

A DARK FANTASY ROMANCE



FEATHERS
SO
VICIOUS

COURT OF RAVENS

1

LIV ZANDER

FEATHERS SO VICIOUS

COURT OF RAVENS

BOOK ONE

LIV ZANDER

INK HEART PUBLISHING

CONTENTS

[Enjoy NSFW illustrations?](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

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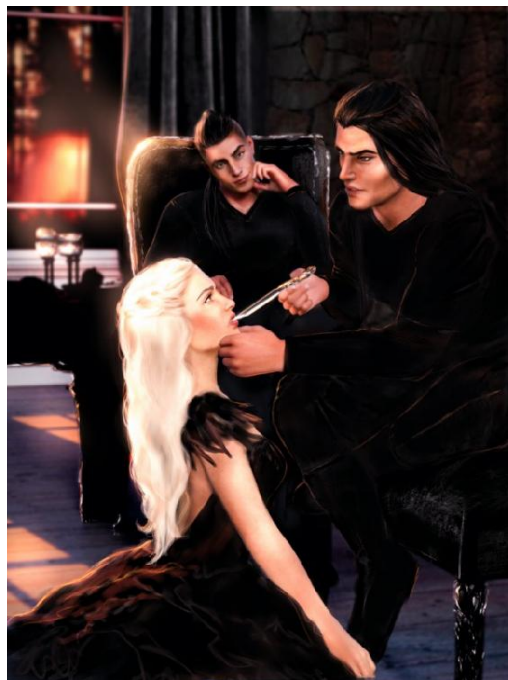
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*For every girl who can love a villain, so long as he's
handsome, hung, and good at groveling.*

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CHAPTER
ONE



This is a **dark** fantasy romance, containing situations that might make some readers uncomfortable. Your mental health matters! You can visit www.livzander.com for details on content and triggers, or reach out to me directly! info@livzander.com

CHAPTER
TWO



Galantia

Past, Tidestone

I killed my first Raven the day my brother died in his cradle.

That morning, Mother’s deep-throated groans echoed from her chambers along the balcony of the inner sanctum. They carried through the door and into my room, like they had all night, turning my belly. How much longer would she labor? Would my little brother have my hair, creamy like the cut oats in the larder?

“Galantia...” Risa straightened in her pale green robes, my nursemaid ever so displeased with my wandering thoughts, and shoved a strand of brown hair interwoven with gray back under her bonnet. “Why did our good King Barat—may the gods keep him and Dranada safe—declare war against the royal House Khysal all those years ago, and eventually attack the city of Valtaris?”

“Because the Raven King, Omaniel of House Khysal, had kidnapped King Barat’s human betrothed many years prior.” I looked down at the painting of the offender in the book before me, his long black hair braided back, his breastplate engraved with the sigil of his house: a raven sitting on a skull. “He’d forced her to marry him for—” My eyes snapped to the door. Had Mother just screamed? “Political... political gains.”

A subtle cough. “What political gains?”

“Lands.” My ears pricked at each hurried footstep behind the oak, each murmur of hushed voices. Was my brother born? “Or strongholds.”

“Galantia...”

My spine straightened, but my eyes remained on the door, ever so disobediently. “Armies, maybe.”

“Or perhaps all three.” Risa sighed the way she often did when I was too excited, which was as perilous as running. “Galantia, will you—”

“How much longer? Can I visit Mother now?” My legs tingled as if they wanted to run. “Do you think the baby is here now? Do you think it’s a boy, like the healers say?”

“Gods be good, they better make it so, and finally place an heir in that dusty cradle.” Turning the page in the book, Risa shook her head, her forehead lined with deep frowns. “Your lord father needs to secure his line and allies now more than ever. It’s the only thing that’ll keep those Ravens in hiding from another uprising.”

Outside, a scream echoed.

High-pitched. Gargling.

“He’s here!” I jumped to my feet and ran toward the door, the green skirts of my dress fanning out behind me. “My brother is here!”

I lifted the bolt, opening the door just wide enough for me to squeeze through the gap and out onto the balcony. My feet slipped each time I pushed against the tiles damp from fog. I wouldn’t let that stop me.

“Galantia!” Risa shouted behind me. “Come back here at once! Your mother does not permit you to run!”

Oh, but how could she be displeased with anything on such a day? I hurried along the carved stone banister and columns that supported the roof, following the wails of my brother. Only a boy could scream so loudly! The future Lord of the House Brisden.

But his cries grew fainter the closer I came to Mother’s chambers. By the time I stood before the tooled wooden door, there was silence.

Belly-churning silence.

Why was it so still?

I wanted to grab the handle, but my arm wouldn’t lift. What if my brother was dead like my little sister? Risa had told me that Mother had lost two babies after me. I didn’t know how many she’d lost before me. Enough to put her aside, Father once scolded her, making Mother cry.

Against the ache in my belly, I pushed down on the handle. The large door croaked on its heavy iron hinges, but only until I snuck inside and pushed it shut. What was that smell?

A strange sweetness wafted around my nose, the air inside Mother’s chambers otherwise stale and depleted. Maids scurried about the room, changing sheets, scrubbing drops of blood from the floor, wringing out cloths over a water basin that stood on a stool beside Mother’s bed.

My chest lifted.

There she sat, the fine golden hairs at her temples curled and clinging to her damp forehead. A smile as big as none before lined Mother’s lips, making all my fear go away. She gleamed down at the baby she cradled in her arm, hushing and rocking the bundle in its woolen blanket.

On light steps, I walked over to her bed. How pretty she looked. How happy.

“Mother,” I said softly as I stopped by the edge of her bed, the heavy green curtain pulled back all the way so the maids

could fluff the pillows, shake the sheets. “Are you well?”

“Shh...” she hushed when the baby scrunched up its nose, rocking the red-faced thing with one hand while the other stroked a gentle finger over its wild fluff of brown hair. Father’s hair. “You’re all I ever prayed for.”

Something shifted in my belly.

Maybe I was hungry.

“So it’s a boy?”

No answer.

Oh, she probably hadn’t heard me.

I stepped closer to her bed, cleared my throat, leaned over a bit so she would see me standing there. “Do I have a brother?”

Mother continued to stare down at the baby while the room somehow blurred around me. Why was she not hearing me? Not seeing me? I stood right there!

“Mother?”

“Aye, it’s a boy, litta’ lady,” one of the maids said, who knelt beside me and scrubbed the floor with ash even as she glanced up at me with frowns between her eyes. “We already sent word to ye’ lord father. Ach, they’ll ring the chapel’s bells for three days.”

“Three days...”

So small, my brother, yet so important. How many days had Father commanded the bells to ring when he’d found me in the cradle? One? Two?

“He’s so handsome,” I said, even though it was a lie. His head looked strangely shaped, and his face was covered in white peelings, but I did not dare say so. “Can I touch him?”

Mother said... nothing.

She continued to hush my brother, gently rocking from side to side, humming a melody I’d never heard from her lips.

“I prayed for you,” she whispered gently between tunes. *“You are so perfect.”* Another hum. *“I love you.”*

The longer she told him these things—things never spoken to me—the more my legs tingled as if to run once more. But where to? Around the room? No, Mother would scold me, but... if she scolded me, would she not also look at me? See me?

I turned away...

...and bumped straight into the stool.

It tipped, sending the washbasin to the ground with a loud *clank*. A flood of bloodied water splashed across the floor, sending the maids to scurry away under yelps and squeals. My brother threw his little arms up in a jerk. His deafening scream followed.

“Look what you’ve done!” Mother finally bore her angered gaze into me, then looked at something behind me. “What is she doing here? Get her out of my sight.”

My heart cracked. “But I didn’t mean to scare my little bro—”

“Hush, child...” Risa suddenly took me by the hand, spun me around, and ushered me back out the door. “Let’s give Lady Brisden time to rest while we see about the orchard, yes? Maisy can cook you up some apples, mash them, and serve them with honey, just how you like them.”

My face tingled and my eyes burned until everything blurred. “I don’t want stupid apples!”

“Galantia...” Risa squatted down in front of me on the balcony, cupping my face between her hands and running her thumbs over my eyes. “Don’t cry, Galantia. Never cry. Come on now... be a good girl and breathe. In and out, just like I showed you.”

My teeth clenched.

I didn’t want to be calm.

But if I didn’t comply, then Mother might hear of this, call me difficult, and send me to my room without Risa. I didn’t

want to be without Risa. Didn't want to be all alone.

Breathe in. Don't cry, Galantia.

Breathe out. Don't cry, Galantia.

"That's my good girl," Risa said with a smile and righted herself, taking my hand into hers. "Better?"

"A little." I blinked away my tears and forced my lungs into an even rhythm, just like she'd taught me. "Will you still take me to the orchard? Outside the walls? Please?"

"This once, and only briefly. Come now."

She guided me along the balcony. When we descended the stairs, one of the chapel's bells tolled. By the time we reached the inner sanctum at the bottom, both bells rang until my ears ached.

"It's so loud." When the stable boys and guards clapped in celebration, I held her hand tighter. "Did the bells ring when I was born?"

"Your lord father wasn't here the day you came into this world; he was gathering bannermen for King Barat before he came home to see the little lady."

"Did he command the bells to ring, then? When he finally came and saw me?"

Her lips narrowed until she finally shook her head. "No bells."

No bells.

That tingle in my face was back, creeping toward my eyes, my ears, my mouth, itching me until my lips parted on their own accord. "They cheer for my brother as if he's the prince himself. He's *ugly*."

"Galantia!" Risa scolded. "How can you say such a terrible thing? And about your own brother?"

My feet dragged heavily over the crushed seashells as we passed the western wall, the kennels quiet since Father had gone out to hunt earlier. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I said that."

I'd wanted a brother or sister since forever. Someone to play catch with, hide and seek, read books to. Anything to pass the boring hours where I wasn't allowed to run, to ride... or even play with the servants' children.

It was always just Risa and me.

During bad storms, she allowed me to come to her bed. Sometimes, she even hid me away under a servant girl's dress and took me to the beach, letting me play with the waves for hours.

My heart expanded at those thoughts.

Still, it never felt quite full.

Always felt a bit... empty.

Risa stopped and turned to me, narrowed lips slowly lifting into a soft smile. "You will ask the gods for forgiveness before you go to bed tonight."

"I will," I said, ears pricking at an ominous howl, like when the wind cut across the gaps in the cliffs where seagulls nested. "I promise."

"Good," she said. "It's not decent to speak of..."

She said more after that, but her voice faded away under another howl coming from a black gap in the door beside us. A bad smell drifted on the current, like the hound dung from the kennels mixed with the stench of the innards Father fed them after a hunt.

The dungeons.

My stomach clenched.

My chest, however, lifted ever so curiously. It did that sometimes when I passed by this place. Maybe because of the noises coming from the inside? I heard them through the stones when I snuck away sometimes. Moaning. Grunting.

Crying.

"Whatever is it now, child?" Risa gave a tug on my arm, and when I only stumbled forward a single step, her gaze

followed my line of sight. “Never go down there. Do you hear me, Galantia?”

I kept staring at the slit of gaping darkness. “What’s in there? Thieves?”

“I’ll tell you what’s in there,” she whispered and held my gaze with shivering resolve. “Rats!” A laugh escaped her at the way I jumped, then she tugged me back into motion. “Rats as big as the corn ears in the larder!”

I followed Risa out the western gate, glancing back over my shoulder whenever she wasn’t looking. Was that what I’d heard? The squeaks of rats and the scuttling of little claws over rock?

“Rats aren’t that big,” I said.

I looked up at the dreary sky, catching a whiff of the salty breeze that drifted between the walls. Waves clashed against the nearby cliffs upon which sat Tidestone, rumbling to the squawk of a gray gull that glided on the wind toward the deep, wide sea.

My chest expanded at the sight. “Where do you think it’s going?”

Risa abruptly stopped. “Oh, no, we’ve come too late, Galantia.”

She waved at the path that passed through the meadows that stretched out before Tidestone, strewn with field stones as big as my head. Apple trees grew like soldiers standing perfectly in line to one side of the road—all of them empty.

I pointed at a lonely cart that stood by the edge, holding woven baskets, each filled with red and yellow apples. “What about those?”

“It wasn’t our sweat that shook those off the trees.”

“But trees grown on my father’s lands.” I released Risa’s hand, climbed onto the cart, and lifted an empty grain sack from a basket of apples. “We only need one. Nobody will miss it.”

“Catch him!” The shout coming from within the gate made me jump up. “Don’t let the prisoner escape!”

My heart thundered inside my chest when my eyes caught on a tall, older boy who slunk around barrels. He sprinted down the path, his long black hair knotted and filthy, his trousers torn, the green-bruised legs poking out beneath like thin stilts of brittle wood. He frantically looked back, as if a wolf was after him. Where had he come from?

Within the blink of an eye, tendrils of black shadows whirled around his wobbly legs, his skinny arms, his sunken-in cheeks. His bare foot caught on one of the field stones, ripping him to the ground.

But he never hit it.

Instead, he burst into a flock of one, two... five ravens. The black-plumed birds flapped, croaking their hoarse *kra-kras*, but they never left the ground. As though their wings had been broken, they all jostled and rolled across the path, never taking flight.

With a surge of black feathers that danced on the breeze, the birds came back together, only for the boy to keep running. Falling. Pushing back up and running again.

My fingers numbed.

A Raven.

Nothing but warlocks and witches with magic as black as their plumes, Father always said, and blood like pitch in their corrupted hearts. They were wayward beings. Wretched. Corrupted. Vile.

“Don’t let the Raven escape!” one of the guards shouted. “Catch him!”

My muscles tensed.

Yes, we had to catch him!

As if curled by the chill running through my limbs, my fingers tightened around the woven edge of the apple basket. I looked at the boy, then I tipped the basket with all my strength.

Dozens of apples rolled off the cart and over the ground. He stepped on one, which ripped his pale-bruised leg out from underneath him. Paddling his arms like useless wings, he stumbled and fell.

Thud.

His head hit a field stone, rocking his face sideways. His matted hair fell away from a birthmark that sat right beneath his earlobe, black and round.

The boy stared at me, unblinking. And he continued to stare at me even as the crushed rock beneath his face swelled with blood, forming a perfect circle around his pallid features.

Not black like Father said.

Crimson.

“What is this?” Father’s deep baritone resonated the area to the hoofbeats of his stallion before he brought the horse to a stop. He dismounted, casting his hazel eyes—which I had inherited from him—over the dead boy first before he finally looked at me. “Your mother will be out of her wits if she learns you left the walls.” He looked over at the boy once more. “What happened here?”

Another guard bowed his head as he slowly approached Father. “The prince escaped with that... evil magic of his.”

Prince?

I eyed the boy. He didn’t look like a prince. Princes were handsome, gallant, and strong. This boy was filthy, skinny, and dead.

“While the others took care of the commotion in the cells, I pursued the prince but...” The guard looked at me. “It was the Lady Galantia who stopped this one for good, or so it seems.”

“Mm-hmm, just as well. This one was useless in lifting that blasted curse from Valtaris.” Father cast his judging stare over the scene once more, the sun glinting off a white stone amulet around his neck, but it softened slightly when he set his

gaze on me. “Is what the guard tells me true? You brought this Raven to justice?”

I swallowed past a lump in my throat, for Father rarely spoke to me unless he was pleased with me, and he was *never* pleased with me. “Y-yes, my Lord—”

“My Lord!” Healer Targen scurried out the gate and hurried over to Father, his thin strands of white hair blown in all directions on his speckled scalp the same way the wind tugged on his brown robes. “My Lord, I bring... gods forgive me for what I must say.”

Father straightened in his brown leather hunting outfit, jaws tightening for a brief moment. “Do you bring news of my firstborn son?”

“My Lord...” Targen bowed his head, leaning closer to Father where he murmured, “Your son lived but a short while, looking content one moment, only for his breaths to fade into silence the next... just like the others.”

My muscles tensed when I watched Father’s hands first tremble, then fist by his sides. Did that mean my brother was dead? Like all the others before and after me?

Father looked toward the bell tower of the chapel for long moments, then his attention returned to me. He unclenched his hand, placing it atop my head. Nothing but a single pat, but it made my heart dance in my chest.

He walked off, shouting to his guards, “If anybody asks why Tidestone rang the bells this day, let it be known it was because my strong, dutiful daughter, the Lady Galantia, killed a filthy Raven.”

A single tear rolled down my cheek, then another, turning my chest heavy as if they all collected inside my heart. For the first time, it felt full. For the first time, I felt loved.

CHAPTER
THREE



Galantia

Present day, Road to Ammarett

“**T**he painter probably rendered him double as handsome.” Back aching from too many hours of sitting in our carriage, I held up the gold-framed likeness of Prince Domren. “Which means he’s truly only about half as good looking as the donkey in the stable. Quite literally. Rather long in the face, this one.”

“Galantia!” Risa’s sharp scold drowned beneath its familiarity where she sat across from me beside Mother. “It’s not becoming of a lady to speak so ill about any man, but certainly not when he’s no less but a prince.”

Not any man.

Not even any prince.

My betrothed.

“Oh please, I’m merely practicing my future role.” I tossed the likeness wherever it may fall, and folded my arms beneath this ridiculous nest of pinned creamy curls I was forced to wear—its torture second only to my stifling gown of heavy brocade. “If a wife cannot speak ill of her husband, then what joys are there left for her in marriage?”

Risa sighed the way she’d done daily for the last decade, except that she’d also started to weave her frustration with me into whatever she was currently knitting. Another shawl in the color of our house, by the looks of the pale green rows, which she pulled from the wicker basket on the floor to place beside her on the golden velvet coverlet.

I rose, slipped off my seat, grabbed her knitting needles from the basket, and reached them to her gouty fingers before I sat back down. A silent apology for every contemptible remark I’d made over the last two weeks on this road.

And the remarks still to come.

I couldn’t help it.

Mother called me quarrelsome, obstinate, or worse each time she had to spend more than ten minutes in my presence. Being forced to endure my company in this carriage for so long didn’t improve her harsh assessments of me, and it positively diminished my ambition to prove her otherwise. Poor Risa was caught somewhere in the middle.

“Rotten.” Mother continued to stare out at the fields of brown and green-speckled wheat stalks, which weren’t a novelty as of late, so the word was likelier another timely appraisal of her disagreeable daughter. “The union between House Brisden and the crown is as much an honor as it is a blessing, even for a spoiled being such as yourself.”

My throat narrowed.

Spoiled...

Oh yes, the Lady Brisden had always been quick to give me everything I’d never asked for, and nothing of what I’d so desperately wanted. Her hug was in the tightness of my silk corsets. Her caress in the rich fabric of my dresses. Her kiss in

the green gemstone that sat in a golden socket against my sternum.

“Spoiled at your command, Mother,” I said. “Surely you will not blame a daughter for her parents’ poor choices where her childhood rearing was concerned?”

“Always so clever in your responses.” Her eyes narrowed, a rare display of emotion that looked utterly out of place on her usually straight face. “I should have allowed Risa to take a belt to your behind.”

I shifted, my breathing somehow spurred on by the sudden image of leather striking my rear. What kind of pain would it cause? A hot sting? Or more like an expanding chill? I wouldn’t know.

Pain was a stranger.

“Perhaps you should have,” I challenged, as if I was ready to lift my skirts to Risa, even though I stood over a head taller than the old woman. “Why didn’t you?”

Something restless swirled around in my chest as I waited for a response. A remark on my impudence, my mulishness, my disobedience. Anything! How about my lack of a penis? She hadn’t lamented about it for months.

Mother only clenched her lips.

Cold. Distant. Silence.

How... disappointing.

I watched this woman who’d birthed me—and under great strain, if Risa’s accounts were to be believed. The dreary bit of light that caught on Mother’s pearl-embellished braid only emphasized her graying hair, and the way her jaws clenched distorted her regal features. Worse was how I still found her beautiful, with a natural grace that must have been the envy of all nobility once upon a time.

With seemingly nothing left to argue about, I brushed a curl from my face. Those erratic coils Risa had put in my hair were subdued by the same pearl pins Mother wore. She hadn’t bothered to remark on them, probably hadn’t even seen them,

for that would require her to look at me. Might as well get rid of them.

I pulled one from my hair, lowering it onto my coverlet. Why had I even chosen them? As much as Mother loved pearls, they never truly stood out against my alabaster tresses.

“But I agree,” I said after endless moments of uncomfortable quiet. “This betrothal is a blessing. Unto the crown, that is.”

After all, Tidestone remained the last stronghold between the Raven’s ruthless revenge and Dranada’s capital, Ammarett. Whereas some human lords had sworn fealty to the usurper who led those black-haired warlocks and witches now, Father remained steadfast in fighting off their attacks. What better way to keep the Lord Brisden loyal to King Barat than to join houses?

“You should thank your father for arranging this match, and all he has given you.” Mother waved her hand over the ornate interior of our carriage, likely as a reminder of all the niceties I’d been afforded in lieu of something as simple as a kind word uttered from my parents’ lips. “Truly, Galantia, there’s no room in this for your dismay.”

“Dismay?”

Stifling a laugh, I ran my hand over the fine threads of gold that adorned my ivory dress, every stitch carefully placed to bring out the value of my womb. If anything, I was looking forward to a life away from Father’s silent disappointment and Mother’s vocal disdain.

Not to mention the suffocating restrictions of nonsensical rules that had wrapped me like porcelain for years. *Don’t run, Galantia. Don’t cry, Galantia. Don’t walk in the rain, Galantia. Don’t touch the knife, Galantia.*

For someone who only ever found scorn for me, the Lady Brisden had an unhealthy obsession with my safety—something I used to tell myself was her way of showing that she loved me. In the end, I came to the conclusion that it

wasn't so much a desire to keep me alive, but simply not to watch another child of hers die.

"You mistake me, Mother." I opened one of the panes on the window, the fields stretched before me burnt black, which we passed at a fast trot. "I am quite pleased with the match."

I would marry King Barat's only living son, heir to the throne of the Kingdom of Dranada. That he was about as appealing to look at as mutton stew was of no concern to me. Maybe it took a ghastly prince to make me feel wanted. Adored. *Loved*.

For just once in my life.

In the field ahead, a woman knelt in the blackened mud, her white bonnet smudged and her threadbare dress coming apart at the seams. Not once did she glance toward our carriage, her entire focus on tilling the ground while the baby strapped to her back with linen wailed.

"Why did they burn all the fields?" I asked.

"Plant lice, potato wilt, worms, swarms of crickets." Risa shook her head, letting the polished bone of her needles clank together in quick succession. "The only way for the farmers to get rid of these pests is fire."

Pests the Ravens had spread across the lands, leaving Father's subjects starving and his army at half rations. I'd overheard a kitchen maid tell another not long ago that entire flocks of them had darkened the sky, devastating our harvests.

My temples ached with each piercing cry as we passed the woman and her baby, and the road so deeply furrowed after days of rain, the carriage jostled me around. "It's strange, don't you think? That the Ravens have been holding Deepmarsh Castle and the Hanneling Hold for months now, but never attacked Tidestone?"

"It's the ocean breeze and the wind cutting along our cliffs," Risa said, her hair long since as white as her bonnet, pinned-back under the cotton as strictly as ever. "Thank the gods, Ravens struggle to fly in those currents, making them easy targets for our arrows and nets. Without them, no doubt

this... Lord of Shadows would have turned our guts into a feast for his followers by now.”

Lord of Shadows.

That name was whispered with fear and worry from the kitchens to the stables. With nothing but a thought, that warlock could cast an entire village into the blackness of his shadows, or so rumors had it. Where he'd come from, I didn't know, but in five short years, he'd managed to assemble a devout army of Ravens around him.

“He is *no lord*,” Mother said, her tone sharp. “Speaking of him as such elevates this usurper above what he truly is: a criminal who pillages, kills, and rapes his way across the kingdom, sparing no human soul.”

“Of course you are right, my lady.” With a dip of her head, Risa returned her attention to the row that had slipped off her needle, carefully gathering it back up. “Our lord has crushed a great many rebellions over the years, and so it will be with this one.”

My teeth clenched.

This was no mere rebellion.

We'd had a great many of those ever since I was a child. Over the years, surviving Ravens had rallied together, vowing to avenge the decimation of the royal House of Khysal. They'd always ended up slaughtered—not comfortably seated inside *our* strongholds.

It was open war.

And I wasn't sure we were winning.

After a while, a pound on the roof of our carriage had Mother blow out a long breath. “We might as well be on this road for two months if we keep pulling into each forsaken village.”

The steady beat of hooves slowed to a walk as the carriage turned, letting the fields beyond the window change into age-cracked wattle and daub. A forge soon came into view, where

red embers slept inside a massive stone hearth, the bellow as quiet as the black anvil that stood nearby.

Mother opened the gilded shutter and her window, wrinkling her nose deeper the longer she glanced about the sizable village. “Why are we stopping?”

“It’s one of the horses, m’lady,” a soldier’s voice sounded from outside. “It’s gone lame after throwing a shoe.”

“Again?” An exaggerated sigh and a dismissive wave of her hand later, she slammed the window shut once more, looking close to a headache with the way she pressed two fingers against her temple. “This journey is insufferable.”

Alas, finally, Mother and I agreed on something. “I will take some fresh air.”

Perhaps for the first time in my life, the Lady Brisden neither confined me to the carriage with a command, nor preached how the autumn air carried the white plague. Oh, my poor mother must have grown weary indeed. Two weeks of pretending I didn’t exist cannot have been easy while sitting right across from me.

With no time to spare, I gathered my skirts and made my way to the end of the carriage. “Open.”

The wooden door lowered down into a short set of steps, and a soft drizzle settled on my face. Even though dark clouds blanketed the dreary sky, I squinted at the sudden brightness after hours inside this thing.

“Water and hay the horses. Have the innkeeper ready rooms for her ladyship.” Captain Theolif shifted in the saddle of his mare, his hair shorn as short as those whiskers on his face. No human cursed with black hair wore it with much pride these days. “House guards! Stay by the Lady Galantia’s side!”

“Oh, these knees will be the death of me,” Risa murmured behind me, making her way down the steps on wobbly legs. “Your dress will get dragged through the muck, Galantia. It’s best to stay in the carriage, not catch a cough out here.”

“However would I survive it?” I clasped her arm to help her down. “Curse this drizzle, but I need a moment away.”

If for my own or Mother’s sake, I couldn’t say, but I immediately spun toward the team of six gray horses that snorted plumes into the chilled air. Two soldiers followed to guard my life, and Risa followed to remind me to guard my damn virtue.

Veering left, I followed along the jagged line of a fence, its stacked rails rough against how my fingers glided over the wood. “Where is everyone?”

“Sitting inside by a dry fire, I would assume.” Old knees forgotten, Risa huffed and puffed beside me, putting even the soldier’s brisk steps to shame. “Where are you going?”

“Anywhere.”

Anywhere that wasn’t Tidestone, with those thick walls I’d never left. I wanted to see a drunkard stumble from a tavern, a man haggle with a merchant over exotic wares, a woman loudly scold her husband. I wanted to see all those things I only ever heard maids whisper about!

When bellows and shouts shattered through the drizzle, I stopped. “Did you hear that? There’s commotion behind the chapel.”

I followed along the stone building, but the crowd of villagers didn’t appear until I rounded the apse in the back. Men, women, and children congregated in a half circle before a wooden platform that abutted the building, which held two wooden posts and a crossbeam.

Gallows.

My pulse throbbed inside my ears, drowning out Risa’s grievance about how this was no place for a lady. “Will they hang someone? Here? Now?”

“Hanging’s no good here, my lady.” A guard approached my side, clearing me a path through the crowd of gaunt faces with one plated arm, finally bringing a man into sight who violently brought down a whip. “Not for her kind.”

The hairs along my arms lifted more with each silent lash, not a single crack in the air. Only the jingle of metal hooks attached to the fall, which smacked and bit into the back of a woman who lay splayed out on the platform, her dress in bloodied tatters.

“Raven witch!” a man shouted at the top of his lungs. “She needs to burn!”

Blood-streaked fingers digging into the wooden floor, the woman struggled to lift her bruised face and let out a deafening cry toward the crowd. “I’m no Raven!”

“Hair as black as those bastards’ plumes,” the woman nearest the platform yelled. “She’s a Raven. I’ve seen this witch about the fields last night, blighting our crops, starving us!”

“It’s not tr—aah!” Another strike of the whip. “The only thing I’m guilty of is being born black of hair! Oh please... please, plea-ha-ha...”

Cold dread shivered down my spine until my shoulder blades pulled together. “What if she’s not a Raven?”

When men with lances stepped onto the platform and the crowd roared louder, the guard beside me rested his hand on the pommel of his sword, though his easy posture betrayed no immediate danger. “Then she’ll prove it.”

“Prove it, how? She’s been whipped halfway to death already.”

“To bring about her shift,” Risa muttered with a tug on my arm. “Galantia... your mother would not want you to see this.”

“Why? Is she concerned that it might give me cataracts? Nothing ever seems to—” Sudden numbness spread along my limbs when two young men carried a steaming kettle by two long handles, which they lifted high over the woman. “Surely they won’t—”

A gargling scream mixed with the splash of water as it hit the woman’s back. Steam billowed into the air, but it barely hid how the woman jerked and shook on the ground, nor how

the hot water rinsed the blood off, sending a wave of pink across the wood before it dripped into the mud.

“Oh, gods...” My voice was merely a whisper since my lungs refused to take in the iron-scented steam that wafted toward us. “How much more torture does she have to endure to prove her innocence?”

“Even before King Barat attacked the city of Valtaris, Raven children were taught to endure great pain,” Risa explained. “Taught how to hide what they are for as long as they could, should it come to war.”

“Please,” the woman pleaded once more, her voice hoarse. “Oh, please... have mercy...”

“She’s no Raven,” I uttered, then a bit louder so the guard would hear. So the guard would intervene with this... atrocity. No creature could endure this to hide its wicked nature. “She’s no Raven.”

Another strike of the whip. Metal clawed into flesh, ripping another scream from the accused, along with drops of blood—and quite possibly pieces of flesh—that speckled the platform crimson.

Then it happened.

A plume of shadows and feathers puffed from the platform, leaving nothing behind but five black birds. They croaked and shrilled, flapping their bent wings and wobbling about. One of them rolled onto its feet, pushed itself off the platform, and into flight...

Until the silver metal of a lance pierced through its body and sunk into the wood, pinning the dying bird down. Its wings twitched for eternal seconds, then stilled. More lances thudded into the wood. Four more, to be precise, skewing the rest of the struggling ravens.

My pulse fluttered in my throat at the sight of this carnage, but it exploded into my head when the crowd fell into turmoil. Men pushed through the mass of people while women slunk and elbowed through the gaps. They all tried to climb onto the platform. Some ripped the lances from the men’s hands and

sprinted off, only to get tackled by another. Others grabbed for the pierced ravens, pulling until the birds tore into feathery pieces, letting red guts dangle from their bellies.

Nausea rose in the back of my throat. “What is happening?”

“Out,” Risa shouted. “Get her out.”

The guard gripped my arm, pulling me away from the chaos as I looked over my shoulder. And there, beneath the platform, cowered a boy. The shadows hid his dirt-smudged face, but not that bright white grin he carried. Not until it disappeared between black feathers as he bit into one of the dead birds.

CHAPTER
FOUR



Galantia

Present day, the village Larpen

I stared down at the roasted bird on the platter where a girl from the kitchen had left it on the table in my room only a moment ago, the way she'd arranged the peppered and salted thing on a bed of red beets nothing short of nauseating. "You cannot be serious."

Risa frowned at the meal, assessing the tiny bird for a second before she simply shrugged. "It's much too small for a raven, so it's probably quail."

Probably...

My stomach clenched. "It could be the size of a sparrow, and I still wouldn't touch it."

I turned away, leaned against the frame of the window, and stared through the thick pane of glass over at the mountain

range where the sun had gone up a few hours ago. “How can they eat something that looked human only moments before?”

“Reckon because it looked plenty like chicken once plucked and roasted.” Risa walked away from the wooden tub in which I’d bathed earlier and rounded my bed. “The people are starving, Galantia.”

“I know.” I turned away from the window, pressing a hand against that sudden cramp in my stomach. “Gods confound it. Eating aside, I shouldn’t feel so ill over this. She was a Raven.”

Evil. Wicked.

The reason for devastated fields, starving subjects, and nearly twenty-five years of bloodshed and hostility. All in the name of a Raven who had kidnapped and raped King Barat’s betrothed, breaking faith with us humans in the most corrupted way.

I stroked a hand over my hair, sleek again since the curls had been washed out, thinking back on how Father had patted my head after I’d killed that Raven boy. *The prince*. Who’d apparently been kept in our dungeons after all, for reasons I’d never dared to ask.

Not that it mattered.

Had I been born a boy, I would hunt down those Ravens myself, doing Father proud once more. The bells had tolled *for me* that day, and I wouldn’t let this unpleasantness drive out the memory of those chimes.

“Ravens are an evil pest that need to be burned away like the ones they spread over our fields,” I said, my spine straightening with new resolve. “One more Raven dead is one less Raven our soldiers will have to face on the battlefield.”

A moment of silence and then...

“I told you not to look.” Risa’s berating remark drew my attention to where she frowned at the sweat-dampened, crumpled sheets on my bed, which she flattened with even strokes of her hand. “But you wouldn’t listen, and now you tossed and turned all night.”

“Because you *snored*. Truly, it’s become rather excessive over the years.” I stepped over to the fire in the hearth where my clay curlers heated in an iron basket that sat in the embers, already wearing my shoes, my gemstone necklace, and a green silk gown with too many frills, laces, and grommets. “I’m fine, and you’re fussing too much.”

When her gaze settled on a white down feather that must have escaped the pillow during said tossing and turning, her hand stalled for a moment, only to brush it off the bed with a disapproving shake of her head. “Yes, you’ve gone from a child to a woman grown. The old nursemaid stays behind with nobody left to fuss over. At least let me fuss while I still have you.”

While I still have you...

Pressure built behind my eyes, strange and unwelcome. Two more weeks on the road, and I would finally escape Tidestone. I would run, and cry, and walk in the rain, and touch all the damn knives I could!

And also leave Risa behind.

Father had meant to dismiss her when I’d turned twelve, saying that she had long outstayed our need of her, but Mother insisted on keeping her. Likely so she wouldn’t have to deal with me.

My nose suddenly turned stuffy as though I was about to cry. Unlikely. I hadn’t shed a tear in... gods, I couldn’t even say how long.

I blinked. Blinked again.

No tears came.

Just as well. How I would manage Ammarett without Risa, I didn’t know, but I could hardly bring my nursemaid to the marriage bed...

“Very well, the pipe clay should be plenty hot now.” I walked over to the upholstered stool and sat. “The gods know it takes quite some fussing to get my hair to coil without it breaking. Will that do?”

A smile hiked the wrinkled corners of Risa's mouth as she hurried over, grabbed the long handle of the iron basket from the fire, and carefully set it on a small table beside me that had already gone black from old burn marks. "There will be no finer bride in all of Dranada the day you wed the prince."

Clad in the tightest corset yet, I sat compliantly still as Risa ran a soft bristle brush over my scalp. "Why I'm forced to survive on little gasps of air still many days away from Ammarett is beyond—"

Thud.

Dust rilled from the crossbeams, making me look up into the gables before I glanced over my shoulder back at Risa. "What was that?"

She squinted up, fingers slipping off my hair, but it was the barks of soldiers that had her spin toward the door. Heavy footsteps, metal clanking against metal, the sound of wooden furniture shifting over the floorboards... it all drifted into my room through the gap at the bottom of the door.

A feverish chill spread across my nape, clashing with the waft of heat from the clay curlers sitting beside me. Was I imagining this for lack of sleep? Making a fuss of it for something as simple as the guards readying themselves for our departure?

The moment I rose toward the window, trying to see if they'd finally finished preparing the carriage, Risa grabbed my arm. "No. Don't let anybody see you in the window. We will stay in this room, Galantia, until Captain Theolif says otherwise."

Surely she had to be overreacting. "Maybe a brawl—"

Glass shattered.

I spun toward the window.

Ice-cold dread gripped my body.

Shaggy black birds fluttered in through the broken panes, cawing and croaking. Their wings bent and warped, feathers

twisting together into shadowy tendrils that turned, tangled, forming the figure of a man.

His body hadn't fully shaped out of the shifting darkness when his green eyes connected with mine, his intense gaze interrupted only by a lock of black hair. It hung over his face where it must have escaped those long strands held back with a tie, the sides sheared up high on his skull.

"Who do we have here?" His rough voice drove a shudder under my skin as his gaze slipped to the gemstone resting against my thudding sternum. "Looks like I found you."

Found me...

Dread like none before chilled me to the bone, and I took a step back, bumping into the stool. It pushed against the table that held the basket of hot curlers. They clanked against each other, louder when Risa grabbed the handle and thrust the searing container at the man.

"Out!" Risa gripped me by the bodice and yanked me behind her just as the man burst into his ravens, dodging the scorching spindles. She shoved me out the door to stumble into the corridor. "We have to find protection with the guards, Galantia. Go downstairs. Go!"

With my breath nothing but frantic little gasps, I hurried toward the stairs, gathering and lifting the train of my dress as much as my shaky hands let me. It kept me from getting my shoes caught in the frills and tumbling down the stairs as I descended into a cacophony of grunts and cries.

"No!" Pottery shattered. Wood groaned. "Get your filthy hands off me!"

My vision speckled from the lack of air. I frantically yanked at my bodice, but my lungs refused to expand. My next step never landed on the wood but inside my skirts. Fabric ripped as I skidded, arms flailing until I regained my balance on the bottom landing.

Then I saw it.

A man—a Raven—held a peasant woman with her chest pinned down on a table, his grip tight in her brown hair. His

breeches were lowered to his pale thighs, showing every dark, coiled hair on his buttocks. Muscles clenched each time he shoved himself into her with such force, the entire table jumped and shifted, letting the wooden mugs roll around.

“No-ho-hooo...” the woman wailed, cried, and gagged into a platter of meat, grunting in pain with each merciless thrust. “Please...”

The man snarled and pushed her face down onto the platter, where her muffled gags and a spray of vomit mixed with the meat. “Shut up, cunt, while I put a Raven inside your belly.”

Cold terror pulled my throat at my next inhale, but it froze my lungs when I spotted one of our guards sprawled out, dead on the ground, with a black ring mark around his neck. Gods have mercy, if I didn’t move now, I’d end up like the woman. Or the guard. Or both.

Just as I glanced over at the door that led outside, something shifted in my periphery. A woman with long black hair held yet another guard by his throat, pushing his writhing body against the wall. Rivulets of her black magic slithered into the man’s mouth, nose, and eyes until, with a wet smack, his eyes oozed out of their sockets in a gush of blood.

I yelped.

The woman let the twitching guard slump to the ground, turned her blood-streaked face my way, and slowly placed her hand on her leather-corseted waist with a siren’s smile on her lips. “Ah, there’s the titled broodmare.”

“Out!” Risa shoved me around the corner, through a kitchen littered with unmoving bodies, and out a door into the damp chill of the morning. “You need to run, Galantia.”

“Run? Run where?”

“Run into the wheat and hide as well as you can.” *Hrrk* went the train of my dress, letting the biting air nip through my underdress as Risa tore the frills to shreds, then yanked at my bodice.

“What are you doing?”

“They can’t know who you are, child,” she said, crooked fingers stripping my finery before she ushered me to stumble over piles of silk and through a stable filled with snorting, dancing horses. “They kill the men and rape the women, yes, but what do you think they’ll do to someone highborn? The daughter of Lord Brisden? The man who slaughtered them by the thousands? Run, child. Run!”

“But what about y—”

“Run! Don’t look back!”

A push against my back sent me stumbling out the stables, eyes searching the seesawing horizon of naked shrubs, crooked grain stores, and empty haystacks. Where was I? Where were the fields?

My heart thrashed loudly in my ears, but not loud enough to drive out the shouts, bellows, and screams shattering through the village. Wheat. Wheat. Where was the damn wheat?!

Ahead of me, one of our house guards lay sprawled out in the mud, dead. A boy cowered, folded like a turtle behind a barrel, a shadowy arrow embedded in his spine, dead. A horse lay on its side where a fog-like blanket of blackness seemed to swallow it whole, dead.

Was everyone dead? Where were our guards? Mother?

My head turned back toward Risa, but the echo of her words stopped me. *Run! Don’t look back!*

Against the numbness freezing my muscles, I lifted my arm as if in a trance, pushing myself away from the wooden beam beside me. One foot inched forward, and then the other followed, carrying me out from underneath the stable’s overhang.

“Where are you going?” An arm grabbed around my waist, pulling me back against the biting stench of garlic and sweat. “Did we have you already?”

“Let go!” No wiggling or writhing changed how the man easily lifted me, carrying me several steps toward a barrel beside an empty stall. “Unhand me at once!”

“Won’t do no harm to have you again.” He pushed against my shoulder blade until my upper body slammed against the wood, an iron ring digging into my lower belly as he kicked my feet apart. “You’re a young one. All soft, tight skin.”

I bucked against the barrel, trapped between unyielding oak and the weight of this man hunched over my back. “Gods fetch you!”

“Keep fighting, shouting, and I might have to share this little pink cunt.” Rough fingers scratched over my knee and up along my thigh as he shoved my skirts up, exposing parts of me no man had ever seen. “But not until I thoroughly fuck this hole.”

My pulse raged at the way he groaned against the side of my neck, making himself smaller until his groin pressed into my bared backside. His hard penis stabbed against my inner thighs, thrusting and shifting in search of my entrance, spreading something wet and sticky across my skin.

Digging my nails into the wood of the barrel, I fought down the nausea and sealed it behind my clamped lips. If I stayed quiet and endured, I might survive. But survive for what? Without my virtue, I had no chance at a life worth living.

“Get off her!” A violent shout echoed through the now eerily silent village. “She’s the one the fate wants, you fucking idiot.”

The man’s weight lifted off me before he staggered sideways, cursing and pulling his breeches up. “How would I know? Doesn’t look highborn to me.”

“Right. Because peasant women wear gemstones around their clean necks where you come from, don’t they?” A yank on my necklace cut off my air, pulling me up and turning me, bringing me face to face with the green-eyed Raven from my room. He held me in place, chain tight in his grip, mouth curling up on one end as his gaze strolled over my underdress. “Though, the way you got rid of the silk looks rather inviting. Molted your pretty feathers right down to the cotton, huh? Who are you?”

My lips parted.

Nothing came out.

Nothing but a gag as my stomach convulsed, sending a burn up into my chest. Would they take me hostage? Perhaps they thought they could get cartloads of coins and silver out of any highborn woman in exchange for her safe return? Yes, that had to be it.

Human or Raven, wars cost gold all the same.

Except... if they'd come for me, shouldn't he know who I was? And if he didn't, was it wise to tell him? If I revealed myself, these savages might rape me, torture me, kill me. Or worse, rape me and keep me alive.

"Swallowed your tongue, sweetheart?" He smirked down at me, his dark brown leather outfit sitting as snug against his broad chest as the bowstring that spun across his tooled cuirass, and eased his grip on my necklace. "Your name."

Fear throbbed through me, clouding my head. What was I supposed to say? None of this made any sense.

"Aww, look how shy she is, sweet little girl."

My gaze snapped to the Raven woman from earlier, who walked up beside us, her fingers wrapped around Risa's neck. Black veins spread from where she dug her long nails into my nursemaid's mottled skin, wrapping around her throat like a tangle of ropes.

A lump of bitterness clogged my throat. *No. Oh, please, not Risa!*

"Lorn..." The Raven beside me let go of my necklace, but I sensed him shift closer against my side. "What do you want with the old hag?"

"This one tried to save the girl. Ah, watching it got me all warm on the inside. Maybe it's her mother? No. Too old. Maid? Lady's maid? What's the difference, Sebian?"

Sebian shrugged. "As if I care."

“Doesn’t matter.” Lorn gave a yank on Risa’s neck, ripping a miserable cry from her that soon turned into a wheeze under the strangle of shadows. “Let’s make this easier. Little girl, who is this woman?”

I looked at Risa, watching her gag and hearing her struggle for air. “My nursemaid.”

“Nursemaid.” Lorn gave an amused scoff. “And who... are... you?”

Risa made a strangled sound. “Naaah!”

I swallowed a gush of saliva, nearly vomiting it back up. Holding back my identity would only buy me time, not change the inevitable. What if revealing it saved Risa? I couldn’t lose her.

Not now, not like this.

“If I give you my name, will you let her go?” When Lorn nodded, I straightened as much as the fear gnawing in my spine let me. “I am Lady Galantia of the House Brisden, daughter of Lord Brisden.”

Sebian sucked a long breath of air through his teeth, but it was Lorn’s malicious grin that turned my stomach before she said, “Brisden’s daughter. Take her to Malyr while I try to track those soldiers who escaped with the golden bitch.”

Dread thrashed through me, but I breathed it down, desperate to salvage the little I could. “You’ll want to take my nursemaid as well. Y-you’ll need her. To chaperone me! If it’s my value you want, let me assure you, it lies in my virtue.”

“My value lies in my virtue,” Lorn mocked in a high-pitched voice as she rolled her eyes, then let out a laugh and pulled a black knife from her belt strap. “Love, you’re too old for a nursemaid. Time to grow up.”

She winked at me.

Then she stabbed Risa in the neck.

CHAPTER
FIVE



Galantia

Present day, the village Larpen

I stared at the spurts of blood that sprayed from Risa’s neck in slowing intervals, my mind trapped somewhere between nerve-wracking shock and heart-breaking anguish.

When Risa’s knees buckled, Lorn gave a shove, letting her body slump to the ground. “There, I let her go.”

She skipped over Risa’s twitching body with the giggle of a scotch-hopper. Just like that. As if the woman bleeding out from her neck was more amusement than a hurdle. At her next step, she shifted into ravens and flew off.

My gaze went back to Risa. Thin, dark purple veins webbed across her pallid face, framing her mouth that gaped unnaturally wide, her tongue entirely black. Her twitching slowed. Slowed more. Stilled.

My heart stopped.

No, this couldn't be.

“Risa?” Why my knees suddenly pressed into the bloodied mud, I couldn't remember. Perhaps I'd collapsed beside her, trembling fingers stroking over her distorted face. “Please say something...”

Why didn't she answer? My Risa always answered; she never ignored me, never pretended I didn't exist. Except...

Risa was gone.

Dead.

A deep cleft cracked open somewhere in my heart, letting new pain pour into my chest until the pressure ached behind my sternum. I wanted to cry, and scream, and thrash, and wail, but I... didn't.

Instead, I remained so still, breathing down each onslaught of hysteria with paced gasps. Exhale. *Don't cry, Galantia.* Inhale. *Don't cry, Galantia.* Exhale. *Don't you fucking cry, Galantia!*

“Alright, up you go.” A set of strong hands clasped my waist, then the world shifted around me. With a thrust upward, Sebian hung me over his shoulder. “I'll carry you to where you're wanted. Be a good girl and save your antics for when I'm gone.”

I dangled upside down, chin shifting over the brown plates of his cuirass that smelled of beeswax and herbs, the leather chaffed as if he'd worn it for many years. The wood of his bow caught uncomfortably on my strands, pulling away on my overhead tangle of tresses, revealing a sight of utter savagery.

Women cried—clinging to fence rails, sat in front of shops among corpses, wailed over little bodies inside their homes behind open doors. Some clutched a hand to their lower bellies, while others hysterically bunched the cotton tatters of their dresses between their legs, wiping at their womanhood.

As much as I wanted to join in their agony, weeping would do me no good. In the back of my mind, I knew I had to fix

my thoughts on how to escape my captor and reach Tidestone. No, not Tidestone! Ammarett.

“Who is this p-person you’re taking me to?” I asked, struggling down the shake in my voice. “This... Malyr?”

“Oh, I have no intentions of taking you to Malyr, and Lorn doesn’t fucking command me,” Sebian scoffed. “My job was to track you down, capture you, and bring you before the fate. Alive and unharmed were his words, which is the only thing left standing between me and a warm meal. If I take Brisden’s daughter to Malyr... well, sweetheart, we might find ourselves struggling with the *unharmed* part.”

Blood pooled in my head, turning me dizzy and scrambling my thoughts. “Fate?”

“Captain Asker.” When the ground beneath Sebian’s boots turned from grass to wet leaves, his shoulder vibrated against me with a shout. “I got the girl from your vision!”

Vision? Like a magical vision? Why would I be part of a vision, yet they hadn’t known who I was upon my capture? My temples ached from all the blood trapped in my skull. I understood none of this.

Except for one thing.

This... fate—whatever that meant—Captain Asker wanted me for reasons I couldn’t grasp yet, but he also wanted me alive and unharmed. That knowledge was no small comfort.

“Fantastic...” Sebian mumbled before he abruptly stopped and lowered me off his shoulder.

My ruined shoes sunk into a blanket of moss as I swayed and glanced around the copse of trees we’d entered. Several tents sat nestled between evergreen shrubs, as abandoned as the half-burned logs in the nearby fire pit.

“Where did Asker go?” Sebian asked loudly.

I frowned at him before I glanced about the silent camp. Water bladders hung from low branches, rolled-up furs were stacked on a stool beside one of the tents, a wooden bowl with

a half-eaten chunk of bread sat beside the cold fire pit... there was nobody here. Who was he talking to?

“Malyr...” Sebian lifted his gaze toward one of the firs while pinching the bridge of his nose. “It took me five days of scouting from the sky to find this damn village. In the rain. I didn’t have a decent meal in just as long, and I’d like to be home before the clouds break again and soak me to the downs. Where’s that damn fate?”

I followed his line of sight, stomach dropping when I finally spotted the raven that sat quietly on a branch. Head tilted, the bird watched me, the bit of light filtering in through the canopy casting a blueish hue over its black plumes.

When a *hrk-hrk* resounded behind me, I spun toward the noise. Yet another raven sat on a young oak across, whetting its long, curved beak on the rough bark. Another perched beside it with its head tucked away beneath a wing, yet one of its eyes poked out from between feathers.

Kra-kra!

The raven’s call drove a shiver down my spine as I turned my head toward the one that sat in the shadows beneath a shrub. It tilted its head this way and that, watching me. Another stretched its wings, flapping them a bit where the animal sidestepped along the branch of a maple. Watching me.

All of them watching me.

It unnerved me, the way ten pitch-black eyes scrutinized me where I’d only ever been ignored...

Wings flapping brought my gaze back to the one on the ground by the shrub. The bird had taken flight, gliding toward me. Another shifted in my periphery. A third dove from the oak to my right, flying my way.

When a sudden flare of wind tousled my strands, I let out a little squeal and ducked just as a raven flew over my head. It circled around a tree, then dove straight at me, along with the other four, making me stagger back a step.

Wafts of black shadows twisted and whirled from their feathers as they all descended at rapid speed. They clashed in a

burst of darkness and black feathers. Some drifted away on the current, while others floated to the ground right in front of me, gathering around a set of black boots.

My heart quickened, filling my veins with liquid terror the higher my gaze wandered along black breeches, an equally dark but intricately tooled leather cuirass, a set of impressive shoulder guards shaped like pointed feathers... until I saw his face.

Then my heart cracked.

The shocking intensity of the man's empty, passionless stare sent an ominous sensation through my body, paralyzing me. Long open strands as dark as pitch framed smooth skin, angular cheekbones, a firm jaw, and a chin held high.

It gave him an aura of forlornness. A sort of apathetic look filled with old sorrow, with his narrow lips in a flat line, his tall stature at ease, the tendons along his neck unmoving, the chest beneath his cuirass lifting slowly with each inhale. He was young, couldn't have reached his thirtieth name day yet. Not nearly.

Sebian stepped up beside me with a shake on his head and a smirk lining his lips. "That shift was a bit dramatic, even for the Lord of Shadows."

Dread expanded in my chest. Oh gods, of course it had to be him who'd decimated that village, killing the men, raping the women. What would he do with me?

I held Malyr's cold stare, trying not to shiver in the throes of his unsettling presence. "You are the one they call the Lord of Shadows?"

Malyr's head tilted sideways—a gesture so similar to the one of his raven, it amplified how my skin cooled at his nearness. How panic clasped at my throat, choking me, making it clear that I stood before the Raven responsible for slaughter, rape, famine, and war.

Chaos.

Terror carved itself a hollow in my chest. How could this be? He was too young to hold such power, too inexperienced

to defeat nearly every lord between Tidestone and the southern seas. Or was he simply evil enough by nature to spread such mayhem over the realm?

“This is her?” His dangerously dark voice spilled into the forest, pebbling my skin. “The young woman from Asker’s vision?”

“I fucking hope so, because I’m not going back to that writhing shadow-mess you left behind at the village,” Sebian said and slowly turned away, gesturing me to follow. “Where is he? I want this settled and done with.”

Malyr reached his hand for my face, cupping my chin. The warm touch sent a flinch through me, surprising in the way his thumb traced the line of my bottom lip. He turned my face to the left. To the right. Up. Down. Scrutinized me from every angle, shifting my face toward every bit of light the forest offered.

“Who... are... you?” The question came slowly, quietly, as though I’d caught his attention by great surprise. “Why did the goddess bring you here? To us?”

“I...” A gasp cut through my words as his face sunk into the crook of my neck, where the cool tip of his nose brushed along a tendon, stubbing my earlobe before it wandered higher and into my hair with a long inhale. *Smelling me?* “I don’t know.”

It was the safest answer I could give before I looked at Sebian for guidance as how to remain *alive and unharmed* exactly, but I only found a hint of confusion on his face before he said, “Are you going to tell me where he is or...?”

“He flew off to have a look at the carriage, likely to see if his gift offered any insight on his *anoaley*.” Malyr pulled back to stare at me, studying my face with great focus as if he expected to find answers along my eyebrows, down the length of my nose... on my lips. “Tell me who she is.”

Sebian folded his arms in front of his chest, frowning at the way Malyr pinched a strand of my hair between his

fingers, inspecting it closely. “Someone who needs to remain—and I cannot stress this enough, Malyr—*unharmed*.”

“So you *do* know.” Malyr let his eyes roam over my form with an appreciation no man had given me before, rousing strange tingles beneath my skin. “I have half a mind to take her to my chambers for the night.”

Sebian chuckled. “Unharmed is not how women come out from there in the morning.”

Cold swept over me, making me shift away from Malyr’s touch. What did that mean? Women never came out unharmed?

Malyr pouted his lips with a slight uptick at the corners as he looked over to Sebian. “You truly worry I won’t like who she is, don’t you?”

“On the contrary, my friend... I worry that you’ll like it too much.” A smack of his tongue. “If I mess this up, Asker will pluck me bare.”

“There is always the option of me ordering your wedding.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“After what you did to that purse of salted shadows?” Malyr arched a brow at him. “Try me.”

“I hadn’t *meant* to lose them at the card table.” Sebian exhaled a long breath. “Fine, you’ll find out soon enough from Lorn, anyway. Malyr, this is Lady Galantia.”

“Galantia...” Malyr breathed. His dark gaze snapped back to mine, eyes burning into me with such intensity, it cast feverish chills across my skin. “She’s the bastard’s daughter.”

My throat tied shut.

Lips thinning into a straight line, stature tensing under the sudden strain of his muscles, tendons along his neck protruding, chest lifting and sinking in an erratic pattern... Everything on him changed, twisting his apathy into unrestrained, frightening interest.

“Mm-hmm, now I *truly* want to take you to my chambers.” His grip slipped to my throat faster than I could dodge it, robbing me of air with how tightly he squeezed, his dark whisper nothing but a purr against my temple. “Or I might just snap your neck, little white dove.”

I tossed and writhed, but there was no escaping the bruising grip of his hand as shadows crept up along his arm. Ice-cold tendrils slithered along my chin, my cheeks, my temples. They crawled into my nostrils, wriggled my lips apart, only to invade my mouth, my throat, my lungs. They strangled me, suffocated me.

My vision darkened.

Blackness swallowed me whole.

CHAPTER
SIX



Sebian

Present day, a copse of trees

Well, I'd tried my best.

Had tried hard to get Asker to dump this assignment on another pathfinder, but no, he'd insisted that *I* found and secured this girl. And look how well that was going...

Malyr wove his shadows down Galantia's throat and into her lungs until her violent thrashing slowed into uncontrolled twitches. He'd been a moody bastard for as long as I'd known him, with a quick temper that hid beneath an otherwise quiet demeanor. That made him all the more vicious. You just never knew when his shadows would lash out.

But he was also a cunning son of a bitch. Malyr knew full well that we needed this girl alive, and it was the *unharm*ed part that currently stood up for debate in that messed-up head of his. He would stop any second now. Any second...

Half a minute later, something akin to concern rose in my empty stomach, because it wouldn't be the first time he killed *by accident*. Ah, shit... he was killing her.

“Malyr...” Focusing on the gift at my core, I communed with his shadows. *Calm. Calm yourselves*. Had any other person dared this, they'd lash back, but not with me. Never me. “Call them back.”

A jerk went through him. He let go of her throat, his entire body trembling as he recalled his shadows—unpredictable assholes on good days, and deadly liabilities on bad ones.

The highborn beauty collapsed to the ground with a heavy *thud*. Silent. Unmoving. Asker was going to have my tail feathers for this...

“Bring me the fate!” Malyr's shout echoed through the forest before wings flapped, and whoever had perched in the nearby trees took flight. “And the healer!”

I grabbed the leather pouch dangling from a low branch, eyes burning and ears buzzing. Spending five days in my unkindness of ravens had overwhelmed my senses to a point I would suffer for a week straight. Every gift came at a cost. Mine? Brain-stabbing headaches.

I retrieved a piece of gray devil's bark from the pouch and placed it on my tongue. My gums clenched at the bitterness, but I chewed past it. It was still better than having to listen to Asker's unavoidable reprimand entirely lucid.

Pouch strapped to my cuirass, I adjusted my bow and rolled my shoulders, my muscles sore from too many hours in flight, damaged as my wings were. “You nearly killed her.”

But only nearly.

My ears still pricked at the wheezed gasps she sucked into her lungs, the slowed pulse that trickled through her veins, the occasional twitch in her finger that let a knuckle grind. Then there was the sour scent of fear seeping off her with each weak beat of her heart, tainted with something sweeter that I couldn't name.

“Even without eyes, I could sense these shadows from a mile away.” Elovan limped into the forest wearing her blue robes, blind as a bat, her kinky hair a wild mess that stood in all directions as she held one hand out before her. When the tip of her shoe stubbed into Galantia’s side, she knelt, letting her fingers guide her hands to the girl’s neck. “This should have killed the thing.”

Yeah, I guess it should have.

I took in Galantia’s ashen face, her unblinking hazel eyes fixed on the canopy, her breaths nothing but tiny, flat whimpers that seized her chest. Fuck, she looked so fragile.

Deliciously vulnerable.

With a shake of her head, Elovan placed her hands on Galantia’s black-stained throat, absorbing Malyr’s shadows into her core. An interesting thing to watch, really, because voids had always been rare—even before we’d systematically killed them some decades ago.

I sighed at that pity. “You should have stopped sooner.”

Malyr’s gaze fell to my lips—undoubtedly gray from the bark by now—and his jaws tensed. “You should have kept her name from me.”

“And have your moody shadows wrap around me instead, fixated as you were on this girl?” He’d looked positively spellbound even before her name had come into play. A rarity, given how most women left him indifferent. “Not what you expected, hmm?”

He shoved at the chest panel of his black cuirass, those fingers he’d used to choke the girl pitch-black to a point it had to pain him. “I didn’t know what to expect from Asker’s vision, vague as it was. None of us have.”

I let my eyes fall to Galantia and how Elovan drew another plume of shadows from the girl’s parted lips. “How did a man with such a rotten soul manage to make such a pretty daughter?”

Of course, Malyr only frowned. He didn’t care for her full blush lips unless he bit them bloody. Didn’t care for her

shapely body unless it carried his marks. Cared even less about those unblinking eyes, not unless he filled them with tears.

Sick bastard.

Malyr shifted beside me as though he was imagining it just as vividly. “Will she recover?”

Elovan didn’t dare to arch that brow at Malyr, though I saw the twitch, her sun-kissed skin mottled with even darker spots around her cheeks. “We shall see.”

“You have found her?” Asker was shifting into his human form, wearing the black armor of the royal ravenguard, looking as proper and stiff as ever with his breastplate polished and those black and white strands neatly pulled into a thinning braid along his scalp that matched his speckled beard. “Let me have a look at her face!”

He knelt beside the girl, observing the shadowmarks on her skin. It had to piss him off to see his vision unresponsive on the ground, but alas, his face carried emotions with the expressiveness of a rock. So perfectly controlled, perfectly honorable. Always... perfect.

“Yes, without a doubt, it is her I saw in my vision,” he said after a while, brushing the sweat-dampened ivory strands from Galantia’s face. “Do we know her identity?”

A twitch ran along Malyr’s upper lip. “Lady Galantia of the House Brisden.”

“I see.” Asker nodded, his gaze drifting into the nothingness of the underbrush for long moments. “The goddess has sent us something precious.”

“So it would appear,” Malyr ground out, probably hating the fact since it would keep him from hating on her.

At least to some degree.

“Depending on how much or how little Brisden knows, he might be willing to release Marla in exchange for his daughter’s safe return.” Asker rose, setting a stare on me weighted down by a set of thick, heavy brows. “*If* she recovers...”

My molars ground together, aggravated with the way he never skipped a chance at criticizing me. Calling me irresponsible and incompetent. Not that he was wrong, but where had *he* been when Brisden shot Marla from the sky and took her captive, huh?

Maybe not so perfect after all...

“I did what you asked me to do.” Poorly, just like I told him I would, so who was the fool for dumping a task of such importance on me? “I’m flying back to Deepmarsh Castle.”

The moment I turned away, Asker’s command cut through my shift. “Wait.”

A deep breath, then I turned to face him and Malyr. “What?”

“What do you know of her?” Asker asked. “You’re the only one here who spoke with this girl, yes? A girl that, by all accounts, grew up so sheltered and protected, few were able to give me accounts of her character. Even fewer are those who managed to behold Brisden’s daughter. We need to understand her true value.”

