Shocked. Upset. In disbelief. Azur had told me that they believed he’d been involved with the Thryki and had potentially been trying to create tension and friction between the Kaalium and Kaazor from within.

Maazin had lived in Erzos for years before he’d traveled to Laras. Kythel had been looking into his time there and likely had something to discuss with his twin in person. Me tagging along was a necessity since Azur didn’t like to be away from me for longer than a couple days. As such, we’d be away from Laras for nearly a full week.

His other brothers were coming to meet in Erzos as well. And while my relationship with Kaldur had gotten off to a rocky start, he had apologized to me shortly after his return from Pe’ji, after he’d recovered Aina’s body and transported her bones back to the Kaalium.

It had been a fresh beginning for us. For House Kaalium and me. For Azur, Kalia, Kythel, Kaldur, Thaine, and Lucen. And for me. I hoped that we could move beyond the pain and tragedy that had brought us together.

I believed we could.

HOUSE KAALIUM'S SHRINE WAS PEACEFUL AND HUMMING.

The Halo orbs were hovering in various spots of the room, illuminating Azur's brother's handsome features from their respective territories in the Kaalium. Kalia squeezed my hand as Azur spilled his blood in the small *zylarr* that stood in front of their family's shrine. A small offering to Raazos, I'd learned, for keeping the souls safe and protected. For keeping them close.

But my eyes flickered to the newest soul gem within the shrine. There were *hundreds* of them—the souls of House Kaalium's ancestors—illuminating the private room with its tall cathedral ceilings. Each soul gem was safely tucked away within the stone, a special carving for each that had been dug out within the black marble slab.

The soul gems were perfectly round and polished. Their insides were frosty and clear, though they were made from bone, a special process within a time-honored Kylorr tradition.

Aina's soul gem was *glowing*.

As it had since the first moon winds after her soul gem had been nestled among the others.

I remembered that night now. I remembered Azur spilling all of our blood, even mine, within the *zylarr*, another attempt to reach Zyos, to appeal to Raazos to lead her back home to the realm of Alara. Where her sister had been waiting for her. Where her family had been waiting for her.

Like Aina had been *waiting* for that path to open for her, she'd flooded back in. The whole room had chilled with her touch, with her joy, and I'd been in wonderment as I'd felt her *all around us*. And the others too. The lingering souls, just like I'd felt within the keep. Their icy touches, the tendrils scraping through my hair.

It had been the closest I'd seen Azur to crying. When her soul gem had lit up and illuminated his face, his expression

had been so fierce and impassioned that I'd embraced him for seemingly *hours* afterward.

"*Raazos's blood,*" Azur had breathed at that first flickering of light.

"No," Kalia had said, shaking her head as silver tears of joy had tracked down her cheeks. "This is Alaire's mercy."

Maybe it had been both.

And now tonight, Aina's soul gem was glowing again. Even brighter than before. And her sister's was too, right beside her.

Kalia and I placed the starwood bloom on the offering plate. The first bloom that had begun to grow among the deadened vines we had revived. Azur placed the dagger.

Together, we felt the souls *sing*.

Azur came to me, embracing me as the Alara opened to us. And then we left the souls to celebrate the moon winds with one another, stepping out onto the terrace that overlooked the *lore* fields.

Kalia went on ahead to Laras's celebration below. But Azur and I stayed rooted in place as the winds burst all around us, as the music grew louder and the sounds of voices and laughter echoed through the villages.

"I love you, wife," he whispered suddenly in my ear, his arm holding me close to his side.

As always, whenever he said that, my heart flipped backward and forward, like we were flying. Azur always worried that he didn't tell me enough, and so he endeavored to say those words more. I'd always told him that I didn't mind it because I *knew* how he felt. His actions told me every single day. Words were simply words...though it was nice to hear them every now and again.

"I love you too, husband," I told him, smiling up at him, watching his pleased grin spread.

We'd gotten married again last month, in a private ceremony at the keep. His family had been in attendance. So

had mine. I hadn't *needed* another ceremony to bind myself to him, but I'd known that it was important to Azur. In the end, it had been one of the most beautiful days of my life.

His kiss was sweet and gentle as the bright, silvery moon shone down on us.

"Let's go celebrate," he murmured with a grin, his fangs flashing.

He tugged on my hand, leading me down the slope from the shrines.

"Laras awaits. And I'm eager to dance with my wife."



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Love,

Zoey

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zoey Draven has been writing stories for as long as she can remember. Her love affair with the romance genre started with her grandmother's old Harlequin paperbacks and has continued ever since. As a Top 100 Amazon bestselling author, now she gets to write the happily-ever-afters—with a cosmic, otherworldly twist, of course! She is the author of steamy Science Fiction Romance books, such as the *Warriors of Luxiria* and the *Horde Kings of Dakkar* series.

When she's not writing, she's probably drinking one too many cups of coffee, hiking in the redwoods, or spending time with her family.

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