“She wasn’t exactly eager to make conversation.” Come to think, she’d been pretty quiet and calm where I’d expected her to grow hysterical. “She said if it’s her value we want, it lies in her virtue.”

A lopsided grin tugged on Malyr’s upper lip before it turned into a sneer, as if his face couldn’t decide if that information bemused or annoyed him. “Mmm, she said that, didn’t she?”

“Right before your pet demon stabbed her nursemaid in the neck.”

His gaze immediately fell to Galantia, who breathed evenly once more. “Isn’t she a bit too old for a nursemaid?”

“The girl needs rest.” Elovan rose and turned toward the meadow, her senses sharp enough as she competently walked around Asker. “I’ll have to make her something for the pain.”

“Sheltered. Protected. Adorned.” Asker turned to face Malyr. “She has to be dear to her parents, indeed. We have to offer her up in exchange for Marla. It’s why the goddess brought her here. Why else would she have bestowed me this vision?”

Malyr’s lips pinched tight for a moment as he held Asker’s stare. “Interesting, how you make no mention of the fact that we now have the future queen consort of Dranada in our keep. Most recently, our spies reported that Brisden managed to arrange her betrothal to Prince Domren, yes?”

Prince Domren.

Memories rushed through me, transporting me back to stand at the center of the flames licking at my skin. Sweat pooled, sending a searing droplet to run down my spine as the stench of that night crept into my nose.

Oil.

Ash.

Singed feathers and charred flesh.

I blinked, taking myself out of the ruthless image, bringing Galantia back into focus. *Prince Dormren’s betrothed.*

Untouched.

Untried.

So fucking helpless.

Heat surged in my veins, funneling down into my breeches. Galantia was pretty before, but this information turned her downright irresistible. Five years ago, I swore I would kill Domren. How much longer until I would finally get my revenge? Might as well bounce his betrothed on my cock while I waited.

Malyr would never deny me a piece of her. Ever since I’d dragged him out of that river all those years ago, feverish and emaciated, I’d had his back. And he had mine, regardless of how many times we butted heads or bickered—which happened more and more often lately.

It hadn't always been like this. Guess spending so many years of tolerating each other's shit had started to take a toll on our friendship. Still, we stuck together for our common goal. We both wanted revenge, and we would help each other see it through, come rain or high wind.

"Maybe we could use her to draw Domren out," I said, eager to make that bastard pay for what he'd done to me. What he'd *taken* from me. "He's leading his father's army now, from what I hear. Forget about Tidestone; it's Ammarett you want, anyway."

Asker's hand settled on the pommel of his black *aerymel* sword. "You know the reasons why I made no mention of it, and instead urge you for an exchange of hostages."

Faint shadows simmered along the edges of Malyr's armor, which was never a good sign. "Selfish reasons."

"Marla is my mate." Asker lowered his head, fixing his eyes on the dirt before him. "Perhaps that makes my reasoning more selfish, but it doesn't make it unsound. If we draw out Ammarett's forces and meet them on the field, place ourselves between Tidestone and the capital, we will have the ocean to our left and our human allies in the back, leaving little room for escape should those fickle beings betray us. I must... goddess be good, I *must* implore that you exchange her for Marla and take Tidestone soon after."

Malyr scoffed. "No army has ever breached the walls of Tidestone."

"Yet Tidestone has the ships we *need* to take Ammarett. We will take the stronghold! Then we shall sail our army around the coast, attack the capital from the ocean only a brief distance away, and the city will fall within hours."

"We already lost several pathfinders trying to stake out a way to attack Tidestone," Malyr said. "To no avail. Twelve net catapults line the cliffs and the walls. Their archers are exceptionally well trained, easily shooting us down by the hundreds if we fly in from the valley. We have no siege weapons of our own, and even if we did, that stronghold has grain stores large enough to last them a year, if not longer."

“Grain stores more than half empty, as per our calculations, and winter hasn’t even arrived yet,” Asker bit out as he lifted his gaze. “Think back on how clear and precise my visions have been in the past. Have they not given us...” he lifted his hands, gesturing at the lands that lay south, “...all of this?”

“And yet your visions failed you when we ravaged the fields that supply grain to Tidestone. Brisden’s soldiers captured your mate. And you saw *none of it*.”

“Vision are...” Asker’s mouth opened and closed, his voice brittle once it returned. “Nothing happens by chance. Marla’s capture was written in the stars by the goddess herself. It is not for us to understand why, but to trust in her wisdom. We have to offer this girl up in an attempt to retrieve Marla. We *need* her. Without my mate, we will make no progress in this war on any border; that, I guarantee you.”

“No guarantees needed. That we have been stuck at Deepmarsh Castle for months now proves it just fine.” With a sharp inhale, Malyr turned away, staring toward a bright clearing ahead for a while before he finally faced us again. “I want a healer to confirm she’s untainted and indeed as valuable as you believe her to be. Once her maidenhead is deemed intact, send a scroll to Tidestone with the conditions of the exchange. If Brisden gives us Marla, he can have his daughter back. If he refuses... well, I shall see to it, then.” His knowing gaze settled on me before he offered a smug grin. “Until such time, she is to remain *untainted*, Sebian.”

So no bouncing her on my cock, then.

That still left me with a dozen other things I could do to have Domren’s future queen scream my name. Learn it by heart. A sad consolation, but still better than nothing while I bided my time.

I shrugged. “Fine.”

“If I may suggest,” Asker said, his averted gaze going to Malyr. “Perhaps it would be best if you kept your distance from her for the time being? Given your... history with the House Brisden?”

A muscle hardened in Malyr's jaw, eyes going to Galantia, then back to me. "Mingle with the humans. See if any of them would dare to betray us by trying to sell-off one of their daughters to Domren instead. That cannot happen. We cannot lose allies, not even the fickle ones."

In a burst of shadows and plumes, Malyr shifted into his ravens and flew off.

"Politics..." I took a bite of the bread in the bowl by the cold pit. Stale, but filling enough to keep my starved ravens from eating grubs without my consent. Few things were worse than the taste of dirt stuck under one's tongue. "Now I have to gallivant around the feasts with lord this and lady that."

"Sounds like a task made for you since there's always wine to be had." Asker stared at my lips, then shook his head. "You've been lazing around for far too long, shunning your part in this war."

I turned away, eyes fixed on the horizon. "My part in this war starts with our attack on the capital and ends with Domren's guts dangling from my beaks."

Even if it was the last thing I would do.

Asker's hand landed on my shoulder. "Take one of the horses. Once Elovan deems her strong enough to travel, you will take the Lady Galantia to Deepmarsh Castle. Staying by her side is your chance to help us see this through. Get revenge. Earn forgiveness."

Scoffing, I glanced back at him. "I don't give a shit about your forgiveness."

"I wasn't talking about mine."

A twinge beneath my ribs. How could I ever forgive myself for what I'd done? For what I *hadn't* done? "I have other things to do."

"What other things? Drink? Sleep? Bed every whore the court has to offer once?"

"I might bed some of them twice."

“May the goddess help me, you’re driving me insane, Sebian...” he huffed. “This girl needs someone by her side, for we both know Malyr will *not* keep his distance. Having Bridsen’s daughter is more of a temptation than he can ignore.”

Just like having Domren’s betrothed was a temptation I wouldn’t ignore, but there were easier ways to go about it than what he had in mind. “Feel free to play her bodyguard. Just don’t let her get captured, as is so often the case with those in your care.”

That shut Asker up, if only for a moment. “If I remain too close to her for too long, she might trigger convoluted visions, muddling my interpretations.”

Sounded like a problem that wasn’t mine...

“Malyr will have a taste of revenge with her, holding himself over until he can get to her father, and I don’t blame him.” Just like I knew he wouldn’t blame me for going after a taste of my own revenge. “She might’ve caught him off-guard now, but he’ll keep himself under control from here on.”

“And if not?” he asked. “Nobody is strong enough to stand against him.”

“Neither am I.”

“No, but his shadows would never attack you,” he pointed out. “You two share a strong friendship.”

“You’re giving me a headache, old man. She’s still breathing, isn’t she?”

“You need to protect her from him.”

Protect her.

Those two words stalled my feet, my heart, my lungs. If the past had taught me anything, it was that no woman should count on me to keep her safe.

I looked at Galantia, but eventually shook my head. “Her safety is your problem now.”

My shift surged through me with an onslaught of sounds and smells, achy wings pushing us into the current coming from between the trees before it carried us away. Everyone I'd once vowed to protect was rotting away in graves—if they had graves at all.

That was how well I'd done it.

CHAPTER
SEVEN



Galantia

Present day, Deepmarsh Castle

H eavy. Convex. Sharp.

I balanced the silver knife on the palm of my hand where I stood by the small table near the crackling hearth, watching how the flames reflected on the pointed tip. It had appeared along with a loaf of rye bread, cheese, and blackberries a good while ago. The latter, I'd immediately devoured. It had all been served by a young Raven girl shortly after I'd woken in this chamber—a room appointed with a large oaken bed, heavy blue drapery, and a wooden screen that hid a set of upholstered couches.

How long had I been here? One day? Three? Five? I had no idea.

After Malyr's assault, I'd succumbed to a restless sleep, teetering between consciousness and delirium. Ones filled

with hushed voices, fingers touching my throat, faces staring down at me.

And wingbeats.

Always wingbeats.

Lowering the knife back to the plate, I turned my head toward the door. The Raven girl had filled me a bath and laid out a simple blue dress—which I wore now—leaving me behind without a word spoken, and without a lock or bar thumping in place on the other side of that door.

My heart beat faster the longer I stared at it. I didn't dare open it. Didn't dare find out what awaited on the other side. Black-haired Ravens, undoubtedly, lots of them.

I walked over to the window beside the four-poster bed and leaned my temple against the cool pane. Even for someone who'd seen nothing of the realm, it had been easy enough to figure out that they'd transported me to Deepmarsh Castle.

Because I was in a castle.

Surrounded by deep marsh.

Miles upon miles of dark green wetlands spread out before my eyes, dotted with brown reeds, tall purple grasses, and red-tipped rushes. Soggy, cold, impassable. I wasn't foolish enough to think I could run from this place, a coddled highborn with no idea which way lay Ammarett.

No, I needed to come up with another plan. For that, I needed to know what exactly they wanted with me. These Ravens probably held me for ransom, for I had no other value to offer that would justify the warm room, the meal, the dress.

The very fact that I was still alive.

Lorn had mentioned the escape of 'that golden bitch.' Obviously, she'd spoken about Mother. She was alive; a fact that relieved me more than it should, considering that they'd left me behind...

My fingers wandered to my throat, brushing over those bruises that were dark enough I could see them in my reflection on the pane. They span across the entire area in

broad lines, narrow tangles, and dots speckled here and there. Why had this... Lord of Shadows—Malyr—attacked me so viciously?

Not for the first time since I'd woken, I pressed down on the marbled skin. A dull ache flared up, yet I held the tension. Paid close attention to how the sensation spread, how it turned from a dull ache to a sharp twinge. It was strangely intriguing, this... pain.

At the upper edge of my vision, something dark came into view on the other side of the window. It swelled. Grew large. Larger still.

Thud!

I jerked my head back, heart jumping from chest to throat at its next beat. Claws screeched over glass. Wings flapped. Before I could blink, the black bird disappeared from sight.

Dread stitched through my chest as I backed away from the window. One step. Two. Could have been a crow, might have been a raven. At my third step, warmth that hadn't been there before wrapped around my back, freezing the blood in my veins.

“Beautiful.” Deep and predatory, that one word purred over the nape of my neck, quickening my pulse. “Turn. Let me have a look at my shadowmarks.”

Tense silence permeated the room for several shuddering breaths. Had I been born a boy, Father would expect me to be loyal, brave, and strong. Surely, I could manage all that without having a wrinkly organ hanging from between my legs.

Chin held high, I turned to face Malyr. He stood tall enough I suddenly found myself staring at his black tailored vest, the front adorned with a large sigil that flattened the breath in my lungs—a silver raven sitting on a skull cracked from temple to cranium, one claw curled into an eye socket.

The sigil of House Khysal?

Impossible.

I lifted my gaze to his strange eyes, gray around the edges of his irises that darkened to deep brown at the center, making his pupils appear dilated even against the light of the window. “Who are you, really?”

Malyr stepped forward. Crowded me against the wall until hard stone bit into my spine. He lifted his hand to my sternum and ran his thumb over my throat, studying the marks he’d left with a self-satisfied smile.

“Does it hurt?” When I said nothing, refused to confess as much, his thumb pressed into one of the bruises until it throbbed, ached, sending unexpected warmth into my belly. “How about now?”

I hated how my breaths turned to panting, giving away what had to be distress. “What do you want from me?”

“I want you to hurt.” His thumb pressed deeper, amplifying the pain as he leaned in, bringing his lips to my ear. “Want you to cry, and whimper, and sob.”

My voice trembled at the back of my throat, but I wouldn’t let it cave. “Why? What have I done to you? Why do you hate me so?”

“Because you’re so undeniably human, with your strands so... pale...” His fingers weaved into my hair and fisted it, pulling my head back until my mouth opened on a gasp. “It is in your gait, your gestures, the absence of even an ounce of magic. I cannot look at you and *not* see a human... my enemy.” He released my hair and gripped my throat, fingers trembling as they alternated between tender strokes and painful squeezes. “What’s even worse, I cannot look into those... fucking light brown eyes of yours, and *not* see your father.”

My esophagus jumped painfully at my gulp. “I am not my father.”

“No, you are so much better, with your skin unblemished, your soul uncorrupted, your body...” he eased his grip on my throat, letting his fingers glide over the swell on the side of my breast. “untainted.”

“It would be in your interest if I stayed that way,” I bit out. “Where is Captain Asker? I want to speak to—”

Wings flapped, and my gaze jumped toward the door of my room, which stood ajar. A single raven appeared from the gap. The one who’d hit my window? It hopped a few steps over the stony ground before it took flight, aiming at its master.

When the bird collided with Malyr, merging with his human form in a gust of black plumes, the man’s fingers dug into my breast. They tightened just as wafts of shadows rose all around him.

Panic surged. Jutting my head back, I slinked around him, backing away from his strangling magic until I bumped against the edge of a table. A wooden cup tipped and the knife fell from plate to table with a muted *clank*.

Malyr spun around and closed the distance between us, pressing his warm body against mine, and... Oh gods, he was *hard*. “Are you scared of me?”

My throat narrowed, letting no more but shallow gasps through and into my searing lungs. “Should I be? Clearly, you need me alive.”

He ground himself against me, letting a deep moan vibrate between us and straight into my bones from there. “If you believe death is the worst I can give you, then clearly, you haven’t experienced much of life.”

Shaky hands clasped to the edge of the table, and I braced against his overwhelming nearness, the engorged flesh in his breeches. “Whatever it is you’re after, Father won’t waste a word on negotiations over a defiled daughter, possibly impregnated with a half-blood.”

“Nothing would amuse me more than to send you back home with my bastard in your belly. How fortunate you are that I would never breed with a human and degrade myself thusly.” He forced his knee in between my legs and quickly gathered up my skirts, sliding one hand beneath the fabric and along my buttocks. “I may, however, just spill my seed where

it cannot grow, and take you..." His finger pressed against my darkest hole, making the muscle clench on reflex. "Right here."

"No!" I bucked and squirmed, slamming my hands against his chest to escape this kind of violation. "Get away from me!"

"It will hurt... I will make sure of it." Smirking, he shoved his knee deeper between my thighs, rubbing his leg over my sex while his finger dipped into me a little, making the tight ring sting in protest. "And you shall cry so prettily for me. Right, little dove? You will give me all your tears?"

"Let me go!"

The numbing fear tingling my fingertips didn't spare me the spikes of panic that carved a hollow in my belly. All the shoving, bucking, and writhing did nothing. Nothing but send the plate behind me trembling across the table.

That was when I felt it, the edge of the knife shivering where I grappled the wood for hold. I sent my fingertips roaming, searching. When I sensed the thick handle, I gripped it tightly. In one quick move, guided by fear and fury alike, I lifted the knife to his throat.

"Get off me, you fucking bastard!" I snarled, watching the blade shudder and quiver above a blue-purple vein flowing beneath alabaster skin. "Or I swear, I'll cut faster than you can caw."

"Mmm, what an unexpected but utterly intriguing offer. You have my full attention, Galantia." A twitch tugged on his upper lip, pulling his mouth into a lopsided grin. "Do you know how to cut for the most pleasure? I do."

Confused by his words, I pressed the blade deeper into his skin, eyes going back and forth between his unmoving stare and the drop of blood that pooled against the silver. "I'll do it."

"I can hardly contain my excitement. Feel..." He leaned into the blade until crimson rivulets ran down his throat, dripping warm onto my sternum as he rocked his hard cock against the junction between my legs. "You enjoy the first cut. I shall enjoy the second, and all the ones thereafter, carving

myself under your skin the way your fucking father has carved himself under mine.”

An unholy tremble ransacked my hand, letting the blade stutter across his throat, leaving little cuts here and there while he didn't even flinch. “You've met my father?”

“Oh, I know him... intimately. There is no cut, no bruise, no broken bone, no *humiliation* your father spared me.” He sneered, letting my pulse thud loudly in my ears. “Because of your father, I am a million shattered pieces, put back together all wrong. Now get that damn knife away from me before you accidentally hurt yourself. Only *I* get to hurt you.”

Malyr snatched the blade with his bare hand. Not a single tremor shook his fingers as he pushed it off his neck and turned it toward me. His bloodied palm slid to the handle, settling warm and slippery over my hand.

“Open your mouth, little white dove.” He forced the blade higher, placing the cold metal flat across my mouth. “Lick the blade, *slowly*, until it cuts into your tongue. Ah-ah... don't turn your head.” He let one finger slip off the handle, stroking the bloody digit along my lips. “Open those pretty lips for me.”

With a slow push of his finger, he parted them. He stroked into my mouth, pulled back, stroked back in, spreading the taste of salt and metal across my gums. The blade pressed deeper into my mouth until the warmth in my belly dropped lower, infusing a strange thrill into the terror that throbbed between my legs.

The blade nipped at my bottom lip. Deepened the sting, quickening my breathing until my bosom rose and fell erratically. A whimper rose from deep within my chest, parting my lips, only to come out as a godless moan.

Malyr's head jerked sideways at that sound, a reflex too quick and instinctual to be human, like a bird of prey who'd caught the squeak of a mouse. The motion let his black strands fall away from his face on one side, revealing a birthmark that sat beneath his earlobe.

Black. Round.

My pulse went wild, pounding against my temples until my vision blurred around the edges, focusing only on that familiar mark. I'd seen it before, but—

No, this couldn't be the boy from the dungeons.

That boy was dead.

I'd killed him!

The pressure of the knife lifted ever so slightly. "Have you seen this mark before?"

I quickly forced my gaze back to his narrowed eyes, dread pooling in my belly over how he'd noticed me staring at it. Perhaps he hadn't seen me that day; perhaps he had but couldn't recognize me. Or perhaps he simply couldn't remember—he had hit his head, after all.

A strike of luck.

Because this Raven boy Father had kept at the Tidestone dungeons...? The *prince*? He'd apparently survived his head wound and had grown into a vengeful, vile monster. What would he do to me if he ever found out that it was me who had ruined his escape attempt?

I held his gaze. "No."

"You father had someone needle it under my skin with ink so he may identify me should I ever escape those damn dungeons, forever leaving his mark on me." He snatched the bodice of my dress with one hand, pulling the fabric down as his legs stepped wider apart, framing mine, caging me in. The other hand lowered the pointed tip of the knife to my sternum, right between the area of exposed skin between my breasts. "Now, I shall leave *my mark* on his daughter."

"No!" I shouted, writhing against the weight of his body. "You need me unharmed!"

"Not all parts of you. You shall keep your pretty face and precious womb. The rest, however..." Tendrils of shadows seeped from his form, cold and biting. They wrapped around my wrists, my calves, my entire body, restraining me perfectly in place. "Shall I carve my name into you? That title your kind

bestowed upon me? Lord of Shadows? Or perhaps... mmm, I think I know.”

One stab, and he cut into me.

But it didn't hurt. Not the way he slowly dragged the blade down on my chest, letting my flesh rip open and blood bubble to the surface around the glinting metal. Not at first. No, the pain came a few seconds later, like a sharp, scorching burn that set me aflame.

“Whimper, Galantia,” he said. “Let me hear your sobs.”

I shifted and writhed, but the shadows tightened the harder I fought them, making me feel faint. “Stop!”

“That is not what whimpering sounds like.” The blade cut deeper, all but scraping over bone. “Cry for me, little dove, and I shall do my best to make it pretty.”

“Gods curse you!”

It was the last thing that left my lips before I clenched them shut, sealing away my screams, my pleas, my cries. He would get *none* of them! Instead, I breathed through the violent throb along the lines he carved into me with slow deliberation and precise movements, mind reciting the mantra of my childhood.

Breathe in. Don't cry, Galantia.

Breathe out. Don't cry, Galantia.

“I shall get your tears in time.” Once the damage was done—my chest nothing but a ball of fire—he yanked me to my wobbly legs by my bodice, and pressed his mouth to my ear where he whispered, “Run...”

His command came with a blast of plumes and shadows. Wings flapped, and the shuddering *kra-kras* of ravens resonated in my skull. Claws tangled in my hair, pulling and ripping, sending a wave of burning heat across my scalp. Something hard hit my skull. *Tap*. And again. *Tap*.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

They were pecking at me!

Pain stabbed into my brain, ripping a scream from me just as I threw my arms over my head. “Get away from me!”

I swatted with one hand while trying to protect myself with the other. Fabric ripped. Heat spread along my arm, burning deep into my flesh. With another scream, I ran toward the door and slinked through the gap. Away. I had to get away from these animals.

Gurgling croaks followed as I sprinted along the corridor, letting bone-deep terror overwhelm my senses as I passed doors, people, flickering fires that danced over the stone walls. Where was I? Where should I run?

Wingbeats.

Close. Closer still.

My feet thrust me forward faster as I turned a corner, dashing along yet another corridor until—*slap!* Pain slammed into my torso, radiating toward my limbs as my legs pulled out from underneath me.

“Whoa!” A set of strong arms wrapped around me, steadying me against a leather-clad chest. “You’re bleeding...”

I blinked, disoriented, searching for the source of the familiar voice, only to find a set of green eyes staring down at me. “Sebian.”

“Shh... it’s alright, sweetheart.” He slid an arm down the back of my thighs before he lifted me up. “I’ve got you.”

CHAPTER
EIGHT



Galantia

Present day, Deepmarsh Castle, Sebian's chamber

C lay mug clasped between my shaky hands, a small piece of what appeared to be tree bark floated on the shuddering surface of my tea. *To calm my nerves*, Sebian had said after he'd carried me to his chamber, sat me into an armchair beneath the window, and handed me the warm mug.

He pulled on the rust-speckled buckles of his brown cuirass where he stood beside his four-poster bed, opening them. "Make sure you drink all of it, or the pain will only get worse from here."

With each additional sip, the burning aches seemed to dull, and my nerves right along with it. My gaze wandered about my new surroundings—a chamber very similar to mine, aside from how dozens of small clay pots lined an open armoire. It smelled like herbs in here, beeswax, and leather.

Like him.

A warning roil shifted in my guts, subdued by whatever I was drinking. In my shock, I hadn't quite cared where Sebian had taken me, so as long as it was away from Malyrs' ravens. Should I even be here? Alone? With a man?

No, worse...

A Raven.

Sebian tossed his cuirass onto a trunk that stood at the end of his bed, his white shirt wrinkled and barely tied over his broad chest. "Open up your dress in the front."

My throat narrowed. "What?"

"Those cuts need cleaning and a layer of tallow." Sebian pushed a stool in front of me with the tip of his boot, its legs groaning over the stone. "Otherwise, they might get infected."

I stared down at the gruesome mess that was my chest, wrought with puffed-up lines, shreds of skin, loose hair clinging to the weeping cuts, and blood. So much blood. "It will scar, regardless."

He took a wooden bowl of water from beside the hearth. "Not if you manage to die of blood poisoning first."

He had a point there, but... "Is there no healer I can go to?"

"Sure. If you prefer to walk across the castle looking as if you barely escaped the henhouse, then suit yourself," he said with annoyance in his tone. "I'm offering you my help. Take it, or stop bleeding all over my room and get out."

My muscles tensed. Compared to Malyr, Sebian seemed to be the lesser evil, but he was still a Raven. *The one who'd captured me.* I couldn't forget that. Neither could I risk infection, allowing these wounds to turn into something even more gruesome. Besides, if I wanted to avoid public humiliation and a stain on the name of my house, I hardly had a choice.

I undid the topmost ribbon on the front of my dress, pulling the fabric until the weeping wound lay generously

exposed. “Oh, gods... how could he do this to me?”

“Did he piss over it after?”

That Sebian needed no clarification on who *he* was told me this kind of viciousness hadn't been out of Malyr's character. “No.”

“Then it could've been worse.”

“Malyr mutilated me. Marked me with... with...”

Gods, I couldn't even tell with all this blood. What would Prince Domren say? Too much was at stake to break our betrothal over it, but what if I would appall him? What if he could never truly *want* me like this?

“Life marks us all in one way or another.” Sebian dunked the cloth into the water. “The only scars truly ugly are usually the ones on the inside, anyway.”

Spoken like a true commoner who had the freedom to overlook such blemishes. Nobody cared about my insides unless it pertained to the regularity of my menses, and even then—

I flinched back on a gasp. “Your hand...”

Elevated scars webbed across his digits, his knuckles, and the gaps between them, enclosing valleys of dark ochre. The disfigurement reached all the way up to his wrist, then disappeared under the sleeve of his shirt. I hadn't noticed it the day he'd grabbed me. How much of his body was covered in these hideous patches of wrinkled flesh?

“Burn marks.” He pressed the cloth against my sternum, droplets of water running down along my wound. “Best take a long hard look, sweetheart, because it'll be a common sight in this castle.”

My insides convulsed. “Why?”

“Same reason Tidestone has weighted net catapults, catching our unkindness if we fly up too closely. Keeping us on the ground, with no chance of escape, makes for easier targets. Birds with feathers singed to the roots fly poorly, if they still fly at all.” He gingerly dabbed the cloth over the cut,

and whatever he'd added to the water or the tea or both made the sting tolerable. "Your father has quite the fondness for setting us ablaze."

Which I fully supported, but telling him so would hardly gain me answers as to why I was here. If this Raven bothered to care for my wounds, how likely was it that he would tell me? Only one way of finding out.

I took a deep breath. "Why do you hold me prisoner?"

"Prisoners don't get fresh clothes, warm meals, and long soaks in a tub. I daresay you're our *guest*."

"Guests don't get carved up, but I'll humor you. Why am I your guest? You want something from my father for my return, don't you?"

His vibrant eyes found mine for a second before a bemused smirk curled his full lips. "Figured that out, huh?"

Tension left my muscles.

At last, good news.

"What is it? Gold? A truce?"

"Your father is holding one of our own in his dungeons. We want an exchange of prisoners."

"That was a very ill way to pronounce *guests*."

A chuckle. "You've got a mouth on you. Lots of ways to put that to good use, so I like it. Malyr does not. Better mind your tongue around him."

Said mouth turned dry when my brain finally caught up with what he'd just said. What if this Raven prisoner was too crucial in this war for me to measure up in value?

But what could be more valuable to Father now than strengthening his alliance with King Barat? The capital would supply him with archers, footmen, and cavalry to keep the Ravens away from their borders—all things needed to keep Tidestone standing. Of course Father would get me back!

My chest squeezed strangely, but I breathed past it. Alright... maybe he had no inclination to get *me* per se, but

certainly this chance at the betrothal. He needed it. Quite unfortunately for him, that meant he needed me.

Another squeeze.

But did he? Marriages tied houses together, to be certain, but so did sheer desperation. Oh gods, this was awful.

Sebian patted and wiped in slow, tender motions, revealing the inflamed lines where the bleeding had slowed. “Just as soon as we get our Raven, Lord Brisden can have his beloved daughter back.”

Beloved daughter. Whatever he’d put in that damned tea to calm my nerves had been too much, because a giggle pushed past my lips as if I wasn’t fucking done for.

Sebian’s hand stalled, and his narrowed eyes found mine. “You have doubts that your father will agree to this exchange?”

Absolutely. “Not in the slightest.”

Satisfied by my response, Sebian once more focused on my wounds. “He cut deep, but clean.”

“So this, um... Raven my father is holding?” I asked, the wound all but forgotten against the premise of my ordeal. “Who exactly is he?”

“*She.* Marla is Captain Asker’s bonded mate.”

She. So it was only a woman, but...

“Bonded mate?” My lessons with Risa had never mentioned such a thing—nor anything else about his kind, really. Because it wasn’t necessary for me to know about these things, Mother had always said, and Father... well, he hadn’t cared. “Is that like a wife?”

He arched a brow at me as though I lacked common knowledge. “Ravens have fated mates, chosen for us by our goddess herself to bond with for eternity.”

Woman. Wife. Mate.

Equally worthless to Father.

“How can you even be certain she’s still alive?”

“Asker’s unkindness is still in full plume,” he said. “If she was dead, his ravens would rip their feathers out in grief.”

Relief finally broke through my dulled panic. Gods be good, this exchange was a done deal! They might as well ready me a carriage and cart me back home. Or to my wedding feast. The latter was preferable.

“Father will comply.” Perhaps he held that woman for no other reason than to taunt the captain of the Raven army. Nothing but a trifling gibe in the shadow of my betrothal. Though one issue remained... “Can I meet this Captain Asker? Assure him of my father’s need for this exchange? If I do, surely, he will somehow interfere with Malyr on my behalf?”

“Asker answers to Malyr, not the other way around.”

My shoulders slouched. No, of course not. Alas, Mother had once again been correct in one of her assessments, hadn’t she? Malyr was no lord.

“He’s a Khysal.”

“The last one.” Sebian dipped the clean side of the rag into the water, then set to work on my chin. “He’s King Omaniel and Queen Elnora’s son.”

“Prince Malyr of House Khysal.” I looked down at my chest, heat flushing through my veins, amplifying the pounding beneath the cuts. Angry-red lines came together in the shape of a raven sitting on a skull. *He’d carved his sigil into me.* How could Prince Domren ever find love for a wife carrying the permanent mark of his enemy? “This can’t get any worse.”

“Trust me, sweetheart, it can.” Sebian gave a tug on my chin, lifting my gaze to his so he may wipe the blood from my mouth. “Don’t provoke Malyr; don’t draw more of his attention to you than you already have.”

“I never wanted his attention to begin with.” It was too intense, too overwhelming, too... unfamiliar. When the cloth reached the cut on my mouth, I sucked in a breath. “Ouch.”

Sebian's deep, masculine groan answered, vibrating the air between us. At first, I took it for annoyance over my squeamishness, but it wasn't that. It couldn't be.

Not with how he gentled his touch, squinting at my lip with greater focus as he licked his own. "He... cut your lip. Interesting."

Lick the knife, Galantia.

My breath stalled for a moment at the memory of how the blade had nipped me, carving a reaction from my body that went against all sense and sanity. More concerning was that thrill returning to my belly, making me shift on the chair.

"There's something very strange in your scent," Sebian said, and whatever did that mean? "In any case, you're all cleaned up, sweetheart."

"Thank you for taking care of me."

His jaws shifted as if he was grinding his molars. "Don't get used to it."

This close to me, I took note of his slightly elongated eyes, the tan of his skin, the shadows that filled the hollows beneath his cheekbones. For someone occasionally covered in feathers, his chin was much too smooth, with not a single whisker in sight. Neither on his honed chest, where slabs of muscles shifted behind his shirt every time he moved.

Strange heat seeped into me, making me distressingly aware of the nearness between us. If Mother saw me this close to man—worse, a Raven!—she would faint.

Internally, I grinned at that.

I shouldn't have.

This was dangerous.

"You shouldn't have brought me here," I said as I shifted back slightly. "It's not becoming of a lady to be alone with a man... with no chaperone who can confirm that nothing indecent happened."

“*Indecent...*” He pronounced that word slowly, languidly, while a lopsided grin tugged on his full lips. “Like what, Galantia? What are those indecent things, hmm? Tell me.”

My teeth ground together until my jaws ached. I’d listened to the maids’ gossip at Tidestone. Wasn’t entirely oblivious to the things that happened between a man and woman in the privacy of a dark corner.

“Are you teasing me?”

His grin climbed even higher, putting a spark of mirth in his eyes. “Aren’t you a little too old to be unmarried? *Untouched?*”

“Not for lack of Father’s ambition. For your information, I was betrothed twice before. And I would long be married, wasn’t for the fact that your awful kind has the tendency to behead my future husbands before I ever meet them.”

“Mmm, a tendency I’ll gladly continue.” His grin eased away. “You still didn’t tell me what those indecent things are, Galantia.”

“Things that might ruin my reputation, putting my current betrothal at stake.” Something they surely had to be aware of. But if not, then now was a good time to mention it in an attempt to emphasize my value. “I am to wed Prince Domren.”

Again, that teeth-grinding. “You sound as if it’s something to look forward to.”

And he sounded as if he was convinced it wasn’t. “What young lady wouldn’t look forward to marrying a handsome prince?”

“Handsome? Have you ever met him in person?” Bowl lowered to the floor, he tossed the cloth onto the nearby table, rose, and walked over to his armoire. “Sweetheart, he has the face of a horse.”

A lump swelled in my throat. Gods fetch him, clearly, he’d set his eyes on the prince before—an advantage I hadn’t been afforded. I wouldn’t ask him just how bad it truly was compared to the likeness the royal family had sent instead.

“Galant, then,” I said. “Honorable.”

“Honorable...” His lips pressed into a thin line. He once more sat across from me with a small clay pot resting in one hand. “This will ease the pain and quicken the healing. Apply it twice a day, but no more than that. The weed I need to make this only grows in the mountains. Difficult winds up there, hard to navigate for my ravens.”

“Because of your burns?” When he nodded, I watched how he gathered some of the dark green stuff on his finger. “Is that what you do when you aren’t busy capturing highborn women? Make salves? Potions?”

“We have studied Ravens for that, but I spend a lot of time in the wild harvesting the plants they need, so I know a thing or two about them.” His finger once more settled on my bottom lip, spreading a thin, greasy layer of the salve in a circular motion. The touch held a care I’d only ever known from Risa. Which was unexpectedly... comforting. “It comes easy to pathfinders like me, spotting herbs from the sky, scenting flowers not even in bloom yet.”

Which explained the scent of herbs that clung to him, along with traces of wet soil, pine needles, *nature*. “You have amplified senses?”

“To a point I hear the rush of blood in your veins. How your heart beats stronger when I’m close to you. How your breath quickens when I touch you...” another tug on my lip. “...right here.”

A touch so different from Malyr’s, inquisitive and delicate, but wrong, nonetheless. My heart shouldn’t beat stronger at it; my breathing shouldn’t alter. Worse was how he noticed...

I straightened, gaining us more distance. I was overwhelmed and confused, nothing more.

“That’s it?” I asked, though it explained his earlier comment about my scent. “That’s your magic?”

“We call them gifts. And no, a pathfinder’s gift holds a little more than heightened senses.”

No small amount of curiosity tingled through me. “Like what?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” A final stroke of his finger over my bottom lip as he winked at me. “We’re incredibly charming.”

Lightness came to my core as I stared at him, flabbergasted. “Charming?”

“Handsome, too.”

Muscles I hadn’t used in so long twitched, bringing an unexpected smile to my face. That it had taken a Raven to put it there was an odd circumstance.

Sebian grinned. “You don’t agree?”

Oh, he was more handsome than one’s captor ought to be, but in a strange, eerie way. Undeniably Raven.

Forbidden.

And yet, he had carried me here. Had cleaned my wounds, covering my mouth in salve and a smile. And, yes, he’d saved me from the fate of the other women in the village, even if he’d had no other obligation to interfere beyond his task to catch me. In all those things combined, I found gratitude. It wouldn’t kill me to confess so... might even gain me a much-needed guide.

“Sebian?”

He gathered a handful of salve and carefully slathered it on my chest. “Hmm?”

“Thank you for... you know, protecting me.”

His hand stalled, rendering him still for long seconds before he narrowed his eyes at me. “What do you mean?”

“From that Raven,” I clarified. “In the village?”

He stared at me for another moment, features morphing between surprise and... something else. Something I couldn’t name.

Until he got up and turned away. “You should go back to your chamber and rest. There will be a feast in a few days to

introduce you to court.”

“*Introduce me.*” What a fine way to describe how I would undoubtedly be paraded around like the captive I was. “What court?”

“The Court of Ravens, of course.”

CHAPTER
NINE



Malyr

Past, City of Valtaris

“**T**he Court of Ravens has been moved underground, so I suggest Prince Malyr flies to our line of pathfinders over here.” Captain Asker pointed at the bone-carved figurines, all of them sitting on a cliff chiseled from stone on the left of Father’s strategy table. “About two hundred of Barat’s archers took over the temple plateau. They’re currently shooting at the fates we sent out on the battlefield before the gate. As long as arrows keep whistling at them, distracting them from their visions, they won’t be able to cut through the cavalry—a problem that our pathfinders can solve quickly and with little risk...” Asker paused, driving up my pulse. “If only the prince would weave his shadows thick and broad, hiding our pathfinders in their plumes.”

Weave my shadows.

Darkness shifted at my core.

Scratching. Scraping.

I crossed my arms behind my back, hiding trembling fingers that had gone numb when Barat's army had appeared on the red horizon. Sun. Moon. Stars. Each of them guiding beacons. What did that say about a blood-streaked sky at dawn?

"He will do it," Harlen answered in my stead, my brother ever so eager to practice his role as heir and future king, but I heard the tension in his voice. Saw how he raked his palm over his three black braids with a single, nervous motion. "Will you not, Malyr?"

Everyone's gaze slid my way, full of heavy expectations that stiffened my muscles. Even Mother looked over from where she held Naya's hand, helping her balance on the low stone wall that enclosed the breezy pavilion. Only my little sister remained unfazed, finding joy in hopping from stone to stone, her long dark hair crowned by a circle of daisies.

Sweet little Naya, so innocent, so blissfully unaware of the war waging around her.

My throat narrowed the longer I watched her while everyone else was watching me. What if releasing such a vast, unpredictable amount of my shadows was necessary to deliver us from this attack? I wanted to do my part in protecting our kingdom, but...

What if I couldn't protect it from me?

My breathing quickened under the constraint of my black cuirass, the weight of leather strangely heavy compared to the velvet of my usual shadowcloth tunics. "Two hundred of their archers..."

Father shifted beside me in his silver armor, his sword of black *aerymel* sheathed by his side. *There wasn't a fate better with the blade in all Vhaerya*, Asker kept telling him whenever they sparred, each thrust of their swords guided by visions. Dreadfully boring, watching two fates fight, none of them ever landing a hit...

“Numbers mean nothing, Malyr.” He stroked his beard, his focus on the table once more, his hair put into a tight braid. “A thousand Ravens can decimate an army of humans ten times that. You mustn’t fear them.”

“I don’t fear them.”

I feared myself.

Didn’t trust this wild, vicious blackness inside my chest. How it writhed and slithered, twisting at my core, carving itself through the gap in my ribs in an attempt to escape my meager control.

My gift.

My curse.

One that had brought about three days of feasting once I revealed at age seven. Father had held a speech about how proud he was, having a deathweaver in the Khysal line once more. Voids had patted my head and squeezed my cheeks, enticed by the strength of my shadows. The strongest weaver since before the first word was written, they’d called me. I’d been so happy.

Until my shadows choked me.

Had escaped me that first night, ripping me from sleep with a death-strangle around my neck. They hadn’t killed me; they’d killed my hound instead. One moment, Asadur had barked, then the next, he’d whimpered, collapsed, and soiled himself.

So I’d kept them inside me. Imprisoned the most vicious of my shadows behind flesh and bone, sensing them grow stronger, angrier, pacing the bars of my ribcage.

Against the weight of my parents’ expectations—the entire damn kingdom’s expectations—I shook my head. “I cannot.”

Father sighed. “Not this again...”

“My prince Malyr,” Asker said. “Have we not practiced your weaving? You can do this!”

“He can, and he will!” Father slammed his fists on the slab of carved stone hard enough, the table quivered and caused several figurines to fall and roll around. “This is war, and I won’t have my son hide in the chambers with the women and children while Ravens spill their blood for the realm and their royals!”

Shadows twisted at my core. Scratching. Scraping. Slithering along my veins and into my fingers, urging me to wrap them around Father’s throat.

I gripped the amulet that hung from my neck instead. Clasped it tightly, allowing it to calm my nerves and shadows alike, this white salt stone surrounded by a socket of black *aerymel*.

Where are you? I need you.

“My king...” I looked at Father, holding his stare that had long lost whatever pride they’d held on the day of his speech. “I am of no use to you in fighting off this attack. Merely a liabi ___”

A tremor rocked the earth.

Dust rilled from the mortar between the stone columns that held up the roof. A deafening sound echoed across the sanctum, making me spin around just in time to see how a part of the highest watchtower crumbled into the depth.

“Blast these featherless cunts!” Father shouted, hand going to the pommel of his sword. “What now?”

Asker gaped at the damage. “Brisden’s catapults must have arrived and hit the tower. They’re trying to put Valtaris under siege.”

“Honorless cunts!” Father’s hand landed heavily on my shoulders as he pulled me toward him, bringing us face to face. “Fly! Find the pathfinders and lead them like is *expected* of you. Protect them from our enemy’s arrows!”

“My shadows do not protect,” I ground out. “All they do is kill.”

“That’ll serve us just fine. Now do as you are bid, Malyr, or I swear, I’ll tie your ravens—”

“Omaniel.” Mother stepped up beside us with Naya sitting on her hip, her dark hair beautifully pinned up with black clasps shaped like feathers, placing her hand on his wrist to calm the shadows at Father’s core. “Do not be so harsh on him.”

Father removed her touch. “No, Elnora. I have watched this one hide from his gift for far too long. This is war! Do you hear me, Malyr? These humans are spreading lies. Dishonoring your father, shaming your mother! Do your duty by this family and unleash your shadows. Let them cut, bite, and choke through every human who dares mean us harm!”

His shout jabbed at my shadows, making them slither and slink just as I contracted every muscle in my body, my entire focus on holding them back. “I cannot... control... them. Not to this degree. Not while standing at the center of chaos and slaughter. They do not do as they are commanded, but as they please.”

“You will control them today!” He squeezed my arms, distracting muscles that struggled to hold back my gift. “Time to step up to your fate. Time to be a man. Serve the house Khysal!”

“Enough!” Mother pressed herself between us, placed her hand on the back of my head, and pulled until my forehead rested against hers. “Why the goddess placed this curse into your cradle, I cannot say, but you mustn’t succumb to its darkness. Now go!” With one quick move, she lifted Naya from her hip and reached her to me. “Take her to the lower chambers and play with her until this is over. I love you.”

I inhaled a deep breath, taking in the fading traces of her scent—rose petal and lemongrass. “I love you, too.”

I looked over at Harlen, who gave me a curt nod. A gesture that sent a chill down my spine, but it had nothing on the frigidness of Father’s voice.

“It’s a good thing you’re the spare, Malyr,” he said. “I swear on the goddess, you were born worthless.”

His words struck deep, rendering me mute as I turned. I carried Naya along the pathway between the gardens and towers that lined to our sides.

“We go fgy?” she asked and bounced on my hip, pointing at the sky. “Up there? In the sky? Majyr fgy and Naya jook?”

“Not today, little bird. How about you show me that doll Father gave you, hmm?” When dark tendrils hushed across her chunky arm, I intertwined my hand with her much smaller one, and lowered her to the ground. “Uh-uh, no shifting. The last thing we need is Naya’s fledglings hopping around a siege. Come on. Walk.”

Something thrummed the air, letting a warning cord vibrate in my chest. A loud *boom* followed, and the ground shook. Something sharp hit my head with a dull *thud*. What was happening?

“Majyyr!”

Naya’s shout echoed around my spinning vision, quickly drowning under the moans of wood and the rumble of stone. Naya yanked at my arm. I squeezed her little hand as pain pricked my shoulder, my neck. It encapsulated all of me, ripping me to the ground.

Still, I held her hand.

I stared at the ground, weighed down by heaviness. The faster I blinked my eyes, the more they burned, blurring my vision. One hand wiped the dust and grit from my face. The other tugged Naya toward me.

She refused.

“Naya. Come to me...” Another tug as I struggled to my knees, letting a piece of rock or masonry shift off me. “Naya! We need to get away from here.”

Disoriented and with a ringing in my ears, I looked down at our intertwined hands. My gaze followed the red cuts and wounds that speckled her arm. Higher. Higher. Stone.

“Nooo!” Mother’s high-pitched screech pierced through my muffled surroundings. “Nayaaa!”

I looked up, watching Mother’s distorted outline collapse to its knees as she stared at me. Father stood beside her, paralyzed. Only Asker and Harlen moved, running toward us, shouting something. *Shift the tomes? Lift the tomes? Stones?*

Head throbbing, I looked down at Naya, but all I saw was her mangled arm poking out from stone. Stone everywhere. Beside me. Around us. On top of her?

My stomach heaved. My chest convulsed as I reached for the angular boulder that rested where her head should have been as blood-streaked the horizon. I pushed at it. Shifted it until a red daisy came into view, sitting between a tangle of black hair, splintered white bone, and oozing pinkish-gray creases. *No...*

My chest caved.

Naya. My sweet, innocent Naya.

It started in my heart, the pain that cracked through my chest. Gnawed itself through the gap in my ribs one vicious bite at a time. Scratching. Scraping.

Shadows surged out of me in a burst of black tendrils. They slithered into the sky at a rapid speed, casting a darkness over the sanctum that chilled the air. Ravens fell from the heavens as a result, thudding to the ground where they writhed, flapping their wings between my shadowy tendrils that crawled over the ground in all directions at once.

They curled around Asker and Harlen, where they’d come to a dead-halt only a few feet from me, spreading their offshoots toward my parents.

Letting my hand slip from Naya’s, I rose and stumbled toward them. “No... not them. Not them!”

The moment I stepped into a thick fog of shadows, excruciating pain clawed at my legs. Like strangling vines, my own shadows wrapped around me, anchoring me down as they climbed higher.

I tried to absorb the shadows back into me. Commanded them to return.

They did not listen.

Freed at last, they cloaked my parents in blackness, swallowing them whole until their shouts faded into silence—a silence that soon spread across all of Valtaris, turning kingdom to crypt.

“Malyr...” Asker’s voice broke through the quiet behind me. “What have you done?”

CHAPTER
TEN



Galantia

Present day, Deepmarsh Castle, Galantia's chamber

I lay in my bed, staring at the strangest square cutout in the stone where wall met ceiling. A peculiarity not easily noticed since dark strings of presumably leather hung over it like a curtain, heavy enough the wind outside barely shifted it. Why was that there?

When my eyes burned from the strain, I squeezed them shut for just a moment. Finding sleep turned out to be a near impossible task, with no Risa to tell me that the howls wailing through the night were nothing but the wind cutting itself on the corners of the castle. No Risa to stroke through my hair. No Risa to comfort me.

No Risa...

I was... alone.

Always so alone.

My vision blurred as something thick and dense rose in my chest, aching behind my sternum. Caused me such pain, I wanted to cry so badly. Wanted to drain this heavy feeling from my chest the way it had done when I was a child.

I slapped my cheek. *Cry!*

And again. *Cry!*

When no tear came, I whacked myself with both palms, again and again, but... nothing. I couldn't cry, and I couldn't cry, and I couldn't fucking cry! Why not? What was wrong with me?

When the hinges of my door shifted ever so quietly, I thrust myself up, my heart pounding wildly in my chest. It wasn't dark enough for supper yet, so this couldn't be the mute girl who brought me meals. Who then? Sebian? Captain Asker?

My throat narrowed.

Malyr?

I squinted at the short, twiggy figure who shuffled out from the shadows. Just another Raven girl.

I commanded my muscles to relax and paced my breathing, easing my heart back into an even rhythm. It lasted until the girl lifted her head, letting the orange flames of the fire flicker across her ruined visage. *Gods be merciful...*

Burn marks covered the right half of her face, distorting its shape into something almost angular looking. They reached into her hairline, where nothing but a few black wisps remained, tangling around the remaining shell of her ear, the lobe gone.

It's a common sight in this castle, Sebian's voice resonated in my head. *Your father has quite the fondness for setting us ablaze.*

My throat wanted to narrow, but I cleared it away, reminding myself of the dead boy at the village. For every Raven child marked by a war *they* had started, there was a human child out there who'd suffered as well. Simple as that.

With a brush in one hand and a blue velvet pouch in the other, the skinny thing inched toward me, her eyes never quite lifting to meet mine. “If you please, they... they sent m-me to —” A gulp cut through her words. “To brush your hair and pin it up so you’ll be presentable.”

Presentable... for court.

My heart tumbled in my chest at the mere thought of feasting among Ravens. Not that I could escape this dreadful fate, so there was no point in making a fuss. *A fuss was exactly what would get Malyr’s attention.*

I rose and sat on the chair beside the table instead, pretending I didn’t likely have red finger marks all over my face from how I’d slapped myself like an insane person. “Very well.”

The girl held her head strangely sideways as she placed the pouch on the table, focusing her good eye on the black pins she retrieved from it, which she lined up for later use. The lids of her burned eye had melted together on the outside corner, the iris behind it nearly white. She was half blind, wasn’t she?

Of course, I knew suffering among the innocent existed in war. Never had I seen it up close in all its ugliness. Somehow, it made my insides convulse. I didn’t know what to do with that.

Ignore it, probably.

Once positioned behind me, the girl carefully ran the brush through my hair. The bristles trembled against my skull as though I could easily kill her with, oh, I wouldn’t know... tendrils of shadows, perhaps. *Ridiculous.*

When the familiar silence of my chamber grew too suffocating, I cleared my throat. “What is your gift?”

“I have no gift.” Her voice carried a tone of somberness that weighed down even my chest. “Not... not anymore. My *anoa* is dead.”

“Your... what?”

“The raven that carries our gift is called *anoa*.” Brush put aside, she clasped one of the pins and skillfully twirled a strand of my hair around her finger. “It is said that, at our birth, our *anoa* flies down from the moon carrying our gift. A heavy burden for a raven, so it can take many years until we receive it... unless it’s the gift of void.” A shrug. “It’s empty, so it weights nothing.”

Yet another thing that no book at Tidestone had ever mentioned, making it hard for me to make sense of this magic and how it seemed to have different classes. “And it saddens you that you have no gift.”

“No. My gift wasn’t very strong.” Once the first strand was pinned up, she set to work on the next. “But without my *anoa*, I will never find my mate. The goddess makes one gift call for the other.”

One’s mate seemed to be a treasured thing among Ravens indeed, which somehow caused a pinch in my chest. “And you can’t make do with another Raven?”

“I guess,” she said with another shrug. “But nobody could ever want and love me the way my fated mate would have. Not the way I... the way I look.”

Irrational guilt tried to surface at the sadness in her voice, the undertone of resignation of a girl who likely hadn’t even bled yet. Why? For all I knew, she might have used her gift against Father’s soldiers one day. But her fear of forever being unwanted? Unloved?

That resonated.

Deeply. Urgently.

The door squeaked, followed by an excited, “At last, a confidante.”

I turned toward the copper-haired beauty who now stood in my chamber, her strands put into an elegant coiffeur and pinned back with green gemstones. “And you are?”

Her hand lifted the ruffled skirts on her green silk gown ever so slightly as she curtsied. “Lady Cecililia of the House Taradur. Cici will do. Galantia, correct?”

Taken aback by the unexpected presence of another human, I only nodded.

“Prince Malyr had this gown made for you. And while he seemed eager to assist you in dressing, Captain Asker hurriedly sent me ahead with it instead.” With a gentle smile on her lips, she walked over, and I only now noticed the heavy black fabric hanging over her arm. “Girl.” A snap of her fingers. “Out with you!”

The girl ducked her head like a beaten puppy and hurried out the door. *What a strange creature...*

I rose with the intention to curtsy, but found myself taking a precautionary step away from this woman instead. “Your father is Lord Taradur? Of Hanneling Hold?”

Something soft came around her blue eyes. “There are a great many things you should fear in this place, Galantia, but I am not one of them.”

“You are no Raven.” Which meant she was a traitor to the crown. Or at the very least, the daughter of a traitor. “Why would your lord father bring you here? To a place like this?”

“Same thing that brings many a lord to flock around the Ravens these days.” She gave a wink that seemed to come as easily to her as her smiles. “Ambition.”

“Your father abandoned his oath to King Barat.”

“Oaths don’t keep you alive these days, Galantia, lest they’re sworn on your knees at Prince Malyr’s feet. Not every stronghold lies safely nestled between harsh winds and Ammarett, let me tell you. Now...” Fabric clasped between her fingers, she held out the dress. “I daresay I’ve never seen anything so fine.”

I stepped closer to the dress, its fabric so black, it seemed to swallow all light, betraying not a single crease, not one speck of glow. Only the bodice reflected the occasional red flicker from the hearth, where hundreds—if not thousands—of black pearls were sewn onto the fabric. No, not pearls.

“*Aerymel.*” A metal so hard and unyielding, weapons made of it never broke, never dulled, yet light as a feather. “Father

has an amulet set into *aerymel*, but I've never seen so much of it."

"More precious than diamonds and gold," she said. "Not such a surprise, considering it can no longer be mined."

I ran my finger down the train, feeling the strange fabric and how its threads seemed to shift in its weave, though it had to be a trick of the light. "Why not?"

"Because of the shadows?" When I only stared at her, she lifted a perfectly arched brow the way Sebian had. "Do you truly not know that the city of Valtaris, almost the entirety of the kingdom of Vhaerya, really, is sitting beneath a veil of shadows? Has for many years, ever since the city fell. I've never seen it, of course, but my brother has. Lost his horse when that stupid beast reared and stepped into the offshoot tendrils that creep across the meadows there. Good thing it threw him off. Those shadows kill everything—beasts, humans, Ravens. Everything."

I looked back at the dress, pretending to inspect it closer when I just wanted to hide whatever ignorant shock might show on my face. No, I hadn't known. Not that I would confess my lack of knowledge in worldly things that seemed to grow bigger with each additional conversation in this damn place. Why had Risa never mentioned it?

Against the risk of making myself sound even more naïve, I gave into that curiosity poking at my guts. "Where did the shadows come from?"

"Nobody knows. My mother once told me the blast killed everyone in the city, humans and Ravens alike, leaving no witnesses behind. Only darkness and quiet mines." She gathered the dress on her arms, then jutted her chin at the one I was wearing. "Now get out of that hideous cotton thing. No lady should be late for a feast held in her honor."

I stripped down to my underdress, then held my arms up for Cici to let the dress fall over my form, and—

Oh, that fucking bastard...

Fury pounded beneath the reddish-brown scabs on my chest that now lay exposed, barely a shred of cloth covering it. Perhaps I was ignorant to many things, but stupid, I was not. No, this was definitely no feast of honor.

It was a feast of mockery.

Mockery, insult, and humiliation, sewn onto this dress in the shape of black feathers. They bobbed on my shoulders with each inhale, tickled at the nape of my neck where a tight row of them created a collar, and shifted where they peeked out from the flowing creases of the train.

“So, the rumors are true...” Cici stared at the spread-winged raven that seemed to take flight from between my breasts, the swelling long receded, the pain negligible thanks to the paste Sebian had given me. “He carved the Khysal sigil into you.”

Shame had me sink my head. “He did.”

“Prince Malyr has no fondness for humans—everyone at court knows that—but scarring you up like this? A human, yes, but a lady of the kingdom just the same? It is... barbaric.” Once Cici tightened the bodice in the back, she shifted one of the pins in my hair, only to give me a final nod of approval. “The dress, however, is magnificent.”

Oh yes, I would be the envy of every widow. “If one plans on attending a funeral.”

“And it’ll be mine if I don’t get you to the great hall this hour.” Without warning, Cici spun me around and ushered me out the door. “The prince is waiting, and so is his court.”

CHAPTER
ELEVEN



Galantia

Present day, Deepmarsh Castle, great hall

Bitter and malty, the air inside the great hall hung thick around dozens of wooden tables—the benches occupied by more Ravens than I would bother to count. They must have feasted for a while already, given the unrestrained guffaws that echoed from the vaulted ceiling. Roasted piglings eaten down to the hocks sat between spills of foamy ale and red wine, the room warmed by two large hearths at the center of each length side.

A third, smaller one nurtured a fire at the wall across from us. The high table stood before it, easily recognized by the black cloth that hung around it, embroidered with the sigil of House Khysal. And there, in the massive wooden high chair behind it, sat the Raven prince.

Staring at me.

I dropped my gaze as not to provoke him, still ever so curious about what had happened in Valtaris. “How can there be a court if everyone died in the blast of shadows?”

“Most noble Raven houses were decimated right after Valtaris fell, it’s true,” Cici said as she leaned into me, her voice low. “Prince Malyr established new ones; he handed out titles, lands, and occupied strongholds among his most devoted and powerful followers. They congregated around him the moment word of his survival spread. King Omani, Queen Elnora, his sister... They all died in Valtaris.”

“I didn’t know he had a sister.” Of course I hadn’t...

“Oh, you sweet thing, my father once spoke of how your parents guarded you, but I had no idea they’ve locked you in the highest tower.” She pointed at the lonely table only three short rows away from Malyr. “Sit.”

For a moment, I considered facing away from Malyr—fewer chances at affronting him. But having your enemy at your back? That didn’t seem wise, so I lowered myself onto the bench to face him instead, but didn’t dare look his way.

“Which one is this Captain Asker? Is he present?”

“The one with the braid and salt and pepper beard in the black armor, over there. He used to serve as ravanguard to the royal family. Annoyingly righteous and proper. Swore that he won’t remove his armor until he redeemed himself by helping Prince Malyr take the throne of Dranada since their own lands are lost to them.”

Redeem himself? “What had he done?”

“Failed to fight off your father’s soldiers somewhere at the border of Vhaerya, I believe, which ultimately led to Prince Malyr’s capture and imprisonment.”

“There are quite a few humans.” Turncoat lords, obviously, and way more than I’d expected. Too many for comfort. They feasted and laughed at tables they shared with Ravens, many of them accompanied by women too young and vibrant to be their lady wives. “Gods, did every lord drag his poor daughters to the Raven court?”

“The smart ones brought their sons, too. You just never know with these Ravens... the unbonded ones, anyway. Which are quite a few since many lost their potential mates during this tedious war.” Subduing her smile, she leaned slightly forward, but didn’t speak again until I did the same. “As for the daughters... don’t trust a single of these titled whores. They’ll conspire against you, scratching your eyes out before they turn on each other again. It’s what they do with every new girl that represents competition.”

“What are we competing for, exactly?”

Again that arched brow that made me feel stupid. “For Malyr, of course. After all, he *is* the prince.”

Ha.

Ha ha.

A prince with no kingdom, no kin, no rightful claim to the throne of Dranada. Five hells, he didn’t even possess manners. The only thing he actually *did* have was the personality of crotch lice.

But all I said was, “What a catch, indeed.”

“He has not found his mate,” Cici continued, “so the pressure for him to take a human wife is growing. As things stand, he’ll need a strong, *reliable* human ally who won’t stab him in the back to win this war.”

Unease welled in my chest at Father’s prospects should Malyr gain such an alliance. “Well, I am no competition.”

“Oh, don’t be so harsh on yourself for your obvious lack of experience in matters of seduction,” she said, which wasn’t what I’d meant at all. Not that her assessment was wrong, either. “Although, perhaps, it is for the best, given the rumors.” She leaned in even closer, letting her voice drop into a whisper barely discernible over the noise. “His sexual urges are... peculiar. Or so some say. I never managed to find myself in his chambers. *Yet.*”

My mind wandered back to how hard he’d been in his breeches when he’d violated me in my room. How he’d held that knife to my mouth with every intention to see me bleed.

I shook my head, dislodging that memory. “I believe the prince has no interest in taking a human wife.”

Cici scoffed, “As if he would be the first prince forced into marriage.”

“He sounded adamant. Said he would never breed with a human. A strange thing to say, considering that he himself is a half-blood.”

“Half-blood?”

“His mother,” I clarified. “She was human.”

“Galantia, my friend, you ought to seek out the library. Your education is severely lacking.” That pitiful look coming over her regal features did nothing to make me feel any less ignorant. “His mother was a half-blood. For many years, she neither shifted nor did a gift reveal itself, so most written accounts refer to her as human; it’s true—the ones written and rewritten by our scholars, anyway. But she had magic, Galantia. And after what happened with his mother, surely Prince Malyr can see how political marriages make or break houses.”

Now I felt downright stupid. “What do you mean?”

“How beautiful you look, Galantia.” Sebian stumbled up beside our table wearing a white shirt with no adornments, halfheartedly shoved into his brown breeches as if he’d only just fallen out of bed. “In that dress, I nearly didn’t recognize you. Halfway expected to see a long-lost lady from some noble Raven house.”

“Must be the feathers.”

“Indeed! I’m tempted to start a courting dance right here.” Grinning, he wiggled his shoulders and bobbed his head much like doves did when they walked. “How am I doing?”

A smile tugged on the corners of my lips, again, easing away some of my tension. “You look ridiculous.”

“It looks better on my ravens, maybe.” His attention fell to Cici. “What is court’s newest gossip? Your mouth is talented in many things, but none so much as running it.”

“That the Lady Galantia is in dire need of books to pass the time while she hides away in her chamber,” she said. “Truly, Sebian, she’s as innocent and naïve as a cow in the pasture.”

My hackles rose at her remark, but I could hardly blame her. She was right. I knew nothing about anything, feeling like a child who had toddled out of the nursery and accidentally stumbled between the grown-ups, unable to follow their conversations. Why had everyone kept me from all this?

“Well, we all know how humans destroyed most of our accounts after the war broke out and rewrote their own. And ours? Well, they’re buried beneath shadows.” Sebian gave a knock on the table before he turned away. “If the ladies will excuse me.”

I looked after him as he turned and walked toward the high table. He jumped up, only for his ravens to cross the distance with one beat of their wings before Sebian reappeared seated... at the high table. Beside Malyr.

They were *close* friends.

Disturbing.

“What about this one?” I jutted my chin toward Sebian but kept my voice low. “Can he be trusted?”

“That one charms himself between the legs of the most gods-fearing maidens, leaving them ruined and heartbroken,” she whispered, but Sebian must’ve heard it anyway, since he looked up from where he poured himself a cup of wine, narrowing his eyes at Cici. “Also *thoroughly* satisfied.”

Sebian gave Cici a little gesture of gratitude and hinted a bow. Then he stared at me, mirth sparking light and color into his handsome green eyes before he winked. It sent an unwelcome flutter into my chest until his face disappeared behind the cup. Gods fetch him, he was a terrible scoundrel, wasn’t he?

A flicker of light caught my attention.

On instinct, my gaze shifted to its source, a silver knife that reflected the lick of the flames from a candlestick. A

finger ran along it, slowly, pulling dread down my throat and into my burning chest with how I suddenly held my breath. *Don't look up. Don't look up. Don't—*

My eyes lifted.

Damnit, Galantia!

They connected with Malyr's.

A chill spread across my skin, rising the fine hairs at my nape. They broke against that stupid collar of feathers when he lifted his hand to his neck. He ran his thumb along the healing cuts I'd left on the side of his throat. Then, in one unhurried, languid motion, he lapped the digit.

Lick the knife, Galantia.

My eyes snapped to that wicked grin he gave me. Teasing me, taunting me. Bastard!

Do not provoke him!

Right. No provoking.

Lowering my gaze took effort as I set aside that obstinance Mother often scolded me for. It would gain me nothing in this place, whereas keeping my mouth shut might just get me back to my chamber. How long did I need to stay here? Could I leave now?

“Lady Galantia of House Brisden!” Malyr's sudden shout silenced everything. Everything but my heart, which stumbled into a quicker pace. “Will you not sit beside me, where you belong?”

CHAPTER
TWELVE



Galantia

Present day, Deepmarsh Castle, great hall

My throat tied up as I focused on a breadcrumb before me on the table, sensing a hundred cold stares slithering my way. May the pox take him, why had the field stone on that day not been pointier?

Cici gave my hand a quick squeeze before she mumbled, “You best not make him wait.”

Legs trembling, I rose and walked toward the high table. It took effort, placing one foot compliantly in front of the other, but I wouldn’t be so foolish and make a scene. No, I would be easy, and compliant, and agreeable. How difficult could that be?

Under the scrutiny of hostile eyes, I rounded it while black feathers bobbed on my shoulders to the mocking rhythm of my hesitant steps. I passed Sebian, who didn’t bother giving me a

glance as he poured himself more wine, and approached the chair that stood between him and Malyr.

The moment I reached for the backrest, Malyr kicked the leg, sending the chair screeching across the stone before it tumbled to the ground with a heart-rending *thud*.

“Mmm, such is her arrogance; she truly expected a chair at the high table.” Malyr rose to the laughs and bellows from the audience, the assembly of Ravens ever so entertained by my humiliation as their prince wove his fingers into my pinned hair. “I said where you belong, little white dove. On your knees. By my feet. So you may kiss my boots and pledge allegiance to your future king.”

Every proud fiber of my being strung tight, and my eyes snapped to his. “You will never be a king of mine.”

I hadn’t fully spoken the words when my stomach turned. I shouldn’t have said that. *Why had I said that?*

“What did I suggest about that mouth of yours?” Sebian asked. “I daresay you’re downright *provocative* tonight, sweetheart.”

A warning.

I best heeded it.

Malyr leaned into me, close enough that the scent seeping off his hair and skin wafted around me. He smelled like the cold air on a white winter morning and something else... Something sweeter that didn’t seem to fit at all.

“On my lap then, for I am afraid we are finding ourselves short a chair.” His dark whisper against the shell of my ear wasn’t the only threat, finger sliding down my spine before it drew one warning circle after the other around my buttocks. “Mmm, how I would enjoy having you squirm on my length tonight. Is that what you want? To rub your ass on my cock until I spill?”

My lips quivered. “No.”

“Then which will it be, Lady Galantia?” A stub of his nose against my temple. “My seed soaking your behind, or your

knees digging into the ground? Choose.”

Heat flared up behind my eyes with how there was no true choice to be had. “The ground.”

“Good girl.”

My pride snapped like thin threads against the sudden weight that came down on my head as Malyr forced me to the hard, biting stone. There I kneeled, in a pool of black silk and feathers, stripped of my dignity for all but the table banner that hid some of my burning shame, though not much. After all, my head remained high enough I could see everything.

Every.

Grinning.

Guffawing.

Face.

They all blurred behind that sting in my eyes, my frantic little breaths like a bellow, turning them hot and itchy. I’d always thought I could never disappoint Father more than I already had with my sheer existence. But if he saw me like this...? If word of it ever reached him? Gods...

Malyr took his chair once more, letting chatter and the clanks of tankards return to the great hall.

“Let me have a look at those sparkling eyes.” Leaning over, he clasped my chin between his fingers, lifting my gaze to that infuriating smirk that seemed to twitch higher the more it distorted. “Are you going to cry for me, Galantia? Are you going to cry so prettily in front of my court?”

Anger sparked at my core.

Anger and amusement.

Was that what he was trying to achieve here? To make me cry? How... entertaining.

A sudden thrill flared at my core, like a pulsing of restless energy that had me lift my chin, letting him see those eyes that had forgotten how to cry. “You have no kingdom, no crown. If

you call this farce a court, then I can only assume that you're its fool."

Somewhere beside me, Sebian coughed. Could have been a subdued laugh; might have been another warning. *Don't provoke him, Galantia. Don't draw his attention, Galantia.*

Well, I'd heeded it all, and look where it had gotten me. Down on my searing, aching knees for the enemy to snicker at!

"Beautiful," Malyr breathed.

He lifted his hand, running a fingertip along those scabs on my chest. Mapping. Breathing. Driving me out of my skin as I waited for him to retaliate. My pulse worked itself into a frenzy as I waited for him to rip off a scab, dig his nail into the weeping wound beneath or... outright whip his palm across my face. Why wasn't he? Had he even heard what I'd said?

And then I felt it.

The slithering beneath my skirts...

Cool tendrils licked across my inner thighs, stroking, caressing. Pressing into my flesh as they climbed upward. At that unexpected touch, so shockingly pleasant and void of pain, my heart quickened and rushed liquid heat into my cheeks, my chest... my lower belly.

That chin I'd held high all this time sunk as I once more fixed my eyes on the fabric of my dress, on those threads that shifted, thrummed, *slithered*.

Not silk.

Shadows.

"Mmm, as much as I hate to confess it, black shadowcloth suits you." Malyr's rasping purr vibrated against my temple as those wicked offshoots gathered at my sex with mind-numbing pressure. "And how nicely you are displaying my mark tonight, showing everyone just whom you belong to. Mine to hurt. Mine to torment."

I tried not to squirm when his shadows probed my entrance, refusing to give him the reaction he sought. "You

made this dress?”

“No. My gift is not... delicate enough to create such fine work.” His fingers clasped my chin once more. “We have weavers blessed with the gift of creation for that. I merely supplied the shadows, and they are *aching* to devour you.”

He sent them to caress my heaving bosom, petting and stroking beneath the black pearls. They tantalized my nipples as the thinnest ringlets lapped at them in tight circles. The most depraved of them drummed my entrance, making moisture gather where there should be none. What was wrong with me?

I clenched my thighs shut. Wouldn't acknowledge those shivering flares of pleasure that threatened to destroy my last bit of grace and composure in front of the entire court.

It didn't have the desired effect...

If anything, Malyr's shadows writhed harder. They slinked through my folds, winding the pleasure tighter, coiling around my clitoris until it throbbed with terrifying intensity. Gods, I couldn't possibly enjoy this...

Could never let him know that I did.

“Her heart's beating fast, Malyr.” Sebian's voice, gravelly and laced with heavy breaths, did nothing to calm the heat pulsing between my legs. He brought his chair closer and leaned over, running a hand down my waist before he whispered by my ear, “Should I tell him how wet you are for this, sweetheart? How needy your little cunt is for his shadows?”

I wasn't sure what burned hotter in my chest as I looked at him, shame or rage. Probably the latter, given how he tortured his lower lip, letting his lustful gaze take a timeless stroll over my degraded body. But gods! The tingles these shadows roused in me...

“Do you like this, little dove?” Malyr asked. “Does Brisden's whore daughter enjoy how my shadows are playing with her tight, pink cunt?”

“No,” I ground out.

Malyr's lips scathed across the shell of my ear. "*Liar...*"

Shadows dipped into me ever so slightly, turning the pressure between my legs unbearable. Oh, how they filled me. Stretched me. Played with me until my lips parted with the threat of a moan.

My breath ceased.

No. No. No.

Not again.

I would rather die than betray a single shameful reaction, so I ripped my chin from Malyr's clasp. Pressing my mouth against the feathers on my shoulders, I breathed the sound into their vanes.

Sebian sucked in a long breath, fingers curling into my waist with possessive strength. "Fuck, sweetheart, that was a lovely moan. Why hide it from us, hmm?"

"You should've heard her when I cut her peachy lip." Malyr ripped my gaze back to his two-colored stare with such force, my balance shifted onto one aching knee until I hissed. "The strangest things lure the strangest sounds from my little dove."

"Did that hurt, sweetheart?" Sebian's fingers ran from waist to knee, where they bunched the fabric of my dress underneath it for a cushion. "Too much pain kills the pleasure, Malyr."

My gaze went back and forth between them, hairs rising along my arms at this strange energy that quivered the air between them, and my nerves right along with it. I watched the quiet looks they exchanged, like an unspoken conversation I wasn't privy to.

"She deserves no pleasure. Not from me, anyway," Malyr said and, at last, his shadows retreated from beneath my skirts. "I simply enjoy watching her act like a common whore while she writhes as if I paid her for it."

That tingling heat faded into nothing but a barren chill, clashing with that relentless throbbing that had settled in my

cheeks. “There is *no* pleasure in this.”

“You haven’t eaten yet; we shall rectify that.” He gave me a pat on the head as if I was his favorite hound, blatantly ignoring what I’d said. “Of the many ways I would like to kill you, had I the leave, starving you is certainly not one of them.”

Searing contempt burned stronger in my veins than the rough stone that bit into my joints. “I am no longer hungry.”

“If you are hungry or not is of no consequence.” His hand hovered over a plate of delicious blackberries, but then shifted as if he knew how much I liked them—and he couldn’t possibly offer me something I liked. He broke off a small piece from the bread on the plate before him instead. He buttered it with the knife now sitting in his other hand and brought it to my mouth. “Open those pretty, cut-up lips, Galantia. Gratefully take the scraps given to you by your betters like the good little Brisden bitch you are.”

Righteous fury knotted my belly, causing such convulsions, as my throat bittered with bile. “I would rather starve.”

“Yes, I figured that you would say something like that. Given how quickly you ended up on your knees and by my feet, I shall provide you with another choice. Take the bread or...” Flames once more reflected on the knife as he brought it closer, pressing the greasy blade against my mouth. “Lick the knife until you bleed. Sebian likes the sound of your moan. Indulge him.”

Beneath the silver, the cut on my bottom lip throbbed, marking the seconds of silent staring that passed between us. To the five hells with him! Did he think that a cut still bothered me? My neck was bruised, my lip aching, my chest carved-up! He wanted me to lick the knife?

Well, as it so happened, I’d promised myself a future where I would touch all the damn knives; I’d just never specified how or with what body part. Might as well fucking lick it.

I parted my lips, holding Malyr's gaze as a flutter infused my veins and that godless throb returned to between my legs. *Don't touch the knife, Galantia.*

A smile curved my lips.

But why not?

I pressed my tongue against the blade. With a determination that returned some of my pride, I slid it upward, slowly, languidly. It burned. Burned so nicely, only to gradually fade into a pleasant after chill as iron seasoned my mouth.

Malyr's lips parted, and the tip of his tongue shifted, curled as though he wanted to lick the blood from my teeth. Air escaped his lungs in a long, stuttering exhale that seemed to send a slight tremble through his entire body, and the thinnest coils of shadows simmered along his corded neck.

"Oh, sweetheart," Sebian groaned, shifting in his chair. "Maybe you do like his attention after all."

My pulse quickened under Malyr's intense stare, the way his shadows thickened. Until his gaze snapped to something behind me, and his jaws tightened.

I didn't see it coming, the hand that clawed into my hair. It ripped me backward with such force, my hip collided with the unyielding stone. More painful was that *thud* to the side of my head when it hit the table edge—maybe its leg. I braced my arms behind me, catching myself from landing flat on my back.

"What is she doing here?"

My teeth clenched at those words. That voice! It had haunted me throughout my delirium.

Righting myself where I now sat on my ass, my dress in tatters around my left arm where the impact must have ripped it, I looked up at Lorn. Watched how she draped herself over Malyr's lap, twirling a black strand of his hair around her finger.

The sight stunned my mind for long moments, though it shouldn't have. Of course they were lovers. Their absolutely pestilent personalities suited each other perfectly.

“What is she doing here?” Malyr fisted and stretched his hand, then lifted it to cup Lorn's cheek. “She is *boring* me.”

My teeth clenched until my molars throbbed for reasons I couldn't quite grasp. What was his entertainment to me? His attention?

Nothing.

“Yes, dull virgins do that to us, don't they?” Lorn said, letting a new flare of heat climb up my neck while she cupped Malyr's smooth-shaven cheek. “Are you happy I returned sooner? Did you miss me while I was gone?”

“You know full well that no moment passes where you're not on my mind.” Malyr's eyes found mine, and a smile that promised nothing good curved his thin lips. “Mmm, where are my manners? Granted, those many months I have spent at the Tidestone dungeons did nothing to nurture my social graces, but even I remember that introductions ought to be made. Although... come to think of it... Little dove, I believe you have already met Lorn?”

That heat spread, flaring up the itch around my scabs. No, he didn't just believe; that bastard knew what had transpired the day of my capture. How she'd killed the only person who had ever shown me love. I could see it in that bemused twitch on his lips.

Lips he pressed to Lorn's.

He kissed her, passionately, moaning into her mouth, lapping at it, caressing it with his tongue. What would it feel like to be kissed with such passion? Would it tingle in my belly? Turn me weak?

Those questions put an odd twinge in my chest because I'd never been kissed before, making this yet another thing I knew nothing about. More painful was how Malyr kept staring at me throughout, as if to remind me of how foolish I was. Just a girl. A child.

“Give the girl to me for the night,” Lorn murmured between kisses as she writhed her feminine, shapely body against him. “I want revenge.”

“You had revenge.” Malyr’s throaty, male groan pebbled my skin as he lifted his hips upward against her. “This girl is *mine*.”

Sebian suddenly appeared behind me and pulled me up, letting the fine hairs rise against his body heat. “Alright, time to go, sweetheart.”

Oh, he didn’t need to say it twice.

I retook possession of my arm and hurried off. “Don’t bother, Raven.”

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN



Sebian

Present day, Deepmarsh Castle

Don't bother, Raven.

Groaning in frustration, I followed Galantia out of the great hall, my cock painfully stiff. Things could've gotten real interesting down there—quite possibly ending with my mouth on her juicy cunt tonight—wasn't for fucking Lorn. How could Malyr have been so reckless, letting her walk in on him like that?

Lorn took no issue with the women Malyr bedded. They were nothing to him—the same way the sorry bastards she fucked were just prey to her. But the way his shadows had seeped from his skin as though Galantia was already writhing beneath him...? How he'd stared down at her, so spellbound, he hadn't even seen Lorn coming? That shit would turn Domren's betrothed into a corpse before I had a piece of her.

When Galantia all but tumbled up the stairs, I shifted into my unkindness, only to reshape at the upper landing and grab

her arm there. “Stop running.”

That flinch of surprised fear didn't go unnoticed before she yanked away from me once more. “Leave me alone.”

My ears pricked at her tone—angry, with a hint of shame. “What did I do now?”

“*Nothing*,” she bit out, and that carried more than just a hint of accusation. “You simply... enjoyed the evening's entertainment. I can't believe you're the same person who looked after my wounds.”

An odd twinge spiraled through my core, though it shouldn't. What had she expected? That just because I had cleaned her cuts, I would coddle her now? Take care of her? Fuck that.

Sick of her attitude and how there was clearly no restoring the mood, I grabbed her shoulder and shoved her back against the stone wall right beside a window. “So did you, judging by that wetness between your legs. You have to be *aching*.”

All color drained from her face before she quickly veered to the right, as if intent on running from the truth. “Let me go.”

I shot my arm out, barring her escape. “I can smell the mess you made between your creamy legs, Galantia. Every pathfinder in the great hall could.”

Her lips parted—quite possibly to deny it—only to snap shut as realization dawned. Yes, I could smell it. Every. Frothy. Drop. That fact turned her unnaturally still, like the rodents in the fields when my unkindness flew across. Adorable.

Until she lifted a defiant chin. “You're depraved!”

“That's bold, coming from the girl who goes around licking knives.” I settled my hand on her hip, kneading, stroking. Fuck, she felt so good in my palm. “If you didn't have Malyr's attention before, congratulations, you have it now.”

If there was one thing that got him harder than tormenting a woman, it was tormenting a woman who might actually *like* it. We'd had a few who'd played the act well enough, they

were almost convincing, but they turned to be nothing but self-serving whores who wanted to get close to Malyr for obvious reasons.

But Galantia?

She'd gotten *sopping* wet. For what, I couldn't say yet. His shadows? The humiliation? The taste of blood? Fear? Danger? Pain? Whatever it was, it turned her scent thick with arousal, making my head run wild with visions of making her come against my mouth.

"He left you wanting," I whispered. Malyr was usually too preoccupied with his shadows to get a girl off properly. And this one? Oh, he probably couldn't even be bothered. "Let me relieve that ache between your legs." I slid my hand lower, letting my fingers branch to her inner thigh. "I bet your little clit is still throbbing."

She hissed at me. Actually hissed! "None of what you say is true!"

"Yeah, it's true, which is half the fucking problem here," I barked. "Now, keep snapping at me, sweetheart, and I'll shoulder you and carry you straight back down there for Lorn to chew up. And, let me tell you, compared to her, Malyr is a saint. Is that what you want?"

She stiffened at my threat, which was smart. "No."

"No," I echoed. "So how about you calm down, hmm?" My fingers stroked over her mound, letting the hard shaft of a feather press down until her breath stalled. Found her clit. "Don't act angry with me when you're actually angry with yourself. Don't call me a liar just because you don't like the sound of the truth. You liked it. No need to be embarrassed about it because, sweet thing..." a lap of my tongue at her earlobe, "so did we."

At that last word, Galantia tilted her head, staring at me as though she was trying to figure out just what that meant, only for her brows to knit in utter confusion. Somehow, that got me even harder. Fuck, she was so innocent.

Untouched.

The healer had confirmed as much while she'd been unconscious. Goddess help me, how much I wanted to be her first. I'd make it good for her. Really good.

But I couldn't...

I rubbed over her clit through the silky cloth, ignoring how Malyr's stupid shadows suddenly uncoiled from their weave, burning into my fingertips. How nicely she held her breath as not to betray how she was panting, eyes flicking around nervously in search for a quick escape while she remained perfectly still.

No doubt Domren would fuck an heir into her soon enough, too selfish to look after her needs. I wanted her to think of me when she touched herself after, remembering how I made her come against my finger, against my tongue, against the length of my cock. Fuck... she smelled so sweet. So perfectly—

Her hand gripped my wrist, hazel eyes seeking mine. "Stop."

"Are you sure, sweetheart?" I pressed deeper into her space, orbiting around her twitching clit. "Because I think your body wants this."

A thick swallow gulped down her throat. "Please..."

That whimper in her plea invaded my head the same way it had been infesting my dreams for five years now—nightmares of snow and ash—stalling my motion. Goddess, damn her, why did she have to open her mouth?

I removed my touch and took a step back, allowing her to turn for the window, where she pressed her forehead against the fogged pane. "You haven't eaten; I'll make sure someone brings you supper."

Where I'd expected her to nod, or perhaps give a meek *thank you*, she instead overwhelmed my senses with the quickening beat of her heart. "Is that... a town?"

What a fucking strange response.

I stepped up behind her, skin pebbling at the return of her body heat, and stared down at Fjelbog. The local town sat nestled between the castle and the outer curtain wall, bustling with nothing more than the usual debauchery—drinking, gambling, fucking. All of which I would join soon enough.

“Looks like it.” I ran a finger along a pinned strand of her blonde hair, loving all the nuances it offered against the flicker of the nearby oil lamps. “What’s down there that has your heart beating like this?”

“People,” she said with such reverence, one might have thought that she’d never seen a damn town before. “I’ve never seen a real town before.”

Well, pluck my feathers and call me a chicken. “You’ve never... What do you mean, you’ve never seen a real town before?”

“Tidestone has none of this. Only four walls holding the same servants, the same forge, the same kennels, the same thing every damn day.” She pressed a hand against the window, rubbing away the condensation with little squeaks. “The closest town, Glostén, is down the western road. Only a brief walk on foot, but I was never allowed to go there, not even during the harvest celebrations.”

I wasn’t going to pretend I knew a wit about noble life, but that struck me as strange. “Why not?”

“My mother is... a very protective woman.”

“Shouldn’t every mother be?” I asked. “As overbearing as they can be, it comes from a place of love.”

“Love...”

A shift—no, an actual roil—worked itself through my stomach. That word carried a strange resonance, like a sarcastic edge cutting through her undertone. Why? What was I missing here?

“Surely your mother loves you dearly?” She better, because if Malyr’s threats wouldn’t convince Brisden to give us Marla, we might have to rely on his wife’s pleas to make

this exchange happen. “I’m sure she’s desperate to get her only daughter back, is she not?”

Galantia glanced back at me with utter disbelief about how I could possibly question it, made an insulted spluttering sound, and said, “Of course!”

Good. Because if she turned out to be worthless... if Brisden refused this exchange and landed us with this girl, I wasn’t sure what Malyr would do with her. Or *to* her.

“I’ve never left Tidestone until we departed for Ammarett,” she said after a while.

My *primal* croaked at my core and spread his wings, eager to force me into a shift at the mere thought of being stuck in one place. Cici’s words came to mind about Galantia being in need of books, making me think back on the conversation I’d had with her when I’d tended those cuts Malyr, the mean bastard he was, had carved into her. How she hadn’t even known that my kind had fated mates.

Used to, anyway.

Bonding one’s mate was more and more a strike of luck. Many of them hadn’t survived the war, leaving their fated other half with no other choice but to make do with another pairing. Or remain untethered. Forever alone.

Like me.

I turned and leaned against the stone sill, if only so I could drink in that unadulterated excitement on her face. “Do you want me to take you outside?”

Her gaze met mine. “To town?”

“I’m not sure you noticed, but your chamber remains unlocked. You’re free to roam.”

“Because you know I won’t make it far on foot in these marshlands. Presume it serves your kind well as a stronghold, easily keeping attackers away without trapping you in. You can fly, after all.”

For someone who’d apparently never left Tidestone, she was a sharp little thing. “Precisely.”

“I think it best to remain in my chamber.” She turned away from the window, but I saw how her shoulders slouched with disappointment. “I would, however, like to visit that library Cici had mentioned. If it’s safe.”

“Malyr never goes there, if that’s what you’re wondering.” He was a terrible book hoarder and had his own personal library for that very reason. Still, the idea of her going there alone didn’t sit right with me. “There’s something I have to do up north. Once I get back, I’ll take you.”

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN



Galantia

Present day, Deepmarsh Castle, library

Sunlight filtered in through the colorful windows that lined two walls of the massive library, casting hues of green and blue across the tall white shelves. They formed a labyrinth of corridors, the air between them thick with the scent of old dust, yellowed parchment, and traces of leather.

I ran a finger over the black pigment of the feather image that decorated the page in the book before me and pulled my knitted green scarf higher. It matched my dress, warding off the strange draft that cut through the corridors. I began to read the paragraph before me out loud, each letter an intricately formed work of art.

In celebration of King Barat's betrothal to Lady Elnora, King Omani of House Khysal flew to the city of Ammarett to deliver his well wishes. Clashed in his

beak, he brought with him hair pins made of aerymel and shaped in the image of feathers. These, he gifted the future queen consort of the kingdom of Dranada, for indeed the two-blooded maiden had revealed to be a Raven only months prior, when her gift of echo had finally presented after sixteen years of being believed to be human. When Lady Elnora thanked him, King Omaniel was forced to his knees by her voice. So taken was he by the sound of it—like notes strung together by the goddess herself and written into a melody of the life they ought to share by fate—he knew that he had, at long last, found his mate.

When I looked up at Sebian, he shook his head where he slouched in a chair across from me, his boots folded on the table. “You cannot tell me this is the first time you hear this story. Even if Tidestone rid itself of all these accounts, your father surely talked of these things?”

I sunk my head.

Maybe. Just not with me.

Never with me.

“But she was betrothed to King Barat,” I said, stating a fact that needed pointing out if one wanted to reach clarity on who was at fault. “Had she done her duty and wed him, our kingdoms would never have gone to war with each other.”

“That’s not how fate works, sweetheart.” Boots lowered to the ground, he straightened, giving a tap at his chest. “Imagine an invisible string tied around your heart, Galantia, right here beneath your ribs, tugging you toward your mate. You long for this person with an intensity that turns every second you are not united into agony. Ever heard the story of Prince Taragor of House Khysal?”

“I have,” I said quickly and perked up, relieved I finally knew *something*. “Insanity made him tie himself to an anchor, letting it pull him to the bottom of some harbor where his ravens drowned.”

“He wasn’t insane.”

“Of course not,” I groaned. “Enlighten me, then.”

“His father ordered that he take some highborn human to wife, even though he’d found his fated mate,” he explained. “When he refused on the grounds that he couldn’t possibly live through the ache of fate urging him to bond with her, his father had the girl burned. In his grief, Prince Taragor took his life, so he may be with her in death where he could not in life. That’s how we long for our mate once revealed. An established bond only amplifies it, along with the strength of our gifts when we are close to each other.”

My ribs curled into my heart. What would it feel like to be loved with such intensity? Such unequivocal fortitude that not even death could impose conditions? I wanted to experience such a love so badly...

“Did King Barat know of their fate?”

“Oh, he knew. From what Asker told me, Malyr’s father offered several coffers of *aerymel* to King Barat for the loss of his betrothed.”

“If the pull is truly that strong, why did the king go to war over it? And years after he married Queen Sarai instead?” I’d heard Father describe King Barat as impulsive, but that was still a far cry from plain stupid. “Bad blood flows between many houses.”

Sebian ran a finger over the gold-embossed spine of a book on the stack in front of him. “Why accept coffers full of *aerymel* if you can just invade the lands and take the mines?”

Dread knotted my stomach, solidifying the logic in his words before I managed to call him a liar. Full body armor no heavier than a night shift, swords that could cut through thousands of enemies without dulling, ships light enough in the keel to navigate shallow waters... *Aerymel* was valuable.

Precious enough for this endless war to be based on a lie?

“There was... friction between King Barat and King Omaniel long before Lady Elnora,” Sebian said. “One accused the other of putting too high a price on the metal, bleeding the royal coffers of Dranada dry to weaken them. Malyr’s father

didn't trust their alliance enough to allow for entire human armies to be equipped with *aerymel* armor and weapons."

"And the *kidnapping* of Lady Elnora offered the perfect motivation for the banners to eventually rally to King Barat's side."

My own words chipped away on my gullibility one childhood tale at a time. What if they hadn't started the war? What if we had? After the things Cici had told me? And this account? Malyr's utter hate for my family name? My kind?

It was possible. Plausible, even.

But was it true?

My gaze sunk to the smiling image of Queen Elnora, her dress shaded in the richest pigments of dark blue and ocean-green. "Between our accounts and yours, how can I be certain which one is true?"

"The History of the House Khysal." Sebian pushed yet another book toward me and tapped at the name engrained into the leather at the bottom of its front. "Recorded by Talahel Surra, who also wrote..." He rummaged through the pile of books I'd brought to the table earlier, tossing them around until he grabbed the one bound in green silk, skimming through the pages with a grin curling his lips. "Ah, here it is. Ravens who give their unkindness leave to feast on rodents' carcass often find their guts to be infested with parasites. In such case, it is advised to clean the guts with a mash of pumpkin and ground moon nettle each day for a fortnight, so the parasites might be expelled through the passage of the rectum or vent."

My entire body shuddered. "That's disgusting."

"I know! Not flattering to my kind, at all," he said and shut the book. "You can't tell me that a Raven who writes about intestinal infestation with such candor could possibly lie about King Omaniël."

When I spotted how Sebian pouted, as though to contain laughter, I couldn't stop from chuckling myself. "That's not truly written in there, is it?"

“No. He talks of feather mites, which isn’t much better. Had them once as a fledgling... cannot recommend it.” Grinning, Sebian tossed the book on the table. “You said when we came here that you wanted to learn more about us.”

I bit down my grin. “About your magic, Sebian.”

“Ah.” He gave me a playful wink. “Let my ravens get that for you.”

In a burst of shadows that made my heart stop, he shifted into his unkindness and disappeared over shelves. I stared behind him, not knowing what to make of this Raven. How could someone be infuriating one moment and kind the next? Fickle bastard.

I rose and strolled along the wall of shelves, running my finger over dozens of spines. Blue silk. Brown leather. Tooled details. Age-faded letters. Most books were written in the common tongue, though some contained the strange letters of what had to be Old Vhaer, telling stories I’d likely never heard of. What if they were all true?

I didn’t want them to be.

Didn’t want my king to be a liar and my father his henchman. But wouldn’t it be foolish to believe the Raven who’d captured me? The daughter of an oathbreaker? The prince who wanted to hurt me?

My head ached from all these questions. And what was the point of agonizing over it? As the future queen of Dranada, I could hardly sympathize with my husband’s enemy.

No, I could not.

When I reached an empty gap where a book had been taken, movement on the far other side caught my eye. A strike of dread hit my stomach. Oh, merciless gods, what was *he* doing here?

Malyr set a stack of books on the table that stood in front of a massive window, dressed in a white shirt, the fine black corset vest he wore above it perfectly tailored and tied in the back. It brought out his straight posture, his broad shoulders,

the way his trim waist tapered down. Someone so cruel shouldn't be quite so attractive...

That dread in my chest heightened when he lifted his head, freezing me in place. By sheer luck, he merely gazed into a corridor as though searching the shelves for a specific spine, then returned his attention to a book he'd opened in front of him. How long until he discovered my presence? Would pin me against a shelf and terrorize me, body and mind?

I quietly shifted and peeked right, toward the only door that led out of here a mere thirty steps away. It might as well have been a hundred, given how I had to cross the room right in front of him. Sebian was nowhere in sight. Curses, this couldn't get any worse.

Until the flapping of wings lured my gaze back through the gap, just in time to see Lorn shape beside Malyr, throttling my breaths into flat, paced gasps. How had she gotten there so quickly?

No matter.

This was *decisively* worse.

Malyr quickly shut the book he'd been reading, only to grab another and place it atop, flipping through its crinkling pages. "What is it?"

Lorn sat on the table, scooting through the boundary of his arm to position herself in front of him, all while running her fingers along his waist. "When I came to your chambers last night, I found the door locked, the windows shut, the flight holes closed."

It was hard to tell from the distance, but it looked as though Malyr's jaws tightened. "I was unwell."

"Unwell..." That word came with a single breathed scoff as her fingers glided lower. "You've been feeling *unwell* a lot lately."

"Which is precisely why I have come here since the healers can find nothing wrong with me. Certainly, there is an answer to be found within these pages where my own leave

me wanting. If only you wouldn't be sitting on the book I intended to read."

"You mean the one you hurriedly closed when I came?" Lorn shifted on her buttocks, but instead of reaching for the book she sat on, she pulled out the one beneath, and held it up between them. "*Delos 'ta lay.*"

Delos'ta... what? What did that mean?

Malyr grew still. "Lorn, I—"

Lorn's other hand shot up, slapping Malyr's cheek with such force, it turned his head. She lifted her chin so provocatively high, my stomach sank under the weight of vicarious fear. He would kill her. Which should have pleased me, but, at that moment, I couldn't deny a sliver of envy for the guts of this woman.

Malyr rolled his shoulder, letting a bone crack as he righted his head, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he stared her down. "You dare strike your prince?"

"You're no prince to me." Lorn moved that hand she kept between his legs, touching him there until he moaned. "You're just a little Raven boy."

Malyr's features distorted until he barred his teeth. "Stop."

"Mmm, you don't have to pretend with me, Malyr. I know all your secrets. Know that this gets you hard, no matter how you want to deny it." Lorn quickly undid his breeches, shoving them down just enough for her hands to reach around his buttocks where they seemingly kneaded, fondled, pulled the firm flesh apart, and... something else I couldn't make out, but it lured one masculine groan after another from him. "Pretty little Raven boy."

Malyr gripped her throat, his entire body trembling enough not even the distance could hide it. "I said, stop!"

"Pretty Raven boy."

Shadows flared up around him. "Shut up!"

A gurgling, scratching laugh escaped her throat as she slapped him again. "Make me, pretty boy."

“Shut your mouth, Raven whore!” In one quick move, Malyr pulled her off the table by her throat, spun her around, and pushed between her shoulder blades until her chest flattened on the table. He yanked her breeches down, rousing a quiver between my thighs. “That’s what you are, isn’t it? A filthy whore.”

“Yes...” Lorn moaned and arched her back, offering herself up. “Same as you, pretty Raven—augh!”

Malyr thrust into her with such force, a book fell from the table and hit the ground with a deafening *thud*. “I fucking *hate* you.”

He gripped her long black hair, yanking it until Lorn’s chest lifted from the table. Suspended by her strands, every jab of his hips ripped a breathed whimper from her, his narrowed eyes consumed by fury and contempt.

The sight chilled my skin with terror while heating my belly with longing. It was horrifying to watch. Terrifyingly raw, uninhibited, and sensual, making me shiver with something other than fear. Something so intense, heat rolled through me, overwhelming my senses with a nervous thrill.

Lorn clawed at the table. “Is that all you’ve got?”

“I told you to shut up.” Malyr gave a harsh tug on her hair with one hand, only to slap her cheek with the other before he dug two fingers into her mouth, pulling the flesh until she moaned in pain or arousal or both. “Shut up and take it like the whore you are, or I’ll fuck that foul mouth of yours.”

I trembled for breath, knowing I was witnessing something beyond my comprehension. It upset me... it aroused me. Of the two, I didn’t know which one was worse. Should I turn away? Should I watch? What if—

A hand sealed over my mouth and lips just as the faintest whisper tickled against the shell of my ear. “Shh... not a sound, sweetheart.”

I panted into Sebian’s palm, faster when his other hand slipped beneath my skirts. His fingers trailed up along my

thigh, brushed over my hip, and dove between my legs, making me squirm.

“Shh...” he once more hushed as a featherlight tickle brushed over my curls. “Does this arouse you, sweetheart? Watching Malyr fuck?”

I shook my head.

It didn't.

It couldn't!

“Yes, it does.” The torment of his fingers slipped lower as he stroked over my cunt, circling their tips around my drenched entrance. “Goddess help me, you have no idea the kind of scent you're giving off right now, Galantia. It's driving me insane, that wetness between your thighs.” He wiggled the tip of his boot between my feet, forcing them apart. “Spread your legs, sweet thing.”

Body still quaking, I stood no chance at fighting the way he pried my thighs apart. “No...”

“Shh...” His hand squeezed my mouth tighter. “You don't want Malyr to find you here, do you?”

Heart racing, I shook my head once more.

“No, you don't want that, sweetheart; trust me. He'd be furious. *Outraged.*” His fingers continued their torturous workings on my cunt with increasing pressure. “Are you going to be so still for me, Galantia? Hmm? Are you going to be a good girl and be so quiet?”

The heat he caressed into my clit made my breaths tumble behind the unyielding prison of his fingers. My nostrils sucked in air at double speed, pulling the familiar scent of herbs and leather deep into my chest. It imprisoned my senses, jumbled my thoughts.

The moment I wanted to look back at him, beg him with my eyes to stop, he held my face in place. Made certain my gaze remained straight on the gap, so I may watch how hard Malyr hammered into Lorn, groaning and grunting, slapping her face, calling her a whore. Degrading her.

He treated her worse than me.

Why?

“You enjoy watching him about as much as you enjoyed his shadows playing with your cunt and his knife cutting into your tongue,” Sebian whispered. “Which is pretty fucking deranged, but I’m not one to judge... We’re all a bit broken here.”

We’re all a bit broken here.

His words struck deep, but not as much as knowing that he might be right. Maybe I was deranged. Why else would I arch my back and rock against his fingers, chasing that excruciating edge that simmered nearby?

“Fuck, the way you’re offering is something I love to hate right now. You’re so wet, I could easily slip in there, but, apparently, that’s off limits. Come against my fingers, sweetheart.”

Fingers that tapped against my hard bud, tantalizing my lower belly into a knot of heat. My toes curled, my skin pebbled.

“That’s it, sweet thing, you’re so fucking close,” Sebian whispered, keeping the motion of his fingers steady, making the intensity crest. “Give into it. Come for me, Galantia.”

I threw my head back against his chest as every muscle in my body pulled tight. His hand captured my moan. Heat crashed down on me like a wave, washing away the ferocity of it, leaving nothing behind in the wake of my trembling being but utter... bliss.

“That’s my good girl,” Sebian crooned into my hair as a gentle warmth settled on my body, turning me sluggish. “Shh... calm your breathing. We have to be so quiet.”

My gaze focused on Malyr, who was alone once more. He stared down at the books. But only until he grabbed the edge of the table, lifted it up, and let it crash with a furious shout while the books thudded to the ground. He shifted into his ravens, then flew off and disappeared from my vision.

Sebian wrapped his arm around my belly from behind.
“Did you like that, sweetheart?”

Had I?

My mind was too stunned to make sense of any of this. Was I supposed to be angry at him for how he'd touched me without my permission, or thankful for how he'd made me feel? Was I flattered? Ashamed?

I didn't know. I simply pushed through his arm, nearly tripping over my own feet as I bolted out of the library.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN



Malyr

Past, Tidestone Dungeons

K eys clanked.
Hinges squeaked.

“Asker isn’t coming to save us, Malyr. He might be dead for all we know. We have to escape on our own before the strength of our gifts fades further.” Harlen sat beside me on the hard damp ground, his clothes torn to shreds, his legs skinnier than even mine and bruised black from the cane. “You *have* to use your shadows. Do you hear me?”

Footsteps thudded.

Water splashed.

“When the jailor comes again, I’ll spit in his face and make sure I get the first beating,” my brother continued. “You have to suffocate him before he alerts the guards, Malyr. We’ll take the keys and fight our way outside. The moment we see

the light, we shift with each other's help. Shift and fly as far away from this place as possible, do you understand me? Malyr?" A shove to my shoulder where I lay on the filthy ground, eyes fixed on that small drain hole at the bottom of the wall. "Are you even listening!?"

Not water.

Vinegar.

The sour tang of it climbed into my nostrils until my mind dizzied and my empty stomach turned, but it wasn't nearly as bad as the sounds the acid always brought with it—deep grunts, high-pitched screams, curses.

"A turd in your teeth!" the girl in the cell beside us shouted. "Touch me, and I'll bite that rancid piece of meat between your legs clean off! No! Get away from me or I'll fucking kill y—"

Slap. "Foul-mouthed little bitch. Tie her down over the crate."

Feet dragged.

Chains clinked.

"Goddess curse you bastards and put pox all over your yard! No! No!" Shouts turned into panicked, miserable yelps, piercing whatever hadn't gone numb inside my chest yet. "I can't do it. I swear, I can't remove the shadows! No! No— augh!"

"Maybe you can't give us Valtaris, deathweaver, but you still have plenty else to give us instead. Hold her legs. Keep her from bucking."

Wood moaned.

The jailor, too, grunting like a beast to the hurried rhythm of skin slapping against skin. It almost overwhelmed the girl's heaving, stuttering breaths. The *oomphs* he ripped from deep in her chest as he hurt her, robbed her of her curses. Left the girl behind with nothing but pained whimpers.

Her name was Lorn.

She'd told me through the hole shortly after Lord Brisden had caught us somewhere along the border of Vhaerya and thrown us into the dungeons. Into a small square of a cell with packed stone, tight weaves of forged iron, and the flames of a faraway oil lamp. No window, no food, no water—save for whatever dripped from the ceiling.

“Stop! I beg you,” Lorn pleaded through her hoarse, staggered exhales. “Goddess, damn your souls!”

Another man chuckled. “Hissing and snarling like the animal she is. I lik’em like that.”

“Because you’re damn goat fuckers! All of you!”

“Shut your mouth, Raven whore!” Another slap, then the jailor grunted louder, deeper. “That’s what you are. A filthy whore. Nothing but a hole to get us some relief, so my lads here don’t go bothering the honest women up there.”

The degree of humiliation overwhelmed all conscious thought, stunning my mind where I stared into the blackness that lay beyond the hole in the wall. Out. I needed out of this wretched nightmare.

“Malyr, I’m begging you...” Harlen crouched to stare at me from red-rimmed eyes, his breath rancid, his face unrecognizable with how gaunt it had gotten over however long we’d been here. Weeks? Months? He no longer looked like a man grown, but a boy. “You’ve been like this for too long now. I need you to get out of your head. Need you to use your shadows.”

Use my shadows.

Agony punctured through my heart, making me bleed into my chest until it filled with the pressure of a thousand souls on my conscience. Torment was all that existed within me, spiked with guilt and shame. My shadows had killed them. No, *I* had killed them. Had killed them all.

And I would kill again.

I shook my head. “No.”

“Malyr, you have to—”

“No.” My head wouldn’t stop its frantic shaking as Harlen’s face blurred into nothing but sharp bone, smudged skin, and valleys shadowed by starvation. “I killed them. Oh, goddess... I killed our parents.”

“We don’t need your regret, Malyr. We need your shadows.”

“N-no,” I stammered as they crept and crawled at my core. “You cannot make me. You cannot—”

“Malyr.”

“—make me.”

“Stop crying.”

“You cannot make me.”

“I said stop—goddess damn you, Malyr!” *Slap*. His palm hit my cheek, making the top of my head hit the stone with enough force, nausea welled in my stomach. “We are going to die if you don’t use your shadows. Is that what you want, hmm? Mother and Father aren’t enough; you have to make sure what’s left fades away in here, too?”

Naya!

Mother’s voice screamed at the back of my crumbling mind. Saliva pooled beneath my tongue. A gag tied my throat shut until, with a heave, I retched nothing but yellow slobbery strings of bile onto the damp, dark stone.

“Fuck, I’m sorry. Malyr, I just...” Harlen shoved his naked foot under my cheek, lifting my face from my vomit while his fingers brushed the tousled, greasy strands from my face. “I don’t want to die. Not here... not like this.”

But didn’t he understand?

He would die either way.

I turned my head, wiping my mouth on the tatters of my tunic before I looked up at him, my chest heavy. “I will kill you.”

“No, Malyr, that’s not true.”

“Don’t make me kill you. Please.” What did I have left but my brother? I’d destroyed it all. Our family, our city, our kingdom. “I cannot lose you, too. Please don’t make me. Harlen... please.”

“Malyr, look at me.” He clasped my face between his hands, lifting my gaze to his. “It was a terrible accident, but an accident just the same. If I remain close by your side, like it was in Valtaris, your shadows will do me no harm. I know this.”

“No.” He couldn’t know that. Couldn’t be certain. “They are *not* my shadows. They’re stolen. Stolen all those centuries ago.”

“Nothing but folktales, Malyr,” he said. “I’d rather die in my brother’s shadows than at the hand of our enemy. I trust in you. All you have to do is trust in your—” Movement through the small holes between the weave of iron bars caught his gaze. “He’ll come down again soon. We must be prepared.”

My fingers searched for the amulet around my neck. Empty. Nothing. Lord Brisden had taken it from me—the one thing that had once offered me hope in times of darkness. The one thing I’d promised to protect with my life.

Father was right, I was worthless.

“Malyr,” Harlen said. “I *will* do this. The question is, are you with me, brother? Will you weave your shadows?”

I fought down another wave of nausea. I didn’t want to do this. Didn’t dare confront my shadows. But how could I deny my brother after what I’d cost us? How could I remain nothing but a disappointment?

I wiped a few tears from my eyes, gaze wandering to the drain hole. “What about her?”

“She’s been here even longer than us.” Harlen released my face and sighed. “I doubt she can still shift.”

But what if she could, this girl behind the hole who’d told me stories of home, offering a sliver of light in this endless dark? I couldn’t just leave her. That was not right.

“Lorn?” I inched closer, peeking through the hole. “Lorn? Can you hear me? Talk to me.”

Something shuffled in the darkness until two bloodied, trembling fingertips poked through the gap in the stone. “Malyr...”

My shoulders tensed. Her voice sounded so different now, empty and depleted. Void of life.

“Harlen and I will escape.” I stroked my fingertips over hers, sensing the slippery blood from whatever wounds they’d left on her this time. “Can you still shift into your ravens?”

She swallowed her little cries the way she always did after the men left, trying to give them no voice. “I... I cannot.”

“What if you focus very hard—”

“Malyr... I *cannot* shift anymore without help.”

I looked up at Harlen.

He shook his head. “It’s been a while since you managed a conscious shift. I think neither of us is still strong enough to do it on our own, Malyr. We’ll have to hold hands once we make it out of here and pray our *primals* do the rest, and that only works in pairs of two.”

“We cannot leave her behind.”

Harlen tortured his upper lip. “This might very well be our last chance at escape, Malyr. We cannot jeopardize it for this girl.”

“But—”

“Malyr,” Lorn’s voice came through the hole as her fingers slipped away from beneath mine. “Go. There’s nothing left of me worth saving. Just promise me you will, should you ever come back and find my body, burn me so my ashes can drift forever on the wind.”

Tears once more collected behind my eyes, running salty down my throat. “I give you that promise.”

“I can hear a key turning in the door up there.” Harlen rose, making his way to the iron bars. “He left it open, I’m

certain. I hear the wind howling through the gap. The goddess is giving us this chance! He's coming back down here. Malyr, cower in the corner and don't look at him. Don't do anything until he starts beating me. I'll tell you when."

Heart beating fast, I did as I was told, focusing on the shadows that writhed within me. They lashed at my insides, each crack a demand for violence, bloodshed, death. What if they killed Harlen? Lorn?

Hinges once more creaked as the jailor stepped inside, a heavysset man with no neck but arms as big as oak branches, his brown hair cropped short. He made a show of how slowly he closed the iron door, a flogging whip tied to the left of his belt, the bloody cane dangling on the other side.

"Ah, lads, the things four months with only scat and rats for meals do to your lot. Where are your birds now, hmm?" The door fell into its lock, sending a strike of dread through me. "Lord Brisden is a... merciful man. All he wants are those damn shadows gone around that cursed city of yours, and the two princes can die old between some whore's legs in exile."

Harlen tried to spit at the man, only for the little he managed to produce to cling to his bottom lip instead. "You'll never get Valtaris!"

The man lifted his arm and struck Harlen straight across the face, making him wobble back on his twiggy legs and crash with his back against the stone wall. He pulled the whip from his belt, letting the strikes pelt down on my brother's chest until it shredded his shirt and welted his stomach.

Harlen grunted in pain as he collapsed forward to the ground, but three words made it through his tortured groans in Old Vhaer. "*Gran den skygga...*"

Free your shadows.

My heart pounded as I rose onto my shaky legs, communing with my *anoa*. Black tendrils rummaged through my innards, squeezing the blood from them. They snaked around my ribcage, stringing my bones tight until they ached,

threatening to crack into a million pieces and me right along with it.

It was too much. Too much.

“Malyr...” Harlen groaned where he clawed at the ground while the jailor kept pelting his strikes wherever they may land. “*Skygga!*”

Sweat broke across my forehead, running down along my temples in the same way my shadows veined across the ground toward the jailor. Or Harlen?

Memories of Mother ambushed my focus. How her jaws had gaped wide open. How my shadows had crept into her mouth, silencing her scream. The same shadows that flicked their black offshoots toward my brother.

I will kill you.

Panic rose, pulling every tendon in my body tight as I curbed my shadows, wrestling them back into the confinement of my chest. I couldn't kill him. Couldn't risk it.

Harlen's stare widened as he watched my shadows retreat. He lifted his head and looked at me. Through the sharp bite of the whip gnawing at his back, he looked at me, showing me every shade of disappointment and contempt in his brown eyes.

He lifted his empty hand toward the jailor. At the next, he stabbed a shadowy dagger into the man's groin, pulling himself up on it. He pulled out the dagger, letting crimson drip off the shadows before he plunged it into where the man's neck should have been.

The big man let out a scream before his knees hit the ground, pressing both hands to the wound where Harlen's shadows dissolved. “Guards! To hel—”

Harlen stabbed another shadow into the jailor's chest, shoving him to fall on his back before he knelt beside the writhing, groaning body. “Malyr! The keys! My hands are slippery.”

Frozen, paralyzed, I stared at Harlen's blood-soaked fingers where they pulled on the iron ring attached to the man's trousers.

"Malyr!"

With a start, I stumbled forward. Keys. Yes, I had to get the keys and open the door!

"Someone might have heard him. We have to hurry." Harlen reached me the clanking iron ring. "It's the big rusty one."

I fought past the violent shake in my fingers, letting the key stutter along the rusty lock for endless seconds before it finally slipped into the hole. At its turn, the lock sprung and hinges once more squeaked as the door opened.

"Hurry, Malyr. Hurry!"

Exhaustion gnawed on my legs at each step, making them want to cave, but I followed Harlen along the damp corridor. Empty cells lined our left, and oil lamps hung from iron hooks to the right. What if we couldn't shift? Where would we even —

Footsteps.

Just as Harlen approached the spindling stone stairs, a guard appeared from a corridor to the right. He stormed at my brother, slamming Harlen against the wall just as his hand reached for the pommel of his sheathed sword.

"Alert!" he shouted and pulled his sword out, letting the blade hum its treacherous melody. "The Ravens are—"

On instinct, I grabbed his throat, watching my fingers go from filthy to pitch-black in the blink of an eye. My gift streamed out of me, painfully so, webbing across his face, seeping into his skin until it wrinkled like a rotting prune. Then, with a silent jerk, the guard collapsed at my feet, dead.

That heaviness in my chest intensified.

I'd killed him.

"Malyr," Harlen's voice echoed. "Hurry!"

I looked up, watching Harlen's foot disappear from sight as he made his way up the stairs. "Wait for me!"

The moment I lifted my foot to step over the corpse, something hit the side of my head. Pain exploded above my ear, rippling through my skull. Everything around me spun. Stone. Fire. Blood. Stone. Fire.

Blood.

Blood running down the jailor's chest where a wound gaped and glistened behind a punctured shirt. His grin was the last thing I saw before his fist hit me straight in the face.

Bone cracked.

Tears welled.

My feet pulled out from underneath me as searing pain spread into my brain.

What happened? Where was Harlen?

"Catch the pathfinder!" The jailor's shout mixed with the sound of my body dragging over the ground. Stone pulled on my hair. Something gripped my ankle. "Mmm, I knew you were a deathweaver. Felt it in my bones. You, boy, won me three silver coins."

I fought to keep my eyes open, fading in and out of consciousness. "Harlen?"

"Your brother won't get far. Don't worry, we'll bring him back to you." A kick into my stomach sent me rolling over the stone. "Back into your cell where you belong."

Bile welled from my throat, bitter and biting, collecting in my mouth only to drool from my parted lips and my nostrils. "Harlen?"

When no answer came, cold sweat doused my skin. Time slipped away, racing so fast, it turned me nauseous, or creeping at the excruciating pace of eternities. Pain held every fiber of my body in a tight grip, keeping me paralyzed on the ground for I didn't know how long.

The brain-numbing screech of hinges caught my feeble focus, eyes going to a guard who held something draped over his arms. Four limbs, a body, and a head with long black hair that wobbled listlessly with the motion. Until he placed it on the ground before me, making me stare at Harlen's black ink mark beneath his ear. A river of blood welled from his head, seeping into his abandoned eyes, turning them crimson.

“Here's a meal for'ye, courtesy of the Lord Brisden.” With a chuckle, he turned and walked away. “A feast fit for ye ravens, ye filthy carrion feeder. Kraa. Kraa.”

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN



Galantia

Present day, Deepmarsh Castle

With my back pressed against the stone frame and one leg stretched out on its sill, I sat inside the corridor's window since it offered the most light this late in the day, the book resting on my lap bound in blackened leather. It had appeared by my door the morning after the library atop a few others with no note. Not that it had needed one. The title gave away my ever-so-vexing benefactor.

Ravens: a Compendium of Gifts.

As far as gifts went, there existed four major types of Ravens: weavers, fates, pathfinders, and voids. Except for the pathfinder, all came with variations, such as voids who could absorb other's shadowgifts, temporarily wielding them as their own. They called them echos—a rare gift, but not nearly as rare as its third variation.

The thief.

I ran my fingertip along the lines in the book as I read...

There once was a Raven, blessed with the gift of the thief. So empty was the void at his core, so desperate for shadows, he stole the gifts of three deathweavers and wielded them as his own. Great was the power he gained for the house Khysal, crowning himself king. Greater even was the burden he carried, the rage of stolen shadows within. Until, one fateful night, they swallowed him whole, turning blessing to blight.

“Galantia,” Cici said, making me look up from the book and to where she stood before me with two young women. “Will you join us for a stroll through the market?”

I looked out the window. The lowering sun illuminated a set of tables where tankards stood about. Men lifted cups, tossed knucklebones over the rough-hewn wood, and traded coins with the wenches who kept the drink flowing. Some even danced in what appeared to be a town square, spinning circles around each other as void of grace as they were of care.

My heart ached. What would it feel like to be down there, surrounded by so much life? What could it hurt if I allowed myself a taste of it? Just once?

I closed the book and slipped off the sill, acknowledging the two females beside her with a nod. “I’ll come.”

Introductions were made as I followed them down the stairs. Outside in the courtyard, Sebian aimed a black shadowy arrow at a nearby target. A pathfinder trait, which explained why I’d never seen a quiver on him. When the arrow dissolved into thin air, he glanced over his shoulder at me as though he’d sensed me. Or... smelled me?

I dipped my head, cheeks heating at the memory of how his skilled fingers had brought me pleasure like none before. Had I wanted it? No. But I had liked it! For that reason, and the fact that Sebian seemed to be my only source of reprieve in this place, I’d decided not to hold it against him.

But it couldn’t happen again.

“Here.” Gabilla reached me her brown scarf, her fluff of black hair neatly pinned up. “Drape it over your head.”

“Thank you.” I wrapped it around me, tugging it over my blonde strands. “With your black curls, I guess you can easily blend in.”

At an elegant gesture of her hand, black shadows appeared between her fingers, weaving into a sort of cape which she wrapped around her shoulders. Shadowcloth. She was a weaver.

“Yes, I blend in easily,” she said, sharing a giggle with Cici, whereas the other girl ran off toward a store. “You, however, do not. Allow me to suggest that, out here, you keep your name to yourself. There is no love for you here.”

Oh please, there was no love for me anywhere, which made it all the easier to ignore her snarky remark. I focused on my surroundings instead, taking everything in with parted lips and a wild flurry of excitement at my core.

Whenever I’d stood on Tidestone’s outer bailey as a child, watching the harvest lanterns illuminate the faraway windows of Glosten, I’d imagined a town to smell like sweet bread, foreign spices, and roasted meat. This place quickly cured me of that romantic illusion. It smelled like shit, urine, and unwashed bodies.

And I loved it!

My entire body thrummed with energy as we passed the merchants’ wooden carts that lined the moss-covered curtain wall, craning my neck this way and that. I wanted to see it all! The exotic fruits, silky linens, and strange trinkets brought here from lands I would never visit. Where did they lay? How long would one have to travel to reach them?

I stopped in front of a cart and reached for one such trinket, running the tip along the row of small, greenish-blue stones strung onto leather. Veins of gold scattered around the beads, which reflected a hint of pink coming from the setting sun. How beautiful it was, so rich in color.

“I’ve never seen such gemstones before,” I said. “What is it called?”

“They’re not gemstones.”

I jumped at the sound of Sebian’s voice and spun around. “What are you doing here?”

Sebian stepped up beside me, dressed in leather breeches, a white shirt, and a brown vest he hadn’t bothered to fasten in the front. He’d put his black strands up in a loose topknot, and a few escaped wisps clung to his sheared sides. It suited him, this ruggedness one might find in the depth of an overgrown forest. Where was his mate? Not found yet? Dead? Was it wise to wonder?

He gave a long, drawn-out sigh. “If I wouldn’t know better, I’d say I’m protecting you.”

“A habit of yours? Saving damsels in distress?”

“Not exactly.” He sucked in his cheeks, brows furrowing. “But I can hardly let you venture outside alone.”

“I’m not alone,” I said and pointed to my left. “I am—” *Alone*. Gods curse them, where had they gone? “I shouldn’t have dawdled.”

“Or maybe you shouldn’t blindly follow women who serve nothing but their own selfish interests.” He juttled at the stone trinket. “They’re rocks from my island, Lanay.”

“That’s where you’re from?” I asked and, when he stared at the gemstone for a long time without saying a word, I cleared my throat. “Sebian?”

A jerk went through him, and he turned his head to look at me. “Hmm?”

“Is that where you’re from? Lanay?”

He nodded. “We call them *laool*, which is Old Vhaer for seafoam... I *think*. Maybe.”

“*Laool*,” I repeated in a language I’d thought as dead as the royal house of Khysal. “You speak it? Old Vhaer?”

“Few Ravens do these days. I remember two or three words my uncle tried to teach me until he said I was a lost cause.” A bemused twitch rippled over his shapely lips, here one second and gone the next. “Malyr speaks it perfectly. Writes it, too.”

As was probably expected of a Raven prince. “What does *dados’ta*... No, that’s not right. How did it go again? *Dalos*—”

“*Delos’ta lay*.”

“Yes.” That had been the title of the book in the library Malyr had wanted to read. “What does it mean?”

“It means *The Endless Ache*. Right in here, remember?” A tap against his chest. “It’s where our *anoa* longs for our fated mate, to a point it can be physically painful.”

Was that what made Malyr feel unwell? Longing? That he felt any emotion other than hate was hard to believe. Above me, wings flapped, making me lift my gaze to the sky. Nothing but an unkindness that must have roosted nearby before taking flight.

I circled the bead with my thumb, bringing my attention back to the stone. “It’s beautiful.”

“I used to find them aplenty at the bottom of riverbeds around my village,” Sebian said. “Sold them at the docks for good coin. Mother almost always caught me. Slapped me straight in the face *and* took my coins away for daring to leave the village.”

“A rule breaker.” I could admire that. “You spent all your childhood there?”

He nodded. “You have to fly over the mountain chain that surrounds the valley to get to the docks. Perhaps the one reason why we went unbothered by war. That was, until Father decided we would leave for the mainland and join the Ravens’ cause. Zaima loves, um... She used to love these stones.”

Used to love.

Used to...

That he spoke of her in the past could only mean she was no more. Which shouldn't affect me the way it did, slowing those pulses of excited energy. Not on this day, not when I was finally surrounded by so much life.

I turned toward the barbican, eager to explore, to experience. Shops. Stables. Taverns. There was still so much to see!

“How many months does it take to travel to Lanay on horseback?” I asked.

“Horseback? A fortnight? Two? Fifteen?” Sebian shrugged. “I wouldn't know. With good winds coming from the south-west and little sleep? I can make it there in five days.”

Five days...

That energy dropped all the way into my fingertips, tingling beneath my nails. What would it feel like to be so free? So untethered, you could reach the highest mountains and glide over the widest oceans, going wherever you pleased? Not for the first time, I harbored something other than contempt for the Ravens.

It was envy.

High-pitched laughter had my attention drift up to the parapet walk. A small boy stood there, red-cheeked and snotty-nosed, clinging to the wooden rail. He whimpered more the harder he braced against those little hands that pushed at his back.

“Don't be so scared!” the girl behind him shouted, giving a hard shove to his shoulder. “Jump, Olivar! Maybe you'll shift!”

My throat swelled shut.

Maybe?

My pulse quickened as the boy's upper body drifted dangerously far over the rail. “If he doesn't shift, he'll break ten bones.”

“More like all of them.” Sebian came to a halt beside me. “It’s pretty high.”

I stared at him, flabbergasted, while the boy’s whimpers grew louder, digging a hole into my stomach. “Will you do nothing to stop them?”

A grin came over Sebian’s face. “Guess the rumor that Ravens make uncaring parents never reached you.”

My gaze wandered back up, guts tying into a ball when the group of children giggled and pushed harder. Then, with a half degree shift forward, the boy fell over the rail. He screamed. Gods, he screamed until my heart stopped inside my chest. Why wouldn’t he shift? Why didn’t he—

A burst of shadows wafted up to the parapet, black tendrils weaving together into four small ravens. They flapped their wings at the children’s excited claps and landed to sit on the wooden rail shortly after.

“Finally! Well done, Olivar!” Sebian’s shout pierced my ears before he looked at me, once more carrying a rather smug grin. “You look paler than usual, Galantia. Don’t tell me your heart’s growing soft for us. Your father would be so disappointed.”

My teeth clenched for a moment, because he was absolutely right. “He was scared.”

“It was his first flight.” With a sparkling wink, Sebian placed his hand on the small of my back, gentling me back into a walk. “My father shouldered me one fine Sunday, saying that he was getting tired of dragging me everywhere on foot. Tossed me straight over a cliff. I shifted right before I hit the waves. The instinct to survive is too strong for our *primal* to ignore, no matter how scared some children are of their first conscious shift.”

“He... tossed you over a cliff? Into the sea?” My core turned heavy, weighed down by the resonance of a dozen rules that had framed my childhood. “Sometimes, I snuck outside the walls and spent the afternoon watching the waves at the

beach, flapping my arms, pretending to be a seagull that could fly far, far away.”

“Snuck out...” Sebian narrowed his eyes at the ground. “Sweetheart, Tidestone is right *at* the beach.”

His reaction added to that weight in my chest. What a terrible bore I was indeed. Nothing but a coddled little girl who knew nothing about anything and had seen nothing of anything.

I glanced back at how an older Raven girl climbed the ladder up the parapet, joining her friends. One after another, they jumped over the rail. Those who waited their turns all clapped and giggled.

All but one.

The girl who’d tended to my hair the evening of the feast leaned against the battlement. A breeze tugged on those sparse black wisps that hung over the burnt side of her face. The other side looked as though it wanted to melt downward along with the rest.

“Why is that girl just standing there?”

Sebian’s gaze followed my line of sight. “Her name is Tjema. She no longer has her unkindness.”

“Why not? Because she lost her *anoa*?”

“Our *primal* is the one allowing us to shift. She lost it when your father came through a camp of displaced Ravens that had taken her in,” he said. “His soldiers caught some of her unkindness in a net and set them aflame—made certain their feathers smoldered enough they could no longer escape before they stabbed them. She only survived because her *udnas*, the ravens holding her human form, weren’t killed.”

My stomach shifted uncomfortably. I thought back on how skittish Tjema had been that day. How I, a Brisden, had caused her visible discomfort. Perhaps even fear was more justified than I’d first thought?

“There has to be more to this story.” Something to smother that guilt surfacing in my core, that empathy I couldn’t afford.

“She still had her gift then, I take it. Perhaps she wielded it against my father’s soldiers?”

“Wielded it against them? Doing what, exactly? Suffocate them under shadowcloth?”

So she’d been a weaver. Harmless. “She’s a Raven. Our enemy.”

“Is she?” Sebian stopped and turned to face me, cocking his head slightly. “She’s a skinny girl with no gift and no ravens left to shift into... who happens to have black hair. Is she still a Raven, Galantia? Or is she now a human?”

That question took me aback, mostly because I had no answer, and... and now that buzzing energy was gone!

“I don’t know,” I bit out, annoyed by how this evening was taking a rather depressing turn. “What I do know is that this is war.”

“That easy, huh? Goddess help me, you’re so terribly obstinate sometimes.” His features hardened in a way I’d never witnessed on this man before, all his usual aloofness cracking away against his sharp cheekbones. “Is that what you tell yourself to justify the atrocities your father had committed against us? Still? After everything you read? Heard? *Saw*?”

With waning effectiveness. “What about your atrocities? You kill and pillage just the same. And you *rape*. Not a single woman in that village was spared *that* atrocity.”

“I have never—” he cut himself off, muscles jumping above his jaws. “Ask me how my sister died.” When I remained still, he took a step toward me, clasped my chin between his thumb and pointer, and lifted my gaze to that swirl of emotions that sat at the depth of his green irises. “I said... ask me... how... Zaima... died.”

A foreboding chill trickled down my spine. “H-how did she die?”

“A hit to the head, because she wouldn’t stop fighting off the man who grunted over her like a beast. Even after her heart had stopped, he fucked into her, ripping her little body apart from the inside.” He held my gaze as though he wanted me to

see the agony in his eyes, the pain he'd hid so perfectly behind his easy smiles and aloof demeanor. Until now. The sight fractured my heart, leaving no doubt that he spoke the truth. "I heard it all over a distance too far for my arrow to reach. Not that it would have mattered, because she was already dead. She was eleven, Galantia. A child who hadn't even bled yet. Do you want to know who did it?" Against the way I shook my head, he leaned in closer, bringing his lips to my ear. "Your *honorable* Prince Domren."

My body went ice-cold. "It can't be."

I shook my head again, clinging to my ignorance as if my life depended on it. Because it did! How could I ever share a bed with Prince Domren now that I know this? How could I bear his children? How could I even *want* such a man to love me?

"Oh, sweetheart, you are so naïve, I can't decide if it's adorable or increasingly annoying." He inhaled deeply, visibly trying to regain his mellow demeanor as he slowly blew out a long breath. "Say it. Say, *it is war*."

The words sat on my tongue for long moments, bitter, foul, rotten. "It is war."

"One *you* started." The sound of my words resonating back to me shook me to the marrow in my bones until Sebian juted his chin back toward the barbican. "Turn around."

My surroundings shrunk as though the high walls were creeping toward me. "But... but why?"

"You're going back to your chamber," he said as he grabbed my shoulder and bodily spun me around, just as faraway lightning scattered along the horizon. "Naïve little girls shouldn't be out here once the sun sets."

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN



Galantia

Present day, Deepmarsh Castle, Galantia's chamber

Palms pressed to my ears, I startled when another flare of light illuminated my chamber, lengthening and distorting the shadows that moved across the floor, creeping, crawling.

“Stop acting like a scared child,” I mumbled to myself, my pulse thrashing wildly right above my sternum. “It’s just a storm. Nothing but lightning and—”

A roar shook my bed.

My spine snapped straight, tossing me onto my back just in time to watch hazy black tendrils fade from the ceiling. Righteous terror settled cold onto my skin, slithering all the way to my bones with the wails of the wind.

Within seconds, my bladder seemed to fill to bursting. Gods damn this place! Not a single fucking tree to break those

constant howls scratching along the castle, loud enough I heard them through the violent crashes of thunder that echoed across miles upon miles of open marshland.

The next lightning strike nearly blinded me, putting black and white specks into my vision—and they weren't the only things that shifted in the room. Right there, on the little square cutout where wall met ceiling, the tangles of leather strips shifted. Maybe the wind.

Maybe not, because a fading flicker of light reflected a set of beady eyes. They filled in the shadows of the nares that sat at the top of a long black beak.

A raven.

I yelped, legs frantically kicking until my back pressed against the wooden headboard and my quilt gathered around my naked feet in a crumpled mess. “Go away!”

The raven took flight, only to land on the floor near the glowing hearth. In one quick move, too fast for my eyes to follow against the ebb and flow of light, it shook the water off its feathers. Then, the beast hopped toward me.

I scooted toward the edge of my bed. “I said, go away!”

The raven stopped and tilted its head, revealing something that sat clasped in its beak, shiny and long. The animal watched me, turning and angling its head as though it listened to the frantic little breaths that fanned along my lips. What was this thing doing here? Where did it belong? Or rather... to whom? Malyr?

When the bird remained still, I dared a glance at the cutout, its purpose now painfully clear. No doubt the Ravens had equipped every room with these, and I just hadn't noticed. But no more birds followed, the leather strings that kept the wind out once more calm and unmoving.

Slowly, the black-plumed bird spread its wings, its head bobbing up and down. A warbling sound resonated from the back of its throat like a ballad of gentle croons. Why was it acting so strangely?

“Go! Shoo!” I quickly grabbed the edge of my quilt, letting the fabric ripple and whip across my bed. “Leave me alone! Go back to where you—”

Lightning struck, fading my surroundings until nothing but white remained for one second. Wings flapped. My muscles tensed. Where was it?

Thunder boomed.

I jumped out of bed with a yelp, stumbling back into the wall just as the bird landed on the quilt.

“S-Sebian...” I mumbled mindlessly, all pride and bravery bled away from my veins as I called for the only person in this place who might help me with this stray bird. “Sebian!”

What felt like an eternity passed in flickering lights and creeping shadows as I pushed myself out of the corner and along the wooden partition. I’d rather run in my nightshift through the castle than have this bird maim me.

The raven mirrored my sideways movement, hopping along the length of the bed, and more crooning sounds followed. Opening its beak ever so slightly, it let a string of some sort fall onto the quilt.

What was this? Why did this animal—

With a flap of its wings that sent a storm of panic through me, the bird hopped to the floor. It leapt toward me faster than I could dodge, disappearing under the flowing train of my shift as I stumbled along the partition. Claws scurried over the stone. Feathers brushed across my ankles. Something hit my calf. The beak?

With a cry, I kicked at the air or the raven or both. I spun around, only to trip over the leg of the table that held my wash basin. Wood moaned. Water splashed. Coldness licked at my chest before pottery shattered.

I ignored it all, raced toward my door, and ripped it open. My naked feet slapped the stone as I hurried across the hall. I slammed against Sebian’s chamber door, pounding it with my fists.

“Sebian!” I shouted, screamed. “Let me in. Oh, gods, please let me in! Open! Sebia—”

I fell forward, and perhaps I would have tumbled straight to the ground, wasn't it for how he caught me, pulled me against him. “What on earth is going on!?”

“There's a raven!”

“What?” He glanced into the seemingly empty corridor before he stared down at me from eyes heavy with sleep. “What are you talking about?”

“Malyr's raven. Or... I don't know.” Malyr had left me blissfully alone these last few days; in fact, I wasn't sure he'd been in the castle. But what if he'd returned with a vengeance? “A raven came into my chamber through that... that... hole thing in the wall. It wouldn't leave. Then it... it pecked at my feet!”

He squatted, lifting the train of my shift ever so slightly to look at them, only for his gaze to return with one brow lifted. “There isn't a single wound.”

My mouth turned dry. There wasn't? But that bird had attacked me... had it not?

“It was just a nightmare, Galantia,” he said as he rose.

“It wasn't—”

My mouth snapped shut. He was nearly *bare*. A detail I must have missed when I'd stormed in here in my terror.

Instead of a shift, he wore nothing but light brown cotton trousers that showed every damnable inch of the outline of his cock. The stretched waistband sat low on his hips, where two valleys rose in the shape of a V toward the sides of his stomach. One of which was partially covered in burn marks, the puckered skin reaching all the way up to his shoulder, from where it encapsulated his entire arm. I didn't want to imagine the pain of such a widespread wound...

“I wasn't dreaming.” I averted my gaze. “There is a raven in my chamber.”

He turned toward the corridor. “Wait here.”

The moment he disappeared, my eyes wandered to his hearth and higher from there. Until they settled on yet another cutout by the ceiling. The entire castle was full of them, wasn't it?

"Your chamber is a mess but it's empty," Sebian said, closing the door, but it was the sight of him, his nearness, that smoothed away my chills of dread.

"There *was* a raven."

He walked up to me until he stood close enough that I could smell sweet remnants of wine on his grinning lips. "Extraordinary..."

My teeth clenched at the sarcasm lacing his tone as more thunder rumbled nearby. "It shouldn't be in my chamber."

"So you thought the best course of action was to storm into mine..." his gaze took a stroll down my form before his eyes finally settled somewhere on my chest, "looking like *this*?"

I stared down at myself, only now realizing I must have gotten my shift wet when I'd stumbled into my wash table, given how the fabric clung to my body like second skin. And a sheer one at that, showing the rosy dark areola around my nipple.

"I called for you, hoping you might hear me." I quickly folded my arms in front of my chest as a spluttering sound escaped my lips. "So much about amplified senses..."

Scoffing, he lifted his hand, combing his fingers through those long black strands he carried loose for once, brushing them over to one side to reveal the sheared part on the other. "My *anoa* isn't with me right now. I sent him away so I could fall to sleep with this dreadful storm. He'll be back soon. *Anoas* hate separating from their unkindness for too long."

"So that damn bird in my chamber was yours?"

"Did the idiot stumble over its own two legs and fly straight into a wall? Because that's him."

"No, but it acted... strangely. Spread its wings, crooned and bobbed its head."

He squinted, the reaction amplified by a strike of lightning that flickered across the slits that remained. “That... doesn’t sound like my *anoa* at all.”

“Who, then?”

“Malyr? Some drunk? What does it matter? The bird’s gone, sweetheart.” One step brought him closer. “I think you should leave, too.” He pressed his lips together, and he wetted the bottom one before his voice returned darker, grittier. “It’s not becoming of a lady to be here with me. Alone. Remember? Something to do with... *indecent* things.”

My breathing altered at the taunting mirth in his voice, rousing a nervous tingle in my chest. Right at this moment, I wasn’t sure what would be worse—being with him here, or being alone there. What if the raven returned? But I could hardly stay here, could I?

The way I glanced around the chamber must have given away my thoughts, because Sebian stroked a scarred finger along the underside of my chin, bringing my eyes to meet his. “Unless you want to stay?”

It was treacherous, that sense of relief that settled on my lungs as I slowly exhaled. “Would you let me?”

“Depends.” A swipe of his thumb over my bottom lip. “What will you give me in return?”

My guts tied into a knot. “What do you want?”

He took my wrist, pulled my hand away from my chest and placed it on his hardening cock. Before I managed to pull back, his fingers curled around mine, enclosing his hardening shaft sitting behind cotton. It swelled against my touch, rocking against my knuckles as moisture appeared beneath my fingertip.

“You’ll leave as much a virgin as you arrived,” he all but groaned against the side of my neck. “Trust me.”

I pulled my hand away and stepped back. “I can’t.”

His long black strands fell along both sides of his face, filling the area beneath his cheekbones with shadows as he

stared at me. For a moment, I expected him to grab me, to force me.

Instead, he turned around, took his bow that leaned in the corner, and pushed it into the clasp of my hand. “Whack it.”

“Wh-what?”

“The raven, sweetheart.” *Now* he grabbed me, led me toward the door, and opened it. “Should it come back, just aim at the head. Try not to break my bow. It’s plumed.”

“What?” I braced against the way he shoved me into the corridor. “But—”

A startling strike of lightning illuminated the corridor. Shadows crept and crawled over the ground, along the walls, along the ceiling toward me. Thunder crackled in the sky like whiplashes, deepening into rolling bellows that slowly penetrated the basalt rocks until the entire castle shook with a desperation that matched my own.

“I don’t want to go back to my chamber.”

Not alone. Not on such a night.

But most of all, not alone!

He stepped closer once more, and I sensed his hard cock against my backside. “Sounds like a predicament to me...”

“You’re still angry with me,” I said. “Because of the argument at the market.”

“You know who’s even angrier with you? Malyr. Perhaps you want to knock on his door? Ask if you can climb under his covers?”

That suggestion was starting to put things into perspective. If he promised that I would remain unblemished, was this not worth it? Justified even, in light of the fact that the bird might have been Malyr’s? What if he came to my chamber? Was staying with Sebian not better? Safer?

His breath fanned my earlobe where he rasped, “I’m not going to hurt you, Galantia. You have my word that you will leave here with your maidenhead intact.”

My muscles quivered as I clung to the calmness in his voice, the reassurance of his words. No, Sebian had never hurt me, had never lied to me. At least... I didn't think he had.

"Be honest with yourself just once, Galantia. You want this. And if Malyr was here right now, chances are that you'd want him, too. But he isn't. It's just you and me, and I don't get off on hurting you. I get off on pleasing you." He pressed a finger into a taut muscle along the side of my neck, rubbing away the tension. "I'll make certain you enjoy this, just like in the library. That felt good, didn't it?"

My pulse fluttered. "Yes."

Little panting breaths heaved from my chest as his palm glided down my arm, removing the bow from my hand and letting it *clank* to the ground before he clasped my waist. He gently kneaded toward the barely-covered flesh of my hip until it warmed, heated, then hiked up my shift.

"Sebian," I breathed, hypnotized by the way his fingers explored and mapped the shape of my body as he slowly slid the cotton upward. "I'm not sure if—"

"Shh..." Hushing me, he pushed the fabric up and over my head, exposing my naked body to the chill of the night. "Am I hurting you?"

I clenched my thighs and hid my breasts behind my arms. "No, but—"

"No. I'm not hurting you, am I?" Arm slung around my belly, he walked us backward, and slammed the door shut. "All I want is to touch you, sweetheart. Make you feel good, like I did in the library. Is that a bad thing, hmm?"

"No."

"No," he echoed as he walked me over to his bed, his hard shaft pressed tightly against my lower back. "And you're going to come for me again, aren't you?"

His fingers skimmed down my belly, climbing between my thighs until they pressed down over my clit, letting rich shivers ripple across nearby muscles. My whimper found voice when

his fingers adopted a circling motion, rousing an overwhelming heat.

“Fuck, you’re sensitive, already twitching beneath my fingertips. I barely touched you, sweet thing. Turn around and sit.” The moment I did, he pushed his trousers down, freeing his erection. “Look at me.”

He clasped my chin before I managed to avert my gaze, lifting my eyes without saying another word. For long moments, he just stood in front of me, demanding that I take all of him in—the hard slabs of muscle that rose and sank with his breaths, the perfectly smooth skin that draped over them, the defined ridges and deeply-cut valleys along his abdomen.

Gods, he was beautiful, scars and all.

He lifted my hand to his cock. “Touch me.”

His bulbous, slick crown pressed into my palm, letting worry and excitement coil deep in my belly. His hard shaft was thick and long, twitching beneath my touch. How soft the skin was. How the raised veins lining it pulsed with blood.

“Lie down.” He climbed onto the bed, making me scoot back until my back hit the furs. “Spread those legs for me, Galantia.”

Before a word of objection crossed my lips, he pressed one knee between my thighs, then the other, prying my legs apart. “Sebian, I don’t—”

“Stop fussing,” he said as the heat of his body lowered onto mine, bringing with it the scent of nature. “It’s not like I get to fuck you the way I want.”

His cock pressed against my mound, sending my mind into a dizzying spin. More intoxicating was the way he rounded his back as he thrust his hips forward, sliding his hot flesh along my clit.

A string of moans parted my lips as liquid heat pulsed between my legs. “Oh, gods... Sebian...”

“There we go. That’s my good girl, moaning my name so nicely.” He kept the weight of his strong chest off me with one

arm as he rocked back and forth with an intensity that shook my breath. “Does that feel good, sweetheart? The way my cock is rubbing along your clit?”

“Yes...”

The tip of his nose brushed the fine wisps along my temple, sending a wave of gooseflesh across my skin that hardened my nipples. His fingers found them, taking turns in circling them, pulling them, teasing them until they ached.

He rolled his pelvis against mine, sending one delicious shiver after the other across my body until my skin buzzed. The tantalizing pressure, the devastating rhythm, the way his crown sometimes slipped against my center, only to glide upward again without entering me... Gods, this Raven could move!

“You’re so beautiful, Galantia,” he murmured. “Fuck, I want you so badly.”

My heart sang in my chest.

He wanted me. *Badly.*

Nobody had ever wanted me at all.

His words emboldened me, making me shift my hips, letting my pelvis join his rhythm. I even dared a glance down between us, watching his crown emerge, shiny and plump, from my curls. A glistening string clung to the slit, dripping into my curls. Seed?

“That’s it, sweet thing.” Deep, masculine groans shook the air. “Roll your hips with mine.”

At those sounds of his pleasure, I rocked against him with more vigor, causing his crown to slip to my entrance once more. To press against it. Dip into me slightly. How would it feel if he pushed inside me? Would it burn? Would it tingle?

“Easy...” Sebian hushed and pulled back, angling his hips just so before he thrust upward and over my mound. “You want me dead, sweetheart? Because Malyr’s going to *kill* me if I get in there.”

Sebian kept his rhythm for a long time, thrusting at a sensual pace, gliding his shaft over my throbbing bud until tingles sparked through the pool of heat. Sweat broke across my forehead and my toes curled.

“Are you going to come for me, sweetheart?” He slowed his motion, pressing his shaft right on my clit where he pulsed his hips. “Come for me, Galantia. Come for me so good.”

“Sebian...” I cried out as waves of convulsions crested over me, washing them across my body, stringing every muscle tight for several torturous seconds.

“Fuck, I love it when you say my name like that,” he hummed as his pace quickened, letting his moans come closer together, faster, more desperate. “I’m going to make such a mess on your belly, sweetheart.”

Mind drowning under the flood of pleasure and bliss, I barely noticed how he lost his rhythm, stalled, picked it up again, stalled once more. Only when wet warmth splashed against my belly to the sound of his *oomph*, did I look down, watching how ropes of glistening seed shot from his crown. Lots of them. They coated my belly, hit the flesh of my breast, pooled in my navel.

Sebian breathed hard for a while, his cock twitching, until he nuzzled the top of my head. “Let’s get you cleaned up.”

Muscles numb, mind dazed, I watched how he fished his trousers from the floor. He wiped his seed from my belly with it, gave his still-jutting cock a quick wipe down, then tossed it into the darkness.

“Come on, under the furs with you.” He lowered himself down next to me, pulled me close against him until my head rested on his chest, and draped several large furs over us.

“What if Malyr finds us like this?”

“He’s been pretty preoccupied these days,” he said. “Besides, he won’t bother you while you’re with me, I promise. Just... try to sleep for once.”

I nodded, inhaling the musk of his skin. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Where is your fated mate?”

Time passed in strikes of lightning and rumbles of thunder before he finally said, “Sparkling among the stars.”

Dead.

At that realization, I remembered how shaggy one of his ravens had looked the day Sebian had captured me. Had he ever met her? Or had his ravens started pulling their feathers out one day, announcing her death before he ever had the chance to find her? That one person he had been fated to love forever?

My heart ached for him when I closed my eyes, the storm drowned-out against the even beat of his heart. As my body grew lax, I found an unexpected sense of safety in the embrace of this Raven—the one who’d suffered immense loss at the hands of the man who would hold me next...

At that thought, I curled myself tighter against him. “Thank you for keeping me safe tonight.”

His chest stilled, skipping a breath, until it returned its rhythm to the tousling of his fingers in my hair. “Sleep.”

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN



Sebian

Present day, Deepmarsh Castle, Sebian's chamber

T *hank you for keeping me safe.*

Those words echoed, making it easy enough to ignore the stings of pain under the weight of Galantia's head. She slept the sunrise away in my marred arm, her breathing deep and even. How long since I'd last held a woman like this?

Two nights.

Maybe three.

With the difference that I'd kicked Lady whatever-her-name-was out of my chamber shortly after I'd satisfied my needs—and hers, because I wasn't a selfish ass—like all the other women I bedded. Raven or human, they didn't get to sleep beside me. Didn't get to wedge their frigid toes under my calf. And they certainly didn't get to drool down my armpit.

I stared at the string of saliva clinging to the corner of Galantia's mouth, not sure what to make of this... languor in my muscles and bones. The storm had calmed hours ago, and I'd developed the need to take a piss around the same time. Why the fuck was she still here?

Because she felt *good*.

So soft and small.

Undeniably female.

I ran my marred, numb finger over the small of her back beneath the furs, feeling close to nothing and somehow too much at the same time. Goddess help me, she was so fucking beautiful in my eyes, drool and all.

Maybe it was a good thing I hadn't kicked her out yet. Obviously, Malyr had gone to her chamber this morning.

How did I know?

Because he was right beside us.

I turned my head in the direction of his thudding pulse, to where he sat in the chair beneath the window. "How long have you been sitting there?"

"Considering that sneaking up on a pathfinder is supposed to be impossible?" His fingers mindlessly pushed at the silver sigil embroidered onto the chest of his black tunic, his features blank, unreadable. "Long enough to wonder if you were passed-out drunk again with how deeply you slept when I came in."

My molars ground together at a remark that might as well have come from Asker. As if how I spent my personal time was any of their concern, considering that I always showed up for whatever task they had for me...

"It's been days since I last stepped into a tavern." Taking Galantia to the library, gathering books for her, making sure she didn't get herself into trouble at the market... it all carved time from my days. "This one kept me preoccupied."

Malyr's gaze drifted to Galantia for the fraction of a second before it found mine again, his jaws shifting. "Yes, I

took note.”

When Galantia’s breathing altered ever so slightly at the sound of his voice, I reached into the leather pouch tied to my headboard. I retrieved a white salt crystal, squeezed it in my palm until it shattered, hovered it over Galantia’s head, and let the escaping shadows do their thing. They created a near invisible weave around her face, muffling our voices, if only some.

“I came here, fearing that my plaything had gone amiss,” Malyr said sharply. “Finding a woman in your bed at this hour was strange enough, so imagine my surprise when I realized it was *her*.”

There was something odd in his tone, strangely close to... jealousy? No, that couldn’t be it. It didn’t run in our blood, least not over a human. We were monogamous beings, sure, possessive and deeply loyal, but only with our bonded mate. So what, then?

Annoyance? Disbelief?

A fart sitting wrong?

I couldn’t quite pin it down, but chanced a smirk. “Surprise? She might loathe *you*, but she slipped under *my* furs with little fuss.”

He rolled his eyes. “Yes, we both know I cannot compete with your well-known... charm.”

“Even someone with the charm of syphilis sores would look like the better option standing beside you, Malyr,” I pointed out. “You’re plain awful to her every chance you get, hurting and humiliating her. It’s driving her straight into my arms... and my bed.”

His jaws hardened, but only until a smug, lopsided grin replaced it. “In your opinion, which one of the two has her moaning and dripping slick down her thighs before she flees into said arms? Cutting her? Degrading her? Politics have kept me busy these days, so I haven’t managed to come to a conclusion yet.”

“Does it matter? In the end, you’re chasing her my way, all wet and confused. She’s so starved for attention that even the tiniest shreds of kindness get you a long way with her.” Why, I wasn’t sure, but I was starting to think she hadn’t received much of either at home. “But like you said before, she doesn’t deserve pleasure from you.” I sharpened my smirk. “Which is fine. I’m better at giving it, anyway. She can drip down the length of my cock and moan my name when she comes apart against it anytime she needs.”

Blowing out a long exhale, Malyr sank deeper into the chair. “Please tell me you didn’t compromise her.”

“No, not even when her tight little cunt begged for it.” And she *had* begged, lifting her hips whenever my cock had nudged at her hole, so fucking ready to be made a woman at last. “Maybe I’ll make her beg some more before I send her on her way.”

“By all means, slake your lust for revenge on Domren’s betrothed while you still can. Brisden reacted faster than I had anticipated.” He stretched out his legs, folding one boot over the other. “Several days ago, two carriages left Tidestone, escorted by a full complement of soldiers. They’re heading southwest along the river. Asker expects them to reach Deepmarsh in a few days’ time, assuming the rapids don’t take down the bridge after this damn storm.”

“So the highborn beauty is going home.” What a fucking shame. I wouldn’t have minded keeping her a while longer. Matter of fact, I quite enjoyed being around her when she was all sweet, flustered, and scared. Fuck, she’d been so scared last night. “Brisden is on his way here?”

“No. He wouldn’t do me the favor, knowing full well that I would kill him even under white banners.”

“What if it’s a trap? Barat might mobilize troops as we speak and be foolish enough to lead them down from the north.”

“The capital’s troops are staying put. Lorn and I scouted out the roads leading away from Ammarett wondering exactly

that. Roosted along the cliffs on our way back when the storm trapped us in a nearby forest last night. I only just returned.”

That got my attention. “Then whose raven was in Galantia’s chamber last night?”

He frowned at me. “What are you talking about?”

“Someone’s *anoa* came to her chamber. I figured it was yours.”

His gaze wandered to Galantia, lips pursing before he shook his head. “Like I said, I wasn’t anywhere near Deepmarsh.”

“Lorn? Her *anoa* isn’t nearly as clingy as ours. Maybe she sent her back here?”

He thought for a moment. “No. She wouldn’t be so reckless and send her gift through a storm just to scare her.”

“Malyr, Lorn caught her down on her knees, licking your damn knife. You were so distracted, you didn’t even see her coming. We’re lucky we didn’t find ourselves out a hostage the morning after.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose the way he always did whenever Lorn had dared another transgression. “I diverted her attention, did I not? Gave you the opportunity to take Galantia away. And how *willingly* you jumped at it.”

“Because Lorn is unpredictable and a fucking liability. I don’t understand why you still keep her around.”

A beat of silence, then, “You know why.”

Because Lorn knew that Malyr was responsible for the fall of Valtaris—a secret she loved to hold, and preferably over his head. It would cost him support among our kind should that ever come out. Then there was the fact that, for a time, Malyr had been convinced that she had to be his fated mate, given what they’d been through together. Years ago, he’d desperately tried to bond with her to no avail.

Add to the mess this other thing that had Malyr more troubled than he needed to be. Not that I ever dared to tell him,

letting on that I was aware of his concern in the first place. It would be fucking suicide...

All in all, it was pressure enough to keep Malyr loosely by her side, no matter how fucking miserable they were together—each of them seemingly addicted to the loathing they harbored for each other.

“I’m drained, so fucking drained,” Malyr groaned, tipping his head back to stare at the ceiling. “Not a day passes without some human lord chasing his daughter after me, and Asker being in my ear about marrying one of them.”

“Humans and Ravens have married and fallen in love with each other since the veil fell.” The shadowed wall that had once separated our worlds, but somehow faded over time for reasons never documented. “It’s an acceptable replacement instead of a bond for many, Malyr.”

“You and I have never seen eye to eye when it comes to humans.” He gave a resolute shake of his head. “I will *never* take a human wife.”

“Then announce a *drif*.” A traditional celebration, allowing Ravens from across the realm to mingle and, goddess willing, find their mate and begin courtship before the nesting season in the spring. “Ale. Wine. Dancing. We could all do with a good time. And who knows? Maybe you’ll find your mate.”

He lifted his hand to his sternum, fingers clasping thin air as if he’d expected to find something there, only for his hand to sink to his thigh. “War’s no time for a *drif*.”

I sighed, not even trying to make sense of the fact that Malyr kept putting off an event the House Khysal had held every fall for decades. Centuries, even. One had to wonder if he tried his hardest *not* to find his mate...

“Bonding is a rare blessing these days, and you can’t even be bothered to find your fated one. A deathweaver’s mate almost always has the same gift. She could help you control your shadows.”

As always, he dodged the subject, this time by rising and rounding the bed toward Galantia. “What does she smell like?”

I took a deep breath, slowly as not to wake her, inhaling Galantia’s natural scent. “Honeysuckle and parchment.”

He stopped beside her, turning his head this way and that as he stared at her. “Strange combination.”

“She’s a strange bird, Malyr. It’s as if they kept her in a cave all these years. She’s shockingly innocent.” A moment’s consideration. “When she isn’t licking knives, that is.”

“And how well she does it.” Leaning over, he ran a finger over a strand of her hair that followed the curve of her shoulder. “She is surprisingly... resilient.”

I couldn’t tell if the sound that followed in the back of his throat was one of awe or annoyance—*probably the latter*. As a pathfinder, my gift forced all sorts of conversations on me that I could happily live without hearing. Like the ones where he’d asked Galantia to cry for him. From what I could tell, she wasn’t the hysteric, sobbing sort.

Didn’t mean he wouldn’t keep trying to turn her into one.

My eyes caught on those skinny, shadowy offshoots that crawled between his fingers. If she woke now and saw Malyr standing there, would she panic? Would her nipples harden? Would she grow slick, making the sweetest mess between her legs?

I would never find out.

Because I’d made a promise.

When his shadows reached for her, I grabbed his wrist. “Not while she’s with me like this.”

Malyr huffed, a forceful exhale of air that underlined the way he barred his teeth. “So you’re protecting her now? From me?”

Protect...

I ignored the dense pressure rising at my core. “Whatever you do when I’m not with her is your business, but I won’t let you—” I hissed at the biting pain of his shadows clawing into my hand, immediately releasing his wrist. “What the fuck, Malyr?”

He pulled his hand back, clenching and unclenching his fist where shadows stretched like black strings of molasses toward Galantia, trying to breach the distance. “They have become... quite erratic as of late.”

“*Erratic?* They attacked me.” They’d never done that before. “Why are they straining like this?”

“Because they want her dead, I presume.” He slumped back into the chair, frustration written all over his face. “I *hate* her, and they know it. Hate how innocent she was allowed to remain while her father corrupted me nearby. Hate even more how I clearly cannot taint her in the same way without risking her death at the hand of my... capricious shadows.”

Beneath the furs, my fingers curled around Galantia’s waist. Perhaps I’d misjudged just how much he struggled to control his shadows around her. Perhaps Asker was right.

“Why not send your *anoa* away when you’re around her?”

“You think I have not tried?” Scoffing, he threw a hand up. “That damn bird of mine hit her window trying to get back to me *seconds* after I sent him away.”

Not much of a surprise. His *anoa* had always been a high-strung jerk with the obedience of a mule and the docility of a kitten on a leash. That bird never separated from him for long, but it had never been *this* bad.

“Perhaps you should stay away from her.”

“Perhaps I should,” he said, but there was no conviction in his voice, the words like a non-committal statement at best, a question at worst. He turned his head, looking straight at me. “But I think you preferred if I didn’t.”

“The fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, come on...” Shaking his head, he rose and stepped toward the door. “The only reason she is in your arms right now, is because you love how innocent she appears, how inexperienced, how helpless. You want to know why?”

My stomach hardened. “Not particularly.”

“Because after all these years, you still refuse to forgive yourself.” He opened the door, glancing back at me once more before he said, “You love saving her where you couldn’t save them.”

The door fell shut, sealing me in with the same silence of that winter night. Only the even beat of Galantia’s heart made it through my stunned senses, standing in sobering contrast to the memory of Zaima’s still heart. Mother’s still heart. All the others...

Everyone I once loved, dead.

Because of me.

Galantia shifted in my arms, pressing herself tighter against me as if I was her shelter, if only for a night. As if I was a man capable of caring, saving, protecting. Yeah, that felt good.

Better than I deserved.

CHAPTER
NINETEEN



Galantia

Present day, Deepmarsh Castle, Galantia's chamber

I want you so badly.

The resonance of those words continued to carry me into restless sleep for several nights, always reshaping into forest-green eyes. I followed their line of sight and stared down at myself. Watched how I ran my fist down the thick length of Sebian's cock.

"Good girl." His purred praise returned my gaze to those green eyes that narrowed. Turned gray-brown, glinting with disdain. "I want you to hurt."

I woke with a start.

Not again!

My pulse thudded loudly enough between my ears, it overwhelmed the morning symphony of the songbirds that roosted in the rushes and reeds outside my window. But it had

nothing, *nothing*, on that violent throbbing between my legs. Gods, I was aching!

I blinked around my empty chamber, hand slipping underneath the quilt and between my legs. When my fingertips dipped into the slickness the dream had left there, I stroked around my heated flesh. Dipped, prodded, and stirred until pleasant tingles spread from my center, chasing relief but...

It didn't come.

I clenched my eyes shut.

Gave it all my focus.

Sebian appeared against the black backdrop of my imagination, muscles on his stomach shifting as he drove his cock into me to the rhythm of my fingers dipping slightly into my channel. He lowered his smirk to my mouth in a slow, languid kiss that made heat crest around my sex.

Close. I was so close.

Until Malyr appeared once more. He suckled my bottom lip between his teeth before he bit down, letting it throb with an intensity that matched the wild pulsing between my legs as blood ran—

No!

I quickly pulled my drenched fingers from underneath the quilt and clamped my arms down by my sides. Gods be damned, how could I be so wicked? It was bad enough that I fantasized about Sebian, but Malyr...?

That was sick.

Deranged.

Rising in defeat, I slipped out of my shift, skin pebbling under the chill of the morning. The sleeping embers in the hearth barely offered any warmth as I walked over to the wash table. At the bottom of it, a streak of blue against the gray stone caught my attention. What was it?

I clasped the little shiny thing and held it against the light of the window. A blue silk ribbon, some parts slightly faded,

others a bit stained, but beautiful! How had this gotten here?

And then the memory of that stormy night struck me. Was this what the raven had dropped from its beak? Maybe.

Using nails and teeth, I tied it around my wrist, then turned to get ready. I quickly washed myself, including the unholy mess between my legs, and dressed. How much longer until I could finally leave this place behind?

After a moment's consideration, I turned toward my door. Perhaps Sebian had news of Tidestone? If he was even in his chamber. The morning after the storm, I'd woken alone. I hadn't seen him since, and—

“Gods...” A start sent such a spasm through my muscles, I jumped and stumbled backward against the wooden partition that secluded my sleeping area. “What do you want?”

Malyr sat on the blue velvet couch beside the door, the black vest he wore over his white shirt finer than any other before. How long had the prince been sitting here?

My stomach dropped. How much had he seen through the intricate carvings of the partition?

“Do you often moan in your sleep?” he asked, answering that question and weaving strands of shame through me all at once. “A pleasant dream, perhaps?”

“A nightmare.”

“Ah, does fear arouse you, then?” he asked. “Presume it explains why humans dread my shadows with an intensity they piss themselves, whereas they make my little dove drip something entirely different down her thighs.”

Fighting the heat that pricked along my neck, I held his stare, pretending I didn't know what he was talking about. His shadows didn't rouse anything contemptible in me—no pleasant tingles, no floods of heat.

But the longer I gazed into his two-colored eyes, the higher his lips curled into a smirk that would look cheeky on Sebian, but on Malyr? It stripped me down. Exposed my unspoken lies, my body's crooked reactions.

I couldn't stand it, which made my gaze drift to the door. If only I could escape into Sebian's cham—

“He isn't there. Given the state I found him in behind the tavern earlier, I assume he is still dragging himself back through the great hall as we speak.” Malyr rubbed his thumb over his bottom lip as if in thought, his gaze going empty before he shook his head. “The Tidestone delegation ought to reach the castle within the hour.”

Within the hour.

I waited for my spine to straighten, for my chest to lift or my feet to tingle with the urge to sprint out the gate and toward them right now. In all the five hells, I would have done with a sigh of relief.

None of it came.

“So I will finally go home.”

Leaving one cruel prince for another. How ironic was that?

Malyr rose, beckoning me to him until I stood close enough that the buttons of his vest nearly snatched on the frills of my dress. He cupped my face, pawing my cheek like I was his helpless prey.

“*Home*. Such a comforting word if one has a home, isn't it?” His whisper against my temple barely distracted from the rush of blood in my head. “Nurturing a false sense of safety that makes one do foolish things. Like leaving a window open for my ravens to glide into your chambers one night, finding you with nothing left to bargain, your life and innocence worthless to me.”

My throat turned dry. “You're getting what you want. Why won't you leave me alone?”

“Because you're mine. Mine to hurt. Mine to agonize. Mine to break.” His cool, minty breath broke against my skin, sending a shudder across my heated body. “I will come for you, Galantia. May it take a year or a lifetime, I will come for you.”

“And then?”

“Then I will shatter you into a million pretty pieces.” His lips brushed over my temple, shifting my thin wisps of hair. “But instead of leaving you wrecked and ruined, I’ve decided that I will put you back together in my grotesque image. Will take your pain and pleasure, your tears and blood, your moans and screams, so I may put you back together... all... wrong.”

I shivered in the throes of his threat, for I knew it wasn’t idle. “You’re sick.”

“So are you, Galantia.” A whisper against my earlobe, “Because we both know that you will like it.”

A gasp escaped me as I turned my head toward his face, only for my next inhale to lodge in my chest. He’d remained perfectly still, bringing our mouths so close, I felt our breaths mingle in the fragment of space between them. Each of my wobbling inhales brought my lips closer to his. Each of his soft exhales kissed mine.

I blamed my dream for the sudden weakness in my muscles, the way his words of perversion resurrected that throbbing between my legs. Nothing else could justify how I stood enraptured, doing nothing to turn away.

Malyr’s gaze slipped to my lips, head tipping sideways in that strange way of his. “You... long to be kissed.”

He wasn’t wrong. “Not by you.”

“No?” One silent second passed. Two. Three. “On your knees, then.”

I wasn’t prepared for how his hand bore down on my shoulder, forcing me to the ground. Didn’t understand what he wanted of me when he sat back on the couch and undid the strings on his black breeches. He took his hard cock out, giving the thick, heavily-veined shaft two slow strokes. Only when he pointed the swollen, jutting tip at my mouth did realization dawn.

“Open your mouth,” he said, raking his fingers along my scalp before he fistfisted my hair. With one harsh tug, he pulled me forward against him and my head back until my throat strained. “Look at me. I want to see your eyes when I fuck

your mouth. Want to watch them when you swallow down my cum... or choke on it. Either one is acceptable.”

My teeth clamped together on instinct. He would find no such shameless satisfaction with me.

“Can you imagine the damage to your reputation if people learned how wet you were for the Raven prince, hmm?” He hooked a finger under my chin, forcing his thumb into my mouth, prying apart my jaws. “Or how you spent your nights in Sebian’s chamber? What a wet, needy slut you were for him, sucking his cock, begging him to empty his seed all over your face like a—”

I reared my head back. “None of that happened!”

The shadows in the valleys beneath his harsh cheekbones lightened some as he glided the smooth tip of his cock over my bottom lip and gave three taps. “Not if you open your mouth.”

I didn’t know what disgusted me more, his demand or how I considered it. I knew better than to place my trust in his words, but was it worth to heighten the risk of him spreading rumors that might reach Ammarett? To fight him? Less than an hour away from finally escaping his clutches?

No.

I parted my lips. Clasped them around his crown, tongue awkwardly curling around it as I waited.

“Mmm, now I know for certain that he never broke in that mouth of yours. Reminds me why I do not care for virgins.” Malyr gave a faint chuckle. “Licks knives so prettily but doesn’t know how to suck a cock.”

My stupid cheeks heated as though his words had slapped them, and I clenched my eyes shut. This shouldn’t hurt me the way it did...

“I said eyes on me.” With a harsh pull on my hair, Malyr returned my gaze to his cold stare before he pressed my mouth down on his cock, making me sputter around the stretching demand of his thick flesh. “Open...”

My head was yanked up and pushed down until it adopted a bobbing motion. My mouth glided down his shaft, sensing every raised vein against my lips, every rush of blood that hardened him against my gums.

“That’s it, little dove.” Malyr breathed heavily through his parted lips, letting a deep, masculine groan vibrate the air. “Show me how much you enjoy having my cock fuck your pretty lips. You like this, don’t you?”

I glared up at him, opening my mouth wider, taking him deeper. Whatever it took to finish this and leave.

“Mmm, are you telling yourself right now that you hate this?” He leaned back and shifted sideways, palming my rear and diving his hand under my skirts. His fingers skimmed around my buttocks and between my legs, finding my sex as drenched as I had earlier. “Lie to yourself all you want, Galantia, but your body cannot hide how it wants to be my whore. How you secretly long for the burn of a cut, the sting of a bite, the tingle of a slap.”

The way he orbited my wet entrance made me moan. The worst thing about this? How my hips circled with his motion, seeking it. What if he was right? What if I longed for all those things?

“Yes, you do,” Malyr crooned as if he’d read my thoughts, which was humiliating in itself, but not nearly as much as how he retrieved his fingers and held the glistening proof of my depravity to my face. “Which took me by surprise, I can admit that. Lick my fingers. Have a taste of your lust.”

I choked around his girth. “No...”

Slap.

His palm hit my cheek just before he pulled my mouth off his cock, but it wasn’t the pain of it that made heat prick behind my ears for it hadn’t truly hurt. No, it was the way he stroked those fingers inside my mouth, rubbing the tang of my arousal on my gums, around my tongue, onto my molars.

Destroying any and all denial.

Malyr pulled my head back down on his cock until his crown hit the back of my throat. There he kept me, trapped between his crotch and the force of his hold, making me splutter, choke... moan.

When I gagged, he allowed me just enough retreat for a gasp of air. Then he thrust his hips upward, keeping my head in place by my strands, no matter how I writhed, struggled, tried to rear back. Only when my face tingled, my eyes burned, and my surroundings blurred did he sink deeper into the couch again and stared deep into my eyes.

And I knew then what he'd come for.

He thumbed the outer corner of my eye as though he could somehow dislodge my tears, but none came. "You truly won't cry, will you?"

Malyr once more glided his fingers beneath my skirts. He ran them up and down along my drenched slit while I sucked his cock until—*slap*. His fingers struck my cunt, sending ripples of pleasure into my clit and heat deep into my belly.

"Do you want to know what is worse than being forced to endure the most... depraved acts?" *Slap*. Another swat at my cunt, followed by wonderful pressure that built, crested. "*Liking them*. Give me your come, little dove."

His demand stoked the anger at my core into blistering fury, heating those tears I could not shed. There was no more pride in it, no more provocation. Only the sobering truth that something was wrong with me.

And he knew.

Because he spanked and thrust my sex into a swollen, throbbing thing, until, at his final swat, my orgasm hit me like a lightning strike. It ached like none before, spreading from my center along my entire body and into every nerve ending, destroying me.

"Such a good little whore," he crooned. "Maybe you are not the precious diamond I first judged you to be, polished to a shine that not even a crown would ever return to me." Harsh, labored breaths accompanied his words as his cock throbbed

against my gums. “Maybe you are already a little bit cracked, a little bit broken. Look at me.”

His words fractured something inside me, splintering away on my dignity, my sanity, my sense of value as I looked at him. He must have seen the damage somewhere in my eyes, that cracking of my soul, because a guttural groan ripped from the chest that held his black heart. By the time salty ropes coated my gums, I had no strength left to keep his seed from running warm and thick down my throat.

He released my hair, retreated from my mouth, then sat up straight.

“Open your mouth.” He cupped my face between his hands and leaned forward until his forehead nearly touched mine. “Show me how you swallowed all of me down.”

My lips parted on their own accord.

Something dark and terrifying glistened at the depth of Malyr’s irises. His lips parted, and his grip tightened on my face before he spit into my mouth, letting warm saliva run down my tongue.

“That is the closest my lips will ever come to yours.” He rose around me and walked off. Helped himself to my pitcher, washing all traces of me off him over the bowl before he put himself away and tied the front of his breeches. “I suggest you fix your hair and clean whatever you allowed to drool down your chin. I cannot let you walk into this exchange looking like a whore. We have to keep up the pretense.”

I tried to bite back the raw anger gnawing at my clenched jaws.

Tried and failed.

“I want you to know that I hate you,” I bit out as I rose and turned to face him, each muscle in my body trembling under the biting strain of rage. “I regret that the rock that day wasn’t sharp enough to kill you. Regret even more that I didn’t slam a larger one down on your head until I made certain you would never get up again. The only thing that offers a sliver of reprieve from all this regret is the hope that the way I stopped

your escape that day added *months* to your time in the dungeons.”

His entire body stiffened, lips parting and closing, eyes narrowing and widening, his entire face a grimace of ever-changing emotions. Confusion. Shock. Agony. It all flitted across his features for seconds. Minutes. Eternities.

A strange gasp made his shoulders bob as though he'd only now remembered to breathe, and a tremble settled on his lips. “What did you just say?”

My breath caught on a rib over the glisten in his eyes, the color that faded from his face. “I... I said that—”

His hand collared my throat before he spun me around and slammed me against the partition. “What did you just say!?”

My mouth fell open, but not a single sound made it past the suffocating clasp of his fury. Blackness darkened the edges of my vision. Hinges creaked. Something shifted to my right.

“What are you doing?” Sebian stepped up beside us, quickly gripping Malyr's wrist. “Let go of her.”

A single tear snaked down Malyr's face, clinging to his jaws where it trembled at his roar. “You killed my brother!”

My blood froze over.

His... brother?

“Shit...” Sebian wrapped one arm around Malyr's neck, pulling him back while his other hand tried to pry his fingers from my throat. “Let her go, Malyr. You're not thinking clearly. Killing her isn't going to bring Harlen back, and it won't restore your family. Come on now, let her go.” When Malyr's fingers slowly released me, Sebian looked at me and jutted his chin toward the door. “Get out and wait for me there! Now!”

I hurried outside, sucking air through my aching throat and down into my stuttering lungs. I'd killed his brother. And if I didn't make it out of here now...? I knew Malyr'd shatter me into so many pieces, there would be no putting me back together.

CHAPTER
TWENTY



Galantia

Present day, Deepmarsh Castle, Malyr's personal library

Lemongrass.

That was the note I had detected on Malyr the day of the feast, light and sweet, like a spring breeze on a warm afternoon. The one that seemed to contradict his scent of winter morning, wafting around a small library just as much in conflict with my expectations.

Clutching the fabric of my dress, I looked about a room cast in warm hues of red where the morning sun filtered in through a maple tree that stood outside the massive window. I wasn't sure how I'd pictured Malyr's personal space to look like. Strewn with skulls, torture instruments, and glass jars containing the tears of his enemies, perhaps.

Certainly not appointed with a large oaken desk that stood between window and hearth, with a threadbare quilt hanging loosely over its chair, as though the prince sometimes suffered

mundane discomforts, like cold drafts on windy nights. Potted lemongrass stood in one corner, some tops cropped short, with a knife lying right beside it. Stacks of books rested here and there between a flickering black candle and a wax seal.

Behind it all, a set of gilded doors led to Malyr's private rooms, easily recognized by the violent clashing of pottery and wood beyond it, the animalistic sounds that shook me to the bone. He was raging, hurting like he'd hurt me.

Something I'd expected to give me a sense of recompense before I would leave this place for good. Instead, a strange heaviness loomed over my heart. The thought of having cost Malyr his escape had been a comforting one. But that I had actually killed his brother?

A boy who'd never wronged me?

It felt terrible.

"What's the deal with his brother, hmm?" Beside me, Sebian rubbed a palm over his red-rimmed eyes, his lips strangely gray, his cheeks dusted in patchy black stubble. "Explain it to me, because my head is throbbing and nothing makes any fucking sense right now."

"When I was a child, there was that young Raven who'd escaped the dungeons," I said. "All this time, I thought it was Malyr, but as it turns out, it was..."

"Harlen."

"Harlen." I allowed that name to linger on my tongue for a second, allowing me to taste the bitterness of what I'd done. "The guards tried to catch him. I didn't think and just... pushed at a basket of apples. They rolled across the ground. He stepped on one, stumbled, and hit his head on a rock. There was a lot of blood coming from his head. I killed him."

"An apple." Sebian frowned at a row of bookshelves, mouth agape, then slowly turned his head just enough to give me a strange side-glance. "What a vicious killer you are, indeed. Do yourself a favor, sweetheart, and just stay quiet. I hear them coming."

Time seemed to drag to a standstill until the side door finally opened.

“Please come inside.” Captain Asker entered, his spine as stiff as his unmoving features, merely offering me a dip of his head before he positioned himself near the desk. “Prince Malyr will be with us shortly.”

Captain Theolif followed, the dark stubble on his usually sheared head matching the one on his face, examining me from head to toe as though to make certain I still possessed both. Next came one of our chapel priests I recognized from mass for reasons I couldn’t fathom, who clutched his green robes tighter than I clutched my dress. And then... nothing.

Nobody else aside from the six Tidestone soldiers, who quickly carried in three heavy trunks. They lowered them to the floor, the coins inside *clanking* in lieu of Mother’s frantic yelp upon our reunion, Father’s questions of my well-being, or whatever other noises loving parents usually made.

Not that I knew.

The soldiers left.

I forced a full inhale into my lungs, driving out that heaviness until my spine uncoiled. What had I hoped for? For Mother to come through that door and hug me? I could count myself lucky that Lord Brisden had sent such treasure as a sign of goodwill, making certain I would leave here today. Wasn’t that enough?

When one of the double doors shifted, I lowered my gaze, but I didn’t need to see to know when Malyr entered the room. I felt his presence in the tension crackling the air, the way the light died from my surroundings, the chill that settled in the room.

It was his shadows.

They drifted around him and toward the window beside his desk, blocking the light of the sun, the warmth of its rays as they dipped the entire library in dreary gray. More terrifying were those black tendrils that slithered across his face, seeping

into and rising from his skin, at times drowning one eye in pitch like some sort of monstrous disease.

That couldn't be a good sign...

Captain Asker took in the prince's state, bit his upper lip as if to confirm as much, then lifted his chin in the direction of the envoy. "You stand in the presence of Prince Malyr of House Khysal, only living son of our late King Omaniell and rightful heir to the throne of Vhaerya."

A presence that caused the priest to stumble back under the mumble of prayers. Even Captain Theolif visibly swallowed as he cast a concerned look over those shadows that seemed to radiate away from Malyr, but he stood his ground.

"Prince Malyr, I am Captain Theolif," he said with a hesitant bow. "I stand before you on behalf of Lord Brisden, and I speak in his name, so we may negotiate terms."

My ears pricked at his choice of words. *Negotiate terms?* But had Father not agreed to the exchange already? Why else send an envoy? Gold?

"Negotiate?" Malyr lifted a brow, the fact that he and I shared confusion was nothing short of disconcerting. "Your lord must have mistaken me, Captain Theolif, for the terms I laid out are irrefutable."

"The Lady Galantia in exchange for our Raven," Asker clarified with a strong step forward as he folded his arms behind his back, letting his black-armored barrel chest push out. "If Lord Brisden wishes to see his daughter returned, you will agree to the terms as laid out by Prince Malyr."

The way Captain Theolif's gaze sought out mine, his brows downcast and his jaws stiff, dug a hole into my sinking stomach. Why was he looking at me like that?

"It was not my choice, my lady," Captain Theolif mumbled beneath his breath, but it dulled none of the foreboding dread that made itself a home where my heart should have beat. Should have. "Lord Brisden refuses the return of your Raven. Perhaps *you* have mistaken *our* lord, Prince Malyr, for he came to understand the true value of your woman. How she

was the key to every battle you have won, every stronghold you have taken. Releasing such a valuable Raven is not in our lord's best interest."

Such a valuable Raven...

Realization cleaved through my jumbled thoughts, letting memories of past conversations pour out of them in a cacophony of voices. But of course... How could I have been so stupid? As his mate, Marla had strengthened Asker's gift of visions, making her essential in all of his military strategies, hadn't she? I'd never stood a chance against someone so precious.

Amid the shock, my gaze sought out Malyr, whose face was framed by a black tangle of shadows that darkened those eyes he held fixed on me. Hate and disappointment sat in the depth of them. Still, it would never reach the amount of hate my parents had for me. How could they do this to me? Why did they resent me so?

Malyr turned away and strolled toward the window, staring at a wreath of dried daisies that hung from a nail, the petals curled. The longer his focus remained on it, the more his shadows slithered and writhed like black snakes from his raven strands. How long until they would lash out at me once more?

"Lord Brisden also commanded me to relay this." Captain Theolif cleared his throat. "Should you attack Tidestone, Marla will die."

Asker lifted his hand to the pommel of his sheathed sword, but his breathing remained even. "What does your lord want? And do not propose that we release his daughter for three trunks of coins.

"These are no mere trunks of coins. For these..." Captain Theolif gave a wave at the heavy things, "are the Lady Galantia's dowry."

My blood froze over. "What!?"

Sebian settled a hand on the small of my back, steadying the dizzying shift in my upper body as the floor seemed to pull

out from underneath me. This couldn't be happening. No, no, no. Not that!

“My lady, your lord father proposes your betrothal to Prince Malyr,” Theolif said with a calm certainty that turned my legs weak and wobbly. “Such a union will benefit both the House Brisden and the House Khysal. It is our lord’s hope that the alliance forged from it will allow Prince Malyr to let bygones be bygones. So we may all reconcile on past conflicts and offen—”

Malyr’s bursting laugh silenced the room and my heart right along with it. I’d never heard the man make such a sound, and that he did so now was nothing short of terrifying. The way Sebian stiffened beside me and Asker gripped the pommel of his sword harder only confirmed my shudder-inducing notion.

I set my pleading gaze on Captain Theolif. “Please, do not make me marry him. Anything but that. Anyone but him.”

My knees shook under the weight of my body, my fears, the premise of a lifetime at Malyr’s mercy. My soul wouldn’t survive it.

“Reconcile on past conflicts and offenses,” Theolif finished as he held my stare, then he looked over at Malyr once more. “In return, you, Prince Malyr, can rely on Lord Brisden as your bannerman in your war against King Barat. We may discuss the release of your Raven at a later point.”

“No!” I shook my head so frantically, my brain ached behind my temples. “Please, I beg of you, don’t give me to him.”

Sebian gripped my arm; if to keep me from bolting or in support, I couldn’t say. Asker looked back and forth between Malyr and me, though his stare ultimately settled on me, heavy and expectant. No, I couldn’t do this. Not him.

“A wedding in exchange for a powerful ally,” Malyr mused as he turned away from the window and lowered himself into the chair behind his desk. He looked at me with

nearly black eyes, then waved his hand, gesturing me to him. “Come to me, little dove.”

Sebian clutched me tighter for a second, as though he wanted to hold on. *Oh please, hold on. Save me. Do something!* But he had his loyalties, and how could I expect them to lie with me?

His hold eased away with a whisper. “Don’t make it worse for yourself.”

At his nudge, I stumbled toward the desk and around, my inhaled nothing but stuttered gasps that seemed to suffocate me the closer I came to Malyr.

The prince clasped my waist in a manner too gentle to be trusted and pulled me onto his lap, only for his poisonous lips to whisper by my ear, “What a disappointment you turned out to be, hmm.”

His words carved at my heart, hollowing it, expanding the void. Yes, I was a disappointment... to everyone. Gods, I’d even failed at being a political hostage.

“A powerful ally, indeed,” Captain Theolif said, eyeing Malyr warily but not daring to remark on this inappropriate position of mine. “Archers, three thousand strong. Siege weapons. Not to mention a fleet of seventy-two longships, capable of carrying eighty men each.”

“Eighty men each...” Malyr combed his fingers through my hair. Detangled my strands. Brushed them behind my ear. Gestures that would have appeared loving to any oblivious soul—like Theolif—but I understood the threat in it. Sensed how his fingertips shook. How his shadows bit at my nape. “With such a generous proposal, how could I not forget that one of the before-mentioned siege weapons crushed my little sister’s skull during the siege of Valtaris?”

His words tied around my heart like a noose, pulling taut until it ached, the last petals of blissful ignorance wilting away at my core. That Father was responsible for that, and worse, was suddenly an easy thing to believe. After all the accounts? Theolif’s mention of past transgressions? The very fact that

Father was cruel enough to abandon me to the monster he had created?

“How could I not forget that your lord had my ravens feast on my brother’s corpse to keep from starving?” Malyr continued. “That I drank from the guards’ piss cup? Chewed the moss off the walls? Eventually ran out of corners to *shit*?” Malyr’s shout had my heart lodge somewhere between my ribs. “That he aided King Barat in the near annihilation of my people? The scars he left on me?” His lips scathed the shell of my ear where he whispered, “That his whore daughter killed my brother.”

I shuddered. It was all true.

Every.

Single.

Barbarity.

Of course, Captain Theolif denied none of it, and merely offered another bow. “Prince Malyr, if I—”

“You came here to insult me by offering *nothing!*” A burst of shadows cast the room into near darkness at Malyr’s shout, chilling the air by several degrees. “Let me adjust Lady Galantia’s value to the terms you proposed.” His warm hand shot beneath my skirts, and his hot whisper broke against my temple. “I should have done this much sooner.”

“My Prince,” Asker shouted. “Please recon—”

A yelp erupted from my chest even before I fully registered the pain, like a knife stabbing into my center, sending one cramp after another to ripple across my abdomen. Malyr thrust his fingers into me as deeply as my body permitted. They jerked, scraped, and jabbed with a violence that turned me nauseous, leaving me a little more cracked, a little more broken.

And a lot more worthless.

Malyr retreated his fingers and lifted them, a thin string of blood clinging to his glistening knuckle for everyone to witness.

Nobody was looking.

Asker stared at the ground while Captain Theolif and the priest turned their backs on me in the same way my parents had. Only Sebian's gaze lifted some, his posture stiff and his teeth barred, but it never reached mine.

Malyr placed his lips by my ear. "Now I rendered you worthless."

The burning cleft in my heart bled into my ribcage. Yes, I was worthless. Never wanted, never loved. And how could anybody love something so deranged? So broken?

I looked into his pitch-black eyes, my throat strangling tight. "No matter how much you want to hate me, it'll never measure up to the loathing my father clearly harbors for me. You think you rendered me worthless? Don't flatter yourself, Malyr. I was *born* worthless."

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE



Sebian

Present day, Deepmarsh Castle, Malyr's personal library

Head pounding and ears buzzing, I lifted my gaze to Galantia, putting such a nauseating sway into my surroundings, the bitterness of ale rose in my throat. It flooded the back of my tongue, rancid and sour, making me gag before I swallowed it back down into the depth of my roiling stomach. What the fuck just happened?

Galantia slipped off Malyr's lap, brushed her skirts down, and crossed the library slowly, as if she'd seen this coming all along, with not a wrinkle on her dulled features. If anything, she looked resolved.

When she disappeared behind the door, I looked over at Malyr; the shadows lifting from his face revealing his blank stare. Not what he'd hoped for, huh? No screams. No sobs. No tears.

Fucking hot-headed bastard.

I could get behind him having her wet and moaning against the edge of a blade, the slap of a hand, or in the binds of shadows. But violently finger-fucking through Galantia's maidenhead in front of her father's envoy? That shit wasn't right.

I shifted and flew out the library, only to crash straight into a wall. Feathers tangled, claws scratched over stone. By the time we finally reached the crooked-looking stairs, I wanted to fucking throw up.

"Galantia," I said as I emerged from my shadows at the bottom landing, one hand clinging to the stone banister to control my sway.

She kept trudging up the steps, her posture slightly hunched, one trembling hand pressed against her lower belly. "I just... I just want to go to my chamber."

Fuck, she looked so helpless, the way she all but heaved herself up along the stone-carved rail. It had been difficult to watch, the way Malyr had jabbed his fingers into her, and in the end, I'd looked away.

My chest tightened painfully.

Why had I looked away?

Without much thinking, I hurried up the steps. I scooped her up in my arms and carried her the rest of the way over the shifting ground. Why did she have to tell him about Harlen? It had taken Malyr *years* to get over his brother's death. The shame. The guilt.

"I got you," I said, suddenly aware of the sour stench that drifted between us, and it sure as fuck wasn't coming from her. "You'll be fine."

"No, I won't." She stared into the space between us, her eyes void of tears—and everything else. No anger, shame, or sadness. Just... nothing. "Now he has two more reasons to torment me, and not a single one to let me go. What will become of me now in this place?"

Good question, but not one I could answer with how my brain throbbed. That captain of hers had made a damn strong

case for this betrothal. Strong enough for Malyr to put his hate aside? I wasn't sure...

"I don't know."

Didn't understand how this could have gone so bad so quickly, my skull such a loud place of crowded memories. Chances were there had been signs that this exchange had been doomed from the start. All of which I'd mostly ignored, too damn focused on rubbing my cock all over her.

"Maybe I deserve him as a husband for how foolish I was. How blind." When we reached the end of the corridor that held our chambers, her voice came out, rusty and meek. "I deserve all of his hate. Maybe I even deserve all of your hate, too."

"I don't hate you, Galantia." Didn't hate her at all... "You just need to lie down in your bed and rest. I'm not going to say that things will look better tomorrow, but perhaps not quite so grim."

"Could I... maybe lie down in your bed instead?" Her little fingers curled into the side of my neck. "Only for a while?"

Against the frailty in her voice—or perhaps because of it—my cock twitched in my breeches. In her state, all vulnerable and broken, a little kindness and care might get me places—especially since all concerns about her purity were currently drying on Malyr's knuckles.

Unfortunately, I was equipped with a set of morals only moderately low, which left me half-hard and fully torn. She was hurt—undoubtedly cramping and sore—which turned her question all sorts of complicated. Women came to my bed to lick my balls, not their damn wounds.

So why was it that I carried her into my chamber, kicked the door shut, and lowered her into my bed? "This good, sweetheart? This where you want to be? My bed?"

Nodding, she lay down on her side, pulling her knees against her chest as she grimaced in pain. "I think... I think I'll just feel safer here. With you."

She feels safer with me...

That tightness in my chest, an ache in a place too familiar, clenched even tighter, turning into a raw, searing knot. Had she thought herself safe beside me in the library? Had hoped I would protect her from Malyr?

I turned toward the hearth, trying to dislodge that unwanted sensation, and put a pan filled with chestnuts into the ashes. When the scent of roasted nuts filled my chamber, I pulled the pan from the heat by its handle. I poured the steaming chestnuts into a leather satchel, and once tied, I lay it against Galantia's belly.

"This will help with the cramps," I said. "My mother used to do this for pains during her time of bleeding."

She clasped it tightly and continued to stare at a dark corner in my room. "Thank you."

"There was nothing I could've done, Galantia." There hadn't been; she had to understand that. "I don't always agree with how Malyr handles certain things but... he's my prince."

Silence.

The uncomfortable kind that needled beneath the marred skin along my burnt arm, rousing a ghostly tingle that no amount of rubbing or scratching would control. For fuck's sake, why was I feeling like this?

"Malyr is also my friend," I added, supplying more explanations—or were they excuses?—where she'd asked for none. "He and I went through a lot together."

More silence.

Perhaps it would've been a good moment to get up and leave. Give her some time alone. But I stayed, watching her, running my fingers through her hair one slow stroke at a time as if... as if I was waiting for something. What was it? For her to confirm that I couldn't have done anything? That I hadn't failed to keep her safe? That I hadn't failed to *protect* her?

"There was a moment when I hoped you would interfere," she finally said, amplifying that ache behind my ribs. "It's silly, I know. But then again, we already established that I'm a foolish girl. Today made that quite clear. It was stupid to

expect that Father would bother to get me back. It was even more stupid to hope that you would... somehow protect me.”

A pierce through my chest.

Ouch.

I stared down at myself, half expecting to find a dagger protruding where she'd somehow stabbed me. It certainly felt like it. Hurt me in a place where I'd been numb for so long, right beneath my fucking ribs.

I didn't like it.

Numb was better.

On instinct, my hand wandered to the leather pouch on my belt. Gray devil's bark wasn't easy to harvest this close to the first snow, but I was in no mood to— Ah... fuck. My pouch was gone, if lost in days of drunken stupor or a poorly-placed bet, I couldn't even remember.

“I'll see what I can find out about this mess.” I rose and headed for the door, eager to leave this suffocating tightness. “Stay here. Don't leave this chamber.”

The moment I stepped into the corridor, I shifted into my ravens. We left through one of the hundreds of flight holes we'd cut into the stone and rounded the castle until we managed to slip into Malyr's private rooms. Wine. Where was the damn wine?

Somehow, my *anoa* was still staggering behind me a few steps until he finally merged with my human form. Dozens of voices and ten times as many scents crashed down on my senses, hurting my head, turning me nauseous all over again. I grabbed the golden carafe that stood on the desk and the goblet beside it, pouring as I strode toward Malyr's library. Empty. Aside from a thick swath of shadows that led me to the door to his private gardens.

Carafe abandoned on a side table, I took a sip of last night's stale wine, and stepped into the green space. Goddess help me, I needed to recover my pouch.

Malyr paced the length of the moss-covered stone bench that stood in front of a small pond where red maple leaves floated on the surface. Shadowy offshoots still danced around his boots, telling me he was far from calm. Good. Neither was I.

“Malyr...” Leaning with his back against the trunk of the maple tree, Asker sighed. The fact that he’d dropped the ‘my prince’ in favor of Malyr’s name told me everything I needed to know about how this conversation was going. “A marriage with Lady Galantia will gain you a bannerman more powerful than any of the other human lords who have sworn you allegiance. It will give us Marla back!”

“If you believe that, then you’re a fool,” Malyr scoffed. “There are two things I swore on my family that I would do: destroy House Brisden, and take Dranada for our new home. I will not renounce one oath to see the other fulfilled.”

Asker propped his elbow against his other arm, letting his face fall into the palm of his gloved hand. “Malyr, conquering the kingdom of Dranada is difficult. More daunting is the task of uniting the human and Raven lords, so you may bring *peace* and *unity* to the realm after an eternity of war. Marrying the girl would send a powerful message about both.”

“I will *not*... marry... Galantia.” Malyr bit out each word, and even suspended his pacing. “Her father is an honorless bastard who doesn’t hesitate to abandon his oath and stab his king in the back, which makes him an unreliable ally, and I will see him answer for the things he did to me. That girl is worthless.”

Asker threw his hands up. “The goddess showed her to me. She is essential.”

“How can she be?” When Asker’s silence gave way to doubt, and the wind rushing into the garden, swaying the branches on the maple and the hundreds of colorful ribbons and threads dangling from them, Malyr shook his head. “I will *not* marry her. End of discussion.”

Another sip of wine. I couldn’t even tell if that was good or bad news for Galantia...

Asker pushed himself off the trunk, nodding solemnly, bunching his big brows together before he stared into the pond. “Without Marla, without your bonded mate, you will have to marry *someone*. Someone who comes with a substantial army. It is the only way to ensure absolute loyalty and avoid betrayal when we march on Tidestone.”

“Yes, I will have to, will I not?” Malyr exhaled a long breath. “The worst day in the history of our kind was the one where some Raven queen decided that we should love humans, marry them, breed with them. My parents fought for their fated bond. And look at me, forced to take a human wife.”

When their argument faded into the howl of the wind cutting along the upper edges of the walls, I deemed it safe enough to step closer. “Maybe if you’d announced a *drif* like I told you a dozen times, you wouldn’t be in the position of having to marry a human.”

“Sebian’s suggestion is sound—favorable, even—*if* we hurry so you may find your mate.” Asker’s jaws shifted as his gaze settled on the cup in my hand. “It is the morning.”

“Not everywhere.” I took another sip just to piss him off. “Besides, you shouldn’t act quite so surprised.”

Huffing, he returned his attention to Malyr. “Send out pathfinders in all directions so they may spread word of the festival.”

Malyr arched a brow at me. “For just a moment, it was blessedly silent. Then you showed up, putting that idea in his head all over again.”

Asker turned to face me. “The girl?”

I gave him a curt nod. “I took care of her.”

“Of course you did.” A shadow hushed across Malyr’s sneer. “Always so eager to comfort Brisden’s daughter.”

“You can kiss me where my tail feathers grow, Malyr,” I snapped, my mood about as foul as his over that damn ache in my chest... “What happened to the envoy?”

“Temporarily situated in the castle under guard,” Asker said. “The rest of them made camp some five miles northeast. I already sent out a pathfinder with a message carrying Captain Theolif’s writing, informing them of the delay. A few days of calm contemplation will do us all some good.” Asker bowed before Malyr. “Please think of Marla. I need my mate back.”

I waited until Asker’s footsteps indicated he was out of earshot before I spoke again. “You’ve gone too far.”

A sarcastic laugh rolled from Malyr’s chest. “At least it provided you with an opportunity to fly behind her for another... heroic rescue, I presume.”

“Heroic rescue!?” The cup trembled in my hand, then against my lips for another sip. “I just... stood there, doing absolutely *nothing!*”

I had done nothing.

Just like five years ago.

“As you ought to!” he shouted. “Because she’s a fucking Brisden!”

“She’s an innocent woman!” That shout ripped from my throat, along with a swell of sour bubbles. “One who placed her trust in me, hoping I would—” My stomach contracted as sourness swished over my gums. I heaved, quickly bending over for a spray of red vomit to speckle the grass. When the last slimy string dislodged from my lip, I shook my head, my posture still slightly hunched. “Do you have any idea what it felt like for me in there, Malyr? It felt like that night all over again, because I did absolutely... fucking... nothing.”

I should have.

Malyr shifted in my periphery before his hand appeared near my face with a black cloth clasped between his fingers. “It’s my fault you spent the last three days wasting away in that... filthy tavern. I shouldn’t have said what I said that morning. I am sorry.”

Well, so was I.

For Galantia.

I pressed the cloth to my mouth and straightened, staring at the cup in my hand. That morning? I'd left her behind to wake alone. What if I hadn't? What if I hadn't spent the last three days in some tavern? Hadn't been in that library earlier, barely able to stand straight?

I might have looked.

I might have done... *something*.

The cup dropped to the ground with a *clank* as I shook my head. "I fucking hate you for how you put me in that situation."

"She killed... my... brother."

"Are you truly so blinded by hate that you believe that?" I didn't bother to wait for an answer. "Malyr, that was what? Ten years ago? How old was she then? Eight? Nine?"

"She confessed," he ground out. "Crushed his skull with a rock."

"So what exactly are you picturing, hmm? Whenever little Galantia got tired of her needlework, she skipped about Tidestone, grabbed rocks, and crushed Raven skulls? Can you—for just a moment—listen to how ridiculous that sounds?"

Seconds ticked into a minute where he just stared at the ground, finally *thinking* instead of acting on that stupid infestation of rage at his core. "How then? How did he die?"

"She tilted a basket of apples to slow his escape. He stepped on one, fell, and hit his head on a rock. She told me right before the meeting."

He turned and opened his mouth, sucking in a breath as if to challenge it, but then luckily, swallowed it down in favor of more quiet thinking. Minutes of it. Until he strode to the edge of the pond, staring blankly into the water.

He clenched and unclenched his hands by his sides, and I only now noticed the bloody cuts on his knuckles. "Apples."

“Bold choice of weapon, even for a killer as vicious as your little dove, isn’t it?” I walked up beside him and jugged my chin at his wounds. “What’s with your hand?”

He lifted it to his face, staring at the cuts before he shook his head. “I locked my *anoa* in a cage before I went to her. And a good thing I did, or she would definitely be dead by now. My *anoa*, however, was *not* pleased when I returned.”

Which explained his earlier outburst of shadows. “What will you do now?”

He folded his arms in front of his chest, jaws shifting, then he turned his head to look at me. “Take a wife, I presume.”

“I meant with Galantia.”

He gave a faint chuckle, which quickly fizzled into a drawn-out sigh. “I want to break her. You want to protect her. How utterly amusing, don’t you agree?”

That tightness in my chest slowly eased. So what; maybe I wanted to protect her. Maybe I enjoyed saving her, indulging in the feeling of being a hero—and maybe forgetting that I was anything but.

Just for a little while.

I shrugged. “I fail to find any humor in this.”

“How do we fix it?” His hand settled on my shoulder, the stiffness I sensed in his slightly trembling fingers making it clear that it cost him a great deal to sustain the touch. But he did, his urgency to put our quarrel to rest palpable. Up to this point, Malyr hadn’t denied her to me. Who was I to deny her to him?

“You won’t hurt her in any way that isn’t sensual in nature,” I said. “And for fuck’s sake, Malyr, give her time to heal before you do.”

Where I expected him to lift a brow in challenge, he only gave a curt nod. “Fine.”

“Fine.” I turned away from the pond with my primal spreading its wings at my core, sensing that we wanted to

shift. “Oh, and also, you’ll never seek her out alone, without me.”

“Why?” His question came behind me.

“Because she feels safer with me.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO



Galantia

Present day, Deepmarsh Castle

Murmurs and snickers followed me down the large staircase and toward the great hall, resonating from occupied stone benches, crowded archways, and wherever else the ladies of the court congregated. Clearly, word about my *condition* had spread.

I ignored it.

Gossip was the least of my worries.

Neither was that sense of dread rising in my chest as I approached the gilded double doors at the end of the corridor to the right. A massive emblem of a metal-cast raven decorated them, its wings spread wide and what had to depict intestines dangling from its claws. The sight alone slowed my steps without my consent. Perhaps my feet had more sense than my brain, urging me to reconsider.

Well, I didn't have that luxury.

For four days, I'd sulked into Sebian's pillow, drowning in self-pity as if I could afford such nonsense. As a noblewoman captured, abandoned, and recently deflowered, I needed to take matters into my own hands to keep myself out of the whorehouse or, alternatively, an unmarked grave. Who else would do it for me?

Not my parents.

And what nobleman, be it human or Raven, would stoop so low—potentially even bring the Raven prince's wrath upon them—and take me to wife?

None.

Which meant that I needed to convince Malyr to marry me.

It was the only way to keep a roof over my head, cloth on my body, and food in my belly. He would torment me, of course—more so than the average husband, to be certain—but I would gain standing and protection. And who knew? If I ever carried his child, he might rein in his hatred, if only for a while.

It was the best I could hope for.

And yet my stomach plunged to my feet, bringing them to a stop mere inches from the doors. I glanced around the corridor, expecting to see some ravens perched somewhere along the window to shift, stop me, and ask my business with their prince. Alas, the man who managed to cast an entire room into darkness presumably needed no guards.

Taking a deep breath, I pinched my cheeks, fluffed the ends of my pinned-up curls, then gave a tug on my boned corset to bring out my cleavage or, more precisely, the raven scarred into its center. I'd borrowed the green silk gown from Cici after hours of careful contemplation. Malyr might take me wearing the color of my house as a provocation.

Good.

Reminding him of whose daughter I was would hopefully taunt his desire to break me. Could he do so without taking me

to wife? Certainly. Was he already planning to? Absolutely. But that wouldn't get him the army he needed to reach his goal.

I brought my clammy fist to the door and gave three knocks. There was a long moment of silence before a muffled, "Enter!" vibrated through the set of heavy doors.

Forcing the tremble from my fingers, I pushed on the wing of the raven and stepped into its treacherous nest. One illuminated by a large stone-hearth to the right, although an oil lamp also flickered where it stood on a small desk to the left. Lemongrass and seasoned oak scented the air, lingering between a set of couches and a large... I wasn't exactly sure what I was seeing. Pillows? Yes, lots of pillows, spread out and neatly arranged in a circle at the far end of the room where a bed should have been.

"Why you suddenly bother to knock is beyond me," Malyr said. "I need you to scout out a valley near the western coast and see if a group of our own is hiding there, struggling to get south and to safety."

So he was waiting for someone. *Sebian?*

My throat narrowed.

Lorn?

Malyr crossed from a wooden armoire toward the desk, wearing only black breeches and boots, his broad upper body exposed, and scarred. Not large patches of puckered skin like Sebian, but raised dark lines on his shoulder, down his upper arm, the side of his torso. I couldn't tell how bad the damage was, but that roil in my stomach had me take a guess.

"The sooner you can head there, the better," Malyr continued and, when no response came, he turned toward me. "Take a fate with you, in case—" He froze in place, silently staring at me for three seconds or thirty, and quickly reached for the white shirt that hung over the backrest of the chair. "You came to me." My ears pricked at the breathed consonance of those words that seemed to run deeper than

surprise, but he cleared it away, straightened his face. “Why are you here?”

I curtsied as he shuck on the shirt, taking no small amount of pride in how *I* had clearly taken him off-guard for once. “To offer myself up.”

He grabbed the metal pitcher from his desk, filled the cup standing beside it, took a sip, then arched a brow at me. “Offer yourself up?”

“For marriage.”

“Of course...” A sneer twitched over his narrow lips as though he had expected something different, then he crossed the distance. “You are your father’s daughter, indeed; plucky enough to seek me out and offer me nothing.”

“My father’s army is not nothing.”

He prowled around me, sipping his wine and running a finger around the neckline of my dress. “Many a ladies at my court come with armies.”

“Yet all of them combined won’t surmount to my father’s army, who is holding the largest one in all of Dranada, second only to King Barat’s,” I pointed out. “I daresay you would have to marry all those ladies to match that... or just me.”

“You wish me to take you to wife, little dove? Have you considered this closely? The hate I harbor for you? The pain it will bring? The humiliation?” The way he stopped in front of me, keeping his gaze locked with mine as his fingernail traced the fresh, sensitive scars on my chest, was all malice, threat, and spite. “Until death... do us... part?”

“We both know there will be pain and humiliation, regardless. Presume I could accept that fate wearing cotton, but I would much rather do it wearing silk. Or feathers, if it pleases my husband.” If my time at the Court of Ravens had taught me one thing, it was that one could not die of shame. Hunger and sickness, however... “You might take Ammarett with the army of another bannerman, it’s true, but certainly not without *heavy* losses. Most of them sustained by taking Tidestone first, which is necessary if you want to break north

without my father severing your line of supplies before cutting you in the back.”

“Mmm, you have a mind for strategy, I give you that.” He took another slow sip of wine, staring down at me over the rim of his cup. “You are raising valid points, little dove.”

My chest lifted. “So you will agree to our betrothal?”

His prowling steps continued until he stepped up behind me, gently removing a pin from my hair. A curl sprung free, which he twirled around his finger, only to stretch it long and lay it on my shoulder. He did that twice more, unfurling my strands with a patience that drove up my pulse. More intense was the wash of warmth against my back as he stepped closer and slung his arm around my belly, his breath warm against my ear. Gods, I hated the effect this man had on me...

“Anything but that,” he whispered at last. “Anyone but you.”

A chill crept under my skin, but I wouldn’t let that deter me. I had come here, fully expecting to leave his chambers hurt, humiliated, belittled, cut-up, bleeding, bruised, raped. But by the gods, I would *not* leave unbetrothed.

I stepped out of his arm and turned to face him. “What will it take for you to agree?”

“Nothing you can offer. As you pointed out so eloquently, you were born worthless.”

I breathed through the painful truth. “You won’t ever let me hear the end of that, will you? Because you know how much that knowledge hurts.”

For a moment, for a fraction of a breath, he worked his jaws, eyebrows drawing together. “Yes. I do know how much that hurts.”

“Well, I’m still good enough to provide you with your sick amusement, and perhaps even a sense of delivered atonement.”

“Atonement.” He chuckled into his cup, emptied it with a long swallow, only for his mouth to emerge as a crooked grin.

“Pray tell, little dove, however might you achieve that?”

“It’s really quite simple.” I gingerly took the cup from his hand and crossed over to the desk, refilling it as I spoke. “Do with me as you please. Choke me. Cut me. Bruise me.”

“I will do all that without taking you to wife.”

“Yes, I know.” Cup in hand, I turned around and walked back to where he stood the way I’d left him, then handed him his wine. “And yet marrying me will give you two things you will not get otherwise.”

“Your skill at gaining my attention is commendable.” He took the wine, eyes narrowing. “Whatever might you give me, little dove?”

“The second largest army in all of Dranada.”

He rolled his eyes. “Yes, we have already been over—”

“And my willingness.”

His body turned unnaturally still, until he stiffly lifted the cup to his mouth, taking another sip as though he needed to wet his throat before he could respond. And even then, he said nothing, his eyes tracing my features, perhaps studying my sincerity. Yes, I had his attention.

“I will not fight you. I will not struggle. Might even confess that I like it,” I added, watching a gleam hush across his eyes. “Is that not what you want? To corrupt me? To make me enjoy the most depraved of acts?”

For long moments, he observed me the way he’d done it in the forest, his interest still as frightening, but also promising.

At last, he emptied the wine in one swallow and grinned. “Say, ‘Please, Malyr, marry me, or I’ll forever be ruined.’”

My molars ground together, but I forced them apart. “Please, Malyr, marry me, or I’ll forever be ruined.”

Long strides took him over to the desk, where he put down the cup. “No.”

“Insufferable bastard!” My teeth gnashed, barely audible over his bemused laugh. Gods help me, there was no avoiding

what I had to do. “I will free Marla.”

He studied what appeared to be a map. “And how will you do that from Deepmarsh?”

“By visiting Tidestone after our wedding.” There was nothing left for me at home or anywhere worth not returning to him, he had to know that. “I know every secret pathway, every dark corner, every broken piece of wall. Give me five days, or maybe even three. I will create a distraction, sneak into the dungeons, and free her.”

“Impossible without being noticed.”

A spurting sound escaped me. “Trust me, going unnoticed will be *by far* the easiest part.”

He gave me an assessing look over his shoulder, one brow lifted as though he was contemplating that statement a great deal. “Before the wedding.”

A spark of hope lit in my chest, only to fade seconds later... “Do I look like a fool? You’ll just rid yourself of me the moment you have your precious Raven.”

Not to mention how he would undoubtedly take Tidestone with the help of Marla and slaughter my parents—a thought that shouldn’t squeeze my heart quite as much, but... it did.

“I will not get stuck with a Brisden bride for an army alone,” he said. “And if you get caught? Then your father might as well keep you and once more offer you up to the Dranadian prince.”

“King Barat would be a fool to allow it, given my father’s betrayal and how quickly word of it will travel.”

“A king once more gaining the Tidestone army can hardly be called a fool,” he said before he gave a little scoff. “Alliances have been forged from weaker steel. If you get caught, I have neither Raven nor army.”

“I will not get caught, and once Marla is lost to Father, he’ll know that he has no leverage left. If she’s truly as crucial in this war as everyone makes her out to be, then Father would be a fool to ally himself with the losing side, and will push for

our wedding all the harder,” I said. “I can do it. *After* the wedding.”

He stared at me. “I fear we are at an impasse.”

Gods be damned, why was this man so incredibly difficult? I needed this marriage if I wanted to secure my future. But how, if I couldn't ensure that the wedding would actually take place? I needed an assurance, something to solidify my plan. I needed... I needed...

... to carry his child.

Princes needed heirs, didn't they? More urgently once they made themselves king. Malyr had fathered no children thus far, or someone would have mentioned it. It was risky, but... If I managed to have his child in my belly before I freed Marla, or at least have him think that I might, would that not be reason enough for him to go through with the wedding? Even if not, a bastard heir was better than none, and certainly worth keeping around along with his mother. Did I even have a choice?

No. My options ended here.

“Very well. I will free her before the wedding.” Until then, I needed to get his seed into me, often, and pray I hadn't inherited Mother's plight. “But I insist on six weeks to...” *get pregnant*, “come up with a plan.”

“Six weeks,” Malyr mused, staring into the room for long moments. Quiet. Thinking. Until he noisily pulled the chair out from beneath the desk and turned it to face me, then lowered himself down and gave a pat on his thigh. “Lie down over my lap so we may begin with your atonement.”

“Pardon me?”

“For my sick amusement,” he clarified. “You cannot possibly expect me to settle on you as my bride without sampling that *willingness* you mentioned.”

On reflex, my buttocks clenched. I'd never been spanked a day in my life, but Risa had fruitlessly threatened to ‘drape me over her lap’ often enough that I knew it was what he had in mind.

Muscles stiff, I nodded, forcing my feet toward him one wobbly step at a time. If this was what it took, then so be it.

My knees liquified once I stood beside him, the way I folded over at the waist and sunk my torso onto his legs—the only thing that saved them from buckling. Two weeks ago, I would have dreaded the humiliation of this. But now...? I feared the physical impact. How hard would he strike?

Ruffles of silk and cotton ghosted up along the back of my legs as Malyr pushed up my skirts, exposing my buttocks, letting the chill of the evening coax shivering bumps from my skin. “Reach down and grab the chair legs. Hold on to them.”

Nerve endings tingling with dread and trepidation, I reached for the chair legs, curling my fingers around them with a strangling grip. I braced for his first strike with such intensity—every single muscle in my body tense and quickly tiring—I wasn’t prepared for the gentle caress of his hand that came. How he glided his palm over my flesh or raked over my skin with the back of his nails.

“You redden and bruise so easily... It is quite a beautiful thing to watch,” he murmured and shifted beneath me, clearly discomforted by his erection that pressed into one of my ribs. That was promising. “Hold very still, Galantia.”

The warmth of his hand disappeared, only to come back down with an echoing swat and a flare of scalding heat that set my body ablaze. It ripped a silent scream from me, all air bursting from my lungs. I was so stunned by the brutal, violent pain, I didn’t even hear the door behind me open.

Only when footsteps replaced the smack of another strike did the tremors twitch along my muscles as if I wanted to roll off Malyr’s lap. The gait was too heavy, too unhurried to be Lorn’s. Which only offered a marginal relief since I’d wanted no audience at all...

“I thought we had an agreement.”

The sound of Sebian’s voice accelerated my pulse, making me lift my head, trying to turn and look back at him. *What agreement?*

Malyr pressed three fingertips into the back of my skull, turning my head forward and pushing it down at the same time. “What can I say? She came to me, wanting to atone.”

“Because she just wouldn’t fucking listen and stay in my chamber like I had told her to...” I didn’t need to see Sebian in my periphery to know that those fingers rubbing at the back of my neck belonged to him, caring, reassuring. “That true, sweetheart? You want to atone?”

Even when he continued toward the desk, positioning himself less than six feet away in front of me, I couldn’t bring myself to look up at him. Too much awkwardness. Too much wondering what he was thinking, finding me like this, draped over Malyr’s lap with my asshole winking at him in greeting.

I nodded.

“Well, then...” Sebian leaned with his backside against the desk, crossing his outstretched legs. “By all means, don’t let my presence distract you.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE



Galantia

Present day, Deepmarsh Castle, Malyr's chambers

For nineteen years, pain had been a stranger.

Malyr acquainted me, letting his merciless swats turn my rear into a blazing inferno. The most vicious of them repeatedly landed on the same spot, sending my entire body into such convulsions, I barely managed to suck in a breath. For someone who'd gulped down two cups of wine, his precision was terribly accurate.

Worse were the strikes that landed between my legs and how they reminded me of my brokenness, making me buck against his thigh, searching for pleasure beyond the pain. It wasn't an easy thing to confess, how I sensed myself going slick, but... gods! I was wet. Wet and aching!

Aching for those burning tingles that made me feel how life coursed through my heated veins. But most of all, I ached for Malyr's shockingly controlled touch. I sensed it in the brief

pauses that followed each swat, the reliable pattern of where he struck, the even rhythm of his hand. Even through the pain—severe enough I worked up a sweat—this didn't feel like atonement.

This felt like attention.

Ardent, undivided attention.

Gradually, I lifted my gaze to Sebian, only to find that he, too, was engrossed. He kept his smoldering green eyes on me, his lips parted, his breathing ragged with how his brown cuirass constantly shifted with it. Did this anger him? Bemuse him? Arouse him?

His hand answered that question, lowering to the leather ties on his breeches before wrapping around thick, swollen flesh. Sebian freed his cock and slowly ran his fist along his shaft, squeezing the reddish-purple head. Gods, the sight shouldn't curl in my belly the way it did...

When my limbs trembled and sweat pearled at my nape, Malyr swung at my sore hind once more, then stopped. He hooked a finger under my chin and turned my face toward his. His thumb swiped over a tear on my cheek that must have dislodged when I'd clenched every single muscle I possessed, but Malyr recognized it as that—merely an unavoidable reflex rather than me crying—and disappointedly let my head slump back down.

"I daresay you're red enough, little dove," he said. "For now, anyway."

"Judging by that scent she's giving off, I tend to agree." Sebian pushed himself off the desk, hard cock bouncing as he took one step and squatted in front of me, brushing a damp curl from my face. "You done atoning for now, sweetheart, hmm? Are you going to be good?"

I sucked gulps of air through my parched lips, my entire body submerged in fire. "Y-yes."

"That's right, sweetheart. You're going to be so good for us. And what do good girls get?" In one quick move, he rose,

plucked me from Malyr's lap, and draped me over his arms. "They get rewarded."

Everything happened so fast, my mind spinning as Sebian carried me to the pile of pillows. At the edge of it, he stomped out of his boots, wiggled my shoes off my feet, and stepped inside. He lowered me to sit in a soft, cushiony ocean of black damask and silver embroidery, but its impact with my sore rear ripped a hiss from me, regardless. What was happening?

"Fuck, sweetheart, that scent of yours has been driving me insane. Are you going to let me have a taste of that, hmm?" Sebian removed his cuirass, gaze going to something behind me. "How are they?"

"Restless." Malyr's hiss scraped down the length of my spine as he suddenly sat behind me, framing my legs with his much longer ones before he placed his lips by my ear. "No matter how much I hate you, my shadows hate you more. Fight them, and they'll kill you. It's not a threat; it's a warning."

With his warning came black, icy tendrils that ghosted over my heated flesh, providing unexpected relief from the throbbing beneath my skin. Malyr's shadows wrapped around my thighs, forcing my legs apart, prying me open.

Unable to force even a croak through my tight, dry throat, I clutched the bunched-up train of my borrowed gown, pushing the fabric down to cover my crotch.

"Fussing *bores* me," Malyr ground out as he reached around me, pulling the silk from my fists, once more laying my spread cunt bare for Sebian to stare at where he stood and removed his breeches. "You're trying to convince me of your willingness, remember?"

Shivering at the taunt in his tone, its malevolent cadence, I sucked in little flat breaths. I'd mentally prepared for all sorts of scenarios before coming here—from betrothal to death and everything in-between. But I hadn't prepared for Malyr's shadows to spread me while Sebian dropped his shirt, lowered himself to his stomach between my legs, and placed his mouth —

“Oh gods...” I rasped out, back arching at that lap of Sebian’s tongue over my wet entrance.

His deep, masculine groans hummed against my cunt as his tongue dipped and circled, lapping at me like a starved animal. The urgency of it, the vigor with which his mouth devoured me thickened my blood, turning me heavy until I sank deeper into Malyr’s chest.

Malyr’s fingers climbed to the green bands on my bodice, hooking beneath the loops and pulling with similar urgency as he opened up my dress. “What does she taste like?”

“Sweet. Fuck, she’s so wet, dripping straight into my mouth.” Sebian shifted his lips higher, framing my clit with them before he sucked, sending such wonderful spasms through the hard pebble, and I moaned in pleasure. “That good, sweetheart, hmm? Let me hear it. Come for us, Galantia.”

I gave voice to a whimper when Malyr roughly slid his hand into my bodice. His fingers kneaded my breast, lifting it from its constraints just as his other hand pushed the disabled contraption down. He did the same with the other, both hands reaching around to squeeze and abuse the full flesh.

“Sebian told you to come for us, little dove,” Malyr whispered ever so quietly, pinning my nipples between his fingers until they ached. He rolled them, pulled them to throbbing, teased and tortured another moan from me. “There we go. That’s what my little dove needs, no matter how much she wants to deny it.”

Trapped between Sebian’s wicked mouth and Malyr’s evil torment, my breath turned to panting. My clit throbbed with the mounting need for release, sending little convulsions into the surrounding muscles until everything seemed to twitch.

I dug my fingers into Sebian’s black strands, gripping hard enough that the leather tie holding them back came undone, letting his hair fall free. Gods help me, he was a glorious sight to behold, with the muscles on his back shifting, his firm buttocks tightening as he rolled his hips into the pillows.

“That’s it, sweetheart, come against my mouth,” Sebian groaned. “I want her to make a fucking mess of my face, Malyr. Get her there.”

When Sebian sucked on my clit once more, making my legs stretch and strain against the grip of shadows, Malyr ran his tongue up along the side of my neck. He bit down, clamping my throbbing skin between his teeth.

I cried out in pain, only for the sound to morph into a whimper of overwhelming pleasure. Heat rolled from my core with violent force, fizzling out along my limbs with such intensity, they turned heavy. My vision speckled, my breath caught.

“Such a fucking good girl,” Sebian crooned, moving his lips away from my clit to kiss around my entrance, up along the inside of my thigh, and over my mound. Once my body came down from this high, he sat back on his haunches, seemingly unbothered by the wet sheen spread across his mouth and cheeks, his gaze going to Malyr. “Given how you took her maidenhead, it’s only fair that I get what’s left of it. I want her.”

He wants me.

Words that had once caressed my soul now scared a flicker of wit back into my head. Between the spanking, the orgasm, and the overwhelming presence of these two men, I’d all but forgotten my goal.

I glanced over my shoulder back at Malyr, finding his jaws a hard, unmoving line. “But... but what of the betrothal?”

Sebian groaned. “Please tell me I’m not about to fuck your wife, Malyr.”

“Whyever not?” There was a twitch in one corner of Malyr’s mouth as he brought a finger to the scar on my chest, scraping along the lines with his nail as he lowered his mouth to my ear. “Little white dove, you assured me you would be mine to do with as I please, remember? Mine to break. Mine to hurt. Mine to torment. And mine to *share*.” I shivered when the warmth of his mouth disappeared, only to emerge on the

other side where he whispered, “What could be more depraved than giving my future wife to my best friend, watching how he makes her moan like a whore?”

Malyr slipped out from behind me, letting my back sink into the cushions the way all my earlier bravado sank into the pit of my stomach. “But—”

Sebian’s big body suddenly hunched over me, long black hair framing his tender gaze. “You have no idea how long I’ve been fantasizing about this.”

“As did she.” Malyr grabbed the silk of my dress, relieving me of it with Sebian’s help and a pull over my head. “She moaned your name in her sleep.”

“Did you, sweetheart? Did you dream about me making love to that sweet, tight cunt of yours, hmm? You want me?”

My heart shook, stuttering over arousal and fear alike. Yes, I wanted him—had probably wanted him for a while—but... I *needed* Malyr! Needed his child. I turned my head, staring at where he sat leisurely beside us, one leg spread and the other slightly folded. Was this a trick? A game?

“Don’t look at him. Look at me.” One arm suspending his upper body, the other tugging on my chin to return my gaze to him, Sebian lowered himself down, slightly angled to one side. “I’ll be so gentle with you. You know that, right?”

My mind numbed as the blood in my veins heated. “Yes.”

I knew Sebian would never hurt me, but that was hardly the issue here.

Not until I stared down between us, catching sight of his hard cock. It jutted and strained mere inches from my opening, thicker and longer than I remembered, with a small droplet of something glistening on the slit on his crown.

This was going to hurt.

“Shh... you’re tensing. Relax your muscles.” His warm skin pressed against mine, robbing me of sight, but I could feel it. How his crown set itself against my entrance, sending my heart into a dizzying speed. “I’ll go slow. Like this.”

His crown pressed against my entrance, dipping in slightly but not truly entering. When his hips gave a testing push forward, pressure emerged. The moment it started to strain muscles I hadn't known I possessed, he drew back, letting it all morph into a desperate tingle. His next thrust glided deeper, stretching me until I whimpered.

"You're going to take him, little dove, do you hear me?" Malyr commanded. "You're going to take every inch of Sebian's cock, or I swear, I'll grab you, turn you around, and fuck into you with not even a fraction of his care, ripping a whole bunch of new sounds from those pretty lips of yours. I'll make you fucking sing."

Sebian groaned, slipping deeper into me with quick pulsations. "That's my good girl. You're doing so good, Galantia. Open for me."

At his next thrust, my entire body quivered with an intensity that shook my breath. "Sebian..."

"You have no idea how tight she is, Malyr. Fuck, you feel so good, sweetheart. So fucking good." Sebian rolled his hips slowly, letting that fullness at my center ebb and rise in a calming rhythm as his face contorted in pleasure and pain. "That's it, sweet thing. I'll make this good for you, I promise."

I moaned each time he slid deeper into me. Stretched me, filled me with his thick shaft. Rubbed along my tight walls until they warmed. Each time his hard body pressed into my mound, rubbing over it with dense muscle, my clit throbbed anew.

He kept his rhythm, rubbing his muscled body over my throbbing bud with each stroke while his teeth barred more and more. Deep groans hissed passed them, his expression taut as though it took him great effort to hold back his more primal urges.

But he did, thrusting at a sensual pace, gleaming down at me with great focus. His senses seemed to catch every reaction. When my pelvis retreated, he slowed. When I breathed harder, he rocked deeper. When I shifted, so did he.

“Fuck, your cunt is so tight,” Sebian said, “milking the cum up my shaft so nicely.”

At his next thrust, harder and deeper than all others, my lips parted with a silent moan. Sebian smirked and gave another hard thrust, trapping my cunt beneath tremors that shook me to the core.

I writhed beneath him, wanting to escape this mounting heat that built behind my pelvis, wanting to get closer. Sebian pressed his pelvis flat against mine in answer, snapping his hips in quick pulsations.

That heat erupted in a flare of tremors and convulsions, forcing all breath from my chest in a scream. “Sebian!”

He lost his breath, fucking into me harder, losing his rhythm. “I’m going to load you up so nicely, sweetheart. Here it comes.”

Mind drowning under the crest of pleasure and bliss, I was still focused on the convulsions that had my body jerk. But between those sensations, I felt him. Sensed how he lengthened and throbbed inside... How he filled me.

Once his breathing calmed, Sebian placed a peck on my cheek. “Let me take care of your wounds.” He pulled out of me and rose, his cock still plenty hard, and padded naked toward a small wooden box that stood on a nearby shelf. “Tarmoss salve?”

“Top left corner.” Malyr gave me a come-hither gesture, which had me roll onto my stomach, beckoning me to him on all fours. “Turn around. Show me those marks I left on you.”

Heart racing from physical exhaustion, I obediently turned around. He would fuck me from behind like the animals did it, wouldn’t he? Impersonal, distant, cold. Somehow, I couldn’t imagine it any other way with Malyr.

“Push it out,” he said. “I want to see his cum dripping from you. Want to see how he used you.”

Whatever muscles I worked must have been the right ones, because I felt Sebian’s seed—the seed of the wrong man—run out of me. And perhaps it would have dripped onto the pillows

or down my thighs, wasn't it for the way Malyr gathered it in his palm, and rubbed it, wet and warm, onto my right butt cheek.

Sebian returned with a small clay mug in his hand. "Her skin needs to be dry for this to soak in and help with the healing."

"Let me make it worth the expense."

Slap.

Pain scalded my wet rear on impact, sending an echoing smack into the room. Gods fetch this miserable bastard; he wouldn't even do me the courtesy of rutting me like a beast?

I hissed and spun around. "What of the betrothal!?"

Malyr took off his shirt, letting numbness spread across my fingertips as he tossed it to Sebian. Dozens of deep welts marred his chest, his shoulders, his stomach, painting a savage picture I'd seen once or twice before on the unruliest of Tidestone prisoners.

Somehow, the gruesome sight made the sting more bearable as Sebian dried my inflamed skin with Malyr's shirt, then slathered it in salve.

"They flogged you." Perhaps as many times in the same spot as Malyr had spanked me earlier... "Now I understand what you meant when you said my father carved himself under your skin."

"I wasn't referring to these scars." Malyr rose with a scoff and walked toward one of the flight holes, looking back at Sebian. "Help her move into the chambers across from mine. It allows for more... discretion. I want you to keep an eye on her at all times, or in short, I'm charging you with the protection of my *betrothed*."

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR



Malyr

Past, Tidestone Dungeons

Time crept through the darkness of the dungeons, each day marked with beatings from the cane, the whip, and occasionally, the jailor's fist. Twice, some human captain had transported me to the outskirts of Vhaerya, locked in a cage and poisoned to near-unconsciousness with gray devil bark, demanding I removed my kingdom's shadowy veil.

I'd refused.

Or at least, that was what I'd told myself each time the shadows hadn't listened, feigning pride where I knew I only deserved shame.

My gaze wandered to Harlen's corpse, where he'd been rotting away for who knew how long now, but I stopped myself. Not for the pale-greenish tint I knew his face carried, or the maggots falling from the corner of his mouth, or even the way his flesh had begun to sink in.

No, it was those empty eye sockets I couldn't stomach, pecked a little bit cleaner to the bone each time I woke against a wall I couldn't recall having fallen to sleep against.

I swallowed past a wave of sour bile and nausea, lest my stomach would rid itself of the moss I'd tediously scraped off the musty corners and eaten to avoid more unconscious shifts. My unkindness was starved, frantic.

"Lorn?" I wrinkled my nose, disgusted by the stench of my breath, and placed my fingers into the gap at the bottom of the wall in search of hers. "Did you wake?"

Her trembling fingertips touched mine. "Would I be so lucky and just not wake?"

I leaned my head against the stone, my core sinking at the defeat in her voice, all that fight she'd once carried extinguished. "Once Asker comes to free me, I'll take you with me far away from this place. Maybe across the ocean, where we—"

"Please stop..." Her voice was a little above a whisper, yet it hung so heavily between us, it burdened my shoulders. "The only Ravens coming in here are deathweavers and voids. This won't stop until they have Valtaris, and even then, it will end in death for us. Unless you finally use your shadows."

My jaws clenched. "They're not mine to yield, which is why they don't listen. It's that curse running through my bloodline. The way for our goddess to make me pay for what my ancestor had stolen."

"It's just a tale, Malyr."

"A tale?" I scoffed. "I told you what they've done to my parents, have I not? To our homelands?"

"Because they're angry," she ground out. "We are deathweavers, Malyr. If we don't feed death to our shadows, they will feed on whatever is in reach. Stop. Fearing. Them."

My head sunk, giving me a good whiff of my body odor, the tatters of my tunic stiff with dirt, my skin sticky with old sweat. How could I not fear them? They had killed my hound,

my parents... Not to mention the many times they had tried to kill *me* when I was a child.

Oh, the little prince will grow into them, everyone had said. Except, my shadows had continued to grow *with* me. Only Mother had ever understood, for she had allowed me to syphon some of my shadows into her void under trembles and tears. That I had once shoved my *anoa* into a flour sack and tried to drown him in a river hadn't exactly helped my relationship with that bird...

Bright and playful, a sudden burst of energy fluttered through my core, fading the pain, the agony, the hunger. What was this?

Pressing one hand to my chest, I gripped the wall with the other and struggled to my feet, stumbling along it guided by... I wasn't sure. On instinct, I stopped several steps from the next corner. I stared up at the damp ceiling. Stared and soaked up this sense of serenity.

Until it disappeared, leaving nothing behind but hunger pains, sore muscles, and a twinge between my ribs, its loss... harrowing. Where did it go? I wanted to feel it again. Wanted to—

Hinges creaked.

I spun around and dug my fingers into the crumbling mortar, fully expecting a punch in the face. None came.

The jailor was still busy locking the iron door from the inside when another guard lowered a wooden bucket with water to the ground between himself and Lord Brisden. The sight alone narrowed my parched throat, making me suck my tongue.

“Get rid of this corpse before the other half of the prisoners succumb to sickness.” Lord Brisden wrinkled his hooked nose at Harlen, that longer brown hair he carried slicked back, the hunting outfit he wore embroidered with green waves. Brisden colors. “They’re dying faster than we can cart them to Vhaerya. Not that any of them are likely to prove useful.” His strong gaze settled on me. “Except for our young prince here.”

A series of cramps roiled through my stomach, one for each step he took toward me. “You took me to Vhaerya twice. I cannot... cannot—” A cough scraped along my throat like sand, eyes going to that bucket. I was so thirsty. “I will not lift the shadows.”

“Yes, so you have said, but having a prince for a captive is never a bad thing, so I decided to keep you.” Arms folded behind his back, he slowly paced before me, eyeing me with an intensity that chilled the blood in my veins. “Same with that... rabid girl next to you. Her shadows are strong.” He stopped and turned to face me fully. “But not nearly as strong as yours, Malyr. Is that not so?”

I licked my cracked lower lip, my eyes on that bucket. “I will not lift them.”

“M’lord!” The figure of a guard shifted behind the tight weave of the iron door to my cell. “It is the Lady Galantia. One of the guards found her sneaking along the bailey again.”

“What is it to me?” Lord Brisden barked. “It is her mother who grows hysteric whenever that girl escapes her nursemaid. Ask my wife what she will have you do.”

“M’lord, Lady Brisden is currently... Well, with the healers.”

“She couldn’t hold on to this one more than a few weeks, could she?” Lord Brisden gave a severe shake of his head. “Lock my daughter in her room and find that darned nursemaid to make sure she stays there.” Lord Brisden pointed at me. “Strap him to the barrel and flog him.”

“No!” I shouted, pulse exploding in my ears. “No flogging. Please! No flog—augh!”

Strong sets of arms grabbed mine, flaring up the pain of old bruises, dragging me toward the barrel that stood at the center of my cell. Until, at a burst of adrenaline and panic, my shift went through me.

My form scattered into my unkindness. We flapped and screeched, scratching on the walls for hold, bending our feathers on the ungiving stone. Out! We wanted out!

“Bloody idiots,” Lord Brisden snarled. “Whack them. *Whack them!*”

Leather lashed down on us, ripping us to the ground. My chin hit the hard stone, making me chomp down on my gums. Iron seasoned my teeth and blood drooled from my mouth, thick and sweet and warm.

“Up you go, little bird.” The jailor gripped me by my matted hair, pulled me onto my shaky legs, and shoved my chest against the barrel. “Tie him down nice and good while I beat the wings out of him.”

Smack!

Dozens of leather strings nipped at my back, making my shoulders pull tight while chains tightened around my wrists and ankles.

Leather smacked.

Fabric ripped.

Liquid fire melted across my back, making every muscle in my body convulse until I rose onto my toes, but there was no escaping the brutal pain. It pelted down on me, repeatedly hitting the same spot until I felt my skin peel, giving way to trickles of blood that ran down my back.

“Enough.” Lord Brisden stepped in front of me and leaned over, the reflection of the torch they’d brought flickering across his hazel eyes. “There is no beating the stubbornness out of this one, as we all know.”

My eyes fell to my amulet that hung on a leather string from his neck, making me want to clench my eyes shut in shame. The white stone dangled inches from my face, worthless to anyone in this world... but worth the world to me.

It belonged to my *anoaley*.

My fated mate.

“What a pretty face. I daresay you are quite the handsome young man, if given a good soak and a comb.” Brisden lifted his hand to my face, making me flinch in anticipation of a whack, only for his finger to stroke a black strand behind that

ear where he'd marked me with ink. "Tall. Long, black hair. A lithe, graceful figure that has not yet grown into its full width and strength. Do you not agree, lads?"

"A pretty Raven boy," the jailor said.

The guard chuckled. "Looks like a woman from where I'm standing."

All my senses sharpened as my heart drummed in warning, making me turn my head to escape Brisden's strange touch. This felt wrong... Terribly wrong.

"I have to say, pretty Raven boy, I am growing rather impatient with this nasty... shadow business around those cursed lands of yours," Brisden said. "I need them gone. Now. And you, Malyr, will do it."

My parched, dry lips trembled more than they should have. "I will not remove them."

Brisden straightened, walked to the wall across, and leaned his back against it. "He reeks like shit and death. Get that stench off him."

One second the rope on the bucket squeaked tight, the next, a splash hit my flogged back, burning, searing, stabbing into my spine, and ripping a scream from me.

Because it was not water, but vinegar.

Sharp, biting vinegar, sending the fire of five hells across my back. Its acidic odor crept into my nostril, bringing with it the memory of grunts, curses, scream. No. No, no, no...

I bucked against the barrel, fighting the constraints of the chains. "No!"

Brisden once more came closer, whispering by my ear, "I will break you, Malyr. And you *will* give me Valtaris."

When someone yanked my trousers down, I fought in earnest, kicking, screaming, cursing. Another splash of vinegar hit my buttocks, only to burn its way down along my scrotum and penis.

Big, rough hands gripped my hips. A foot kicked my legs apart, letting chains rattle and clank. Cotton wiped over my asshole.

The barrel tipped slightly beneath me as the first stab violated me, burning and ripping, letting a shout tear from my lungs and urine trickle down my inner thigh. He forced himself deeper until his skin slapped against mine, hurting me, grunting in pleasure while I whimpered in pain.

“Do you want to know what is worse than being forced to endure the most depraved acts?” Brisden looked down at where I’d wet myself, grinning. “Liking them.”

And I knew then that it wasn’t urine the man forced from me one thrust after another. He cut through my body, past my decaying mind, and straight into my soul. And I felt it crack. Sensed it shatter into a million pieces, filthy and corrupted, never to be whole again.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE



Galantia

Present day, Deepmarsh Castle

Things were finally looking up.

Captain Theolif had returned to Tidestone to relay the news of my upcoming wedding to my parents. My success in securing my betrothal had manifested immediately, taking shape as richly furnished, opulent personal chambers, meals served on gold platters, and at least a dozen people fussing over me in preparation of the wedding.

Like Darien, the court's dressmaker, who ran his splayed fingers along my body without touching, letting threads of shadows thinner than hair weave, loop, and entwine. They formed the sheerest black cloth, which wrapped around my arms and torso like a second skin before it generously fanned out below my waist, yet it managed to cover nothing at all.

I stared down at the contrasting paleness of my skin that shone through the fabric, amplified by the morning sun

coming from the window of my sitting room that overlooked a lovely garden with a pond. “I can only assume Prince Malyr is planning to have me freeze to death in this.”

Arms crossed in front of his chest, Sebian took a few assessing strides around me where I stood in the center of the room, grinned at the sight of my nipples, and gave me a wink. “I like it. Your beauty is shining through... quite literally.”

My cheeks warmed, reminding me of how good he’d felt inside me. How gentle and patient he’d been. How he’d *made love* to me...

... in front of my betrothed.

And at my betrothed’s request, just to add to my confusion. The most baffling part about all this? Giving me to Sebian that night, allowing me to succumb to his tenderness, had probably been the kindest thing Malyr had ever done to me...

“No imagination, this human.” Darien gave a graceful swat of his hand, his black strands an intricate weave of at least a dozen smaller braids, as extravagant as the black trumpet gown he wore. “But one with a lovely waist.”

I cringed, internally mumbling a prayer. Oh please, let me hold on to that waist a while longer. Sleeping with my betrothed’s best friend was strange enough, but potentially having his child in my belly? As things stood, I could hardly claim it to be Malyr’s, potentially leaving me at the doorstep of ruin once more. With a child. From a knave with a certain... reputation.

I resisted the urge to tug on the fabric around my belly to make it less tight. No, I hadn’t yet been in my fertile days that night. Risa had taught me to count based on my menses, so I may put it to good use once I was expected to do my duty and produce an heir. Gods damn this mess. I had to get Malyr to give me his child.

Darien ran a finger down along my waist. “I suggest we bring it out and go with vines.”

At the flick of his pointer, shadows built onto the sheer cloth in the shape of thorny vines. They curved inward along

the natural dip of my waist, making it look more defined, even from my perspective. An optical illusion, which formed a thicket up along my torso before it burst into lacy blooms on each side of my scar, covering my breasts.

“Hmm, what to do with this train?” Darien rubbed a hand over his smooth chin as he walked around me, assessing his creation with a critical look. “Fuller. Yes, that’s what we need, but how to—ah!” He snapped his fingers at Sebian. “My pouch. Over there by the window. Quick.”

“I don’t recall you paying me to run your errands. Earlier, you chased me across the castle to get your measuring stick.” With a heavy exhale, Sebian grabbed the leather pouch where it sat on an upholstered bench beneath the window and tossed it over his shoulder. “Next time, bring your mate to do it.”

Darien let out a frantic yelp before he caught the clinking pouch with both arms, pulling it tightly against his chest, narrowed gaze snapping to Sebian. “She has no sense for beauty and never fails to inhibit my creativity.”

“She?” I took another look at his gown, the neckline so low, it exposed his shoulders and a sparse thatch of hair that sprouted between his pectorals. “I thought you were... were...”

“A lover of men?” he *tsked*, hooked the pouch on the thick belt that clasped his slender waist, and pulled a whitish stone from it, holding it out in his open palm. “Darling, above all, I am a lover of dresses. How can I not be, hmm? Frills, grommets, ruffles, laces, layers. And this...” His fist came down on the stone, letting it crumble. Wafts of shadows emerged from within, weaving into the shape of a rose in full bloom, petals and all. He carefully brought the delicate ornament to my train, stitching it onto the fabric with shadowy thread. “Trousers, shirts, vests. Why would I bore myself with the mundane if I can create this? *Wear* this?”

I watched in awe as he cracked one stone after another, turning my dress into a garden of flowers and ravens that roosted on the vines between them. “What is this?”

“Salted spells,” Sebian said. “If you look closely, you’ll see the shadows writhing on the inside.”

All it took was a hopeful look at Darien for him to hand me one such salt stone, which I turned between my fingers, watching the black threads shift ever so slightly. It was fascinatingly beautiful.

Darien took the stone from my fingers, cracked it, and worked the shadowy rose that emerged into my dress. “It takes me many days to create ornaments such as these.”

That was easy to believe. “What else can you store in these?”

“Any sort of shadowmagic,” Darien said. “But what’s more important than storing threads? Without us weavers, everyone would walk around naked.”

When I looked at Sebian, he said, “We have to work plumes of shadows into our clothes, our weapons, our most important belongings for them to shift with us.”

I looked down at what had to be the most beautiful gown in all the kingdoms, utterly taken by this new knowledge. “I’ll be the finest bride in all of Dranada.” Just like Risa had said...

“Bride? Oh darling, don’t insult me.” Darien chuckled as he fussed with the lacing along the shoulders. “It will take me a fortnight to fashion your wedding gown. This one, you’ll wear to your *kjaer*.”

“My what?” I asked, just as an unkindness or ravens flew in through the flight hole above the window.

“Your *kjaer*.” Malyr was still shaping out of shadows and plumes beside me, running his feathery touch over my scar before his fingertip replaced the sensation, and the scent of winter and lemongrass filled my nose. “Where I shall court you.”

“Court me?” That would have sounded rather romantic coming from any man who wasn’t Malyr. “How terrifying.”

A twitch of his lips. “Agreed.”

“I didn’t think you’d bother with a *kjaer*.” Sebian leaned with his back against the bookshelf that lined one wall, both hands shoved into the pockets of his breeches. “How romantic.”

Malyr rolled his eyes. “Was it not you who suggested we could all do with some fun? There’s much fun to be had during a *kjaer*.”

I looked back and forth between them. “Anybody bother to tell me just what exactly that is?”

“A sort of betrothal ceremony,” Sebian said. “The male will feed you, groom you, present you with a gift. And um... fly with you?” He frowned at Malyr. “How exactly are you going to solve that?”

Malyr shrugged, my future husband once more dressed in one of the smartest corset vests I’d ever seen, the gray shirt underneath embroidered with silver moons and stars. “Most *kjaer* between our kinds made do with the Dance of Ten Feathers, and so it shall be with this one.”

Slowly but surely, nervousness prickled beneath my skin. “But... I don’t know that dance.”

“You have two days to master it,” Malyr said with a wolfish grin. “I publicly announced the *kjaer* and the feast that’ll go along with it less than an hour ago.”

Feast.

That word brought back memories I’d rather forget, making me set my pleading look onto Sebian, but he only let his head slump back against book spines before he said, “It’s a dance for fancy Ravens, not sons of farmers like me.”

Anger warmed my veins over how Malyr was seemingly setting me up for embarrassment again, but acting on it would hardly bring me closer to my goal. I had to make an effort here. Whatever brought our bodies closer together would be a step in the right direction.

I set my hand on his arm and searched his steely eyes. “Maybe you could teach me?” A swallow. “Please?”

Malyr's eyes wandered to where I touched him, as if he was contemplating to slap my hand away, but he merely let it slip off as he walked around me, taking in my dress. Cici was right; I had no talent for seduction.

"Is it to your liking, my prince?" Darien bowed and sidestepped after Malyr, letting one hand fan the train out while the other settled on Malyr's shoulder. "I decided to bring out her—"

"Remove your touch this instant," Malyr growled low, his posture stiff, his death gaze locked on Darien's hand. "Or you will have to finish this gown one-handed."

I frowned at the way Malyr's eyes jumped from that innocent touch to Darien's gown, and back to that touch.

"Apologies, my prince. I get carried away with excitement sometimes." Darien quickly retrieved his hand, cleared his throat, then ran his hands over my shoulders. "Perhaps a collar like the one you had me make for the feast? With her hair curled and pinned up?"

"No curls. No pinning up her hair. I want it down and flowing." Malyr placed his mouth by my ear where he whispered, "That's how you prefer it."

A jolt went through my belly as I turned my head to stare at him in nothing short of shock. Yes, that was how I preferred it, but... how would he know?

"No collar, then," Darien remarked, and pointed at the ravens set into the train. "I'll use real feathers to bring out the dimension of these. The finest, youngest plumes. It's a shame we don't have a white weaver. For the sake of solidarity, a few threads of white would strengthen the picture of unity."

For a second, Malyr's lips pressed together. "My house hasn't seen much solidarity from them when the war started. They hid like cowards, watching the rest of us get slaughtered."

Who was them? But most of all... "What's a white weaver?"

“Some shadowmagic is white,” Sebian explained. “It’s extremely rare; I’ve never met one in my lifetime. Have you, Malyr?”

Malyr ran his hand down along my arm, thumbing the shadow-embroidered vines. “My father had one in his ravanguard. Strange beings, said to be sickly. If one didn’t pay attention, you might confuse them for—” When his fingers reached the silky blue string tied around my wrist, he gripped it, yanking my hand up between us. “What. Is. This?”

“I found it in my room one morning. I think that raven might have dropped it.” I looked at Sebian since Malyr likely hadn’t heard the story. “The one from the night of the storm? Remember, I said it carried something in its beak?”

“Oh, shit.” Sebian pushed himself off the shelf, his hands still buried in his pockets. He looked down at the ribbon, then he lifted his gaze to Malyr, exchanging a long, silent look.

Yet another conversation I wasn’t privy to. Why?

“What does it mean?” When nobody bothered to answer, I looked at Darien. “It’s just a string of ribbon, right?”

My question jerked Darien out of his daze before he pulled the pouch on his belt shut. “Oh, where is my head? I brought all these salted spells, but not a single pearl of *aerymel* for sparkle. No need to fetch it for me, Sebian. I’ll attach those in the morrow.”

Sebian waited until Darien was out the door before he said, “Who would dare?”

“Dare what?”

“Someone who is conspiring against me.” Malyr turned his attention to the hole above the window and pointed at it. “I want a builder to close every flight hole that leads to her chambers. If any Raven at court so much as approaches her, looks in her direction the wrong way, I want to know of it.”

I hooked a finger into the ribbon for comfort. “I don’t understand... What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Sebian ran his hand down my spine before it settled on the small of my back. “Just Ravens quarreling for power is all. Go take the dress off. Put something else on, and I’ll take you to Cici. She might know the Dance of Ten Feathers.”

With a curtsy that went mostly ignored by Malyr, I left through the door that led back into my personal room. What was that all about?

I disappeared behind the privacy screen, peeled myself out of the shadow gown before I hung it over a nearby stand, and shucked back into a plain, silken blue dress. Something clattered behind the screen. Tjema, perhaps, who’d silently adopted her position as my lady’s maid.

“The fire has nearly gone out,” I said, still tying the strings in my front as I stepped around the screen. “I didn’t know what to put on, the oak or the—” The blood chilled in my veins, freezing my feet to the ground. “What are you doing in here?”

“He is mine!” Lorn’s hand collided with my cheek, slapping me with such force, Malyr’s spanking seemed like child’s play as I stumbled sideways and crashed with my shoulder against a stone column. “Don’t you ever forget that!”

Within the blink of an eye, Sebian appeared behind Lorn, gripping her hair with one hand and pressing a shadowy dagger to her throat with the other. “Step away from her right now, or I swear, I’ll do what Malyr can’t bring himself to and put you out of your damn misery.”

Lorn only laughed, letting a cloud of shadows whirl around her before she slipped out of Sebian’s grip. She shot her arm out, caging my throat in the death-grip of her fingers. “You can have the castles, the silks, the titles, but you cannot have him.”

“I got it.” Malyr slowly stepped up beside Sebian. “Lorn. Let her go.”

Lorn set her glistening eyes on him. “You announced a *kjaer*?”

Malyr lifted both hands in an appeasing manner, slowly stepping between her and me. Protecting me? “I have to marry, or I will not win this war.”

An audible gulp hiccupped from Lorn’s throat, a sound too vulnerable for someone so vicious. “Why her?”

“If not her, then another.”

“Is that what you’re telling yourself?” she scoffed. “I saw how you looked at her. Ever since she arrived, you’ve been avoiding me, shutting me—”

“You need to stop,” Malyr growled. “I am a prince in need of an ally and an heir.”

“None of which I can give you because I’m nothing but a fucking Raven whore,” she bit out. “Barren ever since we escaped those dungeons together. Do you even remember?”

My skin tightened as much of Lorn’s hate for me partially explained. They had been kept together. Tortured together. Escaped together.

“I will never forget, which is the only reason why I haven’t sent you off to Hanneling Hold yet,” Malyr said. “But I need you to let her go now.”

“Does she know? Did you tell her what you did? What you are?” Lorn stabbed her finger around him and in my direction. “Little girl, do you know he was your father’s pretty Raven boy?”

“Shut your mouth!” Malyr took a strong step toward her. “I swear, Lorn, one more—”

“She can never give you what I do. Do you know that, little girl? The things he likes done to him?” Lorn shifted her balance to one side, looking around Malyr and straight at me. “Do you know that he likes his vent tickled? Do you know he’s a fucking fa—”

A blast of shadows flooded my room, dousing me in cold blackness. Wood moaned, metal clanked. I held my breath, blinking through the fading whirls of shadows, only to bring Lorn back into focus. The blow had thrown her against my

desk, from which she pushed herself up, staggering a step toward Malyr. There, she collapsed just as her head lolled back.

Malyr caught her, picked her up, and turned to look at Sebian. “Tell Asker to find him. Find him, and bring him to Deepmarsh.”

I watched as he carried her off, leaving me behind stunned, my entire body stiff when I turned and looked at Sebian. “Who is *him*?”

Sighing, Sebian sunk his head into his hand, pinching the bridge of his nose. “It’s... complicated.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX



Galantia

Present Day, Deepmarsh Castle, gardens

“Turn to your left,” Cici instructed, then released a sigh longer and deeper than the other that had come before. “Your other left, Galantia!”

I quickly spun the other way, only to bump my knee into a stone bench that couldn’t possibly have been there before, the white-shelled pathway crunching beneath my uncoordinated steps. “This makes no sense! There is no pattern to it that I can see. It’s just a wild tangle of holding hands, turning, and stepping in ten directions at once!”

“It’s agile, lithe, and graceful.” Sebian folded his arms beneath his head where he’d been nodding on the bench to my far left for the last hour, his black hair sprawled open and hanging shiny from the white marble. “Like us.”

Above him, on the naked branch of a young birch, his *anoa* flapped its wings as if in agreement. Sebian did that a lot,

sending the bird away for a while so he could rest his senses.

Cici brushed a red maple leaf off the train of her forest-green dress, taking Sebian in with an arched brow. “You are, as always, a picture of grace, Sebian.”

He snorted, eyes firmly shut as rays of sun poked through the clouds and into the castle gardens played across his tan face. “What I am is tired.”

Because he took his new assignment very seriously, keeping an eye on me at all times now that I had moved to large, opulent personal rooms. Even at night.

In my bed. Right beside me.

He’d practically moved in.

“Yes, I can only imagine how tired you must be. Rumor has it that you no longer sleep at night.” Cici’s green eyes found mine before she added in a cheeky mumble, “At least, not in his own chamber.”

My tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth as if to keep from saying something that would give away this strange... arrangement I’d tumbled into.

Cici, however, must have taken my silence for a confession, and merely grinned as she added quietly, “Look at you, shattering the hopes of all the poor, heartbroken ladies who pined after this one.”

My mouth turned dry. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Oh please, it was easy enough to figure out, but not for lack of discretion, if that calms your nerves,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper, likely indiscernible to Sebian without his *anoa*. “When the most notorious Raven stops frequenting the local bed chambers and turns those ladies knocking on his door away, one must wonder... What brought about this change in the biggest rake the court had even seen? What indeed, weeks after *your* arrival? I’ve never seen this Raven so... devoted.”

Devoted.

My belly fluttered for all the wrong reasons. That Cici knew should concern me, but instead, a comfortable warmth settled in my core like it did every night when Sebian pulled my head onto his chest, wedged my toes beneath his calf, and stroked his fingers through my hair.

We hadn't been intimate since the night Malyr had spanked me. Too much turmoil with the sudden turn of events, leaving me so exhausted, I basically fainted into bed at night. And yet, he seemed perfectly content with just holding me, that scoundrel whose reputation was crumbling. Why?

I looked up to his *anoa*. The beast ran its beak through its wild fluff of feathers, exposing a bald spot on its neck that made it look like a chicken that had barely escaped plucking. Not an impressive specimen by any stretch of the imagination. With Sebian's mate out of the picture, could his devotion ever grow into love? Was that a silly thing to long for? For him to want me, desire me, love me?

Yes, because I was fucking betrothed to his friend, which made my next swallow go down like dry oats. "It's not what you think."

"It's exactly what I think." She lifted her pointer and tapped the air three times, one for each syllable. "*Im-pres-sive*. No lady had managed to catch Prince Malyr's interest for marriage, just as none had managed to claim Sebian's undivided attention. Pray tell, however did you manage to snatch *both*? I might yet learn from you."

The only thing I could possibly teach was how to create a mess of epic proportions. I needed to fuck Malyr, and instead, he'd let Sebian fuck me. Add to that Lorn, who had attacked me over said betrothed I hadn't even fucked. An impressive mess indeed...

I thumbed the ribbon on my wrist, something that had quickly grown into a habit whenever I needed soothing. "I'll tell you if you teach me how to seduce Malyr before our wedding night. *Often*."

Cici's bosom stopped lifting for a fraction of time, no longer than it took her gaze to sweep down to my stomach,

and to the old oak at the center of the gardens before us from there. “Like I told you once, I’ve never managed myself into his chambers. You’re on your own.”

My ears pricked at her undertone, suddenly reserved where it had only ever been friendly. “You loathe me now, too, don’t you? Like all the other ladies. It’s not like I want to marry Malyr, you know. I have no choice.”

“Do you know why Father and I took residence at the Court of Ravens instead of staying at Hanneling Hold like my ancestors? Because Prince Malyr took it from my family and gave it to some newly-ascended Raven, Lord Baradur.” She took a deep breath, then looked straight at me. “None of us ladies have a choice; it comes with the title. If we did, we would spend our days sipping wine and gossiping about handsome stable boys that bring twice the fun but none of the miseries of marriage. Now do it again.” Cici pointed at her feet as she repeated the beginning sequence of steps with light-footed grace, making it clear this conversation was over. “You have to be on your toes for this one, Galantia, and quite literally.”

I followed along, wiping a thin layer of sweat from my forehead, which I had worked up even through winds promising winter’s first snow. “It’s the handholding and consecutive turning that always gets me since the steps change.”

“It’s the most important part,” she said. “When a raven courts another, they fly together and playfully touch their wings in flight. Here it comes. Hold my hand. Good, now turn and step to the ri—your other right, Galantia!”

One second, my legs twisted around each other, and the next, I landed with my ass on the ground. “I’ll make a fool of myself tomorrow, and that’s exactly what he wants!”

“Ah, but only until I steal the show with my graceful movements!” Sebian rose from the bench and walked over, yawning and stretching his arms overhead, then stopped before me with a wink. “You’re too stiff. Just... move your body any

way you want. Step backward. Sway your hips. Throw your hands up. Flap your arms. Be playful, sweetheart, like this.”

He grabbed my hand and pulled me up against his chest, humming a tune as he guided me into something barely resembling circles. His fingers intertwined with mine, lifting my arms up and down like wingbeats.

“Flap your wings. And one, two—” Releasing one hand, he spun me around my own axis, only to let go of me entirely in favor of waddling around me like a duck as he clucked and croaked, ripping a giggle from me. “Be silly, be ridiculous. That’s what courting is about. Having fun. Being playful. Taunting each other. Come on, show me!”

Memories invaded, reminding me of that day at the beach when I’d spotted seagulls fighting over a dead crab in the sand. How they’d flapped their wings, hopped about, and shook their heads until their feathers fluffed up, making themselves look bigger, more intimidating.

A happy memory, which made something tingle in my core. Before I knew it, it spread into my limbs. Grinning from ear to ear, I strode in a circle with the long-legged grace of a crane, flapping my arms and shaking my head until my hair whipped my heated cheeks.

Cici burst into a laugh, but she quickly regained her continuance and shook her head. “This is ridiculous...”

“Ridiculous, yes, but so much fun!” The gods knew I hadn’t had much of that lately. “Besides, nobody is looking.”

Until I turned, sensing all heat dissipate from my cheeks at the sight of Malyr. He leaned with his shoulder against a stone column wearing a fine tunic, looking all sorts of wrong.

Because he was *smiling*.

But only until our eyes met, which caused his smile to die at the sharpness of his narrowing lips, the joyful expression quickly replaced with his cold, somber stare.

Whatever energy I’d felt fizzled away. Something Sebian was unaware of, who waddled and clucked around me just as Captain Asker walked up beside Malyr. He exchanged a few

words with the prince, only for Malyr to nod and take his leave. Then, Asker walked toward us. “What are you doing?”

Sebian’s spine snapped straight at Asker’s rough baritone, bringing a dead-halt to his dancing. “Having fun?”

“When having fun interferes with more important matters, it is called being *irresponsible*.” Asker bore his stare into Sebian for another moment, the air between them strangely cool, then his attention drifted to me as he hinted a slight bow. “Perhaps you will allow me a few words as we walk the gardens? I shall very much like to try for a new vision.”

“Of course,” I said and followed beside him along the sea-shelled path that wove through small trees, evergreen shrubs, and moss-covered statues.

I glanced over my shoulder at Sebian, offering him a smile as he followed at a brief distance behind us. His features remained hard, telling me these two didn’t get along. Why not?

Asker gave me a side glance, his salt and pepper hair tightly braided along his scalp, his beard rather coarse. “You must find this strange that I am seeking you out now.”

“I wish you’d done it sooner.” It might have saved us a great deal of frustration and embarrassment. “What is it you need me to do to help you gain another vision? One a little more accurate than the last, if you please. Clearly, I haven’t shaped up to be quite the treasure you first assumed.”

“Not every treasure sparkles at first glance,” he said, lifting those bushy brows that seemed to coil in whichever direction they pleased. “My visions are a capricious thing, often triggered by something so utterly unassuming, we might as well exchange our opinion on how best to tie the laces on boots. My mate, Marla, has an easier time with hers.”

“She’s a fate as well?”

“Yes,” he said, slowly striding beside me around a stone fountain that prattled next to the old oak, the flowers around it wilting from the night frost. “But where I get glimpses of what lies in the future, she sees what has happened in the past.”

“I read about that.”

“Have you?” That rise on the corners of his mouth wasn’t exactly a smile, but I could tell he approved that I tried to learn all that had been kept from me... all I had ignored. “Many of our written accounts had been destroyed on the order of King Barat. Ignorance breeds lies, and lies breed wars. But this wedding? It will mark the beginning of a new era, a better era. There is power in this union. House Khysal and Brisden united in deed, Raven and human united in love.”

Hardly, but my wish for love in life seemed as foolish as my worldview. “Yes.”

Giving me another side-glance, Asker pouted, probably well aware that there would never be love between Malyr and me. “What other insights did the books provide?”

“I mostly read up on your magic,” I said. “I focused my reading on voids. Why are they so rare?”

“Because we killed them,” Sebian said from behind us. “Ravens are smart and all that...”

That slowed my steps as we passed a group of congregating females, snickers and mumbles now replaced with curtsies and false smiles as if I couldn’t tell how they all hated me for getting something no sane woman should want. “Killed them?”

“A tale from our darkest times, when our own kind slaughtered each other like animals.” Asker crossed his hands behind his back, letting the crushed seashells shift beneath the weight of his steps. “Equally dark was the Raven whose actions gave birth to said tale. A man with the gift of void, but so strong, not only was he capable of absorbing other’s gifts, but to steal them forever and adopt them as his own. We call this—”

“A thief,” I said. “The shadows killed him.”

“Yes. Yes, exactly. A sin, his son and heir called it, for one Raven to amass such power. He ordered to have every thief killed, so history would never repeat itself. Many echoes and voids were wrongfully accused of being a thief and were put to

death. Others went into hiding,” Asker said, and that certainly explained why they were so rare. “It was King Omaniël who tried to do away with the stigma voids had burdened for much too long, especially after his mate revealed as an echo. It’s a bloody stain not easily washed from the cloth of our wrongdoings. Marla has seen it all, told me about how voids have—” He stopped and turned to face me, his eyes narrowing. “Gallows on a cliff, with the sea stretched out behind it. A golden-haired woman’s body dangling from a noose, drowning beneath salty waves.”

A vision.

Ice-cold shivers climbed my arms, rising the fine hairs. I knew that place. Had seen it once or twice when I’d managed to lean out of my window far enough to glimpse the gallows behind Tidestone. The cliff there hung low, where the waters were the roughest, pounding against the rock with such force, waves shot up and coughed down on whoever twitched at the end of the rope.

“The gallows behind Tidestone, on the northwestern cliff.” I crossed my arms, rubbing them in search of warmth. “Whose body?”

“I cannot say.” He sighed and stared at the gray sky above us. “I must contemplate on this, and why the goddess wished me to see it.”

At that, he was gone, flapping upward and away to disappear behind the roof while my heart gained speed. Malyr and I had agreed that I would travel to Tidestone to free Marla in a little over a fortnight. Why was I getting the feeling that, perhaps, I hadn’t secured my future, but my death?

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN



Galantia

Present Day, Deepmarsh Castle, a meadow

The smell of roasted meats and sweet ale clung to the evening air, along with the oak smoke coming from the dozens of iron-forged fire baskets that illuminated the *kjaer*. It took place on a meadow behind the castle, and right beside a creek that slowly trickled into the surrounding marsh.

I cast my gaze over the occupied benches where I sat beside the Raven prince at our richly decked and decorated table, eyes nervously jumping from one black shroud to the next. Captain Asker. Tjema, who danced with another young Raven girl. Darien. Where was Lorn? Killing puppies? Digging my grave?

“No more for me.” To my other side, Sebian placed his palm over his empty cup until the girl with the wine carafe had passed, the quail before him eaten down to its tiny ribs, the

vegetables around it untouched. A bird he might be at times, but his appetite was all man.

Malyr turned his head ever so slowly, staring at Sebian with furrows between his brows. “And here I thought I would certainly find you sleeping in the stables come morning.”

“Why would I? It’s much warmer between your wife’s legs,” Sebian murmured, flashing Malyr a lopsided smirk. “Besides, I have to keep a true aim. Remember? Your jilted lover is seething shadows somewhere nearby.”

“She ought to be plenty distracted for the night,” Malyr said with a shrug, attention drifting to the shadowy edge of the festivities.

I followed his line of sight.

And I saw her.

Dressed in tight black breeches and an even tighter corset that brought out her shapely figure, Lorn gesticulated wildly to a man in front of her and—oh gods, did she just punch him?

I straightened in my chair, craning my neck to watch her disappear into the crowd before my gaze returned to the man. He raked a hand through his short black hair, grabbing it and yanking it in a display of pure desperation.

I leaned over the armrest of my chair toward Sebian, jutting my chin in the man’s direction. “Who is he?”

“Lord Aros of House Batana,” Sebian said. “He’s Lorn’s fated mate.”

Him.

My molars ground together.

Somehow, the idea of Lorn having a fated mate had not once crossed my mind, especially not with her fixation on Malyr. Why had the Raven prince have him brought here? To distract her? To get her to bond? To... rid himself of her?

“Why aren’t they bonded?” I asked.

“I’d like to say because he’s smart, but I’m afraid it’s more tragic than that.” Sebian shook his head. “She keeps rejecting

him.”

I chewed on that for a moment as a new concern presented itself. What if Malyr came across his fated mate after our wedding? Where would that leave me?

Ugh, now I was getting ahead of myself. First, I needed to ensure that said wedding actually took place. Presume the *kjaer* was a start...

“Enough with the merrymaking!” A man slammed his metal tankard on the table before he shouted from a foam-covered beard, “Court the pale-haired thing!”

“Yes, court her!” Sebian chuckled—his sides freshly-shorn for the occasion, the rest of his hair loosely tied together—and gave me a wink. “Or I might just do it.”

Again that flutter in my belly, whirling around in my chest with concerning intensity. What was he feeling for me? What was I starting to feel for him?

I feared the potential answers.

“You would court my betrothed during a *kjaer* I paid for? That’s bold, even for you.” Malyr took a swallow of his wine, then gave a pat on his lap. “Come to me, little white dove.”

The familiar gesture rose the fine hairs along my limbs as if my skin were erecting a shield. He would unleash his malice on me tonight, I felt it in that itchy scar on my breastbone.

When I slipped off my chair, Malyr slung one arm around my belly and secured me on his lap before he said, “I am looking forward to dancing with you.”

There we had it, one degradation out of who knew how many awaited. “Tell me, Malyr, what gives you more pleasure? Embarrassing me in front of everyone, or setting me up so I will do it all on my own?”

He didn’t even bother to subdue his bemused snort before he lowered his cup to the table. “What do my people say?” he shouted. “What shall I gift my female?”

“Seashells! Glass shards!” a cacophony of voices yelled, shrieked, and cheered in a turmoil of suggestions. “Coins!

Shiny pebbles! Nails!”

I frowned. “Nails?”

“Our *anoas* have the habit of growing quite obsessed with gathering smooth, shiny, or... otherwise beautiful objects. Males often gift them to a female in courtship.” He grabbed a small package of a folded leaf wrapped with twine where it had been sitting on our table since the start of the feast. “This is my gift to you.”

I took the package, untied the twine, and carefully unwrapped it, only for something black and tangly to slip into my palm. “What... what is this?”

“A bracelet. The chain of *aerymel*, a local artisan crafted for me, but the trinkets I chose and gathered myself.” He lifted the bracelet from my palm, letting wood and bone clank against metal. “Show me your wrist. No, the other one.”

I reached my other wrist to him, the one with the ribbon on it, squinting at the dull, flat discs, some of them elongated. “Are those... buttons?”

“Buttons?” Sebian asked, his brows drawing together in a doubting expression.

“Better than chestnuts, no?” When the closure snapped shut, Malyr cupped my cheek. “*Yeh ash valtem skalde ya.*”

Something deep at my core reveled at his words, or perhaps it was their foreign cadence flaring my curiosity. “What does it mean?”

“I will forever treasure you,” he said. “One of many oaths traditionally spoken during a *kjaer*.”

“Show everyone that you accepted his gift,” Sebian said. “Lift up your arm, sweetheart. Flaunt it.”

I lifted my arm higher, giving the air a little sweep to let the buttons *clink* and *clank* before the clapping crowd as I looked at Malyr. “Thank you.”

Nodding, he grabbed a nearby knife with one hand and clasped my wrist with the other. The moment the cool metal touched my skin, I flinched, but he merely let the blade cut

through the blue silk ribbon, letting it fall to drown between carrots and peas in the pot of soup before us.

An unreasonable sense of loss wormed through my belly. I couldn't say why, but I'd grown quite attached to that ribbon. And perhaps I would have remarked on its loss, wasn't it for how the memory of words echoed in my head.

Males often gift beautiful objects to a female in courtship, they said. Nothing but Ravens quarreling for power.

Numbness crept up along my neck and spread across my cheeks. Gods be merciful, Malyr's reaction when he'd found the ribbon on me made so much more sense now! The raven the night of the storm? It hadn't attacked me.

It had *courted* me!

My gaze found Malyr's. "Do you have traitors or Raven lords with too much ambition at court?"

"It wouldn't be a true court if I hadn't, no?" he asked. "The extinction of a royal house is usually followed by the rise of another. Your father's army could have ensured that."

It might also have ensured me other options, but that was no longer something to build on. Malyr could have cut off the ribbon the day of the dress fitting. Instead, he'd waited until tonight.

A public warning for my secret suitor.

I ran a finger over the dangling buttons, hoping to find a sense of calm in their clanks, but none came. "Who is he?"

"This must be the first time your innocence pleases me." He leaned into me, letting his lips press against my temple where they framed a dark whisper. "If I ever find out who dared to court you, little dove, I shall cut off his balls and feed them to my ravens. And you will watch."

My breath hitched at his possessive tone, the warning that growled through his voice. He sounded angry. Enraged.

Jealous?

“Groom your female, my prince,” a woman shouted. “Or by the goddess, you’ll find yourself roosting alone tonight.”

“Quite so,” Malyr said over giggles and bellows of the crowd before he looked at me. “Have you ever watched how birds court in the wild?”

“I can’t say that I have...”

“The male will inch along a branch beneath the spring sun, hoping to get closer to the female without her chasing him off.” With one hand firmly situated on my hip, Malyr slowly lifted the other to my head. “If he succeeds, he will run his beak through her feathers...” his nails parted my open hair, running along my scalp in one long sweep that sent languid warmth down my spine, “like so.”

My shoulder blades pulled together. My bosom rose. I all but shuddered in overwhelming delight when his rhythmic strokes continued to comb through my ends, giving little tug-tug-tugs on my scalp. It was hypnotizing, but not quite so much to *not* make me see what was going on here. This was nothing but him further discouraging my suitor by feigning affection. His tender touch meant nothing.

But I would still enjoy it.

Just once, now that I could.

Nails ran down along my spine. A palm stroked up along my waist. Knuckles ghosted over the base of my neck. A gentle caress here, a finger twirling around a stray strand there. Gods have mercy, I hadn’t thought the man capable of feigning quite so much tenderness.

“Ravens groom and preen each other for hours,” Malyr continued, twirling my hair around his arm before he lay it over my shoulder, letting cool air lick at my exposed neck.

Fingers drew tight circles up along one side of my spine, making my mind go numb with how they kneaded sore muscles, making my head loll on my shoulders. Oh gods, not allowing myself to succumb to my wits with his false affection was torture. Wonderful, sublime torture.

“For that reason, long open hair is a sign of being untethered, unbonded,” he crooned. “Tell me, my betrothed, will you braid my hair?”

I fought my body’s urge to slump against his. “Certainly not before I can call you my husband.”

“Mmm, such doubt in those words.” He gingerly tucked a falling strand behind my ear before he whispered, “*Yeh ash valtem sorg fer ’ya.*” Lips brushed against the shell of my ear. “I will forever care for you.”

A quiver ran through me at the sound of those words, that unadulterated love I’d longed for all my life. For a moment, no more than a few breaths, I allowed myself to soak in them. Pretend they were neither recited tradition nor lie. How wonderful would that be?

“No suitor could possibly convince a female to bond with him without feeding her first.”

Malyr caressed that shield of fine hairs along my nape by merely hovering his finger over my skin, teasing my nerve endings. Then he reached into an ocean of bowls that carried all sorts of fruits in front of us on the table, only to bring a blackberry, where it sat pinched between his thumb and pointer. He brought the berry to his mouth and clasped it between his lips. Then, he angled his head just so and lifted his chin. *Offering.*

Sebian leaned into me, running a finger down my thigh behind the privacy of the tablecloth before he whispered, “Take it from his mouth, sweetheart.”

Pulse quickening, I stared at those gorgeous lips that never smiled—the same ones Malyr had promised I would never get close to. But they beckoned me now, rousing fear and delight in equal measures.

When I shifted forward, his mouth lowered. Mine turned to seek his, parting in search of the black, plump fruit. Our faces drifted together, our breaths mingled.

I tightened my lips around the blackberry, loving the ripe sweetness as its flesh burst and seasoned the tip of my tongue.

My eyes fluttered shut. For a second, the fraction of a shared breath, our lips connected. They sought and shifted in an almost-kiss, stirring a craving in me that penetrated deep into my core.

I didn't realize I'd reached my hand around his neck until my fingers glided into his hair, letting a moan vibrate at the pummel of Malyr's exhale. I opened my eyes, only to find his closed.

Until people clapped.

Malyr ripped his eyes open. We both jerked back just as the berry tumbled onto my tongue and down my throat from there. Seconds, minutes, maybe eternities had passed as we stared at each other, unblinking, unmoving, unsaying. This hadn't felt like feigned affection.

Hadn't felt like feigned affection at all...

"Enough with the feeding!" Asker shouted, the captain not at all his stoic self, but red-cheeked and harboring too many empty tankards in front of him at the table. "Speak your promise!"

Taking a deep breath, Malyr brought his thumb to his mouth, wiping up a dark red drop from his bottom lip before he looked at me. "*Yeh ash valtem haron fer 'ya*. I will forever provide for you."

My lungs stopped mid-inhale, giving room for his words to resonate as the edges of my vision speckled. Why did he sound as if he meant it?

Because I was losing my wits was why.

Hearing things that weren't truly there.

Malyr took my hand right then and rose, letting me slip off his lap before he guided me around our table and to the grassy area. "Are you ready for our dance?"

Oh gods... the dance. Between the grooming and the almost-kiss, I'd forgotten all about it... including all the damn steps!

I sensed a fine mist of sweat settle on my forehead in preparation for impending disaster. “You know full-well I’m not.”

“Yes, I know,” he said and looked over at the musicians.

At his gesture, the lutes and harps turned as still as the air before a storm, only to flare up again in a different tune. A *familiar* tune. One that whirled through my chest, stirring up a tangle of shock.

This was *not* a Raven dance.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-EIGHT



Galantia

Present Day, Deepmarsh Castle, a meadow

My heart pounded in my throat to the lively rhythm of a song I'd heard a hundred times—during celebrations in Tidestone's great hall, betrothal feasts in the courtyard, and my dancing lessons with Risa. But... but how could this be?

My stomach dropped alongside the deep hum of the lutes as I looked up at Malyr. "This is not the Dance of Ten Feathers."

He stepped closer until our bodies touched. "No, it is not."

Malyr took my right hand and placed it on his hard chest. The other, he intertwined with his before lifting our arms into position. His other arm settled across the small of my back.

"Fly with me," Malyr said and, with a spirited step to the left, guided me into our dance.

My feet followed along easily, finding their way into a pattern I knew by heart, no matter how confusion tangled through me. There was no stumbling embarrassment, no floundering disgrace. Only perfect circles as we turned and turned, the sliver of space between us our axis.

I blinked up at Malyr, dumbfounded, his black long strands shifting with the breeze of our motion. “You were taught this Dranadian dance?”

“As a boy,” he said. “My mother taught it to me. We’ll never know, she used to say, when we might find ourselves dancing with humans again. And so, she had me practice many a night.”

Evident in the way his body framed mine, his arms perfectly angled, his feet gracefully swift. It was magical, the way our bodies moved together with such ease, a Raven and a human dancing beneath stars that no war could ever extinguish. Our surroundings blurred away as we revolved around each other on a carpet of late autumn grass, bringing focus to the noble straightness of his spine, the fine features of his aristocratic face, the regal certainty with which he carried himself.

And then I saw it.

The prince beneath the shadows.

A boy who had been taught the dances of the great halls, the languages of the lands, and the movements of deadly swords. Nothing but a glimpse, a precious shimmer in the black abyss of his wicked soul.

He was beautiful.

I shifted my fingers on his chest, not knowing if the ridges I sensed were the silver embroidery on his tailored vest or the rise of the scars that lay beneath. “I fully expected this to be yet another laugh at the cost of my pride. Expected you to be your cruel, cold-hearted self with me tonight.”

“You are my betrothed, my wife before long, the future queen of Dranada and Vhaerya. Before the eyes of the kingdom, I will forever show you the honor and respect that is

due.” His fingers slid up along my spine, only to cup the back of my head, gently pressing until the side of my face sunk against his chest. Lips brushed over my temple, nuzzling me before they whispered, “But make no mistake, little white dove... I have every intention of being my cruel, cold-hearted self with you in the privacy of our chambers.”

His certainty over our wedding should have pleased me, but I couldn’t deny that pressure beneath my ribs, as if the act of kindness hiding in this dance, as unexpected as it had come, suddenly wasn’t enough. “Do you think you will ever grow weary of it...? Of hating me?”

He thumbed the back of my head, letting his fingers toy with my tresses. “My hate for you was placed into my cradle along with my name. As weary as we might grow of our names, they will follow us into the grave, will they not?”

So he intended to hate me until his death. Understood.

“A Khysal and a Brisden,” I murmured. “A union forever thwarted by a malign star.”

Gentle fingertips once more combed over my scalp, each caressing stroke urging my head deeper into his chest. There it rested, in the crook between his pectorals, one ear close to the elevated beat of his heart, the other exposed to his whisper.

“Fated only to end in emotional tragedy.” His fingers stalled in my hair, and I only now noticed the slight tremble they carried. “As it should. As it *ought* to. Anything other than that, Galantia, would be too great a betrayal to my family, no matter my personal... affliction.”

His personal affliction.

What did that mean?

I let the silence linger between us, my heart pounding as I considered the meaning of his words. Was it possible he didn’t despise me as much as he claimed? That, beneath the layer of hatred and animosity borne of our house’s blood feud, there lay something else? Had I possibly misjudged his honor for hate? His loyalty for loathing?

My head shifted and my gaze rose to meet his, even as the weight of memories burdened my thoughts. The way he must have observed how I preferred my hair loose. That moment when he'd watched me dance with a smile on his face. How he'd closed his eyes during our almost-kiss. This very dance, and how he'd pulled my face to rest against his chest.

I held his pensive stare. "And if I were not a Brisden?"

He stilled, his breath hitching in his throat as his feet wavered to a halt. His eyes, usually so cold and guarded, seemed to glisten, betraying an unspoken vulnerability. Instead of answering, he looked away, and the muscles in his jaws tensed.

"*Yeh ash valtem flig ak'ya,*" he said quickly, releasing his hold of me just as fast as he mumbled, "I will forever fly with you."

His reaction left me reeling, the implications of what he'd said—and refused to say—tugging at the edges of my heart. Was there truly something beneath his shadows, something warmer, brighter, hiding inside that shimmer I'd seen earlier?

My chest tightened, a tidal wave of emotions crashing down on everything I'd believed to be true. My thoughts were drowning beneath a surge of memories, one rippling tide for each time I'd felt his hands on me tonight. Hands that had caressed, stroked, and petted.

But also hands that had hurt me.

Hands that *would* hurt me again.

Anger gnawed at my scars, a vicious reminder of the countless times Malyr's actions had left me bruised and broken. The gulf between what I yearned to believe and what I had come to expect from him seemed impossibly vast, and I couldn't shake the feeling that I was teetering on the edge of a cliff, one misstep away from a fall that would shatter me beyond repair. And wasn't that what he wanted?

"Excuse me," I muttered, barely audible even to my own ears. "I need a moment to myself."

I turned away from Malyr and stomped off, the confusion propelling me away from the festivities and into the chilled embrace of the night. Away. I needed to get away from this. From *him*.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-NINE



Galantia

Present Day, Deepmarsh Castle, a meadow

The more distance I gained to the fading music, the thicker the air grew with crisp moisture, wood rot, and stagnant water. My surroundings darkened into nothing but shadowy outlines of grass bushels, naked shrubs, and the occasional stunted tree, my only guidance the glistening puddles that webbed across the area beneath the moonlight. Gods, why was my chest aching so?

Behind me, wingbeats flapped, passing me in a whirl before murky blackness expanded like ink drops in front of my eyes. Unable to stop in time, I stumbled into the earthy scent of black soil and pine needles, only to crash against a chest.

“A deathweaver and a vision potentially want you dead, and you thought it’s a good idea to take a moonlight stroll through the wetlands?” The shine of stars sparkled in Sebian’s

eyes as he looked over my shoulder and threw his hands up. “What did you do now that has her storming away like this?”

Malyr’s chuckle scraped along the side of my neck, making it clear he’d followed right behind. “My word in the goddess’ ears, I was on my *best* behavior.”

Oh, that bastard...

I spun around to face him.

“Your best behavior is half the blasted issue!” Because I didn’t know what to make of it. It was confusing, uncharted land. Terrifying! “I’d take your usual insufferable self over it any day.”

“Ah, why not just say so?” His hand collared my throat with lightning speed, fingers flexing along my tendon, not truly choking me but letting me know he could. That he *wanted* to. “There I was, courting you, speaking promises in our old tongue, not knowing if I am about to avenge my family or betray the last of them, only for you to abandon me at our *kjaer*. In front of the entire assembled damn court, I might add!” He’d shouted that. “Including whoever dared to court... what... is... *mine*.”

That, he’d growled.

“What Malyr is trying to say, sweetheart, is that you weren’t being a good girl for us just now.” Warmth blanketed my back as Sebian stepped closer, sending a shudder along my limbs. “And what do bad girls get?”

“Punished,” Malyr rasped by my ear before he bit my jaw, pinching skin and bone between his teeth until it stung. “Hold her still.”

When Sebian hooked his arms around mine, pinning my back against his chest, my heart stumbled into racing. “Don’t you dare!”

Malyr ignored my writhing and chuckled at each kick I managed to land at his sides, letting himself sink to his knees before me. Determined hands gathered up my skirts until the ruffles bunched around my hips. The chill of winter bit at my

thighs, quickly replaced by wet warmth as Malyr slanted his mouth over my cunt.

“Stop,” I shouted—no, *moaned*—my knees going wobbly at the hot twirl of a tongue around my clit. “You can’t do this. I’m... I’m...”

Angry!

How dare he make me question, make me doubt, make me... *feel*? Feel how his tongue dipped into the valley between my lower lips, only to lap upward over my clit with broad strokes, forcing a gasp from my heaving chest.

“I’ve seen him do many things to many women, but never that.” Sebian glided his hand upward, moulding it around my breast, where he kneaded the heavy flesh before he hooked his thumb into the low neckline. He tugged the shadowcloth down, first letting one, then the other breast spill into the cool night. “How about you be a good girl now and come against his mouth, hmm? Let him have a taste of your delicious honey?”

“Pinch her nipple. *Hard*,” Malyr rasped between little flicks of his tongue that drummed my clit into a throbbing, swollen pebble. “Don’t let go until she fucking comes.”

Two fingers clasped my nipple, sending a hot sting flaring across the flesh of my breast. They tugged, twisted, and rolled, unleashing delirium on my senses. The delicious torture doubled when his other hand gripped my second nipple.

“Is that what gets you off? Pain?” Sebian pinched harder. The ache grew, making me writhe and pant. “You want it to go away, hmm? All you gotta do is come for us, sweetheart.”

The lack of oxygen dizzied my mind and mellowed the pain into pure, overwhelming pleasure, amplified by the way Malyr gripped my thighs. He pushed his face deeper until my feet stepped wider apart, suckling my labia into his mouth, wreaking havoc on my senses. Heat first simmered, then swelled, until it finally burst, sending a wave of bliss rippling across my entire body.

“Fuck...” Sebian pressed his erection against my ass in a suggestive roll of his hips. “Did you hear that, Malyr? How nicely she came for us?”

My head still spun when Malyr suddenly rose. He gripped my hair, ripped me away from Sebian, spun me around, then pressed down on my head, forcing me to my knees.

“Get down!” Malyr barked as his hand slipped to my neck, pushing my torso forward until my cheek settled on the dry, rough grass. “Stay like this. Don’t move.”

Behind me, leather snapped to the distinct *clank* of a belt buckle opening. He was going to rut me like an animal, and that realization made my heart sink. Why? Wasn’t that what I’d wanted?

Yes, but that was before...

Before I’d allowed him to twist my head with his touch, his lips, that damned dance. And how stupid was that? I needed his child. But at the very least, I needed a reminder of his hate, his disdain, his loathing.

“Show me your worst, Malyr,” I snapped. “Make it hurt.”

His palm collided with my wet cunt, letting a slap echo into the night, right along with my yelp. “I just might.”

“The fuck you will.” Sebian’s lips brushed over my temple, making me aware of how he’d knelt beside me, one hand stroking my cheek, the other gliding along my waist. “I won’t let him hurt you, sweetheart. At least not too much.” His shoulder shifted as he reached around me, fingers swirling through the mess between my legs. Then Sebian brought it to his mouth, grinning at the generous glisten that clung to his knuckles. “Better have a taste of you before he adds his own to it.”

Malyr’s fingers dug into my hips, tugging, lifting my ass higher. His blunt crown probed my entrance, teasing it, lubricating itself on my wet lust. Until it pushed forward, straining—

“She’s fertile,” Sebian said, making me lift my head to look at him as he ran his tongue up along his finger. “So

fucking ripe, it has my mouth watering at her sweetness.”

What.

Malyr’s hips locked in place at the sound of his frustrated groan. “Tell me you’re jesting.”

“We have to be careful.” Sebian stroked his fingertip over my lips, painting them with my arousal. “Or there’ll be a little prince or princess in the cradle ten months from now, and we can both scratch our heads while we try to puzzle out whose child it is.”

He. Could. Taste. It.

My pulse stalled in shock, only to return faster in pure excitement. Thank their goddess for handsome and charming pathfinders. This was my chance!

I glanced back at Malyr, who was barring his teeth as if biting back a hundred curses. His chest heaved faster the tighter he curled his stiff fingers into the flesh of my hips, as if he couldn’t decide if he should pull me onto his cock or shove me into the grass.

Before he would decide on the latter, I pushed myself back. I gyrated my hips, ignoring the stretching demand of his crown, focusing instead on the way Malyr groaned once more, on how his hips jerked in little pulsations.

That was promising.

Sebian chuckled. “She’s eager tonight.”

“Not so much eager as she is cunning.” *Slap.* Red, hot heat rippled across my rear at Malyr’s swat, all pressure disappearing around my entrance. “My future wife doesn’t trust me, you see. She thinks I will break our betrothal the moment she gives us Marla. What better way to secure her success than have my heir in her belly?”

Heat itched along my earlobes. Oh, for fuck’s sake, could I ever be a step ahead of him?

“Is that true, sweetheart? You want a baby?” Sebian crooned, thumbing my cheek with one hand while he palmed

his crotch with the other. “You want Malyr to load you up with his cum? Put his child in your belly, hmm?”

The only sound I managed to produce was a huff.

“What did I tell you the day you woke, hmm?” Malyr’s weight pressed down on my back as he hunched over me, fisting my hair and pulling my head back until his breath brushed along my ear. “I may just spill my seed where it cannot grow, and take you...” A finger swiped up along my drenched cunt, slathering the wetness across my puckered hole, circling, drumming, dipping in. “Right here.”

I sucked in a gasp and clenched my ass. “No, please.”

“Shh,” Sebian hushed, cupping my chin and turning my head until my gaze met his. “Relax. The more you fight it, the more it’ll hurt.”

“Fight it, little dove.” Malyr pressed his crown against my darkest hole, his whisper hot against the side of my head. “Isn’t that what you asked for? For me to hurt you? To show you my worst?” He pushed his hips forward, forcing his cock past the searing, stinging muscle and into me to the sound of his drawn-out groan. “Little white dove, you wouldn’t survive my worst.”

I sucked in little gulps of air, panting through the aching pressure as he pushed deeper. “Try me!”

He stroked two fingers into my mouth and hooked them behind my bottom molars, pulling my head back by it just as he gave another sharp thrust that made me yelp. “There we go. Sing for me, pretty bird.”

“You two are unbelievable...” Sebian pressed his forehead against mine and stroked his fingertips into my hair. “Sweetheart, listen to me, because his fucking eyes just turned pitch-black. Are you listening, hm?”

My lips quivered over another gasp. “Yes.”

“This is what you’re going to do.” Another gentle caress of his fingers before he whispered, “You’re going to shut that fucking provocative mouth of yours and take Malyr’s cock up

your ass like a good girl, or I swear I'm going to stuff it with my cock."

My hackles rose.

I hissed at him around Malyr's fingers. Which immediately earned me a little slap from them before they slipped from my cheek to my throat, letting ice-cold, shadowy tendrils whip at my jaw, my chin, bottom lip.

Sebian smirked. "Begging for attention again, are we?"

When he opened his breeches, took his cock out, and knelt before me, Malyr yanked on my throat until my outstretched arms braced the ground. "Show Sebian what I taught you."

The moment my lips parted to spew an insult, Malyr slapped my ass, which dislodged another yelp from my lungs. But it never made it past my throat.

Because Sebian parted my lips with his cock, thrusting into my mouth until he hit the back of my throat. "Swallow."

I gagged, trying to rear back, but his hand tightened in my hair allowed no retreat. In reflex, my throat tightened around his cockhead, and I swallowed.

"Fuck, that's it, sweet thing, now you're being so good for us," Sebian crooned and retreated, only for his hand to guide my head into a bobbing motion. Malyr's hips adopted the rhythm, thrusting each time my lips ran down Sebian's thick length. "And what do good girls get?"

At Malyr's next thrust, he seated himself fully inside me, letting his moan waver into a breathed, "My shadows."

Ringlets of cold slithered down my ass, bringing such wonderful relief to my heated skin. They stretched between my legs, swirling around my cunt, diving between my labia, only to send the thinnest fingerlings to stroke my clit.

I moaned at the stretching demand of Malyr's girth and those waves of tingles that swarmed around my sensitive little organ. They spread to my lower belly from there, only to ripple across my body in a lovely shudder—one that eased the tension from my muscles.

The sting of Malyr's thrusts faded into nothing but intense heat and unexpected pleasure. Arousal surged, and I sucked Sebian's cock hard, harder, humming in delight at the way Malyr filled me and how his shadows caressed where I was aching for release.

"Twirl your tongue around his crown," Malyr rasped, fucking into me with more vigor. "Make him spill in your mouth, but don't you dare swallow it, little dove."

I fed myself more of Sebian's cock, taking him all the way to my throat before I pulled back to run my tongue around the wide flare of his crown. When the first pearl of his seed salted my tongue, I tightened my lips, running them up along his shaft to draw out more of it.

"She sure wants our cum tonight," Sebian groaned, those fingers he kept in my hair shaky, his legs quivering in the darkness. He threw his head back, letting his other hand slip beneath his shirt to caress the shifting muscles on his stomach, his chest, his nipples. "Fuck, sweetheart, I'm not going to last. Do you want it, hmm? Do you want my cum?"

"Yes, she does," Malyr growled behind me, thrusting into me more urgently, sending hot, taunting spasms through me. "She's being such a nice slut for our cum tonight." When something between a groan and a whimper spilled from Sebian's mouth, Malyr lost his rhythm, his thrusts frantic, desperate. "Do. Not. Swallow."

Warm, salty ropes splashed against my gums, my tongue, the back of my throat just as Malyr pulled out of me. He grunted behind me, a deeply masculine, guttural sound. Wet warmth hit my buttocks, my tailbone, my darkest hole, running thick and heavy down along my cunt.

Malyr grabbed my hair and, with one tug, pulled me back against his chest, making me splutter before I sealed Sebian's seed behind my clenched lips. "Give it to him."

Before I managed to look over my shoulder back at where Malyr knelt behind me, his knees framing my thighs, Sebian leaned forward and gave a tap at his bottom lip. "Let it drip from your mouth into mine, sweetheart. Come on."

Overwhelmed and confused, I stared at Sebian's plump, kissable lips for I didn't know how long. Until I lowered mine into the frame of his, pouting them, letting his seed dribble out of my mouth and into his.

My lips hadn't left Sebian's yet when Malyr reached around my belly and yanked me back to sit in the frame of his thighs. "Put it where she wanted it."

With a sealed smirk, Sebian leaned over, maneuvering himself onto all fours. A warm drop landed in my curls between my legs, then another. Like that, he let his seed dribble down along my cunt.

"Can you feel what a mess we've made between your legs? How fucking drenched your cunt is with our cum?" Malyr whispered by my ear, nipping a path down along my jawline as he slid his hand between my legs. Fingers swiped over the seed he'd left there, bringing it up toward my clit. There it mixed with Sebian's as his fingers rubbed and circled, working the throbbing pebble into sheer, agonizing need. "Come for us, Galantia."

Breathing turned to panting and my muscles contracted until a wave of trembling pressure ripped me asunder, making me cry out in bliss and defeat alike.

"*Yeh ash valtem lailla ok darrida,*" Malyr whispered. "I will forever protect our young. And I would never, *ever* let my unborn child get anywhere near your father."

CHAPTER
THIRTY



Galantia

Present Day, beneath the stars

Sebian took care of me.

He carried my exhausted body to the prattling creek, where he washed their seed from between my shaky legs, then righted my dress. When I shivered in the chill of the north winds, he gave me his shirt. Then he carried me to a crooked oak, flattened the bushels of dry grass beneath it with several stomps of his boots, and lowered me into its soft center.

“It’s a shame that it’s too cold for you to sleep beneath the stars, but we can still stay a while,” he said and laid beside me, pulling me tightly against him before he wedged my toes beneath his calf to keep them warm. “This is how you like it, sweetheart, isn’t it?”

Nodding, with my head resting on his chest, I inhaled the scent of moss and musk that clung to his skin. So familiar, so comforting. I ran my fingers over the curve of his shoulder and

down his marred arm; my muscles tired, my mind foggy. Yes, this was how I liked it, soft and gentle and safe.

Yet my gaze drifted into the darkness before me, and to the even darker shadow within, its outline about as clear as my head. Malyr sat nearby, yet somehow far away, likely within earshot, though showing no inclination to contribute anything but silence. As if he hadn't, only moments ago, held me in place with rough hands and fucked me with domineering strokes.

And I'd liked that, too.

Something I'd accepted, the way he tormented my body into bliss, tortured my soul into surrender. But that twinge beneath my ribs at the distance between us? That longing for his strong body to frame my other side? That was new.

New and terrifying.

And confusing, because... how could I press myself against Sebian like this, soaking up his warmth, his care, the sense of protection he provided? And in the same moment, long for the closeness of the man who insisted on hating me? How could I enjoy them both, each in a different way? How could I long for them both?

My throat tightened.

How could they allow it?

The ruffle of feathers pulled me out of my internal ramblings. Sebian's *anoa* shaped out of shadows and darkness beside his arm, lifting a wing, preening beneath it before he flattened it to his body. His eyes caught on my bracelet, on those buttons that *clanked* as I caressed Sebian's arm.

There was no fear when I reached for the bird, running a finger down along its throat, smiling at the way he closed his eyes and leaned into the touch. "Do you do this often? You and Malyr? Share women the way you're doing with me?"

Sebian looked down at me, frown lines deepening between his brows for a moment before they faded to the sensation of his arm clasping me tighter against him. "It happened on a few occasions. Granted, none of them were his selected wife..."

A long exhale left my lungs. “This is so strange.”

“This is amazing. Strokes my ego, for sure. I never had a queen’s lips wrapped around my cock, sucking me off so nicely. And here my father thought I’d never make anything out of myself.” When I jerked my knee against his thigh, a deep chuckle vibrated in his chest, jolting my head around. “You’re looking at this through the eyes of a human, Galantia, but we are Ravens. No matter how human we might look to you right now, we are not... not fully. Deep down in our cores, in our souls, we are animals. And what did Malyr tell you earlier, hmm? Under the spring sun, the male will...”

“Inch toward the female along a branch.”

“Yeah, well, what he failed to mention was that the fucking branch was about to snap because there were about a dozen other males trying to do the same. They puff up their feathers, spread their wings, and strut their chests, trying to convince the female to bond with them.” He stroked a strand from my cheek, eyes dipping to my lips before they found mine again. “The female chooses, sweetheart... not the other way around.”

I frowned at that. “Birds in nature. Fate chooses for your kind.”

“Few of us can rely on fate anymore, giving us no other choice but to fall back on our most animalistic instincts.” He nuzzled his nose at my hairline and down along my temple. “Marriage is a human concept, sweet thing—a strong political tool for your titled lot. Malyr knows this. But as much as Malyr might be a prince, first and foremost, he’s a Raven. Who is he to keep you from me? And who am I to keep you from him?”

“What about my secret suitor? Malyr is clearly trying to keep me from *him*.”

“Because he has political ambitions.”

“What about your ambitions?”

“None. If you don’t believe me, ask Asker. He’ll confirm it.” That strange hardness settled in his jaws again. “It’s simply

not in our nature to make that sort of decision for you, sweetheart.”

“You’ve robbed me of just about any decision.”

“Have we?” The question breathed down along my cheekbone. “Politics. Fucking confusing.” His mouth lingered at the corner of mine. “Or maybe you’re just too much of a temptation for both of us.”

The vibration of his voice quivered over my lips while the moisture of his breath lapped at them, sending a rush of blood into vessels that seemed to pound in my bottom lip. His eyes slipped to my lips in the inch of space between our faces. His tremulous body pressed deeper into mine. Our mouths shifted, floating closer, shyly seeking the other.

Kiss me, Sebian!

Something clacked in the nearby bushes, like a hollow *tock*. With frantic flutters and terrified trills, a flock of small birds fled from the shrubs. They slunk around branches and through fronds, only to lift off toward the big, bright moon.

Sebian’s lips drifted away from mine on his trembling exhale. “There might just be a fox nearby.”

And I wanted its pelt around my shoulders for how it had cost me this kiss...

Frustrated, I turned my head away from the ruins of this moment and looked after the flock of birds. “When I played at the beach as a child, there was that one white seagull that used to circle the bay behind Tidestone often. I loved watching how its wings wobbled in the breeze. How it dove down, only to come back up on an easier drift.”

“If that impressed you, then I promise I’ll take you to the most western coast on sun’s day. Many of the youths mingle there after prayers at the shrine, jumping off the cliffs, testing their limits. Nothing’s quite as daring as a boy trying to catch a girl’s attention, most certainly not a squawking seagull.”

My pulse quickened at the thought of watching them. “I’d love that.”

“It was no seagull, but a dove.”

I nearly jumped at the sudden baritone of Malyr’s voice, having all but forgotten he was there, then squinted at his shadowy outline. “How would you know what I saw?”

He rose and walked off toward the creek, mumbling, “Because there are no white seagulls along our coasts.”

I looked after him until his form blurred with the night, the air suddenly much cooler, sending a shudder across my body. “He’s in a mood.”

Sebian let out a little snort before he draped one arm over his eyes, his body shifting on the grass as if in search of more comfort. “Sweetheart, Malyr is *always* in one mood or another. Learn to ignore it because trying to figure out what’s going on in his head is impossible.”

Yes, and that precisely was the issue that had my stomach churn and my skull ache. There would be no seduction, no child, no alternate plan to ensure this wedding, that much Malyr had made clear. What else was left? Trusting his word and his honor?

I wouldn’t even trust his shadow.

Quite literally.

For a long while, I watched how Malyr sat far away by the edge of the creek and stared at its moonlit surface, until a long sigh escaped me. “Do you think he’ll go through with the wedding?”

When no answer came, I lifted my head, only to find Sebian’s eyes closed, his breathing even. Beside him, his *anoa* had curled its head beneath its wing and huddled into the crook of its owner’s neck. Asleep.

One deep breath bought me the semblance of bravery, then I carefully rose as not to wake the two, and walked over to the creek. Arms wrapped around myself to ward off the biting chill, I stopped several feet behind Malyr. As much as the distance between us had ached me earlier, the closeness unnerved me more.

Malyr stilled, shifting his head a fraction of a degree, as if trying to catch sight of me along the edge of his periphery. “What of Sebian?”

“Asleep.”

Scoffing ever so slightly, he shook his head. “For five years, I tried breaking him of his self-destructive habits. Then you showed up.”

“Habits?”

“Oh, you never noticed that he was fucking drunk half the time? Either that, or his head was poisoned,” he said, making me think back on how poorly Sebian had looked the day Captain Theolif had come, and the gray discoloration on his lips. “You have a strange effect on people, little dove.”

“You included?”

Malyr rested his underarms on his bent knees, one hand shifting something in its palm with a dull grinding sound. “Did he ever tell you how he got his scars?”

Of course, he would ignore my question. “No.”

“Your former betrothed raided one of our refugee camps that was under Asker’s command. Domren caught dozens of Ravens beneath nets while they were sleeping peacefully in their huts before he set them ablaze, burning them alive. Most died, including Sebian’s entire family. He would have, too, had he been there. As he was supposed to.”

Slowly, I dared another few steps and sat beside him. “What do you mean?”

“He was assigned watch for the night. On his way to his post from a nearby tavern, a great owl injured his primal. He shifted, hit his head on a rock, passed out.” He kept palming whatever he held in his hand, letting it grind, making it *clank*. “By the time he reached the camp, it was all nearly over. He went into his family’s hut, trying to save them from the flames. It was winter, and the fur in his bracers caught fire. I found him the next day lying in the snow, unconscious, his arm so badly burned, the snow around it had melted away, the wound steaming. They had attacked from the direction of his post.”

A sharp, biting pain nipped along my arm. Nothing but the wind blowing from the open swamp across as an overwhelming surge of sorrow flooded my chest. That night when I'd thanked Sebian for protecting me? Or when I'd told him that I felt safest with him? Each time, he'd stilled.

I pulled my knees against my chest, curling myself up against the threat of winter. "He feels responsible for their deaths."

"Nearly a hundred souls." The moon reflected on the surface of the creek and cast a pale blueish hue across his handsome features. "It is a heavy burden to carry. One misstep, one accident. One moment of... weakness, leaving you with nothing but guilt. That, and the lifelong urge to make things right. It is what draws him to you, you know. Saving you. Protecting you." Malyr turned his head, letting his eyes lock with mine. "What will happen once he realizes that you are not the damsel in distress you make yourself out to be?"

Clearly, he was referring to how I'd tried to get his child into my belly. "Trusting you doesn't come easily, Malyr."

"Yes, I took notice," he said on a sigh and opened his palm, letting what appeared to be pebbles slip into the grass. "Your father used to wear a pendant around his neck. A salt crystal set into *aerymel*. Is it familiar to you?"

I was about to shake my head when I remembered the pendant from my childhood. "I always took it for a cloudy white gemstone."

"He still has it?"

"Yes, somewhere," I said and glanced over at him. "Why? What does it mean to you?"

"Your father took it off my person when he captured me."

"It was yours?"

"Not truly. It belongs to my *anoaley*. My mate. Years before Valtaris fell, a messenger reached my parents. Around his neck, he wore the pendant, stained red from his blood. Something or someone must have attacked him or his unkindness on his way to our city," he said. "It is of the girl

destined for the younger prince, he had said, muttering something about keeping it safe, danger, and returning home. Where he came from, nobody knew, as he suffocated on his own blood seconds later. To this day, it is a mystery.”

One that stirred the curiosity in my core. “There’s magic trapped inside?”

“That’s the mystery about it,” he said. “It is entirely empty at its core, with not a single shadow writhing within. Many a fate touched it, hoping for a vision, a flicker of magic. Nothing. It’s just... salt.”

That curiosity morphed into unease, reminding me of how fickle all this was, the union between a Raven and a human. “You want me to find it and return it to you... so you may give it to her one day.”

“I no longer have an interest in reclaiming it,” he said. “I was merely curious.”

Maybe he was, maybe he wasn’t. “Sebian told me how strong the pull is. Between fated mates.”

“I found it to be more than tolerable, almost forgettable, really.”

“Not on the day you tried to read up on it in the library,” I said, immediately noticing my mistake when Malyr stiffened beside me. “I walked in the moment you flew off, leaving books scattered about. *The Endless Ache*. Sebian told me what it—”

Malyr sealed his hand over my mouth even before his eyes widened, head snapping toward the rustling in the wetlands across from us. His arm wrapped around my waist, yanking me onto his body as he let himself plop with his back onto the ground.

“Shh...” His hush came with a blanket of shadows that settled over us, drowning out our surroundings. “Not a single sound, little dove.”

Startled by the sudden nearness between us, my heart thudded so hard, there was no doubt that he could feel its vibration in his ribs. I blinked through the pitch-black

darkness, trying to get a sense of where his face was. Until my ears pricked at a shrill voice.

“Where is he?” The voice came muffled through the shadows. “He asked you to come here, didn’t he?”

Lorn. It wasn’t so much her voice I recognized, but the bite it carried, the taunting edge that never seemed to smooth away, no matter what she said.

“Why do you keep running to him, hmm? I am your mate!” the man’s shout, Lord Baradur undoubtedly, startled me enough that Malyr pressed his hand harder onto my mouth. “I have seen *everything* they have done to you in that dungeon. Every beating. Every humiliation. Every. Single. Rape. And I love you no less for it. I admire your strength! I want you no less for it, Lorn, don’t you understand?”

“No, *you* don’t understand!” she hissed. “Just because you saw doesn’t mean you understand. But he does. He does, because he knows what it felt like to lie beneath them, completely powerless, while they—”

Hands suddenly pressed down on my ears, muffling the words, distorting them beyond any recognition. Why? What was it Malyr didn’t want me to hear?

The longer I remained deaf, the tighter his shadows wrapped around me. Offshoots tangled around my ankles, climbed into my hair, wormed themselves beneath my skirts until they slowed. But the more they did, the harder Malyr trembled beneath me. He was struggling to hold them back, wasn’t he?

Slowly, so slowly, he lifted his palms off my ears just as the shadows lifted from around us, seemingly scattering into the night. He stared at me, his eyes crinkled at the corners in nothing short of concern. Did he fear that I heard? Heard what he didn’t want me to know?

“It is cold,” he said after a while. He slipped me off him and rose rather abruptly before he grabbed my arm and yanked me to my feet. “We should wake Sebian so he can bring you back to your chambers.”

He'd already gotten in three hurried strides before I said, "What of our wedding?"

His feet stalled, but he didn't turn around, standing there frozen. "What of it?"

I walked up to him. "How do I know that you won't dissolve the betrothal the moment I free Marla?"

Long moments of silence lingered between us. "Did my oaths sound insincere?"

"No." Which made them all the more suspicious. And even if he truly meant them, I wasn't exactly short on other concerns. "But what happens on the day you find your mate? What will you do then?"

"I cannot find what I am not searching. I gave up on my desire to bond because I am not at all the man fate would have wanted me to become... your father made sure of that," he ground out. "You said you hope that your actions added months to my time in the dungeons, but little dove, I never escaped them. They are with me, inside me, forever a part of me." Another beat of silence. "I would rather suffer The Endless Ache than watch my mate endlessly suffer me. You, however, will."

CHAPTER
THIRTY-ONE



Sebian

Present Day, Deepmarsh Castle, stables

Pius gave a snort when I tightened the girth on his saddle, peeking his brown head toward it for a moment before the white blaze on his nose disappeared into the bucket of oats. Much to the frustration of the chestnut mare tied across, who banged her hoof against the wooden planks that separated the two, demanding a treat of her own.

“All tacked-up and ready.” I gave Pius a gentle pat on the neck before I clenched and unclenched my fingers, trying to force the bone-deep chill from my hand. Galantia would need good gloves and a warm cape. “Make sure you water him when he’s done eating!”

“I will!” Olivar said as he appeared from around the corner, the boy all but dragging a saddle over the straw-covered ground before he tried to lift the heavy thing over his head. “Just as soon as I... as I ready... ready—a”

I grabbed the saddle before he'd collapse under its weight.
"Which horse?"

"Prince Malyr's," he said on an exhale, wiping at his red cheeks before he pointed at the black gelding.

"I didn't know he was riding out this morning." With a swing upward, I placed the saddle on the gelding's back, making sure it sat properly before I gave Olivar a dip of my head. "Don't forget to water Pius. He's got a long ride ahead of him."

I stepped out of the stables and into the morning fog that lingered between the buildings that framed the courtyard, the air wet and biting. Not the best weather to take Galantia to the western cliffs, but how could I deny her with how excited she was? With how I wanted to show her what it meant to be Raven?

Long strides took me up the steps and through the great hall, most of the walls already decorated for the wedding. Garlands of intertwined branches hung along the rafters, dotted with moss, bark strips, pine needles, and other nesting material. Servants sat in small chattering groups by the tables here and there, weaving black feathers into ornaments, though some plucked the white plumes from a couple of dead geese.

With most of the flight holes in this area sealed off, I had no other choice but to make my way along the corridor until I reached the double doors that lead to Galantia's private rooms, which were located right across Malyr's. A glance over my shoulder ensured discretion—not that any Raven cared a whit about who fucked whom; humans, however...

Behind the doors, the familiar scent of honeysuckle climbed into my nostrils. Also lemongrass. Because Malyr leaned with his shoulder against the stone archway, one leg lazily crossed behind the other, hovering a deep purple prune in front of his mouth as if he'd forgotten it was for eating.
Secretly watching Galantia.

"I saw Olivar got your gelding ready," I said quietly as I stepped up beside him. "Where to this morning?"

He released a long breath and finally took a bite of his prune. “Around and around, riding in endless circles through the forest. As if listening to the petitions of my human lords is any less tiresome on the back of a horse.” He turned his head, giving my fur-lined and polished brown cuirass an assessing look before he arched a brow. “You almost look lordly.”

“Almost,” I said. “I’m taking Galantia to the cliffs out west for the day.”

“Was that today?” His attention returned to the room before us, to Galantia. “Mmm... I’d nearly forgotten.”

I followed his line of sight to where she carefully ran a bristle brush over those few wisps of hair Tjema still had on her maimed side, the girl sitting on the stool in front of the mirror cabinet. Galantia ran her fingernail along Tjema’s puckered scalp, bringing a handful of black hair over to the marred side of her face. Next, she gathered strands, braiding them loosely down the girl’s side before she rolled it up and pinned it down.

“Queen Taramia used to wear it like this after her husband had her ear cut off for sedition,” Galantia said, threading a teal ribbon into the plaited nest of hair before she tugged a strand to fall loosely over the damaged eye. “Few knew what the king had done that to her, so the ladies at court were none the wiser and started braiding their hair in the same manner, making it quite fashionable.”

Tjema lifted her fingers to her face, hesitated, then stroked down her melted skin. “People can still see the scars.”

Galantia put the brush down. “They will be invisible to those who truly love you.”

Beside me, Malyr shifted ever so slightly, his jaws moving as if he wasn’t sure quite what face to make. Did this surprise him? How Galantia extended her kind heart to help a disfigured girl feel prettier, if only for a day? Probably. I could hardly blame him.

It wasn’t like he’d taken the time to look past the close-minded, spoiled, self-centered girl we’d captured, finding the

caring, curious soul hidden in the center. That he did so now should be a relief for me, so why did my molars clench? Because I didn't know if I should trust it. Because he'd given her a bracelet that was absolutely meaningless.

Did his *anoa* have an unhealthy obsession with shiny stuff? Of course. But it sure as fuck weren't buttons...

Malyr turned heel and walked away with a mumbled, "Come see me in my library before you leave."

When he was out the door, I stepped through the archway, finding Tjema's eyes in the mirror. "By the goddess and all her stars, who is this stunning young woman, Lady Galantia?"

Tjema hiked her shoulders, giving me a sheepish look as she rose, slowly turning to present her hair. "Galantia did my hair like that of a queen."

"Did she now?" I walked up to them, giving a little tug on Tjema's ribbon in assessment. "Every Raven boy in Deepmarsh will think you're bonded and pull their tail feathers out over it."

Galantia gleamed at me as if I'd saved a kitten from a tree, mouthing a *'Thank you.'*

'Whatever it takes to make you look at me like that,' I mouthed back, which had her frown, of course, but I simply winked and returned my attention to Tjema. "Can you get Galantia some gloves? Warmest you can find, along with a heavy cape. It's freezing outside."

When Tjema raced off, I took Galantia's hand. One tug, and I pulled her into my chest, running my palm down along the sway of her hip, kneading the flesh through the heavy fabric of her fur-lined dress. I gathered up the train and slid my fingers between her inner thighs, rubbing along her slit, loving the way her pulse quickened.

Her head lolled to the side and her eyes fluttered shut on a moan. "What are you doing?"

"Checking your dress," I whispered against the tendon that protruded along the side of her neck, pupils catching on every

drum that pulsed beneath her skin. “Making sure it’s warm enough.”

Her grin brushed against the corner of my mouth as she turned her head, staring up at me from those beautiful hazel eyes. “She’ll be back soon.”

My gaze slipped to her lips like it had done at least a dozen times now, stirring up a swirl of energy in my core that fluttered straight into my stomach. She wanted me to kiss her. So many times, she’d wanted this kiss. So did I but...

I shouldn’t. I couldn’t.

It wouldn’t be right.

“Oh, sweetheart, I can be so fast without even trying.” I grabbed her thighs, lifted her up, and carried her over to the desk that stood beneath the window that overlooked Malyr’s garden. Candlestick. Parchment. Flowers. One swipe of my arm cleared the surface where I sat her down. “You’re no longer ovulating.”

“You must know,” she said, grabbing my hips and pulling me between her needy legs. “After all, I woke to your tongue between my legs.”

“Because you’re fucking delicious.” I quickly undid the front of my breeches, took my hard cock out, and shoved inside her on a shared groan. “Fuck, you feel so damn good. So wet. So tight.”

Teasing me to drive into her fast and hard. Nothing but a morning fuck—quick, fleeting, meaningless. I’d had hundreds of those across the castle with whatever healthy-smelling female willingly lifted her skirts.

Until Galantia.

I lowered my forehead against hers, neither thrusting nor pulling back, but rather, taking in the still sensation of being inside her. I enjoyed the closeness between us, the smell of our mingled scents, the way our breaths became one in the gap between our quivering lips.

Connection.

Intimacy.

Something I hadn't allowed myself to enjoy in so long, my entire body soaked it up, let it seep through my flesh and bones before it settled in my core, warm and languid. That, too, wasn't right. What could I say? I should have fucking died the night of that attack, but I didn't. Was painfully alive, longing for all those things that made each day I waited for revenge a little more bearable.

I curled my fingers around the back of her head, angling it until her pulse lay exposed where it thudded beside a vein in her neck. My next thrust came with the descend of my mouth before I kissed a path from the base of her shoulder to her earlobe. I could give her at least that. Loved how she shuddered in my arms—and *only* in *my* arms.

Right now, she was mine.

At least, that was what I told myself as I rocked in and out of her, pretending she could be, that I would deserve such a thing as a mate. Until hurried little footsteps pounded the stone nearby.

I pulled out, quickly brushed Galantia's skirts down, and turned away.

I was still struggling my erection back behind the leathers of my breeches when Tjema merrily announced, "Darien weaved me the warmest cape! And I found good, warm gloves."

"I told you so," Galantia whispered as she slipped off the desk, turning toward the girl to receive the items. "Thank you. These will do nicely."

I ran a finger over the small of Galantia's back. "Finish dressing, then go to the stables. Malyr wants to talk to me, but I'll meet you there."

At her nod, I turned away and strode off, quietly slipping out of her private rooms and back into the corridor. If we left Deepmarsh within the hour, we would reach the coast before the sun—

I froze right where I stood between the doors of the lord's and lady's private rooms. "What a strange place to run into you."

Cici was still closing the door to Malyr's rooms behind her when her eyes found mine, a taunting, pouty smile shifting around on her lips. "I could say the same. Presume it is a good thing we both share a prudent mind, knowing the importance of the word *discretion*."

That last word lingered as I watched her glide along the corridor in her green silk gown, one of her pinned-up curls suspiciously out of place where the single coil bounced between her shoulder blades. One year. One year of her pushing her tits up and fluttering her eyes at Malyr, and now she'd managed herself into his rooms? *Now?*

I crossed the final few steps to Malyr's doors. I'd never bothered to knock, and I would certainly not start now. I showed myself right in, slammed the door shut behind me before I crossed his library and strode straight to where he sat at his desk.

"I met Cici in the corridor," I said as I let myself slump into the armchair by the window, my voice biting even to my own ears. "What was she doing in here, leaving your chambers at the hour of the rooster?"

Malyr didn't bother looking up from whatever he was writing, and merely continued to run the quill over the parchment, allowing the black ink to form fancy letters. "Playing at politics. Since when do you concern yourself with the women who enter and leave my chambers?"

I inhaled deeply, taking in the smells that clung to his riding outfit, his hair, every inch of his personal rooms. Lemongrass. Leather. Parchment. Beeswax. Ink. Rose petals. Whatever he'd done with Cici, he hadn't fucked her—there was no trace of her scent on him. Come to think, there wasn't even the faintest trace of any woman on him. Not Cici. Not Lorn.

Only Galantia.

I didn't know what to make of that, so I only said, "Since you acquired a betrothed."

I'd told myself I would protect Galantia, be it from his shadows, the worst of his moods, or whatever was going on here. Something didn't feel right...

Scoffing, Malyr gave a slow shake of his head as he dipped the quill into the inkwell, then continued writing. "Rumor reached me that my betrothed is fucking my best friend. I doubt it would break my wife's heart if I continued to enjoy other lovers."

My hands curled into fists because that was precisely my fear. The night of the *kjaer*? Goddess help her, Galantia's heart had stumbled over every whispered oath, every loving touch between them, every circle their feet danced into the grass. For a girl locked up, negotiated away, and ultimately abandoned, it might take as little as that kiss she wanted so badly to fall in love, to hand her heart to Malyr.

My guts tangled inside my stomach. Fucking shit, I should have kissed her. Why hadn't I kissed her? Were my hands the safest place for her to rest her heart? Probably not. Still safer than Malyr's, though!

"Why buttons?" I asked. "Because you happened to pass Darien's button jar, conveniently grabbing a random handful?"

"Actually, I sent a maid to grab me a random handful." His handwriting continued in easy sways and elegant weaves, as if he wasn't ruffling my feathers with his nonchalance. "If there was any part of me that still hoped to bond one day, it extinguished the night of the *kjaer* when I spoke oaths to a woman who will never truly be mine. But I will not gift her any of those treasures my *anoa* has been piling up for years to impress my mate. Some things are meant to stay with what could have been. What *should* have been, had life not interfered." Finally, he lifted the quill from the parchment and looked at me. "I figured that, among all the people surrounding me, you would understand best, considering that your lips never touched hers."

My mouth turned dry. Great, now that I had his attention, I no longer wanted it...

I turned my head to stare out the window, immediately frowning at the flurry that whirled outside. "It's snowing."

Malyr looked outside, narrowed his eyes, then slammed the quill down with such force, the inkwell jumped, spilling black droplets that drowned out the fine letters. "Blasted mess!"

"It's just snow, Malyr. Happens every winter. It's not like we were planning to fly on the capital anytime soon..." I arched a brow at how he frantically pressed another parchment onto his writing, trying to soak up the excess ink. "What is that?"

"The reason I asked you here. This ruined letter to Lord Kullen was supposed to inform him that a party of fifty riders left Ammarett to head far north," he said, rubbing his ink-stained finger on his breeches. "Under the banners of Prince Domren."

Prince Domren...

I shifted in the chair, blood heating at the mere sound of his name. "What's he doing north? So far outside his father's walls?"

"Word about my betrothal to Galantia and the subsequent alliance with Tidestone must have finally reached the capital," Malyr said. "My guess is as good as yours, but both Asker and I think Domren is trying to find himself a new bride in the unclaimed north."

"And a new, closer ally right along with it," I said, sensing my *anoa* spread its wings at my core, cawing, croaking, demanding that bastard's guts. I owed them that. Owed that to every poor soul who lost their life because of my fucking stupidity! "We have to fly up there. How far north did we spot him? You said... what? Fifty riders?"

Malyr shrugged. "Give or take."

"Archers?"

“Not from what the scouts reported. They don’t expect us to head this far north over it, and for good reason, Sebian. I merely shared this so you would be aware of his movements.”

“They’re out in the wide open without archers?” That was too golden an opportunity to pass up. “We can take them with half that if you send me with the best deathweavers and pathfinders!”

Malyr leaned deeper into his chair, allowing himself to slip down some before he pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head. “Not possible. Everyone is flying in and gathering for the wedding. Galantia will leave for Tidestone in eleven days. I cannot weaken our army like that over something that will give us nothing. The clans in the unclaimed north mostly quarrel with each other, so I’m barely concerned about the few men Ammarett might gain.”

“Maybe it’s nothing to you, but it’s the only thing that has kept me fucking breathing for the last five years.” Revenge. And it was so close. So close! “I’ll fly north myself,” I said and jumped from my chair, helping myself to one of the small maps on his desk. “Mark where he was spotted. I don’t need to face off fifty riders. One arrow and true aim is all I need. I’ll fucking kill him, be back before the wedding, and we’ll eat his fucking guts at the feast!”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-TWO



Galantia

Present Day, Deepmarsh Castle, stables

Bright energy pulsed in my fingertips as I ran my gloved hand down along the mane of Sebian's gelding, watching the steamy plumes coming from his nostrils rise into the hay above, which he nibbled through the gaps in the wooden slats. I couldn't wait to spend the day by the sea, watching Raven children jump off the cliffs. How wonderful it had to be, to fall toward waves before gliding across the endless water!

I turned toward the courtyard, impatiently casting my eyes over a square that had still been rather quiet when I'd come down here. Now, it bustled with highborn humans and newly-ascended Ravens alike, matching the excitement coursing through my veins. Where was Sebian? Malyr must have kept him engaged far longer than anticipated.

Behind me, hooves *clip-clopped* over cobblestone, followed by a deep, “Are you lost, little dove?”

I spun around, breath catching at the unexpected sight of Malyr standing beside a black horse, reins in hand. If he was here, then where...

Where was Sebian?

“I’m waiting for Sebian,” I said, taking in Malyr’s fine riding outfit of black leather and dark blue velvet, which matched the saddle blanket. “He’s to take me to the cliffs today.”

Malyr stroked the reins over the head of his horse and down to its withers, giving me a side glance. “It appears to me he must have forgotten.”

“He told me to wait here for him only moments ago.” Or an hour ago? I once more took in the bustling square, fingers stroking over my dress of brown silk and fox pelt, where a dull ache wormed through my belly. “I’m sure he’ll be here soon.”

Of course he would.

He’d promised.

Malyr smacked his lips. “Sebian flew north a good while ago, to where some of my scouts spotted Prince Domren’s banners. It appears as though the Dranadian prince is in search of a new wife and alliance, and Sebian is eager to find his heart with an arrow.”

“Oh.” That was all I managed to say as disappointment and understanding quarreled at my core. I’d wanted to see the tumbling movements of young ravens so badly, but... “Well, it’s understandable that this has precedence, given the loss Prince Domren had caused him. I cannot blame him for wanting revenge.”

“No?” Malyr took me in, letting his eyes take an unabashed stroll over my form. “Not even if it comes in the lovely shape of Domren’s betrothed writhing beneath him, moaning his name?”

That ache in my stomach turned into a hard ball of pressure. “What do you mean?”

“Why do you think he was so eager to pursue you at first? Taking care of your wound? Offering refuge during a storm? Waiting for you to run into his open arms each time you fled from mine? Out of selflessness? Love at first sight?” His focus was on adjusting the girth where my vision blurred around the edges, because I knew full well that Sebian’s reason had been none of those. “The time a man has to wait before he can kill his enemy is well spent between the legs of his enemy’s betrothed, don’t you agree?” His eyes found mine once more, one cheek bunching up at his lopsided smirk. “Or his daughter.”

A spell of nausea flitted through my stomach, here one second and rationalized away the next. That might have been in the beginning, but things were different between Sebian and me now.

Weren’t they?

“Clearly, his motivations have changed.” I lifted my chin, feigning aloofness, but it didn’t get rid of that bitter taste the nausea had left in the back of my throat. “I am no longer Domren’s betrothed.”

“No, indeed not. You are mine now.” Malyr extended his arm in a graceful gesture, taking my hand into his. “May I?”

“May you... what?”

“Take you to the cliffs instead,” he said and slowly guided me closer to him. “A poor consolation, I know, for I cannot seem to compete with Sebian’s... *charm*. I tried it once; you ran away.”

Because I struggled to trust his charm, fearing a vile, ulterior motive lurking beneath. “Not for lack of skill, but rather... questionable motivations.”

“I always thought myself rather honest about my motivations. But be that as it may... salt in the air, children playing, ravens *soaring* through the sky,” Malyr dragged that last word out, obviously taunting me with all those things I’d

been looking forward to. And it was working, given how that excited energy returned to my fingers, buzzing beneath my nails. “Allow me to take you. It has been much too long since I last jumped off a cliff.”

“The idea of watching you throw yourself down is tempting...”

“Yes, I hoped that the fantasy of my untimely death might get you to agree.” He sighed exaggeratedly, which lent the sound some humor, then gave me a wink. “Does it? Or has my hope been misplaced?”

My lips twitched at his unexpected playfulness, that wink I didn’t know his facial muscles could produce. And truly, what would be the harm? I was here; I was dressed. Why would I deny myself such an adventure just because Sebian chased after revenge?

Malyr leaned into me, whispering by my ear, “I assure you, little dove, I won’t be on my best behavior.”

My blood thickened at the way his whisper tugged on fine wisps of hair. He might have caught me off-guard during the *kjaer*, confusing me from head and heart, but I was prepared now. If I kept my wits about me, then I had nothing to fear.

No treacherous flutters.

No dangerous longing.

No ridiculous hope.

I gave a nod. “Very well.”

Malyr let his hands frame my waist. “I take it you were only instructed in side-saddle?”

“I was never formally instructed at all.”

“You are not fond of horses?”

“Oh, I’m very fond of them; I watched riders from the walls often, pretending I was cantering as I ran along the bailey.” When he lifted me toward his steed’s back, I clawed my fingers around the pommel of the saddle. “I snuck off to the pastures many times to climb onto the horses’ backs while

they grazed, kicking their sides until they fell into a canter or bucked me off, whichever came first.”

When Malyr plopped me into the saddle and the ground seemed to fall away beneath me, I pressed my calves tightly against the horse’s rump. The stupid thing started dancing around nervously, making me sway and slip.

“It’s moving,” I said, clasping the saddle tighter. “Why is it moving?”

“Because you’re telling him to. Stop pinching his sides.” Malyr grabbed some leather strap on the saddle and jumped up, mounting effortlessly behind me. “The more you tense, the more nervous Liual will get.” His gloved fingers stroked down along mine, up, then down again, until they slowly lured my hands off the pommel. “Let them hang by your sides, or you’ll keep throwing yourself out of balance. Olivar?”

The young boy ran over from the stable, gleaming up at Malyr with a wide grin. “My prince?”

“Have a blanket ready by the sea in an hour, along with refreshments.” Malyr grabbed the reins with one hand, shifted his balance behind me, and, when I nearly slipped off at Liual’s turn, slung his other arm around my belly, pulling me back into the center and tightly against him. “Make that two hours.”

“Yes, my prince!” the boy said and hurried off.

Malyr pressed his cheek against my temple. “Remember the night you rolled your hips like a bitch in heat with my cock nudged at your cunt, begging me so nicely to breed you, little dove?”

I rolled my eyes. “No, I’m afraid I can’t recall.”

“A shame, considering I cannot get it out of my head how you tempted me.” One click of Malyr’s tongue, and the horse moved forward at a walk, following the pathway toward a smaller gate. “Move like you did that night, and we might reach the cliffs before noon.”

I wasn’t sure what was worse—that he made me remember my poor attempt at seducing him, or that his suggestion

actually held merit. The more I allowed my pelvis to rock in-tune with his, the less I swayed and shifted. Soon, I found my way into the familiar motion, gaining balance.

“How can you be certain which way to go?” I asked after a while. “Have you traveled along this road on horseback before?”

He steered Liual around the carcass of a deer that the wolves must have gotten. “No. Navigating the lands and winds comes natural to us. I feel it in my core, where the sea lies, the castles, the mountains.”

And I knew nothing of the lands beyond what I’d seen on maps. “A Raven on a horse. Why bother learning how to ride if flying is faster?”

“Why bother flying if riding costs me close to no energy? It appears you taught yourself a solid seat in those pastures. Take these.” Malyr split the reins and weaved them through my fingers before he grabbed my wrists and positioned my hands to float to each side of the pommel. “Don’t let go of them.”

My knuckles stiffened. “Why did *you* let go of them?”

“Your first formal lesson. I cannot expect my human wife to move at the speed of my ravens, but I certainly won’t tolerate the slowness of a carriage each time we have to travel in the future.” A tap on my knuckle. “All it takes is the faintest tug on the rein to steer him in any direction you wish him to go. If you shorten them both, he will go slower. If you give them to him, he will go faster.” He pointed to the left. “Cross over that meadow there.”

My pulse spiked at the challenge, the opportunity to finally do something I’d always wanted. As instructed, I gave the tiniest tug on the left rein, chest lifting at the way the grinding of rock and sand beneath us turned into the dulled *thuds* of hooves sinking into flattened bushels of yellow grass.

Malyr pointed toward an evergreen forest that lay ahead. “How about you race him all the way to the edge of those pines?”

“Race him?” My heart gave a clank against my throat. “I... I don’t think I should.”

His arm slung around my middle once more. “I will not let you fall. All you have to do is brace for those first couple of thrusts as he gains speed; the rest is easy to sit, so as long as you follow his movements. Trust me.”

He might as well ask me to make the clouds break open. “I... I don’t know...”

“Where has the woman gone who marched into my chambers demanding a wedding, hmm? My shadows get you slick, but the premise of a brief canter has you stammer? Is this not what you pretended to do?” Malyr asked. “When you ran along the bailey?”

“Yes, but—”

“Stop pretending, Galantia,” he said. “Do it. Lean slightly forward, press your legs against him, and say, *alesh*.”

My pulse fluttered in my throat. “It’s dangerous.”

“Mmm, did your mother not tell you?” he whispered with a shove of his nose at my temple. “My little white dove, so is playing with knives.”

A flutter infused my veins, sending such a thrill through my body, my fingers tightened around the reins. Yes, she’d told me. *Don’t touch the knife, Galantia. Don’t run, Galantia. Don’t walk in the rain, Galantia.* But most definitely, don’t canter a horse across a wet meadow through flurries of snow while in the arms of the deadly Raven prince, Galantia.

Nonsensical rules. Well, I’d wanted rid of them, had I not? And who was there to stop me?

Nobody.

Heart pounding in my chest, I leaned slightly forward and, at the bump of my calves, said, “*Alesh!*”

A single jolt lifted me out of the saddle as Lial’s back seemed to arch. His powerful hind legs thrust us away from the ground, sending us forward and into a gust of wind just as my ass hit the seat once more. Beneath me, the outline of his

forelegs blurred as they extended further, moved faster, changing thuds to thunder.

“Good,” Malyr praised me loudly, his words slightly distorted by the whistling of the wind. “Keep following his movements.”

I cantered across the glistening meadow with Malyr at my back, our bodies rolling in-tune with the rhythm of Liual’s motion. Cold snowflakes dotted my face as the biting chill whipped my cheeks numb. The wind tugged on my hair in the same way Risa had when she’d wanted to keep me from running when I was a child, but I was too fast. Faster than ever before!

Alive!

Something black pushed into my periphery, making me dare a glance that sent a whirl of energy into my belly, making me realize the warmth of Malyr’s arm had disappeared.

Instead, five ravens soared through the wind, fluttering around me in acrobatic movements. They rolled and sunk, rose and scattered, gliding along the ground beside the booming hoofbeats.

A cheeky grin lifted the corners of my mouth. One tug on the rein, and Liual shifted left, forcing the raven by his feet to flutter and drift upward on a warning *caw*. A rolling laugh bubbled from my chest until it distorted into a squeal when claws dug into my hair, giving a little pull before the raven above me somersaulted through the air to a string of croaks as if he was laughing back at me.

Dense, bright pressure filled my ribcage, each inhale sending cold, clean, unadulterated joy through my body. This was wonderful, magical. Like another dance, no less breathtaking than the last one, making me the axis of Malyr’s circling unkindness.

Until Liual stumbled.

Nothing but a single out-of-tune bump before he regained his rhythm, but unexpected enough I curled my fingers into the pommel. Bouncing followed, making me shift, slip, and sway.

In a burst of feathers, black plumes wavered and weaved through the air, their fluid forms gliding effortlessly between the realm of magic and reality. Like a whisper in the air, they undulated around me, only to morph into an arm clasping around my middle once again.

“*Da’eyha...*” Malyr said calmly behind me, steadying me against Liual’s trotting steps for a beat or two before the horse settled back into a walk, then he placed his mouth by my cheek. “How was that, hmm?”

“Wonderful!” I said with a laugh as I sensed his lips curl against my cheek.

Was he...? No, that couldn’t be. I looked back at him once more, only for the sight to steal the wind from my sails.

Right there, on those lips that had tasted like autumn sweetness during our almost-kiss, a heart-rending smile clung to the wavering corners as if it didn’t quite remember how to survive on Malyr’s usually severe mouth. But it did, causing one treacherous flutter in my chest after another for each second it lasted.

And, gods help me, did it last...

“Watch your balance and look forward.” Malyr lifted his hand to my head where he raked his nails over my scalp the way he’d done it at the *kjaer*, grooming me, gently urging my gaze back forward. “Queen Taramia’s ladies-in-waiting knew her husband had her ear cut off. They decided to wear their hair braided like their queen out of solidarity, much to King Willem’s displeasure. He had them all beheaded.”

My breathing slowed at that, my lungs caught between surprise and confusion. “You were watching me earlier?”

“Little dove, I have watched you dozens of times, from rafters, dark corners, through windows.” His words hushed across the shell of my ear, sending a lovely shudder down my neck. “Just because you cannot see me does not mean that we cannot see you. And how we love to observe your excitement when you explore merchant’s wares, read by the window, or twitch your lips in delight at the sight of blackberries.”

My mind went back to the *kjaer*, to the many bowls of fruit on our table, and how certain his fingers had reached for the berry. Should someone who truly hated me know quite so much about the things that delighted me? There was no painless answer to that.

“Why?” I asked. “Why watch me?”

“Presume it is something as simple as the fact that you are beautiful,” he said. “Except when you fight me... then you are stunning.”

“Careful now.” The words came slowly, breathily. More warning to myself than him. “You promised not to be on your best behavior.”

“Oh, but I happen to love how it flusters you.” His chuckle came with those fingers that gently combed through my hair before he nuzzled my temple. “And if you run from it this time? Little dove, there will only be one set of arms left to run into. *Mine.*”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-THREE



Galantia

Present Day, the western coast

Salt seasoned the wet air, bringing with it the scents of algae and stone chilled by winter, although the flurries had stopped and melted away a good while ago. Several feet ahead of where I sat on a quilt of shadows, the jagged cliff lined the entire length of the horizon. The water sat so far below, there was no ocean to be seen—only heard. The rhythmic rumble of waves pounded the base of the cliff formed a roaring backdrop for the high-pitched caws of children.

They soared through the sky, chasing each other. Some of the smaller ravens dashed through the branches of nearby pines, shaking off whoever pursued them. Older boys, some of them men nearly grown, wrestled each other off the cliff, eyes darting to a group of girls who cheered and flushed nearby.

“Is it always like this?” I asked. “For you to easily mingle with commoners? Sit among them unbothered?”

Malyr folded an arm beneath his head where he lay beside me, his eyes fixed on a sky that had opened some, letting rays of sun cast a shine across his black, fanned-out strands. “A Raven king’s mate could be the daughter of his bannerman or the whore working the streets in the shadow of his castle. How could he ever find her if he never crossed her path?”

That made sense.

And all peasants seemed to regard Malyr with great respect, offering him crooked bows and wobbly curtsies, only to leave him be and go about their enjoyment. It had been wonderful to watch ever since we’d arrived when the sun had stood in its zenith. Once, Malyr had done me the favor and thrown himself off the cliff, too. For my sick amusement, he’d said, actually making me laugh.

Not far from us, a man dangled a giggling girl upside down by her ankle. He tossed her little body over the edge of the cliff, only for her to shift into her unkindness and fly straight back to him.

She reshaped to hang from his arm, her cheeks fire-red from cold and exhaustion alike. “Again, Papa! Again!”

“Enough now!” a woman, presumably her mother, scolded her mate while she tried to herd a flock of four fledglings with her arms where they hopped about the basket of foods they’d brought. “If she gets her plumes too sweaty, she’ll catch a fever in this cold.”

When the man planted his daughter firmly on the ground, she shifted once more, only for two of her birds to dash at the basket. Whatever food they stole before they flew off had her mother muttering curses.

I grinned at her rebellion. “How early can you shift?”

“My first shift happened when I was... five, I believe,” Malyr answered diligently, as he had done with all my other questions today—and there had been dozens of them. “I’d climbed the shelves in the larder to get to something. A jar of

honey? I cannot recall. The boards came loose and I fell, but never hit the ground. What a mess that was.” He let out a little chuckle. “Unfortunately, I didn’t manage to shift again when our cook came after me with the wooden rolling pin, chasing me out of the kitchens.”

I laughed at that, picturing a little boy scrambling for footing on the flour-covered ground. “You were a troublemaker.”

He shook his head. “Between the three of us, I was the easy one. Up to a certain age and power.”

“Then who was?”

“My sister, Naya.” There was an ardent reverence in his voice I’d never heard on him before, followed by a smile so sincere and heart-melting, it eclipsed the one from earlier in the saddle. “At two days old, she shifted in her cradle. By the time her flight feathers came in around three or so, servants were instructed to keep the windows, doors, and flight holes shut at all times. Yet she still managed to get out somehow. I found her toddling through the weapons room, dragging an *aerymel* sword behind her shortly before the siege. No doubt she would have swung it one day.” His smile wavered, trembled, then died. “If only she’d gotten the chance to grow taller than its sheath.”

His words squeezed around my heart, the insight into his past, his grief, utterly unexpected. A glimpse into Malyr’s darkness, as if he was opening his shadows, allowing me to look deeper. To search for that glimmer I’d seen during our dance. Would it be wise to dare?

It was tempting.

And treacherous.

“You loved her very much.” I’d heard it in his reverent tone and saw it in the way his gaze had softened, sending a ripple of old guilt across my core. Whatever pain and grief he harbored in his chest, I’d contributed to a great deal. The least I could do was own up to it. “I should have said this much

sooner, but... I regret the hand I played in Harlen's death, Malyr. Deeply."

A muscle twitched in his jaws the way it often did when he was reining in his temper—one of the few emotional indicators he ever offered—but he smoothed it away with a heavy swallow and set his eyes on me. "It was not you who killed him. It was me, with my fear of the uncontrolled chaos my shadows bring, the disobedient destruction."

My ears pricked at the solemn austerity in his tone. "Disobedient?"

He pinched his lips together as if he regretted mentioning it. "We could have escaped the dungeons... if only I had unleashed them."

How had he escaped?

The question stirred in my belly, but I didn't dare ask, else it might destroy this precious moment of tranquil peace between us, fickle and strange as it may be. He'd been so different on our way here, charming and playful, distressingly kind in the way he'd urged me to break free of invisible bonds that had tied me down all my life. Why? Why was he being like this?

When it came to Malyr, I couldn't help myself but expect his ulterior motive of breaking me behind every touch, every whisper, every hint of charm. But then again, Sebian's charm had apparently harbored an ulterior motive just as wicked. But he'd hid it, whereas Malyr had only ever been open about his intent. Did that not make him safe in his honesty? His kindness trustworthy?

What if he was truly torn between his loyalty and whatever warm feelings he harbored for me, the daughter of his enemy, the killer of his brother? Such a thing couldn't be painless to reconcile, nor easy. What if I'd judged him too harshly at the *kjaer*, fearing he was out to hurt me when, in reality, he himself was hurting—pulled into two directions until it threatened to rip him apart right down the middle?

Oh gods, my head ached with how my thoughts raced, colliding against one another as I struggled to suffocate the hope that could certainly only bring heartbreak. To keep my wits about me. Most of them seemed to have scattered in the wind when I'd cantered across that meadow...

"Come here." Malyr rolled onto his side, propping one hand under his head in support while he patted the quilt with the other. "I want my wife closer."

I lowered myself down to face him, resting my head on my arm only a few inches away from him, taking in his scent of lemongrass, letting his body heat seep under my skin. "I am not your wife yet."

"You accepted my gift, the food I fed you, our dance beneath the stars, did you not?" He lifted his hand to cup my cheek, letting the warmth of his palm caress my wind-whipped skin. "Among Ravens, you are my mate now. The wedding is merely a symbolic act to pacify humans and their customs."

His words lingered between us, easing away some of the doubt I'd harbored, the worry that he might break the betrothal, but not all. "I am not a Raven; therefore, I'm not truly your mate, and not yet your wife. That makes me nothing."

Up and down went his thumb along my cheekbone in rhythmic motions. "This morning, after I spoke to Lady Cecilia, I ordered cartloads of grains to be moved from our southern stores to Tidestone, along with dried meats, pulses, and several hundred pounds of seed for use in the spring. Her father, Lord Taradur, and his forces will oversee their transport, ensuring their arrival at Tidestone after you free Marla with how wet the ground is, but certainly before our wedding. If you ask her, I am sure she will confirm."

My lips parted on a little gasp as I stared at him wide-eyed. "You are sending... But... Why?"

"Reassurance." His mouth shifted around as if he was chewing over whichever words would follow next. "Your fear I will break our betrothal once Marla has gone free is valid."

Quite reasonable, even. Tidestone soldiers must have been at half-rations for how long now? Two months?”

More like five, but that would make me seem like a poor bargain struck all over again. “Three.”

“If I am to attack Ammarett come spring once the snow thawed, I will require your father’s army, and it will do me no good if I starved it over the winter,” he said. “I need this marriage if I want to win this war quickly and with few losses among my kind, Galantia. We *both* need it. And it is my hope that this will ease your fear and convince you of my sincerity. My... commitment to this.”

The assurance of his words soothed over my doubts, bringing with them a sense of relief. It lasted but a breath, the now undisputed and proven prospect of this marriage suddenly not enough, even if it ensured me my goal of a secured life. What was the worth of a silk gown if it cocooned a withered heart? What was the worth of a life if there was no love in it?

Sure, Sebian held me at night, gave me care, offered me refuge. But had he ever confessed any such feelings to me? Had he ever courted me? Kissed me?

No.

Not even a peck goodbye...

A cacophony of chuckles and laughs behind me had me glance over my shoulder at a group of young Ravens that sat around a pile of... things. Shreds of fabric. Polished seashells. Nails. A fork. One of the girls closed her eyes and reached into the pile, rummaging through it, only to retrieve what appeared to be a small piece of rust-speckled chainmail.

She opened her eyes.

Her nose wrinkled.

“That’s mine.” The young man sitting across from her leaned toward her, his grin framed by patchy stubble. “As are you, and you know it.”

The girl looked at the young man, then at the chainmail, curling a disgusted lip before she dropped the thing with a

clank and rubbed the rust from her fingers on the leg of her cotton trousers. “In your dreams.”

“In my dreams, you’re lying in a nest of pillows and quilts, begging me to bond with spread legs,” he rasped to the deep-throated chuckles of the other boys and young men. Then, in one quick movement, he thrust himself forward and kissed her. A long, passionate kiss that had me shift my lips, curl my tongue, swallow excessively. “And if you’d stop being so fucking stub—”

Whack.

His face shot sideways at her slap against his cheek, his eyes ripped wide open in shock, much to the amusement of the others. They snickered and guffawed as the girl shifted and flew off, pushing and shoving him, giving him scolding slaps on the back of his head.

Malyr’s palm stroked over my hip, rolling me onto my other side to face the group fully before he pressed his body tight against my backside. “Presume I should count myself lucky that you only walked out on me during our *kjaer* instead of slapping me before the entire assembled court.”

The idea of slapping him for such a transgression seemed quite absurd, given how I longed to be kissed. “Presume you are right, but then again, you didn’t kiss me.”

“Oh, but I did,” he rasped, gliding his palm up along my waist, over my chest, only for his finger to swipe along my bottom lip. “When I fed you from my lips, little dove. It is the kiss of the raven, but a kiss nonetheless, reserved for our mate and no one but her. It is why we guard them so.”

His words caused my heart to catch before I looked over my shoulder back at him, finding his face inches from me, his eyes slipping to those lips he claimed he’d kissed before they locked with mine. Even firmly planted on the ground, a little sway went through my upper body. A reminder that, if I looked too deeply into his shadows, I might as well lose my balance and fall straight into their darkness to swallow me whole.

A gulp went down my throat. “Yet you kissed Lorn.”

“Fate is rarely obvious, and never easy. Few are those who recognize their mate upon first sight, like my father did. There are a great many feathers we might preen that turn out to be not ours to care for. Sometimes, beaks collide.” His arm came around my head, supporting the weight of it, keeping me embraced and urging my mouth closer to his. “Little dove, the wrong ones we kiss are considered, but the ones we never bother to kiss...? They are forever rejected.”

Rejected.

Forever.

A chill hit my core just as a wintery breeze rocked me closer into Malyr’s embrace. Was that why Sebian never kissed me? Because, deep down, he knew that I could be many things—bedmate, distraction, revenge. Heavens, perhaps even a sense of redemption whenever he took care of me, saved me, protected me.

But never his mate.

Never worthy of his death-defying love.

Anguish flooded my chest, making me close my eyes against the threat of tears over how nobody ever truly wanted me. Not my father. Not my mother. Not Sebian. Why was I never worthy of love? Never worthy of a kiss? Never worthy of—

Malyr’s exhale ghosted over my lips. His mouth drifted closer to mine as his fingers curled into my hair.

Then it happened.

Deep and devouring, his mouth slanted over mine in the darkness of my sealed eyes, sending a flare of heat through my core. His warm, wet tongue stroked apart my lips before it dipped inside, bringing with it the taste of berries that mixed with his scent of lemongrass and rose petals.

A kiss.

A real kiss.

Malyr tasted sweet and dark, like the last blackberry on a snow-covered branch, promising pure delight one moment, but threatening downfall, decay, and death the next. It overwhelmed my entire being. Shoved me off that cliff and into the throes of his shadows, drowning me in a flood of fulfillment. In that moment, I would have gladly suffocated on his lips.

By the time his mouth melted away from mine and I opened my eyes, black and white floaters speckled my entire vision, the world spinning. Dangerous longing slinked through the wall of my ribcage, spreading through my core until a hint of wit returned to my brain.

This was bad... Really bad.

Malyr stroked from my cheek to my chin, clasping it tightly, staring down at me from an arched brow. “So pale all of a sudden, little white dove?”

My pulse fluttered so wildly at the base of my throat, nausea once more rose, faster when I scrambled out of Malyr’s embrace and sat up. “Just a dizzy spell. I’m fine.”

I wasn’t fine.

I was falling.

I rose too quickly, swaying on legs that seemed to have turned to water as I struggled to remain standing. “We should head back.”

“Hmm, why does your sudden urge to depart not surprise me?” Malyr’s arm suddenly rounded the small of my back, steadying me against him. “*De’inde, Liual! De’inde!*”

No sooner had he spoken the words, did Liual trot up to us from where he’d peacefully grazed. Malyr once more framed my waist with his hands and lifted me into the saddle.

“Now you might want to hold onto that pommel, at least until I’ve got him ready,” he said just as he slipped the headstall back over the horse’s head from where it had hung from the saddle. He mounted behind me once more, one hand holding onto my hip, the other onto the reins. “Are you running from me again?”

How could I not? I'd been prepared for many things, but not this. Not this...

"Why go through such exertion?" I looked down at that arm that held me, my head a spinning mess, my heart a thudding wreck. "Even at a walk, I seemed to have landed myself in your arms, just like you said."

With a click of his tongue, Malyr commanded Lial into a walk, steering us away from the cliffs. "And is it such a terrible place to be?"

"No." All day, there had been a sense of safety in his arms that shouldn't have been there. Should not be there. "Not until they will hurt me again."

"As they will," he said. "How else could I reconcile how I kissed you, hmm? How my body longs for yours? How I brought you pleasure with my mouth on your cunt? How I spend... way too many hours watching you, annoyingly fixated beyond sense or reason?"

A desperate flutter in my chest tingled along my ribs like wingbeats, causing such a stir of reluctant faith that I twisted in the saddle to look back at him. "Will you have me believe that every cut, every bruise, every scar is a token of your affection?"

With his gray-brown eyes locked on mine, he lifted his hand from my belly to my cheek. Slowly, so slowly, he raked back a handful of strands that the wind had blown over my mouth. He brushed his thumb over my bottom lip while he wetted his own, causing that flutter to intensify until I swayed in the saddle.

His fingers climbed to my head, clasped my skull, and turned my gaze back to Lial's twitching ears. "Look forward."

I let out a huff of annoyance. "My balance is just fine."

"It is not your balance that concerns me." Arm once more slung around my belly, he pulled me tighter against him before he whispered by my ear, "The longer you make me look at you, little dove, the harder it is for me to remember *what* you

are. And I fear that, if I look too long... I just might forget *who* you are.”

An overpowering sense of hope expanded at my core. Hope that he would forget. Hope that he could then love me. I struggled to breathe it away as I stared straight. Stared straight for the entire fucking ride home.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-FOUR



Galantia

Present Day, Deepmarsh Castle, Galantia's chambers

I stared out the window behind my desk, watching black clouds lined with silver slowly drift in front of the moon as I traced the scars on my breastbone beneath my nightshift, the bracelet on my wrist jingling. Thunder rumbled far away, faint and nearly indistinguishable from the low hums of wind that cradled the sleeping castle.

Nothing but the last of autumn's warmth colliding with winter, too weak to let even a single lightning strike illuminate the raven carved into my skin. To give me a reason to run in fear—and straight into the arms of the man who'd put it there. What would Malyr do if I fled across the corridor and into his rooms?

Hurt me.

Because he needed to, didn't he?

Needed to treat me like his enemy to justify that he would make me his wife. Needed to show me his hate to reconcile whatever affection he hid. How could it not be so after the ride across the meadow? The way he'd watched me? After all he'd said? All he still refused to say? After how he'd kissed me...

Gods, I wanted him to kiss me again.

I wrapped my arms around myself, warding off the chill this far away from my crackling hearth as my gaze wandered to my bed. My cold, lonely, empty bed. There was no Sebian to pull me onto his chest, stroke my hair, or caress me to sleep with gentle touches.

No Sebian to kiss me.

Never that.

An itch flared beneath my raven as if promising snow like Father had said his scars often did, making me think back on my childhood. A childhood that had cushioned me in layers of gentleness and caution as a substitute for love.

I longed for the latter with such soul-bending intensity, my gaze drifted over to the doors at the far end of my personal rooms, a nervous tingle rising in my belly. If gentle touches weren't a surety for love, then what were the chances that pain and love weren't as mutually exclusive as my sheltered mind had thought them to be?

Could there be love in pain?

The creepy-crawly pinpricks on my scar intensified. How far would I go to find out? To feel loved?

Would I bruise for it? Hurt for it? Bleed for it?

Yes.

And who did it better than Malyr?

Heart pounding, I let my naked soles slap over the cool stone as I quietly slipped into the dark hallway. A single oil lamp flickered on a nearby wall, casting eerie shadows over the raven emblem that loomed on the doors across. Specks of orange gleamed in the empty sockets of the skull, causing my stomach to twinge.

I padded over and gave a knock, the sound all but drowning against the violent rush of blood in my ears. Excruciating seconds passed, but neither did the door open nor a voice command me to enter. Perhaps he was asleep.

My hand shook when I lifted it to the door a second time, only for me to drop it by my side and turn away. Gods, why was I such coward? So far, he hadn't killed me y—

Hinges groaned, making me look up to find Malyr leaning in the gap, shrouded by darkness, one arm lifted and braced against the wood while his thumb tapped lazily at his forehead. He had tied up his hair in a tousled topknot that only accentuated the sharpness of his cheekbones, wearing nothing but cotton trousers that sat low on his trim hips. His dark eyes took me in, each second he said nothing marked by nervous tingles beneath my skin.

With a gesture of his hand that carried all the noble graces of a prince, he beckoned me inside before he shut the door, sealing me in with my trepidation. That, and the herb-scented steam coming from a tub beside the hearth.

Back pressed against the door, I looked up at him, barely able to hold his intense stare as I scrambled for an explanation as to why I'd interrupted his bath. "I—"

"Took you long enough," he growled.

His mouth claimed mine, making my pulse stall somewhere between fear and euphoria. Malyr suckled my lips between his, lapping at them, parting them with his tongue, stoking longing deep in my belly until my legs quivered. His hand settled on my hip, letting fingers curl possessively into the flesh while the other slammed against the door right beside my head, making me jump, caging me in.

He pulled his head back on a trembling exhale, his face veiled in shadows with how the dim light of his hearth hit his back, as dark as the whisper that followed. "I am not Sebian."

I couldn't say if he'd meant it as a warning or an apology, but it had my body vibrate with dread and anticipation alike. "I know."

His hand slipped from the door to my shoulder and to the ties on my shift from there, giving a harsh yank, opening the fabric some before he let a finger trace his mark on my chest. “I am not gentle. I was once, I think, but not anymore.”

I knew that, too.

It was the reason why I'd come.

I stared into his eyes. “I do not want gentle.”

His gaze smoldered as he took me in for another moment. At the next, his mouth violently slammed onto mine again. Malyr kissed me, suckling my bottom lip between his teeth. Then he bit down.

When I gave a shocked little gasp at the sharp sting and the taste of metal, Malyr groaned into my mouth. His breaths came faster, fanning up the scent of blood that spread between our lips as his hands dropped to my thighs. He clawed at the train of my shift, gathering it up.

His mouth remained on mine as he lifted me up by my thighs and carried me across the room without a single stagger in his steps. Gravity shifted, and my back sank into the cushioned comfort of his nest of black pillows and quilts. His hips wedged between my thighs, allowing Malyr a single roll of his hard shaft against my cunt before he drew back, letting our kiss melt away as he sat on his haunches.

Hands to my hips, he flipped me onto my stomach, only for his hand to collar my throat and pull me back and onto my knees by it until my back slammed into the frame of his chest. “Take this off,” he rasped by my ear as his other hand lifted my shift. “Don’t make me wait because my patience for the moment you finally come to me started wearing thin long ago.”

You came to me.

The resonance of the words Malyr had breathed in the night I’d negotiated our betrothal echoed in my skull as my shaky fingers clawed the cotton of my shift, fervently pulling it up and over my head, forcing him to release my throat. He had waited for me? But... why?

“Since when?” I asked.

His hand gripped my throat once more, tilting my head just enough to expose the side where he nipped along a tendon strung tight. “Longer than you can imagine, little white dove.”

My eyes fluttered shut at the overwhelming spasms each nip roused between my legs, the scene in the forest the day I’d been captured shaping before the blackness of my eyes. *I have half a mind to take her to my chambers.*

“The day you first s—ah!” I winced at the way Malyr’s other hand dug its fingers into my breast, torturing the flesh in his painfully tight grip until my nipples hardened. “Since the day Sebian brought me to that forest, when you first saw—”

His hand closed around my throat, suffocating my words, robbing me of air until a black veil spread across my vision and my thoughts blurred, then he growled against my ear, “*Longer.*”

I thrashed, writhed, clawed at his arm, faster the more my head ached and my muscles tingled. Only when my arms collapsed by my sides and my back arched, the room before me nearly cast into blackness, did the strangling assault ease away.

I sucked in a lungful of air that seemed to whirl straight into my head before it cascaded down my entire body in a thrilling wave of prickles. “That makes no sen—”

Malyr’s fingers snapped shut again, squeezing to each side of my esophagus. Black and white floaters around the edges of my vision followed, along with the circling motion of his fingers on my cunt.

“You didn’t see me, but I saw you.” He placed one finger to each side of my clit, rubbing it, pinching it, pulling on it until it turned into a hard, swollen knot of pleasure and panic while I thrashed once more. “*Come to me, just one more step,* I begged that day where I hid in the underbrush along the cliffs, with my fingers so stiff, ready to choke the life out of you.” He released me, allowing me no more than a single gasp of air before he choked me again. His fingers circled my entrance,

lubricating themselves before they stroked the wetness over my clit, drumming and teasing, orbiting with perfect pressure until the edges of release shimmered within the world that darkened around me. “Now I finally have my fingers wrapped around your little neck, yet I cannot seem to close them tightly enough to end you. You should have died a dozen times at my hands. Why haven’t you, hmm?”

A rush of air barreled into my lungs just as he pressed down on my clit. It pushed me off the edge and straight into the twitching spasms of my release. My muscles contracted, my cunt squeezed. I coughed a ragged, hoarse whimper that once more cast me into blackness before, at my next full inhale, the room returned before my eyes brighter, more vibrant. Gods, nothing had ever felt this intense before...

“I will tell you why,” Malyr heaved by my ear as if he, too, had been suffocating alongside me, clasp my chin and turning my gaze back to meet his. “Because you’re my little dove, astonishingly beautiful, so fucking perfect with how I can strangle you to within inches of fainting and make you come all the harder for it.”

His hand shifted on my cheek, two fingers stroking into my mouth, wetting themselves. Slow and languid, Malyr reached them into his own mouth, lapping at them before his lips sealed over mine. The taste of him submerged my senses, letting everything fade away except for the sensual glide of lips and the passion roaring in the heated breaths between us.

Until his other hand landed on my neck, letting our kiss die on a wet smack before Malyr pushed my face down into an ocean of black velvet and sable mink. “Don’t you dare fucking move.”

Coldness wrapped around my arms, tugging them out from underneath me, sending a flutter of unease through my chest. It could only be his shadows that coiled around me with their icy tendrils, forcing my arms behind my back. There they kept them, tying me up, disabling me.

When Malyr reached around my hips and lifted my ass in the air, I nervously glanced over my shoulder, shifting around

to see. What was happening? What was he about to do? Would he take my asshole again like he did the last—

Slap.

Heat radiated over my rear to Malyr's yank on my hair, on which he pulled my head up, only to straighten my body before he shoved my face back into the fibers. "I said... do... not... move."

My panting breaths broke against the fine hairs of mink, fanning heat straight into my face. There was the harsh *hrrk* of strings pulling through grommets, the scrooping of cotton brushing over cotton, the *crunching* of fur beneath Malyr's knees. And a spitting sound. Warm wetness hitting the very end of my tailbone before it slowly ran over my asshole, tensing my muscles.

"I can tell you want my cock up your ass again; why else would that little hole clench like that?" Malyr's chuckle came with the sensation of his fingers swiping over the wet blob of saliva, spreading it lower, lubricating my entrance. "No, I know where you want me. And you will take me there without making a fuss, and you let me rut you like a good little slut. That's what you are when nobody is looking past the silk and shadowcloth I provide you. My little whore wife, so fucking perfect with how she begs me to hurt her, the way you whimper and moan will make fate itself blush."

His cock nudged at my entrance. With one lurching shove, he thrust inside me on a groan, the sharpness of the intrusion, of his thick cock, barely eased by how soaked I was. The searing pain ripped a whimper from me, interrupted by a hand that seized my throat.

Malyr pulled me up by it until my bound arms pressed into his heated chest and nipped a path from my chin to my ear. "Are you gripping Sebian's cock this tightly as well? Because that would explain why you have him this cunt-strapped." He drew back his hips, only to thrust upward again as he pulled me back onto his hard cock by my throat. "Goddess help me, I won't get ten thrusts with how good you feel."

His next few pumps came harder, faster. He snapped his hips with an urgency that bordered on an obsessed frenzy as he bit at my jawline between panting breaths. His fingers eased and tightened on my throat in erratic intervals, choking my mind into a dream-like spin. Each time he allowed me a morsel of breath, a rush of oxygen flooded my system, sending a tingle into every cell and a relentless, needy throb into my clit.

Nothing about this felt gentle.

Not the violent surges of his hips slamming into me, not the way his teeth clamped down on my skin with bruising strength, not the way my locked shoulders ached in the bound of shadows. And yet my belly clenched with need, making me writhe, making me arch my back.

Because it felt like love.

Terrible, star-crossed, painful love.

Malyr's hips locked and his entire body stilled with his jerking cock deep inside me, giving me a fraction of a warning before his flat palm slapped my clit with a noisy *whack*. "I should redden your hide for making me desire you the way I do. For robbing my sleep. For making my cock twitch, overly eager to come like a fucking untried youth." *Whack*. Another slap to my cunt as his fingers tightened on my throat. "Apologize."

I sucked in a little gasp of air, struggling the words through my trachea. "I'm... sorry."

His thumb pressed against the corner of my jaws, making me turn my face toward his, making me see the shadows that writhed beneath his skin. His tongue lapped at the corner of my mouth, swiped over my bottom lip, then teased my lips apart for a lustful kiss.

"Not nearly enough," he growled. "Not yet."

His hand slipped from my throat to my neck faster than I could register before he pushed my face back into the furs. Weight pressed down between my burning shoulder blades,

colliding with the cold of the surrounding shadows, letting a chill spread across my entire body.

Malyr's cock slammed into me, ruthlessly hammering in and out with such force, each thrust shoved my cheek across the furs as he groaned and grunted. His other hand dug into my hip like a vise, bracing me against the violent power of his body.

"Fucking hard, choking you, biting you, bleeding you, *hurting* you. I cannot help it, little dove; it is what I like," Malyr grunted behind me as ice-cold tendrils spread from my arms down along the sway of my ribs. "You cannot imagine how many women I had beneath me, forcing their cries into sad, pathetic moans. Lorn was the exception, if for the wrong reasons. But you...?" His hips stalled. His hand fisted my hair, yanking me up by it. "How can the man who made me like this have a daughter who takes all of me so perfectly, hmm? You nearly made me come again." Another whack at my clit. And gods, it sent a heat into my belly that made my cunt twitch with need. "Apologize."

I rolled my hips, hating how he wasn't moving. "I'm sorry."

"I am not," he whispered against my mouth, peppering my lips with gentle kisses here and there. "See, little dove, the only way I can possibly reconcile how much I want you, long for you, find myself annoyingly drawn to you like to no woman before in my life... *a Brisden*, no less," fingernails dug into the scar tissue on my chest, straining the puckered skin until it ached, "is by hurting you just a little bit more."

My face fell into the cushions right in time for me to moan my pleasure into the fibers as I arched my back. I wanted the hurt and the pain, wanted the sense of love it brought even more!

Malyr fucked into me hard, rolling his hips at each thrust. Shadows wandered along my belly and between my legs from there, slithering through my folds, whipping at my clit, playing around my asshole, working me toward the glistening height of bliss.

“Look at me.” Shifting his hips behind me, Malyr gripped my throat tightly, forcing me to look at his pitch-black eyes and the shadows that flickered behind him, around him, seemingly rising from the veins beneath his skin in smoke-like plumes. “Eyes on me, Galantia. Don’t you dare fucking move those hazel eyes from mine when I make you come on my cock while my shadows feast on your cunt.”

They tangled around my clit with the same force Malyr choked my throat, letting pressure build behind the organ as my vision speckled. It grew dark, darker still. Until, with a deep inhale and a rush of air, the intensity of it all made me burst. For the fraction of a second, my skin no longer fit me, and my entire body went up in flames.

Malyr grunted as he released my throat and grabbed my hip instead, just as my arms plopped down by my sides. With a final thrust, he buried his cock deep inside me, hips jerking uncontrollably with every twitch of his body. Spurt after spurt, his hard shaft throbbed against my clenched muscles as he filled me with his seed.

When the bliss and the shadows ebbed away, so did Malyr. He withdrew from me and rose, padding over to his tub, leaving me behind in cold silence.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-FIVE



Galantia

Present Day, Deepmarsh Castle, Malyr's rooms

I sat up in Malyr's nest of blankets, quickly grabbing my shift from where it had slipped between pillows, and held it against me as if it could ward-off the sudden drop in temperature. This situation was so strange, so unlike any before with no Sebian to take care of me. Should I leave now? Wait until Malyr sent me away? Which one?

From the hearth beside the tub, Malyr grabbed an iron pincer, poking through the ashes in search of the hot stones buried there. One after another, he lifted them and dropped them into the tub, letting them drown with a hiss so they may reheat the water. As if nothing had happened. Merely a little interruption that had delayed his bath.

Looking around and feeling lost, I rolled my aching shoulders. Perhaps this was where this love ended, in the

collision of painful passion and deranged desires, only to slowly trickle back into Malyr's honor-bound hate.

But the moment I got up and turned toward the door, the deep rumble of Malyr's voice stopped my feet. "No."

I clasped my shift tighter to my chest and looked over at him. "No?"

Pincer returned to the hearth and, with his eyes fixed on the tub, he gestured me over. "Get in the hot water or your muscles will be sore tomorrow."

I stared at him, flabbergasted. He was... concerned about me waking stiff and sore? The gods fetch him, this man never failed to confuse me by being a walking, breathing conundrum.

I dropped my shift and walked over, where I took his outreached hand for stability as I lifted my leg over the edge of the tub. My toes sank into the steaming water, ripping a moan from me at the pleasant warmth and the scent of herbs rising from the surface.

Malyr arched a brow at me. "Too hot?"

"Should it bother you if it was?" I croaked, my voice hoarse, and lifted my other leg over the edge before I sank into the water's soothing embrace. "Or is burning me one of the many other ways you will not kill me?"

A twitch hushed across his lips, so distorted by the shadows that I couldn't say if my comment annoyed or bemused him. "Apparently, I cannot be bothered to kill you at all. Did I not say as much only moments ago?"

Words spoken during passion that only slowly returned to me, now that I had full command of my lungs back, each confession more shocking than the one before. What if they were all true?

Malyr turned his naked self away from the tub and toward the hearth, presenting me a backside shaped to masculine perfection as he reached for firewood, which he tossed into the flames. For the first time in my life, I drank in the sight of his broad shoulders, his firm buttocks, the way the flames

reflected on the plains of muscles on his sweat-glistening stomach as he turned. Valleys of deep shadows furrowed between them, interrupted only by the lines of scars that marked his entire body to about mid-thigh.

It robbed nothing of his beauty, and only accentuated the power of a man in his prime, the virility he exuded. That was something he shared with Sebian. Both of them about the same significant height, but where the pathfinder always carried a hint of aloofness in his posture, Malyr's was straight and proud, at times even stiff. All attests to his royal upbringing, though he possessed none of the visible arrogance that often came with it.

His knot of hair bobbed at the top of his head as he rounded the tub to stand behind me, where he gave a pat on my shoulder, gesturing me to scoot forward. The moment I did, he climbed in, letting the water's surface rise higher along my breasts the deeper he sank. His long legs framed mine. His arm came around my middle, pulling me back against him, and not letting up until my head rested against his chest.

So strange...

From a stool that stood beside the tub held a silver cup, a folded letter, and a basin—filled with herbs, soaps, and flasks of oils—and he grabbed a sea sponge. He dunked it into the water before us, kneading it until it soaked and softened. Then he gingerly pressed it against my throat, but that didn't keep me from gasping at the pain that flared around the tendons lining it.

"You still feel me there," Malyr rasped and squeezed the sponge, letting the warm water trickle down and soothe sore flesh. "A decent man would sink his head in shame."

"But you're n—ugh!" A cough barreled from my lungs, punching swollen flesh on its way out.

Malyr noisily sucked an inhale through his mouth, dropping the sponge in the water in favor of reaching for the cup on the stool, which he held out before me. "Drink."

I took the tooled cup and placed the metal rim by my lips, letting small droplets of sweet wine wet my rough, parched trachea. “You’re no decent man.”

“No, I am not,” he said. “I cannot help but feel a sense of pride, eagerly awaiting the blossoming of my marks and bruises.”

He fished the sponge from the water. Brought it back up. Squeezed. Malyr tended to an ache that he himself had inflicted with such tranquilizing gentleness, the pain itself faded under the soothing comfort of his touch. The ardor that radiated from it seemed incongruous against it, yet it was there, a shimmer of love beneath the shadows of pain.

I returned the cup to the stool. “I’ve had worse.”

“Mm-hmm.” The sponge glided down between my breasts, circling the skull in understanding before it went below water. “Soon, you will travel to Tidestone. Asker already chose the deathweavers and fates who will accompany your carriage to the village Elken, where I arranged for you to have a day’s rest.”

“Thank you.” My muscles softened under the constant swells of warm water he squeezed from the sponge, caring for a wound not yet seen, but very much felt whenever I spoke or swallowed. “Long travels by carriage are exhausting.”

“So I was told. Your father’s men will escort you from Elken the rest of the way since he will not allow Ravens anywhere near Tidestone.” He slowly trailed the tip of his finger down the side of my throat, letting the dull pain flare. Another squeeze sent liquid warmth over the area, soothing it away. It was an odd sensation, as if he was saying *I love hurting you* and *I hate that I hurt you* all at once, his touch the most delicious contradiction. “You best not get caught, little dove. Your dowry didn’t make a dent in the expenses of the wedding preparations. Already, Ravens are arriving at Deepmarsh from all corners of the realm, eagerly awaiting three days of feasting, drinking, and merrymaking.”

“I still haven’t seen my wedding gown.”

“I have,” Malyr whispered with awe in his voice. “The gown is... magnificent. A neckline shaped of shadowy branches, decorated with chips of *aerymel* forming a nest for your scar before they twine down along the corset. Seven thousand black feathers decorate the train, and more are added each day, one plucked from each Raven arriving at Deepmarsh. The shoulder piece is entirely made of shifting shadowcloth, forming the illusion of a moving set of black wings, the edges lined with my plumes. And, um... these arrived today.” He took the folded letter from the stool, letting the parchment darken between his damp fingers as a bright feather emerged from the crease. “I have yet to decide if it should be added to the dress or not, unity be damned.”

I took in the feather, not so much white but more of a creamy alabaster, though the hue could have come from the warm light of the nearby fire. Some of the vanes had come apart, and the downy patch toward the bottom of the shaft appeared rather sparse. Behind it, on the parchment, letters in Old Vhaer slithered across in black ink.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Lord Corvun’s feather, former ravenguard to my family, who deserted the battlefield during the siege on Valtaris to hide among humans,” he ground out. “Old age and sickness keep him from attending the wedding in person, or so his letter says. It might as well be the fact that I ought to see him hang.”

“A ravenguard? But...” I squinted as if it might return color to its vanes. “It’s creamy.”

“As is his hair. Used to be, anyway; although, it is safe to assume that age has now turned it white,” he said. “Corvin is a white raven, little dove.”

“I’ve never heard of that before.”

“They’re exceptionally rare, but animals with the same condition have been reported among other birds, foxes, even a wolf, if rumors can be trusted,” he said. “Corvin is a deathweaver, his shadows like the smoke of burning straw. Poor fliers. Weak feathers, their vanes easily damaged.” With a sigh, he put the letter and feather back on the stool. “Darien

will insist on using it on the dress in lieu of the geese feathers he's had servants pluck. A single white feather among an ocean of black."

It sounded beyond beautiful...

For a second, I closed my eyes, picturing myself wearing the gown. Drop for colorful drop, the image expanded with rough outlines of blurry people and places, creating a backdrop for a possible future. A castle, a realm at peace, rich harvests. And there I sat, on a queen's throne beside Malyr, while I held my husband's hand, donning black feathers that perfectly matched the midnight hair of the little boy sitting on my lap. One who gleamed up at me from gray-brown eyes, causing such a twinge in my heart, longing filled my chest. Could we ever be that?

I slowly turned as not to send any water over the rim of the tub, and faced Malyr's curious expression, his head slightly cocked the way his ravens sometimes did. My fingers lifted from the water, leaving droplets on his forehead that ran down his temples while I stroked my nails through his strands. They made quick work of opening the leather that tied up his knot, letting Malyr's hair cascade down, returning that solemn, guarded look to his features.

When I partitioned four strands, he jerked away from my touch, head tilting just a little as he lifted an almost accusing brow. "What are you doing, little dove?"

Touching him for a purpose other than to ward him off, but to seek a connection with him that might lead to such a future. "Braiding your hair. It won't be—"

His hands shot from the water, letting it splash before they gripped my wrists, but not painfully so, stalling my efforts. Yet he said nothing. Only stared at me, his pupils flitting about my face, his chest lifting faster at how his breathing had suddenly altered. Perhaps this was too intimate, too affectionate, too close to that shimmer he so rarely revealed?

But it was the shimmer beneath the shadows I was after, so I didn't let his reaction deter me, and gathered the strands against the way he held my wrists. "If you turned around—"

“I will not.”

“Fine, have it your way,” I said, lifting the first strand over the other, which caused his grip to loosen. “It’ll be your head carrying a crooked braid, not mine.”

Malyr stared at me for another three weaving motions. At the fourth tug on a strand, his stare wavered, only for his eyes to flutter shut on a moan as his hands slipped off my wrists and returned to the water. Did he enjoy this? Me touching him?

“My mother braided my father’s hair every morning,” he said, his voice suddenly deeper as though weighed down by pleasure. “I remember... stumbling along the corridor, the sun coming through the tinted glass of the windows, casting blue flickers on the stone floor, and into my parents’ bedchamber. And there she sat in tranquil silence, every morning, grooming his hair.”

Perhaps it was the intimacy of that memory that had made him jerk back at first. “Your parents loved each other?”

“Very much so.” A moment’s silence as his eyes opened and locked with mine. “My father was a... a harsh man, and my mother his soft counterpart. Fate always makes it so, creating the perfect bond that runs deeper than death.”

My fingertips tingled each time I ran them over Malyr’s scalp to gather up more hair, his strands so straight and strong, there was something almost spellbinding in manipulating them. “Tell me of Valtaris. I’ve never even seen drawings of it.”

“Imagine sways of hills, perfectly situated to offer plenty of sun to the crops that grow there.” Beneath the water, his palms settled on my hips, running a path to my buttocks, up to my waist, and back again. “Grapes as well, making the sweetest red in all the lands. Their flattened peaks abut the base of the mountain on which stands Valtaris, a sprawling city that stretches over the entire range. It takes a day and a half to walk the tarred road from one end to the other. Beside it, buildings rise as many as three-stories high, built of white travertine and topped with shingles of *aerymel*.”

“I’ve never seen such a thing as black shingles.”

“It is stunning, how they sparkle. The sun heats the shingles, which keeps the city pleasantly warm even in winter, when we lift the wind walls. In summer, we lower them, letting the breeze dance through the city and take away the heat.” Reverence returned to his tone. The same one when he’d spoke about Naya, so full of love and longing. Until he swallowed it down with a visible bob of his throat, letting his voice return, somber and austere. “It is all lost to the shadows now.”

“Can you tell me where they came from? The shadows?”

He took a slow, deep inhale, letting one hand run up to cup my breast. “I can tell you that no deathweaver is strong enough to command them, no void alive empty enough to take them in. Valtaris is forever lost.” He sighed. “And so, I must take Ammarett in its stead.”

I lifted the braid, grabbed the leather tie from the edge of the tub, and wrapped it around the end. “And crown yourself king.”

“And crown myself king.” His eyes held mine captive as he stroked his hand over my waist, tugging me toward him. His lips parted as if he marveled me, yet there was the slightest shake on his head. “You should turn around.”

My skin pebbled down my upper arms at the sudden grating in his voice. His fingers dug into my waist, contradicting his words, as if animosity and affection warred between his head and hands. His gaze dropped to the crown of his cock that poked out from the water’s surface, plump and swollen for me, the way one corner of his mouth twitched reminding me of what he’d said earlier. *I should redden your hide for making me desire you the way I do.*

“And what if I want you to look at me?” What if I sat myself on his cock and pressed my thighs tightly against him, leaving him no choice, lest he would drown me in this tub? “To forget who I am and start seeing what we could be, if only you allowed it?”

Something flickered in his eyes, or perhaps it was the reflection of the flames from the hearth, but they darkened at the next moment as his hand lifted from the water, undoubtedly to bodily turn me around. “You would not survive the kind of pain I would need to inflict on you to indemnify such a betrayal to my—”

I hooked my hand around his neck, rose onto my knees, and worked myself onto his lap with such speed, water splashed in all directions and flooded over the edge. It wasn't a planned move, how I grabbed his cock with my other hand, positioned it at my entrance, and slid down his hard shaft with a wanton boldness that shocked me.

Shocked him more.

Eyes wide, Malyr released an almost agonized groan when I humped my hips against him, guided by sheer instinct. His hands gripped my waist, trembling there for one rolling motion, two, three. At the fourth, they pressed me down on his cock just as his pelvis thrust upward, lifting me slightly out of the water, only to lower and let me drown in pleasure.

“Damn you, Galantia,” he snapped, gliding one warm hand up to my throat, giving a single squeeze in warning. “Don't make me hurt you even more tonight.”

I forced down a swallow, bracing for impending pain before I leaned forward with the next roll of my pelvis, letting my throat sink deeper into the ache of his knuckles. “Then hurt me. Hurt me... but *look* at me.”

His fingers curled around my trachea, released, tightened again, only to slip to the back of my neck. Malyr gave a yank, pulling my face to his. Our lips collided in a kiss that made my stomach cave, only to fill with wicked pleasure at each shared rhythmic roll of our hips. We came together at each thrust, letting our breath become one in the moans we shared, but our eyes remained open, vigilant.

Hate. Bitterness. Loathing.

It all ceased to exist in the space where his gaze connected to mine, transforming into something vulnerable and painfully

raw, a shimmering tide of unspoken words and hidden sentiments, a tumultuous dance of shadows and light, flickering and blazing within those icy depths.

And it continued to flicker as he kissed a path from my chin to my scar, his eyes locked on mine. His arm tightened around my back. His tongue trailed a wet path along the raised outlines. His lips placed kisses into the unmarred areas of the skull and wings. *I hate that I hurt you.*

Until he set his teeth to it.

I love hurting you.

There was a moment of inaction, not so much hesitation as it was Malyr allowing me to prepare for what was to come. Allowing me to see it in those two-colored eyes that held me captive, an icy rim around a flicker of warmth. He bit down on my scar with such force, pain stabbed straight into my core, driving up my pulse until it throbbed between my legs.

The pleasure that washed over me was so exquisite, I cried out when I came. “Malyr...”

Malyr followed, hips jerking so uncontrollably beneath me, the rivulet of blood that ran down my chest trembled toward the left before it flowed down over my nipple. Yet he kept his eyes on me, as if he wanted me to see what he could not say.

There was no hate.

Only a shimmer.

When his bloodied mouth dislodged from my chest, I cupped his cheek and spread the crimson over his bottom lip, not at all surprised when his tongue darted out to lap at it. “You said you watched me from the underbrush in the past. When was that?”

“A long time ago,” he said, and gave a suckle on my bloodied finger. “At the beach behind Tidestone, the day Lorn and I escaped the dungeons.”

So they had escaped together, just like I thought, which explained the connection they’d forged over it. “How did you

escape?”

“By wanting to die and not caring who would die alongside me,” he said, his tone so flat and somber, my heart ached at the level of agony one had to endure to reach such a point. “By letting my shadows pour out of me uncontrolled, embracing death. But they didn’t kill me, nor Lorn. I managed to grab the keys from the jailor’s breeches where he’d hung it on the gate right beside his blackened corpse. Together, we ran for the cliffs.”

My throat thickened. “That’s where you saw me.”

“Saw you playing, running, and laughing while I bled, hurt, and fevered nearby,” he said. “It seemed so... unreal, unfair. Made me furious beyond measure.”

Planting hate at his core for me that had only grown over the years. “Maybe we are truly fated only to end in emotional tragedy...”

“Little dove,” his whisper came with a salty kiss to my lips before he straightened and placed his own by my ear, “love *is* tragedy.”

I hate that I love you.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-SIX



Malyr

Past, Tidestone

My lungs ached as I sprinted through the dense copse of trees, their gnarled trunks blurring together in my frantic flight. Each gasp I took was like swallowing shards of glass when the frigid air collided with my heated, rattling chest. Fever... it must have been a fever.

At my next step, a hidden root snared around my foot, ripping at old cuts and infected wounds. I stumbled, unable to catch my footing. The world tilted, and my shoulder slammed into the hard ground. My head collided with the spongy remnants of a fallen trunk, and pain exploded in white-hot flashes across my skull.

“Malyr!” Lorn stepped up beside me, groaning as she bent over, one hand placed on her swollen belly, the other reaching for my arm, shaking me. “Get up! We have to—” A howl had her gaze snap back toward where we’d come from. “They’re

chasing the hounds after us. We have to make it to the top of the cliff, Malyr. Now!”

Despite the nausea, despite the chills that incessantly bit at my sweaty skin, I forced myself to rise, brushing away the disorientation and pain. Yes, we had to make it to the highest part of the cliff and jump. Emaciated as we were, it was our only chance at a shift. Our only chance at death should it fail, the thought of my body shattering on the rocks almost comforting.

Another howl.

Panic threaded through every sinew as we kept running, the salty taste of freedom so near, yet tinged with the acrid fear of recapture. My heart hammered in my chest, oddly out-of-tune, setting a frantic tempo that echoed in my ears and reverberated through my brittle bones, my once sturdy frame worn down to nothing but gaunt remnants.

When Lorn fell behind, I took her hand, but pulling her with me at a faster pace wasn't possible. Not with how one arm cradled that filthy unborn half-blood they'd fucked into her, her other arm fighting for balance whenever she struggled over trunks, through vines, and around boulders. It wouldn't be an issue much longer.

If we hit the rocks, it would die.

If she shifted in her state, it would die.

And there would never be another...

Laughter, bright and carefree, drifted up from the bay below—a sound I'd all but forgotten after all this time in the harrowing silence of the dungeons. It felt like an assault to my senses, an affront to my panic... until it eased said panic away. My desperate pace came to a complete stop, my gaze drawn to the spectacle unfolding below as Lorn's hand slipped from mine.

Down on the beach, bathed in the late afternoon glimmer of the setting sun, a girl spun along the white ripples of waves, her bare feet kicking up sprays of sand while some woman frantically ran behind her. My breath hitched at the sight, at the

girl's bright blonde tresses that whipped around her face at each spin, a strange pull tugging beneath my ribs.

“Malyr...” Lorn waited several feet ahead of me, desperation written across her bruised face as she waved me toward her. “What are you doing? You have to run!”

Yes, I had to run.

I should have never stopped.

My eyes went back to the girl as my mind blurred and my upper body swayed. I watched as she pirouetted through a flock of gulls, her light spirit a stark contrast with the heavy, gnawing darkness lodged within me. The sight of her childish innocence felt like a slap to my sunken-in face, the echo of her laughter a cruel reminder of everything that had been ripped from me by her kind. She was one of them.

Human.

I wanted to forgive her even that.

Because she was beautiful beyond words, rousing a reaction in my body that made me feel dirty, filthy, reminding me of how tainted I was. So unlike her. She was but a child, flat-chested and scrawny, not a single sway of a feminine curve in sight. So why did I keep staring?

“Oh child, what are you doing? Your hair. Your hair!” the woman chasing after her shouted, trying to grab the girl but failing each time she slinked away. “Put those ribbons back in this instance!”

“No! I hate it pinned back and want it open! Look, Risa! Up there!” She pointed at a bird soaring in the sky above her, its flight seeming to mirror the girl's dance. “You see how fast that white seagull is?”

My ears pricked at something in the tone of her voice, and I looked up and over at the sky that hung over the bay. Not a seagull... a white dove.

Like her.

“Oh, child, if you as much as cut your toe on a seashell, your mother will get a megrim over it. Back to the castle with

you, right—oh no, don't you go running away from me! Your mother does not permit you to run!" The woman struggled behind the girl toward the rocky path that led up here. "Galantia!"

That name wafted upward from the beach, searing into my consciousness like a branding iron, burning through it like a fever dream, the four syllables a death knell to the strange enchantment that had ensnared me.

Galantia.

Brisden's daughter.

I'd heard her name in the dungeons, and that realization crashed into me like a tidal wave, the icy shock of it stealing my breath, replacing the odd heat with a raw, scraping coldness. The dichotomy was jarring, a violent clash between the serene vision of her and the nightmarish echo of her name. How could the goddess show me such a mesmerizing creature bearing the name of my personal demon?

She's a Brisden.

The moment shattered at the mere thought of that name, the shards of a broken illusion biting deep, sowing the seeds of an ire that quickly bloomed into ferocious loathing. A hate I hadn't known before ignited within me, fueling my loathing for this girl. For how she had frolicked and thrived mere feet from me while I had repeatedly been used, spoiled, broken beyond repair.

My gaze followed Galantia's sprightly figure as she danced away from the lapping waves, taking a meandering path that led her straight toward me. My pulse thrummed with predatory anticipation. With hope that the girl might wander close enough for me to act on the icy fury that gnawed at my heart.

"Malyr, we need to go." Lorn's voice was a desperate whisper, but her plea fell on deaf ears. "Someone's coming."

Yes.

She was coming.

To me.

The world around me narrowed down to the singular path Galantia seemed to be drawn toward, a little white dove for prey that was growing closer with every blissfully ignorant step she took. I could almost feel the fragile weight of her skull in my hands, the imagined snap a cathartic symphony playing in my tormented mind.

I wanted to kill her!

A dark satisfaction stirred within me as I nestled deeper into the underbrush, pressing my sweat-damp body barely covered in rags against the trunk of a birch, whispering to myself, “Come to me... Just one more step, and I’ll break your fucking neck, little white dove.”

I stood quietly, poised on the knife’s edge, the girl’s life hanging by a thread, my hands aching to sever it where my shadows had grown too weak to do it. The sweetness of her laughter rang through the air, a bitter taunt in my ears, fueling the consuming need for revenge. Galantia of House Brisden would pay for the sins of her father. A Khysal would be her demise.

The world seemed to slow, suspended in a paradoxical moment where time was both irrelevant and everything. Galantia was close, so close I could reach out and touch her if I chose to. I could hear her breathing, feel the vibrations of her joy as they seeped into the ground beneath my feet.

My arm stretched out.

My balance shifted.

“Oh,” she said and knelt by a patch of clover, her back now turned on me, plucking a lonely white flower. “A pretty daisy like you shouldn’t be all alone out here. You’ll like my room.”

“Galantia!” the woman shouted from somewhere nearby, fueling my hate. “The hounds are out. We have to get back before your father finds us here!”

Oh, he would find his daughter... Would find her little body unmoving on the ground, her head strangely angled, her

eyes desolate.

I leaned forward.

I lifted my arm.

A strange force wrapped tightly around my chest, squeezing it painfully. My hand shook, sweat dampened my forehead, the underbrush blurred. Only the fever. Nothing but the fever.

Do it.

Kill her!

I reached for her neck, only for my finger to sink lower. My digit brushed over a tousled nest of blonde strands, too gentle for her to notice. It was so soft, so bright. Goddess help me, why was she so beautiful?

My hand shook harder.

My muscles locked.

A silent roar of frustration tore through me. I wanted to kill her; I did! But I couldn't do it, and I couldn't do it, and I couldn't fucking do it!

And I hated her all the more for it.

With a primal growl ripping from my chest that had her turn, fall, and scramble away with kicking legs, I tore away back toward the cliffs. My heart pounded violently against my ribs as if trying to escape the cage of my chest, mimicking my desperate need for escape from this place, this memory, this... girl.

“Lorn!” I reached out for her, finding Lorn’s hand in the obscurity of panic. Her grasp was icy, yet it was the only source of reality that seemed to make sense in the chaos. “Don’t let go of my hand, you hear me?” I said, our fingers intertwining tightly. “Do not let go.”

With a final glance back toward Galantia, who’d been smart enough to run back to the beach, I turned toward the yawning expanse of the cliff, the drop a void of nothingness that promised freedom or death or both.

And then, we jumped.

The salty spray of the waves beneath bit at the wounds on my soles. A shout ripped from my throat, part terror and part exhilaration. The shift came as naturally as breathing. My skin gave way to sleek black feathers, my body distorting and reshaping until, in a burst of black shadows, my unkindness cawed.

Lorn's ravens flew right beside us.

Together, we beat our wings, our croaks merging with the rumble of the waves. That, and the echo of laughter, a haunting melody that would forever remind me of the girl who should have died at my hands.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-SEVEN



Sebian

Present Day, Deepmarsh Castle

Eight days.

Eight fucking days wasted, freezing my tail feathers off—three to fly up north, and nearly double that to get back to where I should have stayed in the first place. Whichever pathfinder had reported Domren’s sighting far outside the walls of Ammarett had caused me eight nights of roosting between frigid winds instead of between Galantia’s warm legs. If I found out who that blind fool was, I was going to pluck him bare!

Because Domren hadn’t been there.

I brushed the light dusting of snow from the shoulder pieces of my cuirass as I strode along the corridor, eyes going to Galantia’s chamber door. The sun had only just peeked up behind the white-capped pines that lined the marsh toward the east, so she might still be asleep. Hopefully. I couldn’t wait to climb under the blanket, wrap myself around her from behind,

and soak in her warmth. But not until I had the name of that incompetent pathfinder...

I invited myself into Malyr's chambers, ears immediately twitching at the strangest sound. Not for the rustling of parchment that indicated he was already at his desk—he'd been struggling with insomnia for several weeks now. No, it was his muffled laugh, dull and breathy, as if he'd released it into a crumpled piece of cotton. I'd only heard him laugh twice before—both times I thought his mind was about to crumble.

The moment I stepped into his personal room, my feet froze right along with my heart, as if the chill of the north had followed me home. Galantia wasn't in her chambers... because she sat at Malyr's desk. On. His. Lap.

"I got it all wrong again, didn't I?" she asked as she glanced over her shoulder back at him, dressed in nothing but her long-sleeved shift and a black scarf wrapped loosely around her neck. Oh, and Malyr's wool-knitted quilt was draped over both of them, painting a surreal picture, but it persisted no matter how often I blinked. "These two are just so difficult to tell apart."

"Yes, they seem very similar at first glance, but if you pay attention to the sway down here..." Malyr's hand settled on Galantia's, a quill clasped between her fingers, and slowly guided it to glide across the parchment before them. "You feel this? *Zé* is less elongated and more rounded at the bottom, like a lazy roll on a gentle drift during a summer morning. The letters of Old Vhaer are based on flight movements. Try again."

Galantia nodded, which let her beautiful blonde tresses shift on her shoulders before she lifted the quill out of Malyr's touch, only to place it back on the parchment. She squinted as she gave it all her focus, gliding the tip over it. When it came to a stop, she looked back at Malyr once more.

"Did I do it?" she asked with a cheeky grin.

Malyr's lips parted, and he ran his tongue along the upper corner of his teeth, making it look like he was about to bite,

but no, it was an actual fucking smile. “Make a zé? No. But after five cups of wine, someone cross-eyed might let it pass as a gé.”

Galantia laughed.

Malyr laughed.

What the fuck was going on here?

The longer I watched them, the heavier my breaths became. Since when did Malyr spend time with Galantia outside of tormenting or fucking her? What had happened between them during those eight damn days that he stroked his fingers into her hair and to the back of her head without a yank? And why did he lower his face to hers, closing his eyes as if he was about to—

Oh, shit, he was kissing her.

My lungs caved, refusing another draw of air until the lack of oxygen blurred the sight of how he devoured her mouth. How he rose with her, letting the chair legs groan and the quilt fall as he placed her onto the parchment. How he gathered her shift, shoved his trousers down, spread her thighs for him. All while he kissed her, both moaning so loudly into each other’s mouths, it snapped me out of my trance.

He kissed her.

I stammered in a lungful of air, breathing through that sudden stickiness in my chest that shouldn’t be there. She wasn’t mine... could never be. What claim did I have on her? None. What right did I have to interfere? None.

But I did anyway, stepping into the room, rubbing over that damn tightness in my chest that refused to go away. “Things are awfully cheerful around here this morning.”

Galantia jumped at the sound of my voice, and her hazel eyes found mine. “Sebian!”

“You’re back early,” Malyr said, his tone a little too flat for my taste, but at least he had the decency to put his cock away and brush her shift down. “I did not expect your return for another two days.”

“Clearly not,” was all I said as I looked about the room first, then toward his nest. Discarded cups. Candles melted down to the wick. Platters with fruits and bread. Whitish snail trails all over the black pillows and blankets. Goddess be damned, had they spent eight days in his nest, fucking? “Who was the pathfinder that reported the sighting of Prince Domren outside the walls of the capital? That bastard wasn’t in the north.”

Malyr helped Galantia to slip off the desk, then looked at me with a bored kind of expression I wanted to punch. “His banners.”

“What?”

“The pathfinder spotted... *his banners*...” he enunciated as if I was fucking slow or something, all while Galantia walked toward me. “Reports never said anything about Domren himself. You know full well that scouts are to remain at a safe distance, making it impossible to confirm or deny his presence within his own banners.”

There was a twitch in my left eye. “Are you saying that I spent eight fucking—”

Galantia wrapped her arms around me, taking me into a hug that was a little too stiff, a little too short. “I’m so glad you came back unharmed.”

Unharmed? It had taken me less than fifteen minutes to realize that Domren wasn’t there before I’d headed back, my arrows utterly useless and my balls frozen solid, thank you very much. And Malyr couldn’t have been bothered to give all that a mention?

I breathed through the anger in my chest.

None of that was her fault, so I lifted my arm to pull Galantia deep into me. Goddess help me, I just wanted to grab her, hide us under the blanket, and spend the morning inside her. But before I managed my fingers on her shoulder, she took a step away, taking with her all that warmth I so desperately needed. Why so distant?

Beneath the fur in my bracers, an after chill buried along my skin, lifting the hairs along my arms as if my ravens wanted to ruffle their feathers, eyes going to Malyr. “Why didn’t you make me aware of all this before I headed north?”

“It’s not like you left me much of an opportunity to bring it up,” he said and walked up to me. “The moment I marked the map, you flew off without another word. Even left Galantia standing and waiting by the stables, as if your *sweetheart* wasn’t worth a quick goodbye.” I might have considered that pat he gave on my shoulder as condescending, wasn’t it for how that last part drove shame into my rounding spine. “I will be in my library.”

The moment he disappeared through the set of doors, I looked back at Galantia, seeing the dismay over how I’d left written across her hardened features. “I’m sorry I left without saying a word.”

“I understand, and I’m sorry that it didn’t work out,” she said, trundling up a smile, as lovely as ever but somehow weak around the edges. “You want revenge, saw an opportunity, and took it. They don’t come by nearly as often as the chance of spending a day at the cliffs...”

Well, that summed it up rationally, but did nothing to soften the disappointment on her features. “It’s no excuse to just leave without telling you. I really wanted to take you to the ocean that day, so you could see us fly and tumble.”

“Oh, I did,” she said, the corners of her mouth lifting higher, returning the usual radiance to her smile. “Malyr was kind enough to take me instead. We saw...”

Her words faded into nothing but disjointed noise. Something about a girl. Chainmail. Salt. All I could focus on were the words, *Malyr* and *kind*, and how both were used in the same sentence, such a contradiction, it melted my fucking brain away.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa...” I lifted my hand, which silenced her. “What do you mean, he took you?”

She shrugged, throwing her hands up right along with the motion as if any of this was supposed to make sense. “Malyr found me by the stables where I waited for you. He told me you’d left, then he took me to the cliffs instead.”

That stickiness in my chest turned to tar.

Heavy, viscid, disgusting tar.

My mind went back to that day and how Malyr had brought up Domren. How he hadn’t made a single mention of the chance that the bastard might not even have been there, but how he had eagerly marked the map, anyway. How, all the while, his horse—which he rarely rode and never for the amusement of humans—had stood saddled and ready in the stables as if...

Oh goddess, help me, what an idiot I was.

“That bastard planned to take you there all along,” I muttered low, feeling like twice the fool over how easily he’d managed me out of the way. Why had he? What was all this about? “Goddess help me, I shouldn’t have left. Shouldn’t have left you alone with *him*.”

Shouldn’t have let him kiss her...

“What are you talking about?” Galantia wrapped her arms around herself, fingers mindlessly playing with the edges of her scarf as she frowned at me. “He gave me a wonderful day, Sebian.”

Which was half the fucking problem here, but for reasons I couldn’t quite grasp yet. “This is all so strange... Finding you like this with him.”

Remnants of her smile vanished, seemingly chewed away between her shifting jaws. “We grew... closer while you were gone.”

“Closer?” A laugh burst from my lungs, but I wasn’t feeling amused in the slightest, my voice dripping with bitterness. “Yeah, I could see that when you fucking... *devoured* each other on that damn desk.”

He kissed her!

Goddess help me, why did my chest ache?

“You didn’t seem to have an issue with sharing me when you left.” Her expression hardened. “At least he kisses me instead of turning away from it at every chance.”

That shut me up for a second or two. She had a point. For weeks, she’d wanted my kiss. For weeks, I’d refused her, giving Malyr ample opportunity to just... slither into the that space where she was the most vulnerable. She wanted me to kiss her? I would!

“You have no fucking idea how many times I wanted to!” I grabbed her middle and pulled her against me, tightly, loving the way her weight hung on my arm as if her legs were about to give out. “You want me to kiss you, sweetheart, hmm?”

She nodded in frantic little bobs, nervously wetting her lips, her breathing strained and erratic. “Yes.”

I stared at her lips; those peachy, tempting lips that quivered the closer I came with my own. Our breaths melded into heady longing. Our hearts pounded against each other where my chest pressed into hers. I wanted this, and I didn’t give a shit if it was wrong. I could do this!

Until my lips touched hers, full and warm and puffy and soft and giving, reminding me of how they could never truly preen... and... and...

I couldn’t do it.

I pulled back right then, just in time to watch Galantia’s lips pout toward empty air for less than a second before her eyes snapped open and found mine. “I’m sorry, I just...”

Couldn’t give her that...

When my voice trailed off, she stepped back and hooked a finger into her scarf, tugging the fabric down low enough that dark red marks and purple bruises peeked out from behind it. “You don’t have to explain. Malyr already told me.”

My eyes shot back to hers right then, stomach clenching as if someone had punched me in the guts. “Told you what?”

“That kisses are special to your kind, since they’re reserved for one’s mate,” she said, which soothed my pulse into something less panicked, but only slightly. “We both know I can never be that for you.”

That tar dripped down along my ribcage, staining my core black because she had no idea how that didn’t even scratch the surface of how difficult this was for me. There was so much she didn’t know, so much she wouldn’t understand.

Neither was now a good time to try her.

She’d backed away from me already—clearly upset, perhaps even a bit heartbroken—the air between us frigid. I didn’t like it. Didn’t like how we were with each other right now. Maybe I couldn’t give her a kiss, but what about other things? Falling to sleep together? Waking together? Taking care of her?

I’d given her all that, hadn’t I?

And gladly!

I opened the buckles on my cuirass as if it would help my chest expand, not liking how fucking... emotional this was getting. I reached for her scarf, giving a little tug until I managed a good look at... What the fuck was I looking at? A bite mark?

I couldn’t help but shake my head at the sight. “He fucking bit into your scar?”

“It’s fine,” she said as if it was merely a love nibble. “And it’s not what you think.”

“Oh, sweetheart, you can’t begin to imagine what exactly I’m thinking right about now. Let me see this.” Another tug on the fabric revealed two scabbing marks where his teeth must’ve punctured skin, though purple-blue bruises colored the outline of his bite print. “This is fucking awful.”

Galantia shoved my finger off, tugging the scarf back over it as if Malyr’s bite mark was something precious that needed covering and cradling. “I said it’s fine.”

“None of this is *fine*.” Everything was different from how I left it, leaving me desperate to reconnect with her, to show her that I might not kiss, but I did care for her deeper than I’d realized until now. “How long ago did this—”

“Stop fussing about it!”

All blood left my face, letting my cheeks prickle with the onset of numbness. “I just meant to help.”

“I know,” she said, her features finally softening as her gaze lowered to the ground. “But it’s not needed. He didn’t do it in malice or in a flare of temper. I... I wanted this.”

“You... wanted him to bite your scar?” I’d never much judged Malyr’s sexual urges, or questioned why they were how they were, but this? “That’s a new sort of deranged.”

“I don’t expect you to understand.” She threw a hand up as if she didn’t quite understand it either, and then turned toward the window by the desk. “At first, when he hurt me, there was only pain. Then, it aroused me. But now...” A sigh. “There’s something more to the pain, the hate, the resentment. Something I always wanted.”

Strange how, against the dropping of my stomach and the numbness that spread across my skin, my first thought was that Malyr had to be a damn good kisser. So good, he’d actually managed to make her think this wayward dynamic between them was love—or, at least, something on the verge of it.

Just like I’d feared.

I swallowed past a lump in my throat, feeling sorry for her and me right along with it because... Where did this leave me? “You know, you can never be *that* for Malyr, either.”

She swung around, deep vertical wrinkles set between her glistening eyes. “Why do you have to say that, hmm?”

Because he had stirred her up against me as if he had any truer claim to her that wasn’t based on politics and negotiations. “All I’m trying to tell you is that you should be careful around Malyr and question his motives.”

“Question his...” She gripped the train of her shift as if her level of perplexity required her to cling to something. “What about *your* motives, Sebian?”

“Oh, my motives are in question now? Mine?” The only man of two who actually cared about her in a way I hadn’t in years? So many *lonely* years. “From the moment I took you, I looked after you as well as I could, didn’t I?”

“And why, pray tell, might that have been?” A lift of her chin. “The time a man has to wait before he can kill his enemy is well-spent between the legs of his enemy’s betrothed.”

My jaws locked up so fast and hard that my ears twitched, because that sure as shit sounded like the stuff that came out of Malyr’s mouth. “I’ll chance a guess. He told you?”

“Does that make it any less true?”

“No.” But it made me wonder all the more why he’d clearly been busy these last eight days, driving a wedge between Galantia and me, putting a heavy burden on our friendship. “I wanted you to fucking scream my name when I made you come, and have it echo in your head while that bastard Domren failed to get you there. The difference being that I could discern between you and Domren while, to Malyr, you *are* and always *will be* a Brisden.”

“And yet, at times, I can make him forget,” she murmured.

“Do you know that Cici came out of his chambers the morning I left?” I asked, if only in a pitiful attempt to turn this shit right back around on him. “She looked a tad... disheveled.”

For the fraction of a second, her lips turned into a narrow line, but she nodded it away. “He told me that he spoke to her. Malyr sent wagonloads of grains and food to Tidestone, to ensure the army he needs is fed come spring, yes, but also to reassure me of his *motives*. Lord Taradur is overseeing the safe transport.”

“Malyr extending a kindness toward your father, even if it gives him a slight benefit?” My stomach gave a strange roil, almost like a warning from my guts, because I didn’t believe

that for a fucking second. “If anything, Malyr personally drilled holes into the wagons to have it all spill on the way there.”

“Well, I guess we’ll find out once it arrives sometime after my visit with my parents,” she said. “I tried finding fault in his motives, Sebian. I really did. But I couldn’t. And I’m no longer trying.”

Yeah, Malyr had obviously kissed her wits goodbye, because something about this story didn’t add up. “When did he command the food be transported to Tidestone?”

She shrugged. “The day you left, I presume? Like I said, the decision somehow came out of the conversation with Cici, which was why she was in his chambers in the first place.”

“And when did he tell you about the arrival time?”

“Same day. At the cliffs.”

The day Malyr had spilled ink over a handful of snowflakes...

My gaze trailed to the window. Or more precisely, to the white blanket of snow beyond it. Flying the distance between the southern stores and Tidestone took about five days. No amount of horses could pull that through snow and muck in the timeline she suggested.

Which meant that something was going on here that required Malyr to cause strife between Galantia and me—something he kept me in the dark about. Luckily, now I knew exactly where to go looking.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-EIGHT



Galantia

Present Day, Deepmarsh Castle

The soft morning sun cast glimmers over the powdery snow that blanketed the meadow beside the castle, except for the muddy-brown, circular trail Lial had stomped into the ground beneath us. Each of his trotting steps jostled me around on his back, making me look like a straw doll as I slipped and shifted in the saddle.

Not so much Malyr, who sat behind me, gracefully flowing along with the choppy steps as he let a disgruntled exhale blow into my hair and tug on the strands. “Go with the movement.”

Another jolt tossed me a few inches out of the saddle and, when I came back down, made my ass bump against the upthrust of the gelding’s spine, which had me curl my hand around the pommel. “There’s nothing flowing about—”

“Hands off the pommel.” He slapped my hand away—for the fifth time—sending a searing pain into knuckles already

red from previous punishment. “There is no balance to be found there. It has to come from your spine when it aligns with his.”

My molars ground together in frustration. “Oh, I’m aligning myself with his spine perfectly, coming down with my ass on it each time he seems to lift it, which catapults me right back out of the saddle.”

Another sighing exhale, then Malyr gave the command that let Liual slow into a walk. More jostling followed, the disappearance of forward thrust so sudden, my upper body hinged at the hip. It nearly tossed me over the horse’s neck, wasn’t it for how I grabbed the pommel.

“You are concerned about your rear, whereas I am starting to fear for my horse’s back.” Malyr ripped the reins from my fingers, fisted them about two hand-widths above their ends, stopped Liual, and—*whack!* “Hands off the pommel.”

My whipped fingers splayed out and my hands lifted off the saddle, stiffly hovering over it as the most curious pain spread across their backs like icy-hot tendrils. On the right one, where the leather ends had struck the hardest, the reddened skin started to welt ever so slightly. The sight injected a thrill into the pain, amplified by the way Malyr lifted one hand to my throat, making my head tilt sideways with no more but a little stub of his thumb against my jaw.

“I want you to loosen up those stubbornly stiff hips of yours and start rocking them like you did in the bathtub when you fucked me, and make sure your ass stays glued to this saddle for an entire circle,” he growled along the exposed side of my neck, letting his warm breath caress me through that tingle between my legs. “But if you separate even an inch from the leather, I will carry you into the stables, bend you over the saddle rack, and whip that delicious ass of yours red with these reins. Then I’ll put you back on the horse, and I swear by the goddess, Galantia, every time you lift from the saddle, you will be punished with hellfire the moment you come back down.”

His words, though harsh, were swathed in sensuality, a tingling caress that sent shivers down my spine. What if I wanted to know what that particular pain felt like? Not like the broad swats of his palm when they'd come down on my rear, that much was certain. How then? Sharper? Rippling? Presume I would have to bounce and jostle some more to find out...

Pulling away from his clasp, I retook possession of the reins. "You're an insufferable teacher."

But a good one; one who had thrown the heavy saddle into my lap right after a shared breakfast of oat porridge. He'd watched me struggle the heavy thing toward Lial's back, offering not a single finger of help but plenty of snickers when I ended up dragging a trunk beside the horse so I may get it done before spring.

It was vexing.

It was empowering.

Because for the first time in my life, I didn't just watch life from within the safety of gentle hands. Malyr's hands were rarely gentle, but they certainly never coddled. No, they shoved me straight into life, demanding I participated.

And I loved it.

"I would rather canter some more," I said and, with a bump of my calves, sent Lial back into a walk along the muddy circle. "It's much easier to sit."

"Which is exactly why I have you practicing the *trot*," Malyr said, letting one hand run from my waist, down over my hip and along my fur-lined shadow dress. "A horse can trot for hours, but a canter will tire it out quickly. Now try again, and you best put some effort into it."

I took a deep breath and shortened the inside rein to keep us on the circle the way Malyr had shown me, letting the cold air fill my lungs and stir my determination. So many times, I'd asked Father to let me ride, but he hadn't cared, leaving the final decision with Mother. *Too dangerous*, she'd said, *you may fall*.

But I wouldn't.

I refused to.

Guided by a rush of resolve, I gently pressed Liual back into a trot. His powerful muscles shifted at my command as his large body moved beneath me, offering a first rise of his shoulders and spine, challenging me to stiffen against it.

I didn't.

I relaxed my hips and followed it upward, only to come back down with it. Up again. Down. Up. Down. The ebbs and flows of the horse's motion became an instinctive pattern, my body surrendering to its quick rhythm. I melded with it, my hips and knees absorbing the momentum like the sway of a ship riding the ocean's swells. My muscles began to move in tandem with Liual's, the sensation grounding and invigorating me, as if we were two halves of a whole.

"There we go." There was something very light to the sound of Malyr's praise, almost as if I could hear his smile in the slightly elevated consonance of his voice. "Keep going and finish that circle."

Oh, but I had no intention of finishing it.

Right before we reached the tree stump that marked the end of this round and the beginning of a new one, I pressed my calves tightly against Liual's sides, blocking my own motion. Bouncing followed, leaving me no other choice but to grab the pommel with one hand before I hushed Liual into a walk from which he meandered into a halt. A dead quiet halt, aside from the occasional flutters of arriving and departing ravens above us in the clear blue sky.

Until Malyr's long, exaggerated exhale almost resembled a groan in my ear. "Little dove... why did this look as though you failed on purpose?"

I glanced over my shoulder at him, finding his smoldering gaze going straight to my lips. "Maybe you need to rethink your punishments and stop making them sound like rewards."

His lips curled up at the corners as his gaze lifted to lock with mine, something almost ardent coming over his eyes. The

longer he stared at me, the more his look turned pained for reasons I couldn't fathom, his chilled palm settling against my cheek.

"You were not supposed to be quite so perfect, little dove," he rasped, letting plumes of his breath rise between us as his eyes slipped to my lips once more. "Not only enjoying the pain but seeking it out, making me wonder if..."

"If?"

His jaws first hardened, then shifted, lips parting and closing several times as if, for once, the Raven prince wasn't certain what to say. He kissed me instead, deep and drinking, sending such flutters into my chest I could barely draw in air.

"I can't help but wonder if I am about to make a grave mistake," he whispered between one kiss and the next. "Because the more you enjoy the things I do to you, the less I want to inflict them. And that is a problem." His mouth disappeared, immediately replaced by the cold lick of shadows and the sound of wingbeats, only for Malyr to reshape standing beside Lual. "Get down and wait in the stables for me, preferably draped over something at a convenient height for me with your skirts gathered up by the hip. If you thought I would let this one—"

"My prince..."

Malyr's attention drifted to Cici, who suddenly stood several feet away from us in the snow, the train of her green velvet dress a radiant speck of color in the white vastness. "What is it?"

Cici's eyes settled on me and tightened strangely, though it might as well have been caused by the reflection of the sun on the snow, but only for a brief moment before they found Malyr's again. "May I have a word with you?"

"Now?"

"It is rather urgent, I am afraid, as it pertains to the... grains currently being carted to Tidestone." When Malyr merely groaned, she added, "As well as Sebian, who was spotted flying south."

Malyr's body turned unnaturally stiff then, but only until he turned toward me, looked up, and gave a pat on my knee. "Take him by the reins, lead him back to the stables, and hand him to Olivar. Wait there for me."

He turned away, stomping through the snow toward Cici. Their shoulders aligned as they walked toward the archways that lined the gardens together, words hushing between them that I couldn't hear. What about the grains? And what did Sebian have to do with it?

I dismounted, letting myself sink to the ground in the same way my heart sank in my chest at the memory of how Sebian and I had argued three days ago. How his face had drained of all color when I'd told him to stop fussing over me, his eyes glancing around as if, for just a moment, he hadn't known what to do with himself. All because I'd snapped at his deep-rooted need to care and protect where he'd once failed, which now, shamed me deeply. After all, how could I expect tender, caring Sebian to understand that there was love in pain?

Was it the love I had dreamed of, full of gentle caresses and words of affection? No. But it was real, tangible in a way that nothing else had ever been. There was a love in Malyr's punishments, a sincerity in his cruelty that stripped me bare and made me feel more seen, more understood than ever before. But the worst, most confusing part of all this?

How Sebian had disappeared after, leaving me to spend the night on Malyr's chest, but... somehow missing the weight and warmth of Sebian's calf on my toes. The familiarity of his even breathing rushing in and out of his lungs, those tingling fingertips in my hair, that scent of soil and pine needles I loved so much. Gods, I'd wanted him to kiss me so badly that day...

As I wanted to fix this between us, but how, if he kept disappearing?

I grabbed the reins and led Liual back toward the stables, internally shaking my head at myself. Perhaps it was my inexperience in such matters, but love turned out to be a complicated business. Especially when one's heart and body

longed for two men, both equally complicated. How did that make any sense? How was that even possible?

At the stables, Olivar was quick to take the reins from me. “I’ll untack Prince Malyr’s gelding for you. I already have a nice bucket of oats waiting for him.”

When Olivar led the gelding away to the stalls farther back, I turned to the brown horse right beside me, Sebian’s gelding. His coat was a mud-crusted mess, his tousled forelock in dire need of a brush, and his head hanging low as he dozed through the commotion. They suited each other perfectly.

An uncomfortable twinge tugged beneath my breastbone. I rubbed at it through the thick fur that lined my dress as I turned toward the gardens, just in time to catch a glimpse of how Cici ran her hand down along Malyr’s arm in a way much too familiar.

He didn’t react to it.

Didn’t reciprocate.

My tongue pressed against my gums, anyway, causing a humming sound somewhere in my ears that quickly took on the resonance of Sebian’s words.

Do you know Cici came out of his chambers the morning I left? She looked a tad... disheveled.

The force of jealousy that rushed into my heart set my chest aflame, each cold inhale I pulled down into my lungs agonizing. I forced my gaze away from them. Malyr hadn’t reciprocated, hadn’t shown a single inclination that he had wanted her touch on him. And why would he? In less than a fortnight, we would be married. Was that a guarantee of a husband’s loyalty? Hardly, but the fact that he spent parts of his day, and every single night, with me logically left no time for others.

“That red-haired one hates me, probably because I’m living in her castle.”

The sudden baritone thrumming the air beside me sent a jolt of straightness through my spine as I turned my head toward the stranger beside me. Short black hair, a dark dusting

of stubble on his cheeks and chin. Faint remnants of a fading bruise dotting the area between the inner corner of his eye and the bridge of his nose.

No, not a stranger.

I hinted a quick curtsy. “Lord... Batana, correct?”

Lorn’s fated mate.

“You can drop the lord for all I care for, Lady Galantia. It’s just Aros,” he said with a scoff and hoisted a saddle over the nearby wooden stall rail. “The prince figured I had better chances to entice my mate to bond if I had lands, a castle, and called myself a lord. If anything, that fucking title made her loathe me even more.”

My mind went back to how Lorn had punched him, how she’d refused him in the forest. “I didn’t know that fate could be quite so stubborn.”

“We call it *urdvri*,” he said and lifted his hand to the gelding’s head, rubbing beneath its forelock. “When something happened in the past that shouldn’t have happened, usually because one of us fates interfered, trying for a different outcome in the future. It twists everything that should have been, making it a fucking impossibility. Fates may see the future, but the goddess never intended for them to alter it. It only ever ends in chaos.”

“You can see the past?”

“Yeah, that’s just my fucking luck, that I get to see your father’s henchmen rape my mate over, and over, and over again. See her tears, hear her whimpers. And there is nothing I can do because the past is written in stone.”

I didn’t want it to, but a hairline crack slinked across my heart for her. “I’m sorry for the pain my father caused your people.”

“I’m sorry for the pain your father caused you, little white dove,” he said and walked off, but not without stopping and glancing back at me once more. “I cannot see how it fits together, but... the goddess showed me this moment of your

life so many times during your *kjaer*, it seems relevant enough to mention. *I love you so much.*”

I arched a brow at him. “Pardon me?”

“Your mother’s words to you shortly after your birth.”

My throat narrowed to the width of a hair. “That doesn’t sound like my mother at all.”

“She said it a dozen times as she gazed down at you, her bright blonde strand clasped between your chunky fingers,” he said and walked off, already having brought several steps of distance between us before he added, “Oh, and she said she’s sorry.”

“Sorry for what?” I called behind him.

He only shrugged.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-NINE



Sebian

Present Day, Sage Passage

The Sage Passage was as cold as a widow's heart, gnawing through our down. Beneath us, sleeping trees spread out, bare as bone, arms reaching up to the dreary gray sky. Our eyes cut through the heavy snowfall, sharp and unerring. The wind was a bastard, its icy bite never letting up, forcing us to work our wings harder, driving old pain into marred skin and damaged joints. Where was this damn convoy?

Ahead, the road snaked through untamed land, marked deep by cart and wagon wheels, the muddy grooves slowly drowning beneath a new layer of snow. Then we spotted them, a line of slow-moving figures trudging along the path. Finally!

Beneath us, hidden daggers and chainmail glinted, standing out starkly against the white landscape. Even from this height, we could count at least seventy men, each puffing plumes from heated lungs after a day's worth of marching alongside those carts. To do what, exactly? Protect turnips and

sacks of barley from thieves? In a Raven-controlled area where harvests had been plentiful?

The number of Lord Taradur's soldiers accompanying those carts and wagons was enough to guard a treasury—not food, no matter the desperation in those villages surrounding Tidestone. Something was more off than a three-legged stool with Malyr's story. What was he keeping from me? And why?

With a final powerful flap of our wings, we descended upon the rear of the last wagon in the long procession. The cold air whooshed past us as we swooped down, landing with a gentle *thud* on the worn wooden tailgate. Plumes of shadows engulfed us, allowing me to shift into my human form, the transition greeted by gasps and curses from unsuspecting soldiers.

One of them, a boy barely past his sixteenth summer by the looks of it, jumped back with a yelp, his spear clattering to the frozen ground. His wide eyes flickered between me and the piece of iron he'd dropped.

“By the bloody gods!” he shouted and scrambled for his weapon, scooping it up and leveling it at me with shaking hands.

“Easy now.” I held one hand up, squatting to reach my other hand to the tightly-woven burlap that covered the goods. “Just going to peek under this—”

The blade of his spear clanked against the fastener of my bracer, shoving my arm away. “Get away from the cargo, Raven!”

“Raven?” I asked, not liking how his shout had drawn the attention of too many other soldiers, letting some of them hurry down with their hands on the pommel of their swords. “It's the Raven prince who keeps you and your family fed, so I suggest you stop throwing around that word as if it's an insult.”

His brows furrowed, clearly thrown by my words, and he defensively sidestepped while following the wheels'

squeaking turns. “Human or Raven, I am to guard these wagons with my life, and not let anyone near them.”

“I’d feel fucking insulted if my life is worth a mere sack of grains and a cured ham.” And none of the things hidden beneath the heavy, snow-covered canvas smelled like either. “All I want is to take a quick look beneath—”

A *thud* of hooves and the *jingle* of tack drew my attention to the man trotting along the convoy toward me. Lord Taradur sat astride a chestnut horse, which he reined around the tail of the wagon to follow behind it, the man cloaked in snow and a haughty expression.

Great, just what I needed.

“Sebian...” he grunted, brushing the flurry from a beard as red as his daughter’s tresses. “Come to rob the wagon of its wine?”

His comment brushed me the wrong way, but picking a fight probably wasn’t the way to go about this. “I was sent to ensure myself that the transport was going as planned and to inspect the wagons.”

Squinting his brown eyes at me, Lord Taradur scratched his chin, the sound harsh in the cold air, his gaze filled with doubt and suspicion. “Sent by whom?”

My muscles tensed. Good question. Who sent me? Malyr? Taradur knew full well that the prince and I were friends, so the answer seemed feasible. But the way Taradur’s eyes narrowed the longer he stared at me? If Malyr had kept this from me, chances were that this man knew.

I flared my nostrils, trying to take in whatever distinctive smells coming from the wagons might provide me with hints as to what was beneath the damn, oil-soaked burlap. “Captain Asker.”

His gaze turned as icy as the wind that bit at my face. “Turn around and fly back to where you came from, Sebian. Prince Malyr’s orders were clear; nobody is to touch these wagons, and that includes you. I will see to it that these orders are carried out as given.”

The collective unsheathing of swords and tight thrumming of bowstrings that followed hung heavy in the air, a clear warning echoing along the winding passage. This had just become a whole lot more interesting. Because Asker didn't know, either, did he? Malyr had kept both of us in the dark, scheming behind our backs alongside humans for who knew how long.

I raised my hands in a gesture of surrender. "Fine. I'll be back with a scroll carrying Malyr's new orders."

I shifted faster than the soldiers could gasp, lifting into the air once more. I could feel Taradur's eyes on me, but as the distance grew, the convoy blurred into inconsequential smudges. He could go fuck himself. No way was I flying back with no idea as to what was going on here to watch Galantia fawn over that fucking liar of a friend, Malyr. How could he betray me like this?

We fought the harsh breeze blowing down from the north until we managed to glide into the safety of a nearby tree line. There we waited, roosting in the skeletal canopy of a gnarled old pine, our eyes never leaving the line of wagons as it trudged along the horizon. The sun was going down, bringing with it that damn cold that pricked and itched my marred skin. Silence fell over the Sage Passage soon enough, just like expected. *Pfft... humans. No skill at navigating through the night...*

When the creaks of wagon wheels made room for the laughter of the soldiers and the *thuds* of whatever they unloaded from one of the carts, we silently glided from branch to branch. Not a single beat of a wing fluttered through the quickly approaching darkness, allowing us to sneak up on the resting convoy.

The soldiers busied themselves around their hastily made campfires, their laughter and jests melding with the crackling of flames. Their coarse laughter punctuated with crude jokes and the occasional belch. Some relieved themselves right beneath us, but we stayed still.

Once near enough to the road, we glided to the ground, hopping over the blanket of snow as we neared one of the central wagons, silent as shadows. There we waited, and waited.

A laugh.

Loud and rolling.

In a single, communal flap of wings, we hopped onto the tailgate of the wagon. From there, our beaks poked and prodded at the canvas. Our primal shook a crown of snow off its head. Then we slipped beneath the burlap, our sharp vision slicing through the dark.

The first touch of talons on the stacked cargo sent a wave of confusion through us. There was no texture of sacks filled with grains, no piles of shifting potatoes or bundles of carrots, and not a trace of salt from cured meats.

Instead, the interior was crammed with wooden posts, an array of planks, and cold iron fittings. Rough ropes coiled like sleeping snakes around it all. Glinting hooks lay here and there, along with enormous... arrows?

Yes, arrows.

For a ballista.

Realization slammed into us like a blizzard as this came together, cutting deeper than the winter's chill. Malyr wasn't going to feed Tidestone; he was going to attack it. And what in the name of the goddess had he promised Taradur to gain him as a trustworthy ally?

CHAPTER
FORTY



Galantia

Present Day, Deepmarsh Castle

The grandeur of the great hall unfolded before me in a breathtaking spectacle of black and white feathers as if night and day embraced each other, intertwining the dark history between our kinds with the bright hope that lay ahead. The sheer opulence of intricate details—from the bone-carved birds sitting at the center of feather wreaths to the black skulls painted onto ribbons that sprouted from between their shafts—put even the lavish carriage in which I’d traveled to shame.

And it was all for me...

The sight caused something beneath my ribs to bubble like sparkling cider, tickling my heart with an unconfined glee as I spun around my own axis, trying to take it all in. Long tables sat heavily under the weight of black cloth, woven from shadows, their surfaces glimmering with polished silverware.

Crystal goblets caught the light from the towering stained-glass windows and scattered it in gleaming prisms. Garlands of intertwined twigs hung from the rafters, adorned with a collection of Raven treasures—nails and ribbons, glass shards and coins, pebbles and chestnuts.

To say I was captivated would have been an understatement—I was spellbound, bewitched, mesmerized beyond the ability to breathe. My heart pounded with the rhythm of a thousand beating wings, my chest fluttering with unbridled anticipation. This was everything I'd wanted. The assurance of a dream, the confirmation of a future, and the validation of a love that was stronger and more profound than any pain.

“Astonishing, is it not? I had the servants lay it all out for me today so I may see what it will look like on the day of the wedding.” Captain Asker stepped up beside me, folding his black-braced arms behind his back as his gaze drifted to the high table, where an opulent wooden chair had been added to the one beside Malyr's. “His father spoke his oaths to his mother under the elegance of a very similar ensemble. It cast us into war then. I ordered all this as closely to my memory as I could, hoping that, this time, it will bring us out of it.”

My thoughts drifted to the fantasy of that little boy sitting on my lap, my half-blood son born with the shadowy gifts of a Raven who, gods willing, might sit on the throne one day. “I hope so.”

“You will depart for Tidestone on the morrow. Will you give this to Marla?” From the black scales of *aerymel* that shifted over his hips, he removed a small satchel of shadowcloth, which had something *clank* inside as he reached it out to me. “The salted spells of deathweavers. After months in the Tidestone dungeons, we cannot be certain of her condition. If she has grown too weak, her only chance at consciously forcing a shift is by throwing herself off a high place, such as the bell tower or the cliffs. These will help her get there, should trouble arise.” The moment I took the satchel, his trembling fingers clasped around my wrist, causing me to look up into his brown eyes. “I beg of you, my lady, return my

mate to me. My *anoa* is growing weaker by the day, eaten from the inside by the sheer agony and pain this separation is causing us. I have lost my daughter... I *cannot* lose my mate.”

My heart sank at the desperate plea in his voice, the glistening in the eyes of a man who'd always seemed so stoic. “I didn't know you had a daughter...”

“The sweetest soul among the stars. Ravenna was gifted with visions of the here and now, able to gaze across realms and through the eyes of every Raven.” Dark hollows formed in his cheeks as he sucked them in for a moment. “She died five years ago. Marla is all that I have left. Please... bring her back.”

“It'll be the first thing I do, right after my arrival, when it still has the entire stronghold in commotion,” I said and tied the satchel to the belt on my dress of shadowcloth. “I'll push her from the tower myself, if I must.”

Something akin to a smile tugged the corners of his mouth, quickly hidden by the way he bowed. “Like I said before, not all treasures sparkle at first glance, but I am more convinced than ever that the goddess had our paths intertwine for a reason. To rectify the past. This alliance will—”

“There is no damn alliance,” Sebian ground out through barred teeth as he hurriedly strode up beside us, his cheeks webbed with red vessels from the cold, the fur poking from his cuirass matted with ice. “Malyr fooled all of us, plotting with Lord Taradur behind our backs.”

Captain Asker exchanged a confused look with me before he narrowed his eyes at Sebian. “What are you talking about?”

“Those carts Malyr sent to Tidestone under the protection of Taradur's soldiers...? There isn't a single fucking piece of grain on them.” Sebian's eyes found mine, their emerald glint holding none of their usual softness, driving an ominous chill into my bones. “They're disassembled siege weapons, Galantia. Taradur is marching on Tidestone as we speak.”

My marrow chilled.

No, that... that made no sense.

Asker shook his head slowly. “Impossible.”

“My guess is that Malyr will send Ravens there shortly before the attack, not leaving them nearly enough time to prepare for such an unexpected force,” Sebian said. “Asker, call me a reckless fool all you want, but I’m telling you... Malyr is taking Tidestone.”

Malyr is taking Tidestone.

My home.

Coldness shuddered through me, piercing deeper than the whitest winter, only to clash with that radiant brightness I’d carried in my chest all day. No, this couldn’t be. Could not be. Surely, this was some sort of mistake. A wrong report or... or...

“He is not taking Tidestone.” Strange, how that mumble barely sounded like my own when I turned around, my senses somehow dulled as I all but levitated toward one of the corridors.

“Why would he scheme behind our backs?” Asker’s voice sounded behind me. “No. No, Sebian. I will go and speak to Malyr this instant. He would never betray me like this.”

Precisely. Malyr would never betray me like this. This was all a mistake. A stupid—

I can’t help but wonder if I am about to make a grave mistake, Malyr’s voice echoed in the back of my mind, putting a falter into my next step.

I pushed through it.

He hadn’t lied to me.

He loved me.

Sebian trotted after me. “Where the fuck are you going?”

“To Cici,” I said and quickened my pace along the many doors that lined this particular corridor until my eyes itched. Nothing but the breeze of my speed irritating them. “It’s her father who is escorting the food, after all. She’ll shed light on all this and prove that you’re wrong.”

Yes, yes, she would.

“You and your damn stubborn foolishness,” he hissed, grabbing for my arm. “Galantia, don’t you understand? He always planned to—”

“No.” I pulled my arm away before he managed to clasp it and braced it against the door to Cici’s chamber, hand pushing down on the unlocked handle. Hinges groaned a mournful symphony, the sound scraping my skin with eerie foreboding. “You don’t understand. He loves—”

Frigidness seeped into my veins, flooding my heart until it froze mid-beat, turning it to ice so easily shattered. Air left my lungs in a single sob as I looked at the color of betrayal woven into the cloth of my unraveling hopes. Everything suddenly felt so distant, so stupid, nothing but the echo of a dream that looked like mine but... was not.

“No, he didn’t...” Sebian all but exhaled beside me.

Cici spun around where she stood on a wooden pedestal by the window, red strands framing her wide eyes in the same way the fraying fabric of my sanity shaped around her hips. “Galantia...”

“Oh dear,” Darien, the dressmaker, said where he knelt by the bottom seam of Cici’s gown.

My gown.

Shadowy tendrils sculpted the neckline in the shape of a bird’s nest, the trunk-like columns running down along the corset adorned with shards of *aerymel*. From there, it cascaded down into a magnificent train of uncountable black feathers. Shadowcloth embellished the shoulders, gently swaying like wings tousled by the ocean breeze, the edges lined with the finest plumes. And there, hidden beneath the fluff, a single white feather hidden between the same blackness that cast over my core.

It was magnificent.

Just like Malyr had said.

But it wasn’t mine, was it?

A raw sting pinched at the back of my eyes, sharp and unfamiliar, my hands fluttering restlessly at my sides as I swallowed against my tight throat. “What is this?”

“Sweetheart...” Sebian brushed his hand down along my spine, then clasped my upper arm, urging me to back away. “Come on. Let’s go and—”

“What is this?” I’d meant to scream it, but it only came out as a choked whisper, quickly overpowered by the wingbeats that slipped through the flight hole at the top of the wall.

Malyr shaped out of his shadows, tendrils still forming the long black strands that framed those two-colored eyes that bore into me, only for his gaze to drift to Sebian. “You have nerves, flying south to have your ravens poke their beaks into things that are not of your concern.”

“Look who’s talking about nerves,” Sebian bit back, sliding his hand down to intertwine with mine. “How could you do this?”

“How could I not?” Malyr jutted his chin at Darien. “Get out.” The dressmaker shifted right then, and five ravens breezed past me, almost distracting me from the slow, deliberate grind of Malyr’s boots on the floor as he approached me. Until he came to a stop inches from me, and shifted forward for his mouth to hover by my ear, where he whispered, “Did you truly think I would marry you? You? *A Brisden*? I have nothing but hate for you.”

With the world tilting on its axis, I forced myself to turn my head and look at his hate-filled eyes, feeling my heart tear apart as my throat choked around an invisible knot that seemed to swell. “You... you don’t mean that.”

“All this came at a cost. Obviously, Taradur only made a reliable ally by me promising him to take his daughter as my wedded wife.” A shimmer sparked in the depth of his gray-brown irises, only to extinguish at his scoff, leaving nothing behind but biting malice that dripped from his poison-laced tone. “Thanks to the wedding announcement, Deepmarsh houses enough deathweavers, pathfinders, and fates to make the slaughter of House Brisden more convenient than it ought

to be. Granted, I would have liked you to free Marla first, but no matter. We will strike with such force, there may yet be another opportunity. Little white dove, you were nothing but a distraction and a tight hole to fuck while I positioned my forces at your father's doorstep."

A slicing blade seemed to cleave through my chest, twisting with each callous word he spat. Hundreds of hairline cracks webbed across my heart, threatening to shatter me into a million pieces, just like he'd said. But that had been before. Before the ride to the cliffs, the kiss, the many times I had felt his love in the pain, in the pleasure, and in every unspoken word between us. It hadn't been imagined. It couldn't be... It was real!

"My prince," Cici murmured, her stare fixed on the ground. "Is it necessary to—"

"Shut!" Malyr's shout sent a flinch through Cici, tendrils of shadows flitting across the white of his eyes before his voice calmed. "Your. Mouth." He gripped my throat like he had the day in the forest, bringing his lips to mine, letting them brush his poisonous whispers across them. "Did you really think that I could ever love you?" A faint laugh. "Yes, you did. Poor little Galantia, abandoned, ignored, utterly worthless. Never loved, and oh, so foolish."

Never loved.

Oh, so foolish.

Another crack in my heart.

"Enough!" Sebian barked, slapping Malyr's hand off my throat before he pulled me against his chest. "You're a miserable friend and a fucking cruel bastard."

"Funny you say that, considering it was you who told me just how to get her all flustered." Malyr pressed his face into my cheek, letting the moisture of his breath settle on my skin like venom with how he forced the words through his clenched teeth. "She's so starved for attention, you said, a bit of kindness would get me a long way with her. Guess what? It

did. Didn't take much at all. A few kisses here, a few meaningless words there."

Empty.

Meaningless.

Another crack to my heart.

Sebian gave a shove against Malyr's shoulder, pushing him back half a foot. "I said it's enough! You ruined her twice over now!"

Malyr shrugged. "Now you can... sweep in and save her."

"What?"

"Marriage, Sebian," Malyr said. "How about you take Galantia to wife?" When Sebian's arm stiffened on me, a malicious smirk curled one corner of Malyr's mouth. "No, you are not quite so heroic as to abandon your oaths, are you? Did you actually ever tell her...?" His eyes found mine. "Did he tell you, little dove?"

My entire body shook as I looked at Sebian. "Tell me what?"

Sebian's lips parted, closed, parted again.

Nothing came out.

"I did not think you had," Malyr said. "Do you want to tell her why you never kissed her, hmm? Or should I?" One second passed. Two. Three. "Very well. See, little dove, Sebian—"

"No..." Lips trembling, Sebian hung his head. For a fraction of a breath, he hid his eyes from me, only for the forest-green orbs to lift and find mine with a layer of unshed tears to resemble leaves after a rain. "My mate died in the fire during that night, Galantia, along with the rest of my family. She died because of me, because I didn't protect her." A stuttered gulp. "We were... we were bonded."

Bonded.

My ribs curled into my heart all over again, puncturing a frozen organ wounded with a million cracks. *What would it*

feel like to be loved with such intensity? Such unequivocal fortitude, not even death could impose conditions?

I would never know. Not with either of these men, because one hated me, and the other had his love forever tied to a corpse. Not with anybody else, either. Nobody loved me. Nobody ever would.

My eyes burned.

My surroundings blurred.

Until the sweltering wetness trailed down my cheeks, collecting on my trembling chin from where it drip-drip-dripped onto the floor in an abundance of tears. Years of them flowed out of me as I cried for Risa, for Sebian, perhaps even for Malyr. But most of all, I cried for myself.

“See, there is no love for you here—not from me, not from him. There is no love for you anywhere.” Malyr leaned into me, letting his tongue lap a trail along my cheek, devouring my tears all the way to the corner of my eye, where he suckled and finished with a kiss. “I told you I would break you like your father had done it with me, little white dove. And, oh, how delicious your tears are.”

Another crack to my heart.

Something inside me fractured, a deafening clash echoing through the hollows of my heart, my core, my soul. It cracked through hope and naïve dreams, shattering me so completely, each piece a testament to a love that had never been. Would never be.

From the wreckage of my being, something primal emerged. A force so powerful, so raw, it thrummed with the rhythm of my shattering soul, vibrating through every vein, every nerve, every fiber of my being. The force exploded outwards, a silent, blinding storm of white feathers and plumes that eclipsed my conscience and enlightened it at the same time.

Color bled over the room.

Our vision sharpened.

With a storm of white wingbeats, my ravens carried me up to the flight hole, and out into the even whiter winter from there. Our plumage blended with the snow and the clouds. Our wings carried us east.

Away from the pain.



THIS CONCLUDES *Feathers so Vicious*. If you have a moment, please consider [leaving my story a review](#).

What an ending, huh? Wanna talk about it? Join me in my [Facebook Reading Group](#). There's also a bonus chapter available for [newsletter subscribers](#), setting the stage for [Shadows so Cruel](#), part two in the Court of Ravens Duet.

CHAPTER
FORTY-ONE

***Leucism** (/ˈluːsɪzəm, -kɪz-/)* is a wide variety of conditions that result in the partial loss of pigmentation in an animal—causing white, pale, or patchy coloration of the skin, hair, feathers, scales, or cuticles, but not the eyes.

[Wardruna - First Flight of the White Raven](#)

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